

Twister Turns Man Into Unemployed, Then Entrepreneur

By Raegan Hennemann
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Matthew Milkint has taken devastation and destruction and turned it into opportunity.

Six months after he saw the business he worked for destroyed by the tornadoes that hit the Capital City, he opened his own business, Phoenix Collision & Automotive Refinishing.

"Everything works out for a reason and it always seems like things work out, it just takes hard work and it takes people around you giving you the help and push and everything you need to get things done," Milkint said.

For the past two years Milkint was a body technician at Bill Matthews Auto Body on North Street.

"They were completely demolished by the storm," he said. "They were great people to work for. Besides working for them I didn't see myself working for anybody else. I probably would have been there forever if this wouldn't have happened."

The week after the storm, Milkint helped with clean up at the shop and then made the decision to go out on his own and started looking for a location for his business, which ended up off of Jefferson Street on Springfield's northwest side. Early on Milkint asked his older sister, Tressa Hartman, to help out with the incorporation paperwork and to represent the business at various county board meetings.

"By the time we went for the zoning we kind of just decided that we complement each other as far as our backgrounds go and decided to do this 50-50," Hartman said.

Hartman's background is in corporation compliance, marketing and product development but she's always worked with law firms and financial institutions, not body shops, so she is really in a whole new world.

"We kind of laugh sometimes, you know, how do you end up in the body business after all of that? So, there's a lot I've learned that I never thought I'd know



Matthew Milkint and Tressa Hartman

about body work. But this does seem like the right fit, and you know Matthew said a couple of times there were so many times that things just fell into place that it just kept seeming like this is the right thing to do," she said.

Competition in the auto body repair industry is not a concern for the brother and sister team. While Hartman said "We're the little guys, we know that," Milkint is positive their local roots will help establish a solid business foundation.

"Luckily I have a lot of good friends, good family. They've always sent me work. The work never stops coming and it's all because friends and family and people really want to see me succeed. That's making this happen. It's just an amazing amount of support," he said.

Brad Zara, owner of Zara's Collision Center in Springfield, has been in the auto body repair business since 1987 and has seen the market become saturated over the years, but that's not to say it isn't a worthwhile venture to begin.

"All-in-all it's much tougher to get into now than it was nearly 20 years ago when I got into the business but I would never discourage somebody from doing it because hey, it worked for me and I'm sure

there were some people that discouraged me and once you've got your mind and heart set on something, go for it," Zara said.

Just like for Milkint, the tornadoes created something beneficial for Zara and his business.

"We saw immediately probably a 25 percent increase and a lot of that was the work that the tornado created as far as damaged vehicles and then also with Matthews (Auto Body) being destroyed and being taken out of the market the volume that they did was now being dispersed throughout the market," he said.

Before the tornadoes came along though, Zara said the auto body repair industry was seeing a decline in business.

"There are more vehicles on the road than ever but all the statistics as far as claims frequency, accident frequency, they're all declining. People are maybe being more careful drivers and roads are a lot safer, vehicles are built with a lot higher technology," Zara said. "And due to the cost of repair with the air bags and some of the other safety systems that are put into cars, the people survive the collision, the vehicle ends up sometimes being deemed a total loss because of the high cost to repair and that percentage is going up all

the time as well. So as far as repairable vehicles it's actually lower today than it was even 20 years ago.

"The other thing that affects (the industry) is people have much higher deductibles so a lot of vehicles are just not getting fixed. They can't afford the deductible, if it's drivable it just doesn't get fixed."

For right now though, Milkint and Hartman are focusing on the early times of the business and accomplishing their goals.

"Our biggest focus I think and where we really want to be a niche in the community is we really want to help out the community. We grew up here. I own the house I grew up in two miles away," he said.

"This area and Springfield, we just don't want to be known as another couple body shop owners. We'd like to be known as people who are really into the community and helping the community as much as possible. I think that's what's going to really separate, hope to separate, us from other people in our industry."

And, in case the business' name, Phoenix Collision & Automotive Refinishing, and logo, a profile of a bird with flame-like wings, might conjure up thoughts of Harry Potter and his second year at Hogwarts, it was actually Milkint's love for Greek and Egyptian mythology that inspired the name.

"I've always loved the idea of the meaning of the phoenix and it kind of fit in the whole situation of the storm, rising up from the ashes," he said.

The phoenix, which can also be spelled phenix, is a sacred bird of Egyptian mythology. Every 500 years it burns itself to ashes and then arises young and vigorous and more beautiful. It is known as a symbol of immortality.

Milkint himself has shown his own version of immortality by arising as a business owner after first suffering the destruction of the tornadoes.

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