

## Agency for Change Podcast: Christie Smith, President and CEO, Acclaim Federal Credit Union

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**Christie Smith:** 0:01

Your self-worth is not your net worth.

**Announcer:** 0:06

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

**Lyn Wineman:** 0:30

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. So today we are shining a spotlight on Acclaim Credit Union in Greensboro, North Carolina, for their incredible commitment to community service, specifically their impactful You Have a Friend in Me campaign. So this campaign was inspired by the US Surgeon General's advisory on loneliness not something you would think of from your local credit union. It's all about strengthening relationships in the community, particularly among those who are most vulnerable, and leading this effort is their president and CEO, Christie Smith. Christie, welcome to the podcast.

**Christie Smith:** 1:21

Thanks, Lyn. Thank you so much for having me on your podcast. The work you're doing to highlight different organizations it's really fantastic and I'm just honored that you asked me to be a part of it.

**Lyn Wineman:** 1:34

Well, thank you. I always love to talk to people who are doing really interesting things to support their community and their team, and you are certainly doing that, Christie, and I'd love to just start by having you tell us a little bit about Acclaim Federal Credit Union and what makes the organization so special.

**Christie Smith:** 1:56

Oh well, that's a great question. I love to answer. Acclaim Federal Credit Union. We were originally bounded by what is known now as VF Corporation, and since then we've actually received our community charter and so we serve three counties in North Carolina and that's exciting for us because

we were able to expand our field of membership and so we get to love on more members of our communities.

**Lyn Wineman: 2:29**

You know, Christie, I'm curious for people who may not be familiar with credit unions you use the word membership and not the word customer. I know that's something that's special for credit unions, but can you tell us a little more about what it's like to be a member versus a customer?

**Christie Smith: 2:49**

Yeah. So I'm going to sum it up just like this as soon as you walk in our door, right above our MSR line, it says act like you own the place, because you do.

**Lyn Wineman: 2:59**

Oh, I love that.

**Christie Smith: 3:01**

Our members are our owners, which means when we make decisions about products and services, about dividend rates or, you know, interest and things like that, we're making those decisions with the member in mind, because they're really our bosses, and so we want to make sure that we keep our members and our bosses really happy, and that's just a short summary of what credit unions are. You know, we are not for profit, and so our board of directors they give up their time and their talents just to make sure that we have a really great financial institution and that we can serve our members and our communities to the best of our ability, and I think that that's fantastic. I could go on and on about credit unions, but I will tell you that, you know, the beauty of credit unions is back before the foundation of credit unions, it was the working class that came together and they would go to banks, and because they were making them pay these astronomical interest rates and they really just didn't want them as customers, and so they said, okay, well, fine, we will pull our money together and we will disrupt the financial system. And so that's what the credit union movement's been doing for all these years is disrupting the financial system.

**Lyn Wineman: 4:25**

I love that. I'm so glad you explained that. I think, for people who have not experienced a credit union, that term member and thinking of yourself like an owner is something that's completely new. So I appreciate that, and I want to dive into another topic, Christie. In the introduction I shared a bit about the You Have a Friend in Me campaign, which is also something that I think is really unique to a financial institution. What inspired you to take on this initiative and how has it impacted your community, Christie?

**Christie Smith: 5:05**

So every year we do a community project and this year, after reading the Surgeon General's advisory about isolation and loneliness, I mean we were just, we couldn't believe it. I mean we were really just,

you know, amazed that that many people are you know, Americans were affected by isolation and loneliness. Well, around the same time, my cousin, who was 59, had a massive stroke and because of that he had to go into a nursing facility. And as I would visit him, I would see individuals that were extremely lonely and extremely isolated and they just wanted a friend. They just wanted someone to talk to them, just give them, you know, ask about their, their outfit, or, you know, your hair looks nice today, and you could just see them light up and it was just, it really just broke my heart.

So I brought both of those stories back to the credit union and I said, hey, you know, we had a couple of different ideas as far as what we wanted to do. And I said I really think these folks need a friend and that's kind of how our project was birthed. Do you have a friend in me. We wanted our members in our communities to know that Acclaim is your friend and so that's you know, that was kind of how it was birthed. Since then, what we've done is we have volunteered at a senior center and I'm going to tell you it has just been fantastic Like when you volunteer, you think you're helping someone. No, they're helping you.

