

The Cleaning Bee Three



“If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.”
-Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young

You are young, educated, experienced, and broke in Oshkosh. You apply for every job in your field and rarely get an interview. Advanced degrees, years of training, shiny recommendations, and that big city internship are regarded with suspicion when you show up in your snappy suit for a \$25,000 a year entry level position.

When you are perfectly matched for a dream job, you discover the posting was perfunctory and, surprise, their ideal candidate already works in the office. Sure Larry’s resume was written in crayon on the back of a Pizza Hut menu, but he’s not all pretentious with his fancy-pants marbled stationary and highfalutin’ book-learnin.’ He’s what they call in the parlance of cronyism “a good fit.”

Saddle up next to a PhD at Peabody’s and share a pitcher. Wonder why your college town doesn’t have a thriving used book store or independent cinema. Ponder the reasons potential business isn’t lured into ghost-town waterfront property. Bemoan the fact that you are in the prime of your youth, brimming with great ideas, wildly capable, and thoroughly unemployable in Oshkosh. Are you drunk yet? Cry in your beer.

Now wake up and get over yourself. Post-grad disillusionment is common in a small town with limited resources. Your city planners and business owners could care less about your precious brilliance. They have a budget, the budget is small, and a cheap mediocre job by the devil they know is more comforting than the expensive eloquence of the devil they don’t.

The smart set is giving up on the system. While they may not be able to crumble the wall against progress that surrounds the city, they are spray-painting their initials on it and starting their own businesses.

This month's featured enterprise shows two sisters who tossed out their impressive credentials and started a recession-proof company. Rather than yearning for the jobs they wanted in school, they are loving the one they're with. Hire the Cleaning Bee Three and you have a geographer mapping out the vacuuming coordinates of your house and a trained wood technician dusting your oak end tables. Rebecca Rogers and Kathleen Berens are adorned in antique aprons and brandish feather-dusters. These may be the smartest maids you've ever met.

Scene speaks with cartographer turned cleaner Rebecca Rogers.

SCENE: What was your original course of study in college?

Rebecca Rogers: Geography. My undergraduate background had an emphasis in cartography (mapmaking) and soils. My graduate studies were focused on hydrology, wetlands, renewable energy and GIS. I was the first person to go through the Master's program in Geographical Information Systems at the University of Denver. GIS enables you to envision the geographic aspects of a body of data. It has many uses in the fields of epidemiology, demography, real estate, business, planning and environmental studies. It has improved the ability of individuals to complete and alter spatial analysis studies and cartographic displays in a fraction of the time of older, less efficient methods.

SCENE: What types of jobs have you held over the years?

RR: Pre-graduate school I had a myriad cleaning jobs for hotels, offices and individuals. There was also the summer I was the ice cream truck driver in Oshkosh. My job as a barista when The Blue Moon first opened was fun too.

After graduate school I moved into the analyst phase of my career. I was a GIS Planning Analyst, a Geographic Quality Control Analyst, and a Spatial Analyst. I gained experience hoping to be able to eventually find a GIS job in the Oshkosh area.

SCENE: Have you felt any frustration with the recession-era Oshkosh employment market?

RR: For the first time in my life my education, experience, awards and accomplishments are working to my detriment. Several times a job's requirements and my experience were a perfect match. I thought I was a shoo-in for the position. Instead, I wasn't even contacted for an interview.

It is classic, when you are younger you are always underqualified. Then you spend the time and money to be more employable just to push yourself into being overqualified for

most jobs. Career counselors should really steer individuals towards the happy middle ground.

SCENE: Did you apply for a lot of local positions before deciding to become an entrepreneur?

RR: Oh yes. My family is one of the pioneer families who first settled in Oshkosh. I own a home in Oshkosh. I grew up here and moved back about six years ago after receiving an education and establishing experience in my field. I want to be near my friends and family, but would like a job that pays the bills. The past ten months have really made me question if moving back was a good step. I have friends from around the country sending me GIS job openings in their areas. I am having a difficult time finding any job that will even grant me an interview in the Fox Valley. It is unfortunate, unexpected and disappointing.

