



Liz: Hi everyone welcome to waste three 60s nothing wasted podcast on every episode we invite the most interesting people in waste recycling and organics to sit down with us and chat candidly about their thoughts their work this unique industry and so much more so thanks for listening and enjoy this episode.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Liz: Hi everyone. This is Liz Bothwell from Waste360 with Kevin Atkinson owner of Texas Pride Disposal. Welcome Kevin and thank you for being here.

Kevin: Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Liz: So, I have to ask... I see that you're a loyal LSU alum. How psyched are you to see Odell Beckham Junior in Jarvis Landry together again?

Kevin: I am beyond psyched actually. I have some good friends from Cleveland, and I don't think I'm as excited as they are but I'm very excited to see them back together again.

Liz: Oh it's going to be great. Cleveland should have a very interesting season.

Kevin: Yes I think it will be watched very closely by many.

Liz: I agree. So, you've said that you're just one of those kids who woke up and wanted to be a garbage guy. Could you please share a little bit about your journey from that and to where you are now with Texas Pride?

Kevin: Yeah absolutely. I mean I literally was the kid that grew up chasing the garbage trucks up and down the street, obviously never completely grew out of that. My mom had a whole fleet of trucks, which she kind of provided me as a kid and it was funny because I realized now what she was doing.

I had my outdoor garbage trucks which my mom told me all the weeds in the garden where the trash go pick it up. That was convenient. I was always fascinated by them chase them up and down the street and had goldfish named BFI. And I think my parents were a little concerned about me for a bit but went off to college at LSU and came home my freshman year and needed a job and didn't want to sack groceries make a minimum wage again. So, just called the phone number of my parents recycling bin and three days later, I was on the back of a garbage truck working for WCA. First day on the job, it was ninety-five degrees down here in Houston and came home and told my parents I really didn't think I was cut out for it. And you know they told me just to stick with it for a week and fast forward these 15 years. Now here we are. I worked with the WCA for the following summers and holidays let me come back anytime I wanted. I got my driver's, license drove for them and then after graduation they brought me on as a trainee and then I took over management of a small business municipality for them and then took over their residential division in the Houston market in 2009 and then the hauling division in 2011, I think it was, and then in 2013 I left and started Texas Pride Disposal.

We bought a small company on the southwest side of Houston that had two trucks and 1,200 subscription customers and fast forward to today and we're running just about 65 trucks right now, servicing 165,000 or so customers in the Houston area. And then we've also got a contract with C. Houston helping them with the recycling services which we're servicing about 108,000 homes there. So quite a bit different than it was when we started up quite a bit different than my toy garbage trucks picking out weeds of the garden. But it's been a fun run.

Liz: Oh well quite the story. And you pride yourself on being accountable and service oriented is it do you think that's a competitive advantage for you.

Kevin: Yeah, I mean I think in this that's all we are is a service business, at the end of the day. But I think the passion for what we do, for what I do especially it leads to what

we expect of our crews in the streets. And so, you know truthfully at the end of the day if somebody in the organizations are getting things done, I tell all of our customers at least the decision makers on our contracts, here's my cell phone if you ever need anything call me directly and I'll make sure it's taken care of and I do that for two reasons... one our services is good enough to where I don't worry about giving my cell phone out to 725 different boards that we service but also because I do stand behind the service we provide and if there is an issue I take it very personally and we'll obviously do anything that I can to get it rectified as quickly as possible.

Liz: That's great. And are you still having humans answer the phone? I know that was a goal of yours early on.

Kevin: Yes we are will we avoid the automated voice system, we've got an automated welcome now... God for those times that there may be a brief hold before you get hold of a customer service rep but we do we've got 6 customer service reps, kind of gone through some growing pains at the beginning of this year just with extremely accelerated growth. So, trying to catch up on the customer service side but we still stick with that real-life person that you get. I think that's just something that people appreciate versus having to navigate an automated system that doesn't understand you or takes a half hour to try to get to somebody that can actually assist you.

