



Catch Episode 4 on December 20

A conversation with Catissa Head
Leader, Advocate, Change Maker

Epic-Carteret Episode 4

A Conversation with Catissa Head: Leader, Advocate, Change Maker

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[Intro Music with Gulls]

Intro

Autumn (narration): Welcome to EPIC Carteret. I'm your host Autumn Ware, and I washed ashore on the Crystal Coast with my family in December 2020. I arrived worn and weary, but within a year, I found myself converted from an exhausted traveler to an energized participant in this vibrant community.

I'm a reformed recluse in a place that knows the secret of transforming strangers into neighbors. Now, I'm on a quest to uncover what makes Carteret County such an extraordinary place to call home.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): From cultivating business and learning, to fostering a spirit of celebration and gratitude, we've already covered a lot of ground in this EPIC community. It's easy to see why people come to Carteret County and why so many of us choose to stay, but it's also important to acknowledge that we're not all having the same experience in this beautiful place we call home.

Like most places, Carteret County is a mix of affluence and poverty. Some people live in multi-million dollar houses three months out of the year; others are just trying to keep a roof over their heads.

How we deal with poverty and unmet needs in communities isn't a fun topic or an easy one, and it may seem like an odd choice for the final episode of Season 1, but I believe how a community responds to the needs of its most vulnerable members reveals its heart and soul, and my guest for this episode epitomizes both.

I first met Catissa Head, the Executive Director of Coastal Community Action, at a Chamber of Commerce board meeting in January 2023. I didn't know anything about CCA at the time, and if you don't, never fear, we're coming back to it. But I warmed to Catissa right away when she started telling me about the regular trips she takes with her aging mom.

Catissa's mom has always had a yen for travel, something I can personally relate to, but she also has Parkinson's, which creates some travel challenges. Catissa doesn't let that get in the way of showing her mom a good time. With a compassionate cousin along to help manage her mother's condition on the road, she finds ways to give her mom experiences she never dreamed of for herself.

"When are we leaving?"

Catissa Head: Well, the first trip that really stood out was Washington. When Obama was running for president, she was just mesmerized. I think she said, oh, he was. She just always talked about him and I always was honest. Oh, he'll never make will not read of it and they're not going to have him. said she said, oh, I would love to be there if he becomes president. So I said, if he becomes president, I our being sort of so casting and he make it appear I'll take you up down and I'm I'll make sure I take that. and I woke up that morning. It was about 15 calls. All my phone, just my phone was going out. I did it and my mom asked if she would if I want to. She said, When are we leaving? I said, For what? she said. He wan. And you told me said, you're absolutely right. and you would have thought I took her to Disney World as a child. She was just so amazed and she was just so humble and grateful. She was like, thank you so much. No, thank you for giving me the opportunity and for even not making me feel like it was a burden for you I didn't even realize we were poor.

Until I got older, You never made me feel like, oh, I got to decide if I got to pay the light bill. But as a child, she sent me to Washington when I was in the sixth grade.

Autumn (narration): Catissa's mom faced what hundreds of thousands of parents around the world face on a regular basis – poverty. She was raising her two children with very limited resources, but she hadn't given up on the hope that she could provide her children with more opportunities than she'd had.

"A lot of times she wouldn't come, but we could go places."

Catissa: My mom grew up very poor. She was a reader, so she could dream about stuff, but she never thought she would be able to go. And so when she started having children, she said she wanted to expose us to different cultures, and so she was like, "We were poor. I didn't have any money, but I knew if I put you in these programs that you would be able to see the world."

She always exposed us to stuff, for instance, camping, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. And actually I used to play sports with the county, so I was on traveling teams. Now a lot of times she wouldn't come, but we could go places. So I think I give back to her by giving her trips.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): Catissa's mom didn't just broaden her daughter's horizons with education and experiences. She was also a role model of compassion, and she offered her Catissa early opportunities to make the world a better place through simple acts of kindness.

