

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

Hitting the right notes

MIAMI DDA'S CRESPI AIMS TO PROVIDE BUSINESSES WHAT THEY NEED TO THRIVE



Christina Crespi at Mode, a club she frequents and her team helped get established in the DDA.

Cristina Crespi has been CEO of the Miami Downtown Development Authority since 2020, a period with explosive growth in the city her agency helps foster.

In that role, she oversees a staff of 26 and a \$9 million operating budget.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the DDA began allocating funds to companies relocating to the greater downtown Miami area; about 30 companies qualified. It also started offering grants to startups, and other programs include the Freebee EV circulator, grants for arts and culture, planning for parks and pedestrian pathways, and streetscape improvements.

When not in the office, Crespi can be found playing the piano and singing.

Where did you hang out while growing up in Miami Beach? I loved to hang around First Street. We loved to go to the beach a lot, fishing, surfing and boating. And every Friday night, we would go to the bandshell on 71st Street to roller skate.

What was your first job? Working as a coach at parks and rec in the city of Miami Beach. I coached kids every

CHRISTINA CRESPI

Age: 43

Birthplace: Miami Beach

Residence: North Miami

Current position: CEO and executive director, Miami Downtown Development Authority

Previous positions: Deputy director, Miami DDA; assistant to the deputy mayor of Miami-Dade County

Boards/organizations: Former chair, Making Strides Against Breast Cancer; board member, Downtown Charter School

Education: Bachelor's and master's degrees, Florida State University

summer through college.

Why did you start working in government? At FSU, I started as pre-med and ended up in the school of social work. Once I got into the policy side and got my master's, I called up my old peeps in Miami Beach and got a job in community services. I created a system where we would track the success of a homeless person going through the continuum of care. My boss recommended I apply to a county program for master's students. I was one of the four selected and ended up at the emergency services department. I worked alongside the highest level of county government, like County Manager George Burgess. I created a volunteer program for county employees to work during hurricanes, and we created a grid system to track garbage collection during emergencies. After the internship, they asked me to be assistant to then-Assistant County Manager Alina Hudak.

How does the DDA select businesses to grant incentives? If a business is looking in our district for office space, we have a team of three that, soup to

nuts, helps businesses find the location they are looking for. We work with office brokers. As long as they sign a lease, they meet the program [criteria] and bring in the right amount of employees, they qualify. We work with Venture Miami.

Once the construction on Flagler Street is completed, will it generate more business activity there? Yes, even right now, at [the completed] sections A and B, we have seen a lot of different businesses come in. Julia & Henry's opened a few months ago. It's an adaptive reuse of a historic building into an eatery. Several different clubs have opened up. We changed the law to allow bars and restaurants to be next to each other. Now we are seeing bars and restaurants come back. Flagler Street is a fun, historic street that is walkable and easy to get around without a car.

What are the biggest challenges related to growth in Miami? I feel it may take longer to get movement on certain developments. So, we opened a permit clinic for business owners looking to open locations. It's a one-stop shop to get help and expedite permits. We want to be the city that is progressive in helping developments open quicker.

How has your background in music helped benefit local nonprofit organizations? During the pandemic, while stuck at home all day, I got back into music and taught myself to play piano. I had an idea to do a concert on Zoom. At the time, [DJ] David Guetta reached out to one of our board members, as he wanted to take over a building and do a concert. I asked, "Why don't we tie that to a food charity?" We chose Feeding South Florida and held a giant Zoom call with 20 million people around the world watching a 45-minute show that raised \$1.2 million for Feeding South Florida. It was called United at Home.

What songs do you like to sing and play on the piano? I'm a big Amy Winehouse fan. That is my go-to. I recently started recording, and have already recorded six songs for a disco house album. Maybe someday I'll release them into the world.

What's your favorite local restaurant? I love Soya & Pomodoro. It's in an old historic building that was an arcade in the 1920s, and now it's a nook of an Italian restaurant. I love bringing new people there who haven't come downtown in a while.

- Brian Bandell