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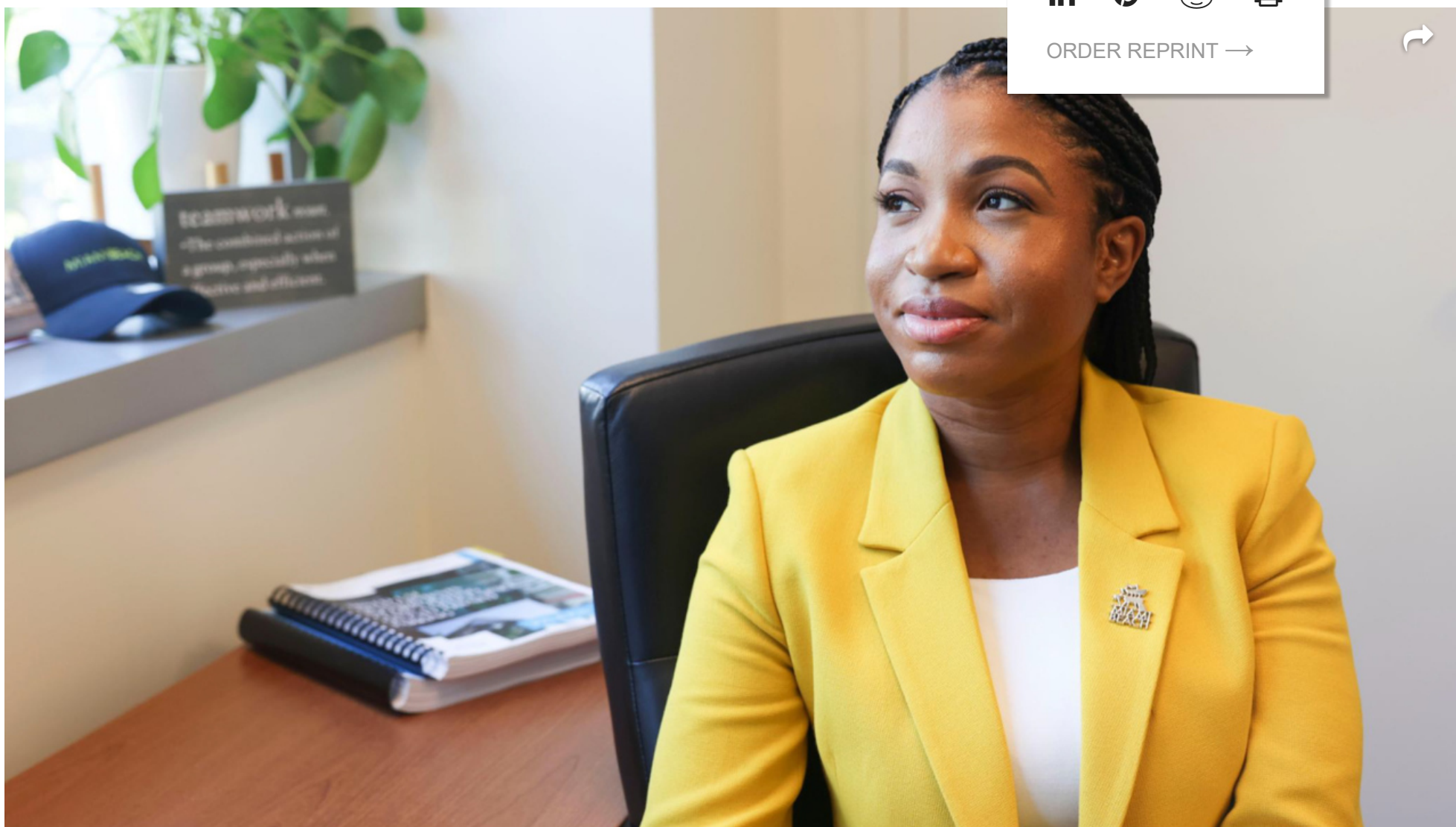
Jamaica native leads push to lure companies to Miami Beach as city's top corporate booster

BY REBECCA SAN JUAN

JULY 24, 2022 6:00 AM



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After joining two years ago, 36-year-old Rickelle Williams, economic development director for Miami Beach, is making a big impact on Miami Beach's economy. BY RESHMA KIRPALANI



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On a recent Monday afternoon in Miami Beach, nine people gathered in a city office in a cool conference room lit by the sunshine streaming in from the windows. A young woman sat at the head of an oval table, framed by long braids pinned behind her ears, clad in a classic black blazer and open-toed heels showcasing a nude pedicure.

She led the team too small to fill most of the faux leather seats in the room, but sets the course for a big mission.

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The 36-year-old Rickelle Williams is tasked with pioneering a longtime dream for Miami Beach officials — diversify the [tourist haven's economy](#). Thanks to her efforts the past two years as economic development director, it's finally becoming a reality.

