

On the Right Track

South Carolina's Al Graber abandoned a NASCAR-related business in favor of a life in portable sanitation and has never looked back

By Betty Dageforde | PHOTOS: James Nix

The Grand Restrooms crew includes (front row) Alexa Graber and shop dog Luna; (standing, from left) Tonya Tessneer (not an employee), Hey Watts, Cindy Graber, Daniel Timmons, James Bond, Raul Perez, Jesse James Bond and Al Graber.

Al Graber has been starting businesses since he was 12. So, as an adult, he was comfortable pivoting to different things as the situation required. Which explains how he got into portable sanitation from his NASCAR-related business buying and selling racecar parts and memorabilia.

In the 2008 economic downturn, his company took a hit and he started looking for options. His daughter is an avid fan of the local minor league hockey team. As a volunteer, she set up a bounce house at events to help promote the team — which gave Graber an idea. He bought inflatables for her, and together they established ABT Events. In five years, after expanding into other party equipment, it was a million-dollar business.

Then one day Graber, 55, noticed something. “When we did big corporate events, we’d be out there setting up for eight, 10 hours in 100-degree weather. Then you’d see a guy come in with a restroom trailer and literally set it up in a half hour.”

When he attended the next American Rental Association trade show in February 2020 he talked to the owners of Lang Specialty Trailers. “They gave us tickets to the WWETT Show and I wound up purchasing two trailers,” he says.

Graber returned home and started a luxury trailer business, Grand Restrooms, while his wife Cindy and daughter Alexa continued with the event business, both located in Clover, South Carolina.

But things did not go according to plan.

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Al Graber

THE FIRST CHALLENGE

“I left the WWETT Show with that tingly, excited-but-scared feeling,” Graber says. Reality hit two weeks later when the country shut down during COVID.

“The great thing was I had nothing better to do than sit there and look at every potential renter — wedding venues, event planners, hospitals, townships, you name it,” he says. “I’m a volunteer firefighter, so I also talked with the county — that if there’s going to be any COVID protocols where extra restrooms are needed, I got you covered.”

Business trickled in and by May some restrictions were lifted. “And then everything went bananas,” Graber says. “All my time sitting there contacting these folks paid off.”



CHANGING DIRECTION

Graber once said, “no way, no how” to standard portable restrooms. But, again, he had to face reality. Even with COVID restrictions lifted, wedding sizes were limited and couples were hesitant to rent a \$1,300 trailer for 35 people.

He had to do something to avoid losing customers. “I took a shot and started saying, ‘How about if I get you an ADA plastic portable?’ We bought our first ones in April 2020 and dressed them up with sinks, mirrors, lights, plants. People started jumping on those.”

Large events eventually came back, and those ADA customers are now some of the company’s top trailer customers.

A GROUP DECISION

With the addition of ADAs, Graber bought a vacuum truck to retain profits lost by paying pumping companies to service the units. Then it was decision time. He sat down with the team.

“These were guys from ABT Events who for years had been wrestling 1,000-pound waterslides, working in the heat,” he says. “I gave them the option — ‘If you want to become full-time employees and you’re OK servicing portable restrooms, I’ll bring them in.’” It was unanimous and the company placed its first order.

That led to an unexpected expansion into construction when one of their trailer customers told him, “If you handle construction portables the way you handle your trailers, we’ll give you all the business you can handle.”

Construction now accounts for 60% of their work. That called for a change in branding, which Graber is currently working on. “The branding was geared towards luxury — crisp, black tie,” he says. “Now we’ve got portable restrooms and we also added temporary fencing (ZND Temporary Fence Panels) so we need something more encompassing.” He’ll keep the Grand Restrooms name, but change the logo.



Below: Daniel Timmons uses a Mahindra tractor to move a Satellite Industries restroom in the company yard.



PEOPLE AND EQUIPMENT

The company now has about 300 standard and ADA-compliant units and 30 hand-wash stations (PolyJohn and Satellite Industries) and 10 restroom trailers (six Lang, two DRE Custom Trailers, one Satellite Suites, one Rich Specialty Trailers). Transport trailers are from F.M. Manufacturing.

Service trucks include a 2020 Ram 5500 from PortaLogix with an 800-gallon waste/350-gallon freshwater aluminum tank and Fruitland pump, a 2011 Ford E-450 with a Robinson Vacuum Tanks 650-gallon waste/250-gallon freshwater aluminum slide-in tank and Masport pump, and a 2022 Chevrolet 6500 with an

Above: From left, technicians James Bond, Raul Perez and Daniel Timmons work together to load Satellite restrooms onto a trailer from F.M. Manufacturing for delivery.



Raul Perez moves a Satellite Industries restroom on the company grounds.



Imperial Industries 1,300-gallon waste/400-gallon freshwater aluminum tank and National Vacuum Equipment pump.

On staff is Jesse Bond, James Bond, Daniel Timmons, Raul Perez and Tonya Tessneer, a shared employee with ABT.

Grabber looks for people who have enthusiasm and dedication, who appreciate job security and a family orientation. A candidate may not initially look like the best fit, but if they have those qualities he'll train them. "They're still a work in progress," he says. "We're constantly training and learning from our mistakes. They're growing with me."

"It's a fabulous business to be in and somewhat easy to get into. You can have some long hours but I'm used to that. There's been no bad."

Al Graber

COFFEE AND PIZZA

Graber loves his customers. "They're not just the people funding our lives; they're our friends," he says. He seeks their opinions and enjoys dropping by job sites with coffee and doughnuts. One of the construction supervisors occasionally makes pizzas for them and they all sit around and have a beer.

"One of the first things our driver is supposed to do is meet the superintendent," Graber says. "Let them put a face to your name. And always keep in mind, what are their needs, what can we do, do they need a different kind of unit, a different air freshener? My guys get great reviews. I think some of our success has been because we're so accommodating."



Al Graber, with his wife Cindy and daughter Alexa at Grand Restrooms in Clover, South Carolina.

PAY IT FORWARD

Graber says he's had a lot of help and mentors along the way — manufacturers, other contractors, *Portable Restroom Operator* magazine — and now wants to do the same for others.

"I absolutely love helping people in the business," he says. "At the WWETT Show, I take classes and network, but the majority of the time I'll be at Lang's talking to people who want to get in the business. I tell them it's a great business, great money, great people — but here are some of the mistakes I made."

Some of his suggestions:

Keep spare parts. "Don't think that just because the trailers are new nothing can go wrong. One deep freeze can put a trailer out of service for a long time."

Success comes from how you handle yourself, your employees and your customers.

Don't have a narrow focus. "One guy just wanted government contracts. Those are great but not that easy to get and a lot of people want them. I just wanted to do luxury trailers, and just service big corporate events and weddings. I also thought I would never do long-term contracts. I didn't see the money in it. That was one of my biggest mistakes; that nobody came out and hit me on the backside of the head and said, 'You fool. You want long-term. It's job security.'"



Al Graber (center) confers with technicians Raul Perez (left) and Daniel Timmons.

NO REGRETS

Graber hasn't been to a NASCAR race since 2014 but has no regrets. He says he's overwhelmed at how quickly the business grew and how willing other contractors are to help him. "It's a fabulous business to be in and somewhat easy to get into," he says. "You can have some long hours but I'm used to that. There's been no bad." ■

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