

cover story

CLEANING UP WHEN NO ONE ELSE WANTS TO

IT TAKES A SPECIAL SENSITIVITY and expertise to handle homes where tragedies, domestic situations and other sadnesses have left their mark



Mickey Couture recalled the middle-of-the-night phone call from Virginia to his Texas home in March. It rang a living nightmare.

"I need you. I need you," his mother cried. "Jenny's gone."

Couture's sister, Jeanette Brabrand, 57, had shot her estranged boyfriend and herself inside their Suffolk home.

Arriving at the scene hours later, Couture found himself "confronted with a household of no living inhabitants and some (vivid evidence) of what had happened," he said.

Amid overwhelming grief Couture learned that cleanup of the scene would fall to him. With no knowledge of what's involved in such specialized remediation, he called several maintenance-type companies for estimates. But the \$2,500 to \$5,000 bids "weren't possible or practical at the time," he recalled. So he placed one more call to Barry Owens of Bay Decon for advice on how to handle it himself.

"Barry's first reaction was to tell me to get

out of the house, that it was way too much for any family member to deal with," Couture recounted.

"He said, 'I'm on my way right now,'" and that we'd work out the payment arrangement, he recalled. "A few hours later he was finished."

Couture said Owens' concern was for the distraught man's well-being.

"I cannot tell you how much I appreciated that," Couture said.

It's knowing that his business provides people with a measure of relief and comfort during difficult times that keeps Owens invested in this strange work since 2006.

"You're helping people when they're at their wit's end," he said.

Owens, 49, also owns a hardwood flooring company. But as new construction slowed in recent years, Owens discovered a new niche — adding specialized cleaning to his expertise.

"I thought he was kidding," said his wife, Barb Owens. "I had never thought about who cleans up after a death, but I knew I didn't want my husband doing it."

Now his business partner, she's proud of her husband's compassion and commitment.

And surprisingly, "even after three years in business, we still find most people unaware of

a business like this one," Barb said. "Most assume the police handle it; it's just not the case."

The work's too specialized.

A member of the American Bio-Recovery Association, Owens is trained and certified in crime and trauma scene recovery and biohazard remediation. He handles a range of hazardous and gross-filth situations in Hampton Roads homes — from death scenes to hoarding; odor neutralization; and removal of dead pests, human and animal waste and contaminated items.

Proper cleanup entails thorough and educated inspection of an entire area and the use of any combination of industry-standard chemicals and equipment. Contaminated materials, such as floor and wall boards, carpets and mattresses, need to be removed and disposed of correctly.

"You can't just take it to the local dump," Barb explained.

Continuing education is essential, as is vaccination against certain diseases.

"Companies like carpet cleaners are adding this type of cleanup to their services, but they're (not necessarily) properly trained," she added, recalling one of the Virginia Beach-based business' first jobs, a bloody scene at a movie theater.

"It took the manager and a security guard all night to figure out who to call," she said. "By the time we got there the maintenance guy had cleaned it up. A mistake.

"They almost sent us away, but Barry suggested he check" with floodlights.

He found blood pooled several rows ahead, under a seat and inside a cup holder, Barb said.

More recently Owens answered property manager George James' call to unearth the source of foul odor in a Norfolk home. Owens discovered a dead rodent in an HVAC duct, cleaned up and later treated the system with ozone for whole house odor removal.

"This had become beyond handyman services," James, of William E. Wood at the Mall, explained.

Feces, urine, gas in the ductwork, "it's toxic," he said. "You can't let people breathe that."

During an ozone treatment persons, pets

and plants need to leave but can return immediately afterward, Owens said.

Odor-neutralization of a death scene can take two or three days, while pet urine can take up to four. He advises against home-remedies like moth balls, deodorizers and bleach, which "don't usually work," he said.

Owens typically arrives within two hours of a death scene call.

The initial phone conversation's "usually the hardest part. It's usually a family member," he said.

He recalled the climb to a bathroom where a girl had taken her own life.

Going up the stairs I could see all these pictures of her and her family," Owens remembered.

He shook his head.

"She'd shot herself in the shower. There was a bullet in the shampoo bottle."

It can't be easy on him, his wife said.

Owens receives one job related to hoarding about every four to six weeks, often requiring two technicians for two days to "remove everything and disinfect."

"People want that kept discreet," he said.

"You have to be empathetic with them."

He urges people to look in on older folks.

"When you don't check on your elderly, and they live by themselves," things may pile up, including trash, Owens said.

Bay Decon's prices vary according to labor, chemicals, equipment and extra services needed. Scenes involving bodily fluids start at \$250 per hour per technician for labor, and average \$1,000 to \$4,000 for an entire job.

"If it involves a child we don't charge,"

Owens said. "We consider it a community service."

In Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina victims of crime may be eligible for state assistance with some expenses, including cleanup. Bay Decon also offers educational programs to real estate professionals and groups interested in learning more about their services. "It's a rewarding job," Owens said, one in which the words "thank you" go a long way.

"The stories will give you chills," Barb added. "But the reality is that when you finish a job, you really feel like you've helped someone during the toughest of times."