



Photography by Rick Swearingen

A Lesson in Hard Times

By Marcia Tillett-Zinzow

Holly Hoffman has had her share of ups and downs. But when she started getting accounts to balance, she finally hit her stride.

Today, Hoffman has her own business in Amherst called Sales Tax Advisory Network, in which she provides “sales tax audit insurance.” First, she gets her clients’ books in order; then she educates them in the importance of sales tax compliance and how to do it, and she adds a guarantee that she will represent them should they be audited by the state. “They’re really buying my advice and training, but they don’t realize it,” she said. “In their minds, they’re buying the guarantee.” she smiled.

She got the idea to specialize in sales tax while working for the Wisconsin Department of Revenue (DOR), where she was a sales tax specialist and speaker’s bureau coordinator for more than seven years after earning both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in accounting. Her work with the DOR set her up with a solid knowledge base to consult, and she gained significant speaking experience in that and prior jobs that honed her training skills.

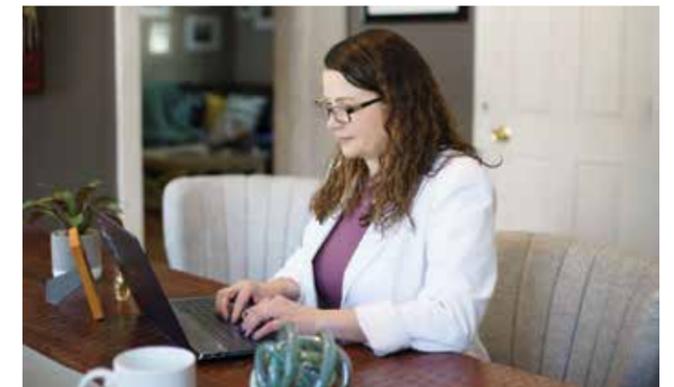
Hoffman is married to a law enforcement officer, has three daughters (Taylor, 25; Sydney, 14; and Payton, 13) and absolutely loves what she does.

“Most people don’t realize how wonderful sales tax is,” she said. “I think they get scared of it, but I enjoy it. It’s not as brutal as income tax, which has an intense busy season. Sales tax is fun, it’s challenging, and it’s all year round.”

All that said, the early years threw Hoffman some serious curve balls.

Fighting a rare disease

When she was in 9th grade at Merrill High School, she contracted blastomycosis — a rare fungal disease primarily affecting the lungs — at an October church



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camp event. “It was the 17th case in my town but the worst case they saw,” she said.

It went undiagnosed for some time because the doctors didn’t want to do a lung biopsy on such a young girl. Consequently, the fungus spread to her skin and bones, producing bumps on her shins and forearms. After injuring her knee working out, the fungus destroyed her right knee joint and anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). Hoffman had knee surgery that March, and a week later she was finally diagnosed — having been ill for about five months — but not until she had endured a frightening episode.

“When my mom brought me into the ER, I had a quarter of one lung left to breathe with,” Hoffman said. “I had 11 surgeries in one year, was in the ICU 11 days, had several blood transfusions, underwent chemotherapy and was in the hospital for a month and a half. After I was out of the hospital for one week, I almost died again because my trachea scarred shut, and I had to have two inches of it removed and reconstructed.”

But, she said, “the experience saved my life and gave me the power to face pretty much anything.” She would need that strength for the next decade.

Finding her way

Hoffman attended Winona State University in Minnesota after graduating from high school in 1991. She was a Spanish major until 1993, thinking teaching would be her career. But then she met someone, fell in love, dropped out of college and got married in 1994. The couple moved to La Crosse at her husband’s urging. Hoffman planned to return to school and had just started classes at UW-La Crosse when she found out she was pregnant. She gave birth to her daughter, Taylor Patel, in 1996, and the family moved to Milwaukee that same year. Eventually, Hoffman got a job tending bar to help pay the bills.

