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PUBLIC SAFETY AMBASSADORS

Walk a mile, or a thousand, in her shoes

By Bruce Ebert

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Valerie Kay Kenny is one of two lieutenants of the Downtown Norfolk Council's public safety ambassadors, prominent on downtown sidewalks, day and night, seven days a week. They help tourists and visitors with questions, act as eyes and ears of the police and even give free rides on "FRED," a courtesy shuttle.

Q: How does this job contrast with your previous one?

A: I was in the Army for 22 years. I was an administrative specialist and, before that, a drill instructor. As an administrative specialist I didn't get the chance to interact with people, and as a drill instructor I interacted in an entirely different way! I believe the real me is being a public safety ambassador. I still get to use my drill instructor skills, however. When we have an event to go to, I line everyone up in rows and make sure we're all walking as one unit!

Q: Have you ever calculated how many miles you walk in a year?

A: Oh, my gracious! Eight to 10 hours a day, five days a week, 12 months a year, minus vacation ...Let's say 2,000 miles a year. I wear out three pairs of shoes a year. I wear Rockport boots and Rockport tennis shoes.

Q: What is the most common question you get?

A: From visitors, it's "Where's the mall?" From the workers, it's "Where's the best place to eat?" I'm not allowed to show favoritism to one restaurant over another but I can ask what type of food they would like to eat, then go to my restaurant guide and show them the choices and help them make their decision.

Q: Have you ever gotten a question you couldn't answer?

A: There was a street I'd never heard of: Rader Street. I couldn't locate it until I went to a map. It's near PETA and the Pier Condominium.

Q: What's the most unusual thing you were ever asked to do that was not a question?

A: Someone wanted me to change a tire, but we cannot do that. But I can use a power booster to jump-start a car.

Q: What is the best part of your job?

A: When a cruise ship comes in and I can help passengers. Greeting passengers as they come off the ship. On the last cruise ship that landed here there were passengers who told me I was the best tour guide in Norfolk.

Q: What's the most difficult part of your job?

A: With light rail coming to the city, there is so much confusion because of the blocked-off streets and intersections. I have to make sure the construction areas have the correct signs and the arrows are pointing the correct way. That's our (Downtown Norfolk Council) signs (which point the way to businesses whose access may be impaired by construction.) If I see something wrong with the city's signs, I report that.

Q: What do you do that the public never sees and yet is essential to the success of downtown?

A: We put together reports on infrastructure that needs fixing – manhole covers that are broken, things that people could trip over, street lights that are out ... Those kinds of things.

Q: What is the most satisfying single act you've ever performed in your job?

A: About six years ago, I saved a baby's life. I heard a lady screaming, "Help, help ..." I saw two men with her but they were saying they couldn't help her. I took the baby, did CPR with two fingers on the heart. I called 911. I was able

to remove the mucous from the baby's mouth and then the paramedics took over. The baby lived ... I was not on the job at that moment but I was an ambassador still.



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Valerie Kay Kenny has been a public safety ambassador for almost 10 years. The ambassadors patrol downtown streets, giving directions, escorting people to cars, and offering a sense of security to city dwellers and visitors.
