

Darian Cranford carries a hose as he and Jason Gibson refresh a row of TSF Inc. restrooms on location at a project for the television series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. (Photos by Mike Lane)

It Came Out of NOWHERE

North Carolina's 64 Portables grew one complimentary restroom unit into an inventory of 400 and a thriving portable sanitation business

By Sharon Verbeten

64 Portables Lexington, N.C.

Owner: Jason Gibson

Founded: 2004 as 64 Septic Service; renamed 64 Portables in 2005

Employees: 2

Service area: 40-mile radius of Lexington

Service: Portable sanitation

Web site: www.64portables.com

NORTH CAROLINA

Fate struck Jason Gibson in the form of a portable restroom landing on his front lawn.

The lone restroom unit and a guardian angel in the liquid waste industry helped transform Gibson from a factory worker stuck in a rut into a budding entrepreneur with a growing portable sanitation business.

Today, Gibson, 30, operates a small company, 64 Portables, just outside Lexington, N.C., where he grew that one unit to 400, and is setting his sights on emerging grease trap waste processing technology and a "green industry" future.

AN UNEXPECTED DELIVERY

Seven years ago, Gibson was unfulfilled in his career working in a school bus factory. It was a good job, but he yearned to work for himself. Inspired by a friend who ran a septic service business, he bought a 1996 Ford F-800 vacuum rig and began moonlighting cleaning septic tanks. "If he can do it, I can do it," Gibson recalls thinking when he saw his friend's success. "I've always had a no-quit attitude."

After running 64 Septic Service (so named due to its location off Highway 64) part time for about a year, Gibson attended an industry licensing meeting where he met Earl Birchfield, a long-time septic service and portable sanitation company owner who became Gibson's biggest supporter.

Birchfield, who lives in Waynesville, N.C. — about 170 miles from Gibson — had been in the septic industry for 40 years and in the portable sanitation business for about nine. After only a brief introduction, Birchfield encouraged Gibson to consider the portable sanitation business. Under-capitalized and already quite busy with the septic service and his full-time job, Gibson was hesitant, but Birchfield believed in his potential.

"Just by talking to him, I could see he needed a little boost," says Birchfield, 70, now retired from both businesses. He says he just wanted to do whatever he could to help the fledgling entrepreneur enter the industry that had been so good to him. "He had a good personality, and he seemed like he could talk to people."

That boost came rather literally, however, when



Above, Darian Cranford prepares to service restrooms on location on the set of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. At right, Jason Gibson powerwashes a service rig.

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Jason Gibson



not long after Gibson met Birchfield, a T.S.F. Company Inc. truck drove up to Gibson's home and a driver dropped a unit onto his front lawn.

"He said it was free to see if I would like to get into the portable sanitation business," Gibson says. Apparently Birchfield had convinced the restroom manufacturer that all Gibson needed was a bit more incentive.

Neither Gibson nor his wife, Amy, was pleased, however, with the unexpected delivery.

"I was just kind of pondering in my mind what I was going to do with this thing," Gibson recalls. "I was thinking this would be a good yard decoration. I didn't have any money (to start a business). We were doing some (septic) work, but it wasn't enough for me to quit my full-time job."

TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Gibson didn't have many business contacts to call about renting the first, or any subsequent portable restrooms. But fate works in mysterious ways, as Gibson soon learned. About two weeks after the free restroom arrived, a local builder knocked on his door inquiring about renting some units.

Bewildered, Gibson had no idea how much to charge the builder for restroom service. He finally settled on a rate similar to what the builder had been paying. But being com-

pletely green, Gibson had to call Birchfield — by now a trusted colleague — for advice on what deodorants to use. Armed with complimentary chemical supplies Birchfield had delivered — and an armload of Charmin from the grocery store — Gibson set about on what would soon become his new career.

"The day that I rented that, I got to thinking, 'There's something to this,'" Gibson says. Taking what he called "a leap of faith," Gibson ordered and paid cash for two additional units from T.S.F.

By 2005, Gibson jumped headfirst into the business — renaming the company 64 Portables Inc. and selling his septic service truck to help finance new T.S.F. units and a 2006 Ford F-550 portable sanitation rig with a

Best Enterprises stainless steel tank (a vehicle he has since replaced).

Just weeks after his initial capital outlay, Gibson says, "My phone was ringing off the hook. It was non-stop growth." Gibson steadily purchased units to meet growing demand, and by 2006 left his factory job to pursue the business full time. While his wife was a bit nervous with his decision at first, Gibson said he was poised to succeed in the business — a business he likely would never have considered if not for Birchfield. "I think the world of that man," Gibson admits.

Gibson now has 350 T.S.F. Company units, 50 PolyJohn Enterprises Corp. units and three ADA units from Synergy World (a division of Satellite Industries). His inventory also includes seven sinks, including five from Poly-John Enterprises Corp. and two from T.S.F. Company; and eight holding tanks.

His fleet includes a 2004 GMC 7500 with a 1,500-gallon (1,100-gallon waste/400-gallon freshwater) steel tank and Masport pump built by Abernethy Welding & Repair; a 1998 Dodge 3500 with 500-gallon (350-gallon waste/150-gallon freshwater) Imperial Industries aluminum tank and Jurop pump (Chandler Equipment Inc.); and a 2002 Dodge 2500 used for deliveries.



Cranford, (from left) Amy and Jason Gibson take a break from cleaning equipment in the 64 Portables yard.

