

Demo Diva Founder Simone Bruni Demolishes New Orleans with Purpose

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In a heavy equipment world full of yellows, browns, dirt, and grime, Demo Diva's vibrant pink branding stands out. Get to know this New Orleans-based company and its founder, Simone Bruni, and the differences are even more noticeable.

Demo Diva was founded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath. At the time, Bruni knew nothing about demolition or equipment. But with perseverance and a genuine desire to help restore New Orleans, she has earned notoriety and respect.

Though her industry is characterized by rugged no-nonsense, Bruni doesn't hide her unique spirit of care and infusing a human touch into a messy business.

TuffWerx is grateful to Simone Bruni for taking the time to chat with us. In this interview, she shares the secrets of Demo Diva's success, her recent exposure to the tsunami recovery efforts in Japan, and her vision for the future.

TuffWerx: On your company website, you state, "We believe in our people rather than systems and heavy equipment." How do you put this philosophy into practice in your day-to-day business operations?

Bruni: We may be doing demolition, but we have fun in what we do. We have crawfish boils together; we go bowling. The system can become so mechanical that you lose that



personal touch. That applies not only within the company, but with our customers. When a New Orleans icon called Hubig's Pies was destroyed by fire, my assistant Rhonda Lange told Hubig's, "We want to work with you. We know you're in a crisis. We know the insurance paperwork will help you." They hired us. We bring empathy and emotion to the job.

TuffWerx: You recently returned from a trip to Japan, where you were asked to share stories of Hurricane Katrina recovery. What did you learn from your trip?

Bruni: It was fascinating. I was invited by the Shibusawa Foundation, which was founded in 1860 to promote business ideas and exchange between Japan and other countries. I was invited along with three other people from New Orleans. They wanted me to share a story of hope and recovery from a demolition aspect, as well to share how in the world I got into this industry as a woman. The Shibusawa Foundation understands that Japan needs young ideas to jumpstart their economy in the cities that were affected by the tsunami.

They're now two years out from their storm, which they call their 3/11. They've cleared out all the debris, and now just the building slabs are there. The buildings are gutted or gone. So they have the framework, but now they're stuck. They're stuck in their heads, with the people, with the politicians. Depression is setting in. There is a high rate of suicide among city workers. They feel shame that they can't make something happen, and they believe the inaction is a reflection on their honor. Based on my experience with the Hurricane Katrina recovery in New Orleans, I told them that they're not going to see the breakthrough until the fourth year.

TuffWerx: How is Japan's tsunami recovery similar to your experience in New Orleans? What are the differences?

Bruni: As far as similarities, you can't rush healing. It can be delayed, but at some point it's just going to take its course and heal.

I learned about the differences from 88 year old Mr. Shibusawais, the great grandson of the Foundation's founder. When he visited our group, he told me, "You know the greatness of America? It's your vastness. We're just a little island. That's the power of the American people. The strength of your country is how big you are."



I saw the truth of this firsthand. When I arrived in Japan, it was a Sunday. There were Komatsu and Kobelco excavators *everywhere*. I also saw some Caterpillar machines that were perfectly parked, like they had used a ruler. I thought, “Wow, I’ve never seen so much heavy equipment everywhere.” But there were no operators. My Japanese guides told me that there is a shortage of operators and labor. As I drove across the region, all the equipment was parked. When I heard about the shortage of experienced heavy equipment operators in Japan, I asked why operators aren’t brought in from other

countries. But apparently Japan won’t allow this. People who overstay their tourism visas are kicked out. This shortage goes up the whole chain of command. They don’t have enough architects or engineers either.

I saw nothing like this after Katrina. What I saw was men beating their ploughshares into swords. I saw an excavator that had been working on a farm pulled down to New Orleans to help. I saw the greatness of Americans coming together. Reflecting on this difference made me really sad for the Japanese. They should let outsiders in to help them.

Another difference I noticed was that Japan didn’t have religious charities involved in rebuilding, that I saw. In contrast, New Orleans had every religious denomination come down and assist with the rebuilding efforts.

TuffWerx: One of Demo Diva’s specialties is architectural salvaging, especially among New Orleans’ historic structures. Who evaluates what should be salvaged? What happens to the salvaged materials?



