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'I've got an open mind': Inside the world of forensic cleaning



 FORENSIC CLEANER: Bryan Norris in PPE gear. Photo: The Canberra Times

Bryan Norris sat on his verandah on a sunny Wednesday morning, with sunglasses perched upon his nose and a much-loved dog cradled in his lap, as he watched his wife hang clothes on a Hills Hoist in the backyard.

The casual observer would never have guessed this man had one of the toughest jobs in Australia.

For the past 15 years Mr Norris has run a bio-hazard and forensic cleaning business. His company, Bio-Cleanse Pty Ltd, services regional Australia including the Southern Tablelands, Southern Highlands, Canberra and the South Coast.

In this line of work Mr Norris faces the stuff of nightmares on a daily basis. The business undertakes crime scene cleanups, and for Mr Norris it's important to focus on helping others to get through.

"When we are knocking on your door something bad has happened," he said.

Empathy is one of the most important qualities for a forensic cleaner.

"The person is normally going through some sort of trauma and they don't need any judgement from us," he said.

"We hold their hand from the start and try to make it as pleasant a journey as possible.

"The most rewarding part is getting a satisfied client at the end. You get a big hug and you've made their life that little bit easier in some way."

He said finding the positive was an important element, "otherwise, who wants to do what we do?"

"It's not fun."

With a background in the army Mr Norris is no stranger to tough situations. He got into the business after a discussion with a friend about a shortage in the industry.

Mr Norris underwent training at The National Institute of Decontamination Specialists, with part of his education conducted in America. Mr Norris is certified with the American Bio Recovery Association.

The businessman jumped into the deep end and attended his first crime scene cleanup within three months of opening.

He said that while most people thought bio-hazard services were restricted to crime scenes, "you'd be surprised when you'd need a forensic cleaner".

Bio-Cleanse specialises in mould cleaning, and also deals with sewage overflow, water damage, and fire restoration. He also cleans up after hoarders and people who live in squalor.

"The difference between a forensic cleaner and a normal cleaner is significant," Mr Norris said.

Decontamination of methamphetamine labs takes up a large portion of his time. Over the past year the company has also conducted deep cleaning for COVID-19.

A number of jobs have stuck with Mr Norris over the years. He said he had a "good psychologist" to help him deal emotionally with the job.

On one occasion, he was called to an incident where downstairs neighbours had painted cat poo on the door and stairwell of a woman's apartment on the top floor.

"I don't know how many cats they had, but they must've had a lot," he said.

"The cat poo was filled at her shoes, there was that much of it.

"There was an intense odour to it. That one took some cleaning."

Mr Norris had also attended a job where a woman had fed mice in her house.

"You couldn't walk anywhere without mice running everywhere, they were popping out of the ceiling. If you shook the curtain 20 of them would fall out.

"There was mice faeces through the beds. There was no way you could sit there without mice running over you."

Mr Norris said a snake had managed to get into the house and had "such a good time eating [the mice]" it got stuck on its way out and died.

"I've got an open mind when my phone rings."