

## THE ORAL HISTORY OF TOM JENKIN

*Tom Jenkin\**

On an early spring morning over Zoom, Mr. Jenkin graciously met with *UNLV Gaming Law Journal* board and staff members to illustrate his journey from fry cook in 1975 to Global President of gaming powerhouse Caesars Entertainment in 2013. Mr. Jenkin has not only been an industry leader throughout his career, but a community leader as well. Mr. Jenkin was named Laughlin's Citizen of the Year in 1996 and has served on the Opportunity Village Foundation Board, among other organizations.

*You began working as a fry cook at Harrah's, Las Vegas, in 1975. Did you realize, at that time, that would be how you would get your foot in the door of the gaming industry?*

I guess the short answer is no. It was actually a place called The Holiday Casino back then. Later, the name changed to Harrah's, but it was The Holiday Casino, and it was owned by a lady and her husband, named Claudine and Shelby Williams. Claudine was the first senior executive female in the gaming business. Shelby died shortly after I went to work there, probably within the first six months or so. He passed away, and she became the boss of the business. She owned it, 100% of it at that time. She, for some reason, took me under her wing, and was a mentor to me. I was very lucky in that regard. But the short answer, when I first went to work there, I mean, like most 20-year-olds, I was looking for a job and a way to pay the rent, and put gas in my car. I had no idea that it would blossom into what it did all these years later.

*Could you walk us through how you advanced from your first position as a fry cook at The Holiday Casino to general manager of Harrah's Laughlin in 1993?*

I joined the company in March of 1975, as a fry cook and I was working the graveyard shift. I did that for about four or five months, and then I got

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\* *Our sincerest thanks to Tom Jenkin for being so generous with his time.*

promoted to a sous-chef, and moved to day shift, and worked as the sous-chef of the restaurant for another year and a half to two years. Then I became an assistant executive chef, and did that for another couple of years. And then I moved out to the front of the house into restaurant management, became a restaurant manager, and then food and beverage director a short time after that. I did that for another year or two, and then had a chance to move. I had become the resident expert in union related issues because all the employees I worked with were represented by the Culinary Union.

The company, at that time, was much smaller. Harrah's had bought the company from Claudine at that point. Harrah's was a small company, just Reno, Las Vegas, and Atlantic City in those days. They didn't have anything anywhere else. I was the resident expert in union issues, so they asked me if I'd go work in human resources for a couple of years and negotiate labor agreements. Food and beverage is a tough business to be in, and requires long hours. And it wasn't clear to me that that was how I wanted to spend the rest of my career. So, I took the opportunity to go do that, thinking that I would probably go back in food and beverage at the end of that period of time. I spent about two and a half years negotiating labor agreements, and then the general manager of the property called me one day and said, "Hey, you want to go run the slot department?"

I was a little bit leery because I didn't know much about slots. So, I said, "I don't know anything about slots." And he said, "all you got to know is people put money in, you take money out. The rest is managing people." He made it sound really simple, much simpler than it was. I went and did that for about three years. I was in charge of VIP services, bingo, keno, racing sports, poker and slots. Then I moved down to Harrah's Laughlin as the general manager in August of '93.

*Do you have advice, since you've worked in so many different positions before becoming an executive, for those just beginning their careers?*

For whatever reason, I think my father had this big work ethic where he used to tell me, as I was growing up, he said, "Whatever you do, be the best guy doing that." If you're washing dishes, be the best dishwasher. If you're bussing tables, be the best person bussing tables. So that resonated with me for whatever reason. I always had that work ethic, and I think that served me well because I did not have a plan. Never have I been in a job where I thought there was another job. When I was a sous-chef, I thought this was a fabulous job. It wasn't like I was working for the next spot. It just happened. And I think the highway of ability is pretty-wide. There's a lot of able people on it. And then there's this little skinny intersection of opportunity. You have to work hard to be ready because opportunities don't come very often. If you're not ready to step into it and seize it when it comes, you'll miss it.

I was lucky enough that I was ready when those times came, and I had some people who took an interest in my career and helped push me along and challenged me. When I was nervous about stepping out of my comfort zone, they

gave me the little shove that was required to get me to move forward. I was lucky in a lot of regards. I never viewed myself as remarkably intelligent. I worked hard and I had the ability to surround myself with people who were substantially better at things than I was. And I recognized that early on, that if I was the smartest guy in the room, we were in big trouble. Whatever the discipline was, I wanted somebody that was way smarter than me in that area. And I was lucky that I was able to build, in most cases, teams of people who fit that bill really well.

