

A clean sweep

The principals of Environmental Consulting Services started off with macaroni dinners at the dining room table, now it's about hot dogs and high-rises.

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Lina Jazi and Sam Barbar are planning a luxurious dinner to mark their 10th year as business partners. They intend to splurge on hot dogs.

While that menu choice may not be extravagant, it's a gastronomically significant reminder of the pair's struggles in getting their now-thriving small business, Environmental Consulting Services Inc., off the ground.

Jazi, an environmental scientist, and Barbar, an environmental engineer, were both out of a job in late 1994 when Houston environmental consulting firm McBon Environmental went under. It was Jazi's first job after graduating from college that spring, while Barbar had joined the firm only weeks before its closure.

After recovering from the shock, the Lebanese immigrants, who met at McBon, kept revisiting the notion of pooling their talents.

"We started talking about it and we knew we both had this entrepreneurial spirit," says Jazi, who now serves as ECS's president. "Each one of us brings something in terms of the business."

For Jazi, that "something" is environmental, soil, groundwater and air consulting. For Barbar, it's industrial hygiene and asbestos work.

Jazi and Barbar pooled \$1,500 to get started in mid-1995, purchasing a business phone line and setting up shop on the dining room table in Barbar's apartment with phone books and newspaper lists as reference guides.

"We looked in the Yellow Pages and figured our clients would be Realtors, engineering companies, banks and developers," recalls Barbar, who is a company principal. "We split the calls in half, making about 250 calls a day, and agreed that we had to actually talk to the person we wanted to reach or try to meet with them. Getting a 'no' wasn't good enough."

Every morning, Jazi would join Barbar at the dining-room table, and the partners would make sales calls until 5 p.m. Then Jazi would cook macaroni, alternating between tomato or alfredo sauce, and dinner was served on top of the pile of papers.

After landing their first asbestos abatement job with Texas Environmental Controls, Jazi and Barbar kept the \$182 check on display for several months as inspiration. When the money arrived in the mail, Barbar suggested they celebrate and skip the macaroni meal that night. Instead, they went down the street to James Coney Island for hot dogs.

So when the ECS owners visit James Coney Island this year for their anniversary dinner, the meal will be symbolic, and satisfying. After generating \$11,000 in revenue in the first six months, Jazi and Barbar have turned their \$1,500 investment into a still-growing business with 14 employees and \$2.6 million revenue in 2004. ECS is on track to exceed \$3 million this year.

Moving up and out

In 1997, ECS moved away from the dining room table and into a tiny, three-room office in a bank building west of the Galleria. The partners struck a deal for the space after conducting asbestos removal on the property.

In the lobby, Jazi picked up a Greensheet flyer, and the pair capitalized on yet another opportunity by driving across town to pick up three desks and office chairs plus eight other small chairs for less than \$200.

That original 450-square-foot space was expanded twice and has given way to ECS' new digs. In January 2005, the firm moved into a 3,000-square-foot high-rise corner space a few blocks down the street.

ECS also has two small sales/consulting offices: the Dallas office opened in 1998, and the San Antonio operation opened in 2002. With environmental consulting being such a low-margin business, ECS is taking a long-term view of expansion into other cities.

Like many small business owners, it's hard for Jazi and Barbar to leave work at the office. Instead, they find themselves on call at all times.

"From the beginning, we told clients we were available to help them 24/7, even Christmas Eve," says Barbar. "If a client needs to change the format of a report, we do it right away and don't have to go up the chain of command to approve it. And if a client calls me up and says 'I think we said it was \$30 an hour instead of \$35,' we don't discuss it. I tell them to change the order and fax it back."



Craig Hartley/HBJ

Lina Jazi, left, and Sam Barbar of Environmental Consulting Services: From a corner table to the corner office.

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Environmental consulting contracts typically go to the low bidder, so ECS was determined to provide high-end service for a rock-bottom price.

"In consulting, you're not providing a product, you provide a service," says Barbar. "The biggest asset you have in this kind of business is your reputation, so if you lose it you can never get it back. Over 10 years, we've been able to keep some of the same commercial clients who don't even shop around. They come back to us."

The partners also realized in 1998 that with Jazi owning the majority share of the company, ECS could apply for several minority business certifications, such as state Historically Underutilized Business status. That opened up bidding opportunities on public sector jobs, leading to high-profile work with the City of Houston and a five-year storm-water runoff assessment contract with the Texas Department of Transportation and Harris County Flood Control along the Interstate 10 freeway right-of-way.

ECS's large commercial clients include Zale Corp. and Trammell Crow Co. The company also has taken on asbestos management or environmental assessment projects for Bayou Place, the City of Houston and the downtown fire station that was purchased by Landry's Seafood Restaurants Inc. and subsequently transformed into the Aquarium entertainment complex.

Although Barbar says he and Jazi still put in 40 hours of work by Wednesday each week, they have added management strength to allow them to focus on other areas.

Jennifer Boone, also an environmental consultant, was hired as operations manager in March to oversee on-site projects, and office manager Shari Baklik was added to the payroll in July 2004.

To take the company to the next level -- contracts with national clients are starting to trickle in -- Barbar and Jazi know they will have to take a big leap of faith and hire another senior manager.

"You have to actually duplicate yourself and find someone you can trust so you can move up and let them replace you," says Barbar.

Until then, they will continue to follow the same slow and steady growth philosophy.

"Even now, after 10 years, we still take jobs for \$200, because at some point they may become a million-dollar client, or maybe know somebody who is," says Barbar. "We would never say something is not worth our time."

Scott Leafe, principal owner of SKA Consulting LP, an ECS competitor in the environmental consulting arena, has known Jazi and Barbar since they went into business, and says he admires their tenacity.

"They are very aggressive and keep their business focused within their line of expertise," says Leafe, who has joined forces with ECS to bid on some projects. "Their focus is on the client's objective, not that they are only selling a particular commodity like an environmental consulting contract to a customer. They go outside the proposed boundaries of the job to get it done."

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