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# Oklahoma woman walked away from corporate life to follow her rodeo dream

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FORT WORTH -- Tana Poppino spent 20 years as a media and marketing executive for an Oklahoma utility company. She earned a steady salary. Good benefits. Lots of vacation.

And she walked away.

"It just wasn't my dream, plain and simple," she says.

Her dream was professional rodeo barrel racing, a future she first envisioned as a child competing in youth rodeos while growing up on her family's ranch.

Since quitting her job four years ago, Poppino qualified in 2006 and 2007 for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas. Her rodeo Web site says she has more than \$300,000 in career earnings.

The 46-year-old is competing this week at the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo.

"Most people thought I was really crazy," she said. "But I just felt peace. If I hadn't done it, I would have spent the rest of my life wondering if I could have made it rodeoing."

### Not just for fun

Poppino grew up in Colorado on her father's ranch, roping cattle and riding horses. Even after she left home, went to Oklahoma Panhandle State University and entered the utility business, the allure of the rodeo lingered.

For years, after arriving home from her day job, Poppino rode horses until darkness fell on her and husband Marty's 50 acres in Big Cabin, northeast of Tulsa.

She competed in amateur rodeos within 200 miles of Big Cabin -- about all the ground she could cover and still get home in time for work the next day.

"We'd get off work, jump in the truck, drive, compete, drive back, get not much sleep, go to work and then do it all again," she said.

It was fun, but that's all. Poppino's winnings were not in the same ballpark as her executive salary.

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"When you rodeo, you only get paid when you win," she said. "As much as you love to do it, you can't afford to do it full time just for the fun."

## Pursuing her dream

In 2003, that started to change. The horse Poppino was training seemed to have what it took for a shot at the professional circuit. Poppino entered some of the big building rodeos and did well.

She came close enough to making the National Finals Rodeo that she felt emboldened to try again.

The problem: The professional circuit required her to travel a lot farther than 200 miles.

"I would take a day off from work and go down to Houston and compete that night," she said. "Then I would drive home all night and be back at work the next morning. ... You can do that for a little while. Then it catches up with you."

She eventually made an arrangement with her company to take unpaid time off to compete. But in 2006, new management came in and told her to choose between her executive job and the rodeo.

She and her husband, who runs a business that sells trailers, talked it over. She had a good job and health insurance. Because the utility company is owned by the state, she was only nine years from retirement eligibility.

She quit.

"It was gut-check time," she said. "Boy, it is hard to flip that switch to a lifestyle that offers no regular income and long hours away from home. But I know if I didn't pursue my dream now, I never would."

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