Williams gained approval in March 2021 from the city commission to pay for two initiatives: the expedited plan review and permitting program and the job creation incentive program. The former ensures applicants receive building permits for office renovation projects within two weeks of submitting an application. The latter rewards \$60,000 over the four years to executives bringing 10 employees to the city with a minimum annual salary of \$70,000. The program gives additional financial rewards to employers that hire local, especially employees educated in the area.

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The result: Six out-of-state firms have expanded to Miami Beach, including real estate-focused private investment management firm JSB Capital Group, investment advisor Melvin Capital and health tech company CourMed. Another two, JAWS and [Wix.com](#), enlarged their footprint and plan to grow their staffs.

[More companies are on the way](#), Williams said, crediting a \$120,000 marketing campaign called Make a Bold Move launched in June. She's targeting financial services, cryptocurrency and resiliency-focused companies from New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco through social media. Venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz signed a lease this month to expand to Miami Beach and another 15 companies are actively considering doing the same.

"I applied for the Miami Beach role in early 2020 the week when everything shut down," Williams said in an exclusive interview. "I thought I could help a city that is at the forefront of economic development — really an economic engine for the county — come through this moment and get to the other side. I saw that as an immense challenge, and I don't think I've met a challenge that I haven't wanted to tackle."




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Miami Beach officials aspired for years to diversify their economy, after Miami-Dade County's Zika outbreak [in 2016](#). Although Wynwood [suffered the biggest](#) hit in foot traffic, [activity slowed](#) throughout Miami Beach as the number of mosquito-borne [cases increased](#) in the later half of the year.

Then the pandemic that began in March 2020 came as a [brutal reminder](#) of how dependent the economy was on travelers. Hotel [occupancy rates plummeted](#) and businesses across the Beach suffered major losses due to losing tourists tied to air and cruise travel.

But there has been a saving grace to South Florida's economy during the ongoing public health crisis — [corporate expansions](#) and relocations. Executives from the Northeast and West Coast relocated to South Florida to benefit from tax savings and escape strict COVID-19 regulations. Miami Beach officials wanted to entice some of those executives choosing to [live in the city](#) to expand their offices and enable them to work close to their new homes by [adding office](#) space and incentives.

Enter Williams, the point person for formulating and dangling incentives in front of executives pondering an expansion. She brought years of economic development expertise, having worked for the city of Miami Gardens, the county and Dania Beach.

However, she faced several hurdles when she stepped into her Miami Beach post in September 2020. The economic development department had just split from the tourism department a year before her arrival. Her [predecessor Bo Martinez](#) bowed out after a year on the job, before Williams stepped in. Months into her job, the city's top administrator Jimmy [Morales left](#) to join the county as its chief operating officer. Despite administrative turmoil, Williams didn't sink — she swam.

“It would have been easy for her to say, ‘No, thank you Miami Beach.’ She didn't do that,” said Alina Hudak, Miami Beach's city manager. “She had tremendous poise.”

Williams got to work, said Eric Carpenter, the city's deputy city manager and Williams' boss. He said, “Rickelle is excellent at understanding how to break down a problem into issues that can be solved individually, and making something that might seem insurmountable be something that can be accomplished.”

Rickelle Williams, pictured above, ensures locals benefit from the corporate expansions to Miami Beach through incentive programs. Alie Skowronski askowronski@miamiherald.com

Born in Mandeville, Jamaica, Williams' path to Miami Beach started with her parents striving for the American Dream. Her parents, Jennifer and Roylan, moved their brood of four children — Williams' older brothers, her twin brother and herself — to Miami when she was 6 years old. They settled in Miami Gardens, in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house, where her parents still live.

Williams grew up in a household dedicated to public service. Her mother worked as a nurse and then as a public school teacher, and her father drove county school buses.

“I didn't know that I would end up in public service but, looking back on it, it makes sense because I saw my parents do that,” she said. “Everything I do is a reflection of them.”

Williams officially started on her public service career at Florida International University, eventually earning a master's degree in public administration. There she met [Ned Murray](#), a housing expert and associate director of the university's Jorge M. Pérez Metropolitan Center. She would end up taking three classes with him, including economic development and urban revitalization.

Murray called Rickelle one of the program's “prized students.”

“We have a lot of interaction in the classroom. Rickelle would take advantage of that. She really wanted to know how this knowledge would be applied in difficult situations,” he said. “The typical A student is able to absorb the knowledge and apply it on the test. Not only did she absorb the information, but she was already thinking of how to apply it in government.”

Murray said Williams, “believed she could take this knowledge, apply it and she already is.”

In Miami Beach, she said she's achieving her mission of creating and implementing economic development thanks to her family's support. She and her husband, Phaion, live in Biscayne Gardens, minutes away from their in-laws and childcare support system. The couple has a 6-year-old son James III, who is obsessed with Batman, and 2-year-old daughter Leila, a fan of Eric Carle's classic "The Very Hungry Caterpillar."

"I want to show my daughter that mommy works hard, balancing motherhood and work," Williams said. "My son, I want him to see what a strong woman looks like."

