

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT



Airport Minority Advisory Council President and CEO Eboni Winbush (left) and Airport Minority Advisory Council Chair Ricky Smith present Ron Gomes (center) with the AMAC Hall of Fame Award at the 2023 AMAC Airport Business Diversity Conference in San Antonio, Texas, in June 2023.

Gomes Retires from HMS Host, Leaving Legacy of Impact and Service

Ron Gomes never intended to spend the peak of his career creating partnership opportunities for Airport Concession Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (ACDBE) firms to join with HMS Host to pursue contracts with airports nationwide. His goal was to become an excellent business development professional, rising through the ranks of the HMS Host organization and

leading efforts to win lucrative contracts for the company as the leading food and beverage concession operator in America. However, leadership in the HMS organization noticed his strong interpersonal skills and business acumen, making him a great candidate to lead the company's initiatives to attract ACDBE business partners to meet diversity and inclusion goals and help HMS Host compete for airport contracts.

Gomes was six years into his dream job as vice president of development when, after several requests, he agreed to accept the new role if they changed the title from vice president of government affairs to vice president of strategic partnerships. The role required Gomes to serve as the connection between the development and financial organizations of HMS Host and

ACDBE business owners seeking airport concession opportunities. “I didn’t have any experience with government, but I did have a lot of experience with business deals, so that is where I wanted to focus,” Gomes said.

The new position required him to apply the engineering and construction experience gained earlier in his career and his six years of development experience to foster win-win partnerships with ACDBE firms nationwide. Although he didn’t recognize it immediately, the position was a perfect fit for Gomes because it capitalized on his strengths – integrity and authenticity.

As he prepared to retire from the position in early 2023, these were the attributes most highly praised by industry colleagues who worked with him during his 16 years in the role. Although peers throughout the industry recognized his expertise and analytical skills, his integrity and commitment to fairness led to exceptional performance. The job required all these skills to navigate effectively between his colleagues at HMS Host, ACDBE business owners, and airport executives. “You have to combine integrity with intelligence and knowledge because if you have integrity but don’t know what you are doing, it’s hard for integrity to ring through,” Gomes said.

Realizing His Superpower

Gomes’ ability to help ACDBEs find partnership opportunities with a high probability of success was a hallmark of his tenure. He believed his greatest superpower was analyzing a potential business deal to determine if it was good for HMS Host and ACDBE firms to enter a partnership. He focused on coaching ACDBEs through the process to ensure they had a clear understanding of the expectations of the partnership and to ensure the deal was a good fit for the current situation. “Some deals are capital intensive, and the ACDBE has to have the financial ability to do the deal. Other deals require more of a time commitment, so if they have other commitments, they may not have the time for this deal,” Gomes said.

One piece of advice Gomes always shared with potential business partners was the airport business is a long-term commitment. Hence, the business owner needs to be ready for the long haul. He stressed that ACDBE partners rarely made much profit during the early years of an airport contract lasting up to 10 years but that if they stayed the course,



Ron Gomes (3rd from left) is congratulated by Yasmin Sheriff (left), and fellow HMS Host colleagues Shelby Scales, April Mackoff, Paul Mammalian, and Devon Ray after receiving the AXN ICON Award in April, July 2023.

the deal would turn out profitably in the later years of the agreement. “The biggest key to success is having patience and being financially astute. The owner must know that it’s a long haul, and they must have a laser beam focus on the dollars,” Gomes said.

JQ Enterprises Inc. President and CEO Sheldon Poole worked closely with Gomes. During these years, JQ Enterprises grew from partnering with HMS Host at the Raleigh-Durham International Airport to additional partnerships at the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport and the Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport in Little Rock, Arkansas. Poole enjoyed working with Gomes and particularly remembers their conversations about business success, and also their discussions about life and family. He is grateful for the insight Gomes provided on potential business deals. “Ron is number one in my book. Although he worked for Host, he would always give you both sides of the story to make sure a deal is right for you, and I trusted his insight,” Poole said.

