

A FOLIAGE GETAWAY  
WHERE THE MOUNTAINS  
MEET THE SEA

CHEERS!  
MADE-IN-  
MAINE  
DRINKS

# Down East

THE MAGAZINE OF MAINE | OCTOBER 2022

## Autumn IN CAMDEN



—  
**Chowder!  
A Tribute**

—  
**York County  
Border War**

—  
**Are Solar  
Boats Next?**

—  
**The Case of  
the Lost Birds**





KNICKERBOCKER  
GROUP

**Top:** Team members are fueled by continuous learning, innovation, passion, community, and collaboration.

**Left:** Knickerbocker Group believes good design starts with caring, thoughtfulness, and attentive listening.

**Right:** Every detail of a home should feel inspired.

# Knickerbocker Group

Behind every stunning home is a team of employee-owners invested in the work . . . and in each other.

**W**ith its commitment to client-driven design, and to supporting Maine creators and protecting Maine's environment, Boothbay- and Portland-based Knickerbocker Group has distinguished itself as a design-build firm with a unique ethos. In 2023, the company will celebrate 45 years of listening intently, finding solutions, customizing, collaborating, communicating, seeing things through, and making dreams come true. And six years of focusing on providing these same touchstones for nearly 100 team members, who all became employee-owners in 2017.

The ESOP model "didn't change us: It fit us," says Knickerbocker Group president Danielle Betts. "If anything, it helped us recognize our culture's power and importance, which motivated us to work even harder to protect it."

Debbie Hilscher, director of people and culture, says the organization strives to ensure employee-owners live their best professional and personal lives. Her focus this year is on creating professional-development plans that build on employee-owners' strengths and provide opportunities for skills building and nonlinear career paths. "Many people

start in one position and end up in another," Hilscher says. Two employee-owners in former administrative-support roles, for example, are now managing sales and real estate. A former assistant project manager is now overseeing construction projects and supervising a team. "We are good at recognizing people's talents and supporting change to help them realize their full potential," says Hilscher.

The ESOP Communications Committee regularly shares fun facts about employee-owners, stories that deepen understanding of everyone's roles, and "high-fives" between colleagues. "We strive to recognize each person's contributions," she says.

The committee also recently created a "Solution Box" to provide an avenue for all employees to have a voice. "We thoughtfully consider every single submission," Hilscher says.

No matter the size, what is evident in every gathering of KG co-owners is: They have fun with each other. It's a company culture cultivated from the beginning by founder Steve Malcom. Hilscher says, "You could work anywhere else, and you would have a job. Here, you have a community. You have a family."

Social events are frequent: Many are devoted to community good. There's a creative energy, too, that enlivens workdays. "Everyone who works here is passionate about homes,

landscaping, and real estate," Betts says, so there are animated exchanges about "what works and what doesn't work."

That dynamic spills over into passion projects, which have turned into new lines of business. The Innovation Team's mission is to incubate the ideas of employee-owners. Derek Libby, a site manager, for example, drives the implementation of new products and methodologies, collaborating first with the architect and construction-practice leaders before testing in the field, which he documents in videos and posts to the company's web portal. Julien Jalbert, a licensed architect, and Bill Burge, a construction manager, are spearheading an initiative to bring sustainable housing to more Mainers, which aligns as much with their professional talents as their personal values.

Ultimately, what clients experience is a process that feels authentic, joyful, and inspired. "We are so lucky we get to build beautiful houses and work with people embarking on one of the most exciting chapters of their lives," Betts says. "There is so much positive energy surrounding that."

Hilscher adds, "To build an amazing house, beginning to end, we have to work well together." ESOP culture fosters collaboration and happiness: essential elements for delivering dreams.

■ [knickerbockergroup.com/esop](https://knickerbockergroup.com/esop)