"She noticed there were a lot of older people that didn't have visitors."

She went to school and became a LPN, first, a licensed practical nurse, and she worked at a nursing home. She noticed there were a lot of older people that didn't have visitors, so on the weekend, she would take me to work with her, and I would go into some of the residents' room and talk with them, and they would be so happy to see me. Even when she was off, sometimes, she would take me to the nursing home, and I think that the reason why I have compassion for people is because she felt compassion for people. That's where it came from.

Autumn (narration): I'm starting with this little bit of backstory because it's so relevant to Catissa's role as the Executive Director of CCA. Founded in 1965, Coastal Community Action projects are designed to decrease poverty in our communities; to address the needs of our most vulnerable individuals, including people with disabilities, children, and the elderly and to provide services and activities addressing employment, education, better use of available income, housing, nutrition, emergency services and health.

Or as Catissa puts it:

"I feed children everyday."

Catissa: I feed children everyday. I keep houses warm. We repair homes, I pay rent for people. I'm here to build development centers. I'm here to make an impact on these communities that we serve.

Like I tell people all the time when I go out: unless you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, you have encountered poor people. You've been impacted by CCA. You may not have known it.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): Originally from Georgia, where she worked for a much larger community organization, Catissa was hired by Coastal Community Action in 2015. Answering a call to her purpose, Catissa moved to Carteret County, where she became the agency's official director in 2018.

This placed her in the precarious position of having to help her new staff and clients recover from the catastrophic impacts of Hurricane Florence.

Unlike the people she was serving, Catissa had never experienced a hurricane, and she struggled to understand the devastation she witnessed and how people in a community so vulnerable to hurricanes had been so unprepared for the storm's impact.

"What happens when all of the houses are impacted?"

Catissa: And one lady explained to me, "Let me tell you. I'm fixing to explain it to you because," she said, "look around. That was my mom's house, my sister's house, my cousin's house. Normally, when the storm comes," she said, "I can go to my mom's house, my cousin's house, but what happens when all of the houses are impacted? Where I'm going now?"

Then I spoke to an elderly lady that said, "My house is gone. They only want to give me \$16,000. Now, I got to get a loan. I just became a burden to my children. My house was paid for. So what am I going to do?"

I said, "Now I understand. I have to apologize because of my ignorance for coming in and just assuming."

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): In her role with CCA, Catissa saw first-hand the catastrophic effects of the hurricane on people with limited resources, and her experience serves as a reminder that we're all vulnerable to underestimating the struggles that our neighbors are enduring and overcoming. To

understand what the people around us are going through, we have to talk to them, have empathy, be willing to recognize how our own blindness prevents us sometimes from recognizing someone in need.

Following her experiences in the wake of Florence, Catissa was even more energized to carry out the organization's mission to empower individuals, families, and communities toward a better quality of life, starting with her own staff, who were long overdue for a raise.

"We doubled the salaries."

Catissa: One of the things I did when I got here, the staff was, I call them wage poor, people making \$7 an hour. They were wage poor, you know, so we doubled the salaries.

You can't serve people that are in poverty, but you're impoverished yourself. And when the storm hit, I said, I can't have staff that are damaged themselves trying to help them out. Let me get a staff that's well, that doesn't qualify for the services that they are rendering.

Autumn (narration): Increasingly destructive hurricanes and stagnant wages are just two challenges that hit different when you're strapped for resources. I say this with all the authority of personal experience, having spent nine years as a single mother barely scraping by on a teacher's salary.

It was hard during the best of times, but throw in any monkey wrenches – say, a broken heater mid-winter, and suddenly, I was looking at almost insurmountable odds.

Today, if you're poor, you're also dealing with the pandemic's fallout, shifting weather patterns, rising rents, and housing shortages. As such, Catissa and the Board of CCA recognize the critical need for Coastal Community Action to engage in continuous assessment.