*Once you started taking on more managerial roles, was there a difference in your management style when it came to operating in a small gaming market, like Laughlin, compared to a large gaming market, like Las Vegas?*

I don't think so. The markets were very different, right? In Laughlin, small property, small markets, small city, talent base there is pretty thin. It certainly wasn't as easy to surround yourself with high caliber people. And we had a management structure that was really thin, so it forced me to be involved in every aspect of the business, much more so than when I got back to Las Vegas. I hired a really good marketing person who did a great job of marketing in Laughlin. Even with a solid marketing person, I had to be much more involved in the marketing of the property, and the operations of the property, and food and beverage decisions. So, I think from a training perspective, that was a great market to spend five years, because it really forced me to roll up my sleeves, get actively involved in virtually every discipline in the business, which made me, I think, a much better general manager when I came back to Las Vegas.

But I think my management style, for the most part, stayed the same. I've always tried to figure out how, when you look at the team—every team has strengths and weaknesses—to give direction, be supportive, and get out of the way so people can do their job. I tried not to micromanage, but to be a thought provoker. I always tried to challenge people's thinking and people's creativity. I really saw that as my role. Keep the team focused, keep them together, make sure I'm providing the resources and the support that they need to do the job, but really to let high caliber people do high caliber work, and get out of their way. If you get in their way, it slows everything down.

*While all this was happening, Harrah's was growing. And eventually, in 2013, you became global president of a gaming industry leader. Would you be able to walk us through what an average work day for you consisted of and compare that to an average work day when you were in Laughlin?*

Well, I'm going to take it back a little bit farther. In 2004, I was the general manager of Harrah's, Las Vegas and the Rio. And then in 2005, 2006, we bought Caesars. That really changed my role because then, instead of managing two properties, I managed what was called the Western division. That was all of Las Vegas, and our two Indian properties in California and Phoenix. That really set

me up for my job in 2013, when I became global president for the entire company. It didn't change immensely from what it was in 2010 to 2013. The big change was really in 2006, when I had to start thinking about big markets like Las Vegas. When you have seven properties in one market, it's easy to cannibalize yourself and compete against yourself. I had to first think about, how does the sum of the parts equal more than the sum of the parts? How do we make the seven properties work together so collectively, we'll do better together than we would do individually?

I thought that through and came up with a bunch of theories on it, and then had to convince the team, who were all entrepreneurial and used to maximizing their little piece of the pie. I had to get them to think more holistically and say, "Maybe the best thing to do is not do an event at Bally's because that event is better held at Caesar Palace, or maybe that isn't the best thing for Caesars Palace. That'd be better done at Paris." Everybody wants to protect their little piece of the pie. I mean, even down to the VIP hosts, saying, "It's okay to send your customer across the street," which is completely foreign to how they had thought about the business before. It was really critical to change that kind of mindset, and get people thinking bigger picture than just one property. I think we were incredibly successful at doing that.

*Having such an illustrious career, are there any memories that particularly stand out to you? Any favorite moments that you've had?*

Oh, boy. Well, the beauty of this business is, over time, some of your good customers become your good friends. I've developed some wonderful relationships, both with co-workers, people I worked with over the years, but also with customers of the business, who've now become my friends. For about 25 years, I hosted an annual trip to Alaska, with our best customers. I would take 22 very good customers to Alaska, for a week. Certainly, some of those are my best memories. I remember opening a myriad of new properties, so those are fond memories.

But I think the thing that truly, I feel best about or blessed about is when I look at who runs the company today, and I think about where we became acquainted with those people. I'm very proud of to have said that I played a role in almost every senior executive in the company today, growth and development. I feel good about that. I'm proud of the group. All the general managers or the regional presidents, with few exceptions, worked with me and progressed in their career along the way. So I'm really proud of that.

