

ORLANDO Business Journal

Vol. 19:36; Jan. 24-30, 2003

Seminole County Update

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Altamonte firm cleans up in the office building market

By **BOB MERVINE** Staff Writer

ALTAMONTE SPRINGS — Al Sarabasa doesn't mind spring cleaning.

In fact, his 500-person company, Altamonte Springs-based D&A Building Services Inc., cleans about 8 million square feet of space — every day in every season.

Sarabasa, who graduated from the University of Central Florida in 1985 with a marketing degree, worked for a window cleaning company to pay his school bills. With a family, Sarabasa says, finding a job to make ends meet was a necessity.

After graduation, Sarabasa's boss, Don Woodall, invited him to work full time, and the pair eventually formed a partnership — pairing Woodall's operating expertise with Sarabasa's marketing knowledge.



Photo by Tanya Lundine

“In the beginning when things suck, no one wants to lend money. Now that things are good, they are knocking down the doors.”

**Al Sarabasa,
D&A**

“I did some research into the office cleaning business, and the projected growth was fantastic,” he says today.

For the first six months, Sarabasa also learned the ropes, working side by side with Woodall in every facet of

D&A's Al Sarabasa

the business, including hanging outside multistory office buildings to clean windows.

“It's a little scary,” he says. “Climbing over the parapet on top is the worst. Once you get in place, however, there's a certain comfort level.”

Fifteen months after starting the business, Woodall died in an on-the-job accident, leaving Sarabasa in charge — and stunned. “It was such a shock,” he says. “My heart went down to my stomach.”

However, he shook off the loss and began to run the business by himself. Sarabasa soon learned there might be a better way to do things.

“Don never worked with contract business. He would go out and find a job

and do it and then go on to the next one,” says Sarabasa. “I restructured us as a maintenance company. I started creating the contract business.”

Cash flow and finances were a problem for the small, struggling company. Using rental equipment and contract labor, the firm struggled until some of the contract jobs began to kick in.

Today, with a projected \$8.5 million in revenue this year, things are different.

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In the beginning, Sarabasa did most of the sales work as well. Today, he has a

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vice president and four salespeople developing new business. "Much of it is relationship-based," Sarabasa says. "We've managed to build a lot of long-term business that way."

Another big step, he points out, was a turnover in the company's management staff nearly six years ago. Today, Sarabasa's wife, Kathy, serves as the executive vice president of the firm. "Having her in charge has freed me up to do a lot of other things."

The company does about 85 percent of its business in cleaning and maintaining large office buildings, with the remainder in window cleaning. Many of the commercial properties are in the

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Diane Sitzler,
Advantis Real Estate Services

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Maitland Commons area, downtown Orlando and Heathrow.

One of the company's biggest clients is the Orlando International Airport, where D&A handles much of the facility's minority business contracts.

The company's revenue has increased by \$3 million in the last three years, shrugging off much of the economic

downturn since Sept. 11, 2001.

"Some maintenance work can wait when things get bad," he says. "The window cleaning can get pushed three months down the road. A leaky window can wait until the rainy season begins. But commercial properties can't cut back on contracted janitorial service for their tenants."

Many of the company's customers have been with him a long time. Diane Sitzler, a senior property manager for Advantis Real Estate Services — a national manager of commercial properties — oversees 800,000 square feet at Gran Park at South Park and has worked with Sarabasa's company, in this location and others, for 11 years.

"I don't need to baby-sit a janitorial service," says Sitzler. "With D&A, their management is always available, they provide good follow-through, and they make my tenants happy."

Technology has impacted the business, Sarabasa says. Sitzler cites the company's quick response to an e-mail. "I don't even have to call them, just send an e-mail and things are taken care of."

But more than streamlined billing and communications technology, Sarabasa says it's all about safety: "Today, that end of the business has improved drastically. We have far fewer incidents, and we can work much faster than 10 years ago."

As for the work force, Sarabasa says his family heritage is the biggest reason his work force is 90 percent Hispanic. "Many of our employees are highly educated, doctors and lawyers who can't find other work at first," he says.

He has settled in Seminole County. The business's 8,000-square foot offices and warehouse are in Altamonte Springs. Sarabasa's parents and family — his wife and four children — also are Seminole County residents.

Sarabasa was among the first wave of Cuban refugees fleeing Fidel Castro as

IN BRIEF



Company: D&A Building Services Inc.

CEO: Al Sarabasa

Year established: 1985

Line of business: Provides janitorial services for commercial buildings, window cleaning, general maintenance and final construction cleanup service; D&A is a privately owned, small Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) business and is certified under the 8(a) program

Local presence: Based in Altamonte Springs with 500 employees in offices throughout the East and Midwest

Revenue: \$8.5 million

Clients: Colonial Properties Trust, Highwood Properties, Greater Orlando Aviation Authority

Web site: www.dabuildingservices.com

part of Operation Peter Pan, the influx of 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children to the United States.

Unlike most, however, Sarabasa had no one to meet him in October 1961 when he arrived. He ended up moving in with a family he met during the journey. It was more than two months later when his parents joined him.

Looking ahead, Sarabasa predicts thinks the business will continue to clean up with new clients in the Southeast and Midwest. He's projecting \$2 million growth next year.