

# Local company growing through disaster cleanups, biomass needs

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When Bill Gaston got into the tree trimming business as a teenager, he didn't realize he was building the foundation for, not one, but two family-run companies that eventually would aid disaster relief efforts across the country and fuel the county's future power plant.

Gaston, now 62, began doing part-time tree care work when he was 17 years old and later started Gaston's Tree Service in 1971 at age 21. He said he hadn't realized he was establishing a business for himself until someone told him he had a good business and he asked, "I do?"

"You start out just trying to make a living," he said.

Four decades later, his son Shawn runs Gaston's Tree Service, while Gaston heads Wood Resource Recovery — a vegetation recycling company that sprouted from his original operation. His younger brother, Levin, serves as the company's chief operating officer, and Gaston's wife, Faye, serves as the companies' chief financial officer. Other family members have helped out over the years, as well, including Gaston's daughters, who did administrative work there while they were in school.

Together, the two companies — both based in Gainesville — employ about 30 people, Gaston said.

Levin Gaston, 58, worked with his brother off and on over the years and now helps run Wood Resource Recovery.

"A lot of brothers I know express to me their envy that they're not able to work with their families, that they don't get to see their families," Levin said. "And it's been real good for me and Bill."

Gaston entered the recycling industry out of necessity after the disposal of yard debris in landfills was banned. Running a tree service company generates a lot of that material, and opening Wood Resource Recovery in 1985 provided a way to personally manage it. This has helped the company hold costs down for customers over the years.

"Everybody benefits by taking this material and recycling it," he said.

The recycling company gives tree service companies such as Gaston's Tree Service a place to dump their debris. "I like to say our competitors become our customers," he said.

The company processes the material into landscape mulch it can sell or fuel wood it can deliver to biomass power plants that use it to generate electricity. It also receives yard waste from the joint Alachua County and city of Gainesville curbside collection program.

In addition to providing a destination for local yard waste, Wood Resource Recovery also does contract work for disaster relief around the nation.

It helped clean up the Alachua County area after the 2004 hurricanes, moving about 565,000 cubic yards of debris during those efforts. One hundred cubic yards of such debris weighs about 20 tons.

Most recently, the company spent almost two months removing debris generated by Hurricane Sandy from the New York City borough of Queens

and might do some more mop-up work there soon. It also has helped clean up communities after ice storms and tornadoes.

Wood Resource Recovery has contracts with several companies that request assistance shortly before a disaster hits, providing a brief window of time to mobilize, he said. It also hires its own subcontractors to help remove debris from the community and haul it away.

Staff have used cranes to lift trees off of homes and power lines and operated in places that often were still without power or basic amenities.

"It's like a military operation," Gaston said. "We're totally self-sustainable."

Depending on the level of the disaster, Wood Resource Recovery workers might need to bring food and water supplies as well as RVs to serve as temporary housing for staff.

"It's extremely tough. We work seven days a week, 12 hours a day," he said. "People want their life back to normal as quickly as possible."

Back home at Wood Resource Recovery's Alachua County recycling site, trucks piled high with tree limbs navigate the dirt path between hulking mounds of mulch and vegetation throughout the day.

They dump their own material onto the pile, heading out as other trucks stop at the weigh station where their hauls are assessed.

Discarded Christmas trees are visible beneath clumps of dirt and leaves around this time of year. Cranes pluck thick stumps from one mound and add them to a stockpile of material the company is collecting for the Gainesville biomass plant, scheduled to go online in late 2013. It already has amassed about 150,000 tons of inventory for the plant.

Wood Resource Recovery has a long-term biomass supply contract with the Gainesville Renewable Energy Center (GREC) — the largest contract the company has ever had. It will supply almost half of the biomass plant's fuel, and it has plenty to spare. Locally, it processes about 100,000 tons of yard debris per year.

The company plans to expand its operation in the coming months, Gaston said. It has about eight sites in Florida and expects to have a total of 20 within the next two years.

Rick Scarborough, president and owner of Scarborough Insurance, which has served as the insurance agent for Gaston's businesses for at least two decades, said he has referred customers to them over the years.

"If there's ever a problem, they respond quickly, and they're proactive to keep problems from happening to start with," he said.

Shawn Gaston grew up around his father's business. Now 42, he serves as the chief operating officer of Gaston's Tree Service and has run the company for the past decade or so, having started out working there part time as a teenager. But when he joined the company after graduating high school, his father started him out on the field crews because he wanted his son to understand every facet of the business.

"You know, obviously coming out of high school, the fact that somebody could be paid to climb trees was just unbelievable to me," Shawn Gaston said.

He said he loves the industry he's in, and most of the work Gaston's Tree Service does is for steady customers or people who have been referred to them by others, he said.

Shawn Gaston has two daughters — Morgan, 13, and Madison, 11 — whom he would welcome into the family business if they were to decide they want

to get involved when they're older. He said he knew early on that he wanted to join the family business.

"Watching my father work so hard for everything he had really made a huge impression on me and gave me a strong work ethic," he said. "Some people want to work with their fathers, and some people don't. It's just something I always wanted to do."

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