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JAMES KNOX

Working for Positive Change

Editor's Note: This article is part 2 of our six-series focus on the mayors of northern Brunswick County.

STORY BY BILLY JASON FRYE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH KETCHUM

When you see James Knox these days you may notice a bounce in his step and a smile stained on his cheerful face. That's because he won the Democratic Party Primary for the N.C. House District 17 seat this spring and has high hopes for the fall and beyond. As Mayor of Northwest for the past 16 years, he has an idea of what the coming race will be like and plans to call on the experience, patience and humility he's garnered during his 23 years as a pastor to see the race through. A lifetime of being a son, husband, father and friend has given him the wisdom and support needed to run the race to the end and come out the other side a better man, no matter the outcome.

But right now he's riding the high of his victory and is glad the primary season is over.

"We're finally in a rest period," Knox says. "I guess things will heat up again in September. For now I'm glad to be able to get back to my family and friends and live life a little bit."

James Knox's life has always revolved around the town of Northwest, a tiny dot of a community in one of the largest counties in North Carolina. It would be easy to grow up here

Above: James Knox, Mayor of Northwest for 16 years, emerged from an impoverished background to lead the town in which he was raised.



Above: Mayor, Pastor, father, son, husband, friend, and Northwest native Mr. Knox draws upon his experience, humility and community roots to poise the town for prosperity.

and live your life in the background, just one of the regular people doing regular things. Growing up here, his life seemed to be on track to be one of the background players.

“The house I grew up in is right there,” Knox says, pointing into the morning heat. “They moved it years ago. It used to stand right here, where they built the Town Hall.” The little house shimmered in the heat rising from the road. “We were poor, the whole county was poor. We all had outhouses and I remember that some of our neighbors didn’t have electricity. Northwest was just a forgotten pocket of minority farmers and workers. My grandfather was one of those farmers.”

Growing up on the family farm, he didn’t envision a life beyond cropping tobacco, picking blueberries and digging potatoes. When he was offered a college

scholarship to play baseball he realized there were more opportunities out there and decided to pursue them. But after a



semester away he returned to Northwest to find a job and support the child he’d fathered.

“I started working at DuPont,” Knox says. “They treated us very well there. They paid 100% of our college tuition and 75% of our book expenses. How could I pass that up?”

Simultaneously working at DuPont and studying at Shaw University’s Wilmington campus, Knox earned a Bachelor of Arts in Religion and Philosophy and a minor in Business Administration.

“[DuPont] was promoting people with college degrees,” Knox says. “That, coupled with the funding for tuition and books, made it a no-brainer for me. I had to go to college and I’m glad I did. Getting my Bachelor’s degree is one of my proudest moments.”

With a good job and familial roots anchoring him to the community, Knox began to carve out a life in Northwest. His

“WE’RE POISED TO GROW. WE’RE POISED TO PROSPER.”

family grew, and his career continued a steady upward climb. Softball and golf replaced baseball as he settled into his life. Then, in 1994, his ambition reached higher than a college degree and a promotion at work—he felt called to serve his community as mayor. He entered the race, won and hasn’t looked back.

“A few years before I ran for mayor, in the late ‘80s, I felt called to the church and began increasing my role there, eventually moving up to pastor,” says Knox. “In some ways that was an easier transition than becoming mayor; as a pastor you have a guidebook, the Bible, but as mayor you don’t have anything. But you learn fast. I did. You see how difficult it is to manage the resources of a town, even one as small as Northwest.”

The success Northwest has seen in recent years is a testament to Knox’s management and foresight as Mayor. From the impoverished town of his youth to the relative



Above: Mayor Knox lives his life by the Golden Rule, bringing positivity to the lives of others by giving back to the community.

prosperity it sees now, Northwest's face has changed. With the introduction of companies like DuPont (now DAK Americas) came long-term job security for many residents. As shipping needs increased as a result of the success of DuPont and of Wilmington's Corning facilities, more jobs were created in the region, helping rural communities like Northwest grow.

"Take a look at where we were when I was born," Knox says. "Folks using outhouses. Some homes without electricity. A town suffering and struggling to make it. Now we're a proper town. We have all the services and we're always trying to improve so we have the infrastructure in place when the real estate market rights

itself and people are ready to build again. We're poised to grow. We're poised to prosper."

It's this kind of long-term thinking that helped James retain his seat as mayor and may propel him to Raleigh in the fall. But he's a humble man and knows he wouldn't have the blessed past and potential-filled future he has without help.

"I'm a pastor, so, of course, I'm a praying man," he says. "I seek His guidance in all that I do, I'd like to say I always did, but I had my rebellious younger days like everyone does. But in the end, I sought the face and forgiveness of God and I've been blessed ever since. Part of my blessing is the family I have. I have five children, all healthy and doing fine, and Debra, she's the best wife anyone could ask for."

Debra works in the school system and Knox has recently followed her lead, substitute teaching as a way to provide a positive male role model for youth in his community.

"I see so many young people, black and white, with no positive authority figures in their lives," he says. "No positive male figure because daddy is nowhere to be found and no positive female figure because momma has to work extra to pay the bills. If I can be an example to a handful of those kids, if I can show them a positive life and a positive outcome, then things will get better."

Knox believes all people can benefit from a lesson he learned in church and teaches as a pastor: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's been a driving tenet in his life. It's the reason he substitute teaches, the reason he was called to be a pastor and mayor and the reason he feels called to higher political offices.

"In my life I want to be a positive force and I want to do that through my words and actions," he says. "I was taught to be polite and respectful and to be a good steward. If I see a need, I try to meet it. That's the way I live as a husband, father and friend; the way I lead as a pastor; the stance I take as mayor. It's a rewarding way to live." ■

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