This approach ensures the organization can effectively address the ever-changing circumstances affecting the economically vulnerable in Carteret County. They can proactively adapt their services to meet these evolving needs and support our community's resilience.

[music swells and fades]

"We do a self-assessment and community assessment."

We do a self-assessment and community assessment. We talk to clients. We talk to agencies. We talk to people in the community.

On that community assessment, it identifies if the county's changing. For instance, we have a Head Start center in Beaufort. Well, we know that's an older county now. People over there ain't having babies; people are retiring. So is that center going to be viable? Do we maybe need to look at adult day care?

For instance, my mom has Parkinson's. If I couldn't leave her at home, where would she go? Because I got to work. I'm by myself. I got to work. So do we need to look at that?

Or if there's already an agency [in the community] doing stuff, how can we partner with you? Maybe you can't put the roof on, but maybe I can.

Our self assessment, we address certain issues. Our board members, the Policy Council, they go out, and they assess our buildings, they assess our procedures, they assess our programs, and they may say, "We don't need that no more. Maybe we need to look at how we're going to address homelessness."

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): With a clear understanding of the community's needs, Catissa and CCA can shift the focus to action. When talking with her team, she emphasizes the importance of engaging folks wherever they are to foster communication and problem-solving within the community.

"How do we better the community?"

Catissa: How do we better the community? We need to have more community engagement activities where they come out, and we talk about crime. What you going to do about the crime in your neighborhood?

So we work together. How do you overcome something? You got to address it, acknowledge it, and then address it. How are we going to address it?

Autumn (narration): Coastal Community Action offers a wide range of services to address the needs of vulnerable populations. You might be familiar with Head Start, a federal program for young children from low-income families that provides education, health, nutrition, and parental support services. It focuses on helping kids develop the skills they need for school and works with parents to help them support their children's education and achieve their own goals.

CCA administers the local Head Start programs, managing the day-to-day operations, including enrolling children, hiring staff, and ensuring the program meets educational, health, and developmental standards.

Coastal Community Action plays a crucial role in tailoring the Head Start program to meet the specific needs of the children and families in their local area, and they do that by, once again, engaging with the families.

"Policy Council is made up of families."

Catissa: Policy Council is made up of families. Under that Head Start grant, there's a board of parents of the active children. They have to help with decision making.

We do a Man Up program, too, under Head Start. You don't have to be the daddy. You just have to be a male figure in those children's lives. And they come and put on programs. They come together; they talk what their feelings, how to be a better parent, how to be active in the lives of your children.

Autumn (narration): In addition to helping parents – many of whom are working multiple jobs to make ends meet – to be more successful in nurturing their children, CCA also helps families find a way out of poverty and onto more stable ground, something that holds a special resonance with Catissa.

"We're here to help you."

Catissa: We tell the parents, "Long as you're on a path and you're trying to do right, you're going to slip and fall. But we're here to help you. If your long term goal is to get a house, well, let's take the small step first. Maybe we need to get you just paying your rent on time. Maybe we need to look at cleaning up your credit. Maybe we need to look at getting you a better job."

[music swells and fades]

In tackling the complex issue of housing in Carteret County, Catissa takes a hands-on approach with Coastal Community Action's HUD program, for instance, coming up with innovative events to foster open dialogue between property owners and renters.

Her goal is to break down barriers, address common concerns, and encourage participation in HUD's housing programs in order to get more financially-challenged families into homes.

CCA's initiatives not only facilitate better housing solutions but also empower community members to advocate for themselves, a crucial step in building a supportive and inclusive community.

Lunch with landlords, tea with tenants.

Catissa: Under our HUD program, we're going to start doing lunch with landlords, tea with tenants. I say, "Feed them. Let's talk about: landlord, how can we get you to put your house on this program? What are some things that we need to ensure that we're doing what we're supposed to and that will make you feel comfortable about adding your house to HUD. For the tenants, what are some issues you have? Let's talk about keeping somebody else property up."

