

HARRISONBURG BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES ISSUE #3

By Grace Sanderson for Harrisonburg Economic Development

Immerge is the digital marketing division of McClung Companies. Located in downtown Harrisonburg, Immerge provides digital marketing and web development services as part of an integrated marketing offering to businesses. They work hand in hand with their clients to build websites and create targeted digital marketing campaigns to spur business growth.

I recently spoke with three employees of Immerge to hear their perspectives on working and living in Harrisonburg, and why, with the options their skills afford them, did they choose Harrisonburg. Each of them has very different backgrounds. James Carter, originally from Bath England, is married with 3 teenage children. Sam Johnson moved here for his now wife from the big sky country of Montana. Kari-Lyn Henkel is from Utah, moved to Charlottesville, and relocated to the area after graduating from Radford University.



(left to right) James Carter, Sam Johnson, Kari-Lyn Henkel

Tell me about your academic and professional background.

James: I have been working with the web in one way or another since 1999, in sales, running my own eCommerce store, and managing employer's sites, but my real interest in web development was sparked during a CIT class on Dreamweaver while I was working at JMU. Andy Perrine encouraged me to take Media Arts and Design classes at JMU and eventually I ended up as the webmaster for JMU.

Sam: I graduated from the University of Montana with a degree in Business Administration specializing in Digital Marketing and International Business. And I've worked as a digital marketing and content marketing intern for several tech startups. I started working at Immerge in 2016.

Kari-Lyn: I was an Information Sciences and Systems major with a concentration in Web Development at Radford University. I have been coding since I was 16 years old. That's when I decided I wanted to do this. When I learned CSS, I fell in love with web development. Previously, I worked for a company that did internal software and built internal systems. After about a year and a half there, I got my dream job at Immerge!

What do you do at Immerge?

James: I am a Senior Web Developer and have worn many hats at Immerge. They all have a common thread of keeping Immerge up to date with current industry trends. I work with the sales team to create solutions for our clients, monitor quality assurance, along with develop, design, and market the sites. I enjoy fostering an ongoing relationship with clients so that I am a partner in their success.

Sam: I am a Digital Marketing Specialist. I design digital marketing strategies and then implement all of the different tactics. That can include search engine optimization, search and display ads, social media advertising, and also email marketing campaigns.

Kari-Lyn: I am a Senior Web Developer. I meet with clients to plan their website design, functionality, and then get to implement that functionality. My favorite aspect of this job is watching our client's website grow from an idea to a final product.

When did you move to Harrisonburg?

James: Having met my wife in my hometown of Bath, England in 2001, we stopped in Harrisonburg on our honeymoon to visit Massanutten before heading to New York and Boston. Following a day of snow tubing, we were talking over dinner and decided that this is a friendly place and we should move here. After a few years of research and saving, we packed up all our possessions in the belly of a jumbo jet and became residents of Harrisonburg in 2005! Within a week we had rented a house and found jobs, and that was the beginning.

Sam: I moved to Harrisonburg Christmas Eve, 2015 after graduating from the University of Montana in Missoula, Montana.

Kari-Lyn: I moved to Charlottesville from Utah in 2006, then I moved to Waynesboro after college. I made the commute to Harrisonburg from Waynesboro for 2 years before moving to Verona.

You each have highly in-demand skills. Why did you choose Immerge?

James: I had known William since I moved to Harrisonburg. One day in 2013, I bumped into him in downtown Harrisonburg, and we talked briefly about a freelance project I had been working on. We then had a few more conversations and the subject moved to me working for Immerge. I decided that it was time to branch out from my job at JMU and see what the private sector had to offer. Since then I have been able to work on a wide variety of projects.

Sam: I have always had a passion for local business. Before I graduated college, I worked as an Intern for The Sustainable Business Council and I've loved working for local businesses ever since. When I relocated to Harrisonburg, I met William through my girlfriend's family, and he mentored me on my career path. I was really into how Immerge focuses on local businesses and growing them online, and when they finally opened their digital marketing sector and told me I could be an intern, I jumped at the opportunity.



