

# Westine Report

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## Calling it a Knight

### Longtime Chamber director to step down after a generation of promoting the community

By Gautam Singh

For 22 years, Carol Knight, has made her mark on the community from her Greater Union Grove Area Chamber of Commerce office.

Knight plans to retire from the Executive Director position at the end of the year, joining her husband Michael, who has been retired for the past two years.

“It’s a strange feeling because I’ve been coming to work for 22 years and it’s going to change,” Knight said.

Knight said she would still like to make a meaningful contribution to the Chamber – but as an individual member. She will hand off her duties to Terri Gray, now a part-time employee who will step into Knight’s position, and current President Tina Hartlage.

Knight plans to take a hands-off approach.

“I think I need to let them do it their way,” she said.

In many ways running the Chamber has always fit Knight’s personality, which has always gravitated to non-profit and other community-oriented professions.

She said she has always enjoyed taking phone calls that start off with “This might sound crazy....”

“The Chamber of Commerce is the place people call when they don’t know where else to call,” she said.

Her mantra for helping area businesses and residents is simple.

“You don’t need to know everything, you just need to know who to call,” she said.

Knight was elected as Town of Yorkville’s treasurer in 1967 before the town had an office. For 10 years, town residents came to Knight’s farmhouse to pay their taxes.

She was then employed by the Racine Area United Way. From 1983 to 1988, she was the Union Grove Area Food Bank’s first director before dedicating herself full time to the Chamber.

Knight was hired as a part-time employee in 1986 when the Chamber landed its first office in the Union Grove/Yorkville Fire Department, sharing the space with Union Grove’s former police department.

Due to the proximity of the police and Chamber offices, Knight sometimes ended up being the police department’s secretary. She found herself babysitting stray dogs, calming people who could not see an officer immediately and she even had to dial 911 on a handful of occasions.

When it came to her Chamber duties, she needed to actually define her position.

“In the beginning, I don’t think they knew what they wanted me to do,” Knight said.

The first task Knight undertook was expanding the Chamber's business listing, which had 110 businesses. Knight got in her car and drove, figuring out where all the area businesses are located and often parking on the shoulder of the road to write down information.

Already having a plethora of contacts, Knight expanded that list to more than 500 businesses. "I did all my shopping here so I knew all the store owners too," she said.

Gerry Hancock, Chamber president in 1994 and currently a semi-retired pharmacist at the Aurora Pharmacy in Union Grove, praised Knight's organizational abilities.

"If it was expected to be done and Carol was responsible for it, you knew it was going to get done," Hancock said.

Hiring Knight also proved to be a case of the right person being at the right place at the right time, according Rich Swantz, former owner of Swantz Ace Hardware and the Ben Franklin store. Before her arrival, Chamber presidents operated out of their own businesses, but with Knight in place, the fine details could be addressed.

"There was really no one to do the leg work," he said and added, "She just helped the Chamber get to the next level – which we were ready to do."

Hancock agreed.

"She just took the Chamber under her wing and took it to a higher level," Hancock said.

Swantz said he also appreciated Knight's promotional efforts for local businesses over the years. None was better than Town and Country Days, a three-day festival that included music and entertainment and connected residents to their local businesses.

Now the Chamber has introduced "Get to the Grove," which includes 13 nights of music at Village Square Park during the summer while local businesses stay open longer.

Knight also brought elected officials to the Chamber's monthly luncheons, created the Chamber's monthly newsletter and introduced the Leadership Union Grove program.

Knight said the Chamber has hosted 264 luncheons.

"That's a lot of speakers and a lot of meals to pull together," she said.

Leadership Union Grove, a community-based program used across the nation to develop participants into civic leaders. Knight said the program has sprung younger residents into government positions and involvement with service organizations.

"It's a big asset," said Kitty George, president Chamber in 2001 and currently vice president of Community State Bank. "It makes people run for office...I think that's going to be her legacy along with 100 other things."

George added that it would be difficult to replace Knight's ability to stay on top of several different projects but still give her full attention to each one.

"She just spreads herself out but not thin," she added.

Swantz said, "She was the one behind the scenes that kept everything going."

Knight said she is especially proud of Chamber hosting candidate forums that brought in the likes of former congressman Mark Neuman and current U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan. The forums, however, were never well attended.

"Sometimes you do something because it's the right thing to do – not because a big crowd will

be there,” Knight said.

Knight and the Chamber also watched Main Street deteriorate, as mom-and-pop shops could not compete with nearby shopping malls. Empty storefronts began to dominate Main Street and Knight remembered presenting welcome certificates to the same locations that became revolving doors for businesses.

To help build a business community and allow for more local networking, Knight spurred the creation of the Business Breakfast Alliance. Businesses now refer their own customers to one another and are beginning to keep residents in town.

“We don’t have everything, but if we do have it, we want them to come here,” Knight said.

Before joining the Chamber, George said she mainly shuttled to and from work in Racine and missed what was right under her nose.

“I think through my work in the Chambers as a leader I was able to appreciate this wonderful community that we have,” George said.

During the past year, Union Grove reconstructed and redesigned Main Street to make it more appealing to new businesses. Knight is optimistic that the downtown can flourish once again.

“I think it’s very exciting now, I think the businesses are going to come back,” Knight said.

Knight has also represented Union Grove on the Crime Stoppers of Racine County and the Racine County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“I think it’s important for Union Grove to be represented,” she said.

Knight’s jovial exterior hides the tough, no-nonsense approach as a citizen.

When something is not right, Knight said she “feels a letter to the editor coming on.” When Stericycle, a medical-waste disposal facility, attempted to, and eventually, landed in Yorkville, Knight wrote a letter to the editor in support of the business.

Knight is an active member of 4-H and in the Yorkville United Methodist Church, where she has been the congregation’s lay leader for 10 years and church treasurer for 15 years.

Knight is an avid singer and dancer. She once performed in the St. Mary’s Medical Center’s annual “Cardiac Capers” shows for 10 years and was a member of the Dudes and Dolls Square Dance Club for 25 years. She and her husband still square dance today.

She also has sung in her church choir for 46 years and currently sings in the Rhythm and Praise a capella group.

With more free time, Knight hopes to return to playing the piano, which she began learning to play 10 years ago.

Knight will also spend more time with her nine grandchildren, one of which is in Houston, Texas.