*You mentioned that during the beginning of your career, you spent some time negotiating labor contracts. Could talk a little bit about your negotiation style and maybe some tips for young attorneys?*

Well, there is a tendency, I think, particularly when people do it for the first time, that the notion is, "I'm going to crush my opponent, I'm going to win every

point.” And that’s generally a recipe for some level of disaster at the end, right? Because most of the labor unions are more savvy than that. I always took the approach that, look, whether employees are represented or not, I want to, every year, give employees a fair rate. We want to have a competitive benefit program. We want to have, either a good 401(k) or a good pension plan, and we want to have reasonably fair and consistent work rules. Those are things that make up the majority of the union agreement anyway. While sometimes people get put off by it, there isn’t that much difference between how you’d want to run the business and how you have to run the business in accordance with the labor agreement.

I just always approached it as that. I was never a fan of the, you start ridiculously high and I’ll start ridiculously low, and we’ll waste a bunch of time to get to what’s the sweet spot, which should be fair. I always took the approach to sit down with the union leadership well in advance of our first negotiating session, and try to identify where that fair spot is. Now the fair spot, in their mind, might’ve been a 5% package. And the fair spot, in my mind, may have been a three and a half percent package. That’s where we’d then negotiate. The give and take would be between those parameters, not some 10% on their end and 1% on my end.

Then you have to remember in that process, that it’s not personal because the employees who are advocating for the union, they become quite anti-company at that point. And the union becomes very adversarial. You have to remind yourself, this is their schtick, and it’s not personal because when it’s all over, everybody’s high-fiving, happy, and shaking hands. And you’re back to managing the business.

*Are there any lessons learned over the past year, with the pandemic, as well as are there any changes that were put in place that you think will stay with us going forward?*

Well, yeah, it was crazy, right? I retired July 20, 2020, so I helped through the shut-down, the rewriting of every job description and protocols, health, and safety protocols to go with every job. I worked with infectious disease doctors, and then figured out how to restart the businesses before I left. So, it was a crazy time, right? Lessons learned. The speed in which the folks I work with were able to execute enormously difficult tasks was unbelievable, right? I mean, you never want to do it, but in a space of three days, they were able to shut down a company, basically, that was producing \$11 billion in revenue, and deal with all the complexities of that. Gaming regulators, cages, a million things that you had to do because different states all have different regulations.

And while Nevada gaming regulators, Sandra Morgan at that time, were really helpful, some states were not so helpful. It made the process much more onerous on the company. The speed that our folks did that, it was truly incredible. Then to sit down and, of course, everybody’s working from different corners of the world at that point, we get on a call and we say, “Okay, we got to create all

these safety protocols, every job.” And just thinking through, what’s that going to be? How’s it going to work? Our people did marvelous. In quite literally a month, we had those put together with the help of a well-renowned infectious disease expert, and he was very helpful. A number of states took what we put together, and that became their template for handing out to the rest of the industry and saying, “Here’s what you need to do.” I felt remarkably good about that.

Then the restarting of the businesses was incredibly challenging because you couldn’t just open what you had when you closed because you don’t have any customers at this point. It was a really cautious, staged, reopening into businesses. Then I think the biggest lesson that we learned is how many people can work from home effectively in our business. That’ll change the business going forward. I don’t think we’ll ever see some functions return to a workspace. I think they’ll continue to work remotely. That creates a myriad of challenges too, monitoring productivity and all that. And I’d argue, we don’t do a very good job, monitoring productivity on people who come into the office so there’s probably not a real danger there.

In fact, when people are at home, we essentially got to monitor more than when they come into the building. But it appears, at least last time I had visibility to it, that productivity was just fine. People were getting their work done remotely, as effectively as they were when they were in the office. I think it makes their lives a little bit better, for the most part. People who want to do it, it’s certainly less expensive for the company because you don’t need the office space. I think our industry, but broader, across all businesses, that’ll be a lesson that’s taken away from the pandemic.

*Will the ability to work remote impact hiring practices? How would that impact smaller gaming markets like Laughlin?*

Certainly, in jobs that are not customer facing, where we used to think, okay, our talent pool is Las Vegas or talent pool is New Orleans—now our talent pool is virtually anywhere, maybe even worldwide. It’s worked out well. We did reservations for the entire company at Las Vegas, and a little bit out of New Orleans. But virtually all those people work remotely now. They figured out a technology solution so people can sit in for their computer at home, and take reservation calls, and book rooms, and do just what they would do while they’re in the office.

