



Enterprising Woman: Simone Bruni

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Demo Diva: Her Own Force of Nature

THE DAY BEFORE Simone Bruni's cover feature interview, an article about learning to cope with life's unexpected turns found its way to her. Particularly attuned to the importance of timing, she took it as a sign for the theme of the day's discussion. Simone Bruni religiously reflects on how opportunities in the guise of adversity or coincidence have found their way to her and shaped her life, from social service work in early years to creating a local business empire built not on tearing down, but on rebirth.



Resilience is the ability to recover from difficult experiences, to adapt, move forward and grow. One's resilience is said to be a product of personal history, environment and the circumstances of an event. While Hurricane Katrina is the definition of adversity for many New Orleanians including Simone, she demonstrates one of her strongest assets, mindfulness, in wanting to find meaning to see the will of God in seemingly chance occurrences to continually grow in purpose and service.

As for her personal history, she is the older sister of two brothers who grew up in New Orleans East with a Brazilian father and New Orleanian mother, and attended Ursuline Academy. "My father grew up in rural Brazil's farmlands but worked to become a doctor here. His being a minority gave me a different prism through which to see the world. The Ursuline Sisters, with their motto of *Serviam*, helped develop my moral compass and a mission of altruistic concern for others." Of her role as a leader, a doer and an adventurer comfortable with being independent but dedicated to family, she says, "I get my strength from God and my parents, and I'm very grateful for my upbringing. The woman I've become at 48 is a tribute to them."

Famously known for the bright pink dumpsters and heavy equipment used in her demolition business, the savvy marketer didn't set out to ascend in a traditionally male industry, but once there, brilliantly used her unique position as an advantage. "As a child I thought I might become a missionary or a nun. I wasn't a tomboy, I painted my nails," she laughs. And when she told her very role-traditional father her idea for the business after Katrina rendered her hospitality job moot, "He was totally against it. But people were in such desperation, I was compelled to use those skills and experience working at the Port of New Orleans to take on a dirty job and address the overwhelming need – despite happening to be female. I believe God uses our perceived weaknesses to make us strong."

Successful resiliency is also affected by managing one's environment. Answering calls to service while attending Loyola University taught her to adapt to difficult surroundings with the courage and strength a purpose greater than oneself provides. Desire Street Ministries, a faith-based education program, had Simone tutoring Carver High School students in some of the city's most challenging and potentially dangerous urban neighborhoods. Missionary work in a Guatemala orphanage reinforced the lesson of accepting what cannot be changed and focusing on what can be changed. And, 'coincidentally', while there she learned to speak Spanish fluently. "My faith

armed me with zero fear of ministering to people in areas others were afraid to go. And speaking Portuguese and Spanish was instrumental in building my workforce after Katrina. I want to laud the contribution of immigrants, and the troops of Baptist Church volunteers in rebuilding New Orleans. Counter to my childhood ideas of having to travel the world to serve others, I believe my early experiences weren't just coincidences but that God used them to strengthen and prepare me in many ways to be part of the rebuilding and alleviation of suffering right here at home."







If the ability to see opportunity in negative circumstances is an indicator of resiliency, Simone has certainly earned her title of Diva. But rather than only taking advantage of the post-Katrina situation, she remains for the long haul, once again interweaving lifelong passions—architecture and trees—into the task at hand of fostering renewal.

First fascinated as a schoolchild by the magnificent, storied buildings of Ursuline, some of the oldest in the city where the sisters have consistently ministered during the hardest of times, she was inspired to diversify into a salvage business. Reclaimed Diva Millwork takes heart pine floor joists from old houses and transforms them into tongue and groove flooring and beams. Of her growing enterprise Simone says, “Whether it’s a pandemic, personal issues or business, we have to learn to pivot in order to succeed. There’s always something to salvage. To repurpose this antique wood, hundreds of years old, rather than discard it—this material that we can’t grow again in our lifetimes—was the right move for the company. It promotes sustainability, and it’s a beautiful metaphor about resiliency.”

Simone quotes Psalm 1:3 regarding her kindred spirit with trees and her journey to resiliently live by their example—with grounding roots allowing her limbs to reach out, providing support, sustenance and relief for others. “She is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.”