

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([00:15](#)):

Welcome back to Co-Op Energy Talk. I'm Courtney Doyle, communications and marketing specialist at Cherry Land Electric Cooperative. You are probably expecting to hear Rachel Johnson's voice. She has been Cherry Land's member Relations manager for the past 10 years as well, a host of the Co-op Energy Talk podcast. But as of June 15th, she is the cooperative's new CEO. In case you're not familiar with the process as a not-for-profit member owned electric utility, your board of directors are the ones who actually hire the CEO. So, your board did a very in-depth application and interview process with a couple of really fantastic individuals, and they ultimately decided that Rachel's in-depth knowledge and her experience, both here at Cherry Land, but also at the national level, which we will hear about a little later in this podcast, that all made her the perfect person to lead us into this next chapter. So today, we wanna make sure that you, our members, have the opportunity to get to know Rachel, both professionally but also a little personally. So sit back, relax, and join us as we get to know your new CEO. Rachel, thank you for joining us on the podcast. You're always on the podcast, but now you're in a different seat.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([01:28](#)):

I know, I know it feels different on this side of the microphone, but, um, but exciting, exciting to move into a new phase.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([01:35](#)):

Yeah, for sure. So, this podcast is all about getting to know you. So let's start with a little bit of a, a resume rundown. Tell us a little bit about your history and how you got to cherry land.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([01:45](#)):

My, my path to cherry land is actually not, it's, it was unexpected. This was not necessarily what I saw as my career prior to coming to Cherry Land. All of my career experience was in higher education. I worked for, uh, Pepperdine University out in Southern California as their assistant registrar, and then I also taught communications and public speaking at Penn State and for a very brief moment as an adjunct instructor at Northwestern Michigan College. So I really had to spend a lot of the first, let's say, 10 years of my career in higher education. And I loved higher education because I do believe that education has the power to change lives. And I found it to be an very inspiring industry to be in. That said, I also found it to be more bureaucratic than what fit, how I like to approach problems and just a little bit too slow moving.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([02:30](#)):

So after several years in that industry, it was very, very clear to me that even though I believed deeply in the impact that we have in higher education, that it wasn't gonna be the right career path for me because I wanted to move too fast and innovate more than, than maybe most higher education institutions were ready for. So my husband and I were living in Penn State, PA. I was working at Penn State at the time, and we had this weird moment where we didn't have anything tying us anywhere or drawing us anywhere, and we got to pick anywhere in the United States. We wanted to,

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([02:58](#)):

That's a really weird moment in time <laugh>.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([03:00](#)):

It's a really weird moment in time. And we made the decision really fast. We were sitting on our, our deck in Pennsylvania, um, and I said, Hey, we should, my, my family, my parents had moved to Suttons Bay. I, I never grew up in this area, but my parents lived in Suttons Bay. So we would come here to visit over the course of our marriage and I said, we should check out Traverse City, like very cool area, a place we would really like to live. We went online, uh, saw a house that we liked. I called my dad and said, Hey, there's an open house at this house tomorrow. Don't get excited. We're not moving to Traverse City, but go, go check it out. And he called the next day and said, this would be really perfect for you. So without even seeing this house, we called the realtor and said, we'd like to make an offer. Oh

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([03:36](#)):

My gosh,

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([03:37](#)):

<laugh>. And she had an, she had an existing offer, it fell through. So she called us that week and said, if you want it, you, it's yours, but you, you know, you have to move fast. So, I mean, with, within the course of like 10 days, we basically decided to move to Traverse City, bought a house, and we were here six weeks later. And, and like I said, I didn't know where I was headed. I just knew that, well, I wanted to continue to support higher education. It wasn't going to be my career.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([04:01](#)):

So it, it was time for a change.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([04:03](#)):

It was, and at the same time, I, if I, if I look back over my time in higher education, not only from a career perspective, but also my own education, I think in a, in an interesting way, it really did equip me to be successful here. So I have a bachelor's degree in business and communications from Augustana University. And then when I was working at Pepperdine, I took advantage of the opportunity to go back to school and picked up a master's degree in communications from them. And then recently completed my MBA from Davenport. And all of those, um, kind of educational opportunities that I've pursued myself have been one, they've all been labors of love, cuz two of them I did while working full-time, which is not something I recommend, but it, it, you know, it was worthwhile. But those, it equipped me with the tools that I think I needed to be successful in this industry, which is very, very complex. And, uh, and fast

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([04:48](#)):

Moving what you were looking for fast

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([04:49](#)):

