



## A CONVERSATION WITH **Tara Smith**

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I initially came to the Department of Enterprise Services (DES) because of their DEI and anti-racism stance. Then Tara Smith, the new Director, recently appointed me her Chief of Staff. I was excited and honored because I know she possesses the passion, experience and leadership to help make real changes.

Here is a conversation she shared with me about her background, influences and goals...

### ***You are originally from Miami, Florida. What brought you to Washington State?***

Actually, I am originally from Sarasota, FL. Sarasota is on the west coast of the state and my entire family still lives there. I moved to Miami when I was 18 right after high school graduation, and lived there for 30 years. I loved Miami because I felt so much more comfortable being myself there and I blended in better. In Sarasota I always stuck out like a sore thumb!

I feel so grateful to my Miami community for helping me grow into the adult that I am today. I was able to build a good career, friendships, and network of support in so many ways. But somehow, in that deep place of inner knowing, I always felt that I would leave Florida one day and change my life completely.

Eventually...slowly...I began to realize that I was growing weary of the excessive energy that surrounds anything and everything in Miami. It really IS as bright and shiny and loud and fabulous as you may imagine it to be. I found myself trying harder and harder to keep up with everyone else, and not really caring so much about keeping up anymore. Honestly, I hated the weather! Every single July I would complain that I refuse to spend another year in that humid, torpid place. I know that sounds insane if you've lived in the Pacific Northwest all your life, but I was ready for cooler weather!

So I began seeking other places where I may want to live, starting with the US News and World Report's *Best Places to Live in the US*. I pored over those reports every year and visited a few cities across the country, applied for a few jobs to see what may happen, and never connected strongly to any one place.

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Within weeks, our landlord called to tell us that she was selling the apartment we rented in downtown Miami. She offered to give us first rights to buy, but at \$1 million we were not interested and took that as a sign that It Was Time. We began to look at houses, and jobs, and somehow all of the many moving pieces fell perfectly into place.

We arrived in Puyallup on August 20, 2021 after seven days of driving 8 hours a day across the country. With 3 cats. And this is the point where I have to clarify that my partner actually did ALL the driving while I held down the cats, LOL. We drove up to the house, sight unseen, with Chris Stapleton's *Starting Over* album playing, and broke into tears together because the house was perfect and we felt so much gratitude to be here.

***During your hiring process, what did the State do correctly and what areas need improvement?***

I was really impressed with the State's recruitment process overall. It was pretty rigorous – which is what I would expect for a position that holds this much responsibility. I counted a total of 8 different interviews overall, including the Governor and key stakeholders at different points.

It would have been nice if the process went faster, as there were long periods without feedback or progress, but it all worked out in the end and I'm very humbled to bear the responsibility for shepherding this special state agency and all of our 800 employees.

***What do you enjoy most about the work you are doing for the state/DES?***

The people, hands down. Not because I'm an extrovert – I am fitting in nicely with the rest of Washington's introverts actually! But I so enjoy leading people in a way that helps them grow and develop, feel heard and valued, and feel proud to contribute to the community that we live in.

I am a public servant at heart, and chose the field of Public Administration intentionally because I love the idea of giving back to my community. To this day, I remember and utilize different aspects of my public administration master's degree courses.

The combination of meaningful work that allows me to lead people in a servant manner is my jam!

***What role or stance (if any), do you or will you take when it comes to bettering and improving opportunities for the LGBTQ+ community in state government?***

I'd love to know more about how I can do just that. As a start, I am deeply committed to creating a safe environment for DES employees to be themselves at work. I am so excited to be working alongside the agency's first Chief Equity Officer who will help move that work forward to create a workplace that welcomes all people, including LGBTQ+, where all employees have opportunities for growth and leadership.

I'm so profoundly saddened to see what has developed in my home state following the recent "Don't Say Gay" legislation that so blatantly paints the LGBTQ+ community as predators. I am so relieved to be in a state where that is not presently happening at a legislative level, and promise to speak up if that ever becomes our reality here in Washington.

I hope that RAIN will allow me to remain involved in providing leadership to the work that is already being done across the state, and keep me involved in ideas and projects where DES can provide support.

***When it comes to intersectionality, you are a woman and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. How does this benefit or hinder your initiatives?***

I've become accustomed to being the only woman in the room on any given workday. That has brought its own challenges that still materialize in pretty subtle ways, where I wonder whether I was treated a certain way or spoken to a certain way because I'm a woman. I hope to see a day where those dynamics no longer exist, and I do a lot of work around supporting women to grow into leadership positions.

I've always been open about my sexuality across these 20+ years of my career, and I've been really fortunate that it has not negatively impacted

my ability to grow into successive levels of leadership. As far as I know, anyway! That likely has a lot to do with the fact that all of my career has been spent in a large metropolitan like Miami which has a higher number of diverse professionals than a smaller town would. I was not the first, or only, LGBTQ+ professional to be in leadership in my organization, and I really honor and appreciate those who were out and open before me and made my experience more seamless.

But, I do remember a time when I wondered how I could ever be open and honest about my sexuality with my family or at work. When this was all new to me, during my college days, it was a strange and surreal transition that I'm sure many can relate to. The pivot point for me – the point at which I decided that everyone on this earth can just Take Me or Leave Me as I am – was when I fell in love with a woman. Once I knew that this relationship was the best thing I'd ever experienced to date, nobody and nothing else mattered as much.

***What can we do as state employees to make our workplaces more inclusive and welcoming for marginalized groups?***

**Speak up.** When you're a bystander and you hear subtle or obvious discrimination, it's our responsibility to do something. It doesn't always have to be right there in the moment in front of everyone, but reporting it

is the right thing to do. I recommend reporting it to HR, who has a role and duty to protect you in your reporting. I was so moved by the recent words of Michigan Senator Malory McMorrow when she said, "Hate wins when people like me stand by and let it happen. I won't."

**Use visual cues.** I recently learned from an employee how impactful it was to see signs of acceptance and safety in the workplace through the display of pride flags or other messages.

**Be yourself.** I know that is easier said than done, especially in some places more than others. It takes courage, especially when you don't feel safe to do so. But, the more you choose to be yourself, the more others around you realize that they can, too. Don't be afraid to reach out to your agency leadership if you don't feel safe to be yourself at work, or the Office of Equity.

***Any words of wisdom you can share?***

Find your allies in leadership, those who will work to create a safe place for you. If you're lucky, they will be in your own agency and will be willing to escalate any concerns you have to the uppermost levels. You may be surprised that your managers and leaders really do care about this. And if they don't, go up the chain. Seek allies in leadership, even if they are in other agencies.

I, Tara C. Smith, will be your trusted ally if you need one.

