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Girl Power

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keep a Katrina-born
business thriving



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Truth. Strength. Fortitude.

In the span of a day, Simone Bruni Couere seemed to have lost everything — everything except for her resilience. A New Orleans native, Simone had been working in the hospitality industry for 10 years. She just purchased her first home in Lakeview, a neighborhood of the city of New Orleans. She was loving life. Then Hurricane Katrina hit and changed everything. Her house was destroyed, and she was laid off from her job. But that didn't stop her, in fact, the tragedy inspired her.

She immediately rolled up her sleeves and start volunteering with her church, gutting flooded homes. From that experience she saw firsthand that gutting and demolition was the first step in getting everyone back. "Demolition was a business of hope, and I liked being in the business of hope," explains Simone. "I was a single woman and fearful. Starting a new business was a daunting task. So, I decided to target women because I thought men would naturally assume a woman wouldn't know anything about demolition. I started with \$250, no experience, no license, just a bunch of yard signs and bright pink business cards — that's what catapulted me into launching 'Demo Diva Demolition'."

Simone took the branding skills she honed from her former hospitality career and used them to make her business stand out from the rest of the many companies doing demolition post-Katrina. She also used her pride in New Orleans and her Demo Diva signature pink color to drive her marketing. To her pleasant surprise she soon learned that it wasn't just women who needed her services, but it was an entire city. Simone knew that anyone could sell demolition, floor tile, or carpet, so she had to be unique. "I didn't sell my product, instead I sold my passion, and my passion was New Orleans."

With minimal start up capital, Simone went straight into structural demolition and subbed out the work to experienced contractors. Contract after contract began coming in along with the money. After two years, she was able to purchase her first piece of heavy equipment, giving her optimal control over the operation. Since Katrina, Simone estimates she has helped at least 3000 families "take it down to the dirt" so they can rebuild — her true passion and hope realized.

But her success hasn't come without its share of growing pains. She admits that over the years she's had unfortunate business associations with people she thought were reputable and staff who were discovered to be untrustworthy. Six years into her business, rattled by numerous problems like wrong filings, bookkeepers not coding correctly, and even embezzlement, Simone had a chance meeting with Shannon Summersgill, a CPA who operated her own business, a relatively new firm in Covington.

"I was invited to a business lunch with some other female business owners. That's where I met Simone," recalls Shannon. "My first impression was that she had an amazing marketing talent she was using every day in Demo Diva. It was an honor to meet Simone and to listen to her story of how she brought her business to what it is today and where she wanted to take it."

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Simone knew there was a positive connection right away between the two female business owners. "Shannon had a very calm demeanor and I desperately needed that at the time," shares Simone. "We set up an appointment to discuss my business. She sat down with me and put things in order. She gave me a sense of focus. I appreciate that Shannon is very methodical — implementing and reviewing methods — and as an entrepreneur that's essential to me. It was the first time I had a female CPA. Shannon brought a different type of emotion to my business. What I brought to demolition, she brought to accounting."

Started in 2009, Shannon's practice caters to a variety of clients, including construction and manufacturing companies, grocery stores, retail boutiques, and various non-profits and tax-exempt organizations. She notes that their niche has evolved into servicing small businesses and taking care of their daily accounting and payroll needs, as well as year-end tax returns. This developed over time when she realized how efficiently she could provide these services to small business owners, and for a lower cost than they could pay a full- or part-time accountant — and handle the duties of an internal accountant independently.

Shannon's staff includes one other CPA, Chandra Jambon, and two accountants, Dena Knight and Sarah Moses, who are both studying to become CPAs. "My team brings Demo Diva an attention to detail and experience in performing daily accounting tasks like bookkeeping and payroll — exactly what Simone needed to streamline her office," affirms Shannon.



Shannon (center) and her firm's staff works closely with Simone (right) and her Administrative Assistant, Alyssa Wagstaff (left), to improve accounting functions at The Demo Diva Demolition Company.