Moving. Yeah, exactly what I was looking for. So, you know, I feel very, very grateful for the role that higher education has played in my background, both as a student and also as an EM employee of different institutions. Yeah.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([05:01](#)):

So you moved to Traverse City in, uh, six weeks time. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO (05:05):

Almost exactly six weeks Yeah.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist (05:07):

Without a job, right? Like you just came to Traverse City Zero

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO (05:10):

Job. Yeah. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And it was a rough, it was a rough time. It was the only time in my life that I've been concerned I may have like an extended period of unemployment. So we moved here in, we closed on our house in May of 2012, and I did not have a job until January of 2013. And that was very, very stressful for us. Um, and our finances were incredibly tight during that time, and we just bought a house too. I mean, it was

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist (05:34):

Right, the cheapest thing you can buy, right? Like,

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO (05:36):

Everything was stressful. And I, and I, I've told this story to some employees, but I feel profoundly grateful for the chance that Cherry land took on me because had this opportunity not come up to come work at Cherry Land, I was looking at maybe some opportunities that weren't gonna have as fruitful of a career for me. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I mean, I was, I would apply, I was applying for anything. I was getting ready to go to a job fair with McDonald's. Cause I was like, I, I can work hard, I can work my way up. Right? And this, uh, the position I was originally hired for at Cherry Land was called Grassroots Advocate. It was a position that did not exist before I was hired into it. And essentially it was, um, meant to improve Cherry Land's member engagement efforts and engage our members in not just with the co-op, but also with industry issues.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO (06:20):

And so, you know, in, in one way, my communications background was a good fit for that. My, um, education in PR was a good fit for that. But I had no industry knowledge. I mean, if you had asked me at that moment, which thank goodness they didn't in the interview, I'd be like, where's electricity come from? I don't know. Unicorns, <laugh>. I mean, it was just, it was really far outside of my wheelhouse. And, um, you know, Tony took a chance on me and I'm, I'm very, very grateful for that. Cause it, it changed my life.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist (06:42):

Well, yeah. And here we are. You're about to be our c e o at Cherry Land, which I mean, over the course of 10 years, that's a lot of time and, and passion that you've invested into your career to land you there. So can you talk us through a little bit about the past 10 years from, from grassroot advocate to, to CEO and everything in between?

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO (07:01):

Yeah. You know, I guess I would start by saying anybody out there who is looking for a place to build a career, I ca I could not recommend electric co-ops more. One of the things I really love about Cherry Land is we're, we're pretty small. We're pretty nimble. There's not a lot of silos. So very early on it gave

me an opportunity to learn all different parts of the business because nobody, nobody said no. Right? If I went to the accounting team and said, Hey, I'm kind of interested in how inventory works, they'd be like, okay, cool. Join us for a cycle Camp <laugh>. Right? You know, I would go out in the field with crews. And so I had this, this really organic learning opportunity. And I think that just being someone who is inherently a learner benefited me in that process. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([07:37](#)):

But I, I started in that grassroots advocate role and then about maybe eight months later, our member services manager left and it gave me the opportunity to expand up into that role. So then my position evolved from grassroots advocate to overseeing our member services department, which is our call center. Everything to do with our cash office, a lot of our billing and collections, and then, uh, our communications and PR programs. And then finally also our energy use services, which is things like our rebate programs and our home energy audits. So all of those kind of landed on my lap within the first year working at Cherry Land. And then over the years we've as a team worked really hard to, I think, innovate how we think about our members' experience in all three of those areas. And it's, it's, there's never been a dull moment.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([08:19](#)):

We're constantly trying new things and I'm really, really proud of what we've built on the member services side of the co-op. One of my favorite leaders in the community is, uh, former president of nmc, Tim Nelson. And he has this quote where he talks about being a, a, a Boy scout and having, you know, like wanting to always be sure that he leaves his campsite better than he found it. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And I do feel like the team on the member services side has helped me feel very comfortable and confident that that is better than it was, uh, when I started managing that department 10 years ago. So it's, it's, it's been a super fun ride and hopefully we'll sustain that into the future.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([08:52](#)):

Yeah. Well, and you talk about how important it is for you to keep looking for the next great innovative idea, right? And there's a, a lot to be owed to you for that. Um, something I'd love for you to talk about a little bit is the loyal, the member loyalty index. Because that is something that not only we, uh, take into account here and live by here at Cherry Land, but coops across the country have adopted it. Like that's a big deal.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([09:17](#)):