I get more from volunteering than I ever give, and that's the truth. But we have a Meals on Wheels route, and so we get to know our residents on our route and we're able to deliver a hot meal which I think everyone should have, you know, at least one hot meal a day. It has really impacted us as an organization in just seeing some of these isolating and lonely communities and how we can make a difference just by doing a few small things.

**Lyn Wineman: 7:14**

Yeah, that's great. So I understand you've got some additional activities planned related to this campaign. Anything you'd like to share?

**Christie Smith: 7:27**

So in October we are going to partner with NAI Piedmont Triad, which is a commercial real estate brokerage that my husband works at, and we're going to be two organizations coming together just to make a difference in our community, and so we are going to have like a packathon and we're going to pack food, and if you really think about it, I can't imagine anything that feels any more hopeless or lonely than not knowing how you're going to feed your family or knowing how you're going to eat, and so I think it's a wonderful nonprofit and we're really excited to get to do that. My husband is. He has a volunteer heart too. I could go on and on about how wonderful he is, but that's not why you had me on your show. But we came together and we thought, you know, we really could do a joint venture, and so that was really fun for us to get that together.

**Lyn Wineman: 8:18**

I think that's wonderful that you can work together in that way with your team, with your husband, with the community, and obviously Acclaim is really deeply dedicated to the community. And you and I had talked earlier and you mentioned something that really struck me. You said you approach community engagement with the same strategic planning you use for deposit and loan growth. Can you tell me more about what that looks like and how you came to that?

**Christie Smith: 8:50**

Yeah, credit unions were founded on cooperative principles, and one of the cooperative principles is concern for community. As a credit union, if we're going to operate using those cooperative principles, we need to have concern for our community, and that looks different for us every year. However, if we don't make a conscious effort to plan for that, we won't do it, and so we're going to plan for what we're going to do, we're going to budget for that, and then we're going to execute that in the same way we would for deposit or loan growth, because for us, it's not just a transactional. We don't want to be a transactional bank or credit union, but what we want to do is be relational, and for us, that does mean we have to get out in the community and we actually have to try to make a difference.

**Lyn Wineman:** 9:53

I love how you tie everything back to kind of the core of who you are as a credit union and an organization. It all just fits together, and so it's not surprising to me that you have received some recognition in your community for this type of work. Now I read that you received the Dora Maxwell Award for Social Responsibility not just once, but three years in a row. Could you tell us more about what the award is for and some of the things that you did that may have led to that recognition?

**Christie Smith:** 10:24

Yeah, actually, Dora Maxwell is a credit union pioneer, so for us to even receive that award is an honor. To receive it for three consecutive years, that is just amazing for us. It's just something we're extremely proud of. The first year we thought about community involvement in this way was really when everyone was coming back to work and it was still kind of during the pandemic, and there were a lot of people struggling with mental health issues and we were seeing that in our own families, we were seeing it in our employees and we were seeing that in our communities, and so we wanted to do something to help out.

**Christie Smith:** 11:09

And that year we sponsored a 5k for mental health awareness. It was called May the Course Be With you and it was Star Wars themed and the money was donated to a nonprofit here in Greensboro, North Carolina, and what they do is they offer reduced rate mental health counseling and they have certified counselors. And we thought, you know, if we can just get X amount of people into counseling, you know, wouldn't that be fantastic? And so our staff just they got so involved and it was just so fantastic for us to give back in that way. Since then we have done 50 acts of kindness and we did that on our 50th anniversary. So that was very intentional because we had to make sure that we did exactly 50 acts of kindness. We actually did more than 50, but that was okay.

**Lyn Wineman:** 12:04

I was going to say that's almost one a week. It was that's a lot.

**Christie Smith:** 12:09

You have to stay on top of that. We did. We had it scheduled out just like everything else, and so you know we had to be very intentional with that. And then we've also done food insecurity. And what that looked like for us was partnering with a nonprofit where we would pack food bags so that the

community would come in and then we would get their orders, and then there's a warehouse and we would pack their bags and send it. We would actually deliver food. So that was fun. And then this year, you know we're doing our. You have a friend in me, so you know it's it's been fun, and every year we kind of try to up the bar a little bit more. So it's been really fun, but we want to win it four years in a row. I want to win it 20 years in a row.

**Lyn Wineman: 13:05**

Well, what it does is it keeps you motivated, right, it keeps you inspired to keep coming up with ideas and getting people involved, and I think that's beautiful, Christie.

