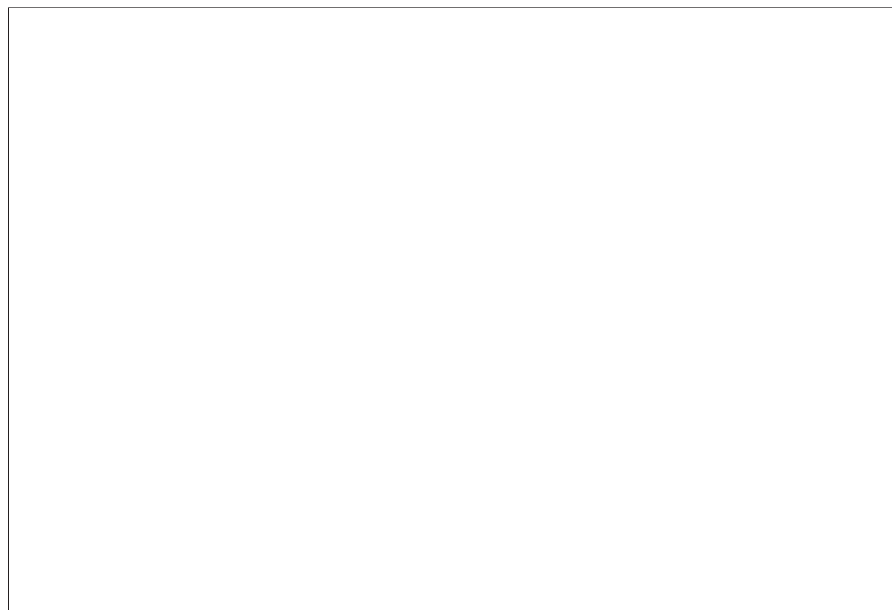


# Truphae: Flexibility Is Key

BY NICKY PESSAROFF

This young pen shop is writing a new chapter in retail pen sales by finding unique ways to foster community.



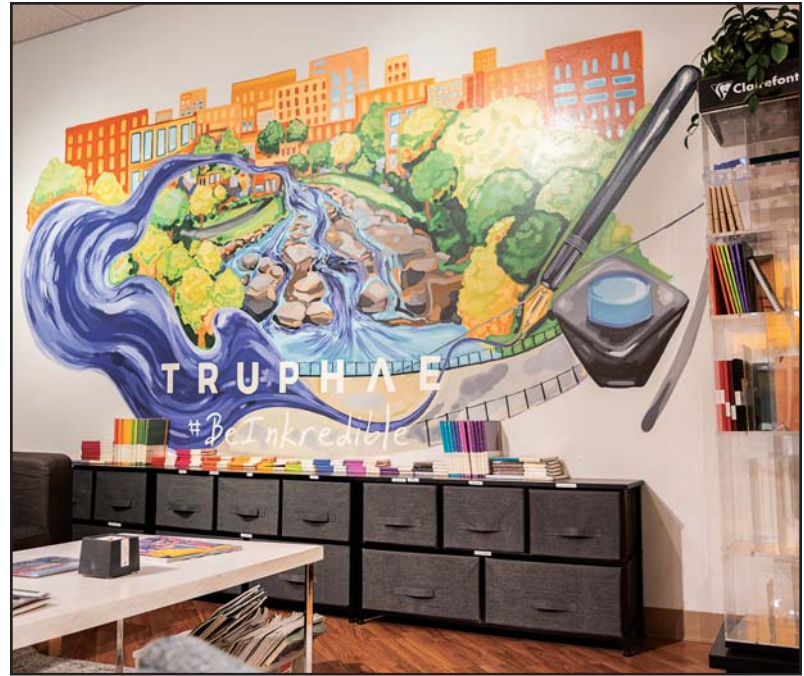
This page—the foyer entryway and the storefront shingle of Truphae pen and stationery shop in Greenville, South Carolina.