Liz: It's wonderful to have humans now because you just expect it to be automated so

Kevin: Yeah absolutely. That's a plan.

Liz: So, do you think this industry is becoming more data driven? It certainly looks that way. But what do you because you're out there and seeing it on a daily basis?

Kevin: I think that it definitely is and there's nothing wrong with that to a degree. I think maintaining that balance of data and common sense though is key. I think that there's a fine line that the data can be either overly harvested or overly used which point it just becomes essentially cumbersome, or really just more or less an obstacle for you to process what we're doing. I think people over complicate that were garbage guys, we go out and pick garbage up and all the technology in the data can be helpful, it can also lose sight of what we're doing at the end of the day.

Liz: Sure. And I have heard you say it's simple... People want their garbage picked up and they don't want to deal with it and they want it to be seen which is possible.

Kevin: Yes absolutely. I mean it's a very simple concept and unlike a restaurant that you know has to go and prepare a fine dish or, you know, maybe a service where you do a concert venue or a sporting event and to experience something in that sort of nature. People want their trash gone and there's no need to overcomplicate that.

Liz: And then are you seeing any trends in in the more e-waste, smarter recycling? Are people catching on or is the education paying off?

Kevin: I think there's been a lot of attention in the last 15 months on the industry side obviously with the state that recycling is in right now, but I think the media has done a good job of somewhat accurately portraying what's going on with China and with recycling in general. I think that that large media presence seen at newspapers, seen it in the news, obviously news websites, Facebook, everywhere you look, it's been plastered everywhere which helps us in getting the message out about cleaner streams and what can and can't do into the recycling containers. But, you know, ultimately it's a it's a long road to haul there when you've got customers that that sometimes see that recycling container as a second trash can or want to wish cycle they're waste away. Education is key. And getting that message out is crucial.

First it streams themselves though obviously Amazon and all the shipping that we see nowadays. I think the last 10-15 years you look at the swing from newspaper to cardboard and it's pretty incredible. We service our customers typically on a weekly service schedule for recycling. And it's amazing to me how many of our recent customers have opted to move from the 18-year-old banner a sixty-five-gallon cart to a ninety-five-gallon cart simply because of all the cardboard that they're receiving at the home. So, it's very interesting I'm curious see what that will do to the residential stream but also the commercial stream as we move forward with the with people moving away from the brick and mortar to a home delivery.

Liz: Oh definitely. And I'm sure it will grow even more so it will be interesting to watch.

Kevin: Yeah absolutely.

Liz: So last time you spoke with Waste360, you had put a lot of safety procedures in place. Could you tell us a little bit about what you have done and are you seeing?

Kevin: Yeah. You know we've grown quite a bit since we last spoke. I think that was two years ago, but the results are definitely there. Our insurance company has almost been blown away with the numbers that we've kind of put out there. I've been blown away with the numbers that we've been able to achieve over the last couple of years as well compared to industry standard, compared to really just a loss ratio as a whole, that our insurance company handles. We've been one of their top performers, you know, monthly safety meetings, safety stand downs when there's an incident that occurs. We actually have a safety director in place now we were smaller a couple of years ago and didn't have that luxury, but we've got a full-time safety compliance manager which I think has been a big help as well. Much more rigorous onboarding process very detailed both in regard to the safety side as well as the service side. All good stuff and all very positive results that we've seen because of that.

Liz: Good for you. That's great.

Kevin: Yeah it's great news for obviously our employees that are out there working in the field but also for us financially as well.

Liz: Definitely. What lessons did you learn during Hurricane Harvey both as a leader and as a business that needs to prepare and ultimately clean up after these devastating super storms?

Kevin: Yeah. It was obviously a huge event down here. Fifty-four inches of rain over a couple of days is that more than anything is really meant to handle even down here. But had eight days, eight service days that we suspended because of you know the inability to either navigate roadways or our employees to get here safely to go out and service our customers.

