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# The Rembrandt of Refuse

New Orleans's Sidney Torres IV is an artist when it comes to making garbage disappear. By Nicole Alper

**BUZZING AROUND** the French Quarter in his tricked-out Polaris Ranger, Sidney Torres IV — his film-star good looks as notable as his familial Roman numeral — is chasing garbage trucks. “There it is!” he shouts, throwing pedal to the metal. “That’s one of ours!”

As we approach the back of the vehicle, its chrome wheels catch the sunlight and its pristine black exterior gleams like a freshly polished grand piano. The signature bull logo (Torres’s ancestors, he tells me, were bullfighters) along with the initials SDT, for Sidney Donecio Torres, can be spied from several key angles. It’s unlike any garbage truck I’ve ever seen. Then again, Torres is no ordinary waste-management CEO.

Just back from vacation in the Bahamas (something he rarely takes), his skin glowing behind black Armani sunglasses, Torres is doing for garbage what CNBC’s “Money Honey,” Maria Bartiromo,

did for Wall Street: making humdrum work — and in Torres’s case, downright dirty work — sexy.

When I cease being distracted by this improbable scenario, I begin to notice what Torres has brought me out here, at six a.m., to see: absolutely nothing. Not a cup. Not a piece of paper. No indication that we are in the heart of the postweekend French Quarter in a city that still suffers in reputation — often unfairly — for being filthy and unsafe.

Torres’s metamorphosis into Mr. Clean emerged out of equal parts necessity and entrepreneurial spirit. A real estate hotshot and the owner of three hotels when Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005, Torres was facing a growing mountain of garbage in the aftermath of the disaster. When he researched much-needed waste pickup for his hotels in the absence of government service, he found “the prices



were insane," he says. So, he bought his own truck. Upon discovering that people were desperate for efficient, affordable garbage collection, he soon purchased another truck. Then he submitted the winning bid to collect garbage in New Orleans's neighboring St. Bernard Parish. Before he knew it, his SDT Waste and Debris Services had secured an annual \$9 million, 10-year city contract

for the French Quarter and beyond.

Torres's unabashed enthusiasm surely plays a role in his success. "I love the garbage business," he blurts out merrily. "We're adding class to trash!" Torres's newfound passion is even more incongruous given his youth (32) and his résumé: In his late teens, he led a rock-and-roll lifestyle as personal assistant to music legend Lenny Kravitz.

"For Kravitz it was a business," explains Torres, "but for me it was a nonstop party. I hit rock bottom and knew I had to stop." So Torres went straight, turning his attention away from drugs and toward mentoring at-risk youth and purchasing real estate.

**I FIRST MET TORRES** in 2000, when he was just opening a second boutique hotel, Hotel Royal, an 1827 Creole town house in the French Quarter. I was staying at his other property, Melrose Mansion, an impeccably restored Victorian manor where a six-foot-tall, tuxedo-and-ball-gown-wearing papier-mâché couple greet you at the entrance and a life-size wooden farmer lurks in the hallway. I was immediately struck by Torres's style — elegant with unexpected flashes of whimsy. Torres was one of several young businesspeople accenting a city reputed for its traditional jazz roots and old-world charm with a more youthful, hip vibe.

Post-Katrina, Torres is among a group of young residents committed to a new vision for their city — only today the challenge is to reinvent New Orleans's image rather than bolster it. Nicolas Perkins, a 36-year-old Tulane University graduate and serial entrepreneur who brokered a deal selling his last employer to Microsoft for somewhere in the hundreds of millions, chose to base his revolutionary new online trading company, the Receivables Exchange, in New Orleans. And real estate mogul and hotelier Sean Cummings (owner of the International House and Loft 523) is overseeing a massive new waterfront project aimed at reconnecting the iconic Mississippi River to New Orleans and its residents.

Linked by a dedicated vision, these businessmen are also perfectionists. Torres runs his company with the precision of a German-Swiss watch and virtual omniscience, thanks to a \$500,000 custom surveillance system that lets him track just about every discarded to-go cup and beaded necklace in the Quarter. "At first my staff was wary of the system," admits Torres, "like they were being watched. But I explained that it wasn't about spying on them — it was about doing the best job possible."

Maintaining a crew of supervisors to oversee the street sweepers, garbage collectors, pressure washers, and hand crew, Torres likens his methods to doing battle. "If you listen to the radio, everybody is in com-

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