
She's your ambassador to downtown

Posted by **Jeremy C. Fox**

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By **Jeremy C. Fox**, Town Correspondent

Katie Maraqa loves her job and appreciates the people she works with. As she walked up Winter Street toward Boston Common on Tuesday morning, she paused to say hello to two co-workers cleaning the window of Jewelry Plus with Windex and a squeegee.

"Nothing better than that," she said, smiling, as she walked away. "Teamwork — it makes me happy."

Maraqa and the window-washers are among 30 people recently hired to act as ambassadors for the Downtown Boston Business Improvement District, the first organization of its kind in the city. This is a busy week for everyone in the BID, as it celebrates its official launch today with an 11:30 ceremony at One Boston Place and kicks off its Stepping Up Downtown! Summer Series with events throughout the week.

Funded by \$3 million in annual fees from commercial property owners, the BID works to supplement existing city services by working alongside the police, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, Inspectional Services Department, Public Works Department and other agencies to make the neighborhood cleaner and more welcoming to visitors.

More welcoming — that's where Maraqa comes in. Tuesday through Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., you'll find the 20-year-old Wakefield native patrolling the area around Downtown Crossing, the pockets of her cargo pants stuffed full of maps.

As a hospitality ambassador, Maraqa's core responsibility is helping people find their way around the confusing streets of downtown — to Faneuil Hall or Boston Common or the New England Aquarium. She'll tell them where to find a cup of clam chowder, or a burrito if they prefer, and direct them back to their hotels after a long day following the Freedom Trail. On rainy days, she hands out umbrellas.

"I hit those streets running," she said. "It's great. It's awesome because I'm a people person. I love meeting the people."

A few months ago, Maraqa was less self-confident. She had never held a fulltime job and had no direction or plans for her future. She was working part-time at a Market Basket and battling a drug addiction when a counselor at her South Boston halfway house referred Maraqa to Project Place, a 44-year-old nonprofit that helps homeless and low-income people develop job skills.

Today, she's one of seven job-readiness program graduates from Project Place who have found work with the Downtown BID through Block by Block, a firm that provides services to business improvement districts across the country.

"Bad choices and bad decisions brought me to that halfway house, but thank God, now I'm making good decisions, which led me to Project Place and which led me to the BID I'm working with now," Maraqa said. "Today I have possibilities. Today I have a future. And before I didn't."

Suzanne Kenney, executive director of Project Place, said that Maraqa's story is similar to that of many people the organization works with.

"That is a typical profile, is that someone's had a difficult situation, they're looking to overcome it, they're looking for a chance, and then we provide the opportunity," Kenney said. "What gets harder is convincing somebody outside of our walls to then give them a chance."

That chance came about through Project Place's longstanding relationship with the BID, which goes back to the Downtown Crossing Partnership that preceded the BID and the Downtown Crossing Association before that. Kenney said Rosemarie E. Sansone, president of the BID, has long been supportive of Project Place.

"Rosemarie has been our voice, our advocate," Kenney said, helping to get graduates of the program hired as ambassadors and making it possible for the organization to get a contract providing overnight power-washing and plant-watering services in the BID area.

In an interview on Tuesday, Sansone said it was important to her to ensure that Project Place would continue to have a role in making downtown better.

"That relationship already existed, and when the BID was being planned, we wanted to make sure that that engagement would continue and that there would be a role for Project Place to play," Sansone said.

A former Boston City Councilor and a city official in Mayor Raymond L. Flynn's administration, Sansone came to the Downtown Crossing Partnership after 13 years as the public affairs director for Suffolk University. She has brought that experience and the relationships she formed with city agencies and educational institutions to bear in forming the coalition that made the BID possible.

"This is fascinating work. It's a collaboration among everybody," she said. "Tomorrow's event is the coming together of residents, nonprofit organizations, property owners, business people, city officials, staff members among agencies in city government that have all been engaged in this process. This is everybody's BID."

Maraqa shares in that ownership, and she takes pride in it. She enjoys being able to make a difference in someone else's day, but what she values most are the opportunities she sometimes gets to connect with others on a deeper level, as when she had a conversation last week with a man who told her his aunt had recently died. Maraqa had recently lost her own aunt, and the two of them talked for a while about their experiences.

"You meet people out here, and they come up to you, 'Hi, how are you doing?' And you have a conversation with them, and it gets on a deeper level, and it's not about directions, and it's not about this — and you just start talking about life in general," she said. "That will make my day worth it, just that. ... So much of this just blows my mind away."

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