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From Wasteland to Wonderland

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From Wasteland to Wonderland

UM engineering alumnus Brooks Wallace's technology transforming debris removal industry

JUNE 27, 2016 BY EDWIN SMITH



Brooks Wallace's name isn't as widely recognized as Microsoft's Bill Gates or Apple's Steve Jobs, at least not yet.

But with each professional success he experiences, the University of Mississippi civil engineering alumnus becomes more and more known as a rising star in the debris removal industry. Sooner than later, Wallace may join the ranks of the aforementioned living and late business legends.

For starters, the Columbia, Mississippi, native developed DebrisTech, a software that tracks debris trucks with barcode scanners, digital photos and global positioning systems. That data is then wirelessly uploaded to a central database where Federal Emergency Management Agency and other agencies can retrieve it later for verification purposes.

Since Wallace created DebrisTech in August 2010, it has been used to document debris removal in the New York City area after Hurricane Sandy and in Pearl River, Lincoln and Pike counties after Hurricane Isaac. City officials in Moore, Oklahoma, used the software to clean up the devastating piles left by tomos earlier in 2013. More recently, DebrisTech has worked the 2014 north Mississippi tomos, the Christmas tomos of 2014-2015 and the 2016 floods in Louisiana.

Industry experts expect technology such as Debris Tech's to have a profound effect on post-disaster cleanup.

"It really feels good to know that something I created is used by different entities across the United States during the times when they are in need the most," says Wallace, CEO of DebrisTech. "When an entity chooses to use DebrisTech, we are solely responsible for making sure that their debris removal activities are properly documented. Without proper documentation, the entities are subject to losing millions of dollars in reimbursements."

Already, Wallace's software is being called a "game-changer" in disaster debris removal. Following the firm's work in Moore, FEMA produced a Best Practices video highlighting their work.

"The message was very clear, and that was very rewarding," Wallace says.

DebrisTech was a partner in a civil engineering firm that won a \$200 million contract to remove wreckage from six Mississippi counties. The firm was using a paper ticketing system to track the trucks hauling away debris, a standard industry process.

Executive Recovery Group, started and co-owned by Wallace, used 60 employees in Moore to monitor and document debris removal contractors.

"I've been in debris-removal projects all over the country – Florida, California, Texas, Virginia – huge hurricanes, wildfires, floods," says Russ Towndrow, a former Mississippi Emergency Management Agency official who has used DebrisTech software. "This real-time data is a game-changer."

Vice president and principal engineer for Dungan Engineering, Wallace began working for the company in June 2002 at its Columbia office. He recalls vividly how he came to be employed there.

"My Mom and Dad were good friends with Jeff and Rene Dungan," Wallace says. "Jeff and his brother, Les, owned Dungan Engineering in Columbia, so I made an appointment during spring break to spend a day with Jeff and see exactly what a civil engineer does."

Dungan remembers the conversation he and Wallace had that fateful day.

"He asked me some poignant questions about engineering and working here," Dungan says. "Being a Mississippi State graduate, I was really tempted to misdirect him to State."

Wallace asked Dungan if he indeed had to attend MSU if he wanted to be an engineer.

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OXFORD, Miss. – Eleven University of Mississippi students spent their winter break learning about the people who work behind the scenes of the American government in Washington, D.C. Lead by Jonathan Klingler, assistant professor of political science, the students of Pol 391: Applied Politics met not with candidates, but with the people who make candidates'

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OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to abate. The Federal Reserve's

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"To my surprise, he told me it didn't matter where I went as long as the school was ABET-accredited and my grades were good," Wallace says. "That made my day. I returned to Mississippi College and immediately rearranged my schedule to fit the Ole Miss engineering prerequisites."

Transferring from MC after his sophomore year, Wallace enrolled at Ole Miss as a junior in fall 2000. He graduated in May 2002 with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering.

"My Ole Miss education certainly opened the door for my employment with Dungan Engineering," Wallace says. "I really believe that my problem-solving skills were learned and developed during my time at Ole Miss. The Ole Miss family and has been very helpful in my professional career."

The plan was always for Wallace to transition from Columbia to Picayune, which he did in July 2003. As manager of the Picayune office, all was going well until August 29, 2005.

"The eye of Hurricane Katrina came directly over Picayune," says Wallace, who also serves as consulting engineer for the city of Picayune. "We were tasked with coordinating, managing and documenting the county's debris removal efforts. Our sleepy little office with three employees almost instantly turned into a chaotic operation with over 150 employees."

