



## News Article

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#### **Vince and Chelle Caruso: Partners in life**

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If you go clear back to 1992, and travel all the way to Draper, Utah, you'll find where it all started.

It was there, in a tiny space, that Vince and Chelle Caruso opened their first sandwich shop.

Vince made the sandwiches; Chelle greeted the customers and took the orders. They were young and dedicated to each other and their business. They focused on the basics - quality products, reasonable price, fresh ingredients, exceptional service - and it worked. Today, they're the franchise owners of Caruso's Sandwich Company, with delis in Coeur d'Alene, Hayden, Post Falls and Spokane Valley.

"When people come in and try our sandwiches, they taste the difference, I think," Vince said.

Vince and Chelle are high school sweethearts who have been married 20 years and have two children. Their commitment to making their business succeed was driven by their love of their family and determination to be together.

"I think another great aspect of this business, it allows you to set aside those timeframes to be with your kid, to offer yourself to the community whenever they need help," Vince said.

The Carusos are equally involved with their community, volunteering with 4-H, coaching sports and donating to local nonprofits and giving time at their children's schools. Being owners of their business, they said, allows them to do that.

"It's a great way to spend family time and be involved in the community," Chelle said.

"It's always been really important to both of us we're there for our kids."

How did your business career together get started?

Chelle: We needed to finish getting through college and just were tired of working for other people. We were both hard workers and it was like the more we did at work, the more work we got, but it didn't really benefit us financially. We were always the ones willing to pick up whatever and do whatever. We both have strong work ethics. We just thought, 'Why don't we do something where our work benefits us?' So we opened a really small shop. We leased an old ice cream shop that was attached to this theater that was only open on Saturdays in a small town outside of Salt Lake. And so we leased it during the week and ran the most minimal sandwich shop you've ever seen. We started with \$5,000. It may as well have been a million at the time. Vince: I made sandwiches, she took orders, got drinks. Within the first couple weeks, we found someone to help us

through the lunch rushes and we had lines out the door. It wasn't even a year later we ended up going to a new strip mall that was! just being built and opened our first Caruso's deli in 1994.

So, how did you settle on sandwiches for a business?

Chelle: I had been in restaurants since I was 15. I liked customer service. Ironically, Vince had never done customer service and was not allowed to talk to customers. They called him the bear, he was so ornery. He would almost growl at people. So we had a deal. I said, 'You don't talk to the customers, I will talk to the customers.'

When we ate, what we looked for was a good sandwich shop. It's like the perfect meal. You have all your vegetables and proteins. We just thought that was something we could do with a minimal amount of money. We wanted to work during the day. We had morning classes and evening classes. So we wanted to work during the day. That's really the only type of restaurant business out there that is a daytime gig. So that's what we did.

What were you studying in college:

Chelle: I was in communications.

Vince: I was in flight school.

You decided against being a pilot?

Vince: I have my pilot's license. But this was back in the recession and there was a waiting list a mile long of pilots. In the meantime we had this business that was going crazy. We ended up opening another store in Salt Lake, so we had two locations up and running so I kept going with that.

Chelle: A lot of things happened. My parents were killed in a plane accident and we had a baby six months later. And we just had a whole reassessment of how do we want our family to be. Do we want to be out of town? Do I want to be in law school and a career as a lawyer, or do we want to just keep working at this and fit it around our family?

Basically we fell into it trying to get through college and it kind of took over. What was nice about it, once we did have our first child, we could both work at it, but somebody was always able to stay home. We got to work together, we got to raise our children. And now, he's great with people!

Why were you gruff with customers?

Vince: It was overwhelming how many people were coming in. I was making the sandwiches by myself, there were orders lined up a mile long. There was so much going on, it was like 'Don't talk to me, I can't lose my place.'

Chelle: It's a high adrenaline industry. I was used to that. He kind of got thrown into it. For me, it was fun and exciting. For him, it was overwhelming. Most people, when they come to the restaurant industry, are not prepared for that. By the time we opened our first store, he was well on his way, and now he's better at customer service than I am.

