



# Q&A

with  
**Lisa Marie Harris**



GFOA's **Timothy Martin** had a conversation with **Lisa Marie Harris**, director of finance for San Diego Water Authority, as part of GFOA's new series, FINE(ance) Fridays. This article was adapted from the January 7, 2022, episode, "I Was the Only Fallback." To listen to the full **FINE(ance) Fridays** conversation, go to [gfoa.org/fineance-fridays](https://gfoa.org/fineance-fridays) or search for GFOA on your favorite podcast platform. Episodes 1-7 are also available for download or streaming. The second season of FINE(ance) Fridays is expected to be released in late summer 2022.

**L**isa Marie Harris, who grew up as the eldest of seven kids in a family of limited means, speaks candidly about making her own opportunities, being a woman in the workplace, and proving oneself. Lisa Marie is director of finance and treasurer for the San Diego County Water Authority, where she oversees the agency's \$2.3 billion debt portfolio and \$385 million investment portfolio. She is also responsible for the development of the biannual \$1.5 billion operating budget and the setting of annual rates and charges. Before that, Harris was chief deputy treasurer for the County of San Diego Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office; executive director of the California Debt and Investment Advisory Commission (CDIAC); assistant deputy airport director for the City and County of San Francisco – San Francisco International Airport; and senior vice president for Siebert Brandford Shank LLC. She is a past executive board member and has served on GFOA's Debt and Nominations committees, as well as being a past executive board member for Women in Public Finance (WPF) and a founding member and vice president for WPF's San Diego chapter.



### **You grew up in a big family in San Francisco.**

I was the oldest of seven kids, and being the oldest, you grow up having more responsibilities, which shaped who I am today. Taking leadership roles was a natural transition for me, with the skills I learned from being the oldest child—I had to be accountable, I had to be responsible, I had to help take care of my siblings. And I have no regrets about that because it shaped who I am today, and I'm grateful for that. I didn't get to participate in extracurricular high school functions like volleyball—I really wanted to play volleyball!—but when I wrote that into my narrative when going to college, both the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan were excited about that part of my story. They saw significant value in it.

### **How did you balance your high school education and moving toward college with your responsibilities at home?**

At that point I was used to juggling the responsibilities, and my siblings were older then, too, which helped. I was also working a few days a week to make some pocket money, and I really enjoyed working. It got me outside the house. My grandmother owned a convalescent home, so I was a nurse's aide for one

or two summers. One of the main things I learned there was that I didn't want to wear white, and I didn't want to work in a hospital. By the third summer, I got to work at Baskin-Robbins, and I was so happy because all I had to do was scoop ice cream. Working in a convalescent home is hard, and I respect everyone who works in the medical profession, but it wasn't for me.

These jobs allowed me to explore the world outside my house, and they allowed me to explore what I did and didn't want to do. That's half the battle.

### **I assume that you had to learn financial management early on. Did that help shape the rest of your life?**

It was two things. The experience in the convalescent hospital, and I remember my dad taking me with him when he went to pay the insurance. In those days, you had to pay everything in person or put it in the mail. And I remember seeing this beautiful black woman, and her hair and makeup were perfect. I thought, I don't know what she does, but that's how I want to look.

And when I got my first job, my father helped me open a savings account and taught me about saving any money I didn't spend. I would go make my deposit every week, and that instilled discipline.

**You've mentioned that money was tight in your family, and Berkeley is not an inexpensive school. How did you make that happen?**

Berkeley is one of the top schools in the country, and it just happened to be the one that I could get to from where I lived. But there was no way my father was going to be able to contribute. He wanted to, but it just wasn't possible. I just started working part-time, and what's amazing is that at that time, a semester there was \$400. So, if I had a place to live, I could make ends meet by working part-time, without any loans. Of course, it's a completely different story today, and it's so unfortunate that the picture looks so different 25 years later.

I had to leave home before I graduated because of my parents' situation. I lived with my aunt for a while, but that didn't work out. I ended up living with my boyfriend's grandmother, who only charged me a minimal amount of rent. And I wound up marrying my boyfriend, so that turned out all right! I felt like I was homeless for a moment in time, but under no circumstances was I going to quit Berkeley.

