

at work with ...

## Cheryl Mathis

### public service ambassador, Downtown Norfolk Council

A few people asked me how I became Downtown Norfolk Council's Employee of the Year, and I said I'm not trying. But I treat everyone 50 and older as though they were my mother or my father, and those 50 and younger as my brother or my sister. That's how I was raised – to respect.

Doing this, you meet interesting people every day. Sometimes I'm not very good with names, but I remember faces, and I can remember things they said to me. Sometimes I think that's important, when you can see someone and ask them, "How is your granddaughter?" Those little things are important when you see people every day.

People tell me it's nice to see me out there smiling. Because I'm this way all the time. I don't change. Even if it's raining. Or hot.

I'm just me, constantly.

Before here, I was working at a middle school in Hampton, and I got stabbed twice by one little girl who was going through some issues. And I was like, OK, there's only so much you can do to children when they do something to you, so it's time for me to leave and get my thoughts together before something else happens.

Miss Noelle, who works upstairs at DNC, is friends with my sister. And they needed a mascot. They said Cheryl is crazy, she'll do Cool Jack. So they hired me to be a mascot, and then gave me a full-time job in 2008.

Have you ever seen Cool Jack? That's me inside. It's actually fun. Any of the Christmas parties downtown, they ask for Cool Jack. I walk around the streets downtown and try to make people smile.

There's a lot to what we do. Some people think all we do is escorts, but if there's a light not working, we take the numbers down and send it over to the city. If a building looks like it's been broken into, we write up a report, call the owner and say things don't look right, would you like us to call the police? We're extra eyes and ears.

In October, they introduced us to FRED, and they took us through a little course on how to back up and do figure eights in a golf cart. I was like, in a golf cart? They said it seats six people. I figured I used to drive 18 wheelers, so I could do this.

This is more personal than the 18-wheeler truck. That was more like you pick up your rig, hitch on your container, and drop it off. The people really never talked at all, and I'm a people person. So I was like, OK, I'm not going to be doing this for very long.

This is different because I'm able to talk to people. And I love people.

Our weekends are pretty interesting – we have the people who have been barhopping. One particular night all the curtains were down because it was raining, and I was like, "My gosh, where did you guys go?" They asked, "You want a drink?" And I said, "I'm tasting everything you guys had this evening. I know it's a little cold outside, but I need to open up the curtain."

We get a glimpse of everything.

When they got FRED, I figured there were going to be quite a few calls for this. Time is so limited for people to go to lunch, and now they can actually go to the Freemason Abbey, or they can go to 456 Fish.

Instead of staying in the same area constantly during the day, they have a better opportunity to venture out and see what else is downtown.

It's mostly locals, maybe 70-30 locals to tourists. Visitors will tell you – "This is free? For real? And you don't take tips? I wish my city did this."

FRED is going to be permanent. I think they're interested in getting another one. I told them they should call it Freda.

We have a few people who think that FRED actually belongs to them, so that's funny – "I called for my FRED hours ago." And I say, "Your FRED? FRED belongs to everybody."

As told to Pilot writer Meghan Hoyer



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