SCENE: Launching a cleaning company seems a little off your beaten path. What gave you the idea?

RR: There is a need. I live with an individual who has allergies and asthma. My sister has chemical sensitivities. There are ways to clean that can help these two and countless others live more comfortably and improve our environment.

Why is “soap scum remover” listed as an ingredient? Surprisingly, cleaning products do not have to disclose their ingredients or give away their “trade secrets.” This bothers me and it should bother you too. We have no idea what we are spraying around our families, our pets, our homes and our working environments.

The fact is there are 80,000 chemicals out there and according to the Breast Cancer Fund only 7% of these chemicals have had a complete toxicological screening. More than 90% have never been tested for their effects on human health. In 1901, 1 in 8000 people would develop cancer in their lifetime, now that rate is 1 in 3, some suggest 1 in 2.

Why not check what is in your cleaning products at www.householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov? It is not perfect, but it gives more information than the product’s container and sometimes includes the Safety Material Data Sheets.

I recently received a call from an old friend in San Francisco. I was telling him about the path my sister and I are taking. We discussed our old friend Cash from Madison. His father, a janitor, was burned on the job by chemicals he was using. Cash’s dad started his own green cleaning company over 20 years ago. The company was never promoted as eco-friendly. Cash’s dad just wanted to make sure people were using good products and his employees were safe. It’s funny because back then a number of my friends worked for Cash’s dad. We all knew vinegar was one of the greatest cleaners out there, but no one assumed what Cash’s dad was doing was revolutionary at the time. Using basic cleaning agents and disinfectants that people were using 100 years ago was thinking outside the box.

SCENE: These are all noble reasons, but what gave *you* the cleaning bug?

RR: I completed high school in Madison at Malcolm Shabazz City High. I remember one of my teachers, Steve Stuckert, asking me what kind of job I thought I would want in the future. I said, “One where I don’t have to dress up, don’t have to work nine to five and don’t have to be stuck in an office all day.” The Cleaning Bee 3 will fit the bill.

When I think of past jobs that I loved I often remember being a housekeeper at the Multicultural Education Center on the UW-Oshkosh campus for a number of years or being a maid at the Holiday Inn Express in Bellingham, Washington (which won national awards for excellence while Kathy and I were employed). I even worked construction clean up and had a job as a housekeeper for the Royal Mile Residence in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The reason I loved these jobs was because I could make my own schedule and take pride in my work. Also, I can clean and complete the job. It is rewarding to realize someone comes home or returns to their office and a weight has been lifted off of them because of my services. I love GIS, but when you are working with 168,000 parcels in a dynamic world you will never be done.

The other side of my personality is excited about the Green Irene Home and Office Makeovers. It is great for me because I am environmentally conscious and frugal. Information is powerful. Helping people become more aware of indoor air quality and the toxins they are unconsciously bringing into their homes rewards everyone. Showing people how to save money by going green is my cup of tea.

SCENE: How did your education and professional skills prepare you for starting your own business?

RR: While taking a full time load in graduate school, I worked as the Campus Mapping Research Assistant for the Facilities Management Department of the University of Denver 20 hours a week and worked as a GIS/Planning Intern for Arapahoe County, Colorado, for 20 hours a week. These experiences taught me a lot about organization and time management. Without these skills I might never have made it.

Starting a business requires planning and determination. It also helps when you believe in what you are doing. I did then, and I do now. When I moved back to Oshkosh I helped my brother buy Rogers Pump Company. It was important for us to keep the company family owned and operated as it had been since 1886. I am lucky that I can absorb information quickly. I went to the library and checked out business, accounting, marketing and legal books. I ran Rogers Pump with my brother for about four years. I left to pursue other goals but the experience offered a thorough background in water quality issues in our region and gave me a solid sense of running a small business.

SCENE: So tell me about The Cleaning Bee 3. Where did the name come from?

RR: It is all about the different aspects of “bee.” The bee itself represents hard-work and integrity. We work hard. We work fast. We like to make sure people feel they have gotten their money’s worth and that we are making quality products. There is also the fact that we are working together to clean as folks did years ago with quilting bees and corn husking bees.