Do stuff like that to help the get the community involved. Then, while you're there you talk about: how do you advocate for yourself? You know, if your water is higher, who do you go see?

[music swells and fades]

In addition to family and housing services, CCA offers three very special Senior Programs to people 55-years and older: Senior Companions, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, or RSVP, and Foster Grandparents. These programs play an important role in enriching the lives of elderly individuals in our community who are living on limited resources.

While their lives may be rich in stories and wisdom, they're often confined within the walls of necessity. CCA's Senior Programs expand the horizons of elderly people, much the way Catissa's mom expanded her children's horizons, by engaging them in community support. Being actively involved in the lives of others reduces loneliness and reassures older members of our community that they continue to have value past their working years.

"So the first program is the Senior Companion"

Catissa: So the first program is the Senior Companion. You go out, and we will fit you with another companion senior that you can just go out, and I say, you just go out, have a good time, take them out to lunch, take them to sit on park bench, you know, take them to have a cup of coffee and conversation. We're not there to provide medical services or anything because that's not part of the job. We're just there to be a companion. If you need to go shopping and you know your mom needs somebody to sit with her, hey, that's what we do.

And actually during COVID, when they couldn't go out, we provided iPads and phones. Call them, call people, check on them. You don't have to go in. Blow the horn. Hey, just checking on you.

And then we have a RSVP, Retired Senior Volunteer Program. A lot of the transient people, too, that come down. They may be here for just three months, and they go back. You'll see them. They're coming in to volunteer at the food pantry.

[music swells and fades]

Catissa: So then we have the foster grandparents. Those are the grandparents that are in the school systems; they're in our child development centers. They're pretty much dealing one on one with children. And actually what you have them in there for is you may have a baby that needs a little special care and little special love, and there ain't nothing like a hug from a grandparent. You'll see them when you go out in the centers. You'll see they have on their little smocks, and you'll see them sometimes working one on one with children. They're not there to replace the teachers. They're just there to give a little extra love, because not everybody has that grandmama. And there are granddaddys, too, there in the center. They call them Grandma and Granddad. So wonderful.

And I think it does more for the for the senior than it is for the kids. I went out to the center about a month ago and one of the grandparents said, "I got new teeth." I said, "Well, let me take a picture."

And she was like, "And of course, the babies, they knew."

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): While Coastal Community Action organizes several direct service programs, their role in the community extends beyond these initiatives. Apart from spearheading their own programs, CCA's commitment to community enhancement reaches into collaborations and support for other community initiatives.

"We don't have to be the face."

Catissa: Through advocacy, education, support services, we will empower individual families and community towards a better quality of life. How do we do that? By advocating. I go to Washington. I go the H.R. person. I go to the local state government, talk about this program, talk about poverty, education. We educate children. We educate the parents.

We don't have to be the face all the time to help you. If I can help you, if you're doing a project, let me help you, because sometimes I have the different funding, and I can help and say we did our community engagement. We didn't put on the production, but we are part of the production.

Autumn: So also Coastal Community Action will help with other non-profits?

Catissa: Yes. It don't even have to be a nonprofit. Like I tell people, if you're doing something that helps the community, let us be a part of it.

Autumn (narration): CCA significantly benefits from federal community block grants, but it's important to recognize that these funding sources often fall short of fully addressing the community's needs. This shortfall can lead to difficult decisions, such as reducing benefits or creating waiting lists for services.

Community donations and volunteers play a vital role in supplementing these funds, ensuring that Catissa and the CCA team can continue to provide essential services to those in need in Carteret County.

"We get it through donations."

Catissa: Under weatherization, we have to get a \$2 million in-kind, it's 20%. Senior program, there's a match on their funds as well. So how do we get it?

First of all, we get it through donations. You can make a cash donation. We have some board members that write a check, give, because I told them, it starts at the top.

If you're a dentist, you can come out and talk to the kids about proper dental stuff. We can get in-kind for that. We can get in-kind for our buildings. If I lease from you, I can use that space as in-kind.

