

Date: Thu 27-Jan-2005
Publication: dh
Category: ear
Author: rodeba
Illustration: p
Location: 1b

Oranges into lemonade

Couple's business puts others' junk to good use

By Dale Rodebaugh

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A between-semester visit to Belize led Mark Thompson -- a student of international affairs -- **into** a career stateside unrelated to his major.

The career -- recycling -- led to recognition two weeks ago when Thompson, 29, and wife, Alex Arribau, 28, who founded Phoenix Recycling in Durango in 2001, received the Green Business Leadership Award given annually by the Durango Chamber of Commerce.

During a snorkeling trip to Belize, Thompson got to know a youth hostel manager who was trying to compost mountains of water-polluting orange peels created in the process of filling orange juice tankers. "I don't know how the venture came out, but I liked the concept of taking something that can harm people and replacing it with something that helps them," Thompson said in an interview last week.

Once back on campus at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Ore., Thompson met Latin American affairs major Arribau in a chemistry class. There was "spontaneous combustion," and they have been personal and professional partners since. Upon leaving Lewis and Clark with their degrees, the couple spent a year in Steamboat Springs working service-industry jobs and skiing.

"We were ski bums, which wasn't fulfilling because we were working all the time and didn't feel involved in the community," Arribau said. "We knew we needed job experience so we headed for California."

Using Oakland as home base, Thompson found a job managing a 50-employee recycling center in nearby San Leandro. The operation was open 24 hours a day separating cans, bottles, paper, plastic, cardboard, waste wood and scrap metal, including old bicycles and brake drums.

"We produced five semi (truck) loads of recyclable material a day," Thompson said.

When Bay Area population and traffic began to weigh on them (they had to stop for traffic lights when they bicycled), Thompson and Arribau returned to Colorado four years ago. They were looking for a city larger than Steamboat Springs but smaller than Eugene, Ore., the city where Thompson was born and reared.

"I'm from Denver," Arribau said. "We looked there, but we found that it was all filled in from there to Boulder with chain restaurants and such. There were good jobs but no real quality of life. It was California all over again."

In Durango, they found a real economy, mountains, quality of life -- and their niche.

"We knew we'd be in the recycling industry because we found convenient trash services but no convenient recycling," Arribau said. "If you have to haul your material **into** town, recycling really is more difficult. We think convenience improves participation."

In Durango, the city provides curbside recycling to single-family houses and duplexes within city limits, plus some apartment complexes and businesses. Phoenix Recycling offers household trash pickup and recycling in unincorporated areas of La Plata County, competing with Texas-based giants Waste Management and Waste Corporation of America (Transit Waste).

Phoenix Recycling offers three sizes of trash cans -- with a critter-proof lock -- for household waste, Thompson said. But a family of five can use the smallest (32 gallons) if members recycle.

"The whole idea is to get people to do the right thing -- reduce, reuse, recycle," he said.

Thompson is amazed by the disparity in recycling rates.

The California counties of Los Angeles and Alameda recycle 60 percent of their waste, Thompson said. The national average is 28 percent, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. By Thompson's calculations, La Plata County stands at 8 percent.

"We get bent out of shape when people here say they don't have any recyclables," Thompson said.

Arribau, who operates Phoenix Data Protection (document shredding), a logical extension of Phoenix Recycling, adds:

"People think it's going to be a pain, but it's not once it becomes a habit. You don't forget to brush your teeth."

Most people agree that landfills are bad, Thompson said. But they don't seem to connect recycling with the savings that accrue from making paper from paper instead of felling trees, and making tin cans from tin cans instead of mining ore.

"If you recycle, the manufacturing process doesn't start over at the beginning. It starts most of the way through the process, which saves energy and reduces pollution," Thompson said. "Seventy-five percent of the benefits from recycling are the reduced air and water pollution associated with manufacturing."

In the United States, the savings from not polluting are not taken *into* account, Thompson said.

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JERRY McBRIDE/Herald

Alex Arribau and Mark Thompson, owners of Phoenix Recycling, stand next to their truck on Monday. The couple recently received the Green Business Leadership Award.