

Why I Became A Lawyer: Completing The Journey Home

By **Jason Hauter** (May 15, 2019, 4:53 PM EDT)

This article is part of a monthly series in which attorneys reflect on the formative life experiences that helped lay the groundwork for their careers in the legal profession. In this installment, Jason Hauter of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP describes how his desire to reconnect with his family's Native American roots, and to find a way to be of service to his community, led him to become a lawyer focusing on tribal issues.

Through my mother, I am an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community, a federally recognized Native American community located near Phoenix, Arizona. My mother and her story had the largest influence on my becoming a lawyer, and my decision to enter the legal profession was driven by the desire to return to my tribal community and help it and other tribal communities in any way I could.

My mother was born in 1950 in Phoenix, Arizona. Her mother was Pee Posh (aka Maricopa) and Akimel O'otham (aka Pima), the two tribes that form the Gila River Indian Community. My mother's father was a member of the Hopi Tribe and a World War II veteran. Unfortunately, my grandfather suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. My grandmother's relationship with my grandfather did not last, and my mother never knew her biological father. Not surprisingly, my mother rarely talked about him.

After my mother was born, my grandmother married a non-Native American who was farming at Gila River. Soon after they married, my grandmother moved to eastern Washington, to be closer to her husband's family. My mother grew up in eastern Washington on a farm in a predominantly white rural community, far from her extended Native American family in Arizona. Growing up, she became fully assimilated in the dominant white culture. She did not learn how to speak Pee Posh, and was rarely in contact with her family at Gila River.

My grandmother had grown up speaking Pee Posh, but did not teach her language to my mother or my aunts and uncles. My grandmother told me that she did not teach her children Pee Posh because there was no need to use it where they lived. My grandmother was also conditioned not to use her language while attending boarding school in Phoenix. She told me she was only allowed to speak English at school, and was beaten if she was caught speaking her own language. As result, my mother grew up without knowing her tribal traditions in any meaningful way.



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After graduating high school, my mother left to attend Western Washington State College at Bellingham, Washington. There she met my father, who had recently returned from the Vietnam War. My father, who is non-Native American, grew up in Renton, Washington, in a typical post-World War II, white, middle-class suburb. Like many students of the late 1960s and early 1970s, both of my parents were active participants in the counterculture.

During this turbulent time my parents took a class from Vine Deloria Jr., who, in 1969, had published his book "Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto." It was this class, and the general questioning of the dominant society's norms that was taking place in colleges and universities around the country, that inspired my mother to become more connected to her Native American heritage. During this period she briefly visited Alcatraz Island, during its 19-month occupation as a protest by Native American youth to demand self-determination for American tribes. She also visited her home in Gila River.

In December 1971, I was born near Bellingham. By the time I was four, my parents were living separate lives. My mother remarried, and moved to Arizona to be close to her mother, who had retired to Parker, Arizona, on the Colorado River Indian Tribes' reservation. Although Parker was not her tribal community, my mother made it her home and decided to raise my three sisters and me there.

Living on the reservation in Parker in the 1970s and 1980s, I saw that there were clear racial distinctions between Native Americans and the white community that lived there. It was growing up there that I became aware that I was Native American, and that this distinction was something to be proud of — but also the cause of insecurities, given the racist attitudes of some in the white community, and the resentment this caused within the tribal community.

Until I was 16, I lived most of my life with my mother in Parker when school was in session. In the summer, I usually lived with my father, who was often on the move. Oscillating between Parker and wherever my father was at the time forced me to develop skills to adapt to changing environments and different subcultures. At the time, I did not enjoy this back-and-forth between my mother and father, which left me with the sense that I did not have a true hometown, and was not from any place in particular.

On rare occasions I would take trips to Gila River, to visit family that I barely knew. I loved these visits, especially when my great-grandmother, grandmother and mother were all together. My grandmother eventually moved home to Gila River to be near her family. My mother sometimes talked of returning home as well, but she had built a life in Parker and seemed reluctant to leave it.

I would not change anything about my upbringing. I was able to experience new places and new people in ways most people do not get a chance to when they are growing up. But I was ungrounded and unfocused, and school was not a high priority. After graduating high school, I attended Northern Arizona University, but I soon quit and I got a job working in construction.

In July 1995 I met the woman that I would marry. One of her first questions she asked me was, "What do you want to do with your life?" My response was that I wanted to return home and help the Gila River



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Indian Community, although I did not know in what capacity. After I married my wife I returned to school, eventually graduating from the University of Washington in 1999.

As graduation approached, an adviser asked me about my next steps. I said that I was thinking of going to graduate school and pursuing a Ph.D. He asked what I wanted to do. I responded that I wanted to return to Gila River and help my community. He said getting a Ph.D. would probably not help achieve my objective, and asked whether I had ever considered law school. I do not recall imagining becoming a lawyer until that conversation.

To my wife's chagrin — she jokes that she would have never married me if she knew I was going to become a lawyer — I enrolled at the University of New Mexico School of Law, because it had a strong federal Indian law program. My wife eventually forgave me, and I graduated in 2002.

My first job was with the Gila River Indian Community's general counsel's office. I worked there for nearly eight years, representing my community, and also getting to know the home I never knew. The return home was rewarding professionally and emotionally, and I was fortunate to be surrounded by many experienced lawyers, both in-house and outside counsel, that mentored me during my first job as a lawyer. During this time, my mother would call me on occasion to find out the latest news from home, ask me to clarify a legal question related to federal Indian law, or gossip about the politics in Parker.

In 2010 I was ready for a new challenge, and joined Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP's American Indian Law & Policy practice in Washington, D.C. On occasion, I would talk to my mother about returning home, and she said she would after she retired. But she never completed the journey home. Soon after she retired in 2016, she became very sick, and she died in February 2017. It was a bittersweet feeling when I found out I was going to be made partner at Akin Gump in 2018. The first person I wanted to tell was my mother.

Although I live in Washington, D.C., now, I still represent my tribal community, and I get to return often. I also have the privilege to work for other tribal communities, on a variety of issues that are often challenging but also intellectually stimulating. I love my job, and it is a joy to come to work each day. I would not be where I am today without my mother's influence — and my desire for both of us to return home.

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