

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of a red brick building. A large, arched window is visible on the left side, reflecting the sky. The brickwork is detailed and textured. The overall tone is warm and architectural.

THE FLORENCE CITIZEN

**INTRINSICALLY
ENTREPRENEURIAL:
FLORENCE COUPLE
BLAZE NEW TRAILS**

The iconic book and movie *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has an unforgettable scene near the end when Dorothy clicks her heels together three times and repeats, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home," and is transported back to Kansas. This is how Anthony ("Tony") and Sara Puckett feel about Florence, Colorado.

While Sara counted Florence as home for a number of years growing up, she also spent time outside of the state of Colorado. Tony, who grew up in Williamsburg about three miles outside of Florence, led an even more peripatetic early life, spending time in places that included the states of Washington and Hawaii. "Tony and I always seemed to end up back in town at the same time," Sara relates. "We didn't really cross paths until we returned, but we have been inseparable since."

Tony concurs with Sara's assessment. "We both come from families that moved a lot," he explains. "Her family would uproot and move somewhere. My family would uproot and move somewhere. I think there was something about both of us instinctually that was willing to take larger risks." As a result, when the opportunity to launch a sign printshop about five years ago, the two of them didn't think twice. "We simply aren't scared to take big risks," Tony adds.



CREATING AN INDELIBLE IMPRINT WITH 719 CUSTOM

Tony and Sara founded 719 Custom to provide signage and branded products to local area businesses, and that it would afford Tony an opportunity to leverage his artistic background. "I was always artistic as a child and enjoyed drawing," he relates. "I taught myself how to print digital images, reverse them, and manipulate photos."

Getting the business up and running wasn't easy. "We had a handful of businesses that wanted digital designs, signs, and business cards right out of the gate," Tony notes. "The rest of the business came through hard work. I would drive around town looking for locations with permits in their window, and I knew they would need signs and would proactively approach them." Once Tony started getting clients, word of mouth propelled the business forward. "When you design one business sign, other businesses notice and ask who did it?" Tony explains. "The next thing you know, we had done 10 signs on Main Street."

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT KICKS IN

When an opportunity at the beginning of the year opened up at the local radio station for ad sales, Tony's entrepreneurial spirit automatically kicked in. "I thought, 'how fun would that be?' I have working relationships with many of the business owners in Florence because of 719 Custom, and I figured that would open the door for radio ad sales."

At about the same time, the local owner of The Florence Citizen was looking for help running the local newspaper. "Knowing we had built 719 Custom from the ground up, she wanted to get our thoughts on what could be done to turnaround the newspaper," Sara recalls. "We took a look at the books, and saw a lot we could improve from our other business experience." The one upside was the newspaper hadn't incurred any debt. Considering the paper had been in almost continuous publication since 1898, the couple jumped at the chance to preserve such a historic treasure.

"I think there was something about both of us instinctually that was willing to take larger risks. We simply aren't scared to take big risks."

~ Tony Puckett, Florence Entrepreneur and President and Founder of 719 Custom

A "GIFT" WRAPPED IN NEWSPAPER

After further discussions, the owner decided to transition the newspaper to Tony and Sara. The transaction was completed on May 1, and Tony and Sara have been busy at the helm—trying to manage multiple companies and jobs and a family at the same time. Add the economic and social effects of COVID-19, and the circumstances might be overwhelming for some—though not for Tony and Sara. And while they have only been running

the newspaper for a few months, they have already accomplished much.

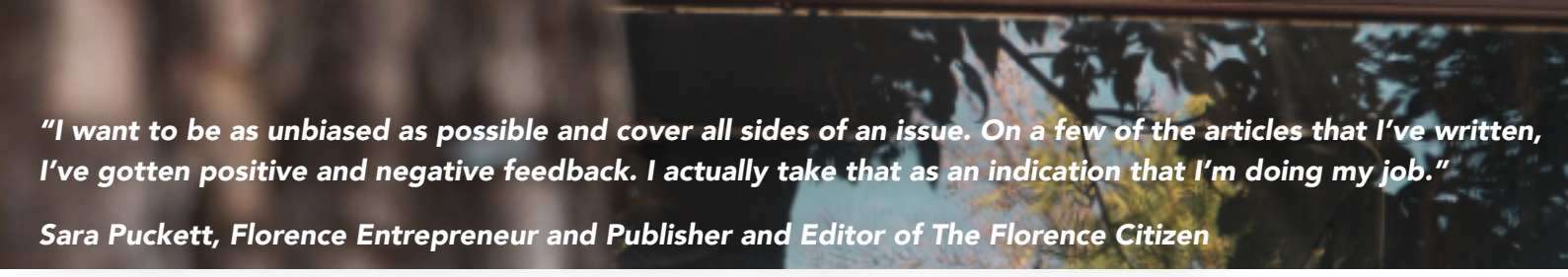
One of the first things Sara discovered was discrepancies in the subscriber list. "We had a number of subscribers who hadn't paid in a few years," Sara says, who serves as the publisher of The Florence Citizen. Billing and account information was updated, and delivery was stopped for accounts that were no longer valid.