When did you move to Coeur d'Alene?

Vince: We sold every-thing in '97. We sold our businesses, we sold our house. We sold every-thing we couldn't take with us and we bought a motor home and we traveled the United States. Cicely was 2 then. We started in the West Coast and went to the East Coast and back, knowing we wanted to settle somewhere in the Northwest. We traveled all through Montana, looking for that ideal spot. We ended up driving into Coeur d'Alene and just figure this has got to be the place.

When did you decide to franchise Caruso's?

Chelle: When we came here we had to change a couple things. One, we had to learn to bake our bread, because we had a bakery in Salt Lake bake our bread. We called that bakery and they said, 'Yeah, we'll teach you how.' We learned how to bake bread in five hours and then had to implement it into the store. We opened our first store here in Hayden, it just happened to be a good location.

In the process of doing that, we did have a five-year plan to run it and franchise it or expand. Today we have stores in Spokane Valley, Post Falls, Coeur d'Alene and Hayden. As franchise owners, what's your role?

Chelle: A lot of administration and marketing. We are working right now on completely redeveloping the franchise so we can sell more franchises. We're close to opening a store in Sandpoint. Part of it is selling more franchises. Part of it is making sure the cost of food for all of the stores is where it should be, negotiating with our distributors, negotiating with anything from credit card processing, making sure they're getting the best price, advertising, whatever they need as far as marketing to be successful. It's cool because when we owned our own store, we had all these things we could do to make it more streamlined and more efficient, but you don't have the time when you run the store. So now, we get to do all those things and it benefits all of our store owners.

Looking back, would you do anything differently? Any regrets?

Chelle: No. There's no regrets. We're just moving forward.

What would you tell someone thinking about going into their own business?

Chelle: Find people who have already done it. Don't reinvent the wheel.

Vince: That is the reason we are franchising. We've already gone through all the test marketing. What works, what doesn't. What people want. That was a huge time-frame of our lives trying to figure those things out. To jump into business with all of that already in hand, it will set you years ahead.

Chelle: I wouldn't start from scratch, especially not in my 40s (laughs).

What's been the best part of this journey for you both?

Chelle: Working together. We work well together. For whatever reason, we know each others' strengths and weaknesses. We're a good partnership. I think that kind of a partnership in life, not necessarily even just a marital partnership, but a business partnership, is unusual. We just happened to be married also.

Vince: Being able to spend extra time with my family. I was there 2-3 days a week I would spend with Cicely, I would spend with CJ. I was home taking care of my kids and working with Chelle instead of flying off somewhere for days at a time. And getting to know people in the community is incredible.

So being married and working together is a good thing?

Chelle: It can be tough. We learned years ago it's a separate relationship. Yes, we talk about work probably all the time. But we learn that we have a business partnership and we have a parenting partnership. You're not the same person you are as a parent you are as a wife. And we have our marital partnership. We're not the same two people we are in business as we are at home.

Did you ever consider a name for your business other than Caruso's?

Vince: No.

Chelle: It sounded just right.

Hobbies: Chelle - horseback riding; Vince - fly fishing. Favorite type of music: Chelle - anything uplifting; Vince - country to rock and roll.

Number of hours on average you work in a week: Chelle - 24 hours a day, it seems like.

Best advice you ever received: Vince - My grandfather once told me, 'Muscles should be used for necessity. Your brain should be used to make money;' Chelle - "Life is too short to have enemies."

Quality you admire most in a person: Vince and Chelle - honesty.

Any one person who most influenced your life: Chelle - My dad, Craig Peterson. He was a very balanced, intelligent, caring man. He treated me like an equal, even as a child. He was always willing to help me walk through things to see them from a different perspective. He encouraged me to keep an open mind. He taught me to take risks and enjoy life; Vince - My wife. She brings out the best in me. She always has.