



Catch Episode 9 on Generous Leadership

A conversation with Erin Knight
Pioneer, Partner, Pacesetter

Epic-Carteret Episode 9 How Generous Leaders Nurture Community Growth

with Erin Knight

TRANSCRIBED by [Autumn Ware](#) with the help of [Hindenburg Pro](#)

[Intro Music with Gulls]

Intro

Autumn (narration): Welcome to EPIC Carteret. I'm your host Autumn Ware. I'm a reformed recluse in a place that knows the secret of transforming strangers into neighbors. Join me as I explore what makes Carteret County such an extraordinary place to call home.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): Producing EPIC Carteret over the last two years has given me lots of opportunity to think about different types of leaders and how they impact their communities. I would call all of my EPIC guests "generous leaders." Mayor Sharon Harker creates positive change for her constituents through active listening. Writer Emily Carter cultivates a more joy-filled community through her playful Halloween season shenanigans and her leadership in local arts programs like the Carteret Writers. Educator Amanda McCall tirelessly builds community buy-in to support young learners. Generous leadership is in how we attend to others, how we lift each other up, and how we make space for everyone to grow.

We began EPIC Carteret talking with Tom Kies, author of the Geneva Chase mystery series and former Chamber of Commerce President, and so it felt appropriate to round out the series in conversation with the Chamber's new president Erin Knight, who *embodies* a generous leadership style. From creating innovative policies like parental leave to empowering her team to thrive, Erin's approach is rooted in empathy, collaboration, and a deep commitment to the community.

We recorded this episode at the Carteret Community Theatre, a space Erin chose for its symbolism of resilience and renewal — qualities that are central to her vision for leadership in Carteret County.

It's really symbolic of Carteret County right now.

Erin Knight: I'm Erin Knight. I am the president for the Carteret County Chamber of Commerce.

Autumn (narration): Why did you choose the Carteret Community Theatre?

Erin Knight: For a place for our podcast today? It represents community and relationships and growth and our youth and so many wonderful things with them trying to build and recover from the hurricane. It's really symbolic of Carteret County right now.

Autumn (narration): The theater also happens to be the location of our second annual Winter Hauntings event on January 29, 2025. All ticket sales for the evening of ghost stories will go to the theater's Ovation Campaign to rebuild the troupe's Morehead City venue, which was destroyed by Hurricane Florence in 2018. Visit epic-carteret.com to learn more about the community-oriented event, to become a sponsor, to advertise, or to buy your tickets before they sell out.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): Erin Knight has lived many lives, from special education teacher to military mom, and each one has prepared her for the role she holds today as President of the Carteret County Chamber of Commerce. She's not the kind of leader who sits behind a desk dictating policy; Erin is the type who rolls up her sleeves, gets to know her team, and asks the critical questions: *What do you need? How can I help?*

Her journey to this role started in Havelock, where she served as Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce for four years. It was a role that came naturally to her, as a former military spouse who understood the challenges and opportunities of serving a transient population.

Carteret County is big, and each of the areas has its own culture or subculture.

Erin Knight: So the Havelock Chamber of Commerce, I was there for four years. Completely different type of Chamber, different audience, kind of more transient population versus Carteret County is a lot of tourism and service industry. And so it was a great experience, and I loved it. I was prior military spouse, so I understood the community a lot.

One of the first things I did when we got down here, when I came down was go to all the candidate forums in each of the municipalities because Carteret County is big, and each of the areas have their own culture or subculture, and so understanding that, if I was going to serve all of those areas, was going to be really important.

Autumn (narration): Erin's commitment to understanding the unique needs of the community became the foundation of her leadership style. Rather than imposing a vision from the top — she's all about learning the landscape, listening to the people, and finding ways to meet them where they are.

During her time in Havelock, Erin saw an opportunity to use technology to address a common small business challenge: visibility. For families moving in and out of the area, knowing where to find essential services or enjoy local events wasn't always easy. So she developed an app to bridge that gap.

The app was really pivotal in helping the community know what was going on.

Erin Knight: The app was really pivotal in helping the community know what was going on in their area and know how many restaurants. Did you know Havelock has 12 parks? Well, the app allowed

them to click on parks and see a map of where all the parks were, and getting it out to that transient military population that comes new to the area every time was really important because every time a family moves, they have to find a new dentist, a new barbershop, all those things. So just trying to help them learn about what was available in their community was really helpful. And the city started doing their concerts in the park and those things. So the app allowed for push notifications to be able to tell the community the day of, Hey, this is going on in your area.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): This ability to adapt to the times is one of the most striking aspects of Erin's leadership style. Technology is often credited with being the root cause of many of our modern social ills, but Erin's work is a reminder that technology, when used thoughtfully, can strengthen the fabric of a community.