Shannon worked with Simone to get Demo Diva back on track by giving her guidance on how to improve accounting functions in her office. "We, in time," Shannon explains, "took over some of the tasks her staff was trying to accomplish while doing their other duties — this allowed Simone's office manager to really focus on management duties."

The two business owners meet a minimum of once per quarter. Meetings typically last about three hours, spending time reviewing Demo Diva's books and strategizing. They may have a quick lunch at some point in between, but more often they talk by phone. Shannon credits her staff with working hand in hand with Simone's staff two to three times per week, dealing with daily issues needed to keep the demo company running smoothly.

"Simone is a lot of fun and has so many ideas and different places she wants to bring her business," says Shannon, "and we love being a part of that process. Many of our clients are focused on one thing, but Simone is always coming up with new ideas. However, she, like most of our clients, have growth as a common goal."



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Shannon Summersgill, CPA, Owner, Shannon H. Summersgill, CPA, LLC

With a great mind for marketing and a CPA who shares her passion for hope, Simone's business has grown indeed. When all other companies were providing multiple services, such as demo and plumbing or demo and pile driving, Demo Diva did nothing else than demolition. Now a decade following Hurricane Katrina, Simone feels her business's staying power is due in large part to the fact that she treats her bank account and books like the Holy Grail. "I don't spend lavishly through the business and I've spent a lot back reinvesting in my business," asserts Simone. "Whether it's new tires or repainting the dumpsters, we're constantly maintaining the image of the company. It's paid off because it shows that we take pride in how we do business."

Demo Diva Demolition has morphed into primarily commercial demolition and laid the groundwork for other tangential businesses. In 2013, Simone started Dumpster Diva — her self-described "mobile billboard". Just last March another business naturally evolved: Reclaimed Diva. "We were salvaging antique pine lumber from the homes we were contracted to demolish and selling it to a mill that would refurbish and resell it as flooring," explains Simone. "Since then, we purchased the mill, salvage wood and other architectural elements ourselves, and will sell them through our new Reclaimed Diva retail outlet expected to open in the months ahead."

Simone recalls the sense of pride she had when she bought her first piece of large equipment. "I couldn't image how someone so normal and average like me could have done something like that," Simone states with emotion. "When that huge piece of equipment was delivered and parked at Xavier University, and I was getting ready to tear down a whole city block for the school with my equipment — I was euphoric."

No matter how her business grows, Simone always remembers her roots and how she got her start. "I love taking it down to the dirt where life meets life — taking something down to its most natural state and saying here's your palette, now go build your art. I loved watching the transition in life within my community. Initially after the storm I saw such pain and disappointment in the faces of homeowners, families, the elderly. Then I felt the mood shift to young people rebuilding, and now it's young entrepreneurs and developers who are investing in our city. I've seen the profile of our customer change and that's been rewarding and so invigorating to touch the earth and to see this truly remarkable transformation."

Shannon will be working closely with Simone and her team as Demo Diva Demolition expands into government contracting so they can take the business to a whole new level. "It's time for us to grow in that area," says Simone.



“I didn't sell my product, instead I sold my passion, and my passion was New Orleans.”

Simone Bruni Crouere, President, The Demo Diva Demolition

As women-owned CPA firm serving a woman-owned company, Shannon believes that she shares some basic common interests with her client. "Besides the obvious of being females, Simone and I are dedicated professionals who are very motivated to continue to grow our businesses. We both love what we do. We are different in that I love the accounting side of business and Simone loves the marketing side and creating new things — it's a great partnership."

But as the Demo Diva herself continues to look for more opportunities to help her beloved city rise up again from the dirt she so passionately cultivated, her CPA is at the ready. "We feel we understand her business better every day," says Shannon. "It is constantly changing and expanding. Slowly, we have taken over more and more which has allowed Simone the time and peace of mind to focus on what she knows how to do best — growing her business." ♦

