

## SMALL BUSINESS

# Disasters' Silver Lining: Green

*Business Booms for Some Companies That Provide Assistance in Catastrophes*

BY SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN

When a large number of people die, such as after a massive fire, shooting or natural disaster, Michael Richardson's 15-person business provides a way to keep the bodies cool while local authorities search for enough refrigerated facilities to house them.

"We benefit from other people's miseries more or less," says Mr. Richardson, president of **Mortuary Response Solutions**, a Belton, S.C., manufacturer of cadaver storage and transport equipment used when fatalities exceed the number of available units in an area. "It sounds kind of morbid or arrogant, but someone's got to do it."

In recent years, many small companies have begun offering services and products for dealing with disasters. They say more businesses, government agencies and individuals are looking to safeguard themselves from potential catastrophes in light of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina and more recently, the oil spill along the Gulf coast.

**DKI Services Corp.**, a national franchise system that specializes in cleaning up homes and businesses that have been inflicted by major trauma, hosts an annual trade show for the disaster-relief industry and has seen attendance increase in recent years. In January, the convention welcomed 500 participants, up from 430 in 2009.

Dale Sailer, president of the Woodale, Ill.-based franchise, estimates that the number of disaster-preparedness and recovery businesses has increased by 20% to 30% over the past five years, adding that most are small.

Last month, two disaster-relief companies were honored by the Small Business Administration. **Engineering & Computer Simulations Inc.**, based in Orlando, Fla., was named National Small Business of the Year, while **J.C. Restoration Inc.**, in Rolling Meadows, Ill., was second runner-up.

Engineering & Computer Simulations provides customized software programs aimed at helping emergency-response



(Top to bottom) Associated Press; Jay Dunn

professionals design and practice strategies for reacting to various disaster scenarios. Its customers include the federal government, local police and fire departments and hospitals.

The 55-employee company has seen its revenue grow by more than six times over the past five years, largely due to military spending, and last year earned \$11.5 million, says owner Waymon Armstrong.

J.C. Restoration provides 24-hour emergency services to homes and business throughout the U.S. that have been damaged by natural and other disasters. "When bad weather's coming, I got a smile on my face," says

owner Warner Cruz.

Mr. Cruz took over the business in 2002 from his father. He added marketing staff to promote it, and says sales have increased about 38% each year ever since. The company is on track to post about \$16 million in revenue this year, according to Mr. Cruz. "Mother Nature has been active," he says.

J.C. Restoration did see sales decline among one demographic last year—homeowners. Mr. Cruz says this group, which represents about 45% of his business's customers, in many cases may not have used money gained from insurance claims on damages to their homes for re-

DKI helped clean up a flooded parking lot in Nashville, Tenn. in May. Left: J.C. Restoration's Warner Cruz (center) seen with his father and a technician.

pairs, most likely due to the recession's impact on their finances.

Demand for disaster-relief services and products does tend to waver. So far this year, there have been 47 disasters declared in the U.S., 59 for all of last year, and 75 in 2008, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "There's always going to be disasters," says Mr. Cruz.

With hurricane season afoot, **Agility Recovery Solutions Inc.** has been fielding more inquiries than usual, according to Bob Boyd, president of the Charlotte, N.C., provider of emergency-response services such as back-up computer support and mobile offices.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts this year will exceed the average of 11 named storms, six hurricanes and two major hurricanes along the Atlantic. "Anytime there's a big disaster, we have more customers calling us, and when we call prospects, they're more receptive to hearing about potential solutions," says Mr. Boyd.