One of her priorities as President of the Chamber of Commerce is ensuring that local businesses have the resources they need to succeed, especially in the face of challenges. Erin recognizes that strong connections — both between businesses and within the community — are key to overcoming these obstacles.

It's really important for businesses to know that there's a community of people that are going through the same thing.

Erin Knight: Well, what we've seen between COVID and hurricanes is that the supply chain can be volatile and the workforce can be volatile. And so it's really important for businesses to know that there's a community of people that are going through the same thing and they're taking the time to work together and to network. So the Chamber has worked really hard to create opportunities for any business that needs any support. Whatever their stumbling block is, the Chamber is going to have resources to help them in doing that or being able to point them in the right direction to give them that boost. There are 30-minute marketing meetings that you can take to brainstorm or to get help with something particular. If you're struggling with your website or if you want to do segmented emails or if you need to work on a brand folder, anything in regard to marketing. We're pivoting towards being able to list when our businesses are hiring and helping them find matches. And then also, I'm a notary, so we have notary services at the Chamber. So if one of our members just needs something notarized real quick, they can just zip on in and get that handled. Our conference room is available for our members to use now, and we've got the big TV that was sponsored by Carteret Health Care. And so we've got Zoom capabilities. Those are some of the great new member services that we have

Autumn (narration): Through services like marketing consultations, job postings, and networking opportunities, the Chamber has become a vital hub for local businesses. Erin also highlights the importance of creating spaces for younger professionals to connect and grow.

Those are just really good opportunities for some of the younger professionals to come together and be re-energized...

Erin Knight: The Connect Carteret Young Professionals group has started doing great things. They have service projects for each season that they do. They do their Claus Crawl in December. But additionally they've started having speakers, and those are just really good opportunities for some of the younger professionals to come together and be re-energized and and kind of redirect their focus and and expand. Connect will get together, and they'll do socials on a Wednesday at like 5:30 and just have cocktails and brainstorm together, and you have some of the best conversations and encouragements coming out of that group where they're supporting each other and talking through some of the hurdles that they're seeing in their particular jobs, even though they're all in different industries.

Autumn (narration): Erin is eager to highlight the value the Chamber brings to its members in 2025 because she wants businesses to feel confident in their decision to join and participate. She also wants to dispel common misconceptions about the Chamber itself.

All of our funding and everything that we do and all of our services that we provide is either through membership or fundraising efforts.

Erin Knight: There are big changes about putting us in the forefront and increasing our visibility. So people understand what we do and how we do it and marketing that we're a non-profit. There is this huge misconception that the Chamber of Commerce is somehow funded by counties or cities, and there's no funding at all. All of our funding and everything that we do and all of our services that we provide is either through membership or fundraising efforts. So we're going to increase the visibility and we're going to build that goodwill within our community in what we do and continue to provide great services to all of our membership.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): During her inaugural year as the Carteret County Chamber President, Erin's team, spearheaded by the Chamber's talented Communications Director Taylor McCune, gave the Carteret County Chamber of Commerce website a much-needed update to empower the non-profit's business members.

We've worked really hard to make it a hub for our Chamber members.

Erin Knight: So with the new website, we have worked really hard to make it a hub for our Chamber members to be able to share information with us so that we can push it out to the community, to other businesses. We've used it as a hub of our businesses, knowing what's going on in the area also. And then with the increased tempo of business right now, everybody's hiring. Well, how do you provide services and meet the needs of businesses that are constantly hiring? Well, we do job listings on our website now, so just constantly listening to our members and what their needs are.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): It looks fantastic.

Erin Knight: Taylor has worked so hard on building that website. Nowhere on her job description did it say website development or finding a new ticketing format or finding gravity forms for us to use versus the Google Docs forms? Taylor has amazing skills that are way outside the box of what her job description is.

[music swells and fades]

It's really important to ask people what parts of their job they enjoy.

Erin Knight: The best way to help somebody, anybody, in any setting, is to ask them what they need. You know, you see a homeless person on the side of the road and you can give them food, and you can give them money, but unless you stop and talk to them, you might not know what they need. Well, the same thing goes into a working organization, into employees' relationships with parents or anything else. Unless you ask them what their needs are, you don't know.

We have employees that are grandmothers or have aging parents or kids at home or, you know, husbands that only have one day off a week. Well, that time really matters. So when you look at the health of a family, one employee needs time with her husband. Another employee needs to be able to go to the band concerts. Another employee needs to be able to go to mom's doctor's visits. Those things are important.

So it's really easy at the Chamber because when you talk about how hard that staff works, and their heart in everything that they enjoy about their job, it's really easy to say, yes, please. And for the team to pick up the slack if someone has to step away because the team is all supporting each other in the same way. Family first. Then we do our job with love.

