



Reopening quickly after Katrina, Metairie, Louisiana-based One Cleaners experienced a deluge of work. The plant's skeleton crew got by— with a little help from their friends.

By Steve Boorstein

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and the surrounding towns, thousands of businesses and homes were damaged and destroyed, including dry cleaners. Just outside New Orleans, One Cleaners in Metairie, LA, was just one of the cleaners hit—and also a close friend of mine.

Operator Claude Foreman, his wife, Jean, daughter, Sydney Anderson, and his grandson, fled Metairie like so many others, leaving behind a thriving dry cleaning business with its inventory and machinery still inside. They found refuge in Destin, Florida, thinking they'd be back in a couple of days.

Foreman and his wife returned twice in the first two weeks of the storm's aftermath to clean up. The building's exterior suffered minor physical damage and they were able to open for business three weeks after the storm. "It was very hard, emotionally, to deal with what had happened to the city," he says.

They had downed signage, flooded floors, rusted machinery, waterlogged computers, and water-damaged clothing. And to top it off, only 13% of the plant's workforce could be located – including himself, his wife, two drivers and a presser. Anderson couldn't return to the plant until the following week because her son was in school – just one of the four he has attended this school year.

Together, they set the plant in motion, but were overwhelmed by all of the work coming in – a great thing, to be sure – and the raw emotion they faced at the counter every time a customer came in.

Over the next two months, clothing and household items came in fast and furious, much of it water-damaged. Most customers didn't want their clothing back anytime soon, since they had no place to put it while they got their homes back in order.

Some customers' homes could not be restored. It seemed like every customer had a heartbreaking story to share, and many spent 20 minutes recounting it—a catharsis that needed to unfold.

"Keeping a positive, upbeat attitude was extremely hard," Foreman says. "We had solid goals prior to Katrina—Leading Cleaners Internationale (LCI) certification; positioning [our plant] as New Orleans' No. 1 cleaner; possible succession issues. Now, it's difficult to think of long-term goals after dealing with day-to-day crises."

One Cleaners had no emergency plan in place, and no one within 100 miles who could help with the work. But friends started arriving to offer whatever help they could.

"Friends and associates through Methods for Management (MFM) and LCI came to the rescue—thank goodness," Foreman says. "The help and concern we've received during this disaster has meant so much to our family, we often can't find the words to express the level of our appreciation."

"Mark Porter, of Porter's Fine Cleaning in Shreveport, was the first to assist, and his help was *huge*," Anderson says. "We drove six hours to deliver a tractor-trailer full of moldy clothes for Mark to process. A week later, we went back to pick it all up.



Above, top to bottom: Margaret's Chuck Horst flew in from San Diego to work the presses; wife Robin pitches in with alterations; One Cleaner' Claude Foreman shows off a water-damaged gown typical of the orders coming in after the flood.

"Friends Indeed" (continued)

"Then, Eddie Mannis at Prestige in Knoxville had his own man drive 15 hours to pick up a truckful of molded clothes. They wrote them up, processed them and drove them back! At this time, were still [at] a month turnaround."

Then, Anne Schedler, a former manager; her husband, Steve; and Bryan Nunnely, the operator for whom she had recently worked, came down for a week. "The work they did saved our lives," Anderson says. "Steve even built a mezzanine for us to store clothes until we could get them written up."

Even with help from Porter's and Prestige, One was still two to three weeks behind on mark-in. Fellow LCI members Chuck and Robin Horst, of Margaret's Cleaners in San Diego, soon arrived with plenty of energy, empathy and skills. "If you're going to One Cleaners, then I'm going to, too," Robin told Chuck before he took off on the 2,000-mile journey. "I want to help."

The Horsts spent seven days and endless hours at the plant, sneaking in some time to witness what had happened to the Crescent City. "The airport was empty when we arrived," Robin Horst says. "We expected to go straight to One, but instead went to Claude's home. We toured the parishes and the devastation, and even went to Claude's grandson's football game."