She's up by 4 a.m., before her husband and kids. She turns to the Bible and prayer to ground her.

By 4:30 a.m., she walks to her dining table, props open her laptop beside a notebook and a stack of the Miami Herald, South Florida Business Journal and Miami Today newspapers. Within two hours, she responds to emails, reads the news and researches new and pending economic development projects, all while drinking a glass of the malt drink Horlicks.

By sunrise, she dresses her kids and prepares their lunches, and then Phaion, a general contractor, engineer and business owner, takes them to school while she leaves for the office.

She arrives at the office around 9 a.m., and typically starts with back-to-back meetings. At her staff meeting on the recent Monday, Williams listened to her team as each one went around the room updating her about upcoming conferences, commercial lease subsidies and new initiatives.

Pen in hand, Williams listened and jotted brief notes on a notepad, waited for them to conclude their minute-long updates before responding. A University of Miami intern talked about research on business incubator programs, and reaching out to start-up companies that had participated in accelerator programs. Williams told her intern to ask participants, "What could have been done to improve the experience?" She wanted to know the mistakes Miami Beach should avoid.

Williams' right hand colleague is New York native Heather Shaw. She is a constant in Williams' work day, breaking up the flow of meetings with in-person updates and drop-ins at her office.

After a 10-hour work day, Williams returns home at around 7 p.m. Her husband and kids — whose maternal and paternal grandmothers pick them up from school — await her for dinner, homework, bath time and reading before bed. Williams winds down by 9:30 p.m. by perusing Instagram for interior design inspiration from her favorite muse and designer [Amber Lewis](#) or finding new baking recipes.

At times, Williams stays up late to work from home. Her boss Carpenter said, "Rickelle is one of those people that is always on. She's texting me at 7:30 in the morning and calling me at 8 or 9 at night. She's constantly thinking about doing new things and creating more ways of being more productive and effective."

Her hard work is paying off for Miami Beach with the continual flow of business expansions and relocations. For example, in May 2021, New York-based JSB Capital Group decided to relocate its headquarters to Miami Beach. Its president Jay Lobell said the firm wanted to [capitalize on corporate expansions](#) and the [movement of more people into South Florida](#), especially since his firm develops, owns and manages commercial and residential real estate.

Lobell considered office space across Miami-Dade, but Williams sold him on Miami Beach. In touch with a wide network of office brokers, she reached out by email as soon as she learned JSB Capital signed a lease at a 3-story office building across from The Lincoln Eatery.

“I didn’t know that I would end up in public service but, looking back on it, it makes sense because I saw my parents do that,” Rickelle Williams said. “Everything I do is a reflection of them.” Above: Williams walks past storefronts on Lincoln Road. Alie Skowronski askowronski@miamiherald.com

“The camaraderie — the friendship, if you will — gives us the sense that hopefully we don’t need anything,” Lobell said, “but whatever we need from the city, she’s there to be helpful and to help build our business with us.”

JSB Capital has eight employees, a mix of locals and New Yorkers. Lobell plans on hiring 12 more people over three years, filling positions in acquisitions, underwriting, development and property management to oversee projects across the state, including in North Miami Beach, Fort Myers and Orlando. All of the jobs will come with a starting salary of about \$100,000 per year.

In addition to luring more businesses to the city, Williams has other plans for the community, such as a business incubator program. She plans to propose the \$130,000 program in October to the city commission for its approval. The program would help scale startup teams with 10 employees focused on resiliency, hospitality, health and wellness, technology and financial services.

The underlying goal, Williams said, is to help further diversify the local economy, while providing more opportunities to residents.

During a lunch break at a fairly empty Harry’s Pizzeria Miami Beach, Williams reflected on her next steps. Although animated when talking about her work and plans, she paused every now and then during the conversation to bite into a Polenta fry or a slice of the Margherita pizza. A carb lover, Williams had ordered her favorite items on the menu and takeout boxes to save pizza slices for later, promising some to her kids.

Always focused on the next agenda item, Williams said she’s happy living in the present and serving the city. Her track record shows an influential yet fleeting figure, job hopping every two to three years. This time and her critical post, Williams said, are different.

“Everything that I’m doing has such a deep impact, and that’s appealing to me,” she said. “Miami Beach is an opportunity to never get bored. There’s always something going on; there’s always something new; there’s always a challenge; there’s always a juggling of priorities and perspectives and stakeholders. You are constantly in a position where you have to think on your feet. And I love that.”

PROFILE SNAPSHOT

Who: Rickelle Williams, 36, Miami Beach economic development director since September 2020

From: Born in Jamaica, relocated to Miami when she was 6

Education: holds a master’s degree in public administration from Florida International University and a master’s degree in mass communications from the University of Florida

First economic development experience: after joining city of Miami Gardens in 2014 as a capital improvements projects coordinator focused on new developments, including public parks

First impression: “I thought, ‘That’s cool. I’m part of something real, you know? I’ve never gotten tired of that feeling,’” Williams said. “I have that more so here in Miami Beach.”

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