

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Ember Strange

President of GFOA's Women's Public Finance Network



GFOA's Women's Public Finance Network (WPFN) held its annual business meeting on June 5, 2022, and **Ember Strange**, chief financial officer of North Little Rock, Arkansas, was introduced as WPFN's next president. GFOA's **Elizabeth Fu** sat down with Ember to discuss her career path and her hopes for WPFN.

Ember offered four pieces of advice from her career journey.

1 Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone—you don't grow when you're comfortable.

While Ember was studying accounting at Arkansas State University, she came across BKD (now FORVIS), an accounting and advisory firm that was hosting interviews on campus. Intrigued by BKD's large presence in Arkansas, Ember interviewed during her junior year and was offered a position. After she graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees in accounting, Ember moved to Little Rock to work with BKD. Her first few assignments were with banks, but then she was assigned to an audit for the City of Little Rock, an assignment that became instrumental to her career. Ember and her BKD manager worked well together and continued to staff the engagement for the next two years. During the third year, the city's comptroller position opened, and the city's finance director walked into the audit room where Ember was

working and asked her to apply for the comptroller position.

Ember applied, interviewed, and was offered the position—but despite knowing the finance staff well through her auditing experience with Little Rock, she turned it down. “All I had ever done was auditing, I can’t run payroll, accounting, and accounts payable for the capital city of Arkansas,” she explained. But soon afterward, when another candidate couldn’t be moved forward, the finance director came back to the audit room, this time with the assistant city manager, to again offer Ember the position. Ember spoke with her BKD partner, who assured her that she was indeed qualified, and after some thought, Ember accepted the position and became the city’s comptroller at 25 years old.

Having a senior position at such a young age led to some uncomfortable situations. For example, during a job interview, the candidate asked, “You’re the comptroller for Little Rock?” Ember responded, “Yes—not what you were expecting?” “No, not really,” the candidate responded. “You’re kind of young.” The candidate didn’t get the job.

When something like this happens, Ember quickly establishes the tone of the meeting by showing her knowledge and her confidence. This also extends to situations in which she is the only woman in the room. Ember shared a recent experience when she asked an intern, a college-aged woman, to attend a meeting so she could watch the dynamic between Ember and a

bank team, all of whom were men. She wanted the intern to experience the interactions a woman faces in a male-dominated industry. “I have to make the bankers know that I am in charge of the meeting, and they want me to hire them. I need to run the meeting.”

2 Keep learning.

After an 11-year stint at the City of Little Rock, Ember felt it was time for something different, and closer to home. In 2019 she became executive director of the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) Foundation. She quickly discovered that she missed the challenge of the public sector, and the time to unwind during her longer commutes to and from work.

Five months into the job at UCA, the finance director role opened at the City of North Little Rock. Friends and colleagues encouraged her to apply, and despite “not being one who job hops,” Ember was excited about the opportunity to take on a new challenge and further her skillsets. She applied, interviewed on a Monday, and received an offer that afternoon. Three years later, Ember is still at North Little Rock as its chief financial officer.

3 Find something you're passionate about and get involved.

In GFOA, Ember has found a forum that helps her engage in her passion for public finance and to expand her connections. When she worked for Little Rock, the city would send its finance director, comptroller, treasury manager, and budget manager to GFOA's annual conference each year. Ember's first GFOA conference experience was in 2009 in Seattle, Washington, and she attended for a couple of years before becoming more involved through GFOA's standing committees.

Ember learned about GFOA's standing committees when she saw that applications had opened. Wanting to take on a new experience, she applied and became a member of the Accounting, Auditing, and Financial Reporting Committee. Reflecting on her first year, she described her initial reaction as "Oh my goodness, what have I gotten myself into—this is really technical." However, she quickly realized that everyone was going through similar operating challenges, and there was some comfort in knowing she wasn't alone. Ember quickly made connections with fellow committee members and discovered a particular benefit from being a committee member—the opportunity to ask others for guidance. For example, since North Little Rock's fiscal year ends on December 31, she can ask other committee members who have earlier fiscal year ends about implementing new accounting standards.

Today Ember is vice chair of the Accounting, Auditing, and Financial Reporting Committee. She admitted that the position both scared and excited her, but "I'm always up for new challenges."

4 Always strive to make a positive impact on the world around you because you never know how far a simple act of kindness can go for someone.

At another annual conference, Ember came across GFOA's Women's Public Finance Network (WPFN) annual business meeting and luncheon, and she decided to attend so she could learn more. Despite her initial reservations—she didn't see the full value of identity-based groups because she tries to be inclusive—her impression quickly changed. "Watching all the strong women in that group was really impressive," she said.


The women at the WPFN event reflected qualities that Ember lives by. She was raised by a single mom, and her family struggled financially when she was growing up. These early experiences motivated Ember to be self-sufficient and independent, qualities she instills in her 10-year-old daughter, Ava.

In the months leading up to her 2022 to 2023 tenure as WPFN president, Ember thought a lot about Ava as she considered her theme for the year. She reflected on what matters to her personally and developed the theme of "impact, influence, and inspire." These three words kept coming back to her as she thought about WPFN.

Impact: Ember was on a basketball team as a teen, and because her mom was often at work, she wasn't able to attend most of Ember's games. Her friends' parents would be in the stands cheering her on and taking her out to celebrate. The impact that her friends' parents had inspires Ember to pay it forward by letting Ava and her friends know that they can talk to her about anything and even serving as a troop leader for Ava's Girl Scout troop. For

Ember, much of WPFN is about the impact women can have on each other, including the next generation.

Influence: This past spring break she saw the interactions between Ava and her babysitter (also named Ava). She noticed how her daughter was borrowing mannerisms from Ava and how Ava was an influential figure to her daughter. Ember also noticed how she was also influencing her daughter. "My daughter...doesn't think she ever argues because she thinks she is explaining to me why she is right," she said, laughing. "She is just telling me. I realize that I say that to her a lot—I'm just telling you." It's hard to get mad at her when she's using my own words against me." And WPFN members can also positively influence one another on a personal and professional level.

Inspire: Many people have inspired Ember throughout her career. There were individuals who inspired her to get her master's degree early on, and there was her BKD partner who pushed and inspired her to work in local government. Ember points out that even the smallest act can inspire others. 

WPFN'S YEAR AHEAD

Ember is most looking forward to meeting more WPFN members. She was able to meet many in Austin, Texas, at GFOA's annual business meeting in June, and she hopes to connect with many others. Ember wants to make WPFN a more personal experience, so members can see the impact that WPFN can have. To that end, she will be focusing on several priorities for WPFN this year, including:

- Engaging members through network events, webinars, and WPFN's mentorship program.
- Increasing membership by 25 percent.
- Increasing the number of mentors in WPFN's mentorship program to achieve a 1:1 mentor/mentee ratio.
- Rolling out a welcome message to all new members.

We look forward to WPFN's year ahead.