We had to prioritize the waste we were collecting because after over a week of no service there was quite a bit of waste that was gone bad either due to a loss of

electricity or flooding, just very extenuating circumstances. So, we moved we opted to suspend recycling service, take those trucks, focus on getting garbage collected.

Fortunately for us we as a customer base were not impacted tremendously which made things easier on our side. More challenges were just roadways that were still closed for weeks after the storm just because the water that was still flowing in and out of the city.

So logistically that was a challenge for TCQ lifted all of their tonnage restrictions on disposal sites which was a plus for us. But trying to get the garbage picked up trying to get us picked it up safely. It was a lot of catching up. It took us our guys, our team did a tremendous job. They worked the Saturdays and Sundays for the two weekends after the storm trying to get everything back on track. We turn recycling back on, I think it was about a week and a half after the storm, and I think really it was about two weeks after the after, the eight days off that we were back on a regular schedule and up and running.

We had the luxury of being able to help out some of the communities that we service with additional service or additional collection of some of storm they encountered and then we also were able to help some cities that we didn't service that couldn't wait for the county to come out and pick them up. So, we've actually built a relationship with a small-town west of Houston that we had been open service before they let anybody come in there and pick up whoever they wanted to. Through that hurricane and the relationship thereafter we actually now have an exclusive contract with that city for their residential services. So, you know being able to go out and help the residents who were affected, by it the citizens who were affected, by the storm the fact that our crews were willing to go out and do that. Obviously picking up garbage it's been soaked in flood water for a week is never a fun job description but kudos to our guys for willing to go out and kind of go above and beyond what we typically ask them to do on a regular service day. And I hope we don't have to go through something like that again. Not my idea of fun, not my definition of fun but our team did a tremendous job of coming together and servicing both our customers and again people that were just in need at that time definitely.

Liz: And speaking of that it seems that you and your company do a lot for your local community even outside of extenuating circumstances like that. What types of Good Samaritan acts are you guys doing and for whom?

Kevin: Yeah, we really just try to tell all of our customers that you guys support us and we're happy to support you, so fitted in the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo golf tournaments. We just by chance happen to sponsor the LC Houston Alumni Association. I am a proud sponsor of that one but really just the anybody that we service. We're always happy to assist and the bigger we've gotten we've actually started to talk about either charities or groups that we would like to be more involved with.

I kind of look at what I did and having a dream as a kid to be able to do this and now being able to do it. I think it kind of hits home closer to home for me on kids that are maybe affected by an illness or something that maybe won't be able to see or live the kind of dreams that I got to. So, as we continue to move forward, I think that an organization of that nature or maybe the children's hospital in town will be something that we try to work more closely with and donate to as well.

Liz: Oh that would be amazing.

Kevin: Yeah it's a, it's just something that I'm very fortunate in the spot that I'm in and it's always tough for me to see people and especially kids that are in a little bit of a different circumstance and like you said hopefully something we've been talking about for quite some time and the bigger we get I think the more we are able to hopefully do something there.

Liz: Oh good. Good luck. I hope you do.

Kevin: Absolutely.

Liz: You're speaking at WasteExpo at our new Business Growth Forum in a session about organic growth. Could you tell our listeners a little bit about?

Kevin: From our standpoint, you know, obviously a lot of lessons learned having gone to work for a large national company and being moving up from the ground up and then

being put in place over an existing operation that had 200,000 customers to go from that to starting a business literally from basically scratch, you know, two trucks and 1,200 subscription customers and no contracts. You know, if I were to do it all over again, it's very fortunate that I had a business partner and a mentor who's been in the business for 40 years, I wouldn't be here without him.

So, whether it's a partner or just a mentor. Highly recommend, especially for somebody that's trying to do this maybe for the first time, I highly recommend having somebody like that that you can lean on for advice throughout the process whether it be something small or big.

