



ABOVE: Sanico Inc. owner Johnny Sandras stands outside his company's Long Beach, MS, plant following a natural gas leak that led to a devastating fire. The slow pace of insurance payments led Sandras to give up on rebuilding plans and shift his attention to the company's other plants in Lake, MS; and Cottdale, AL. The fire was the third major disaster the company has experienced since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

SANICO: A RHODES SCHOLAR IN THE 'SCHOOL OF RESILIENCE'—

INSIGHTS ON HOW AN INDEPENDENT HAS MANAGED THREE DISASTERS SINCE '05

It takes hard work, adaptability and diligence to recover after a hurricane, a tornado and a major fire

By Kelli Sandras

I recently interviewed Johnny Sandras, Sanico Inc., Lake, MS., to discuss his story of rebuilding our family business not once, not twice, but three times. Established in 1988, Sanico Inc. services much of the Southeast U.S. in the food and beverage (F&B) sector of the linen, uniform and facility services industry. While the company has grown significantly, it's also managed to survive three catastrophic disasters. The first was a hurricane in 2005; next, came a tornado in 2011; and last year the company experienced a major fire.

In terms of disasters, if you can think of it, Sanico has likely experienced it.

KATRINA COMES CALLING

Hurricane Katrina was a historic "Category 5" storm (winds 157 mph or greater) in 2005 that triggered a disaster across the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast. Sanico was one among thousands of businesses regionwide that were left with fragments to rebuild. When asked why he decided to rebuild following Hurricane Katrina, Johnny answers that, "It was our livelihood; it was our home." After Katrina, Johnny decided to prep for the next hurricane

by building a plant outside the range of hurricane damage near Lake, MS. He noted that before the hurricane, he had no plans to open another plant, but afterward it became a necessity. The plant on the Gulf Coast had the basic infrastructure in place to rebuild, including the frame of the building and many machines that survived because they were bolted to the floor. This, along with the fact that the rest of the Gulf Coast was rebuilding, gave Sanico enough time for insurance to be useful. In the interim, Johnny did all he could to keep serving customers. The family then moved to Cottdale, AL, in 2006.

TORNADO FLATTENS HQ

The second disaster to impact Sanico took place in Cottdale. In 2011, an EF4 tornado (the second-highest on the Enhanced Fujita Scale with winds of 116-200 mph) hit the Sanico home office. This tornado had less impact than Hurricane Katrina, but it was nonetheless devastating. Johnny's office was located directly in the path of the tornado. Immediately after the tornado tore through his office, he went to retrieve the servers in an effort to keep servicing customers. This quick action helped ensure that the Sanico servers were first in the queue for repairs. Johnny notes that, "There was not a huge rush for insurance" to repair the Cottdale office because "The tornado hit just the office, so it was pretty easy to replace the desks." Insurance eventually helped out, but Sanico continued to service customers throughout this period. Today, the company has many fail-safes in place, in case another disaster should strike its office.

NATURAL GAS EXPLOSION/FIRE


The most recent disaster occurred in 2023 at the Gulf Coast plant in Long Beach, MS. A gas line exploded, igniting a fire that destroyed the building overnight. The plant that survived

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Hurricane Katrina, sadly, couldn't overcome this fire. This was the first time the Sandras family hasn't rebuilt. Unfortunately, delays in insurance forced our family to close that plant. "The decision was made for us," Johnny says. "Insurance policies and practices made it impossible for us to rebuild. It was devastating and not what we wanted. When you have something catastrophic, you're counting on that insurance, and any delay forces your hand." The family did everything in their power to rebuild the plant, including relays from their other plants in Lake and Cottondale, as well as processing overnight to handle the increased volume in an effort to hold on until their insurance payout arrived. Johnny has since installed advanced sprinkler systems to prevent such a fire in the company's other locations.

'JUST START TACKLING IT'

Understandably, this trio of disasters has earned Johnny something akin to an advanced degree in disaster recovery from the school of resilience. Overall, the business and family have grown stronger by overcoming these profound losses. Fortunately, no one was injured in any of these events, which came with little (or no) warning. As Johnny says, "If you're in it right now, just start tackling it. It's taking it a day at a time and getting as much done as you can every single day, so that your customers get serviced and your plants are up and running again. Don't give up, and you'll come back better, wiser, stronger and more prepared." The determination and adaptability of Johnny Sandras and Sanico Inc. is inspiring the next generation of textile rental leaders, including his son, John, and myself. I hope this article can serve as a testament to our Sanico family's will to survive and rebuild. **TS**

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