*How did you maintain work-life balance during your career?*

I was not all that great at that. I’d get up early in the morning. We had thirteen businesses in Europe, so I’d be on the phone, six-thirty or seven o’clock, with the gentlemen who ran the European businesses for us. Then an hour later, I’d be on call with the East Coast guys. And then by eight o’clock, I’m talking to the guys in the Central Time zone. Then I’m on to the people in the West by around nine o’clock. It was busy and there was a lot of stuff to do, but I had really

great people working for me. I had regional presidents who, if somebody had kidnapped me and locked me away for twenty days, business wouldn't miss the beat. I really believe that.

Again, when you have high caliber people, I'm talking to them, not every day, but every other day, 15 minutes, 20 minutes. We'd have more formal things once a month, but most of the time it was just to catch up real quick, see what's going on, talk about this or that, or some special initiative. But for the most part, these people run the business. They didn't really need me. I tried to help with bigger strategy issues, capital and development stuff. If we're going to build something new or we're going to change something here, I try to be a thought provoker there. Then once we decided what to do, to help them make sure they're able to manage that project effectively, I would spend a fair amount of time working with the marketers, just to get the marketing strategy right. Because it's ever changing. Re-investment levels and different things, ever changing landscape, just make sure we're on top of that.

However, even last year, I was still involved with the labor negotiations. That's something I continued to do, not on the little contracts, but on the big contracts. Then I would help the entertainment guys think through the entertainment strategy, what acts are we going to do? I also continued to work on the development of food and beverage outlets. I brought Gordon Ramsey to Las Vegas and to Caesar. I met him in London and we started chatting about doing restaurants together, so that happened. Then I reached out to Guy Fieri just out of the blue, and he came to visit me in my office. We walked down into this spot that was dirt and was under construction. And I said, "I want you to close your eyes, and I'm going to tell you a story about what we're going to build here." I gave him this vision, it turned into Guy's Kitchen and Bar at the LINQ Hotel, which has done fabulous for us. I brought that deal in.

Then Giada De Laurentiis, I convinced her to do her first restaurant at The Cromwell. Giada's Italian Restaurant has done just fabulously well for us as well. I was pretty involved in those kinds of things. I picked all the fun stuff. I let all the other guys do the hard work—although even the fun stuff, it was challenging. I had to get it right, because I knew if we didn't do a great job for the chef's brand, that it'd be really hard to get the next celebrity chef to come in. So we had done a good job with Bobby Flay, we'd done a good job with Rao's.

I think we killed it with Gordon and Guy, and Giada. Now just before we left, we were talking to Caesars about doing a deal with Martha Stewart, and they just put that deal together. Martha Stewart's first restaurant is going to open at Paris, sometime towards the end of the year, I believe. Vanderpump's Cocktail Garden, we put that deal together just before I left. Those were all fun projects.

*Throughout your career, do you have any examples or stories about particularly good lawyering that you witnessed? Or any cautionary tales from your interactions with lawyers during your career?*

Early on, when I was in the kitchen, I don't think I knew who the lawyers were. But later I became much more involved with the legal team. I've worked with really great ones and ones that were good lawyers, but were overcautious about everything. Literally, the only thing they would've been comfortable with is pad locking the doors, right? The one that I enjoyed working with the most still works for Caesar still today. She was just spectacular because she would help you figure out how to get done what you wanted to get done, and not tell you why you can't do it. She didn't try to get involved in the business and the deal points. She just tried to help you get what you wanted to get accomplished, accomplished. She couldn't always do it, but she was a pleasure to work with.

Other ones that I've had to deal with...I would just absolutely dread working with them. I remember I was negotiating entertainment deal for Cher and the company sent—I apologize. I don't mean to tell bad lawyer stories—but they sent a lawyer from Atlantic City to help. They said, "This is the entertainment lawyer for the company, so you must have this person with you." She came in and Cher wasn't there, but her manager was, and her lawyer, etc. We'd basically read everything. Somehow, this thing got derailed between the entertainment lawyer and Cher's lawyer, arguing over things that were completely immaterial to the deal. Literally, I had to take a break and call her boss and say, "I'm sending her home. Don't send her here again." She had just about killed the deal over such a ludicrous thing.

Ultimately, the lawyers that I most enjoyed working with are the ones that knew what the goal was. The ones who, to best of their ability, would figure out how to get to the finish line without driving the truck into the ditch. Do not be an attorney that fears something bad around everything corner to the extent that you never look around it.