

# Prince Ink sets up "vibrant space" on Granby Street

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Harry Gerwien

Matt Wallace, from left, Chris Gundry and Dustin Wallace inside the new Prince Ink on Granby Street in Norfolk.



Harry Gerwien

Prince Ink also carries things like handcrafted leather footballs, artisan shop towels in a can or immaculately designed playing cards.



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In addition to selling their own shirts and accessories, Prince Ink will carry merchandise from clients that fits what Wallace said is their unique brand aesthetic.



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A custom electric bike with helmet and goggles is among the offbeat merchandise at Prince Ink.



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Prince Ink has moved from Hampton to 433 Granby St. in downtown Norfolk.

The art of screen printing is all about process and patience. While anybody can squeegee ink through mesh to make a mark, it takes true passion for detail to turn an ordinary T-shirt into a work of art.

The same goes for running a small business.

When it comes to printing, Matthew Wallace is confident. He has more than a decade of experience trading his craft for cash.

But as the 31-year-old owner of Prince Ink stood behind the counter of his shop's new retail/production space on Granby Street and stared at the brown paper covering the windows, he addressed the future with a nervous smile.

"I don't know what this is going to do," Wallace said. "I have a good feeling about it, but I really don't know what to expect."

Matthew and his brother Dustin Wallace, 36, founded Prince Ink in 2011. Until recently, they ran the business from a shop in the Phoebus area of Hampton. But last year, the company was selected as one of the first small businesses for Norfolk's Vibrant Spaces initiative.

The city program rewarded Prince Ink with a \$20,000 grant and two year's worth of half-price rent for its new location at 433 Granby St. in downtown Norfolk. The move gives them a prime spot in the city's revitalized shopping district, next door to The Barrel Room and on the same block as the Field Guide restaurant and Grow, a digital creative agency.

Along with Chris Gundry, 27, the Wallace brothers worked for months to design a different kind of print shop. They printed work for clients while juggling renovations and moved their operation across the water one piece at a time. “We’ve done the bulk of this ourselves,” Matthew Wallace said. “That’s the downside of not having more backing, but at the same time, we know everything is exactly how we want it.

Their big idea? Create an open, clean and efficient space that flowed seamlessly from the back of the house to the front door.

“The idea is that you could look through the window and see how everything is made,” Wallace said. “That way people don’t think that we just press a button and a shirt comes out.”

One of the biggest changes for Prince Ink is the new location’s retail focus. While their Hampton shop had visitors, Wallace is banking on a steadier flow of foot traffic from Granby Street’s diners, shoppers and students.

Wallace also said the Phoebus showroom was more of a portfolio for Prince Ink’s printing capabilities. On Granby, they’ve created a destination retail store of curated products. In addition to selling their own shirts and accessories, there will be a selection of merchandise from clients that fit what Wallace said is their unique brand aesthetic.

If you’ve been looking for a place to buy a handcrafted leather football, artisan shop towels in a can or

immaculately designed playing cards ... look no further.

“We wanted to have things that people couldn’t get just anywhere,” Wallace said. “We’re kind of old school and we like the craftsmanship and quality of back-in-the-day and that’s what we pay homage to here.”

Those who walk into Prince Ink will find themselves surrounded by a robust and retro-inspired sense of style.

The walls are exposed brick and the wood is dark. The couches are brown leather. And supplemental light is provided by naked bulbs burning inside the skeleton of an old spring mattress overhead.

As one would expect from a business run by three bearded men under 40, Prince Ink reverberates with a hip masculine vibe. But that sense of “metropolitan macho” is complemented by a genuine respect and reverence for craft. Because as much as Prince Ink is a production space and a retail store, it’s also a museum of things well-made.

Alongside the merchandise, there’s a vintage pinball machine (Spirit of ’76), a custom electric bike (with helmet and goggles) and a 100-year-old (functional) letterpress in the corner.

Wallace said he isn’t sure what will happen when the brown paper comes down and the doors officially open to the public, sometime in the coming weeks. He doesn’t know exactly what people will make of his quirky experiment in commerce and creativity.

He said he's hoping for the best.

"I don't want it to be unapproachable and I don't want us to come off as pretentious," he added. "We've really taken our time to make everything exactly how we wanted it to be. I want it to be exciting for everybody. I want it to be an experience."