Give me your time. We know that we need buildings painted. I was in a strong pain that we know we need

Anything that the agency would provide in services, you can count it toward in-kind.

Autumn (narration): In other words, there are lots of ways you can help support CCA's mission to empower individuals, families, and communities toward a better quality of life. You can donate directly. You can volunteer. You can come out to community events, get engaged, because the strength of a community isn't found in its financial resources, but in its willingness to face difficult challenges, find innovative solutions, and uplift its most vulnerable members.

"The world is still changing."

Catissa: Just because we're not moving. The world is still changing, and in order to grow, you got to get uncomfortable.

[music swells and fades]

Conclusion

Autumn (narration): Catissa, the CCA Board, and the agency's boots on the ground staff are critical in providing care to people in need in the wake of large-scale catastrophes, like a hurricane or pandemic, as well as personal catastrophes, like job loss, addiction, or medical emergencies, all of which exacerbate poverty, making it harder to escape.

Through Coastal Community Action's efforts, led by the compassionate vision of Catissa, we see the transformative power of empathy and cooperation. It reminds us that every act of support for the most vulnerable members of our community, big or small, weaves a stronger social fabric and makes the whole community more resilient.

In Catissa, I see a profound gratitude for the opportunities her mother created for her as a child, despite the limiting circumstances of poverty, and I see a desire to reciprocate and even to extend those opportunities to other people who may not have had the benefit of that same support system.

It's a quality she shares with all my previous guests: a deep-seated desire to leave things better than she found them, for herself and for her community. And, of course, it's a quality that's not limited to my EPIC Carteret guests. A quick look around and you'll find that many people, businesses, and organizations on the Crystal Coast are committed to helping their neighbors in their time of need, and that, in my opinion, is epic.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): This is our last episode of 2023, but there's more EPIC Carteret to come in February 2024. Even better, we've got funding from the North Carolina Arts Council through an Artist Support Grant to make the podcast sound better and reach farther.

In the meantime, visit epic-carteret.com to find out how to donate to CCA or volunteer with one of the programs. There's a link on the show notes page to the Coastal Community Action website and other relevant resources. While you're there, you can read love letters to the Crystal Coast penned by talented, local writers on The EPIC Blog.

And on January 11, 2024, plan on coming out to Winter Hauntings, an evening of ghost stories at the Morehead City Train Depot. We'll be celebrating the winners of our Carteret County-inspired ghost story contest with haunting tales told by talented local actors, murderously good music by local entertainers, and more.

Tickets will go on sale the last week of December, and all proceeds from the ticket sales are going to the Title Wave bookmobile featured in Episode 2 with Amanda McCall.

However, I must warn you, the stories you'll hear deal with adult themes, so leave the little ones at home for this one, and if you're a chicken like me, bring a friend. You're going to need a hand to hold. Preferably one still attached to a body.

Get all the details about Episode 4; Winter Hauntings, an evening of ghost stories; and other EPIC news at epic-carteret.com.

Autumn (narration): Before we wrap up, I'd like to take a moment to extend my heartfelt thanks to those who made this episode possible:

1. Thank you, Catissa, for taking time to talk with me about some of the needs in our community and how we can better address them, for your commitment to serving the most vulnerable, and for warmly welcoming me into your CCA community.
2. And to the team at CCA, from board members to boots on the ground staff, thank you for feeding children, keeping the lights on, visiting the elderly, and all the other ways you serve the county.
3. Thank you, North Carolina Arts Council and Craven County Arts Council, for the vote of confidence and the funding for 2024. It will make a huge difference for us.
4. Thank you, Jack, my EPIC sound engineer, for making EPIC Carteret possible. I'm sure you have no regrets.
5. Last but by no means least, a big thanks to you, EPIC listeners, for caring enough to come along on this journey with us.

Stay tuned for more EPIC Carteret in 2024, and remember, if you're curious to know what it takes to create an epic community, the answer may be you.