

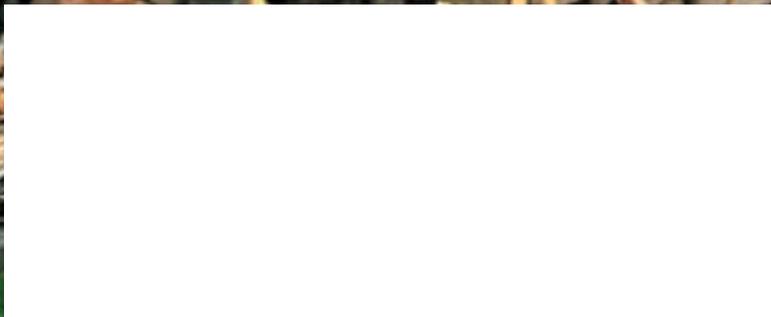
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# Demolition Gets a Makeover

New Orleans owner thinks outside the box with business built from the wreckage of Katrina.

BY CHRIS MOON

**W**hen Simone Bruni walks onto one of her New Orleans jobsites, her employees know she's there.

It's not just the pink that she's usually wearing. And it's not the fact that she's a woman, which is not always a typical sight in a demolition zone.

No, her employees know she's there because of the energy she brings with her. Bruni has a boundless energy—a pacing, observing, critiquing, joking and laughing kind of energy. It's a larger-than-life kind of energy that stands out in any crowd.

She's the Demo Diva after all.

"You definitely know it when she's around," says Tank Gillard, who operates one of Bruni's Volvo EC210C excavators, which is painted bright pink to stand out as much as its owner.

The story of Bruni's company is similar to that of New Orleans itself, built virtually from the ground up out of the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina. Leaving her life as a corporate event planner behind, she launched into the world of construction, which she admittedly knew almost nothing about.

But with a bit of savvy marketing, a heavy dose of strong sales skills and three excavators by Volvo Construction Equipment, she's created Demo Diva Demolition, a business that's positioned for continued growth. Her pink excavators have been the talk of New Orleans, especially in the construction circles where the Demo Diva has fast become a rising player.



In New Orleans, Demo Diva Demolition stands out with its pink Volvo EC210C excavators.

It's a story that's left even the most seasoned in the industry scratching their heads.

"I've been doing this for 12 years, and I've never seen anything like this," says Rodney Guggenheim, a sales representative with Scott Equipment Company in New Orleans.

"In demolition, a lot of it is the same. Same companies. Same equipment. It's pretty cut and dried, and it's usually not a pretty thing. But you know how demolition is. She makes it pretty. It's unique. How else can you say it?"

### A Life-Changing Moment

Not long ago, Bruni was living in what she calls "the world of lace."

She spent 10 years as an event planner, putting together multimillion dollar parties for one of the top firms in New Orleans.

But in 2005, Bruni's world changed. "My house was in Katrina," she says.

Not long after the hurricane hit, Bruni went back to her home to assess the damage. She snuck through the barricades before New Orleans officially reopened to the public. She had to park blocks from her home and climb over a twisted mess of giant oak trees that had fallen across the street. Everything was coated with gray mud. Her front door was swollen shut with the moisture.

"There was a smell of death in the air, and a silence that really hung heavily," she says.

Flooded and subsequently laid off, Bruni was offered an event-planning gig in New York—and a chance to leave all the ugliness behind. But she stayed, and in doing so found her future within the devastation.

"I remember just standing on my front porch with no job, flooded property, and I could see all these men," Bruni says. "I didn't know what a 'dually' was, but the sound of an F250 just rocked my world. It was so attractive. I just knew it was the sound of men who were here to help."

It was a life-changing moment. Suddenly, the sound of heavy equipment was mesmerizing to Bruni.

"I was really just moved with jealousy," she says. "It was a jealousy for my community: 'Wait, I want my place in this, too!'"

Bruni started asking questions: What kind of machine is that? Who are those men working for? Where did you get your sand? Who owns that truck? And then her neighbors started asking Bruni questions: Should we tear down our homes?



