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Death, Sex & Money

# In New Orleans: Becoming the Demo Diva

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Simone Bruni, a.k.a. the Demo Diva, on a job site with her signature hot pink equipment.

([Rush Jago](#))

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Summary

Simone Bruni never imagined she would someday run a demolition company. "I grew up in a very traditional Latin home," she says. "My mom did not work. I wanted her life. I wanted to be a stay at home mom." But when Hurricane Katrina hit, Simone was 32 and single, working in the hospitality industry.

After the storm, she found herself unemployed. "No one knew what to do. I did nothing," she recalls. Jobs were scarce. "It was...a situation of blaze your own trail or leave. I wasn't going to leave."

When waves of aid workers showed up to help with storm cleanup, she saw an opportunity. "I realized the first step to coming home was demolition," she says. Armed with her skills in marketing, Simone started [Demo Diva](http://demodiva.com/) , a demolition company geared towards women. "I had everything painted hot pink," she laughs. "I said, 'I'm in this and I'm coming out strong.'"



Simone Bruni, on a job site in New Orleans. Her excavator is named "Smashing Star," because "she looks smashing."  
(Rush Jagoe)





Host Anna Sale, meeting Simone's baby squirrels. "I've notified all the tree companies that when they find baby squirrels to call me." (Katie Bishop)

## Transcript

*Simone Bruni: I had everything painted hot pink. So that was when I said, "Alright, I'm in this and I'm coming out strong."*

**This is Death, Sex & Money...in New Orleans.**

**The show from WNYC about the things we think about a lot, and need to talk about more.**

**I'm Anna Sale.**

*SB: It was a Friday afternoon, 5:00 o'clock, August 26th.*

**The way Simone Bruni remembers it, it started like any other weekend.**

*SB: It was that last weekend of summer. It was going to be the first Saints pre-season home game, and all my co-workers and I were coming down the stairwells. It was Friday. We were laughing, "Hey, have a great weekend, I'm going to the Saints game." "Me too. See you all Monday." No one knew about the storm.*

**She went to the game, at the Superdome. The Saints lost 21-6 to the Baltimore Ravens. She went out afterwards.**

*SB: It was 11:30 that night, standing in a bar and I just happened to be standing next to a guy, didn't even know him, still don't. We both looked up at the TV in the corner of the bar, and that was the very first time that we saw that monstrosity of that cloud and the trajectory had just moved it over New Orleans. That was the first time.*

**That storm demolished everything in Simone's life. And created an opportunity she never would have predicted. Simone moved to New Orleans from Brazil when she was three years old.**

*SB: I never left. After college, I quickly went to go work in the hospitality industry and it was parties, parties and more parties.*

**Simone liked the work -- she did it for ten years -- but it wasn't the life she expected for herself.**

*SB: I grew up in a very traditional Latin home. My mom did not work. I wanted her life. I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. I wanted a family. And those things didn't happen.*

**When Katrina was approaching New Orleans, Simone was 32 years old and living by herself. She'd just bought a two-bedroom house, which she rushed to evacuate.**

*SB: I threw my jewelry and birth certificate into a rolling ice chest and I grabbed a pillow and a comforter. I boarded up my house. It was a scramble to get any kind of plywood, to get any help.*

**AS: When did you come back?**

*SB: I came back fairly quickly. This is so silly to admit, I came back in with a 15-pound bag of birdseed. And like a ten-pound bag of cat food. And the trees were covering the streets, like we had to park blocks away. And it's ludicrous to just even say that, but I was like, "Oh my god, did any of the alley cats survive?" You think about the birds. It's just traumatic and you do really irrational things.*

**AS: Did you put out the birdseed?**

*SB: I did. I just dumped it on the gray, mud front lawn. And it was still wet. Mud covered everything. The really unique thing, there was a silence that the mud created. It insulated sound, one. And two, there were no sounds to be heard. There were no birds. Or crickets. When they're not there, you hear it and the silence was so loud.*

**Simone's house was destroyed. At the peak of flooding, there was 12 feet of water in her neighborhood. She was also unemployed. About six weeks after the storm, Simone got official word that she was laid off, because there was tourism industry to sell at the moment. She didn't know how she was going to make money, or where to start to get back into her house.**

*SB: I did nothing for four to five months, I did nothing.*

**AS: Where were you staying?**

*SB: Someone offered me an apartment in the downtown area that did not flood. And housing was so hard to come by.*

**AS: Were you at a point where it was a question of how you were going to cover bills?**

*SB: Do or die? You know, there was definitely that sinking feeling in your stomach that one gets when you're in survival. I knew that I couldn't leave my parents. I wasn't leaving the city. I didn't know what opportunities were here. The only opportunities that I could see were like waitressing or Starbucks, serving coffee, but there were not many jobs. For a good two years after the storm. And it was really*

