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Demo Diva Dazzles at UNO Entrepreneurship Week



Demolition Diva Simone Bruni dazzled marketing students at the University of New Orleans today during a talk she gave for UNO Entrepreneurship Week entitled "Shoe Me Up!"

Demolition Diva Simone Bruni dazzled marketing students at the University of New Orleans today talking about shoes. The woman whose sustainable start-up demolition business has made the pages of *Forbes Magazine* gave a speech entitled "Shoe Me Up!" that was designed to inspire.

"Basically, show me your shoes and I'll show you where you're going," Bruni said during a noontime talk attended by more than 150 students in the College of Business Administration. Bruni, a keynote speaker for UNO Entrepreneurship Week, has tackled personal and professional hardships to gain success and fulfillment through entrepreneurship.

Bruni, who is founder and owner of The Demo Diva Demolition Company, blazed a trail for herself in a male-dominated industry when she founded her demolition company in 2006 to clean up the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She had lost her job, her home and her city when the federal levees failed and spun her experience in the hospitality and tourism industry to found a business that she branded pink.

"It had nothing to do with public relations. It had nothing to do with marketing and it had nothing to do with glamour," Bruni recalled.

She told students her story, beginning her tale on August 25, 2005.

Following her college graduation from Loyola University's School of Communication she said, she had bought herself five pairs of fancy high-heeled shoes that would help her to make her way in the grown-up world. After a stint working in public relations for the Port of New Orleans, she traded in her heels for more comfortable shoes working for a catering business.

There she learned logistics, she said. There she became humble. There, she learned a new kind of servitude.

In August 2005, she was working for a local branding and marketing and company where the owner had admonished the women who worked for her to wear closed-toed slingback shoes – they needed to represent her company with pride and respect, Bruni said of the boss and the job she loved.

On Friday, Aug. 25, she and colleagues walked down Canal Street in their high heels for after-dinner drinks and high-fived each other for a job well done before heading home for the weekend.

"I never realized that I was telling that career good-bye," she said.

Sixty hours later, the levees broke, wiping out her home, her job, and her town. The "apocalyptic, catastrophic event" changed her life, she said.

During the weeks that followed, friends and colleagues from all over the country offered her a ticket out of town. She received an offer from a top company in New York City.

"This is my tragedy and this is my city," she decided, determined to rebuild her life.

In her devastated Lakeview home, she found a moldy old pair of green tennis shoes, she said. She picked them up and cradled them as she cried, on her knees and rocking.

"Lord, I've been taken down," she said. "I don't know which way to go," she said. "I can't anticipate where you'll take me, Lord, but guide my feet, guide these shoes."

And that's how she ended 2005, she said.

She set about fixing up her home and enlisted two contractors from Brazil, her family's homeland. The workers broke through her living room walls and she let out a gasp, crying. The sensation was one of pain, she said.

"It was the sensation of letting out a tourniquet," she said. "I was rocking back and forth, saying Oh my God, oh my God, what am I going to do?"

One of the workers looked at her and said: "Que sa problema?"

And that is when she had an epiphany, she said.

"I had the education. I had the poise. I had the finesse. I had the contacts. But I didn't have the tenacity," she said. "I didn't have the fire in my belly. But I had that moment. I had these green shoes. They were getting me there."

She started her business with \$250 – she spent \$30 for a box of pink business cards and \$50 on a box of car magnets and spent the rest on yard signs, she said. It was 10 months after Hurricane Katrina and contractors could be found all over the city. No doubt, she faced plenty of experienced - and male - competition.

She built her business on confidence and trust, she said. She ran around in flip-flops getting clients and helping contractors clear lots under her name and her liability insurance. Then a voice reminded her that she was not respecting herself or her business. She upgraded to tennis shoes. Shortly later, she purchased her own excavator, a Volvo excavator that she paid \$7,000 to have painted pink.

Volvo's public relations department launched the story internationally and sent Bruni to Amsterdam. She was a new face among women in business – women in the construction business.

"I went into that business saying 'Trust me, trust me,'" she told students. "But I had to change my shoes. I had to wear shoes that showed I was going places."

Going places, she was. Mega-star Brad Pitt and friends hired The Demolition Diva in 2008 to clear lots connected to the Make It Right Foundation's renovation projects in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Not long later, Bruni parked her pink excavator and pink dumpsters on a lot near Xavier University, where another highly visible demolition project could be seen from Interstate-10.

Since then, her dirty heels have taken her nowhere but up, she said.

For her work, Bruni has not only received the thanks and appreciation of thousands of New Orleanians. She has received the following awards: 2008 *Gambit* 40 Under 40, 2008 *CityBusiness* Women of the Year, 2009 – 2010 Busy Working, Working, and Working!, 2011 Louisiana Women Summit Award, 2011 Junior Achievement Rising Star Award, 2012 Louisiana Women in Government Big Dream Award, and 2012 Brees' Dream Foundation Mentor of the Year.

Bruni, operating as The Demolition Diva, owns three businesses these days: A demolition and clearing company, a salvage and debris (dumpster and refuse) company, and -- newflash! - a mill she purchased three days ago. She will now mill reclaimed wood to help install historic pine floors.

And she is alternating between wearing hot pink work boots and pretty pink heels.

"Only you can walk in your shoes," she told students, during a question and answer session. "Only you can bring self-expression to your business."

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[The Demo Diva Demolition Company](#)

[Changing Course But Swimming Back from Katrina, Forbes](#)

[Demolition Diva Proves That the Deconstruction Business Isn't a Man's World](#)

[Scott Equipment helps "Demo Diva" stand out from the pack](#)

[Entrepreneur Spotlight: Simone Bruni, the 'Demo Diva'](#)
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