**Christie Smith: 13:30**

I also want to say that it's tied us together as a staff. It's made us closer. So I think as a staff it's bonded us in uou know the different projects that we do every year because they're excited. You know we pay our employees. So if they get, if they volunteer after hours, you know, let's just say they volunteer an hour. Well, I'm going to match that and I'm going to give them an hour of PTO because you know that's something that we want to encourage volunteerism in our community and that's a way for us to reward the employee, for you know their efforts.

**Lyn Wineman: 13:57**

That's really lovely, you know since you mentioned your team members, I know they're so important to you, Christie. How does the credit union's mission and thoughtfulness extend to your team as well?

**Christie Smith: 14:12**

Yeah, I often refer to them as world changers. They are fantastic and they are so relational. And that's what I love about our staff is you know I've said this twice now is our members are not just transactional. We don't just take the pot, we get to know them so they go the extra mile. I mean, they really do. So some of the things that I've done this year, on their birthdays I bring them in a flower and a note just saying thank you and happy birthday. We've started employee of the month, which has been fun, and the other employees can nominate on one of their team members who you know has really just gone above and beyond. And then we actually had a wellness walk. So we, our field of membership, our three counties, we had different markers and if you get to that, if you walk the miles that it takes to get to that marker, then you get an incentive.

So if you made it back to the credit union, you got a day off. If you made it to the amusement park, then you got tickets you know, so it's been really fun. But the other thing is with that, we know movement and exercise actually helps with not feeling isolated and lonely. It was a way for us to tie that into something to do with our staff too. So you know, that was it's been really fun, and actually the end of this month is the program is going to be up. But I think most of our employees now have walked the entire three counties and they're really excited about that.

**Lyn Wineman: 15:51**

That's amazing, I've got to say. Acclaim sounds like a really fun place to work and I love the things that you're doing.

**Christie Smith:** 16:00

Oh, thank you. We hope to be a fun place to work, because we spend a lot of time here.

**Lyn Wineman:** 16:07

You spend a lot of time with your co-workers in your office. I think that's fantastic. So, Christie, we touched on this a little bit earlier when I asked you about the term members, but credit unions do have a unique place in the financial world. I'd love your thoughts on why the credit union movement is so important, especially right now, in today's economic environment.

**Christie Smith:** 16:32

You're not just a number. And I think that's big. I actually wrote an article that talked about how people want to be seen, they want to be heard, they want to be known, they want to be respected. I think that's huge. And again, I'm a big, small credit union advocate. But that's in credit unions in general. Again, because you have that member that is your owner, you definitely want to make sure that you're offering products and services and things to that member. The other thing is sometimes with a larger bank, it's harder for people to connect with the trust value and things like that. I mean it's really easy for us to build loyal, you know members because they trust us, they know that we are going to guide them, we're going to try to guide them to better financial wellness and with that we do get a lot of loyal members. And I think that that's huge because, again, when you're not-for-profit, your profits go back into your membership. When you have, you know, stockholders and people that you have to answer to, then obviously you want to make them money and as they should.

But because we are not-for-profit, you know, all of our profits go back to the member and I think that's a huge difference. And I know now, especially with the younger generation, they like to align with people who share their values. And you know, I do think that the credit union, the credit union movement or credit unions, they do share those core values with the younger, or the youth of our day.

**Lyn Wineman:** 18:12

Christie, I'm glad you mentioned that. I've seen that same research as well about how people want to align with organizations that share their values, that make a positive difference in the world. I'm curious, then, and I think you've touched on some of these points but I want to ask this next question so how does Acclaim Federal Credit Union embody those principles of the credit union movement?

**Christie Smith:** 18:38

Well, I appreciate that question. Our motto is we connect and you know we connect, and then you fill in the blank. But one of our biggest initiatives is we connect you to financial wellness, because we know if we can empower you with knowledge and information that's going to help you make decisions, that's going to change your lives. And so one of the fun things about that is, as we, you know, as we're teaching or as we are instructing our members on better choices and things like that, then they take that

home and they're able to share that with their friends and family, and so we've been able to see that come full circle, and that's that's been really fun to watch. But the other thing is we have half of our staff are certified financial counselors.

We have three more that are being trained this year, and so it is our goal for us to have a staff that is 100% of our staff would be financial counselors, and that way, if you get a member on the phone, you know exactly how to answer those questions. If they're starting to tell you they're having issues, you know the resources that you need to go to guide that member, because we want to empower this next generation and the generations that are before us. You know, with that knowledge and that's something that's really important to us.