I'm so, I'm so glad you asked that question cuz it's a super nerdy thing that I'm proud of. But it's actually kind of an interesting tie back to my educational background as well. So when I came to Cherry Land in that grassroots advocate role, and I had mentioned that like the kind of the goal of the, that job was improve member engagement with an end goal of having members be more loyal to the co-op and, and be more effective advocates for their co-op and for their needs as energy users in this community. So that was the goal. The problem we had early on is we had absolutely no way to measure whether or not we were accomplishing that goal. And so I worked with a colleague at Michigan's, uh, the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association, which is our statewide organization. Her name is Casey Clark. She also has a background in communications and we did a ton of research. We found this random professor in New Zealand global,

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([10:03](#)):

He took it global Yes.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([10:04](#)):

Who was doing really innovative research in ag co-ops about member loyalty and what was likely to make an ag co-op member choose to renew their membership. So we reached out to him and he, he shared his, kind of his research with us. And then we adapted that to the electric co-op model and, and did a bunch of pilot research here and essentially developed a statistically reliable way to measure member loyalty, which we called the member loyalty index. And the index isn't the good part. The good part is all of the insights the index has given us on what it is that we can do, whether it's in communications or in member services that will strengthen a member's relationship to the co-op that will cause them to say, I may not have a choice of where I get electricity, but if I did, I would choose you.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([10:46](#)):

And if I think you are under threat, I'm going to fight for this co-op. So this lets us measure that before we need them. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, which is really, really important. And some of the insights that have come out of that research are that the way we communicate with our members about issues that impact them about challenging issues when things go wrong. So think outages or some other sort of major co-op crisis, there's ways we can do that, that strengthen their loyalty to the co-op. And so we've used that and applied that in a lot of our planning here with programs. A perfect example of that is our, our outage texting program. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So not necessarily the most innovative thing that's ever happened, texting people leaving outages, but we didn't have anything like that. And when we started rolling out outage text, very few co-ops in the country had anything like that mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And it had emerged in our research that that was an area where our members were saying, you know, the, how well you communicate with me when things go wrong will impact my loyalty to you. And also we really wish you would text us. So we're like, okay, we

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([11:40](#)):

Let's do it. Yeah. It's

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([11:42](#)):

Lessen message matured. Right. And so we developed that custom texting system here. What's what's really cool is now other co-ops are using it, but we also saw a really significant increase in that member loyalty index score in our surveys after outage text versus before outage text. And that's just one example, but we've really used the idea of building an authentic relationship with our members as the key driver of all the programs we've developed. And I'm really proud of that. And then as you pointed out, one of the kind of cool outtakes of the Member loyalty index is it's now being used by co-ops across the country. Our statewide organization includes it, I'm sorry, our national organization includes it in their surveys that they do for co-ops all over mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So we not only have the insights from it, but we now have national benchmarking on members loyalty to their electric cooperatives.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([12:30](#)):

And that's thanks to you and Casey and that's pretty darn cool. <laugh>

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([12:33](#)):

And all the co-ops that took that seriously. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you know, I think it's easy to think of yourself as just a utility that's, I think a cop out, but it's an easy way for, uh, what, what whatever kind

of utility you are. What's special to me about cherry land is we have fully embraced the fact that we're not just a utility, we're different. We are a business model that empowers people. And in order to live that business model out, we have to be very serious about member loyalty. So I'm really proud of how many other co-ops in the country share that same value system.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([13:02](#)):

And it, well, it goes back to that question that you asked yourself, right? If y yes, our members may not have the choice for us to be our utility, but we want them to choose us, we would want them to choose us. So I think that that paints that picture really well of saying, Hey, we still want to make sure that we're your best option.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([13:19](#)):

And I don't think we can lean on members not having a choice as a long-term business strategy. When you look at the technologies that are evolving today, it's just distributing how energy is produced and consumed. And there's a lot of technologies available to our members that, that, that can disrupt their relationship to the cooperative. So I think this sets us up to continue to attend to that in a way that at the end of the day, I still believe the best value for a member who wants energy is Cherry Land Electric cooperative. And I think that this, this will help us continue that into the future as more and more disruptive technologies potentially could get in between us and our members. Well,

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([13:56](#)):

And that also lives out, you know, the, the cooperative model of we are member owned, cherry Land is owned by the membership, so we should be doing everything we can to make sure that they are proud to have cherry land as their, as their electric supplier. So

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([14:07](#)):