Our family used to have bees to help people build homes, garages, and sheds. I have a cookie bee every December for my female relatives and friends where we get together and swap cookies. I think we need to bring back the bees, the community gatherings and the group efforts to accomplish common goals.

SCENE: You use green products and employ a green methodology. Can you talk a little more about your environmentally friendly philosophy?

RR: We pride ourselves on our cleaning and greening skills. We make the majority of our own products. We are concerned that so many words on commercial cleaning products like “natural,” “chlorine-free,” “chemical free,” and “non toxic” are unregulated and undefined.

Something may state it biodegrades or breaks down but in what period of time? It was important for us to include a green consulting side to our business. We researched different businesses that offered ‘eco-consultant’ training. We chose Green Irene because they are thorough in their reviews of homes and offices while still being economical.

In a Green Home or Office Makeover, my main task is to go into a person’s house or place of business and assess what changes could be implemented to help save money and environmental resources while improving the indoor air quality. Clients can visit our web site at www.TheCleaningBee3.com for tips or call (920) 312-1812. I provide ideas for changes in which the whole family or office can participate.

Our mantra is nothing new: Be Green, Save Green. If I go to a person’s home or office and they change one lightbulb or get a power strip to help reduce their phantom (waahaahaa) power loads or they find out they can recycle disposable batteries locally, I have done my job.

Our Green Irene site carries a number of great products like rechargeable batteries that not only hold their charge in high drain devices like a camera, but also in low drain devices like remote controls. As expected there are outdoor composters for sale, but there is also an indoor composter for under the kitchen sink that converts food waste in two weeks and uses only 10W of energy.

Switch out one incandescent lightbulb or use a lower wattage and you have made up for the 10W. While you’re at it, why not switch out two bulbs? There is also a nice selection of hard to find compact fluorescents (CFLs) and cold cathode bulbs.

SCENE: That's it, I'm switching to candlelight. I was reading your website and there is a community feel about your company. You write about new moms, the elderly, pets, and finding ways to declutter one's space and make life a little more manageable. Are there any other little touches that make The Cleaning Bee 3 special?

RR: We are more than just a cleaning company. We are really a way of life. Since having her baby my sister Kathy has become acutely aware of all the things to consider as a mom. Silicone nipples, not rubber. The effects of volatile organic compounds off-gassing from cribs, paint, drapes and carpets. She grows her own vegetables and blends organic baby food. This healthy way of cleaning house is a natural extension of the changes in her life.

SCENE: What is Kathy's educational background?

RR: She studied speech pathology focusing on communicative disorders and completed her wood technics in fine furniture making at Fox Valley Tech. Those were her passions. It was hard to get a job in her field as a woman in Oshkosh (maybe as a woman anywhere!) She went to places where the owners of a store refused to shake her hand.

SCENE: I guess her communication disorders studies came in handy in those situations! What is your business philosophy?

RR: Many of us want to eat better, but we get in a rush and grab something on the go that may not be the best for our body. It is the same with implementing a greener way of life. Most of us want to have less of an impact but think it will be too expensive or too time consuming to do the research and make changes. We encourage people to get a Green Home or Office Makeover and then hire us for weekly or bi-weekly cleaning. By doing this you get the basics of easy changes you can make to reduce your bills and your impact on the environment, not to mention the environment's impact on you.

We want to make it easy for people to live a more sustainable life. When we clean we always leave idea cards or a little treat like homemade air freshener. It is a way for us to reinforce some of the suggestions in the Green Irene Report after the home or office makeover is completed. Ultimately it is an individual's choice as to what steps they want to take, but some have an easier time starting new behavior when the ideas keep reappearing and there is encouragement to change.

SCENE: What are your future goals and aspirations for the business?

RR: Do what you love and you'll love what you do. I am excited about the opportunities my sister and I have created for ourselves. We hope our passion becomes addictive for others. Come to a workshop for making your own laundry detergent and you will see how easy it is if you just take the first step. We want to inspire. The best is yet to Bee.

