



Mike Oetting, owner of Summit Sweeping

From the ashes

Barely six months after a fire nearly destroyed his business, Mike Oetting and his Summit Sweeping crews haven't skipped a beat.

article by Ann C. Smith • photos by Steve Vorderman

As Mike Oetting rounded the curve on Indianapolis Road the evening of Jan. 26, 2005, he knew by the sight of the glowing orange sky that the fire at his business Summit Sweeping Services Inc., was a major devastation. Alerted by one of his employees that fire trucks had been dispatched to the site off Lower Huntington Road, he hoped it would be just a false alarm. Instead, the fire totally destroyed the buildings where his business and two others were housed. The raging blaze also ruined the majority of equipment and rolling stock inside the facility. For Summit Sweeping that meant the loss of two trucks and two industrial cleaners. Everything that wasn't reduced to ashes was damaged by smoke or water — or both. For some companies, such devastation might cause business to halt, at least for a while. But Summit Sweeping was operating the next evening, because to Mike Oetting, serving customers is paramount.

Summit Sweeping specializes in large-site cleaning for several types of customer needs — parking lots, industrial floors and construction sites. Presenting a well-kept appearance is crucial to the image of companies that welcome people daily. Oetting realized that managers of shopping areas, housing developments and industries that used his services would count on his crews to keep their commitment, regardless of the fire. By the next morning, Oetting had secured a temporary facility for operations and sent crews to their usual sites. In the five months since then, he has resolved insurance matters, caught up on all bills, cleaned and restored all salvageable equip-

ment, and replaced those that were lost.

Oetting is not new to adversity. Summit Sweeping didn't gain momentum until after its first four years. Much of that time it operated in the red; soon after, however, customers started flocking to the business.

Oetting has also overcome serious health issues. To him the fire was just another major, but survivable, challenge. "There's no excuse not to provide service," he says.

Summit Sweeping maintains the same core functions as it did before the fire. Cleaning parking lots is a primary activity. Many of the largest mall areas, retail outlets, restaurants and parking garages rely on the company to remove the barrage of trash that accumulates daily. Here, attention to detail separates Summit Sweeping from competitors who rush through the job or become unreliable. Because much of this work is done in the dark, crews are uniformed and the equipment is made visible so security personnel can plainly identify them. Oetting regularly communicates with local managers of the facilities to be sure his company is meeting their needs.

A major segment of Summit Sweeping business is regular cleaning of construction areas. This function is significantly important for new or expanding housing developments. "Construction is an inevitably muddy activity," Gary Allen, president of Windsor Homes, says. "Summit Sweeping is very effective in helping keep things clean as possible while the work continues." Events where crowds of potential buyers come to consider new developments require showcase clean streets and sidewalks, even in the midst of continuing construction. "This is another area where our attention to detail makes a difference for the public and developers," Oetting says.

Summit Sweeping also specializes in

cleaning large industrial flooring. Because the company's crews are skilled in using complicated equipment, facilities managers can be confident this task will be handled with professional attention. Many plants have environmental and safety standards contractors must meet. Summit Sweeping assesses these standards and satisfies each requirement. "In virtually any type of environment, we can provide the machine, materials and manpower and complete the cleaning more efficiently while saving the customer money," Oetting says.

For now, Summit Sweeping operates from two sites, one of which stores much of the equipment and the other, serves as the office and maintenance facility. Long-term arrangements for a permanent location are under consideration. The business has reached the level it was at before the fire, but the decentralized buildings do pose an inconvenience. Eventually, Oetting plans to expand Summit Sweeping beyond the Fort Wayne area, but not until he is assured that all customers, present and future, would receive only the quality attention he is used to providing.

Oetting expresses total gratitude for public safety personnel who responded to the fire, for friends and associates who helped him in the aftermath and for the community at large who encouraged him. "The support in itself has been extremely motivating," he says. •

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