Yeah. And I think you let that drive also your, what you communicate with your members about. So it would be really easy to, you know, put together like really, really corporate packaged pieces. Right. But that's not our communication style at all. We have this very authentic raw communication style. Couple of other things we've added on the communication side since I've been here, the blog, I mean, I know everybody thinks the blog has always been there, but we didn't have a blog in 2013. Like that was new. And, you know, to, to Tony's credit, him being willing to go in there and engage with members in that space, I just think that's a, that's another trust builder. It's another loyalty builder. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it is something I fully intend to continue this podcast. Right. The willingness to come on here and without a script talk about energy issues with our members.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([14:49](#)):

And sometimes we get it right and sometimes we get, get it wrong and that's okay. Cause we're just being honest and authentic about the challenges we're we're working through the opportunities we see and how we think it's gonna impact our members. So I think it's driven a lot of our communications programs. I also see the increasingly see the influence of this idea of forming a different relationship with your members in our energy use services as well. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, we've already started some of that work, but the technologies are just evolving so rapidly and we're gonna have to continue to get better and better at that.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([15:16](#)):

Yeah, for sure. So when you are not, uh, soon to be running an electric cooperative, you do a lot of other things in the community, can you tell our listeners a little bit about some of the positions you hold and kind of how you've become a change maker in our community?

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([15:33](#)):

Oh man, that's, you're

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([15:34](#)):

Welcome. <laugh>.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([15:36](#)):

Can I get that on a t-shirt or a business card? I'm a change. No, you know, it's interesting, Courtney, because I, I think I knew this about myself, but I hadn't really realized it till I came here. So one of the, um, co-op values is commitment to community. And, and, and to Tony's credit, he has instilled that virtue throughout our entire organization by leading by example with his, the things he's done in the community. When I got here, I immediately had the opportunity to start getting engaged in the community. And what I realized is that that sense of belonging that I got from being a part of things in the community completely changed how I felt about who I was, what I could do, what was possible for me. And just gave me such a strong sense of belonging to this community. And along with that sense of belonging, I think came a, a real sense of responsibility, right?

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([16:21](#)):

Like, this is my home. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, this is the place that I would like to live for the rest of my life, and someday they will bury me somewhere in this town, <laugh>. And I just want it to be as healthy and strong as it can be. So if a few of the things I've had a, the privilege of being a part of here, I, I'm a serial board member. I just, yes, <laugh> me board member Rachel will show up, but, uh, I, I'm, I'm right now on the Traverse Connect board, and one of the things I really appreciate about Traverse Connect is their, their focus on regional economic development and really not thinking about just Traverse City, but rather regionally, they're doing some really cool stuff with creating kind of a, a, a new blue economy and making this area kind of the hub for freshwater innovation mm-hmm.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([17:02](#)):

<affirmative> as it pertains to not only research, but the commercialization of freshwater technologies. That's, that's a cool thing to be a part of. Something that will create jobs here that will create opportunities here that keep our, our kids here and then they grow kids here. Right. Like that's, and they grow 'em <laugh> right in the ground. It's right in the water <laugh>. So, you know, that, that's, that's been exciting. I also, um, am currently on the board of, uh, nmc board of Trustees, which is an elected position. If you had asked me 10 years ago if I would run for office, I would've not believed that was something I would do. But again, I think my commitment to higher education is satisfied through that, while also not having to work inside the bureaucracy. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and I love the college because NMC is such a unique community college. Their focused on these kind of in demand, really innovative technology driven programs like drones and unmanned underwater vehicles and all their marine technology, the aviation program, I mean, it is just such an economic driver in the community. And it

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([17:59](#)):



Community, it goes back to being so in touch with our community, right? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, which is again, uh, something that's so important to us at Cherry Land. So that makes a lot of sense to me that, that you were drawn to that. Yeah.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([18:07](#)):

Yeah. And, and they all kind, if you look at 'em, you start to find these intersections between these things, right? So the work that Travis Connect is doing intersects greatly with the workforce development work that NMC is doing, which intersects a lot with the members that we serve. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and the types of businesses that we serve and the jobs that, that our members have. When I look at the things that, the things that appeal to me in the community where I'm gonna spend my time are things that I think they're very, very long term. They're not necessarily making a short term impact. But when I think about what this community can be in 20 years or 30 years, I'm really excited to be a part, a part of organizations that I think are driving that. And then the other thing I've been kind of trying to incorporate more into my volunteer life.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([18:45](#)):

