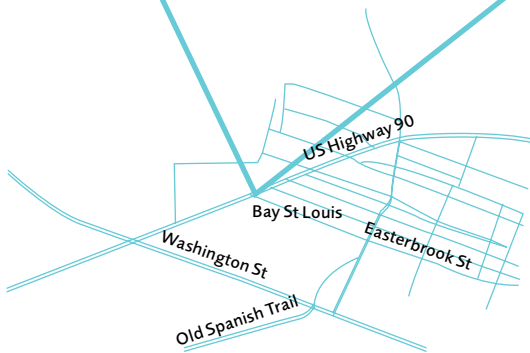




CASE STUDY #1

ALICIA COOL

Owner: Bloomers Flowers
Highway 90, Bay St. Louis, MS



Alicia Cool moved to the Gulf Coast from Atlanta, Georgia. She started her floral design company, Bloomers Flowers, in 1996, and in her words, “it’s been all over the entire Gulf Coast.” After her third child, she reduced her three stores down to one in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. We interviewed her there in January 2007.

Tell us about your hurricane experience.

I was not here. We chose to leave because . . . we went through George, and that was enough for me to know that I wanted to get out. So we left. We went to Tunica. That’s normally where we evacuate to.

We didn’t know exactly [what had happened] until a couple days afterwards. As soon as the storm had passed, my husband came back down here. We pretty much knew that it was going to be bad just from everything we were hearing on the news.

We did get some water in my neighborhood, but our house is up on a hill. We’re up on a crawl space too, so we got probably a couple of inches. So we were able to offer some shelter to some neighbors that were down below us that got eight foot of water.

I think we fared pretty well and that was a blessing. The business here got about three and a half feet of water. It came in and left, and it was kind of strange. There were high area water marks. There were low area water marks, and so we’re not exactly sure what the final count was. But it was strange. Everything got water.

So essentially, everything in your business was wiped out?

Yeah, just about everything. Things that were up relatively high on the walls, we were able to salvage but for the most part everything was destroyed. By the time we got here to clean up, several weeks had gone by. My husband said just don’t come back. There was just a state of chaos—for lack of a better word—here so he said, “Don’t bother coming back. I’ll call you when you can come back.” So probably about six, seven weeks later, my mother-in-law who owns the store with me came back and started cleaning. By that time the mold had taken over—it was pretty disgusting.

Again, so you came back, and did you focus on building both the business and home at the same time?

Well, we started on the business first. Because I think without business you can’t have people wanting to come back and stay here so we focused primarily on business—getting it up and running so that we would also have an income to live and build our house back. And then we started on the house. We were also waiting for a FEMA trailer for a couple of weeks. So we just hopped right in and got in here.

Tell me a little bit about your recovery period. What did you have? Were you adequately insured?

We [thought we had] adequate insurance. We didn’t need flood insurance because we weren’t in a flood zone. But because it was a hurricane, nothing was covered. We were caught in the rigamarole of that whole battle over what’s covered, what’s not covered, what are we going to pay, what are we not going to pay. We wound up getting about \$15,000 total, and that was because we had a fence and an outside structure and things like that that were covered. So that helped us get back on our feet again a little bit. The business itself here got nothing. We fought with the insu-

rance company just to get \$1,000 out of business coverage and so the total coverage that we got paid for this shop was \$1,000. We did everything else ourselves.

So did you apply for any SBA loans? Or federal assistance?

We applied. We got a bridge loan through a bank that was to buy some supplies to get us going again and that was enough just to start. You know, elbow grease and a lot of effort is worth more than money is.

How do you think government is handling the situation?

Our local leaders did an excellent job. I wasn't a huge fan of Eddie Favre, the mayor [of Bay St. Louis], before the storm because I wasn't from here. He's a good old boy, and that's great here because this is a good old boy town. But I'm not from here so I didn't connect with that. But after the storm I realized that he probably was the best man for the job when all this happened, and I'm impressed with how he handled everything and is still handling things. So now I'm an Eddie Favre fan.