She was working as a bartender at The Chancery Restaurant & Pub on Downer Avenue when word came down that the restaurant needed someone to enter their accounts payables. No one else wanted to do it, and Hoffman needed a little extra cash. “It was extra hours, and you could come in and do it anytime. It was only two hours a week, so I volunteered,” she recalled.

At minimum wage (\$6.10 an hour at the time), it didn’t amount to much, but it was something to help put food on the table. Her husband wasn’t contributing much.

Hoffman enjoyed the work, and she discovered she was good at it. She started noticing things, like a bill for something they never received or a price that didn’t seem right. Management loved her. “My numbers always came out right,” she said.

Another one of the chain of four restaurants asked her to do their payables, and it didn’t end there. “I ended up doing three of them,” she said. “And I started thinking, ‘Hey, I’m pretty good at this!’”

Soon, however, she had to make a change. After discovering her husband had been unfaithful, she and her daughter left. She confided in a customer at the bar.

“I told him I was going through a divorce and couldn’t continue working evening hours anymore because I didn’t have a sitter. And he said, ‘Well, a 9-to-5 office job doesn’t bring in much money. You need to do accounting.’”



Hoffman checks her schedule often to make sure she’s still on track.

Hoffman told him she didn’t have a degree and didn’t think she was qualified. But he said he had heard her managers talk about her doing their accounts payables and urged her to pursue it. Recalling his words, she said, “He told me to go down to Robert Half and take the test and said, ‘Holly, you’re intelligent, and you’re a hard-worker — you can do this!’”

“And that’s how I got into accounting,” she said.

Hoffman’s first official accounting job with Robert Half paid \$12.25 an hour and was for a local law firm. Her second job as a temp was with J.M. Brennan Co., a local mechanical contractor, which brought her on full time. Twenty years later, the company is a client of hers.

College ... and then more college

After three-plus years with Robert Half, she moved on to regular employment and changed jobs numerous times, each job paying a little more than the last — struggling to support herself and her daughter. She had no family nearby to help. “We made it — but often on sheer grit,” Hoffman admitted.



The Hoffman family: Taylor, Ryan, Payton, Holly and Sydney.

Some of the places she worked included The Mark Travel Corp., where she traveled globally to train the company’s marketing departments on how to write contract language; M&I Bank, where she processed thousands of invoices per month; and GMR Marketing, where she served as compliance manager and developed and implemented a Sarbanes-Oxley training program for all 400 employees — from vice presidents to receptionists.

“Everyone there got the same training,” she said. “I wanted to be consistent in my messaging across all levels of the company, and they really appreciated that.”

In 2003, she met her current husband, Ryan Hoffman, who at the time was in the Air Force Reserves and part of the 440th Airlift Wing at General Mitchell International Airport. They married in 2005, just before he was deployed to the Middle East to provide personal security detail to Gen. John Abizaid, then commander of the U.S. Central Command.

After GMR, Hoffman worked as a financial specialist at UW-Milwaukee, where she managed all financial transactions for the Physics Department. When her husband came home, they moved to Amherst so he could take a job as a deputy with the Portage County Sheriff’s Office, where he is now a sergeant.

“I thought that since I was already with the state at UWM, I could easily just transfer my employment to UW-Stevens Point,” Hoffman said. “But it wasn’t that easy. I actually interviewed there 11 times before I finally got a position!”

That was 2009. In the meantime, she had given birth to two more daughters — Sydney and Payton — and that year, she also enrolled at DeVry University. By 2012, she truly had earned her bachelor’s degree. And then she earned a master’s in 2016.

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Hoffman credits the “job hopping” of her early career with much of her success today. “Having worked in various types of businesses in different roles has provided me insight into how data flows through accounting systems, how errors occur, how departments communicate and generally how people interact with each other.”

She credits her earlier hardships with the positive outlook she has today.

“Every day is a choice to be happy,” she said. “Always. That is what I learned.”

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