**Lyn Wineman:** 20:11

What a great example of living your values. That is a really neat program to have to have your team members trained in that way, and how great for your members as well. So I love all of the visionary and innovative things that are happening at the credit union. Christie, I'm curious next, as the president and CEO, what has been your vision for the organization and how do you ensure that vision gets realized every day?

**Christie Smith:** 20:42

My vision is for Acclaim to always be world changers. I mean, I said that again. I refer that, you know. I refer to our staff as being world changers but it is really important for me to make a difference and I always say you get to change someone's life just with a couple of different things, listening to the member and offering products and services that they need, not necessarily because it makes the credit union more money. It's something that they need that will help them, empower them and help them have a better life. That's how we make a difference and that's how we move forward and that is my vision for the credit union, whether it's helping in the community or empowering our membership here. It's actually what we have to do to make a difference in the world, Because one day there's not going to be a Christie here, and so I want to instill those values in our young staff is always do the next right thing, whatever that may be. Do the next right thing, and, you know, make sure that you're always looking after the best interest of the member. When you do that, the growth is going to come. Everything else will come. It's just doing the next right thing when it comes to what the members are needing.

**Lyn Wineman:** 22:04

That's fantastic, Christie, we've talked about so many innovative things that you're doing. I'd love to have you share a story or an example, maybe, of how Acclaim has made a significant difference in the life of a member of the community.

**Christie Smith:** 22:42

Well we had a gentleman come in and his goal was to own a home. So I am blessed to have a young staff, and that is one of the things that they confide in me is I don't know if I'll ever be able to afford to buy a house. That breaks my heart, to be honest. But this particular gentleman, it was in a different time where things weren't as tight as they are right now.

He couldn't buy a house because his credit score just was not going to work. So what he did was he sat down with one of our employees and she told him exactly what he needed to do you need to do this. And once he did, he would come back in and she would say OK, well, let's give you a small loan and let's help you do this. And he did. And then, all of a sudden, we watched that score just go up, up, up, up.

Well, guess what, how happy we were when we were able to give him his home loan, and you know, it's things like that. That really it just it's, it's our why, it's why like that. And because he was able to then realize the American dream that everyone wants to own a home.

**Lyn Wineman: 23:54**

Christie, that just takes us back to. You mentioned the trust factor earlier, I think even to feel comfortable walking in to the credit union, sitting down kind of humbling yourself and saying, hey, I have this goal, but I also know I have a problem that's going to keep me from the goal. Can you help me? And then you actually helping and him sticking to it and then getting that home loan. I think that's all beautiful. So, Christie, as you look to the future, what are some of the key initiatives or goals that will take a claim federal credit union forward?

**Christie Smith: 24:38**

The key initiatives for us is again that connect to financial wellness. I am fixing to work on my first podcast and it's going to be around financial wellness. And so we are so committed to empowering our communities to realize that you know just a couple of small things and actually make a huge difference in your life. And we're going to try to have different guests on from different backgrounds. You know different careers, and just try to see if, when they were asking me what I wanted from the podcast, I said if one thing is said that will help change someone's life, to me that's success. And so you know, we're not trying to get a trillion followers or anything like that, but we'd really just want to make a difference in this space and that is going to be our initiative. Moving forward is how can we empower our communities and our members with financial wellness? We have free courses on our website. You don't even have to be a member. You can go on our website and take free financial courses.

And we do financial literacy. We love to teach financial literacy. Anyone who's ever asking us to do that, we will. One of the fun things we're doing that's actually I just thought about this around the senior center is we're going to teach them do's and don'ts as far as information sharing. So don't ever share this or don't ever, you know, give out this information, and that's we're going to do that in November and so it's really going to help, we hope, fraud and with people taking advantage of, you know, the elderly or people that just they trust such a generation of trust and what a beautiful thing. But then you know it can also hurt you as well it can.

**Lyn Wineman: 26:40**

That's great. That's great, Christie. All of those things are really great, and congratulations on the podcast. I have to say, when KidGlov started our podcast in 2020, I was terrified, but I did it anyway and now it's become one of my favorite things to do and I can tell you are going to be amazing at it as well, and maybe a little bit of practice for the podcast. I'm curious because of your background do you have any advice for individuals who might be looking to improve their financial health or maybe navigate a financial challenge?



