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The Rembrandt of Refuse

New Orleans's Sidney Torres IV is an artist when it comes to making garbage disappear. By Nicole Alper

BUZZING AROUND the French Quarter in his tricked-out Polaris Ranger, Sidney Torres IV — his film-star good looks as notable as his familial Roman numeral — is chasing garbage trucks. “There it is!” he shouts, throwing pedal to the metal. “That’s one of ours!”

As we approach the back of the vehicle, its chrome wheels catch the sunlight and its pristine black exterior gleams like a freshly polished grand piano. The signature bull logo (Torres’s ancestors, he tells me, were bullfighters) along with the initials SDT, for Sidney Donecio Torres, can be spied from several key angles. It’s unlike any garbage truck I’ve ever seen. Then again, Torres is no ordinary waste-management CEO.

Just back from vacation in the Bahamas (something he rarely takes), his skin glowing behind black Armani sunglasses, Torres is doing for garbage what CNBC’s “Money Honey,” Maria Bartiromo,

did for Wall Street: making humdrum work — and in Torres’s case, downright dirty work — sexy.

When I cease being distracted by this improbable scenario, I begin to notice what Torres has brought me out here, at six a.m., to see: absolutely nothing. Not a cup. Not a piece of paper. No indication that we are in the heart of the postweekend French Quarter in a city that still suffers in reputation — often unfairly — for being filthy and unsafe.

Torres’s metamorphosis into Mr. Clean emerged out of equal parts necessity and entrepreneurial spirit. A real estate hotshot and the owner of three hotels when Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005, Torres was facing a growing mountain of garbage in the aftermath of the disaster. When he researched much-needed waste pickup for his hotels in the absence of government service, he found “the prices

were insane," he says. So, he bought his own truck. Upon discovering that people were desperate for efficient, affordable garbage collection, he soon purchased another truck. Then he submitted the winning bid to collect garbage in New Orleans's neighboring St. Bernard Parish. Before he knew it, his SDT Waste and Debris Services had secured an annual \$9 million, 10-year city contract

for the French Quarter and beyond.

Torres's unabashed enthusiasm surely plays a role in his success. "I love the garbage business," he blurts out merrily. "We're adding class to trash!" Torres's newfound passion is even more incongruous given his youth (32) and his résumé: In his late teens, he led a rock-and-roll lifestyle as personal assistant to music legend Lenny Kravitz.

"For Kravitz it was a business," explains Torres, "but for me it was a nonstop party. I hit rock bottom and knew I had to stop." So Torres went straight, turning his attention away from drugs and toward mentoring at-risk youth and purchasing real estate.

I FIRST MET TORRES in 2000, when he was just opening a second boutique hotel, Hotel Royal, an 1827 Creole town house in the French Quarter. I was staying at his other property, Melrose Mansion, an impeccably restored Victorian manor where a six-foot-tall, tuxedo-and-ball-gown-wearing papier-mâché couple greet you at the entrance and a life-size wooden farmer lurks in the hallway. I was immediately struck by Torres's style — elegant with unexpected flashes of whimsy. Torres was one of several young businesspeople accenting a city reputed for its traditional jazz roots and old-world charm with a more youthful, hip vibe.

Post-Katrina, Torres is among a group of young residents committed to a new vision for their city — only today the challenge is to reinvent New Orleans's image rather than bolster it. Nicolas Perkins, a 36-year-old Tulane University graduate and serial entrepreneur who brokered a deal selling his last employer to Microsoft for somewhere in the hundreds of millions, chose to base his revolutionary new online trading company, the Receivables Exchange, in New Orleans. And real estate mogul and hotelier Sean Cummings (owner of the International House and Loft 523) is overseeing a massive new waterfront project aimed at reconnecting the iconic Mississippi River to New Orleans and its residents.

Linked by a dedicated vision, these businessmen are also perfectionists. Torres runs his company with the precision of a German-Swiss watch and virtual omniscience, thanks to a \$500,000 custom surveillance system that lets him track just about every discarded to-go cup and beaded necklace in the Quarter. "At first my staff was wary of the system," admits Torres, "like they were being watched. But I explained that it wasn't about spying on them — it was about doing the best job possible."

Maintaining a crew of supervisors to oversee the street sweepers, garbage collectors, pressure washers, and hand crew, Torres likens his methods to doing battle. "If you listen to the radio, everybody is in com-

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munication. The supervisors are constantly talking and know where everyone is. It's like fighting a war — positions are known at all times." So much so that SDT's new corporate headquarters in St. Bernard Parish houses a war room armed with 20 flat-screen monitors displaying everything from the GPS surveillance system to weather and traffic channels. The command center is

even capped off with a rooftop helipad. "It looks like you can launch a space shuttle from there," laughs Torres.

A decidedly atypical garbage kingpin, Torres is also far from the typical boss. Listening to him do shout-outs to his workers, who don stylish uniforms — black pants, SDT-logo tops, and an SDT hat (Torres insists that his garbage staff display the same

polished look as his hotel staff) — he seems more like a musician connecting with his band members (okay, maybe sound crew) than like a garbage boss surveying his staff. Torres emanates — on the surface, at least — a "we're all in this together" vibe, insisting he will never ask a staff member to perform a task he himself is not willing to do.

"You just don't expect to see a guy who looks like that and is worth all that money being out there on the garbage trucks," says George Segers, co-owner of Tommy's Flowers. "But he is, and he's doing a fantastic job. The French Quarter has never been cleaner — and that includes pre-Katrina!" It's a sentiment shared by most French Quarter residents and shop owners, as well as by the city itself, which made Torres grand marshal of a Mardi Gras parade honoring SDT and others for their behind-the-scenes work for the city.

Though he collects the kudos, Torres knows good people are essential to his success. Every month, he runs an ad in the local paper to highlight the employee of the month — an honor that comes with a \$500 bonus. His staff earn more than they would at any other waste-management company in the state. And virtually every employee is local. "They approach their jobs," says Torres, "as an investment in the city's rebirth." To that end, Torres is now recycling at his transfer station and is in the process of testing a biodiesel truck. If it's a success, the entire fleet will go green.

Another key to Torres's success is that he exceeds expectations. "The industry standard is to do the bare minimum," he says. "If a company empties a trash can and drops a bottle in the process, odds are they'll leave it behind. With us, we go the extra mile. In some areas we even power-wash the trash cans and spray them with a fragrant disinfectant. It's not in the contract, but it makes a difference and people appreciate it. Do something because it's the right thing to do, and it will come back to you tenfold."

Torres's mantra appears to be working. He's expanding his company within Louisiana and plans to go national in five years. When he's asked how he could ensure the same meticulousness if he were to expand the company to that extent, he simply says, "That's why they invented helicopters." ■

NICOLE ALPER is a freelancer based in Philadelphia and has written for *Gourmet*, *Real Simple*, and *BestLife*.



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