

Trent Shores Reflects On His Time As U.S. Attorney, Remains Committed To Justice For Indian Country

KOSU | By Allison Herrera

Published February 24, 2021 at 4:40 AM CST



▶ LISTEN • 5:20



Twitter.Com/USAO_NDOK /

U.S. Attorney Trent Shores speaks at press conference in Tulsa, Okla. in September 2020.

This is a bittersweet week for U.S. Attorney Trent Shores. [He tendered his resignation](#) effective February 28th to make way for President Joe Biden's new head prosecutor for the Northern District of Oklahoma. Over the last four years, he's worked closely with tribal and state leaders, as both adjust to last summer's landmark *McGirt v. Oklahoma* ruling.

KOSU's Allison Herrera talked with Shores about how his office has been transformed by the ruling, what he hopes for the next person who steps into his role and being the only Indigenous U.S. Attorney.

ALLISON HERRERA: When you were appointed by former President Trump four years ago, what was your vision for the job in the Northern District of Oklahoma and how has that changed over time?

TRENT SHORES: One of the things the senior leadership team and I talked about was



staff. I think we did that really successfully. And, we wanted to make sure we upheld our trust responsibility to all of the tribes in the northern district, tackling issues like domestic violence and missing and murdered Indigenous persons.

HERRERA: Did you anticipate the Supreme Court's decision in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*? And, how did you handle the cases and deal with families of some of the victims when you were preparing to take on cases?

SHORES: The approach that we took to every case, and certainly those that were upset in some way by the *McGirt* decision, we looked to what we needed to do for the victims to ensure that they received not just a measure of justice, but justice wholly and comprehensively. We walked them through the process.

I remember sitting through the oral arguments at the Supreme Court and wondering what the outcome will be? We saw a decision that held the United States accountable to treaty obligations that it had made. And once we saw that decision come down, from the very next minute, it was my intent as U.S. Attorney to implement that decision. I think that's the job I signed up for, to implement the law, to abide by rule of law. And in that case, that meant honoring the treaty and it meant upholding our federal trust responsibility, in particular with regard to public safety in Indian country.

HERRERA: Indigenous people have had a very fraught and difficult relationship when it comes to law enforcement in Indian country. How have you and your office worked to overcome the challenges and earn trust in Native communities?

SHORES: One of the things that we heard about early on and that I was able to help lead the charge on was [the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women](#). And I'm really proud of the work that we were able to do to advance that cause and direct more resources from the Justice Department in particular to help address that crisis and better understand it. I hope that those efforts will continue. But with regard to how is it that you build that trust? I think it's open communication and I think it's following through on promises and obligations and trust responsibilities that we, the United States Attorney's office have to tribes. One thing that you mentioned was the declination rates. That is something that it's disconcerting when you look at sort of the initial numbers. And as we dug into those as well, and there was something that was encouraging to me: some of those cases that people were describing as declinations were actually cases that were being referred to tribal attorneys general to be prosecuted. And I think that when a tribal attorney general decides to prosecute a case that's actually a great exercise of tribal sovereignty and tribal justice system. So, I don't consider that case a declination where justice wasn't pursued. It was just pursued in a different courtroom. And, I think the tribal court should get our full faith and credit for being the great justice systems that they are.

HERRERA: District attorneys across the state have expressed outrage over the decision and have publicly denounced the idea of tribes having greater jurisdictional authority. They often point to the notion that this will make eastern Oklahoma more dangerous because it will give more violent offenders the opportunity to be released early. How do you feel about how district attorneys have characterized *McGirt* and tribal sovereignty? And do you think they've been willing and respectful partners as the state, federal and tribal governments try to move forward?

SHORES: You know, I think that all of our district attorney partners are going through the same sort of experience that tribal attorneys general and the U.S. attorneys are- that overnight there was a change in jurisdictional responsibilities. And certainly, there have been some comments that I've heard that I refer to as the 'Chicken Little' comments that the sky is falling. But what we see in actuality is that the sky isn't falling. That we can actually and should be promoting confidence in what is and has been great partnerships among state, tribal and federal law enforcement entities. In fact, the rest of

is that we should be having positive interactive cooperative partnerships between tribal law enforcement and state law enforcement.

Certainly, I understand the concern. Any time that you're dealing with such a large body of cases where there were convictions and victims are having to go back through the experience of court cases and not knowing whether or not justice will be pursued or will be achieved a second time. I, too, would share that concern as expressed by the district attorneys. But at the same time, I have experience working with and in the tribal court system, and I know that they are just as dedicated to justice and ensuring that these victims get a measure of justice.

HERRERA: How does your background and experience as an Indigenous person inform your work both before and after *McGirt*?

SHORES: That's something that really means a lot to me. My history growing up in my family, we didn't talk about the fact that we had a Native American heritage. My grandmother was Choctaw. And the reason we didn't talk about it is because she grew up in an era where she was discriminated against. Native Americans weren't even United States citizens until 1924. She was born in 1900. It just wasn't something that she wanted us to openly talk about. So for me to have the opportunity to work at the Department of Justice and work on issues that pertain to Indian civil rights and improving public safety in Indian country and advocating on behalf of victims and being a tribal liaison that gets to go out and work in Indian Country with tribal leaders, it means so much to me on a personal and a professional level to have the chance to raise the level of awareness about the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous people. That, to me, is something I will carry with me forever. And to be frank, it's not something I'm done working on. I'm going to remain committed to pursuing these public policy issues for Indian country and for Native Americans.

Support this vital local reporting with a donation to KOSU. [Click here to give.](#)

Tags

Politics

Trent Shores

McGirt v. Oklahoma

Indigenous peoples

tribal sovereignty

domestic violence



Allison Herrera

Allison Herrera is a radio and print journalist who's worked for PRX's The World, Colorado Public Radio as the climate and environment editor and as a freelance reporter for High Country News' Indigenous Affairs desk.

[See stories by Allison Herrera](#)

Donate Your Car to KOSU!

[Get Started Here](#)



Hey! Did you enjoy this story? We can't do it without you. We are member-supported, so your donation is critical to KOSU's news reporting and music programming. Help support the reporters, DJs and staff of the station you love.

Here's how:

- Become a KOSU member.
- Sign-up for our newsletters.
- Subscribe to our podcasts.

[Donate To KOSU](#)

Related Content



Health

Long before Roe v. Wade was overturned, Indigenous women faced barriers to abortion

3 hours ago



World News

Ecuador's government has lifted a state of emergency amid an Indigenous-led strike

June 26, 2022



Health

Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade. What it means for Oklahoma

June 24, 2022



U.S. News

The U.S. is reckoning with its troubled past of Indian boarding schools

June 23, 2022

KOSU

Stay Connected



© 2021 KOSU

[About KOSU](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Public Documents](#)

[The KOSU Daily](#)

[How to Listen](#)

 KOSU
Morning Edition

Newsletters

Become a Member