Autumn (narration): Erin's approach isn't just good for morale — it's good for business. When employees feel supported, they're more engaged, more creative, and more likely to go above and beyond.

It makes the Chamber as a whole look polished.

Erin Knight: And so it's been really great to see the growth of the team over this last year because of the opportunities to support them and help them find joy in their job and that ownership, it makes the Chamber as a whole look polished and it helps our hearts shine. So that's something that I've heard from our community, is that it's really obvious that everybody on our team has a heart for what they do.

Autumn (narration): One way that Erin went above and beyond this year was through the implementation of a precedent-setting parental leave policy.

I don't know many employees that would make themselves replaceable unless they felt safe in their job.

Erin Knight: When we were blessed with an employee that got pregnant after some effort, it was important that they feel supported and that their job wasn't at risk because I can't imagine working for seven or eight more months not knowing if I was going to have a job at the end of things. Before we did the parental leave policy, I did research. I reached out to other chambers. I looked on the Chambers Facebook page to see what the norm was for parental leave. And I will say that it wasn't just chambers, but most nonprofits do not provide family leave. And so we worked really hard to build a policy that wasn't unique to the individual that we knew already had an amazing work ethic, but long term thinking, something that would outlive us and be a good example for the community. It's built for adoption, surrogacy, any of those things. We reached out to Carteret Community College. Dr. Mancini loaned me her h.R. Person, and so she worked with me to build a policy that blanket covers. You know, all of the ways that you can become a parent and the genders. So the policies built to where if there is a mom birthing a baby, she gets four weeks to pretty much recover. But then there's also the four weeks built in for bonding. So a mom that would deliver would get eight weeks. A dad who's, you know, the spouse of somebody else that delivered would get four weeks. So he would still have that bonding time. It allowed this person to feel comfortable in their position and they spent a good amount of time creating training documents to where their job can be done in their absence. And I don't know many employees that would make themselves replaceable unless they felt safe in their job.

[music swells and fades]

Autumn (narration): Erin's commitment to leadership doesn't stop with her own team. Through her continued cultivation of the Chamber's long-standing 12-week Leadership Carteret program, she's helping to develop a new wave of community leaders who are prepared to meet challenges with creativity and collaboration.

Leadership Carteret. Wow, that is such an amazing program.

Erin Knight: Leadership Carteret. Wow, that is such an amazing program. The number one thing that people say is the relationships that come out of it. But there's learning. At the end of every day, you're just mentally exhausted because you're taking it all in, but you're doing it with, you know, 30 other people that are also going through it. Um, gosh, one of the best lessons was to really be authentic. When you're meeting with these people every Wednesday and being vulnerable while you're climbing a wall or getting pulled up or, you know, sharing, sharing the excitement of being behind the scenes at the aquarium with the sea turtles that were shocked in the cold weather, like those are really revealing environments to be able to build authentic relationships. You know, they say you're going to get 30 new best friends. And that is, in fact, the truth. But what you learn from that is that every business individual that you're encountering is a person and if you can find an authentic way of reaching them, you have a best friend, you have a partner that's going to cheer for you. So that's just a really good way to do business in general is to really be authentic and build that relationship.

Autumn (narration): The program's impact goes beyond its participants. By fostering connections and encouraging innovative thinking, Leadership Carteret helps the entire community grow stronger through service projects, partnerships with local non-profits, and by fostering a regular habit of volunteerism.

I've learned that a good number of my classmates continue to go in and volunteer for the nonprofits

Erin Knight: Our 2024 class actually got back together for a breakfast a few weeks after class was over, and one of the things we did was celebrate all the partnerships that came out of it. And we talked about who was using whose businesses or what connections were getting made. You know, somebody starting a new business, and they they reached out to one of the lawyers that was on the group to help them. It's just the shared business that that happens with that. How it helps the community overall, you know, with the service projects that happen, I've learned that a good number of my classmates continue to go in and volunteer for the nonprofits or to collect food or that their organization still does a fundraiser. For some of them, it's an investment. So when you've invested so much of your time into Leadership Carteret and the organizations that you're seeing, it becomes really easy to prioritize working with those companies and helping each other still.

It helps them look outside the box. We all live in our own world and especially small businesses. They will work themselves to the bone in one location without coming up for air. And so it's really important to learn that there are resource sources and community partners out there that can support you and carry part of the load or or just help you be more efficient. So by looking at the different parts of the county and meeting so many people that are outside of your bubble, you really learn to harness those resources and strengths from other people. And that's a really important leadership skill, is somebody else has done it. You can ask somebody else has those resources, you can ask somebody can help you. It's just good for everybody.