Chuck Horst was ready to mark-in, tag, assemble and work on clothing; Robin wasn't sure what she should do to help at first. But she soon pitched in, performing minor repairs, sewing buttons, ironing shirts and talking to customers at the counter.

"There were so many sad stories, and it was very hard to listen, but almost every customer had one," Foreman says. "One man only had one pair of slacks that he could find and salvage, which didn't fit! Robin altered them."

"They had been open for about three weeks at this point, and everything was completely disorganized and in shambles, with clothing stacked everywhere, racks broken," Chuck Horst says. "The work came in so fast that the marking was way behind, and bags were everywhere. I just wanted to take everything to the parking lot to sort and start over."

Drivers were pressing; people were in jobs they've never done."

Proving the value of cross-training, One was barely surviving with one experienced presser. The shirt machine was breaking buttons on every shirt, keeping Robin busy, and the computer server was flooded. Fortunately, the team was able to save the hard drive and rebuild the network after it had stewed for weeks in three inches of water.

With the huge amounts of clothing people were bringing in, Foreman realized that storage would quickly become a problem. The team spent half a week writing a program to precharge orders and sort out house accounts and cash-on-delivery. And storage times could be long, because many customers no longer lived in New Orleans.

Horst helped assess the damage for customers, deciding what could and couldn't be salvaged. A newsletter he had written on mold proved to be most helpful; he made copies and handed them out.

They received many French linens and leathers—including some from actor and New Orleans resident Nicolas Cage—which were sent to the Margaret's plant for processing. Horst trained the staff in processing them, too, so that the next order could be done in-house. At this point, One had 12 of its 35 former employees back at work.

The store itself smelled of mildew, so Foreman decided not to accept wet clothing. Horst did an in-store presentation on soaking St. John's knits. He also got the ball rolling to order a carpet-extracting machine for wet stuffed animals, luggage and other items that couldn't be dry cleaned.

LCI member Joe Hallak, of Hallak Cleaners in New York, was the next friend to arrive, with his head finisher in tow. A great technician, his help was invaluable.

"Sometimes we forget how lucky we are," Hallak says, recalling his arrival in New Orleans. "We sit at home and watch on TV as they show pictures of disasters such as tsunamis and hurricanes. When 9/11 hit us here in New York, I was amazed at the outpouring of support that came in from around the country, but people still could not conceive of what had happened."

"When my friends from One Cleaners needed some help to get on their feet, I didn't expect to see the devastation I did," he adds. "I watched TV and saw all the video clips, but being there was different. Just coming in for a landing and seeing the sea of blue tarps covering the roofs of homes and businesses was a sight."

"You could drive miles and miles with no sign of life—it looked as if a nuclear bomb was dropped. Thousands of cars were abandoned all over the city as if they were Matchbox cars, covered with mud and dust. FEMA trailer homes were parked in front of home after home, as people who didn't leave tried to restore their homes while living in a trailer in their front yard."

"Although One Cleaners had some water damage, they were still luckier than many of their neighbors," Hallak says. "The building next door had [its] roof ripped off and water damage throughout the building."

Hallak stayed for a week and taught the staff on how to use On-Site's machine for restorations. "We seemed to be a help," he says. "So much so, that they asked if [Hallak finisher] Roberto could stay for another week. He stayed until Thursday, so he could be back for our Christmas party on Friday."

"I know that were just a little piece of the rescue puzzle, but it was nice to know that in their time of need, we were able to step up and contribute."

By mid-January, One Cleaners was at almost two-thirds of its pre-Katrina staff, including many new employees. And by mid-March—six months after the storm—the operation was up to 25 staffers and doing about 85% of the previous year's sales.

It was friends that made the difference. Foreman's family business survived—even thrived—in the face of the worst natural disaster to hit the U.S. in a century.

"When you have owners leaving their own businesses [and] their families, flying down, and pressing 14 to 15 hours a days for you in New Orleans in September, it's all about friendship and good people," Anderson says. "We will never forget our friends in the industry."