

Lowell business center director has been there and done that

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Liliana Kualapai opened Downtown Dancewear on Merrimack Street in Lowell in 2006. She closed it recently to take a new job as director of the Merrimack Valley Small Business Center. COURTESY PHOTO

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LOWELL -- The next time a prospective downtown business owner walks into the Merrimack Valley Small Business Center on Middle Street, he or she can take comfort that the advice is coming from someone who's already done it.

Liliana Kualapai, who for eight years ran Downtown Dancewear on Merrimack Street, recently closed the store upon her hiring as director of the small-business center, an affiliate of Community Teamwork Inc. that offers entrepreneurial training, counseling and workshops for those owning nascent businesses or seeking to form one.

She replaces Stacie Hargis, who took a position at Middlesex Community College after three years.

Kualapai, 33, decided to make a career change after the birth of her second child eight months ago.

"Owning a business takes away a lot of your personal endeavors," she said in a phone interview Tuesday. "It's like having another child. The amount of work, for me personally, wasn't balancing out with family.

"I found that my personal priorities changed."

Karen Frederick, executive director of Community Teamwork Inc., said the nonprofit is pleased to have Kualapai onboard.

"We're very pleased to have someone in there who knows Lowell, who has run a small business and has the appropriate educational background," Frederick said. "She is going to bring in new ideas and enthusiasm, and will work well with small businesses that are already in existence or looking to start up."

Frederick said small-business candidates are frequently in need of the "niche" products and advice the small-business center provides.

"Some of these businesses are too small to get a loan from banks," she said, noting that the small-business center offers microloans for these candidates.

Downtown Dancewear opened in 2006, at 122 Merrimack St.; it moved next door, to the larger quarters at 120 Merrimack St. two years later.

The store sold dance shoes, clothing, and assorted dancing-related gifts and memorabilia.

Although she was just 25 when she opened the store, Downtown Dancewear wasn't Kualapai's first retail business; she ran a similar operation from her parents' garage in Nebraska starting at age 13, stopping only to go on to college.

As director of the Merrimack Valley Small Business Center, Kualapai is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operation of the MVSBC and its strategic direction.

She supervises two full-time and two part-time workers.

"I had put my résumés out there, but when Stacie (Hargis) left, I jumped at this," said Kualapai, who started on March 24. "It's perfect. I'm still involved in the business community and I can use my personal experience running a business downtown to help others."

Kualapai said she considered selling Downtown Dancewear but decided that liquidation would work better as she transferred positions. She admitted to "feeling a little bit bad" about closing, given other recent, high-profile closings on Merrimack Street, including Mambo Grill and Welles Emporium, as well as the moving of Chantilly Place to Chelmsford.

"They were all for different reasons," Kualapai said. "They're my friends."