

5.5.25-Xtra

Women Leading the Way

Brandy Tomhave Leads with a People-First Mentality

By Jordan Bradley

Brandy Tomhave, Executive Director of the Native American Humane Society (NAHS) and an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, has learned a lot about leadership in her first year leading the association, she told *USAEXtra*.

Most specifically, she said, the value of listening.

But before her leadership lessons in her position with NAHS, Tomhave worked alone frequently or as part of a two-person team. After graduating from University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in English—"which prepared me for almost nothing"—Tomhave and her mom started a business hand painting duvets, pillow shams and kimonos, and traveled the country selling them wholesale out of an old RV.

Throughout her time on the road, Tomhave came to realize, "as corny as it sounds," that what she really wanted to do with the rest of her life was help people, "especially people who tend otherwise to be overlooked and ignored."

"I wanted to be a voice for the voiceless, and I think it's because I broke down so many times in what people on the coast consider the middle of nowhere and I got a front seat view of the destruction of Main Street in small towns," Tomhave said. "If you travel

on the road through small towns, rather than fly over them, it looks apocalyptic in a lot of places with windows boarded—and the folks who are left behind often are the ones who couldn't get out."

After four years of being on the road, Tomhave decided to pursue her law degree at Southern Methodist University, where she met her husband in the Native American Law Student Association. After they both graduated, Tomhave's husband was offered an "amazing opportunity" to move to the east coast, where she began her career in law as a public defender.

"Most of my clients were just like my former neighbors when I was living on the road," Tomhave said. "They were indigent, mentally ill, and they had committed misdemeanors as a result of their inability to access treatment."

So when an opportunity appeared for her husband to be the founding executive director of a tribal environmental nonprofit organization, she went to work on Capitol Hill as a lobbyist for the first psychologist elected to Congress, Ted Strickland, who eventually went on to be governor of Ohio.

"Ted tasked me with finding a solution, creating a legislative solution, for individuals who are caught in a red tide of recidivism because of their untreated mental illness," Tomhave said. "And so I had the privilege of drafting

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Brandy Tomhave with her dog, Luke

and helping shepherd to passage the legislation that authorizes the U.S. [Department of Justice] behavioral health court grants."

After that, Tomhave began advocating for improvements to tribal environmental management, working with the Navajo Nation in Washington, D.C., and eventually joined her husband at the Tomhave Group, which consults

primarily on community infrastructure needs on reservation land.

Then, Tomhave was offered the role of executive director at NAHS, an opportunity she snatched without hesitation.

NAHS has a niche and heart-full purpose ripe with nuance. The association is dedicated to advocating

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for animal welfare on the 326 Native American reservation lands, rancherias, and Alaskan native villages throughout the United States.

Because all tribal land is held in trust of the federal government as a result of treaties, tribes are “federal dependent sovereigns,” Tomhave said. Tribes are unable to impose property taxes on reservations in order to pay for public services and instead rely upon funds from the government to support health, education, housing and public safety in many cases.

“Notice I did not mention animal services,” Tomhave added. “Back in the 1930s when the federal government started to decide how they’re going to manifest that responsibility, we didn’t know that veterinary services are critical to the health and safety of humans because of zoonotic diseases, so there are no federally funded animal services on Indian res-

ervations and tribes don’t have the ability to levy the taxes that their non-tribal neighboring jurisdictions do to pay for those animal services.”

And being a vet on reservation land is no easy feat in and of itself, she added.

“There are almost no places to launch a practice from” due to lack of access to critical infrastructure such as running water and electricity, Tomhave said. “And they’re communities with some profound challenges economically.

We all know how expensive [animal] care is. Where there’s a market in a community with 86% unemployment—like on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming—how are people going to pay for that?”

All of this creates a significant challenge to living on reservation lands: an overpopulation of mostly dogs as well as a critical lack of access to veterinary medicine and animal care.

In the face of these challenges, the association aims to do several things: uplift and empower Native Americans to address animal health care across reservations in ways that make the most sense to their lifestyles, offer educational resources on animal welfare and best caretaking practices for reservation residents, and connect community stakeholders with area organizations dedicated to serving the four-legged population.

For Native American communities, dogs are considered relations and hold traditional places in communities, Tomhave said.

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“Traditionally, it’s not like dogs just showed up in tribal communities,” she said. “Dogs are present in a lot of tribes’ origin stories, their creation stories. Dogs have been a part of tribal communities since time immemorial—probably since they split off from wolves.”

But because of the limited space available in the federally funded housing on reservation lands, dogs and other companion animals frequently live outside, leading to

what appears to the unknowing eye as a large population of stray dogs. In reality, they are free ranging, often beloved members of the community, Tomhave noted.

Though the NAHS main focus is on animal care, Tomhave said, the association is a people-first organization.

“My job is to be a tribal advocate first, and then the animal welfare advocate second,” Tomhave said. “I don’t know of another organization like that in the country and that’s a tough place to be when working with animal advocates. We do not distinguish between the two- and four-legged members of a family in the community.

We have to put people first, and that is necessary to then help the dogs and cats who rely upon people for their survival.”

As part of the association’s work, NAHS distributes informational pamphlets and resources to Native communities on the benefits of dog ownership for children and diabetics, the benefits of training your dog, and a coloring book for kids on how to take of their dogs. The association offers information on career paths in veterinary medicine as well. These resources are available on the NAHS website and distributed throughout reservations and native communities.

NAHS also connects community representatives on reservation lands with neighboring organizations working in animal advocacy in order to facilitate conversations about practical solutions to the overpopulation of dogs and other companion

animals on reservation lands.

Tomhave is only the second executive director of the 10-year-old NAHS, succeeding its founder—who built the organization from the ground up and mostly on her own—last year, Tomhave said.

“I will tell you that as an advocate and a former federally registered lobbyist, I had some serious self-doubts about leadership,” Tomhave said.

Having spent her career as part of two-person teams, Tomhave found quickly the value of listening to both employees and community partners in leadership, she told *USAE*, learning that “less talking and

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more listening and visiting tribal communities, being in community, and listening to the real, true experts about all of this—who are the native people living in their own tribal communities” yields the most effective results.

As does “recognizing how to cultivate relationships” within those communities “and honor them in a way that elevates your constituency, not yourself,” she said.

Tomhave added: “I think that this has been a really humbling year of teaching me about understanding the limitations of my role and its true purpose—which is to facilitate the opportunity for the real experts and the true leaders for the folks on the ground to come together in a safe and supported space...As an outsider, it’s really important for communities to be able to articulate their own experiences in order to be able to develop the best solutions.”