

BUILDING STRONG CITIES

BY NICOLE LAIDLER, BA'03, MA'04

In today's global economy, standing out from the crowd is key for any municipality wanting to attract outside investment. But if your city doesn't have the established reputation of a New York, Moscow or Beijing, potential foreign investors might not even know you exist.

That's where Kadie Ward, BA'06 (Philosophy), MA'07 (FIMS), comes in. The self-described international economic developer has built a busy career helping communities position themselves to compete in the global marketplace.

Ward launched her consulting business, Build Strong Cities, in May 2012, and has already established close working relationships with municipalities in the Ukraine, Vietnam and the Caribbean. It's a long way from Sudbury, Ont., where the 33-year-old entrepreneur grew up.

"I was always interested in travelling for cultural reasons, but it didn't really occur to me that you could do this as a job and be involved in the economies of different cities," she says. That seed was planted during her time at Western, when she served as University Students' Council VP of Communications (2001-02).

Wanting to break the 'town and gown' divide, Ward volunteered with the London Chamber of Commerce and quickly developed a fascination with how local economies work. "It was an interesting moment in media and culture," she notes.

Richard Florida's creative cities theory was a hot political topic in London, and Ward decided to write her master's thesis on communicating economic theory with a focus on how Florida's philosophy was being promoted and applied locally.

After graduation, she spent 18 months as the Chamber's director of marketing and communications before accepting a position with London Economic Development Corporation (LEDC). "A lot of the marketing we did at LEDC was about positioning London in other markets," Ward says. "When delegations travelled internationally I would create the campaigns and the content they took to sell the city."

Ward says her work at LEDC gave her a firm foundation in international development, an understanding of the global supply chain market, and the confidence to go out on her own.

"During my second year at LEDC, I began to realize that the type of work I was doing – place branding and marketing for economic development – is a speciality, and that there is a whole global market place that needs it," she



Kadie Ward in London's downtown

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says. "For me, it was about following my passion, not my pension."

Building on relationships established through international volunteer work with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Ward landed her first contract with the Ukraine's Municipal Local Economic Development (MLED) agency, working with the cities of Dnipropetrovsk, Kryvyi Rih, Nikopol and Pavlohrad.

"Kadie is a unique specialist in marketing and branding with great experience in Canada and all over the world," says MLED project director Alexander Kucherenko, speaking over Skype from his office in Kiev.

"We are living in a world where cities make the scene, where cities make

the economy of the country," he continues. And while people overseas have heard of Kiev, they probably wouldn't know about a city like Dnipropetrovsk. As a centre for Soviet rocket technology "it was kind of an invisible city," he says, largely closed to foreigners until 1989.

Kryvyi Rih is also not on the international map, despite having a population of around 700,000 and producing a large percentage of the world's iron ore. "We need to position our cities so that investors know about them and will be interested in coming here," notes Kucherenko.

Ward is quick to point out that she doesn't try to tell her clients what to change. "They are the experts in their city and their economy, and cultural and economic differences are significant," she says.

Rather, Ward helps clients identify their city's existing physical and economic attributes and how they can be leveraged to attract international interest and investment. A typical engagement lasts around 18 months and includes consultations on strategy as well as training sessions on economic development, place branding, and marketing.

"I am a big believer in capacity building and ensuring that the municipality has the ability to carry on the work even when my contract with them is complete."

Kucherenko has no doubt that Ward's work will make a lasting impact, despite the Ukraine's ongoing political turmoil. "Whatever happens, life continues, and life is in the cities. The cities are the drivers of the economy, and also where most people live," he says. "Our focus is business development and investment, and we are developing implementation plans that will pave the way for the economy for the next decade."

Ward's growing reputation and engaging personality have made her a popular guest speaker. Last November, she gave the keynote address at the Association of Vietnamese Cities' Annual General Meeting, where she also hosted a three-day local economic development workshop for three of the country's fastest-growing industrial cities.

Between her international travels, Ward also found time to write a book, *Build Strong Cities*, which she hopes to publish this year, and taught part-time in Western's Communications and Public Relations Continuing Studies program. She now teaches part-time in the Faculty of Media, Information and Technology's Digital Communications Program.

"Teaching keeps me on top of my game, it forces me to develop professionally, and it gives me access to Western Libraries for the huge amount of research I have to do for my work," she says. "And London has all the amenities of a big city with a nice community atmosphere, and it's nice to come home to that."

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