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## Midwest Maintenance uses creativity during pandemic challenges

by Richard D. Brown

Midwest Maintenance, a 55-year-old south Omaha-based commercial cleaning firm that's coming off one of its best years with revenues doubled and contracts in at least seven Midwestern states, is facing adversity as events by several of its customers are being cancelled or significantly curtailed due to the pandemic.

One of Midwest Maintenance's largest clients is MECA, the public agency that oversees TD Ameritrade Park, the CHI Health arena complex, among other entertainment venues. Earlier this month, the NCAA announced that the annual NCAA Men's College World Series would not be held due to the pandemic.

"It's among the two top challenges I've had," owner/CEO Jamie Gutierrez said. "So many emotions are involved and so many lives are being hurt."

Gutierrez has headed the family cleaning firm since 1995. It has grown to about 1,000 employees working on any given day throughout Omaha and Lincoln and for the past six years, and in Houston where the firm has added its third branch office.

Midwest Maintenance continues to operate out of a 12,000-square-foot building — remodeled and oft-added onto since her parents Paul & Alice Gutierrez founded the company with \$2,000 of the family's savings in 1965.

On the planning table — and perhaps in danger of being pushed back a year or two — is the construction of a multi-use building near Midwest Maintenance's current headquarters. The planned structure will better enable the firm to house its growing managerial staff, warehousing needs and many initiatives aimed at south Omaha's burgeoning Latino community.

Gutierrez said the coronavirus pandemic needs to be approached by Midwest Maintenance and the growing number of players in the national professional cleaning industry with cogent analysis.

"While significantly impacting revenues, our industry, which often has been taken for granted by clients, now has been elevated in importance," she said.

Big issues on the debate table include effectively cleaning to prevent viruses, the concept of "clean" air, the use of robotics and sensors — among others.

Midwest Maintenance has three branches: janitorial and commercial cleaning, hospital housekeeping and a staffing agency. Commercial and industrial work has been on a steady



Owner and CEO Jamie Gutierrez ... Navigating a challenging and essential industry with aims to exceed customer expectations for cleaning services. (file photo)

increase. Specific categories such as health care and the entertainment industry have seen the largest increases.

Branch offices have been added in Lincoln at 301 Centennial Mall South and contracts in Missouri and South Dakota demonstrate a strong demand for cleaning services, especially in the health care and arena sectors.

Gone are the days when many of Midwest Maintenance's employees were assigned to one large client's headquarters.

"Now large health care clients might have 11 or 15 facilities that need our attention," said Gutierrez, who remembers at age 9 cleaning ash trays and picking up paper after league bowlers exited Papio Bowl — one of her dad's initial clients.

The firm she now heads has done work in nine states via affiliation with industry groups such as the Building Services Contractors Association International and National Service Alliance.

Leadership in the industry, Gutierrez said, has been a differentiating factor in the growth of Midwest Maintenance.

"We want to tell the client what's going on — rather than they telling us," she said.

Often that can mean seeking Midwest Maintenance's expertise when a new structure is being planned.

germs. An air-scrubbing system, used in conjunction with another machine, purifies air circulating in a room. Although often used after fires, the equipment can also be used for virus suppression.

President Mark Oldaker, a 30-year veteran of the corporate accounting world, joined Midwest Maintenance and among other responsibilities, meets with the firm's top clients, sometimes on a daily basis.

Gutierrez said the "personal touch" she, Oldaker and other key employees of the family-owned firm can bring to a crisis situation is priceless. One such incident came in Houston a few years ago during the challenges of managing the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

"We were at the convention center there that served as a rescue site for 10,000 homeless people and pallets of donations," she said. "Luckily FEMA stepped in to help out too."

While smaller jobs might need a small cleaning crew for eight hours five days a week, larger events such as the NCAA College World Series or Olympic Swim Trials hosted in Omaha can require 100 or more Midwest Maintenance employees to be on-site 24/7.

Gutierrez credits two important decisions that have enabled Midwest Maintenance to find and develop the large number of full and part-time employees it has needed during its growth trajectory. One is a partnership with Metropolitan Community College for a non-credit course open to the public that covers instruction and certification in customer concierge service, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety issues and an introduction to chemicals and cleaning equipment. The second factor is an attractive benefits package in an industry that traditionally has not had such options.

Paul & Alice Gutierrez have retired and now live in Northern California. Jamie, 53, remembers their tutelage that honesty and hard work are the key ingredients in building a business. Since 1994, she has placed an emphasis on taking Midwest Maintenance's name from its former stronghold in downtown and south Omaha into west Omaha, Lincoln, and into contiguous states.

Clients can select from a menu of 20 services, including biohazard and blood borne pathogens, waste management, touchpoint cleaning, and emergency cleanup, among others.

From each challenge, she said, what emerges is a stronger, more creative and confident woman.

Last year, Jamie Gutierrez became the first Latino to serve as a governor on the Knights of Aksarben Board.

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