

Rising to the Top

Chinook Winds GM Sar Richards lays down his cards about his leadership style and more

By Allyson Longueira
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Despite the clear, sunny skies and 65-degree weather on a beautiful summer day, space after space in the Chinook Winds Casino parking lot is filled with the cars of those enjoying the inside amenities — gaming and dining among them — at this oceanfront resort. Also inside is the man in charge of all of it — the resort's new general manager, Sar Richards. His office, which does not, as one might suppose, have a view of the ocean, offers instead a view more befitting a casino resort — the sea of colorful lights, flashing cards and stacking chips of the gaming floor. And, of course, of the players themselves.

Path to Leadership

The first tribal member to run Chinook Winds Casino Resort, Richards wears the title with that much more pride. It's one more step closer to his ancestral roots. But it has been a roundabout journey.

Richards, 40, was raised in Albany by his mother, Edele Richards, from whom he gets his ancestry as a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. But while his grandfather, Edward Collins, always talked to him about tribal ways, he says he didn't have much exposure to cultural events as a child. His mother was in the U.S. Navy, and that shaped his upbringing more than his heritage. After high school, he spent four years and four months in the U.S. Army as a Russian linguist.

"One of the first things they teach you is: 'I know secrets. Don't shoot,'" he says of his training.

He spent most of his time stationed in Germany and was held over because of the first Gulf War. He was there when the Berlin Wall came down 20 years ago this November. He even has a piece of it.

After an honorable discharge, he attended Oregon State University, graduating in 1996 with a degree in finance and a minor in Russian.

"I really enjoy working with numbers," he says.

Although hired by the casino as a revenue auditor in August 1997, he only worked half a day before being hired as a gaming commissioner by the Tribe. It was a position he held until being hired by the casino as slot director in 2000. He was promoted to director of casino operations in December 2002. He was named interim general manager Feb. 13, following Jim Kikumoto's resignation, and was officially promoted to the position on July 10.

His gaming experience, as commissioner and then slot director, give him a breadth of experience that the Siletz Tribal Council has seen him bring to the job already, says Tribal Chairman Dee Pigsley.

"He has an amazing ability to apply his knowledge," she says.

Richards has even surmounted an area of concern about his new role, managing the directors who were once his peers, which is always a challenge, Pigsley says.

"He's done an amazing job," she said.

Respect for Team

As Richards does a walk-through of



Sar Richards is settling into his new role as general manager of Chinook Winds Casino Resort.

the casino, something he does regularly to keep his finger on the pulse of the business, two things become readily apparent: nothing misses his analytical eye and he holds teamwork and openness as key components to a successful business.

As he greets dealers and other employees, Richards is mulling over the business details necessary for running a casino, such as slot turnover and the importance of caring for your customers, including making the high rollers feel especially attended to. Despite the view from his office, he likes to see the floor from the players' eyes, he says.

During this walk-through, he has an opportunity to put his methodologies into practice when a player picks out Richards, dressed handsomely in a crisp, pinstriped suit and colorful tie, as a figure of authority. He tends to her concern immediately, although he needn't have personally. One of his employees was only a half-step behind to help her. With a simple glance, the employee knows where to pick up the conversation, and the customer is smoothly transferred, her issue quickly resolved.

"I appreciate his ability to talk to people, handle the issues and resolve the issues," Pigsley says.

Getting to know the "team members," as he refers to his employees, is the part of the job that has been the most fun, he says. He values their opinions and suggestions as he feels strongly that the people doing the job need to have input about how it's done. To that end, he instituted the "Ask the GM" policy while he was still the interim GM.

Employees can drop a question into the box, and he'll answer it in the next "Tillicums" employee newsletter. So far, it's been highly successful, he says.

"There's 900 opinions out there, and you've got to listen to all of them, because that's where the ideas are coming from," Richards says.

Some of the suggestions have helped in streamlining costs, a necessity in maintaining the same level of customer service in a time of economic turmoil, he says.

"There's more openness, so they know what's going on and they can get involved," Richards says.

Although headcounts are up, customers are not spending as much they used to, which is keeping numbers pretty stable, he says, and customers are more aware of how they spend their dollars.

Manning the helm of Lincoln County's largest employer, while at the same time being a small-business owner — he and his wife, Karen, own C&J Boutique in the historic Nelscott Strip — gives him a unique business perspective and understanding of the tourism economy.

"That makes me more efficient and effective at looking at what we do," he says. "Every dollar is important."

A Man of Vision

Although the troubled economy necessitates a mindset acutely aware of the present, it doesn't stop Richards from formulating his vision for the resort's future. Halfway through a suite remodel in the resort's hotel, he takes a look at one of the newly completed rooms. He points out details such as granite countertops and new furniture, much in the way you would when giving a tour of your own home.

Stepping out onto the balcony and its panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean, it becomes clear that his vision stretches as far as the view.

Included in that vision is a piece of oceanfront property that has thus far remained undeveloped — Lot 57.

The parcel, which sits to the north of the casino, could one day play host to a ground-floor convention center and more hotel space. Given that the current second-floor convention area and limited hotel space are two of the biggest constraints

on the casino's ability to diversify its large-group offerings, Richards says he hopes to have a plan for how to develop Lot 57 by the end of this year. And he is in the process of developing a 5- to 10-year plan so employees can see, too, the path on which he'll lead them.

A Personal Touch

Richards' check of the golf resort on this summer day is more of a drive-through than a walk-through, given the stunning weather.

As he drives along the golf course, he shares more of his vision, which includes an expansion of the golf course and more tournaments, and also an opportunity to see the easy manner with which he interacts with his employees and customers.

Stopping on the putting green to say hello to Lincoln City Councilor Dick Anderson, an avid golfer, the two take a moment to discuss their recent youth golf clinic partnership, which allowed area kids an opportunity to develop a love for the game. Returning to the pro shop, Richards jokes easily with pro shop associate Donna Harris and fitness center manager Maxie Kinney, whose fondness of Richards is clear.

"I was so pleased," she says of his appointment. "I had him trained, and I didn't want to break in a new one," she adds with a smile.

Richards has also been adeptly handling the challenges of working for a nine-member council, all of whom bring different experiences and ideas to the table, Pigsley says.

"That's the beauty of a board — you get all these great ideas," she says.

Pigsley says she's looking forward to working with Richards on the visioning for the resort and is confident he'll make them all proud.

"He's a bright and shining star for his family and the Tribe," she says.

News Guard photo by Allyson Longueira