



KEANA PARKER

A WATCHFUL EYE Gina Ramirez has been cruising Pacific Avenue as part of the Downtown Santa Cruz Hospitality Guide Program since 1998.

The Eyes and Ears of Pacific Avenue

A new survey explores public perceptions of the City of Santa Cruz's Hospitality Guide Program

Pacific Avenue

BY ARIC SLEEPER Whether she is dealing with an intoxicated man spewing insults, a business owner saying hello, or a tourist looking for the best place to buy an umbrella, 16-year veteran of the Hospitality Guide Program Gina Ramirez rarely loses her smile.

Coupled with the meager equipment the downtown "host" carries in her one-strap bag—cellphone, keys, and informational pamphlets—Ramirez's disposition and street acumen are the most effective tools she possesses to manage the often calm, and sometimes chaotic, environment of Pacific Avenue in Downtown Santa Cruz.

"There is no typical day, and that's probably why I like the job," says Ramirez, Hospitality Guide Program (HGP) manager and contractor. "It's never the same. You can be dealing with an intense crisis—somebody having a heart attack—to just saying, 'Hey, hello, how are you doing today?' to helping families find

attractions. You can go from one to the other in a couple of seconds."

Strolling up and down Pacific Avenue in blue and yellow uniforms, Ramirez and the four others who serve as hosts work seven days a week, year round, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The HGP formed in 1994 through the Vision Santa Cruz program, which was created by the Santa Cruz City Council to rebuild downtown after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

"After the earthquake, the vacancies and the undeveloped property brought an element that was not safe," says Ramirez, who is a life-long Santa Cruz resident and has been a host since 1998.

Modeling the Santa Cruz program after others, such as Seattle's Downtown Ambassadors program, local business and property owners, in conjunction with city officials, created the HGP to deter unwanted behavior and foster a more welcoming atmosphere.

The Downtown Management

Corporation (DMC) was created at the same time to ensure that the HGP funding is being properly implemented, among other functions. Funding for the HGP is provided by tax revenue from downtown businesses and property owners.

With a recent increase in business in Downtown Santa Cruz—a good indicator that the local economy is on the upswing—the DMC found itself with more funding than expected and commissioned a survey to determine where these additional funds should be allocated, and whether the existing host program is effective.

Participants in the survey, which was conducted by the local public policy hosting platform Civinomics in February, were asked questions regarding their experiences with the HGP and their perceptions of the program's efficacy in its stated purpose: "promoting a clean, safe and friendly atmosphere downtown."

Among the business owners,

Good Times 4-10-14

HOSTS *CONT. FROM P.8*

managers and employees who participated in the survey, 84 percent felt that the HGP was effective in making Downtown Santa Cruz safer.

"I shared [the results] with the staff and it improved morale, due to the stress they endure on the job," says Ramirez.

Fifty-two percent of the survey's respondents felt that the host program is somewhat effective in addressing and resolving "anti-social" behavior, while 24 percent stated that it is very effective and 21 percent felt that the program is minimally effective. Economic Development Department Executive Director Bonnie Lipscomb tells *GT* that the results will be used to "better inform our future decisions."

Although the majority of those surveyed felt that the hosts create a safer environment downtown, and the anecdotes provided in the survey point to mostly positive opinions of the HGP, the hosts say they still deal with many citizens who are unaware of the limits of their jurisdiction.

Misconceptions regarding the hosts' powers often leads to frustration and confusion among those living, working and patronizing downtown, says HGP host Kymberly East.

"Problems arise when people assume what our role is," says East. "A lot of people think we are police officers, or [that] we can run down a person who has just robbed a store."

The hosts are not enforcers of laws, but rather serve as the eyes and ears of Pacific Avenue, from Water to Laurel streets—including the adjacent side streets and parking areas within one block.

"What we do is inform the public of ordinances so that they don't get a ticket for something they're not aware of," says Ramirez. "Basically our job is done once we do that."

In addition to informing the public about shops, directions, and public ordinances, the hosts also connect different outreach and service organizations of the city, such as the police department and public works, to problems they spot like crime, out-of-order street lamps, and graffiti.

"We work as a team," says Ramirez. "One's picking up the poop, another is taking somebody to jail, and another is helping medical needs to be met. Everybody's working together."

While walking down Pacific Avenue with *GT* on a cloudy Friday afternoon, Ramirez explains that the key to managing the busy strip lies in building relationships with the denizens of downtown, whether with business owners or the homeless.

"As you work down here over the years, you develop relationships," says Ramirez. "A lot of times people will cooperate because you have a sense of respect back and forth. We don't make people do anything. We ask them. By promoting respect and treating people the same, no matter what walk of life they're from, you tend to get cooperation and respect back."

East refers to the host's relationship with some of downtown's unhoused regulars as occasional friendships, and characterizes other dynamics as an "uneasy truce."

"It can change by the contact," says East. "For lack of any other way to describe it, sometimes it's like a big dysfunctional family."

The importance of these relationships becomes apparent as Ramirez drops her smile and shoots an authoritative look to a young man smoking a cigarette on a bench. He apologizes immediately with an uneasy grin and snuffs out the cigarette. Afterward, Ramirez mentions that she knows him.

In regard to making the HGP more effective, Ramirez feels the hosts would benefit from new equipment, like upgrading from cell phones to radios, and acquiring tablets the hosts could utilize to better assist citizens looking to book a hotel room or find information they may not have readily available. Ramirez

HOSTS *CONT. FROM P.9*

would also like to unite ambassador programs from other cities through conventions and expand the information center downtown.

"I am always exploring options to improve and will continue to question if the service we provide is effective," says Ramirez.

After conversing with varied individuals and smiling through the belligerent remarks of a towering drunkard, Ramirez explains that it takes a special breed to make it in the HGP.

"The burnout rate is quick," she says. "You have to have patience, tolerance, compassion, and caution. You have to be invested in your community."

When asked how she feels as her day's shift

comes to an end, Ramirez seems to break character for a brief moment as she imagines the end of her day.

"I can't wait," she says, "because you're on constantly. Like right now, I am observing everything around me—people, noises, what belongs, what doesn't belong. You get used to the environment because that's your safety. At the end of the day I could be angry or sad, but I'm generally a good-spirited person so I can still go home and feel good because I know that if I've done my service in the best capacity I could at that time, then I have done my job." **gt**