That brings me to another influential factor. I read books, all the time, and that was something that gave me peace through all the chaos. One of them was *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (by Betty Smith). In the book, the daughter was battling with the mother because she wanted to go to college, and they couldn't afford it. The mom won out and the girl didn't go to college, and I vowed to myself that wasn't going to happen to me.

I had this compelling belief that once I got into Berkeley I was going to graduate, and the challenges I was going to face didn't matter. I was going to get through it.

In the first semester I had to move twice, and my tuition wasn't paid for, and I was on probation because I didn't have the books I needed to pass my classes, but everything started settling down and I developed a plan for paying for everything. By the third year, I applied to be independent from my parents, which is hard to do. I had to keep appealing over the period of a year to prove that I wasn't getting any support from my family. Someone finally approved my application, and then I was able to get grant money, which made my life at Berkeley much more secure.

You just have to persevere. There are always highs and lows, and there's always something standing in your way because four years is a long time.

**You had so much going on, and so much stress. Would it be fair to say that you were determined to have a better life than you grew up with?**

Once I had to leave home, I realized the only fallback was me. And that's a lot to motivate anybody. You have to focus on achieving something, like graduating and getting a job, so you can take care of yourself. I think too often when you grow up in a poor community, there's a tendency to just let your children go when they're 18, and that's a legacy that needs to stop. Nobody should have to leave the family at 18 and be expected to find a way to succeed.

**As you started moving on from college, had you already figured out what you wanted to do with your life?**

That was the great thing about working. I explored the kind of talent and skills that I had. One of the best jobs I had at Cal was in what was called student advising. This was a program that managed letters of recommendation from professors, mostly for medical and law school students, as part of their application packages. We also offered counseling services for students who were trying to figure out what they were going to do with their lives. All the programs for graduate school funding also came through the student advising office, and I got to see everything that was available. One of the programs I learned about was the Sloan Fellowship for Public Policy. Its goal was to encourage minorities to consider government service, to get more minorities into leadership positions in government. I was the last cohort of their 10-year program. After a summer program at Berkeley, I applied to several of the schools and got into the University of Michigan. Sloan provided a year of funding, but Michigan matched it, so I got two years. I also got a stipend. I was set. I didn't have to work anymore. I could just focus on getting my master's degree in public policy.

I probably would have gone to business school, but the Sloan program gave me the ability to consider going into government. The program served its purpose, at least for me, because I've been one of the few Black females in leadership, wherever I've worked.

I've been in the public sector for my whole career—except for two years when I tried to be an investment banker.

**Between your undergraduate and master's degrees, you had an internship with the City of Richmond, California, and after you finished your graduate degree, you went to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).**

It was great because everyone there is well-educated; it felt like an extension of being in college. The people there are so dedicated and care so much about the environment. I started in the toxics department, doing economics work. They had a process of negotiating with companies instead of having to regulate them, which was very difficult. One of the first negotiations I had was to get rid of a chemical used to blow air into foam, and it was causing cancer. I had to negotiate with the CEO of the company to figure out a way to build the foam without the chemical. I was 25, and I was in a room by myself with two old White people, and they looked at me like, do you belong here? And I wondered if I belonged there, too. But I negotiated, and after the first meeting, they knew I was going to be it, and we ended up with a resolution. The company changed the chemical voluntarily, and that was an amazing experience, as a young person, to be given so much responsibility, and to be successful. I won an award for that, too!



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#### **And then you went to the airport.**

I was at the EPA for five years, first working with toxics, and I also worked with solid waste. That was a nice transition to a broader environment. I got to travel all over the country looking at cement kilns and incinerators that produce power—and waste. I probably would have stayed there for my whole career, but my husband was finishing law school and we wanted to go back to the Bay Area to have the support of our extended families when we had children.