In my life, I have attended more creative writing workshops than I can count. I have read and commented on literary fiction where not much happens, vampire fiction where too much happens, and romance novels where confusing things happen. I have been critiqued by professors whose work appeared in the *New Yorker*, and I have led workshops with undergraduates trying their hand at fiction for the first time. But no creative writing gathering has been quite like the Pens & Pages workshop I attended at Truphae pen shop via Zoom on March 28.

This workshop was different for two reasons. For one, although it catered to amateur writers, the caliber of talent was exceptional. For another, I have never seen such furious scribbling with so many beautiful pens. The attendees at this writing workshop were not just aspiring writers, they were regular customers of Truphae in Greenville, South Carolina. It felt like a bunch of friends catching up at one of their favorite hangouts who just happened to be trying their hand at writing fiction—because that is exactly what it was.

Those regulars included poets and Converse University Associate Professors of English Rick Mulkey, who led the workshop, and his wife Susan Tekulve, whose poem “In Praise of Fountain Pens” was published in this magazine (Vol. 36 No. 4). Mulkey is the Director of the MFA and BFA creative writing programs at the university in (relatively) nearby Spartanburg, South Carolina. He and Tekulve are also both avid fountain pen users. When they discovered that Truphae was an easy 20 mile drive from the university, they became regular customers.

In September, Truphae will celebrate its five year anniversary as both a brick-and-mortar and online retailer of fine pens, inks, papers, and other accessories. Owned by husband and wife Chris and Kylie Henline, the shop is regarded for its carefully curated selection of products, yes, but also for its overall vibe: casual yet professional, unintimidating, warm and welcoming. Even in that little box of a computer screen through which I could espy a mere segment of the shop, I was struck by its resemblance to the library at my elementary school. The aesthetic falls somewhere between a professional retail environment and your cool older relative’s downtown loft.



From above, clockwise—Truphae’s front entrance; the Paper Lounge, featuring a mural, Clairefontaine and Leuchtturm1917 notebooks, and a lounge area; aesthetic touches like this vintage record player create a casual environment; Truphae’s newest employee, Cary Yeager, helps a customer.



Chris Henline recalls that Mulkey and Tekulve were customers first, who then became personal friends. “Through that friendship, we became aware of their amazing teaching skills. We noticed that a lot of our walk-in and local clientele were interested in journaling and creative writing; however, we also noticed that a great deal of us fawn over a new pen, but as soon as we obtain it, we don’t know what to write. Creative writing classes became a great excuse for people to just have an outlet to write with their new pens as well as spur some creative thinking.”

Greenville, South Carolina, is one of the fastest-growing areas of the country, and while Spartanburg is a 35 minute drive away, the entire area is its own destination due to the beauty of the countryside, the vibrant restaurant industry, and pedestrian-friendly downtown shopping areas. Both Charlotte, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia, are within a two hour drive of the central South Carolina region.

Tekulve says, “We go down once a week, and they know us. We think of Chris, Kylie, and the Truphae staff as our friends. Rick even goes with Chris sometimes and works the Truphae table at pen shows. Our time at Truphae is a nice break from what we do for a living. There’s an idea that people come together at Truphae to share and talk. There’s community and connection, which creates empathy.”

When Mulkey proposed holding regular creative writing classes at Truphae two years ago, the Henlines jumped at the chance, seeing it as an opportunity to foster a greater connection with both Greenville locals and the Converse University campus.

Mulkey says, “Truphae is a great match for our creative writing program, which tends to attract non-traditional students. One attendee of the workshops at Truphae enrolled at Converse.” Not only does it provide Converse with a direct connection to Greenville, it has also led to more programs, such as an annual award for an outstanding work of fiction that is then published by Clemson University Press.



Left column—when not running creative writing workshops, Rick Mulkey (center) is an avid customer; another view of the beautifully appointed shop; Truphae owners Chris and Kylie Henline. Top right—Truphae customers, ink wall in the background.

Mulkey continues, “This year’s winner also got a pen donated by Truphae. It was almost as exciting to present her with the pen!”

