

"Miss Marie" lives life by the Golden Rule ? and BMO customers return the favour



Marie De Souza receives a congratulatory certificate on her retirement from Mayor Geoff Dawe as her son, as she is joined by her son Chris. Auroran photo by Brock Weir

By Brock Weir

"Dear Miss Marie," wrote one eight year old customer, to BMO's Marie De Souza. "You are a really nice person and you are very special to me? thank you for being so nice to me in letting me use the bathroom."

This customer is much more than that to Ms. De Souza. He is family ? and it was indeed a family reunion at the Bank of Montreal's Yonge and Wellington Branch on Thursday as the bank bade farewell to her, their Financial Services Coordinator, who is retiring after nearly 20 years at that location.

As the day went on, customers coming into the bank were almost evenly split ? some were coming in to deposit a cheque or make a withdrawal but, more often than not, they were coming in bearing flowers, cards, and other tokens for Ms. De Souza.

"I have worked with Marie at this branch for 15 years and Marie is BMO in our clients' eyes," said Maureen Farrell, after Ms. De Souza received a congratulatory certificate from Mayor Geoff Dawe. "This position is ideal because she is the face of BMO and the clients just think she is God. It is her smile, her demeanour, and they just love her.

"She just really cares about people, she is their counsellor in that they will come in and tell her anything, and she is like a mother to everyone."

This is a sentiment shared by Ms. De Souza herself, who helmed her desk for the last time on Friday afternoon.

"This is a family I am going to be leaving," she said. "These people are not just customers. I have been with them through their joys, their sorrows. I have seen their babies have babies, and I have made myself honorary mother to a lot of these customers here and it is going to be sad for me to leave them."

But, all good things must come to an end. With her husband retired for the last three years, she decided it was the right time to spend some time together because "you never know what is in the stars."

As countless members of her BMO "family" came in for a hug and a chat, Ms. De Souza's son Chris, a Police Constable at Queen's

Park, looked on proudly and summed up his feelings in a way that was particularly apt for his profession: 'She has been granted parole for good behaviour, so she is going to enjoy herself.'

'I think there are a lot of people that really take to her and actually really like the service she has provided for the years she has been here,' he said. 'I think it is going to be emotional because it is something she gets up and does every day, she does it very well, and she is happy to do it. Just by seeing how many people are coming in and taking time out of their day just to say thank you, people who don't actually have official business here, it is very powerful and empowering after all the work she has done.'

Marie and her family came to Canada from Jamaica over 30 years ago. After they arrived, she was encouraged by a friend working in the banking industry to just give it a try. After 10 years working in Downtown Toronto, she spent two years working at the BMO branch on Yonge Street at Mulock Drive, before beginning her 18 year tenure at Yonge and Wellington.

When asked what her key was in making such a connection with her customers-cum-family, Ms. De Souza says a very simple formula was handed down to her by her mother.

'She always told me growing up that we should always treat people as we like to be treated and I have lived my life by that,' she said. 'Whether you have \$1 or \$10 million, you need to be treated with respect. If we could all just take the time to see the other person and be mindful of them, it would be a nice world to live in.'

'She also said if we smile, then the world will smile with you, but if we cry we cry alone. When people come in on some days, they might not be feeling great and they'll ask, 'So what is so great about today?' Because you got up today. You lived to see another day. That changes their whole attitude. Sometimes if they come in frowning, I just point at them and they smile because they know what is coming next.'