

HOW DID THEY DO IT?

Picking Up the Pieces

Knocked down by Katrina, this Lakeview resident made it her business to know demolition

By Lisa M. Daliet

Simone Bruni lost a home in Lakeview and a position as a corporate meeting planner to Hurricane Katrina. Like so many, she faced hard decisions about how to put her life back together. One thing was certain: She wouldn't abandon her property. She waded through city hall's red tape, learned the ins and outs of available grants and rebuilt her home. But something unexpected happened along the way. She became a demolition diva.



Photo by David Tompkins



A rarity in a male-dominated construction industry, Simone plays up the fact that she's a woman. In fact, her pink-and-black logo has caught the attention of many, from local homeowners and the Zurich Classic

to national companies. But don't let the colors fool you, Demo Diva gets down and dirty at work.

Simone, where did you get the idea of starting a demolition company?

It started with that question I had to ask myself: Do I tear down or rebuild? I knew nothing about construction. But as I was rebuilding, my neighbors were coming to me and asking, "Should I tear down my house?" It was such a personal decision that people were agonizing over. I started to walk through houses and could see that some really weren't salvageable. It was just in meeting the needs of my neighbors and getting excited to help out that I got into demolition. I taught myself the whole paperwork process, and that's what people really need—someone to hold their hand and help them through the process.

How did you get started acquiring the equipment and crew you needed?

I don't own any equipment. I'm 100 percent sub. And that's the miracle of everything. I'm the marketing machine. I'm licensed as a demolition company; Louisiana recognizes me as a contractor. But I am the name that goes out and finds the best team for the job. My initial investment was \$30 for a box of 500 cards from Office Depot. It was go get business cards, go talk to people. It was sell trust.

Did you encounter any resistance along the way?

The resistance I encountered was from seasoned men in the construction world. But when they realize that I sincerely listen and commit to deliver, they take me seriously; they know I'm going to follow through. I'm conscientious, and I've earned their respect.

Tell me about your marketing strategy.

The marketing has really been the most fun in all of this. I created these pink-and-black yard signs and asked my neighbors if I could put [a sign in their yards]. And I really networked in the

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neighborhood, going door to door I went out ... and put my hot pink business cards on people's windshield: and I got such a [warm] response from people wanting to see me succeed.

What else sets you apart from other demo companies?

I'm the only one that I know of that went through the flood. I'm from New Orleans, stayed in New Orleans, and I know the agony the homeowner through to make that decision to tear down. My heart is in this. It's not a business. What sets me apart is the empathy I feel for my customers.

Did you have any help from friends or family?

No. I really had to pull myself up by my bootstraps. The epiphany came when my Brazilian immigrant painters were working in my house, and I was sitting on a paint can holding my head. These guys looked at me and asked, "Why are you sad?" I said I don't know what I'm going to do. They said you're an American you have everything at your fingertips. You have all the right to go out and start your own business. They taught me the American Dream, honestly. And so I told myself I can do this, anyone who works hard will succeed in this country. And there was nothing to hold me back from that point on.

Do you think one of the keys to your success was that you were approachable?

That's absolutely true. I was an encourager and an optimist in a time when people were full of dismay.

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