I had to start all over with my career. At the EPA, all the economic work is done at headquarters in DC. They have a regional office in San Francisco, but my line of work wasn't available there. I read *What Color Is Your Parachute* (by Richard Nelson Bolles), a book that helps you evaluate your skills when you're starting over in your career. I was encouraged to use my network, so I asked University of Michigan and Berkeley to send me a list of all their top graduates who lived in the Bay area. Then I asked those people for informational interviews. I met with top people at companies and while nobody could give me a position, one meeting led to another, and everyone gave me advice. I ended up talking to a supervisor at one of the departments in the City of San Francisco who told me to apply for a job as an analyst in the 911 Department, and after a year or two there, that led to being the finance director of the newly created 911 Department. We sold a couple of bonds there, and then the deputy director at the San Francisco Airport opened up, and I had enough experience to get the interview.

The only inconvenient part was that I was pregnant with my son. I didn't want to tell anyone, so I didn't. And the process took so long that by the time I finally got the offer my son had just been born, and I had two weeks to decide. So, I started two weeks after my son was born.

It was a big job because we were building what was then the new international terminal, a two-million-square-foot, \$2-billion facility. My biggest task was to issue bonds to pay for it. I had just inherited the plan. Instead of issuing \$2 million in bonds in one fell swoop, like Atlanta had—that was a \$1 billion

deal, and they were the first one to issue that much at one time—we issued \$500,000 twice a year. Looking back, I'm not sure that was the best use of time, but I sold four debt issuances over two years. Once we closed a deal, we were planning the next one.

It was a great experience. I had 20 financial professionals working with me to get this done—the bond counsel, the financial analysts, the underwriters, dealing with the rating agencies. I was 31 at the time, so I was relatively young, and some of the bond team knew I'd just had a baby, so they had doubts. But when I came into my first meeting, they understood that we were going to get it done. When I start work, you'll find that I'm no joke.

We were one of the largest issuers in the State of California at the time, and that's what got the attention of the state treasurer, Phil Angelides. Whenever high-level executives vet people, they just ask around first, and when he did that, my name kept coming up—so that's how I got an interview with him.

#### **Was your pregnancy, and having just had a baby, a real concern then?**

I didn't know if it was something that would make me lose the job, but I wasn't going to take that chance. I don't know what the rules were back then, but it was certainly something I was worried about.

For the interview after my son was born, I had to bring him with me. My husband came, and we brought my daughter, too. It was a family affair. And I told him, stay in the car. It should only take 20 or 30 minutes. But when I got out of the interview, he was in the lobby, with the baby crying, and my daughter running around talking to everybody.

#### **But it wound up being your “I did it” moment.**

For me, that was the job where I broke the glass ceiling. It was the first job where I made more than \$100,000, and felt like, wow—I got it done. And then, once I got it, it was so much work—not just to prove myself to everybody, but to get the job done. At the time the mayor was Willie Brown, and John Martin was the airport director, and they were very important people who were trying to get this incredible facility completed on time and on budget, and I was at the helm of that.

I was well-educated and had good experience, and the complex analytical work I'd done at the EPA was much harder—not to belittle public finance!—so that made the analytical work as a finance director easier, at least.

#### **After working at the airport, you moved to the County of San Diego, California. Can we talk about that, and when GFOA got on your radar?**

It got on my radar when I worked at the state treasurer's office, when I was the executive director for the California Debt and Investment Advisory Commission (CDIAC), which is funded by bond issuances. It's an organization that provides training in public finance, and it also has forums and conferences,



and does research on public investments. I got much more exposure to debt and investment because we also served as the clearinghouse—all the state debt issued goes through the CDIAC, as well as all investment policies. From that information, we're able to do research.

Also at the time, Phil Angelides was running for governor, which made the job that much more high-profile. He asked me to develop a strategy to get more exposure for CDIAC, and so one of the strategies I developed was to partner with organizations like the California Treasurers Association, and the California Finance Association. I asked for a time slot in their conferences, which helped boost CDIAC's profile. I'm very happy about the legacy I left with CDIAC.

From that experience, I started attending all the GFOA debt committee meetings, and I applied to be on the committee. I was still learning about GFOA and how influential it was or wasn't, and I remember having breakfast with the SEC regulator and asking her if GFOA was influential in the industry. She told me absolutely—that's one organization you need to be a part of. And coming from her, I really heard it.