A Graceful Exit

Due to the sensitive nature of strategic partnerships between HMS Host, ACDBE business partners, and airport clients, Gomes recognized the need for a smooth transition

when he decided to retire in 2023. He aimed to ensure the partnerships he helped create maintained a solid connection through his transition, including the relationship with airport clients. One of his final initiatives was leading the search for a replacement to continue the work he spent years developing and with the capability to lead the program to greater achievements.

The national search led to the selection of Shelby Scales, a former president and CEO of the Airport Minority Advisory Council and former director of the U.S. Department of Transportation Office of Small Disadvantaged Business Utilization. Gomes believes Scales is a great fit to take the program forward due to her deep industry relationships and leadership abilities.

HMS Host President and CEO Steve Johnson echoed Gomes’s sentiment in a press release after Scales joined the company. “HMS Host has developed an award-winning, industry-leading strategic alliances program that champions over 100 minority partners generating nearly \$500 million in revenue annually, and I cannot think of a more qualified and accomplished leader

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than Shelby Scales to take the helm of this important program," he said.

Scales' experience and expertise is important as the company moves to a new chapter in its history. HMS Host merged its U.S. operations with fellow airport concessionaire Hudson Group. The merger of Hudson Group's parent company, Dufry, and HMS Host's parent company, Autogrill, was finalized in February 2023, creating an integrated travel experience player serving 2.3 billion passengers in over 75 countries. The merger will unite two of the largest airport concession operators in the country. Gomes said the merger was rumored for some time but had yet to learn it was coming when he decided to retire. "Yeah, I didn't see that coming, and I certainly would have given Shelby a heads-up before joining the company, but she's the right person for the job," he said.

Leaving with Honors

Several industry associations recognized Gomes' impact on the industry during his tenure at HMS Host in 2023. The Airport Minority Advisory Council presented him with the Hall of Fame Award at the 2023 Airport Business Diversity Conference in San Antonio, Texas. AMAC also announced the creation of the Ronald J. Gomes Scholarship Fund (RJGSF) annual scholarship to provide funding to one



Ronald J. Gomes



Les Cappetta, former CEO of SSP America, announces the creation of the AMAC Foundation Ronald J. Gomes Scholarship Fund alongside Ron and Maria Gomes at the 2022 Airport Business Diversity Conference. The fund will provide funding to one or more minority students who have demonstrated an incredible devotion to their communities, made an impact on the next generation through tutoring engagements or mentoring, and/or demonstrated efforts to improve diversity and inclusion in their environments.

or more minority students demonstrating devotion to their communities, making an impact on the next generation through tutoring engagements or mentoring, and showing efforts to improve diversity and inclusion in their environments. Airports Council International honored him with its 2023 Leon C. Watkins Guardian Award for Excellence in Business Diversity. Airport Experience News selected Gomes as its AXN Icon for 2023.

"Ron Gomes has an exemplary record of encouraging and supporting business diversity in our industry, and his passion for helping underrepresented businesses succeed is clear in the outcomes his leadership has produced for those businesses and the people they support," said ACI-NA President and CEO Kevin M. Burke in a press release. "Through his personal mentorship of ACDBEs, industry professionals, and small businesses, Ron has proven that this is not just a job — it's a passion — and his work has made a meaningful difference in many lives."

The outpouring of acknowledgments and awards from colleagues across the industry humbles Gomes. He says he plans to build things in his home workshop, cherish time with his wife and family, and give back to his community through volunteer engagements. He is also awed by the idea of having a

scholarship named in his honor that will impact lives for many years. He says it still gives him shivers, and he's still digesting what it means.

He is also proud of his work for HMS Host and how he maintained his character throughout his tenure. Gomes said, "I came into this role; the table was set for me by some legends in the industry, and I didn't break the dishes. I honored what they built, tried to build upon it, and did it respectfully, thoughtfully, and meaningfully. I'm proud that I can leave knowing I didn't have to change who I was to do the job."