In-store events are nothing new. Shops regularly host nib grinders, local calligraphers, brand representatives, Bullet Journaling specialists, and artists, and Truphae is no exception.

But there is a level of flexibility and experimentation to Truphae’s outreach. Truphae has maintained a reliable and trustworthy staff that bring their own ideas to the fore. Morgan is in charge of customer service, which means that each email is answered personally. In-house photographer and ink specialist Cristy creates boutique product photos rather than stock photos provided by the brand—including the photos in this article. She also fulfills Truphae’s successful Inkredible ink subscription service. April is the shop’s Boutique Coordinator and the primary reason why Truphae’s in-store events are so well-run and unique.

“We have to take a moment to highlight a very important new hire,” Chris says. “We’re excited to welcome Cary Yeager to the Truphae team!” Yeager is the founder of Fountain Pen Day and a former employee of Kenro Industries. At Truphae, he will fill the role of Chief Operating Officer (COO). “Cary will be pivotal in taking this local community that we’ve built to the next level.”

Of his move to Truphae, Yeager reflects: “Chris and I have known each other for over seven years now. I know the business model he champions is rooted deeply in the community that supports him. For me, that’s everything. The consistent in-store events like Pen Club meetups, Pens & Pages, Urban Sketching, Bullet Journaling, etc., is the way I see for a retail store to thrive. Taking on the role of COO at Truphae was an easier decision knowing Chris and Kylie have a deep understanding of Fountain Pen Day. They get that it stands separate on its own as a community-driven holiday that has become the day for fountain pen enthusiasts across the globe.”



Above—some of Truphae’s mid-level writing instrument offerings include LAMY, Visconti, Laban, and much more.

Right—Truphae’s expansive ink wall.



## Visit Truphae

500 South Main Street, Suite 200 • Greenville, South Carolina 29601

Phone: 828.467.0224 • Website: [truphaeinc.com](http://truphaeinc.com)

Hours of Operation:

12 – 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday • Closed Sundays

Also unusual is Truphae’s approach to its physical space: Chris and Kylie are more than happy to rearrange the shop based on the current needs of customers.

Kylie remarks, “The environment we created is constantly evolving based on what our client needs are. For example, we used to have the Ink Lounge, which had a small wall of inks for sale and a couch and a chair along with a coffee table. That area has now become our Paper Lounge because we had so much ink that we now use two different walls!”

Chris continues, “Flexibility is most important. We used to create 30 days of social media content at a time, but usually by the second week, a lot of what we were posting had already sold out. So, we’ve had to adapt and create content in real time. We also work to be flexible with our customers, so we offer pens from every price point imaginable, accept any payment method imaginable, and sometimes even offer tailored payment programs. This flexibility lets customers know that you’re not just out to make a buck, but that you want to provide them with a pen you know they won’t regret purchasing.”

That low-key approach and natural community that Truphae fosters is the reason Mulkey and Tekulve thought that the Pens & Pages workshops would be successful in the first place.

“Truphae fosters the idea that everyone has a story. Our workshops do the same. People become very emotional,” Tekulve says, to which Mulkey adds, “We approach the workshops as something anyone can do. Inclusivity is part of what Chris and Kylie created in the store.”

In his workshop, Mulkey had these aspiring writers take a real-life personal event, then rewrite it from someone else’s point of view. I watched as a man first wrote about the birth of his child from his point of view. In the rewrite, he switched to his wife’s viewpoint. I heard revelation in his voice as he found insight into his wife’s experience. He read aloud, and the pen in his hand buzzed. I couldn’t tell what type of pen it was—a Montblanc? A Pelikan? In the end, the brand didn’t matter. What did matter was this man’s insight, his passion for his own work, the readiness of his pen and his hand and his head and his heart for the next insight that would begin filling the next empty page.

*Learn more about Converse University at [converse.edu](http://converse.edu).*

*For those interested in trying their hand at the writing prompt at the Pens & Pages Workshop of March 28, turn to “how to” on page 72.*