Following Katrina, Wallace became a storm-chaser who wanted to reduce and eliminate expensive fraud in the debris removal industry.

"Brooks is a technical wizard," Dungan says. "He loves the technology in engineering, but he also deeply cares about the people in disaster-impacted areas. That's why he created DebrisTech."

The entire Debris Removal and Debris Monitoring Project lasted more than a year and totaled more than \$100 million. Toward the end of May 2006, the Mississippi Legislature created the Pearl River County Utility Authority.

"One of the most challenging tasks I've had to date was the creation and startup of the PRCUA," Wallace says. "This entity was created by the Legislature following Katrina to manage water and wastewater infrastructure within the county."

Many in Pearl River County saw the PRCUA as another unnecessary layer of government. Convincing citizens that it was to their benefit to have an entity focused solely on water and wastewater issues was a hard battle.

"Ultimately, the PRCUA persevered and was able to execute and implement the master plan," Wallace says. "Today, Pearl River County is a better place to live because of the work of the PRCUA. What started as an entity that was hated by many has now become a financially sound, vital part of the county that serves thousands of customers each day."

Wallace readily acknowledges that his achievements are shared accomplishments.

"This success would not have been possible without the vision and leadership of Steve Lawler (PRCUA board chairman) and Michael Caples (the board's attorney and a fellow Ole Miss engineering alumnus)," he says.

Family is also extremely important to Wallace. He and his wife, Susan, have three sons: Andrew, Connor and Luke. The family enjoys boating, spending time on the Jordan River in Bay St. Louis and vacationing at the beach. Of course, the Wallaces join their family and friends at Ole Miss Rebels' football and baseball games.

Wallace also maintains close relationships with his parents, Randy and Jenny Wallace of Columbia. His younger sister, Whitney, is married to Ryan Holmes, another Ole Miss engineering graduate and Dungan employee. The Holmes live in Brookhaven.

"I enjoy working with Ryan because I think that we are a lot alike," Wallace says. "Over the years, we both moved to new locations, have built a good client base and business in each of our locations for the firm. We both understand what the other has gone through to build what we have built and can understand the challenges of managing a remote office."

Holmes expressed nothing but admiration for his brother-in-law.

"Brooks is passionate about his work and family," he says. "Being passionate to me also gives you a sense of accomplishment when you complete a project. I feel like he challenges me to be better and to learn new skills."

Dungan had nothing but kind words for both Wallace and Holmes.

"Brooks and Ryan have each done an incredible job of cementing our presence in the cities where they live," Dungan says. "Though they are different, they share certain qualities such as character, a strong work ethic and a dedication to make things better for others through really excellent engineering."

Wallace, along with three others, incorporated Heritage Christian Academy Inc. in 2013. A 501c3

nonprofit organization that began operation the next year, HCA has 70 students in grades K-4. The organization has purchased property, and a groundbreaking for a new \$1.5 million K-8 campus is scheduled for August.

"I would have to say that my most gratifying personal achievement to date has been the formation of Heritage Christian Academy," Wallace says. "It's very rewarding to know that I played a major role in something that has such potential to make an eternal impact upon so many people in our community."

Wallace says he is already seeing the impact HCA has made on his children and their classmates, and he looks forward to continued growth.

"To be a part of something that can help provide a better path for the children is something I really enjoy," he says.

Asked if he had any words of wisdom for high school graduates looking to continue their education, Wallace heartily recommends his alma mater.

"I try and advise young people who are trying to make a career decision, specifically engineering, that Ole Miss is the place to go," he says. "I do this because I really enjoyed my time in Oxford and feel that because of the size of the engineering program, you have a lot more one-on-one time and attention than you would at other, larger engineering schools."

Not one to rest on his laurels, Wallace remains focused on his short- and long-term professional goals.

"My short-term career goals would be to continue to build DebrisTech and position the company to be ready for the next major disaster," he says. "My long-term goals are to make DebrisTech a national leader in the debris monitoring industry and to continue to build lasting relationships and meet the engineering needs of Pearl River and the surrounding areas."

As for joining the ranks of Gates, Jobs and others, Wallace says remains hopeful.

"I believe that hard work and perseverance is essential to success in business today," he says. "I always try and look for ways to get something done rather than coming up with reasons why it can't be done. I also believe that God has a plan for my life professionally and personally, and where I'm headed in the future is subject to change at any time."

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