Bruni: I walk through and assess each property myself, then I call in a salvage yard if there's a lot of stuff. I also have certain brokers that I call for lumber and brick. I stockpile a lot of salvage to reuse on rental properties. I also have a consignment booth in Fairhope, AL where I sell architectural salvage stuff. None of it goes to waste.

TuffWerx: What kind of jobs are your favorite to be a part of? Why?

Bruni: I've had two types of jobs that I've really enjoyed. I like old commercial buildings that we get to dismantle. Right now, we're doing this for a four-story historic building in the center of New Orleans that's probably about a hundred years old. It has over 100-150,000 bricks that we can salvage. I love walking through these old buildings that have a lot of memories and meeting the neighbors. The building we're demolishing used to be a theater, and the neighbors remember going there as kids.

I also enjoy working with families who call me. Many times, kids will call about tearing down their parents' old house because the land is more valuable without the house. When I walk through, I see a lifetime before me, including among all the materials that I get to salvage.



TuffWerx: Are there any demolition jobs that you won't take?

Bruni: Oh yes, we love to say no. There have been times when historic groups have gone into buildings first, then they contact us to do the demolition. It sounds like a wonderful thing that they're doing, and they think they're doing something good, but these groups can compromise the structure of the house, and the house can fall and crush neighboring properties.

We also don't do implosions, so we stay away from the larger jobs.

TuffWerx: What is the largest structure you'll demolish?

Bruni: The tallest we've done was a 4-5 story building. Someone tried to hire us to demolish a dorm, but they wanted to rush the job. When it comes to stretching myself to that next growth level, I've learned that if I grasp at it, it tends to fall apart. When I make a natural stretch, I'm able to grab a hold of that next level.

TuffWerx: What kept you and your company going through the learning process and other challenges?

Bruni: I have a bigger vision. I don't feel that demolition is the mission. I feel that there's a higher purpose in all of this. My faith in the Lord has kept me humble through this process. We gather as a company and I'll say a prayer over us and for us as a team. There have been times that I failed, and I've gone before my staff and apologized for not seeing the situation the way they did.

The first few years of this business was meant to heal people in New Orleans. Now we're a full-fledged business, but Demo Diva is still an inspiration in the community. We sponsor programs around town and build a business for others.

We sponsor flag football that involves 400 girls in the community. We were recently involved in Lemonade Day with 15 inner city kids. We had pink lemonade and pink balloons, and signs that said, "Get your Diva on" and "Drink a diva." We also had the kids singing the Demo Diva song.



So we support a lot of kids groups and initiatives, but we're also involved in the New Orleans Mission, which is a homeless shelter for men. My philosophy is that everybody should get a second chance and a third chance and a fourth chance. We've employed people through the Mission's work reentry program. We've teamed up with them, putting their guys back to work in the workforce.

TuffWerx: We first learned about Demo Diva through your active and engaging Facebook presence. Few construction-related companies are able to build a devoted online community like the one you have. What do you believe has been the cornerstone of your success?



Bruni: It's really my voice. I'm the only one who posts. It's sincere, not packaged. You can see the emotions in my posts, my highs and lows, including when I'm really mad.

Other sites put up cookie cutter messages. I've tried to keep it grass roots. I'm posting pictures of my people and having fun. I'm capturing the job.

I considered giving handles and administrative access to my employees, but I decided not to. Demo Diva has one voice and one philosophy.

TuffWerx: How would you like to see Demo Diva expand in the future?

Bruni: There's two things. I'd like to expand in the area of architectural salvage. Not just getting more money and expanding our footprint, but getting more money out of each demolition – squeezing that grape a little tighter. We're ramping up in this area, including moving towards a brick and mortar store. We're also expanding our dumpster business. We can't keep up. We're not the cheapest or most expensive in town, but our dumpsters are cheery. They're hot pick dumpsters with graphics on the side. We're going to be buying more dumpsters, and we're looking at expanding to another city.

TuffWerx: Where can our readers learn more about Demo Diva and follow your adventures?

Bruni: On the [Demo Diva website](#) and on [Facebook](#).

Photos courtesy of Demo Diva Facebook page.