

The Day - Casinos' leadership now in hands of tribal members

Written by Administrator
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Jason Guyot was 13 years old when Foxwoods Resort Casino debuted in 1992.

When the doors flung open, he was standing next to his mother, Barbara Poirier, who would serve a term on the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Council from 1993 to 1995. At the time, there was no plan to ever close the casino — not for a minute, let alone 11 weeks.

But that's what happened when the coronavirus struck.

And right in the middle of the shutdown, following the brief tenure and abrupt resignation of John James, the tribe named the 42-year-old Guyot interim chief executive officer, adding the job to the one he'd held for years — senior vice president of resort operations.

Last week, the tribe dropped the "interim" from Guyot's title, naming him president and CEO and making him the first tribal member ever to hold Foxwoods' top position.

Jeff Hamilton, Mohegan Sun's president and general manager, is the third member of the Mohegan Tribe to lead Foxwoods' chief rival.

Rodney Butler, the Mashantucket chairman, said Guyot's promotion was bigger news than the announcement two days later that the Mashantuckets had reached a gaming-expansion agreement with Gov. Ned Lamont and the Mohegans. The deal could lead to the legalization of sports wagering and online gaming in Connecticut.

"Hopefully, he'll be leading us for decades to come," Butler said of Guyot. "It's at the core of who we are. It's about self-governing as a tribe. There's no better sign of that than to have a tribal member in Jason's role."

Guyot, who grew up in Norwich and graduated from Norwich Free Academy and Mitchell

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College in New London, acknowledged the circumstances were daunting when he took over Foxwoods in mid-April.

“The CEO had just resigned, we were in the middle of a closing, with no reopening date on the horizon,” he said in an interview. “I think we came out of it so well because we focused on the right things — safety and security — and trying to anticipate when the right time (to reopen) would be.”

The shutdown, which lasted from mid-March to June 1, 2020, allowed Foxwoods to “reset,” Guyot said.

“I am very analytical. I used the analytics team,” he said. “We took a look at previous business volumes, performance indicators and recreated the entire staffing model. ... We made some tough decisions about reducing our workforce by more than half. Unfortunately, many long-term team members still are not back. We’re still not out of the woods.”

Guyot has a history of taking advantage of opportunities.

“I wasn’t the biggest fan of school,” he said. “But based on opportunities available through the tribe, I graduated college with a bachelor’s in behavioral sciences. I thought I’d be in social services.”

He’d gotten a taste of the hospitality industry while working as a bellhop one summer at Foxwoods, and in 2003 started working at the casino as an employment and diversity manager. In his 18-year Foxwoods career, he’s held senior positions in human resources, marketing, gaming and hotel operations.

Guyot gravitated to the operations side of the business after Foxwoods added MGM at Foxwoods in 2007, the freestanding hotel and casino that’s since been renamed The Fox Tower. In 2015, he took the general managers program at Cornell’s School of Hotel Administration.

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State Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, whose district encompasses the gaming tribes' reservations, is among those who have lauded the Mashantuckets for handing Guyot the Foxwoods reins.

"I met him several times through the pandemic and found him to be someone who knows his facts and is very qualified for the CEO's position," Osten said. "It's exciting to see a tribal member in this position for the first time. It's a great story."

Guyot said he recognizes that holding Foxwoods' top executive position as a tribal member makes him a role model for younger tribal members.

"Part of the reason I've taken my career so seriously is that I want to deliver the same support to other tribal members that I received," he said. "That's an added weight, but at the same time it's a driver for me. In the grander scheme, Foxwoods is owned by the tribe but not all members are interested in working here. Based on how interconnected we are with the community, there are tremendous leveraging opportunities that can help members do whatever they're interested in."

According to the tribe, Foxwoods employs 114 tribal members, including 11 at the director level and above.

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Hamilton, Mohegan Sun's top executive, joined the casino in 2004 and was named president and general manager in December 2019, succeeding Ray Pineault, also a Mohegan tribal member, who was promoted to regional president of Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment, the tribe's corporate gaming arm. Pineault had succeeded Bobby Soper as Mohegan Sun's president and general manager in 2015. Soper was the first Mohegan tribal member to lead Mohegan Sun.

Last week, Pineault was named interim president and CEO of Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment.

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Hamilton, 38, grew up in Groton, graduated from Fitch High School and attended Seton Hall and the University of New Haven — opportunities his tribal membership opened up to him.

“More than 2,000 tribal members depend on the (tribal) organization for things like health care and education,” he said. “When the casinos were built, both tribes invested in education. If you’re willing to dedicate yourself to a better education, it can make such a big difference.”

After considering a career in social work, Hamilton took an entry-level job in human resources at Mohegan Sun, obtained a master’s degree in business administration and ascended through the management ranks at the casino.

The Mohegans’ goal always has been to have tribal members running their businesses, he said.

James Gessner Jr., the Mohegan chairman, said as much in a statement last week.

“A goal of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act is to have Tribal citizens gain the education and experience necessary to one day run businesses for the Tribe,” he said. “The Mohegan Tribe is the embodiment of that spirit, as we consistently place our members in critical leadership roles.”

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