As part of the revamping of their subscription model, Tony and Sara implemented an online payment wall for annual subscriptions. They have three subscription options—Senior Citizen, Fremont (County) Citizen, and State Citizen (anyone living outside of Fremont County in the U.S.). With a renewed focus on engaging content and new editorial ideas, Tony and Sara have been able to grow the number of subscribers to The Florence Citizen by several hundred. "We still have around the same number of subscribers as when we took over the paper," Sara observes. "The only difference is that they are all paying subscribers."

Newsstands is another area that Tony and Sara reinvigorated. "We increased the number of newsstands by several and made sure they were in strategic locations," Tony says. "We almost always sell out at all of them now. Most of our increase in sales is tied to the newsstands."

"The Emergent Campus is a safety net for local startup companies and dreamers. Florence has big plans, and we've taken on more businesses and things than I can talk about. We're making an impact on this community, and the community has impacted us at the same time. It's truly an exciting time."

Sara Puckett, Florence Entrepreneur and Publisher and Editor of The Florence Citizen



"I want to be as unbiased as possible and cover all sides of an issue. On a few of the articles that I've written, I've gotten positive and negative feedback. I actually take that as an indication that I'm doing my job."

Sara Puckett, Florence Entrepreneur and Publisher and Editor of The Florence Citizen

BUILDING A BRAND & ADVERTISING PRESENCE

Recognizing the importance of brand presence, Tony immediately concluded that the newspaper was in the wrong location in town. "The previous office was in the bell tower and almost hidden from view," he notes. "It didn't make sense. As a result, we moved to a new location that is quite visible to the public. This presence keeps us top of mind with Florence residents."

Advertising is an area that Tony also revamped. "Print ad options were confusing, including the amount that each one cost," he says. "We've simplified the whole process so that advertisers know exactly what they are getting." Along with print ads, Tony launched online ads with the digital version of the newspaper. "Right now, we're selling weekly and monthly ads on the website for real estate listings," Tony notes. "We've configured ad sales based on timeframe to ensure they get all of the traffic and rank higher than Google Ads. We could give higher priority to Google Ads, but this would drive down the amount of traffic advertisers received."

One advertising option where Tony and Sara elected to forego selling are ads for recreational marijuana and syndication of Google Ads. "Like other media outlets, we could realize much higher revenue with Google Ad placement and recreational marijuana ad sales," Tony says. "But this would have detracted from local businesses being able to advertise, and we felt these options weren't the right thing to do for our community."

Social media is another area that Tony and Sara relaunched. "We wanted the Facebook page to reflect the brand of the newspaper," Tony recalls. "We completely redesigned it and publish posts about the local news in each month's newspaper."

Regardless of the digital progress they've made in a very short time, Tony and Sara indicate they still have much to do. "Our digital presence is very much a work in progress," Tony observes. "We have a lot of ideas and hope to explore and implement them in coming months and years."

"LIKE A DUCK IN WATER:" RUNNING A NEWSPAPER

Sara serves as both the publisher and editor of The Florence Citizen. Unless you count a couple years of journalism in high school, Sara had no prior experience in the field. Most people would have been intimidated at the prospect but not Sara. "It has been a really interesting experience," she notes. "News obviously has been 'odd' because of the pandemic. Now that things are opening up a bit—school is back in session, city meetings are taking place, and so forth—there will be more stories to write about."

Yet, despite the pandemic, Sara has unearthed several interesting stories

in the few months running the newspaper. "We have a local clothing and seamstress business that switched over to 100% American made," she comments. "It was our cover story for August and was a huge success."