I would always recommend new equipment over used equipment. I know some people don't have that luxury but we started with used equipment and after a fire burned up a quarter of our fleet due to a fault battery turn off switch that was kind of the final nail in the coffin for us on unused equipment because it was started in a used truck we had purchased. So, we've tried to stick to new equipment since then just the reliability of it.

Finding a vendor equipment manufacturer that you can trust, and it will be there to support you. We've done a really good job with Freight Liner and Hiler here in Houston. Both have done a really good job of taking care of us from those respects so trusted vendors. Containers, same thing. We used rare and predominately for almost everything that we've done for the last five and a half years. Always taking care of us. We needed carts in a pinch. They were able to do it very first large contract we got, we had to turn around 2,200 carts in 10 days and they did it for us. So just having those relationships in place I never really understood the true value of vendor relationships when I was at WCA. But as a small business I definitely learned that very quickly.

Then financing, I mean making sure you've got that lined up before you dive into it, is key because you don't want to get stuck with your pants down with a contract in your hand. But no trucks or containers to go service with. So, the financing is key.

We had a good partner here in Houston that was a local partner. We kind of I think outpaced in outgrew what they could handle for us. And luckily, Comerica was down the backside forests to help us continue our growth.



Another fantastic partner to have they understand the business. They loan off of, I guess, models that are more inclined to benefit this industry versus traditional models. It's been a real pleasure working with Comerica with them for just about a year now but it's just been a breath of fresh air. Having a bank that really understands the business working with you. But yeah, I think you're the vendors you work with crucial and then just not forgetting the fact that your service business and doing everything you can to go above and beyond the service for the customer.

Our mission has been since day one and is still to deliver service that goes above and beyond what our customers' expectations are and what we don't do that every time. It's just you can't lose sight of of the service.

Liz: Well those are great tips and I look forward to seeing your session at WasteExpo. So, what's next for a Texas Pride Disposal. What's your vision for the company now that you're nearly doubling in size year after year?

Kevin: I get this question all the time and I feel like every time I answer it, I'm completely off on what my idea or expectation is of it. But, you know, we've had accelerated growth for the last three or four years now. The last couple of years I tell myself we'll never do that again and then we add more homes next year more customers and next year we added over 50,000 homes to our residential services last year. And I said okay we'll definitely never do that again in one year. And through this year we've already booked 35,000 homes so, you know, it's fun, it's breakneck pace but that's kind of how I like it.

I know that we are working on moving closer toward a commercial front load service as well. We offer a real load right now. And just with the amount of containers we have on the street we are moving closer to moving in the front load which we're excited about.

But, you know, I tell everybody when I started this thing you know you asked me where I would have been in 10 years, I would've said probably run in 20-25 trucks and service in 70,000-80,000 customers and happy as a clam. Never expected it to turn into what it is now and we'll see where it takes us. But I'm only 33 I got a long way to go before I retire. So, I'm just gonna have fun with it and see where it takes us.

Liz: Amazing what we can't wait to see what's next. Because I'm sure more growth is ahead and who knows what else.

Kevin: Absolutely.

Liz: So what else should we be paying attention to in the world of waste recycling and organics? What do you think the next frontier is for the industry?

Kevin: The next frontier. You know, I think the recycling, I think is truly the next frontier thing revisiting what we're doing with recycling is the immediate current frontier, almost like full circle. We went from the 18-gallon bins to these containers where we throw everything into and now, we're re-evaluating that. I think the changes that are taking place in the recycling markets right now are going to be more or less permanent. So, I think that the current frontier is revisiting recycling.

Think longer term you'll continue to see the increase in organics in the food waste collection. I think it's an interesting concept with that because it's one of those the traditional materials and recycling in the cardboard and plastic paper the value that you see in those materials may not repurpose them versus use spent food and yard waste than what it takes to go and get that collected a piece of equipment that's burning fossil fuels, think you start to walk a little bit of a finer line there. Curious to see what happens with e-waste as we continue to move forward because obviously, we all become more and more dependent on our devices as things progressed. So, I think there's going to be a continuing increase and that's in the overall waste stream.