Autumn (narration): From modernizing tools to creating supportive work environments to nurturing future leaders, Erin Knight's approach to leadership is both innovative and deeply human. At its heart, Erin's philosophy reframes leadership, making it less about wielding authority and more about creating spaces where people feel valued, heard, and empowered to bring their best selves to the table. Here are her suggestions for developing a more generous leadership style.

Nurturing a team means that you've got to slow down the hustle and bustle and get personal and get real.

Erin Knight: I would say definitely get to know your employees on a personal level. You know, something I did to help bond with the team when I first started was we had Friday Fifteens, and I would sit down with them and some of them would use that fifteen minutes to talk about work stuff and some of them would use it to talk about their personal life stuff, but it gave them a sounding board to know that they were cared about because I would stop and just invest in them. And what, what, what was highest on their mind in the moment.

Nurturing a team means that you've got to slow down the hustle and bustle and get personal and get real so that you can value somebody, celebrating the wins and helping them overcome any of the barriers that are having if they feel like they're heard. That alone is a lot. Even if no action steps are taken, Just having the safety to express those things is really important.

It's not always about the action steps. I find that a good number of people just want to be heard. You know, we've had individuals call the chamber to complain about a business or a bridge or what somebody is doing with property or anything along those lines. And I don't know, they just

sometimes want to be heard. And if you're listening properly, you know, very clearly if they want action steps or resolution or if they just need you to say, I understand how you're feeling or, you know, with your employees, just just hearing what's important to them.

Autumn (narration): At its heart, her philosophy challenges us to think differently about what it means to lead. It doesn't always look like standing at the helm, issuing directives. Sometimes, it looks like stepping alongside others, listening to their needs, and creating an environment where everyone can thrive. Whether it's a young professional looking to build connections or a seasoned business owner navigating new challenges, Erin's work reminds us that leadership is, ultimately, about lifting others up.

And she's not the only reminder around. Across Carteret County, we see examples of people and organizations embracing the same ethos of leadership that prioritizes empathy, adaptability, and collaboration.

So I leave you with some questions for consideration as we enter a brand new year that will, no doubt, require generous leaders like you:

- What does leadership look like in your own life? Are you nurturing opportunities for others to grow?
- How can you bring more empathy into your interactions — whether at work, at home, or in your community?
- What community resources or networks, like the Chamber, might you tap into to make a greater impact in the year to come?

When we take the time to reflect on these questions, we open ourselves to new possibilities — not just for personal growth, but for building stronger, more connected communities.

Leadership isn't reserved for people with fancy titles or long résumés. It's something we can all practice in small but meaningful ways.

Here's my challenge to you: Think of one person in your life — a coworker, a friend, or a neighbor — who might need a little extra support right now. Reach out to them. Ask what they need, and listen with an open mind. You might be surprised at how much of a difference even a small gesture can make.

If you're looking to make a broader impact, consider getting involved in your local Chamber of Commerce or another community organization. These spaces offer incredible opportunities to connect, collaborate, and lead in ways that expand far beyond your immediate circle.

[music swells and fades]

Conclusion

Autumn (narration): Our next episode of EPIC Carteret will be the final of 2024 — and the last official episode of the podcast in its current format. It's a special one, celebrating the strength and resilience of empowered women. We'll explore how women in Carteret County are breaking barriers, lifting each other up, and transforming their communities through leadership, creativity, and determination.

But this isn't a goodbye. While EPIC Carteret is wrapping up its regular run, I'll be sharing special episodes from time to time in 2025, so stay subscribed for updates and please continue to share with friends and consider leaving a review if you've enjoyed it.

In the meantime, I'm excited to announce that I'll be working on a brand-new podcast project next year — one that takes storytelling to eerie and unexpected places. Stay tuned for more details soon.

A quick reminder: Tickets for Winter Hauntings, our annual evening of ghost stories, are now on sale. Join us on January 29, 2025, for an unforgettable night of spooky tales, dramatic readings, and community connection at CCT's temporary venue at Atlantic Station in Atlantic Beach. You can find all the details 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, Erin, for your dedication to nurturing leadership, building meaningful connections, and creating opportunities for growth in our community. I'm so grateful you made time in your busy schedule to share your vision and insights with us.
2. And thank you to Rebekah Brooks and the Carteret Community Theatre for providing such a meaningful and inspiring space to record this episode. It's an honor and a pleasure to be part of your journey as you rebuild and continue to enrich the cultural fabric of our area.
3. Thank you, Jack, my EPIC sound engineer and husband, for actively listening to and generously supporting all of my wild ideas.
6. Last but by no means least, a big thank you to you, EPIC listeners, for celebrating this incredible county with us.

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