*just a situation of blaze your own trail or leave. I wasn't going to leave.*

**So when waves of aid workers showed up to help with storm cleanup, Simone was there.**

*SB: So I had been volunteering and leading church groups into the community because there were no street signs. And so I realized, the first step to coming home is demolition.*

**She realized this was an opportunity...**

*[Commercial] "Having your house demolished is never easy, but it's the first step to a fresh start."*

**And ten months after the storm, Simone got into the demolition business.**

*SB: So with \$250, I bought a \$30 box of business cards that said, "Demo Diva"...*

*[Commercial] "Dirt's never looked this good! Demo Diva taking it down to the dirt."*

*SB: ..magnets for my car, because I thought, if you're legit, you're going to have magnets, right? And then the rest were in yard signs.*

**AS: What'd your signs look like?**

*SB: They were pink and black. I only found one printer about an hour and a half away from here, and he's like, "Ma'am, if we do pink on black, that takes a double run." And I said, "Run it through twice, but I'm standing out." Again, I was ten months after the storm. And other people were already here doing demolition. But they were not marketing themselves. They'd go in, they'd hustle a deal, tear down the house, and pull off. I went to all those nice, sandy lots that were cleared, and I asked the homeowner if I could put my yard sign out, so within a week I put out a hundred yard signs on jobs I didn't do. [Anna laughs] And so, yes, fake it til you make it, and keep on trucking. With a big smile.*

**Pink and black was strategic for the customers Simone was after.**

*SB: I targeted women.*

**AS: Why?**

*SB: Because I figured men would know that I didn't know what the hell I was talking about.*

**AS: Wait, so it wasn't because you thought women were active consumers but it was because women you could fool? [Laughs]**

*SB: No no no no. Well, maybe that a little. No, I figured that women, I really thought that women would be a little bit more compassionate towards me. I didn't know what any of the equipment was called, I figured women, like women were in my shoes, kind of fearful of this decision. And I also thought women were going to be the decision makers of those homes, you know. So I'm like, "Alright, I'm going for the decision maker or the compassionate one."*

**AS: How quickly did business pick up?**

*SB: Oh, like immediately. Immediately. I remember an entire demolition of a city block, that was my big break. When I got that contract, I said, "That's it. I'm going to buy my excavator." And I bought five dumpsters. And I parked them right in front of the interstate where everyone drives to work. And they saw it that day, and I just left it there. And that's when I really just showboated and I was like, "Demo Diva's here as a real entity."*

**Coming up, how the Demo Diva went from hiring contractors to her own demolition workers...all of them, men.**

*SB: I wish I could have a woman. I've tried. That is a career field for women. It's very delicate, all in the fingertips.*

**Seventy percent of the housing units in New Orleans were damaged by Katrina and the flood that followed.**

*Big Freedia: It was just so bad they tore it down.*

That included the duplex where Big Freedia, the star of New Orleans bounce music, was living.

*BF: I don't know why they didn't build it back.*

Ten years ago, Big Freedia was trapped with her uncle, brother, her sister, and her sister's newborn baby when their neighborhood filled with water after the storm.

*BF: Then we had to cut the hole into the roof and get higher cause the water started like seeping in all of the hallways, and the steps, and the house. It was just the scariest thing that I've ever went through.*

Big Freedia is one of the five people I talked to in New Orleans about the the ten years since the storm. She was part of a major migration out of the city after Katrina. In fact, Orleans Parish had 100,000 fewer black residents in 2013 than it did in the 2000 census. In the next episode in our series "In New Orleans," hear why two years after the storm, Big Freedia came back.

*BF: You know you hear everybody, the hype, and, "Oh, it's going to come back bigger and better," and you know, the money was plentiful. A lot was happening after Katrina, I mean money slinging everywhere, you know everybody had FEMA checks, girl.*

Hear Big Freedia's story, and her hard-charging bounce music, in our series "In New Orleans."

This is Death, Sex & Money from WNYC. I'm Anna Sale.

Simone Bruni's new career may have been in demolition, but she quickly got a sense that all her years in marketing were paying off.

*SB: I remember going through a McDonald's, and I was going through the drive-thru and there was a young girl that said, "Are you THE demo diva?" And it was the first time that I had been addressed as a persona. And I said, "Uh, yeah." And she said to me, "You go girl."*



**AS:** And at the height of your busy-ness, how much demolition were you doing?

*SB: We were doing, at my peak, we were doing two houses a day, every day for probably a year.*