From then on, I was on the debt committee, and when I rolled off that I was on the investment committee, and I was the chair of the Black Caucus—once I'm in, I'm all in. I ended up being an executive board member. I encourage all my staff

to at minimum be a member, but I encourage them to not just seek membership, but also to seek leadership, so they can influence their organization. And GFOA has been there every step along the way. It's a great organization to leverage talent I can't use at work, like helping with conferences. I remember one of the most fun experiences was helping plan the Black Caucus party—and everybody wants to go to the Black Caucus party—but planning it is a lot of work.

I think one of the strengths I have now at the water authority is just leveraging years and years of education and experience. I'm very well attuned to the trends in the finance world, so I can use my own thought process to decide if I agree or disagree with something. We're just bombarded with advisors who help us, but as a lifelong learner, sometimes I tell my advisors what should happen, and then they think about it and agree with me. You shouldn't count on an advisor; you should have your own thoughts and beliefs about a particular issue. GFOA equips finance directors to have those beliefs and experience and knowledge. The trouble some finance directors get into is because of relying on some lawyer or advisor, but at the end of the day, if everything falls apart, it's the staff member who loses their job. You're going to be held accountable even if a financial advisor or a lawyer told you to do it.

## FINE(ance) Fridays



Each **FINE(ance) Fridays** podcast features a candid conversation with a GFOA member. We talk about their life's journey and the important people who helped shape their path through a successful career in public finance. In their pursuit of building stronger communities and fiscal responsibility, you begin to see patterns emerge: a hardworking drive, a dedication to safeguarding public funds, a willingness to share and pass their success on to others, and a good sense of humor.

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**You certainly set the bar very high for GFOA membership. Now, what's your experience at the San Diego Water Authority been like, and what does the future hold?**

I've been at the San Diego Water Authority for seven years. It's an amazing, very challenging experience. It's a utility, like an airport—we rely on the revenue we generate rather than on taxes. That's another reason why the airport experience helped me. Relying on revenue from water sales makes the finance director's job that much more complex, because you have to generate the revenue for your organization.

Water is so complex, and especially in San Diego. We are essentially a desert, so without the San Diego Water Authority, we wouldn't have water. We import 90 percent of our water through the infrastructure built by the water authority, and we built \$3 billion of infrastructure—dams, a desalinization plant that's one of the biggest in the Western Hemisphere, 300 miles of pipe to get water to this region. We only have 255 employees, so we're not a very personnel-intensive organization, but we're very infrastructure-intensive. We only deal with the wholesale aspect; we deliver the water to the city or a smaller district, and they sell it to commercial and residential customers.

I take pride in the work I do. And over the last few years, during the pandemic, there's been tremendous pressure. People already don't want to pay much for water, and then during the pandemic people were out of work and trying to make ends meet, and there was a moratorium on being able

to shut water off. It put pressure on us to keep increases to a minimum, to take the pressure off our member agencies. I had to develop a strategic plan to make all that happen—to have the fewest rate increases possible, but at the same time keep the water authority whole. We also have very high ratings, which we want to maintain because we have \$2 billion in outstanding debt. When you have that kind of debt outstanding, there's a lot to lose if your finances aren't in order. I was able to restructure some debt and call for some rate relief, at least last year and this year, and to maintain our ratings. We were put on a negative outlook, however, and I'm working hard to make that go away. We'll see what happens. It's been a challenge, and I'm so grateful that I was able to develop that plan, execute it, and make sure our 36 board members understood it—they're from diverse communities and financial backgrounds. The good news is that we were able to have very minimal rate increases last year and this year, and I've been able to maintain our rating at the same time.

It's been a challenge, but the experience I've had so far helped me develop and execute that strategy, and I applaud GFOA for always keeping me up to par with the issues at hand. In fact, we had a board member who wanted to do pension bonds, and I told him I don't do pension bonds, and I'll send you the GFOA advisory that explains why I don't. And that was the end of that. It was so nice—I didn't have to have a debate about it, and I had something in writing that I could give to him to support my position. It just gave me that much more clout, if you will, and that's the kind of support that GFOA offers. **■**