And then long term, I think there's been a lot of talk about the autonomous vehicles and I'll be very curious to see the progress that those make. I think that you ask anybody right now do you want a driverless truck driving neighborhood streets where your kids are out playing on their bikes and stuff. I think anybody in their right mind would tell you "absolutely not, no way in hell right now". But we'll see where that technology advances over the next 10, 15, 20 years. But obviously I think that's probably further down the horizon than anything else. But as with anything technology seems to continue progress and with it the industry continues to adapt so we shall see where everything goes.

Liz: We shall see. And what advice would you give to young professionals entering this industry?

Kevin: Advice to young professionals. It's a very fun industry. You know, I think unlike a lot of industries, it's a very you're your competitor could also be somebody that you go to a meeting and you go head to head against and then that afternoon you go out and you have a beer and just talk about how things are going and have a laugh and shake hands and go home. I love the industry for that reason. You know one of our biggest allies in this market is WCA the company that I came from and it's just unlike a lot of industries where it can be very cutthroat. Stabbed in the back I think this is a very tight knit industry. Anybody coming into it, don't burn any bridges and just be a sponge and learn everything you can. But it's a very fun industry at the end of the day. And he's made a good choice getting into it.

Liz: I agree. That's great advice. What keeps you busy outside of work?

Kevin: Outside of work. That's the question my girlfriend asked me quite a bit as well.

Obviously, sports... LSU football during football season, I always try to get up to go skiing in Colorado once a year. I enjoy wake boarding stuff of that nature. I'm a craft beer nerd, so visiting some of the breweries around town and patios season is always nice balance between work and enjoying life I think is a huge piece of the puzzle and, you know, there's definitely times you need to turn work off and just focus on the other relationships in the life. And that's something that again for people that are maybe doing something on their own or starting to do something on their own, can't lose sight about of that. I tell my girlfriend all the time know Texas Pride Disposal will be here until it's not, but hopefully she's around for the long haul and I know I am with her. So that's of I think that matters at the end of the day. But yeah, it's sports, beer. I sound like a regular dude, I guess.

Liz: That's great. That's awesome. And then how can listeners hear more from you and Texas Pride Disposal.

Kevin: You know, I think we're very active on our Facebook page. We'd get an Instagram page now as well. So, we try to post there pretty consistently. Anything that

goes through our Facebook page, I'm the one that typically response to that so if you're going to send us a message, it'll more than likely be me responding. And our website as well we try to post a lot on our website, TexasPrideDisposal.com. Just for our social media, you know, Facebook, Instagram there. We try to post pictures and information on services customer information for possible service delays or, you know, we've had some phone issues recently, so we post that information up there. But we have fun with a lot of fun with our Facebook and Instagram pages.

Liz: OK. Well we are following, hopefully our listeners will be too. And then Kevin, you still seem just as passionate about the industry as you probably were as a kid when we got to know you earlier on. Is that just natural? Is that how you approach life or is that really you just love this industry that you know?

Kevin: I think my parents said maybe I ate paint chips as a kid and it was wired in me for that reason. You know, I was fortunate enough to get to do what I love or work for work and, I guess you know, hobbies outside of work, you could consider this a hobby almost because at times it doesn't feel like work. There are definitely days that it does feel like work. But, you know, I think being able to deliver service and continue to grow like we have it's a challenge for me individually for the company as a whole and as long as we continue to grow and we can service our customers and keep them happy. You know, it's I don't see why anybody would enjoy that challenge and get me come in and do what you love every day.

Liz: Oh, it is a blessing to love what you do.

Kevin: Absolutely. That's the that's the definite truth right there. Definitely makes work a lot easier.

Liz: Well this is great, Kevin. Thank you so much for talking with us and spending so much time with us. We look forward to seeing you at WasteExpo very soon.

Kevin: Yeah likewise. We look forward to being out there and safe travels and we will see you soon.

Liz: OK. Thanks Kevin.

Kevin: Absolutely have a great one.