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Clearing the Way for Hope: The First Response Team of America

How a Successful Contractor Devotes His Life to Saving Lives

Written by: Robert Ring

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Running a search-and-rescue operation mere hours after a tornado had landed, Tad Agoglia and his team came upon a house in which there were seemed to be no survivors. However, moments later, someone found a glimmer of hope: the family's baby, crying in a nearby ditch. As Agoglia spoke with a neighbor who was simultaneously distraught at what had happened and thankful for the help that the team had provided, the latter said something that would stay with him forever: "I don't know what to say except thank you for cleaning up this rubble. ... I feel encouraged." For Agoglia, those last three words summed up the goal of his life and of his nonprofit organization, the First Response Team of America. "I thought to myself," he says, "What a terrible situation. There's no way we can take away the pain or the suffering that this tornado has caused. But, we encouraged someone."

Agoglia is a unique individual. Though he completed a Master's program in theology, he ultimately chose to focus his professional life on growing his excavation and disaster recovery businesses, and by the age of 29, he had become a millionaire. While Agoglia was focused on running his businesses, he experienced the death of his father, an event that would change his life. While this was as difficult a time for Agoglia as it would be for anyone, it also reawakened his drive to help others, a drive that he said was instilled by his parents when he was young. Speaking of his father's death, he says, "For whatever reason, that reminded me of the brevity of life, how short life can be, and that pushed me that much more in my thought process of what I am doing with my life."

Though he could never have been classified as ordinary, it was at this point that Agoglia would do the most eccentric thing he possibly could: He gave up his for-profit business to help people for free. "To be honest with you," he says, "even though I was successful and a millionaire at a young age, I knew there was a piece of the puzzle that was missing." With a fleet of trucks, the ability to handle heavy equipment and a dose of the business sense that had allowed him to become so successful, Agoglia identified an important cause that he was well positioned to help with: the

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clearing of roads for emergency response teams in areas hit by natural disaster.

Agoglia started devoting his time and his businesses' resources to helping with such causes in 2007. At first, he used his excavation equipment to move debris at disaster sites so that fire trucks and other emergency response vehicles could reach people who need help. As he became increasingly involved in these efforts, he began identifying other needs that arise during such times—namely, those that more immediately involve saving lives.

Noting that local governments and municipalities are often unprepared to deal with the aftermath of natural catastrophes, Agoglia expanded his involvement in disaster relief by purchasing and renting equipment such as light towers, generators, technical search-and-rescue gear and hovercrafts. By doing so, he was no longer only clearing the way for others to save lives (though that was still a large part of his involvement); now he was saving lives himself, engaging in rescue efforts that most fire departments and other emergency response teams did not have the equipment to execute. Using specialized equipment, Agoglia's team was able to find individuals trapped beneath rubble. Light towers provided visibility to find victims in nighttime operations. With generators, the team was able to power emergency rooms and intensive-care units. Using hovercrafts, they were able to save flood victims.

Eventually, Agoglia's work became noticed by large corporations, which began offering their own assistance to his team, often in the form of donated equipment and, in some cases, manpower. "I think the moral of the story," Agoglia says, "is, as a business owner, it's vitally important to be functionally responsible and to help in areas that you can help in." His team's efforts were growing, not only in his commitment to disaster response but in the assistance he was receiving from other companies.

In 2008, Agoglia formed the First Response Team of America in an official capacity and poured his wealth into this new organization, which he now runs full-time. Working with meteorologists to identify impending natural disasters, the team travels across the country year-round with millions of dollars of heavy equipment in order to arrive on-site within hours of these events—the time that help is needed the most.

The First Response Team has visited dozens of disaster sites since its inception and has achieved national (and in some cases international) renown for saving lives in ways that are unique from any other organization. The First Response Team has helped the victims of Hurricane Isaac, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the 2011 F5 tornado in Joplin, Mo., as well as many more disasters that have received less media attention. Saving lives and inspiring hope has become an everyday part of the organization's work.

Most recently by helping out in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the First Response Team of America continues to encourage others and save lives, and they show no signs of letting up. To learn more about this nonprofit, as well as how to donate to the organization, visit www.firstresponseteam.org.

Author Bio: Robert Ring is the associate editor of *Construction Business Owner*.

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