**Tank Gillard, excavator operator for Demo Diva Demolition, says the power of the EC210C can demolish a house in minutes.**

She realized then that if they were going to demolish their homes, she should be the one doing it. She wrote contracts on the hood of her car and gathered a crew.

### Birth of the Demo Diva

And that's how it started. "I came from a world where I had to decide whether to put organza on a tablecloth. Now it was juxtaposed against machinery," Bruni says. "I wanted to be right alongside the people. Demolition was it."

Bruni decided to target women with her business. Tearing down one's home is an emotional proposition, and it's one where the woman of the household calls the shots, she says. Bruni wore pink shirts. She spent about \$350 on fliers and yard signs, all in pink. And so the Demo Diva was created.

With her hired crew bringing their own equipment, Bruni's company was launched. She started demolishing about two houses a day. That went on for three years.

At that point, Bruni decided she wanted to take her business to the next level.

Scott Equipment's Guggenheim had called on Bruni once, inquiring whether she was interested in looking at a Volvo. She pushed him off then, intimidated by the prospect of buying. But then she did her own research.

She talked to people around town. Her hired crew had shifted to Volvo equipment and swore by their new machines. They said they were fueling up a lot less with Volvo's higher efficiency machines.

"Not being an operator myself, just being the one paying the



**Demo Diva hoses down a jobsite during demolition. The company tore down about two houses a day for its first three years in business.**



**Demo Diva Demolition owner Simone Bruni decided to get into demolition after Hurricane Katrina because she wanted to help her community move past the devastation of the storm.**

bills, that was one of the biggest things to me. That is what stuck out in my head,” she says.

So Bruni went down to visit Guggenheim. “He really held my hand through it,” she says. “My experience with Volvo, I feel like I have been working with a big brother ... The service guys, they are my friends. I really feel that way.”

### Muscle Behind the Operation

Bruni’s first purchase—about a year ago—was an EC210C excavator. She leased another one about two months later. She has an

EC210CLD excavator on order now, with Volvo’s full demolition package.

Guggenheim says it hasn’t been difficult to convince Bruni to stick with Volvo. “It took over a year to sell her her first machine,” he says. “It took me about 20 minutes to sell her the second one.

To fit with her branding, Bruni painted each machine pink. The reaction, she says, has been amazing. It’s not every day you see a pink excavator.

“Just this morning we were tearing down a residential house,” she says. “I had 10 neighbors come out to watch. They were like, ‘You go girl!’ They love it.”

Gillard, Bruni’s chief operator, says his Volvo is the best machine he’s run in his 17 years in the business. It’s quiet, he says, and has the requisite speed to keep up with him as he loads debris onto trucks to be hauled away.

On one recent morning, Gillard was staring at a 1,700-square-foot home, rotted out by termites. It already had been a busy, attention-grabbing morning. Just getting the machine to the site meant passing by a group of gawking school children, curious about the pink excavator. Sitting in front of the house, Gillard was confident.

“Five minutes, it’s done. In five minutes, I’m walking on it,” he says.

That’s because of the power behind the EC210C, Gillard says. It’s equipped with Volvo’s 147-horsepower D6E engine.

During his year sitting in the cab of his Volvo, Gillard has torn down everything from wood-framed houses to concrete-block commercial buildings.

“It’s all muscle,” he says.

### ‘The Power of Pink’

Residential work remains the core of Bruni’s company, but she also has been doing some commercial jobs, too.

Bruni says most of her success can be attributed to having “the power of pink” behind her. And with her new business, new opportunities have come. She has teamed up with Radio Disney and the NFL to form an all-girls flag football team in New Orleans. She’s spoken to the girls about using their ability to break the mold, to take the nontraditional route. Cheerleaders have created cheers in her honor.

Bruni’s Demo Diva brand has taken hold. A few months ago, a couple of girls stopped her on the street and asked if they could dress up as the Demo Diva for Halloween. She told them she would set them up with hard hats and shirts. And so it goes for the one-time party planner.

“I think when you have passion about something, you really come alive,” she says. **SP**

*Chris Moon is a writer in Wichita, Kan., who follows the construction industry.*