

**interiors** AMY CAVANAUGH

## She's made to clean

Lesbian-owned cleaning company uses eco-friendly products

MAID TO CLEAN IS AN ECO-FRIENDLY, gay-owned business that is quickly becoming one of D.C.'s most respected cleaning companies. The family operation has recently launched its second branch, servicing more than 400 clients in D.C., Maryland and Virginia, and they've been ranked No. 1 in Checkbook Magazine, a national consumer publication, for two years in a row as the highest-rated cleaning company for quality and reliability in the D.C. metro area.

Cinderella "Cindi" Bermudez, who is a lesbian, started the company in 1996, because "I'm a clean freak," she laughs. "That the bottom line."

A former housekeeper in the hotel industry, Cindi has expanded her company from a one-woman operation to a two-franchise business.

"I rented a townhouse [in D.C.], and when I moved, I thought it was not clean enough, so I asked the property manager to let me have the key a day early so I could go in and clean it," she says. "When she saw that I was cleaning, she asked me to clean other rental properties, so I got into it sort of by accident. ... Within a few weeks I realized that I was doing what I loved."

Part of what makes Maid to Clean unique is its eco-friendly approach. The company uses environmentally friendly, non-toxic, non-abrasive products and allergen control equipment. Bermudez has always used eco-friendly products out of concern for staff.

"Working in the hotel industry, I saw what happened to the girls' skin and hands, and I knew I wanted to use products the girls could use every day that wouldn't damage skin. Eco-friendly products are usually less expensive, and [they] do not use anything that damages the environment."

In January, she teamed up with her brother, Merced Bermudez, who is also gay, to expand the business.

"I was considering becoming a national franchise, and asked him to come on board



**CINDI and MERCED BERMUDEZ**, a gay brother-sister team, run Maid to Clean, an expanding local cleaning business that uses eco-friendly products. (Blade photo by Henry Linser)

and help sort out if it's something I wanted to do," Cindi Bermudez says. "Merced redid the web site and logo. The first step toward becoming a national franchise is to open up a new office and see what that entails. After that we'll decide if we want to expand into a national franchise."

**THE BERMUDEZ SIBLINGS HAIL FROM** Austin, Texas. Cindi came to D.C. via Costa Rica, where she did a two-year stint in the Peace Corps, and Merced moved to Alexandria this year to help his sister.

"It's a family business," he says. "We're brother and sister, and we're both gay and lesbian, and it adds another dimension to the word 'family.'"

Merced admires his sister's business savvy, which has paid off with a number of dedicated employees and internal growth.

"I liked her business approach," he says, "it has always been about ... empowering women in management positions and training them to do their jobs."

Cindi is most proud of how well trained Maid to Clean employees are and how so many have stayed with her for a long time.

"What makes my company unique is its teamwork," she says, "It's only when my employees are ready for new clients that we grow. We all have the same vision, so it's not just me who is making all the decisions. ... Most employees stay with me, and all growth in the company is from within. I don't hire supervisors or managers outside the company."

Maid to Clean has a base of 450 clients with 44 staff members, and the Bethesda

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branch has 55 clients and six staff members. Sixty percent of Maid to Clean's clients are in D.C., and the rest are in Arlington and Alexandria. Merced's new office covers Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Silver Spring and Takoma Park.

**CHEERIE SMITH, A CLIENT FROM** Alexandria, Va., has her house cleaned by Maid to Clean twice a month. Smith heard about the company from a friend when it first started, and when she met Cindi she liked her direct approach.

"I've been very happy with them," Smith says. "Like any service industry they aren't perfect, but every problem I've had has always been handled professionally and quickly. Cindi has a lot of longevity in her employees, which is not always the case in the service industry."

Both Cindi and Merced are involved in the local gay scene. Maid to Clean participated in this year's Gay Pride parade and festival, and 40 to 50 percent of the company's clients are gay.

"We're a gay business and we support the community," Merced says, "We get involved with AIDS fundraisers and we participated in Pride. We try to stay involved, and our largest clientele is the gay community."