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Trash-recycling trailblazer

By LAURA GREEN

A Q&A WITH ...

CHARLES GUSMANO

Co-founder of **Southern Waste Systems**

You might consider Charles Gusmano a pioneer of recycling. Before it became trendy, before it was good karma, before anyone thought about landfills filling up, Gusmano's family garbage business started to find a second life for the stuff people threw in the trash.

It was more than three decades ago, and a single landfill had a stranglehold on the New York City trash market. The landfill charged \$40 per cubic yard or about \$800 for a single construction-size Dumpster of trash.

Gusmano's parents and uncles, who owned Allied Sanitation, at first paid to truck the trash to a dump in Pennsylvania where they paid \$2 a cubic yard. But eventually paying to transport the trash became too expensive.

"We were forced to pull as much out of the garbage as possible just for survival," said Gusmano, who started out at the family business licking envelopes before he could read. "We were recycling before recycling was even talked about."

They burned wood before regulations prevented it. Then they sold it to be turned into chips. They also found a market for cardboard and broken-up concrete.



Charles Gusmano's Southern Waste Systems earned the 2010 Governor's Business Diversification Award for its 'green leadership.'

Recycling was part of Gusmano's mind-set long before he moved to Florida and opened Lantana-based Southern Waste Systems in 1999 with his uncle Anthony Lomangino.

Sun Recycling, its sister company, is Florida's largest independent recycler of construction and demolition debris, which accounts for 30 percent of the state's waste.

The company earned the 2010 Governor's Business Diversification Award for its "green leadership."

The state set a goal of 75 percent recycling at waste sites, but Southern Waste Systems averages 85 percent and boasts more than 90 percent at some of its 10 locations.

"Recycling is something that goes way beyond economics," Gusmano said. "It's the right thing to do all the way around: for the environment, the Earth, the people."

Name: Charles "Charlie" Gusmano.

Married: Karmita Gusmano. They have six children, ages 2 to 15.

Age: 43.

Hometown: Lindenhurst, N.Y./Palm Beach Gardens now.

Education: Bachelor of business administration, major in accounting, from Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y.

About your company: Based in Lantana. Ten facilities in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties; 365 employees. Full-service waste company. Collection of municipal waste, commercial waste and construction and demolition material. We also are the largest recycler of construction and demolition material in the state.

Your first paying job: Delivering newspapers.

Your first break in the business: I went to work on the weekends and during school breaks in the recycling facilities picking cardboard.

How your business has changed: We are focused on recycling for zero waste. The industry has evolved from a mind-set of landfilling to recycling.

How you keep up with your customers: We are very open-minded and have the ability to be creative in meeting their individual needs. We are hands-on and accessible.

Best business book you've read: I read every trade and business journal I can get my hands on. My team is used to getting torn-out articles from me weekly.

Best business advice you ever got: Work hard, give it your best no matter what you choose to do. Be focused on your own business and what you do best.

What you tell young people about your business: The future lies in what we do. Recycling is the right thing to do; it is great for the environment. I give them the same advice I was given and add to it that they should stay the course and never give up.

Power lunch spot: City Cellar or Atlantis Grill.

What do you know now that you wish you had known when you started your career? How important it is to be focused on people. Completing the task and doing it well is important, but leadership and building a team is the key to running a successful organization.

What is the most important trait you look for when hiring? I look first to the person: their morals, integrity, honesty.