When reporting on controversial issues, Sara tries her best to play it straight down the line. "I want to be as unbiased as possible and cover all sides of an issue," she says. "On a few of the articles that I've written, I've gotten positive and negative feedback. I actually take that as an indication that I'm doing my job."

When it comes to editorial, various members from the community are involved. It is truly a community newspaper. "We have a Memory Lane section researched by Martie LaCasse and the Florence Historical Archives," Sara comments. "For each issue, she goes through previous issues of the newspaper and picks out an article to republish." With a history that extends back to the Colorado Gold Rush in the mid-1800s, Florence has a unique history, and there is no shortage of stories to include in the section.

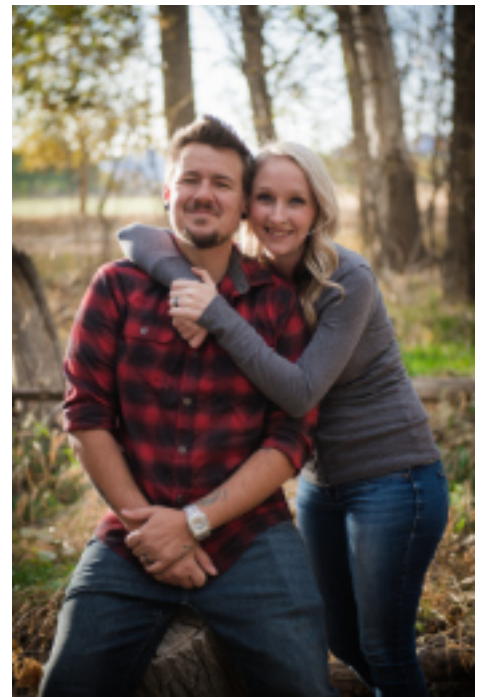


Community-contributed editorial involves more than just written content. “Those who live here absolutely love Florence, and they want to see the town continue to flourish,” Tony says. “We put an ad asking for local artists to contribute their talents in the comic section and have been getting several submissions for each issue. I’ve even tried my hand at a few.”

Tony and Sara discovered editorial can be a revenue-generator as well. “For our 2020 graduates, we decided to create a special color insert,” Tony relates. “It was a huge hit with the community, and we sold four times the normal volume at our newsstands. This coming year’s seniors are already looking forward to ‘their’ issue.”

BUILDING "HOMEGROWN" DREAMS

Florence recently received a Homegrown Talent Initiative grant—facilitated by Colorado Succeeds and the Colorado Education Initiative—which has both Sara and Tony really excited. “When Tony and I attended the public schools in Florence, there wasn’t any mechanism in place to help high school students identify a career track before graduating,” she relates. The grant funds an internship program, and Sara and Tony are excited about the prospects of getting involved. “It gives us a chance to support the local community by giving high school students a chance to learn a profession,” Tony notes. “We can also use the help—whether helping us to create comic strips, manage various administrative functions, or get news scoops around town,” Sara adds. “It is a win-win scenario.



Tony and Sara are also energized by the potential the Emergent campus offers to the community. “Historically, there really weren’t many outlets in the community for a professional career track other than the prison,” Sara reports. “Rather than having our young adults leave Florence for big cities, we want some of them to stay here—just like Tony and me.”

Ultimately, Sara and Tony envision the Emergent Campus as the means for helping dreams come true. “It is a safety net for local startup companies and dreamers,” Sara asserts. “We’re just all dreamers. Florence has big plans, and we’ve taken on more businesses and things than I can talk about. We’re making an impact on this community, and the community has impacted us at the same time. It’s truly an exciting time to be here and be able to contribute to a place that has done so much for us.”



FEDC TechSTART

Fremont Economic Development Corporation is a 501(c)6 professional economic development organization focused directly on business attraction, retention and expansion in Fremont County, Colorado. With an established and growing network of business, academic and governmental partners, we directly assist companies with competitive location or expansion projects by connecting them with the right people, the appropriate resources and the most meaningful and relevant information. FEDC’s TechSTART program is an award-winning tech sector co-working community, creating an innovation catalyst for rural Colorado.

FEDC TechSTART is a proud supporter of the Upper Arkansas Technology Sector Partnership, the second tech sector partnership in the state of Colorado.