EMERGING LEADER OF THE YEAR

TAKING FLIGHT

Hunter's Leadership Creates Opportunities for Others

By Anthony Schoettle



When Chelci Hunter learned she had been named the 2026 Jackson Lewis Emerging Leader of the Year by the Indiana Chamber, her first reaction wasn't pride. It was gratitude.

The 34-year-old program manager of business alliance at the Indianapolis Airport Authority immediately thought about the people who helped her get there, the mentors who took a chance on her and the single mother whose example shaped her outlook on leadership and service.

"I'm still super humbled by it," Hunter shares. "I did not get here by myself."

That perspective has become a defining characteristic of Hunter's career. Whether she's helping businesses navigate opportunities at the Indianapolis International Airport, mentoring interns or connecting companies with potential partners, she has built a reputation as someone who believes relationships can change lives because they changed hers.

Finding her own runway

A Greenwood native and Perry Meridian High School graduate, Hunter admits she wasn't ready for college when she graduated.

"My parents wanted me to go to college. I did not want that," she recalls. "I didn't know who I wanted to be."

Although she enrolled and took classes part time for several years, Hunter eventually stepped away from college and spent the next decade working in security. The experience taught her about people and responsibility, but she wanted a career rather than a job.

Then two people stepped forward and offered something that would alter the course of her life. Pam Wagner and Nancy Manley knew Hunter through a long-standing connection with her family. Both had worked with Hunter's mother, Stacy Hunter, at the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission. Years later, while serving in leadership positions at Indianapolis-based IndyGo, they offered Hunter an opportunity despite her unconventional background.

"Sometimes people just need to be given a chance," Hunter remarks.

Wagner and Manley hired Hunter as a disadvantaged business enterprise liaison officer despite her lack of traditional corporate experience.

"That chance changed my entire life and trajectory," she asserts. "That exposure created the opportunity to do so much more and the opportunity to give back."

The experience reinforced a lesson that continues to guide her today: talent often exists in places others overlook.

Built on relationships

If there's a common thread running through Hunter's story, it's relationships.

She first met Wagner and Manley when she was 10 years old, accompanying her mother to work. At the time, they were simply adults in her orbit. Years later, they became professional mentors who saw potential she hadn't fully recognized herself.

Their influence shaped how she approaches leadership.

"It's amazing when you realize you made a difference in somebody's life just from connecting them to the right person," she offers.

That philosophy fits naturally with her current role – which she's held since early 2022 – at the Indianapolis Airport Authority. In simple terms, Hunter describes her job as being a connector.

The airport authority works with a range of businesses, particularly in construction, infrastructure development, professional services and consulting. Hunter helps companies understand how the airport operates, identifies opportunities and introduces them to the people and resources they need to succeed.

"I've seen firsthand what can happen when you connect people who may not have otherwise crossed paths," she explains. "A conversation can become a partnership. A partnership becomes an opportunity, and an opportunity can create jobs, build a business and develop a workforce that strengthens the entire community."

Christy Gormal, president of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) Indianapolis, first met Hunter around 2017 through the organization. Since then, the two have worked together in various capacities as Hunter volunteered with NAWBO while advancing her career through multiple organizations.

"It was incredibly rewarding for me to see Chelci receive this recognition," Gormal says. "We saw something special in her leadership style very, very early on."

That promise was recognized in 2019 when Hunter became the youngest recipient of NAWBO Indianapolis' Choice Award, an honor recognizing advocates for women business owners across Indiana.

"She's really a connector in the truest sense of the word," Gormal emphasizes. "She's constantly looking for ways to bring organizations together that are focused on creating change and opportunity in our community.

"Sometimes the greatest impact we can make is introducing the right people and helping someone gain access to an opportunity they didn't have before," Gormal notes. "To me, that's leadership. It isn't just about what you've accomplished personally. It's about what you make possible for others."

Beyond her professional accomplishments, Gormal describes Hunter as someone whose energy and optimism are contagious.

