

# Tickled PINK

New Orleans  
native turns  
disaster into  
opportunity.

By Laura Weiner

**Simone Bruni** draws people to her business, the **Demo Diva Demolition Company**, with her bright smile, compassionate attitude, and bright pink *everything*. Her company's dumpsters, excavators, and loaders are all a bright shade of the traditionally feminine color. The equipment, and Bruni herself, clearly stand out in an industry dominated by men, but she uses it to her advantage. In fact, she believes that standing out is the only way to fit in.

Bruni, 37, started her now successful New Orleans-based company while she was in a state of despair. After Hurricane Katrina, not only was her home severely flooded, but she lost her job as a corporate meeting planner, selling the City of New Orleans to high-end convention planners.

"I had six feet of water in my house," Bruni explains with an upbeat attitude that she can't seem to hide, even while speaking of her plight. "Everyone in my neighborhood was trying to figure out what to do. Should we tear down our homes

and start over? Just the thought of that was emotionally draining."

So draining, in fact, it left Bruni feeling hopeless. Each day she would drive from her borrowed apartment to the flooded house, where she would mope around. Then one day she met two brothers from Brazil, who had moved to New Orleans for work gutting houses. While they were helping clean Bruni's home, they provided exactly the jolt she needed.

"I was sitting in my house, and they stopped by to offer to help me clean up," Bruni recalls. "They asked me what I was acting so depressed about. I said, 'Isn't it obvious? I've lost everything.'"

"You are an American," they said. "You have everything. You have the world at your fingertips. You can start a business if you want. *You* can change your life."

With those words, Bruni's attitude began to transform, so much so that she saw what had been right in front of her.

"Every day that I was at my house, I was seeing crews come through and demolish homes," she says. "There was an opportunity there."

"I knew nothing other than that I needed work and I wanted to help my city rebuild," she says about start-

ing her own company.

She began talking to demolition crews in the neighborhood and gathering the names of contract workers with equipment in the area. About eight months after Katrina, she secured her first job, from a woman in the neighborhood. Bruni says she initially targeted women because she knew they were more likely to trust her.

"It is about people and trust," she says. "I got people to trust me, and then I delivered."

The neighbor paid Bruni right away and she quickly distributed the money to the team that had worked on the project, keeping a \$1,500 finder's fee for herself. Soon, word got out that Bruni paid her workers, and fast.

"People were begging to work for me," Bruni says excitedly. "The Demo Diva was paying!"

She was also becoming a local celebrity. Using the money she earned from that first demolition job, she bought marketing materials and soon lined the streets with her pink signs. Friends and family decorated their cars and trucks with pink Demo Diva stickers as well.



Simone Bruni

"The marketing made people think I was bigger than I actually was," she says. "But really, I was just putting stuff in key locations where I knew they would be seen."

Her voice was also being heard on local radio stations.

"My first commercial job came six months after I started," Bruni recalls. "A man heard me on the radio telling my story and gave me a shot with a strip mall."

Even with all the newfound attention, the first year was challenging for Bruni, and her mistakes came at a price.

"It was Demo 101, and I was being self-taught," she says. "I didn't know how to bid so I would underbid.

The money I lost was a lesson to be learned and I paid to teach myself. To date, no one has yet to teach me how to bid. I'm still figuring it out as I go and as the projects get larger."

There were additional challenges as well.

"I was the envy of men because of the attention I was getting. It was jealously from the big boys. And yet there was, and there still is, a certain respect level from some of them because I was growing in such a male-dominated industry."

The more jobs Bruni got, the more she learned, and the faster she grew.

"I thought this would be a flash in the pan, but it has lasted for five years," she says. "This has all been done on a wing and a prayer. I still don't have a 'go to' person to help me write bids, so often I have to break it down in my mind and just hope I am pricing competitively and that I'll still make a profit. As a subcon-

tractor, I have been fortunate to work under some really good people who've been very fair with me."

Bruni was able to move into an office space in August of 2008, almost three years after Hurricane Katrina. She then bought her own excavator and had it painted, pink

she says. "I feel like New Orleans is back."

And Bruni is proud of being a part of the transformation.

"When someone recognizes me, it is like a thousand pats on the back," she says. "The other day a woman in the fast-food drive-through saw my

Demo Diva sticker and she said, 'You go girl!' I feel like the community is cheering me on and they are really proud of me."

Bruni brings that positive attitude to each job.

"There is an emotional factor for the customer that inevitably transfers to us," she says. "My staff and I are compassionate.

We listen to people's

stories because we know that behind every property there is a story. And a new story can begin after a tear down. A person then has a clean slate to build their dream."

Bruni herself is certainly building such a dream—even if it's one that she didn't even realize that she had. ♦



Simone Bruni and her dog in front of one of her many pink dumpsters.

of course. The pink dumpsters came soon after that.

"I needed moving billboards," she explains, "and I thought the dumpsters were a great idea."

Currently her company demolishes around 500 residential and commercial properties a year and has two full-time employees and 15 contract workers.

Right now, Bruni is bidding on her first industrial job—the demolition of a levee wall.

"The federal government is repairing the levees and retaining walls throughout Southeastern Louisiana," she explains. "My next goal is Haiti. Disaster demolition!"

Bruni, who has rebuilt her house since Katrina, can relate to the people who are suffering from the devastating earthquake, and she also knows how it feels when your city rebuilds.

"You realize that, even when things are bad, this too shall pass,"

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