Kari-Lyn: I chose Immerge because it was my dream job. Since I was 16, I have wanted to work with people on creating ideas for the web - whether that's a cool design or a just a neat feature that will help them work more efficiently or make it easier for clients to contact them. Working with clients on a day to day basis is why I'm here.

What do you like to do in Harrisonburg?

James: I love to spend time with my family and friends, especially goofing around with my kids. When I am not injured I enjoy running, cycling and hiking, as long as the sun is shining. Harrisonburg has a huge offering of parks that are great to visit and a vibrant downtown district that has changed beyond recognition since we moved here. I have three kids - ages 19, 13 and 11.

Sam: I really love food, so I like to try out the local restaurants and I try to go when they have new menu offerings. I like to check out the vineyards and breweries as well, and I love to go to the farmers market and get fresh produce and meat. I think there are a lot of great events that go on downtown, so I try to attend a lot of those and then obviously there is such great hiking around the area.

Kari-Lyn: My husband and I love to go to brunch downtown. We would do that every weekend if we could.

Tell me about your commute to work?

James: I am fortunate to live close to work and, depending on the weather, it can involve a very quick drive listening to WMRA, a bike ride which allows me to clear my head and enjoy the cool breeze, or a 20-min walk listening to music and planning out my day while working on my tan.

Sam: I walk to work every day! It's only a five-minute walk, so unless it's terrible weather I can always make that commute.

Kari-Lyn: I have a 30-minute commute. Since the drive is mostly on I-81, it's my one downfall to working in Harrisonburg. It's the one thing I would change about our region to improve my work-life experience.

Where's your favorite place to eat in Harrisonburg?

James: At our kitchen table on Boxing day (the day after Christmas), surrounded by family and friends. We all repurpose food from the previous day, and crack open special beers that we have saved through the year. I also love eating downtown, there isn't a restaurant that I don't enjoy so it's great to be able to pick them based on the mood I am in, or how healthy I am feeling.

Sam: I like eating downtown a lot. It's hard to pick my favorites, it just depends on what food I'm feeling. I like getting burgers from Cuban Burger or Billy Jack's for their daily specials, especially the Sticky Nugs. And then for a nicer date night I like to go to the Local Chop House.

Kari-Lyn: Tacos el Primo the taco truck. I love that place.

Do you have any favorite local shops in the city?

James: I love Glen's Fair Price. I enjoy photography both as a hobby and a freelancer, so it's ideal for me as they have a massive selection of kit there to buy or rent. No matter how long I take in there, my kids are happy to wander around the rest of the store.

Sam: I really like the Friendly City Co-op and all of their high-quality foods, local meat, and local beer and wine tastings they do. It's just great all around.



Kari-Lyn: I really like New Creation. They have really cool, unique purses that you can't find anywhere. It's like a boutique, and all their profits benefit human trafficking victims and prevention. You are getting a nice product without the money going to a large corporation.

Finish this sentence—the best thing about Harrisonburg is...

James: It's a safe, vibrant, and a diverse community, that welcomes people from all backgrounds.

Sam: The best thing about Harrisonburg is the diversity. Lots of different cuisines to try and lots of interesting people to get to know.

Kari-Lyn: The best thing about Harrisonburg is the small town feel with city amenities. I know so many people in this area and they all seem to be connected in one way or another. It makes you feel like you aren't running out of people to meet, but you don't feel alone when attending a new event.

Thank you all very much. Any last words about Harrisonburg?

James: The father of my best friend when I was in senior school referred to my hometown as an overgrown village. After 12 years, Harrisonburg truly feels like home now, and the friendly disposition of the city means that statement stands true here. I like that no matter where I am, I am likely to bump into someone I know. Even if you are sitting in Jack Brown's, waiting for a friend to arrive, it's easy to strike up a conversation with a stranger and leave as friends.

Sam: It's been a great place to move to right out of college. It's really easy to make friends and get to know people really quickly. And it's really cool to see it growing and improving so much all the time.

Kari-Lyn: I've made a lot of friends through the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce's Community Leadership Program. I enjoy seeing their perspective of living in Harrisonburg and how much they enjoy it. I love getting together with them and going downtown to eat and talk about things that are going on in the community.