**AS:** That's lot.

*SB: Yeah.*

**AS:** Can you just tell me about the conversation where you were asking for someone to paint the excavator hot pink?

*SB: Yeah. I was still dealing with my subcontractors. And the abuse back to me was really getting more and more. Like, they were holding me over a barrel and I didn't have a lot of control of the jobs. And so, this one particular morning, one of the guys working for me started in. And I said, "You know what, that's it." And I went and bought a brownie and an iced coffee. Comfort food. And I said, "I'm going to buy my own equipment." And so I drove out to the place, you know, on Airline Highway, to buy my equipment. And I walked in and I said, "Is Rodney here?" He's the salesman who had been trying to get me to buy. And they said, "No ma'am." So she calls and she says, "Demo Diva's here. Demo Diva's here." And he's like, "Keep her there. I'm coming back!"*

**AS:** [Laughs]

*SB: So I'm sitting there eating my brownie and drinking -- I'm like a child, you know, sucking on her bottle, like, "I can do this." And so, he said, "I have one on the yard right now I can sell you." I said, "Okay," we signed the deal, and I said, "Can you price me to paint it pink?" And he said, "Well wait, let me explain to you how heavy equipment goes. You buy this and you keep it for about three or four years and you trade it in and then we're going to upgrade you." And I was like, "Um, well, this is a purchase, right?" And he goes, "Yeah." And I said, "Okay, it's mine?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "Okay, I want it painted pink." I said, "This baby's going in the hall of fame."*

**AS:** How much does an excavator cost?

*SB: They're around 150 to 175, so I had it financed.*

**AS: Yeah, is that still the excavator you use?**

*SB: It's still working. Yes. I just came from the job site and she's -- her name is Smashing Star because she looks smashing. [Laughs]*

**Simone says Demo Diva now does millions of dollars in business a year. Her office walls are dotted with framed newspaper articles and 8 x 10 photos with dignitaries.**

**AS: Is that Warren Buffett?**

*SB: Yes.*

**AS: That's pretty impressive.**

*SB: Yes.*

**Simone's life has changed in other ways. She fell in love three years ago and got married last year. It's a different marriage than the one she envisioned before the storm, because of her business.**

**AS: When you married, was it difficult to think about how to share resources with your husband?**

*SB: Yes, it still is. I think that, you know -- my accountant told me something that really changed me. He said, "Simone. Why would you stress about this when you found love?" Because I was really worked up about, do we do a prenup? Do we do this? And what's mine is mine and what's his is his and let it be that way. But, it's different now, I think that when I found someone that I want to share everything with, I want to share that happiness with them. But at the same time, the same way that I remember starting Demo Diva is the same way that I feel about it now. And it's: Protect your bank account.*

*And so, sharing in the resources of, "Oh, I'll treat for this," that's part of just the respect to the union of the marriage. But I get really protective of the business.*

*Yeah, it's really...That's been a -- really an area that I probably have thought the most about is how to protect the business that no one, you know, husband or ex-employees or lawsuits could harm the business, because it's a precious entity, yeah.*

**AS: Do you still feed animals?**

*SB: I do. I have my baby squirrels in the kitchen, I just...*

**AS: Wait.**

*SB: Yeah, here.*

**AS: What does that mean?**

*SB: Two baby little squirrels and actually it's their feeding time. You know we do trees, whenever we go into demolition jobs, I have -- we have to tear down a lot of trees. So I've notified all the tree companies that when they find baby squirrels to call me.*

**AS: [To squirrel] Your eyes are closed!**

*SB: I carry them around in my make up case, with a heating pad. I haven't even named them.*

**AS: I would never want to go back into nature if I was carried around in a makeup case with a heating pad.**

[Laughs]

That's Simone Bruni, owner of Demo Diva in New Orleans. You can see a picture of her with Smashing Star, the hot pink excavator, on our website. Go to [deathsexmoney.org/neworleans](http://deathsexmoney.org/neworleans).

*SB: I'm just really into squirrels.*

Death, Sex & Money is a production of WNYC. The team includes Katie Bishop, Emily

Botein, James Ramsay, Rachel Aronoff, Benjamin Franklin and Joe Plourde.

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The Reverend John Delore and Steve Lewis wrote our theme music, and this is the Outer Borough Brass Band performing it. Thanks to band members Jeff Pierce, Scott Bourgeois, Rick Faulkner, Joe Scatassa, and Jason Isaac.

I'm on twitter @annasale, the show is @deathsexmoney. You can sign up for our weekly email newsletter at [deathsexmoney.org/newsletter](http://deathsexmoney.org/newsletter).

And the Demo Diva has expanded her business to include hot pink dumpsters...and a mill to process reclaimed wood.

AS: Is the woodmill that you're running called Demo Diva or does it have a new name?

SB: *It's actually, it's called Reclaimed Diva.*

AS: [Laughs] That's like...what do I picture with Reclaimed Diva?

SB: Tell me. What do you picture?

AS: I picture like an old diva who's had some work done.

SB: *Hey, I like that. That's a good idea.*

I'm Anna Sale, and this is Death, Sex & Money from WNYC.

ABOUT DEATH, SEX & MONEY

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making it all count while we're here.

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