



community development partnership

Creating opportunities for people to live, work, and thrive on the Lower Cape

Seeing the connections between business, housing and community: Sara and Eric Whiteley

“What really lifts me is the sense of connection here....not just to my own family...and to people we grew up with, but to community.”

Sara Whiteley



Sara and Eric Whiteley are the brother and sister team behind the third generation of W. Vernon Whiteley, Inc. in Chatham. They are also new members of our advisory council with up-close experience in the ways small business success, affordable housing, and community life are interconnected.

The two grew up on the Cape, but left for careers as engineers, with a stop for Eric in the Navy, too. What drew them back in the late 1990s was the chance to help their dad run the plumbing and heating business their grandfather had started in 1952.

Even with a family business to join, they knew that making the move back to the Cape would involve some risks. What if things didn't work out?

“Early on, we knew there weren't going to be the same kinds of opportunities engineers like us can find in cities, where it's easy to jump ship and go from one firm to another,” Sara explains.

They worried about having the right practical skills to bring to the company. Eric is a master plumber and had worked summer jobs in the trade, “But we joke that our insurance policy doesn't allow either one of us to touch the tools,” says Sara.

The two were relieved to find that their engineering backgrounds served them well as far as running the business. “There's a logic to managing the flow,” says Sara, “that plus a strong commitment to springing into action when the phone rings at night.”

Above all, the siblings agree that what has buoyed them through the years is the strong sense of community they found living here on the Cape.

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“Sure, it’s amazing to be able to collect my thoughts at the edge of the ocean on my way to work every day, Sara says, “But what really lifts me is the sense of connection here. And not just to my own family tradition and to people we grew up with, but to community.”

When a friend told the Whiteleys about the CDP’s focus on empowering the next generation of small businesses, they wanted to know more. They both see small business as absolutely critical to the economy here.

But running a small business has brought them face to face with the Cape’s affordable housing crisis. “We are generating good jobs, but decent wages don’t seem so decent when the median house price is over \$400,000,” says Sara.

The result has been that more and more of the company’s employees are commuting to work from off Cape.

“At a certain point you have to think about what you’re doing,” Sara says. “If the people who work for you can’t live here, then what does that mean for the future of our community?”

The Whiteley’s conclusion: when it comes to creating a sustainable future, affordable housing is part of the story.

Because the CDP brings together the goals of supporting small business and improving access to housing, our mission meshes well with Eric and Sara’s hopes for the community. We’re grateful to have them as corporate sponsors of both the Summer Evening on the Farm and the Last Gasp this year.

Our participation in the Commonwealth’s CITC (Community Investment Tax Credit) program is also important to them. “We’re already glad to support the CDP’s amazing work, and the fact that the CITC essentially doubles our contribution is exciting,” Sara says.

Being on the advisory council has given both Eric and Sara the chance to learn from people taking part in CDP programs. Whether that’s someone trying a new business strategy or finding an affordable home, they say, these stories show how, if we care, we can still strengthen our communities.

And one of the best things about living on the Cape, Sara says, is this: “People here really do care.”