What about the state and federal level?

I think that before the storm he [Mississippi governor, Haley Barbour] made a great call, putting us on notice early enough to get help as soon as we could. It would have been nice to have it earlier. It took about a week to get some real help in here. But I understand that things happen, and this was an experience for everybody, so maybe next time help will get here a little faster.

As far as the national level, I think there's a lot of bureaucratic crap. There's just entirely too much red tape to go through to get funds to the people immediately. I think the biggest thing that I kept hearing over and over again after the storm was that we can go and rebuild Iraq but we can't rebuild our own country. That's true, and that's disturbing to me.

You've said that this was a very competitive business environment before. What's the competition like now?

There isn't a whole lot of competition right now. There is another flower shop that has opened in town, and we try to send him business to kind of keep him going because I do like some competition. I don't want to be the only name in town. I'm hoping more will come.

After the storm, a few [stores] were the first names back. Everybody was drawn to you just because you were the first back. We were the first retail store so people would just come in here. A *lot* of people came in here. Not always to shop. But just to see some normalcy. To feel that things were getting back to normal. We opened in the end of October [2005]. It was really pretty quick after the storm, and it was nice because we redid our walls green and pink. It was bright. People would come in here and say, "Thank God, something looks normal around here." So that was nice. And with that happening, we became the only flower shop, the only boutique in town. So we made a name for ourselves and are very busy now.

What do you think is keeping the other competition away?

They're scared to open up. It's tough for someone just to open up. It's a different market now. You don't have the same types of purchases. We've had to kind of re-invent ourselves in some different areas. We have a party room here that we're going to be closing down and going to a gift basket division in a corporate level because it just seems to be where the market is taking us. So we're trying to reinvent some things to stay ahead of the game, and I think for the average Joe, that's difficult. Even if you're in business to do it—but to come into a community and kind of judge where things are going, it's difficult.

How has your business grown?

The corporate aspect has just gone through the roof. With us being the only store here, nobody really had anybody else to go to. So now we handle a lot of casino accounts, a lot of amenity baskets. We handle the flowers now of a lot of big names corporations. We actually formed a different company to encompass this, and that's lots of different employees.

How did your corporate accounts find you?

DuPont was our first corporate client after the storm. They are a big-time proponent of local business—a requirement for doing business with them is that you are local. They found that we were open; they used us; they loved us. We got on their list.

We had a caterer friend that was doing some things for Harrah's. He recommended us. We did a job for Harrah's, and then they stopped using their out-of-town people and started using us primarily.

It just built from there because we started getting references and word-of-mouth advertising.

We've talked to people who work with a lot of small businesses, and one of the things they talked about is how important a network is. Tell me about your network in terms of who your network was before, what happened, how you pieced it back together.

Of course, I had friends that had been in the floral industry with me for years, but right after the storm I couldn't find them and really had no way of getting in touch with them. The wholesaler that I used, that we have here locally, I couldn't even get in touch with him to find out where people were.

[For example,] we live an hour from Ocean Springs. If I have an order coming in [for Ocean Springs], and I can't find the lady that I normally would send that order to, that order just doesn't get taken. That's frustrating because normally I'm able to help clients regardless of what they need.

So losing touch with people was probably one of the hardest things. I kind of just threw up my hands and said, "I'm sorry I can't help you." I'm not used to doing that.

[The situation changed when] the wholesaler that was in Gulfport came back. As he started coming back, local florists started getting in touch with him. Then I was able to contact him and see who was going to open back up and whom I could send my clients to.

Has your business helped you with getting some normalcy in other areas of your life, like your family?

Wow, I would think that my family was probably insane until we got back into our house. I don't think that work offered any sort of stability for us because it was so busy and so—we were just all over the place between me trying to work here in the shop, handle the corporate clients, try and rebuild our house, try and keep the family together. It was absolute chaos and insanity for months.

Photo: Billy Herron