ABC's *Extreme Makeover* Offers Exposure

Jason Gibson knows a thing or two about the phrase "It's who you know." His connections not only got him started in the portable sanitation business, they also helped him land a highly visible role for his company, 64 Portables.

At his son's school about four years ago, Gibson met a woman whose husband was a local builder in need of a restroom supplier. At the time, Gibson — then very new to the business — only owned three units and they were all rented.

Seizing the chance to grow his business, Gibson purchased 10 additional units to supply the builder's demands. Flash forward to 2009, that same builder — Jason Hedrick of Hedrick Creative Builders in Lexington, N.C. — was selected as the contractor for an episode of ABC's reality show, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

Hedrick recalled the service Gibson provided and asked if he'd donate his services for the taping in November 2009. Gibson supplied 22 restrooms for the crew. The crew built a new house for a family whose mother had been diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer.

Gibson says employee Darian Cranford was a huge help in setting up, pumping and cleaning the units, as well as servicing several RVs on site, everyday during the one-week build.

64 Portables is mentioned on ABC's Web site and gained a bit more visibility in February when the episode aired, but Gibson says, "I didn't do that job to gain business. I've always tried to help the community. When I started out, people had to help me out. This community has put me where I'm at."



Extreme Makeover: Home Edition designer Paul DeMeo takes a minute out of a hectic construction project to visit with Jason Gibson.

GROWTH THROUGH ACQUISITION

Gibson credits his incremental growth to several factors, including qualifying potential customers and pursuing acquisitions.

"I cherry-picked when I started the company," he says. "If I saw somebody building a house, I'd ask around. 'Who is this guy? How does he pay?' If they'd been around and paid well, I'd go after them."

He also acquired units and clients by buying out two of his competitors. Gibson first approached the competitors amicably, noting that he would be interested in their businesses if they ever considered selling down the road. The approach paid off.

While Gibson says 2009 was his most successful year financially, he believes that growth has stagnated in recent months. "I

haven't put on any new trucks, any new drivers. I feel at a standstill, even though the money's good."

Despite what might seem like a fortuitous beginning, 64 Portables hasn't been immune to a shifting economic climate. About 85 percent of the business is construction, which provided steady revenue until late 2007. Gibson usually has about 300 units rented, but, at that time, "I had two units sitting on the lot, and I was getting ready to order a lot; next thing you know, there are 100 (unrented) units."

The downturn in construction starts could have proved fatal for the small operator. Rather, Gibson credits the recession with saving his business.

"If the economy had not turned when it did, I would have filed bankruptcy," he says. "I was growing too fast. My cash flow was non-existent. I was going in the hole fast."

Gibson (left) and Cranford clean and replenish supplies at a bank of hand-wash stations.



"I don't feel comfortable at all unless I'm growing. That's my comfort zone."

Jason Gibson

The building bust allowed him to catch up on cash flow issues; it also enabled him to diversify his business plan.

"I just had to switch gears and look for other ways to make money," he says.

While he does service some special events — the biggest is a threshers' reunion that draws 25,000 attendees — Gibson is hopeful for an opportunity in a new, but related field — creating biofuel from recycled trap grease.

GREASE: THE NEXT BEST THING?

For this next venture, Gibson is doing a bit more research to establish a solid groundwork — mainly because he believes the niche is wide open. Right now, he says, none of his competitors are pursuing this avenue.

"Dollar for dollar, I think grease is the way to go right now, versus septic. I think grease recycling will be the thing to be into in five years." With such a huge volume created on a daily basis, grease from restaurants and other businesses can either be a costly pollutant or a potential energy source. Gibson thinks "energy source" is the right and optimistic way to look at the disposal challenge.

"Now is the perfect time," Gibson believes, to recycle what is a nuisance into a valuable biofuel. "This nation is becoming a 'green'



Darian Cranford handles the hose while offloading portable restroom waste at a wastewater treatment plant.

Gibson found a company in another area of North Carolina already recycling trap grease and he's studying ways he can become involved in the processing end of the business. "I'm going to approach pumpers," he says. "I have no interest in pumping grease. I just want to recycle it."

Septic companies must pay to dispose of the grease, and local city ordinances require grease traps to be pumped monthly. In addition, "Most of the cities are requiring any convenience stores to have a grease trap." Gibson believes he'll be offering pumpers an attractive disposal option.

And while he doesn't feel he'll have trouble finding enough sources of grease, Gibson realizes finding end-users of the recycled biofuel may be more challenging — and that, along with the recycling process, is something Gibson is still researching.

nation. If I can figure out a way to use this grease, I'll be a step ahead. I believe that I have the contacts to make this a viable fuel. Grease does have a Btu value; it will throw off heat."

At the same time, he is seeking to purchase a local facility — ideally about 10,000 square feet — to run the operation. "I want to make it very accessible for the drivers," he says.

Gibson remains optimistic about finding that ideal location — he's planning on bidding on some available locations soon — and pursuing his goals of expansion. But whether it's through restroom company acquisitions or a new grease operation, Gibson believes growing his business is the key to his future success.

"I don't feel comfortable at all unless I'm growing," he says. "That's my comfort zone."

MORE INFO:

Abernethy Welding & Repair Inc.
800/545-0324
www.abernethywelding.com

Best Enterprises
800/288-2378
www.bestenterprises.net

Chandler Equipment Inc.
800/342-0887
www.chandlerequipment.com

Imperial Industries Inc.
800/558-2945
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Masport Inc.
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www.masportpump.com

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800/292-1305
www.polyjohn.com

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