



WOODED BY PUEBLO

Words: Darcie Nolan • Photos: Teryn O'Brien

Inspired by a box full of fragrance samples and scraps from the vintage botanical wallpaper hanging in her office, Cordelia Smith established her handmade soap and body product business in Seattle 20 years ago. Her small batch Etsy store quickly took off, and she found herself in a tiny brick-and-mortar retail space on the trendy Ravenna Boulevard in Seattle.

The Formulary 55 storefront on Ravenna was at the heart of the University District of Seattle. It was surrounded by swank boutiques, up and coming restaurants, chic coffee shops and had close proximity to the University of Washington - which has more than 44,000 students. From the outside, it appeared to be prime real estate and great access for a business offering a gorgeous handmade product. However, the combination of a small and expensive space, a drop in the nation's economy and competition from similar nearby shops affected the boutique's stability and stalled its growth.

When Cordelia met Anthony Hill, Formulary 55 was running into a brick wall. The soaps and lotions were well received, but the limited space wasn't able to accommodate larger wholesale orders. Cordelia was turning away interested clients. Business hours in the Ravenna shop weren't lucrative, and Cordelia was spending multiple days a week competing for attention and waiting for customers instead of making her product.

As Cordelia and Anthony's relationship grew, Anthony was able to look at Formulary 55 from the business perspective - bringing his analytical skills from a previous tech position with Microsoft. What he saw was a fantastic product that wasn't fully reaching market saturation.

"She is very much the creative mind and driver behind this; doesn't so much care for the business side of things," Anthony said. "I'm great at the business side of things and not so much the creative."

Anthony's business expertise freed Cordelia up to explore the creative side of the business more fully. Both agree, it was a great match.

Their dedication to each other and the success of Formulary 55 spurred the conversation of moving elsewhere, together. They began researching cities across the United States where they could live and work side-by-side. Surprisingly to some, they ended up choosing Pueblo.

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Redefining Pueblo

Most people don't think of Pueblo as a particularly inspiring town. At one time, the "Steel City" may have been one of the largest steel producing towns in all of the United States - but the smog, mills and industrial plants stifled it from being a destination of culture or creativity. After the steel crash in 1982, Pueblo's economy repeatedly dropped into trouble. Workers went on strike for years at a time, while mills were closed or sold to out-of-state companies, only to be closed or sold again. In 2003, the Bessemer Historical Society purchased many of the steel industry's important buildings to convert them into museums. Pueblo was on its way to being another ghost town - a remnant of a bygone era and dying industry like the mining towns that dot the Rockies.

The Historic Arkansas Riverwalk was one the first major indications of Pueblo's effort to change its verve. Bike lanes, coffee shops and kayak rentals soon followed, filling the newly redeveloped area. Industry diversified as small businesses were attracted to what was once a completely unusable section of town - a section that now has sidewalks lined with café tables, twinkling white lights and open-air orchestras. The Riverwalk spurred the dusty old economy, and the city began to rebuild with newness and creativity.

In recent years, the city of Pueblo has intentionally welcomed small businesses and innovative technology like wind and solar energy through incentives and tax breaks. This once dying industrial center in Southern Colorado has caught the attention of small business owners from cities across the country. Newcomers enjoy the friendly small-town community that is welcoming the diversity with open arms and partnering to lay the framework for an artistic rebirth.

Woody by Pueblo

With Anthony and Cordelia committed to each other and the growth of the company, they began researching the places where they could build the life they wanted: A walkable city with a high quality of life and low cost of living. One that had a business-supporting community and the shipping infrastructure they needed to get their products out. One that offered them a political environment in line with their liberal values. They narrowed down their list of cities to just a handful, Pueblo being among that list.

The sun and dry air that Pueblo offers and the amount of real estate available for great prices are just part of what wooed them (the average home price in Seattle is more than \$500,000, while the average in Pueblo is closer to

\$120,000). The couple was able to purchase their first building to operate as an occasional retail shop, a manufacturing hub and an eventual live-in loft. They remodeled it - exposing the brick walls and arranging their manufacturing center to accommodate a varying number of workers as needed.

The move has paid off. Formulary 55 has been in Pueblo for barely a year, and they've been able to lease a nearby building for added workspace and are looking at purchasing another in the near future to accommodate wholesale orders. Recently, they've been busily preparing an order that will place Formulary 55 products in all of Anthropologie's 208 stores—an order that they would've had to turn down back in Seattle for lack of space.

Investing in Community

Growing into a larger space and the friendliness of Puebloans haven't been the only good things to come out of the Formulary 55 move. Along with being able to fulfill orders they used to turn down, Anthony and Cordelia have embraced an opportunity to invest in their community in ways that weren't readily available in Seattle - a city with six times the number of people. They've become involved in everything from organizing an upcoming handmade holiday market to serving on local boards. They've recently helped influenced the city council's approval of "art crosswalks" which is an opportunity for local artists to bring both creativity and safety to 30 designated streets throughout town.

Comparing Pueblo to Seattle to Anthony and Cordelia is apples and oranges. Instead of the stiff competition they battled in Seattle, Formulary 55's monthly retail events immediately attracted self-appointed brand ambassadors who spread the word about the company, bought their products and encouraged other community members to support them. The entire community of artists and creative people in Pueblo across industries has been embracing and open about sharing ideas, space and events - all collaborating to support each other's success instead competing to win out over one another. The couple has not only built their business, they have built deep and important friendships and partnerships that will continue to help them grow.

Anthony and Cordelia see Pueblo as a land of opportunity, small yet developing.

"We think Pueblo has tremendous potential, and we moved here exactly for that reason," Cordelia said. "Anytime . . . someone is trying to do something good and be positive, we definitely want to support that. We are advocates for the city on a regular basis, talking about everything it has to offer, not it's shortcomings."

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Handmade Goods

Formulary 55 specializes in handmade bath and body products that are scented with sophisticated medleys attractive to both men and women. With their new manufacturing capabilities, they're looking at some of the largest orders they've ever fulfilled and entering an international market, all while upholding their dedication to offering a handmade product.

"It is really important to us that we maintain that we are a handmade company," Cordelia explained. "We want to keep these small makers helping us."

Cordelia also shared her thoughts on why people are drawn to handmade products, which includes how community and lifestyles used to be.

"People are getting back to old fashioned ways and values," she said. "I feel like it is something people need ... it is necessary for people to have that human connection with what they are buying, they are eating, they are using to decorate their homes. There is so much moving away from human connection with everything else in the world."

Anthony agrees and said that people are finding more value in experiences versus just consumption.

Formulary 55 produces more than 2,000 bars of soap each week. They hand weigh and wrap their products to ship to wholesalers and fulfill online orders. They also host events once a month at their storefront in Pueblo. At these events, people can buy their products and see some of the other makers that Formulary 55 supports.

Anthony and Cordelia have found that the fulfilling life they were looking for - one of experience, community and connection - wasn't on main street in a popular town in the Pacific Northwest. Rather, it was in the heart of a small town working to redefine itself and grow in Southern Colorado. Here, on the cusp of transformation, they are able to more fully realize the potential of their own business while helping a town embrace its own creativity and vibrancy. ●

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