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## Forces of Change: Cleaning up the environment

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## Cleaning up the environment

### Shannon Simpson Riley '94 has a rare

characteristic for a chemist: She loathes the lab.

In fact, Riley does her best work outdoors — especially in unpredictable, sometimes dangerous situations.

One venture took her to the swamps of Florida to contain a chlorine gas leak. Then there was the time she and her team donned astronaut-like uniforms and hiked deep into the dark Alabama woods to manage a cyanide leak near a flaming train derailment.

“Anytime there’s a chemical spill, it gets fun,” says Riley, the founder and owner of One Stop Environmental in Birmingham, Ala. “Those situations really get your adrenaline going.”

In case you haven’t guessed, Riley is not your typical, suburban mother of four — although she did give that option a shot.

Riley, who holds a master’s degree in chemistry from the University of Alabama, worked for two different companies before dropping out of the workforce in 1998 to be a stay-at-home mom.

That lasted about six months. “We needed more income, and I just had too much energy to stay at home, so with the encouragement of my husband [Richard], I decided to start my own company,” she says.

With the help of a \$60,000 line of credit and \$5,000 she collected from selling her Ford Explorer, Riley purchased air tanks,

protective equipment and a trailer and opened One Stop Environmental in response to the area’s need for a reasonably priced environmental services provider. For the first few years, the company operated out of the garage of her home.

Today, the company employs 40 people, has a warehouse and a fleet of trucks, and is one of the fastest growing businesses in Alabama. In 2006, One Stop — riding a wave of business generated by Hurricane Katrina — topped \$4.5 million in revenue.

Riley cut her teeth in the environmental clean-up field as a field chemist and safety officer for Emergency Response Specialists in Birmingham from 1996 to 1998. She was often one of the first to arrive at the scene of a hazardous spill, where she would help develop the recovery plan.

After the owner of the company decided to retire and sell its assets, Riley worked briefly as a consultant, even helping to pave the way for a current competitor to establish a business in Birmingham. After turning down a job offer from that company, she tried staying at home, but when she realized it wasn’t for her, she founded One Stop, figuring it would allow her to generate some income and set her own hours.

As is the case with most startup businesses, she faced some turbulent times early. When an emergency call would come in, Riley would scramble to call friends and relatives to care for her small children. She was fortunate that, because she and her husband are Birmingham natives, she had plenty of options. Once the children were set, Riley would then call on off-duty firefighters to assist with the clean-up.

Today, in addition to emergency response, One Stop contracts with local companies to manage and transport hazardous waste. Because environmental regulations are becoming more complex, Riley explains that many companies prefer to outsource environment-related problems to specialists. In addition, One Stop provides consulting services and offers asbestos, lead and waste-stream analysis.

Riley has also worked to position One Stop to receive government contracts. In 2005, the company generated about \$300,000 in revenue from government contracts. That figure rose to more than \$3 million in 2006.

While much of the sudden increase could be attributed to One Stop’s work in removing abandoned chemical drums from New Orleans following Katrina, Riley says the company has laid the foundation to receive more government work. Most recently, One Stop was awarded a contract by law enforcement officials to disassemble all methamphetamine labs discovered in Alabama — on average, about four a week.

“The company grew about 200 percent last year,” Riley says. “We can continue that growth through continuing to pursue large-scale government contracts. There is a lot of potential there.”

— JOHN ROBERTS

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