

COMMUNITY

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Gunnar & Merri Whitehead are making a green living



Kathleen Turner/WRJ

Gunnar and Merri Whitehead came to the valley for hockey and have stayed for the lifestyle. The owners of Whitehead Landscaping, they work together on a daily basis to mesh their business life with their family life, and have found a balance that works.

"Mom and pop" businesses have been a cornerstone of economic communities across America for decades. While the general store may have gone by the wayside in most modern communities, working together has become a preference for many 21st century couples, keeping them connected and allowing them an understanding that goes beyond answering the old "How was your day, dear?" question. There are a number of successful, professional and truly happy couples in the Wood River Valley, working side-by-side both day and night, enjoying the advantages such a partnership offers. The Journal found their experience and insight to be valuable for any couple considering joining forces in the workplace.

Home Team Advantage:
How working together works for couples

By KATHLEEN L. TURNER
The Wood River Journal - Hailey

People come to the Wood River Valley in search of a certain lifestyle that amplifies the sporting side of life. Some come for skiing, some for fishing, others for biking, still others seek it all. In 1990, Gunnar Whitehead packed up and left New Hampshire for Idaho, with Merri sitting shotgun, to play for the Sun Valley Suns Hockey team.

"My brother said they needed a defenseman," Gunnar explained, so the choice was an easy one. Gunnar, then 21, went to work for a local firm, ready to plow snow when he wasn't blocking slap shots. Unfortunately, not much plowing was needed that year, which pointed out one of the disadvantages of depending on snow for a living.

Gunnar had worked for his father's landscaping business back in New England, thus arrived equipped with experience and lessons learned. He began to mow lawns for a local company but soon began a business of his own.

Merri, who had gone to work as a manager for a retail store, learned how to do books and payroll. That knowledge proved useful as she

began to keep records for Gunnar's new business.

The hardest years, when both the business and the children were infants, presented the challenge of balancing work and family. Gunnar continued to work for another firm while building the first two years of his own company. The demands on his time left Merri with much of the household and family duties, but both knew they were working together with the right plans in place toward the same goals, plus the motivation to always do the right thing.

The Whitehead's business has grown and prospered, with new products, new techniques and 34 employees. And, in an interesting switch, Gunnar's father, who has found a home in the Valley close to his sons and their families, now works for his son.

Gunnar, Merri says, comes up with the ideas. She puts them to the economic test, determining how best to fit them into the business plan. One idea, however, came to the couple as they noticed a rash on their son after playing on the grass in their yard. They determined that the rash came from skin contact with a non-organic fertilizer

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applied to the lawn. The couple went to work to put an organic fertilizer in their repertoire.

They have also gone organic in a big way with vermicomposting. That means they make use of earthworms. The worms, kept in bins in an appropriate environment, devour food scraps. They produce a very rich compost soil and an accompanying liquid called "tea" that nurtures grass and other plants with a healthy, valuable combination of nutrients.

The first year or two the process proved challenging, with some variables that needed tweaking. Gunnar says they have worked through the process and developed plans that now keep things green and growing all summer long with this natural, organic process. Vermicomposting by the company keeps 200 lbs. of

food waste per week out of the landfill while providing a valuable product. Gunnar's staff picks up food waste from Atkinson's three times a week in winter and everyday in summer.

"People should be doing this," Gunnar says, having seen impressive results with the process.

Their days begin early but they also end early, as people want to get home after work and enjoy the results that come from engaging the Whitehead Landscaping crew. The Whiteheads have made their office in their home. That makes it easier to be there for their children after school and on vacation days. While Gunnar sees to the physical and technical side of the business, Merri keeps the books in line and attends to other details that arise on a daily basis.

They are still a hockey family and can probably be found at the ice arena playing with their free time. Gunnar and Merri are on a coed team together, and they have taught their children to play as well.

In the summer the family frequently heads to Alturas Lake for some waterskiing and a weekend away from daily concerns. Gunnar says he feels the business is in a solid position and growing at a comfortable pace. Both Gunnar and Merri acknowledge they have a really good crew that helps to keep things running smoothly.

Noting that the balance they've found between work, play and family is a good one, Merri concludes, "We just have fun playing together."

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