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Photograph by Miriam Miller



# Cleaning up crime

Two Sydney nurses discovered there was a ready market in eliminating gore and going where other cleaners fear to tread.

In Quentin Tarentino's *Pulp Fiction*, Harvey Keitel plays the role of what is known in gangland as a cleaner. "I solve problems," he tells Jules and Vincent (Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta), two wayward hitmen who need to erase some grisly evidence after accidentally shooting a passenger in their Chevy.

In Sydney, Pam Marsden and Bronwyn Ward provide a similar - but legitimate - service. Their business, BVM Clean Scene, works with clients including the police, the public trustee, health services and property managers, cleaning up after crime, decompositions and difficult tenants.

This is no ordinary domestic cleaning service: Marsden and Ward use their many years of experience as trained nurses to totally disinfect sites where other cleaners fear to tread, sites where bodily fluids are present that may harbour infectious diseases such as hepatitis.



"Our clients are many and varied," says Marsden. "We have murders, we have suicides, we have decomp, - the ones that have been dead for a while, decompositions. Sometimes we have deceased estates, or people being moved to nursing homes, where they've been incontinent, that sort of thing."

"We probably have more decompositions than anything else," she adds.

The pair come to the scene armed with more than strong stomachs and a bottle of Pine-O-Cleen.

"You can't be too careful," says Marsden. "We wear disposable overalls, which are discarded after each job. We wear gumboots, which are disinfected after each job. We wear hoods, masks and goggles. We wear three pairs of gloves - we have cotton ones, then we put surgical ones on, then we put heavy industrial ones on."

"Everything that's associated with bodily exudate could be there - particularly hepatitis, because hepatitis will last for quite a while," she says.

"It's not for the faint hearted, it really isn't, particularly the decompositions - they are just the pits," she says. "We had one last week where, for the first time, I nearly threw up. Usually we're pretty good, but we were both heading for the back door."

"You just have to bear in mind that it's a job that needs to be done, and if we don't do it, who will?" she says. "It's a service."

BVM Clean

Scene was established about 18 months ago after Marsden read about a similar service in the United States. "That prompted me to wonder if anybody did it here,"

Marsden says. "I did the necessary research and couldn't find anybody, so I thought, 'Right, here's a niche - I'll fill it.'"

The former general nurse and midwife says she is addicted to change and had been on the lookout for a business opportunity for some years. "I've had all sorts of ideas - most of them hare-brained - but this one seemed not quite as hare-brained as some of the others," she says. In the past she has worked as a nurse on cruise ships and considered businesses ranging from manufacturing anaesthetic gas masks to replacing piers on people's private marinas in Sydney harbour.

"The trouble with most businesses is that unless you set them up yourself there are huge costs involved," she says. "I might have champagne tastes but I'm on a beer budget - a lot of the ideas had to hit the deck because of that."

Marsden says she approached Ward, a friend she met at the pathology centre where they both worked (and still do part-time), with the latest idea, which required little capital. The pair undertook some market research, speaking to morgues, police, and

volunteers with organisations representing the victims of crime.

"Sometimes the members of volunteer organisations did the cleaning - I thought that was pretty horrible because they'd already been through the same sort of thing themselves and this was the last thing they needed to do," says Marsden.

"Likewise, the police sometimes did it out of the goodness of their hearts. That's not good either because they're busy enough, and they really weren't equipped to do it - they weren't taking care of the infection side of the job. And sometimes it was just [left to] the victim's relatives, which was equally horrific."

Marsden says while she does not often meet clients herself, she feels that "just the fact that we provide this service must give them great peace of mind".

While the pair were caught up in some controversy after appearing on ABC Television's *Elle McFeast Live* - on the same program as convicted killer Chopper Read, although in a separate segment - Marsden says she and Ward are aware of the special sensitivities involved in their business. "You've got to be cognisant of people's vulnerability at this particular stage - when we're dealing with them they're right in the acute phase of distress," she says. "You can't go plodding in there like a herd of elephants. You've got to respect them, you've got to be sensitive."

"We maintain high ethical standards and it's very important to us to be as professional as possible. You are dealing with people in highly sensitive states, they're very emotional. You must deal with them honestly and you don't invade their privacy in any way. You've always got to keep in mind what victims of crime - or any stressful situation - are feeling."

As for the response of other people to their unusual business, Marsden says most react initially with horror. "But the next thing, of course, is that they're avidly interested and want to know all the gory details. It's like people and accidents - they've just got to look," she says.

BVM Clean Scene currently operates throughout New South Wales but has had calls from other states. Marsden says she and Ward are considering taking on staff to meet the demand that has built up over the past 18 months. The two women are also investigating the longer-term possibility of franchising the business. "We wouldn't mind seeing if it could be a franchise," says Marsden. "It's still embryonic so it's difficult to know. The fact that it's intellectual

property makes it hard too - you can't really patent the idea."

The unusual nature of the business means that Marsden is unable to quote facts and figures, for example, on market share and client base. "We don't actually have clients as such," apart from a limited pool of regulars such as property managers, she says. Essentially, each client is just a member of the public who has found themselves in a distressing situation - and hopefully someone the women won't meet again. "We don't actually want repeat business - I wouldn't wish that on anybody," Marsden says.

Marsden says her advice to other people who come across an unusual business idea is to take the plunge.

"If you've got a good idea, give it a go," she says. "Lots of people have terrific ideas but because they just lack the courage to have a go they never get off the ground."

So, she's glad she finally settled on one of her many business proposals? "Absolutely," she says. "I'm having a ball."



Pam Marsden (left) and Bronwyn Ward