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YOUNG PROFESSIONAL PLAY DOWNTOWN: CONNECTING AFTER 5
COLLEAGUES TEAM TO FIGHT ILLUSION THAT 'THERE IS NOTHING TO DO' IN DETROIT
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FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

Melissa Marshall watched eagerly from the sidelines as the volleyball match got under way near a sparkling fountain. On a warm and sunny summer evening, she and some of her colleagues had met after work to have fun with other young professionals.

If this scene sounds like something out of San Diego or Ft. Lauderdale, think again.

The volleyball tournament was Tuesday at Campus Martius in downtown Detroit.

Yes, downtown Detroit.

A program called Connect After 5 has created a social and entertainment option for the growing number of professionals who work in the city.

It's the brainchild of 26-year-old Kerry Doman, founder and chief executive of After 5 Detroit, a Web site that promotes things to do in the city.

After talking to executives at several downtown companies, Doman discovered the need for downtown events that fostered social interaction outside of work.

"Their main concern was connecting with their employees outside of work," Doman said. "As a region, we are struggling with attracting and retaining young professionals."

The program seems like a natural extension of Doman's Web site, which she said gets close to 65,000 monthly visitors.

Connect's events are not limited to young professionals, but that seems to be a natural market, Doman said.

And the most common misperception about downtown among her peers boils down to five words: "There is nothing to do."

Connect held its first event in March, a broomball tournament at the Campus Martius ice rink.

It plans to hold a softball tournament Sept. 9 at Wayne State University.

Participants like Marshall, who works as an auditor for Ernst & Young, enjoy working downtown.

"Detroit's really improved a lot in the last couple of years," said the 26-year-old Royal Oak resident. "A lot of people don't know it."

Adelia Romeo, a recruiting coordinator for the law firm Miller Canfield, came to the volleyball tournament to cheer on her colleagues.

"I like what we're trying to do with the city here," said the 32-year-old, who also lives in Royal Oak. "I love working downtown."

The events particularly appeal to local law firms, which are eager to show their summer associates that Detroit is a great place to work.

The volleyball tournament also attracted employees from other businesses such as Compuware Corp., Health Plan of Michigan and Marketing Associates Inc. Companies competed against each other to win a giant trophy.

To participate, businesses pay a fee to Doman that varies depending on their size.

They don't charge the employees, who can partake of free beer, food, water and T-shirts at the events.

"It's a perfect opportunity for our folks to engage with each other," said Mark Petroff, chief executive and president of Marketing Associates, which moved its headquarters downtown in November.

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CONNECT AFTER 5

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION:

Photos by DAVID KILKENNEY / Special to the Free Press

Marketing Associates team members, foreground, face off against Dickinson Wright members during a volleyball tournament at Campus Martius in Detroit on Tuesday as part of the "Connect After 5" effort.

DAVID KILKENNEY / Special to the Free Press

Kerry Doman, CEO of www.after5detroit.com, registers Kenny Ingle, 43, of Plymouth for a volleyball tournament at Campus Martius in Detroit on Tuesday as part of a "Connect After 5" effort.

CAPTIONWRITER: Bryan Zak, 25, of Royal Oak, top, and Erin Wallen, 22, of Wyandotte, above, warm up with their Ernst & Young teammates.

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