"I've never been around Chelci when she's been grumpy or unhappy or unmotivated," Gormal recounts. "She's full of energy and life and always asking, 'How can we make this better?' "

That combination of enthusiasm and action is what makes Hunter effective, Gormal adds. "She never just talks the talk. She's always willing to do the work."

Community gateway

Hunter describes Indianapolis International

Airport as much more than a transportation hub – a "city within a city" where as many as 11,000 airport staff, contractors and business partners may be working on a typical day.

"It's not just a place where you go when you're traveling," Hunter states. "It's an economic engine and a place where businesses, people and opportunities come together."

Investments in the airport, she notes, create ripple effects throughout Indiana's economy, supporting jobs, workforce development and community growth. "Our airport belongs to this community. I don't think a lot of people realize that."

According to Caity Withers, communications manager at the Indianapolis Airport Authority, Hunter has built a reputation as an advocate for small and emerging businesses throughout central Indiana.

"Indianapolis is often described as the biggest small town," Withers begins. "Chelci has devoted her career to making this big city feel even smaller by leveling the playing field so that local small businesses can find connection and growth."

Withers describes Hunter as a "natural connector and facilitator" who works to ensure small businesses understand airport contracting opportunities, gain introductions to larger firms, receive mentoring and develop the knowledge necessary to compete successfully.

The impact extends beyond relationships. In 2025 alone, the Indianapolis Airport Authority invested $194 million with more than 350 local and emerging businesses, representing 82% of its overall spending. Hunter helped support that effort by developing tools and processes that increased transparency and access while supporting more than 90 capital projects totaling $146 million, with 90% involving local and emerging businesses.

"Relationships matter and exposure creates opportunity," Withers says, describing a philosophy that has guided Hunter's work.

Among the initiatives Hunter has helped champion are outreach events, networking programs and partnerships that connect small businesses with decision-makers, buyers and contractors. Through those efforts, she has helped create new pathways for entrepreneurs and underrepresented firms to gain a foothold in major projects across the region.

Lessons from home

Hunter credits much of her outlook to her mother. Stacy Hunter spent decades working for the state of Indiana while raising Chelci as a single parent after separating from Chelci's father when Chelci was 5. The two were exceptionally close.

"If she was at work, I was at work with her," Chelci Hunter recalls.

Growing up, she witnessed firsthand the challenges her mother faced balancing work, finances and family responsibilities. It taught her that many people struggle quietly and that support systems can make all the difference. That realization became a driving force behind her desire to help others.

She pays that support forward by assisting small businesses, mentoring interns and connecting professionals with opportunities.

Going back to school

Years after leaving college, Hunter returned to school while working at the airport authority and earned an Indiana University degree in civic leadership with an emphasis on law.

Balancing a full-time job, school, marriage and parenthood required persistence. At one point, she pushed back against a required internship, believing her years of workforce experience should exempt her from the requirement. Instead, an IU career development leader, Stacy Lozer, encouraged her to see the opportunity differently.

Hunter completed the internship in another airport authority department, gaining a broader perspective and validating the value of stepping outside her comfort zone.

Looking back, Hunter says leadership isn't about titles or achievements. "It's about how you show up and how you treat people and what you do with the opportunities you've been given."

A thoughtful leader

Asked how she hopes people will describe her in 10 years, Hunter doesn't mention awards, accomplishments or job titles. She chooses a single word: thoughtful.

She hopes people remember someone who listened before speaking, treated others respectfully and welcomed diverse perspectives. She wants to be known as someone who did things the right way rather than taking the easiest way. Most important, she hopes people view her as approachable.

"I want people to remember that they could come and talk to me about anything without any judgment," she imparts.

For young professionals hoping to make a difference, her advice is straightforward.

"You don't have to figure it out to have a place at the table," she says. "Sometimes you just have to ask the right questions and know the right people and be willing to put in the work."

Then she adds one more essential ingredient: "Most importantly, give back."

It's advice rooted in gratitude, informed by experience and embodied by a leader whose career has been defined by helping others get where they want to go.





Hunter remembers those who believed in her and is committed to helping others soar in their careers.