You, I, I, I ha I felt a little too tied to Traverse City. And if you look at Cherry land service territory, we serve from Manistee to Northport to Williamsburg mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And we've got members all across those different areas. And I wanted to, to have a better sense of the needs of those communities and two organizations that are doing that for me. One is Impact 100. I've been a member of Impact 100 since their first year. I was on their board for a little while, but the way that they do their grant making across five different counties helps me stay in touch with the developments in terms of nonprofits in those counties. And then I also, a couple years ago, joined the Manistee Community Foundation's investment and finance committee and, and we're really focusing there on developing impact investing and Manistee. So again, all of these things kind of all tie together into like, how do we have the healthiest possible local, regional economy in order to make sure that this community thrives into the future.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([19:34](#)):

You weren't kidding. Serial board member. I

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([19:36](#)):

Didn't even tell you about the boards. I'm no longer on <laugh>, all, all fun things. A

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([19:40](#)):

List of those online. No, I'm kidding. <laugh>.

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([19:42](#)):

Yeah. It's, it's, it's been fun. And you know, I think this community has so many people who are generous with both their time and their treasure, and it's easy to take that for granted. I've lived a lot of communities where that's not true. So it's, it's exciting to be a part of it. Yeah.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([19:56](#)):



No, it's, it's an amazing place to work, live and play. And, and it's people like you who help us get there. So thank you for all of that. But when you are not being a serial board member or running an electric cooperative, tell us about what you do in your free time. Is that just something we can call it?

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([20:13](#)):

Yeah, yeah. <laugh>, you know, there's a couple things that I love to do. I, um, I'm very lucky my whole family is here. So even though I didn't grow up here, my parents were living in Suttons Bay when we moved here. My sister, who I'm very, very close with, moved here about a year after I did lives so close to me. I can walk to her house. I'm really involved with, uh, with her family. Um, my nephew is six, he's a first grader at Silver Lake Elementary School. So I, I love being able to spend time with my family here locally. Um, as in terms of personal hobbies, really avid reader. I love to read. And also, we live on Silver Lake and I love to paddleboard. Um, so, you know, anything that I like to do, it's interesting because as much as most of my work and volunteer things are about interacting with people,

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([20:55](#)):

<laugh>

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([20:56](#)):

In my free time, if I'm being honest, a lot of my endeavors are pretty solitary.

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([20:59](#)):

And with your dog, Hank,

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([21:00](#)):

Oh, we haven't even talked about Mr. Hank. Yeah. So, no, my husband and I, uh, we don't have kids, but we do, um, we are committed to dogs <laugh>. So we, uh, we've, we've owned five different boxer dogs, um, four of whom we've adopted, and our most recent adoptee is Hank. And he's such an awesome dog. He's just really sweet and loyal and kind of stupid, which is exactly how I like my dogs. Um, but, you know, I think dogs are cool because it's the one relationship in your life that's really easy. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, right? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, feed 'em, and they're gonna love you. And honestly, even if you don't feed 'em, they'll probably still love you. Which is really an amazing, amazing thing. Like, there's a, a simplicity to the loyalty that a dog shows. And so, yeah, it, it brings me a lot of joy. We

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([21:41](#)):

Love Hank. We'll feature. Hank, uh, if you check out the June issue of Michigan Country Lines, you can see Hank for yourself. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, you can read a little more about Rachel in there, but Rachel, before we end, I just wanna give you an opportunity as you step into this role, you know, our members have really treasured the relationship they've been able to have with Cherry land. Is there anything else you want our members to know as you move into, uh, being the CEO of their electric cooperative?

Rachel Johnson, Incoming CEO ([22:07](#)):

I, you know, I think that I want members to know that they can continue to expect that same level of transparency and communication that we've had with them historically. My background is in communications. I'm very committed to that. And I'm really, really excited about our future. There are

real challenges in the future, but I, I am a hundred percent confident that this team is well-equipped to meet those challenges. And in fact, I, several people have heard me say this, our team here at Cherry Land is so strong. We have brilliant, talented, dedicated employees. I actually think I'd have to work hard to mess it up, <laugh>. That's, that's how good our kids. So, you know, I just, I hope that our members have confidence that they're in good hands and know that the, the level of communication they've had, they can expect to continue. And I hope that they will engage with me, um, in the same way that they engaged with Tony over the last 20 years. Yeah,

Courtney Doyle, Communication Specialist ([22:55](#)):

I know, I know. We're excited. We're looking forward to this next chapter. So thank you, Rachel, for sharing a little about the history of your life, essentially with all of us. Uh, you can read more about Rachel in the June issue of Michigan Country Lines. And then again, that will be on the blog chair, land electric dot co-op. Join us next time for more co-op Energy Talk.