

Sandy Whann Bakes In a Large Helping of Preparation

Sandy Whann is the current president of the family owned-and-operated Leidenheimer Baking Company. He is the fourth generation of Leidenheimer men to run the company which was founded in 1896 in the city of New Orleans by Sandy's great-grandfather, George Leidenheimer of Germany. The bakery produces French bread made famous by traditional local dishes like the muffaletta and po boy sandwiches that originated in the heart of the French Quarter.

As a lifetime citizen of New Orleans, Sandy has experienced many evacuations and has become adept at hurricane planning through the years. When the hurricane alert was issued on Saturday, August 27, 2006 this veteran immediately put his family emergency plan into effect as his wife and two children prepared to leave the city. Sandy remained near the plant to keep a close eye on his 110-year-old company and keep production working at a minimal capacity. With his family out of the city, Sandy now focused on his employees and their families.

On Sunday, after meeting with his upper management, Sandy uncharacteristically decided to shut the bakery down, secure its exterior, gas lines and doors and encouraged his employees to prepare their own homes and loved ones for the storm and potential evacuation. Both Sandy and the Leidenheimer management team keep home phone numbers and emergency evacuation contact information for all employees. After most of his employees had left, only Sandy, his plant manager, and chief engineer, all of whom play key roles in the business's preparedness plan, remained in New Orleans.

Once Sandy and the others had completed their assigned duties in the emergency shutdown, they left as well. While driving to meet with his family in Baton Rouge, Sandy was struck by the unusualness of the event, particularly because the drive which normally takes one hour took seven hours.

"Things were very different this time around," said Sandy. "But in the gridlock I still made the most of the little time we had before the storm hit. Having an emergency preparedness plan helps you focus your priorities and helps you know what you need to be doing with the limited time you have in any situation."

En route, Sandy checked with his insurance provider, accountants, legal consultant, and spoke with customers via cell phone to keep them abreast of the situation and the affect of his shutdown on their supply of baked goods. Sandy's business evacuation kit played a large part in his success. Sandy's kit included: financial and payroll records, utility contact information, updated phone lists for his customers and employees, back-up files and software, as well as computer hard drives. Well before the evacuation Sandy placed the kit in a mobile waterproof/fireproof case that could be taken with him at a moment's notice. As part of Sandy's written plan, he set-up a satellite office for the Leidenheimer Baking Company in Baton Rouge where he made contact with his bank, forwarded phone lines, and was receiving forwarded mail within two days after the evacuation.

On August 29, Sandy breathed a sigh of relief that his family and his company had escaped a major disaster. He and his leadership team had high hopes of getting production up and running, but had no luck in finding out the status of their facility. Once they received word of extensive flooding in New Orleans, Sandy's anxiety as a business-owner really started to set in.

Water in the plant was the worst problem, from a business standpoint, says Sandy. "My first instinct was to return and help with recovery, repair damages and get home. But this was impossible because Katrina's wake of devastation was so severe."

Fortunately, Sandy was able to return to his plant within a week of the storm hitting. When he returned, he was met with widespread damage, but without the flooding he had expected. In the facility, thousands of pounds of melted yeast and other ingredients had been sitting wet for weeks without refrigeration. The roof had severe damage, there was no power, no usable water, and no one was permitted back into the city except the National Guard. The plant was 120 degrees of foul smells emanating from every square inch. All Sandy could focus on was getting the plant back into production as soon as possible.

Despite caring deeply for his business, the most important thing to Sandy was his employees and he felt fortunate that all of the company's employees were safe. He arranged a carpool service to pick up employees at shelters to drive them to work and back each night. Sandy tried to remain supportive of his employees while staying open for business.

"The rebuilding process included a handful of things," said Sandy. "Number one is the employees. What some of our folks faced and what they are still facing in their personal lives is heart-breaking. It is important to listen to the needs of employees." Sandy expresses.

In summing up his experience Sandy said, "Katrina was severe enough to teach even us experienced hurricane survivors a few new things about our emergency planning." Since Hurricane Katrina, Sandy has revised his business emergency plan and gained a more extensive understanding of the importance of preparation.

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