

## Restoring the faith

When disaster strikes, Enviro-Care is there.

Growing up as the son of a funeral director teaches you a few handy lessons.

Just ask Chuck Mertz. As the top man at Enviro-Care, Inc., he runs a company that helps people and businesses after disaster strikes. Whether the damage comes from fire, water or wind, Enviro-Care has the tools and technology to restore and rebuild.

That's what the company is paid to do, but it's only part of what the company actually does.

"A good part of what we do," Mertz says, "is dealing with the emotions of the homeowner."

After a fire, he says, successful professionals - people who always have the words to describe their feelings and a plan for tackling any challenge - are almost always at a loss. From dealing with insurance companies to hiring a restoration firm, tasks that might be routine become muddled.

"They don't know what to do," he says. "That's where we thrive. We walk them through the process."

That's where the sensitivity he learned as a kid helps out. For 61-year-old Mertz, whose father and brothers operate Carl Mertz & Sons plus two other funeral homes, it's second nature to offer someone in distress as much comfort as he does business advice.

"One of the most damaging things you can say when you walk into a house is, 'What a mess this is!'" he says. "No matter what condition the house was in before the fire, that's their castle."

What's going on: Located inside a 24,000-square-foot facility in a Buffalo industrial park, Enviro-Care does work both on and off site. When a home or business is burned or flooded, an Enviro-Care estimator sizes up the damage, telling the customer what can be saved and how long the restoration will take. (While Enviro-Care works for the customer who experienced damage, the firm is paid through the customer's insurance company.)

Large storage rooms inside the Enviro-Care facility are packed with heavy-duty equipment that can be transported to a job site and used to dry out walls, drive out lingering smoke particles, and cleanse stationary equipment such as a mainframe computer.

Smaller possessions are transported to Enviro-Care's warehouse, where they are catalogued, cleaned and stored until the home is ready to be inhabited or the business is about to re-open. Enviro-Care has 100 personal storage crates for that purpose.

High-tech stuff: While Enviro-Care's work is highly specialized, not a lot of it is high tech. Wood products, for instance, are restored by applying a tan-colored cream that is aptly nicknamed "peanut butter." There are exceptions, however: An "ozone room" to neutralize lingering smoke particles on possessions, and a machine that squirts de-ionized water can thoroughly clean delicate electronic equipment.

"It's not a real high-tech field," Mertz says. "A lot of these are just processes that have been refined over the years."

One example of improvement: Sometimes Enviro-Care is called to do an immediate clean up at a site such as a school. After spending too much time scraping together all the necessary equipment, the Enviro-Care staff decided to have it ready ahead of time. Thus,

they put together "crash carts" - shrink-wrapped wooden carts that can be rolled onto a truck, brought to the site, and contain all the necessary materials to put 30 people immediately to work.

Who's who: Mertz, who founded Enviro-Care in 1984, is president and CEO. Day-to-day operations are handled by general manager Ralph Gattozzi.

Employees: 30

Revenues: \$3 to \$4 million annually

Business clients: Erie Community College, International Institute of Buffalo, Salvatore's Italian Gardens.

Approaching the customer: When a business or household has a fire, Enviro-Care will call.

"We do call on people who have had fires," Mertz says, "but we do it in a legal, professional and moral way. When we knock on the door, we say, 'We're here to see if we can help you.'"

Along with a brochure that details its services, Enviro-Care has produces and donates to fire departments a flip-card document titled "After the Fire is Out." The eight-section brochure includes information on property protection, cleaning tips, hazardous materials and a reference directory.

It's both a public service and a way to let anyone affected by disaster know that help is available.

"A lot of people don't know a company like ours is out there," says Susan Searcy, marketing director.

Standardized service: Enviro-Care also has an employee handbook, "Moments of Truth," which includes scripts for handling every imaginable situation, from recording a voicemail greeting to handling customer complaints. All employees are required to answer their phones and record their greetings in the same way - and Mertz does occasionally check up on them. (He calls it the "voicemail police.")

Community service: Enviro-Care maintains bank accounts that arson investigators from Buffalo and Erie County can use to pay out reward for tipsters. The program began four years ago when Mertz learned that the investigators didn't have a source of funds to offer tips.

"In the third month," Mertz recalls, "they were able to pay a kid a \$100 reward and learn who started a fire."

Proud moment: Among a handful of distinctions, Enviro-Care has twice in the last three years won the Torch Award from the Better Business Bureau for marketplace ethics.

"That was really important to me as the owner," Mertz says. "We're in a business that can go sideways ethically. You're dealing with other people's money, and there are an awful lot of opportunities to do things in this business that aren't legal or ethical. Because of that, we're sensitive to it, and we're proud to be recognized for our ethics."

On the California wild fires: Mertz recently got a call from a restoration colleague in Riverside, Calif., asking if he could spare some staff to help deal with the aftermath of wild fires.

To his disappointment, Mertz says, he can't do it: Enviro-Care's warehouse is already crammed with work. But he wishes he could.

"Not only to help those people," he says, "but also to gain the experience. My staff was ready to go."

