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tucson  
**MEET OUR**  
*makers*

Sometimes you find love in the most unexpected places. That was certainly the case for Kristin and Alex Tovar, who own the Tucson-based retail brand "Why I Love Where I Live." Keep reading to hear their story or click the "What's New" link below for the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

[What's New](#)



## Meet Kristin and Alex Tovar

Tucson wasn't the obvious choice for Kristin Tovar.

In 2011, after spending time in D.C., New York, and Seattle, the Arizona native longed for the hustle and bustle of city life and the ease of connections made at bars and coffee shops. But her now-husband, then-boyfriend, Alex, was in Tucson, just finishing up his master's degree at their shared alma mater, the University of Arizona, and he had already secured a teaching job in the nearby bedroom community of Vail. So, Kristin packed up her belongings and returned to Tucson, never intending to stay long-term.

Fast forward to today, Kristin and Alex own "**Why I Love Where I Live**," a retail store that's a tribute to Tucson, a city Alex describes as always having appreciated, but not overtly, and Kristin describes as being a convert to. Situated in an 800-foot shipping container in Tucson's MSA Annex, the store is stocked with the brand's eye-catching goods (mostly hats, shirts, and stickers) and that of more than 50 Arizona makers.

At first glance, their boldly colored merchandise (that includes bestsellers like the emblazoned “Tucson” t-shirt Alex is wearing during our interview) resembles the pages of a trendy gift guide. But both Kristin and Alex say their store represents so much more than that. It’s a reminder of their journey of falling for Tucson and their ongoing commitment to building community to put others on a similar trajectory.

“We have this little voting area in our store that poses the question: ‘How do you feel about where you live?’ The idea is derived from a book we read called *For the Love of Cities*,” Kristin said. “The author provides a diagram called ‘The Continuum of Engagement.’ We want to move people along the continuum until they are fully engaged and love this place.”

The shop’s roots trace back to Kristin’s conversation with an employee at a coffee shop who shared the reasons he had chosen to live in Tucson. His words inspired her to go on her own fact-finding mission. Together, she and Alex traversed the city: dining, hiking, and exploring every inch of it, all while snapping photos that Kristin posted to a “Why I Love Where I Live” Instagram account.

For years, “Why I Love Where I Live” was exclusively that – a social media account with a “Humans of New York” feel to it. But instead of focusing on the people that comprise a place, Kristin’s Instagram content relayed information about the easy-to-overlook nuances of Tucson. It was and continues to be laden with images of downtown murals, unusual cloud formations, the couples’ favorite beverages, thousands of bats taking flight at sunset, and oddities like Tucson’s Paul Bunyan statue.

Then, in 2015, the brand began to evolve. On Valentine’s Day, also Arizona Statehood Day, Kristin and Alex hosted an event that was “surrounded by and made up of community, rather than individual romantic relationships,” Alex said. Kristin engaged the help of a local muralist to paint a picture of the Arizona flag, replacing the center star with a heart. Hundreds of people attended and shared

why they love Tucson on the bottom of the mural.

“It definitely felt like the community was coming together to celebrate Tucson,” Alex said. “After that year, we knew we wanted it to be an annual tradition.”



In 2016, Kristin and Alex determined that in addition to painting a mural, they would work with a designer to make t-shirts that had an outline of the U.S. and a heart over Arizona. The shirts sold out immediately, and several attendees inquired about purchasing more.

Just like that, the brand shifted to an online retail shop Kristin and Alex ran out of the closet of their downtown home until their daughter was born, and they converted the closet into her room.

“We started searching for a storage unit close to our house .... and that’s when a friend told us about the MSA Annex. We signed the lease because it was 320 square feet, about the size of a walk-in closet. It was exactly the amount of risk that we were willing and able to take on at that point,” Kristin said.

Today, the shop still resides in the MSA Annex on Tucson’s west side, though at 800 square feet, it’s larger than its initial iteration. Amid COVID, the couple moved their store to a larger space and conducted a virtual grand opening, complete with a 3D tour of the new space, interviews of various stakeholders, and embedded prizes. Though the virtual event didn’t net the revenue of an in-person one, the couple says it proved their resilience and ability to weather any storm.

“The pandemic made us make certain decisions and certain pivots that in the end, after the initial really difficult parts of Covid, made us stronger,” Alex said.





Just as their business has evolved, so has their relationship with Tucson. Kristin says over the years, she's realized that the city has a complicated history, and she's learned to embrace that alongside the parts that initially enticed her.

During our interview, she mentions a book they stock called *La Calle* by Tucsonan Lydia Otero, a University of Arizona professor and author. The book

discusses the implications of urban renewal in a city that was once comprised largely of barrios, or neighborhoods that were home to a variety of minority groups, including Mexicans, Chinese, and African Americans.

“I’ve learned so much more about the city and the places I’ve been in, and even the pain that was caused in some of those places, with downtown urban renewal and the communities that were displaced,” Kristin said. “It was this weird juxtaposition of me enjoying all the things that I love above the ground and coming to realize there’s all this history below the ground.”

This knowledge has led to Kristin and Alex championing several Tucson causes that are helping to resurrect the cultural elements of the past while also paving a sustainable path for the future. They participate in 1 Percent for the Planet, donating one percent of their shop’s gross sales each year to Tucson-based non-profit organizations like Native Seeds Search, Watershed Management Group and Friends of Saguaro National Park. They are business partners with the Living Streets Alliance, a non-profit that aims to create safer streets by encouraging less dependence on cars, and Blax Friday, an organization that promotes Black-owned businesses throughout Arizona. They also partner with outdoor retailer Summit Hut on an annual hiking challenge each March in Tucson.

As if that’s not enough, last month Kristin and Alex opened a second “Why I Love Where I Live” in Gilbert, Arizona, in the heart of a buzzing mixed-use retail, restaurant and residential hub called Epicenter at Agritopia.

“If we can do two, maybe we can do more. But the idea is that it started in Tucson. It’s where all the magic happened for me, for changing my heart and my eyes in how I see things and people and place,” Kristin said. “So, it’s a Tucson thing, but it’s something that people can take with them wherever they are to not only be content but to celebrate a place and thrive.”

### **Top 5 Tucson Recommendations from the Founders of “Why I Love Where I Live”**

1. Visit **Mission Garden**

2. Dine at **Tito & Pep**
3. Hike **Wasson Peak**
4. Enjoy a cocktail at **The Nightjar**
5. Eat, eat and eat some more at **Locale**

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