**Christie Smith: 27:18**

When I teach financial literacy, the first thing that I tell my students is start small, because you know as well as I do that everyone joins the gym in January and then by the end of January they're not in years perhaps. So you know, start small, and maybe what that looks like is just writing down on a piece of paper your income and expenses. You know, just start making a mental note of eating out. You know how many times do I eat out. If I bought that at the grocery store and cooked, what would that look like? Can I find a coupon? You know, thrift, that's a huge thing. Now, you know, I always say that the youth, they are so innovative. I mean, who would have thought that they could sell their clothes you know, Poshmark and these different places and make a killing. You know just small steps. I think that that's a big, you know, a big win is just learning how to do the small things first and then build on to that. So, putting \$5 in your savings account, you know not saying, oh, I'm going to save a thousand dollars. Well, you don't have a thousand dollars and so you know that's not attainable. And so you know, just starting small because that \$5, I promise will add up. And then all of a sudden you're you're like, oh, I have this money.

I always advise starting small. For people that are already struggling, I think the biggest thing is communication. When we have members that call us and they trust us enough to say, look, this is my issue, I lost my job or you know I had an accident or something happened, then we can offer alternatives. So we can say we have options for you. Okay, we have a hardship program or maybe we can defer you know your payments until you know you get over this hardship or whatever that may be.

But if you don't communicate with your financial institution or you know whoever has your debt. They don't know, and so you never know what options are out there for you unless you communicate well. And then I promise from our side we receive it really well, because we're going to fight for you at that point, because you know you're hurting, we're going to try to help you, and so I think that that's big is just making sure that you communicate, and I think sometimes people want to hide that and that's not always the best course for resolution.

**Lyn Wineman: 29:56**

Yeah, really great advice, Christie. So for people who would like to learn more about the credit union, maybe check in on some of those resources or watch out for this new podcast that's coming. Where can they find information about Acclaim and the work that you're doing?

**Christie Smith: 30:17**

Our website. It's [www.acclaimfcu.org](http://www.acclaimfcu.org). And then we're also on social media. We have Facebook. It's Acclaim Federal Credit Union dot org. We have an instagram a claim fc. And we actually have a tiktok oh nice, acclaim fc, where we do a little bit more light-hearted things. A lot of our younger staff members they really enjoyed that. When I allowed them to do that, I did tell them they had to have a dedicated phone just for TikTok.

There's nothing else on that phone, just TikTok. I love it, but they were very appreciative that I would let them do that Again. You know just following us on our social media and then again we will launch our podcast when we get ready to do that, and that's going to be really fun.

**Lyn Wineman:** 31:09

Beautiful Christie, and listeners will get all of those links in the show notes on the KidGlov website as well if you didn't catch those. So, Christie, I'm going to ask you my favorite question next, and I know I already know you've got a good answer for this. I don't know what it is, but I am really inspired by motivational quotes, and could you give us a Christie Smith original quote to inspire our listeners?

**Christie Smith:** 31:37

My Christie Smith original is going to come from financial literacy course that I teach to a crisis pregnancy center. And so there's these beautiful women in there that I get to spend time with. And I told them one day your self-worth is not your network, and so please don't ever tie money to self-worth. You are always going to be more than what's in your bank account. Whether you're a CEO or you're a stay-at-home mom and you're homeschooling your children, you matter a whole lot more than anything that's monetary, and so just making sure that we never get so entwined in money or anything like that that we don't know that our self-worth is so much more important than any type of monetary amount you could put on that.

**Lyn Wineman:** 32:32

Christie, that is just beautiful. I knew you would have beautiful words of wisdom, so thank you for that I have really enjoyed this conversation and, as we wrap up our time together today, I'd like to end on what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing at Acclaim Federal Credit Union.

**Christie Smith:** 32:55

Lead with love. That's the best thing that I can say is, with everything you do, lead with love. And whatever you're doing, it does matter. Whether it's small or big, whether it's just a few acts of kindness, it matters in someone's life and I think that people should be proud, even if they do really small things like just really know that you're making a difference. But with everything that we do in a society that's so polarized, you know I love people, period. I don't have to put anything after that. I love people, and that actually is very freeing for me because I don't have to worry about anything else.

I get to love people and so if you lead with love, I think that that is how we change the world and I think that it's just good for mankind that is so beautiful.

**Lyn Wineman:** 33:48

That is so beautiful. What a great way to wrap up this episode. Christie, I fully believe the world needs more world changers like you and more organizations like Acclaim Federal Credit Union. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

**Announcer:** 34:11

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from.

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