

Reaching out

Boston Community Capital vice president taps into her entrepreneurial spirit



W. MARC BERNSAU | BUSINESS JOURNAL

Community outreach has defined the career path for Jessica Brooks, vice president of development and communications for Boston Community Capital.

By Keith Regan | Special to the Journal

When she was leaving her job 10 years ago as director of online communities for Abuzz, the Cambridge startup that had been acquired by the New York Times, a colleague pointed out to Jessica Brooks that the part of her job that seemed to give her the most satisfaction was doing community outreach.

“As an unofficial part of my job, I coordinated our community involvement — volunteering in schools, hosting student interns, providing technology assistance to a local elementary school,” Brooks said. “A colleague pointed out that while I was always excited about our work, I got a special gleam in my eyes when I talked about our partnerships with community groups.”

The co-worker suggested Brooks find a way to make that work her career and after some time off spent traveling and volunteering — she built houses for Habitat for Humanity in Nepal and worked on an organic farm in Tuscany — she found that opportunity at Boston Community Capital.

Brooks was drawn to the entrepreneurial nature of the community development financial institution, which has invested \$550 million into Boston-based initiatives since 1985.

“I felt like I could learn a lot from the leadership team,” Brooks said. “Coming from the startup world, I could never have imagined staying at a company for 10 years. But while I’ve been here, we’ve raised over \$500 million, launched five new business lines and continued to re-envision the role we can play in low-income communities. So the mission’s the same, but we’ve managed to take on new challenges and keep it interesting.”

What are your top three goals for the year?

To build out our foreclosure-relief program here in Boston and Revere, and then scale it to communities across Massachusetts and nationwide. To date, we’ve helped over 100 families facing foreclosure to buy back their homes, but we want that number to be in the thousands, or hundreds of thousands. Also, to communicate our impact to investors and key partners, and enlist their support as we dream up our plans for the next five years, and to strengthen our team with key hires who can help us launch new ventures and build our business.

What are your guiding principles for good management?

Bring together talented people from a range of back-

grounds and perspectives, and look for common ground and points of difference. Build on the strength that comes from that diversity — helping individuals expand their range, pushing the group for solutions that are better than the sum of their parts, and refusing to deliver anything short of excellence.

JESSICA BROOKS

Title: Vice president of development and communications, Boston Community Capital

Age: 39

Hometown: Newton

Education: Bachelor’s degree, American history, Brown University, 1993

What is the best business decision you’ve made?

When I left the New York Times 10 years ago, I took eight months off to travel and volunteer before looking for another job. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on where my strengths and passions were; when I came back, I landed at Boston Community Capital.

What is the toughest business decision you’ve made?

Saying no to a would-be investor who was pushing us in directions we knew didn’t make sense for our communities. The investment might have opened doors, but ultimately they would’ve been the wrong ones.

Who were or are your mentors?

Elyse Cherry, CEO of Boston Community Capital — for almost a decade now, she’s been showing me how to operate at the intersection of sound business practice and community values. John Rizzi, the former CEO of e-Dialog, who was my boss at Abuzz. He taught me to listen first and talk later — understand your partners’ goals and priorities so you can figure out how best to work together. Andy Sack, who was one of the founders of Abuzz, taught me the value of tenacity and follow-through.

For more with Jessica Brooks
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LESSONS LEARNED

How closely have you stuck to your original business plan?

PHIL NOONAN, Contravisory Investment Management



We began as a research organization and made the strategic decision some years later to leverage this research to manage assets instead of selling the research to institutional houses. That was a major shift from our original plan, and one that has proven to be very successful.

MICHAEL MCMAHON, Hill & Partners



Our business plan emphasized providing true value and flexibility, where our clients were liberated from the “one size fits all” relationship. In an ever-changing business environment, we have maintained these core values, which speaks very well of the original plan 15 years later.

NATHALIE MAJOREK, Dermatique MedSpa



I initially focused on skin care, but new technologies like the Zerona laser and the consumer focus on looking and feeling better created a natural progression for expansion. We now offer body contouring to cater to a changing market.