



DormAid **Cleans Up** on College Campuses

Two college students turned their controversial dorm cleaning venture into a **multi-million dollar** business.

By Susan Johnston

WHEN MICHAEL KOPKO WAS A FRESHMAN AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY, HE JUST WANTED A CLEAN DORM ROOM. Now, three years later, he has a thriving business offering cleaning, laundry and other services to college students across the country.

DormAid started small. Kopko and his roommate agreed to share the costs of hiring a professional cleaning service. By the end of his freshman year, Kopko was scheduling cleaners for many of the students on his floor. Over the summer, he and his brother, a soon-to-be Princeton freshman, agreed to launch DormAid on their respective campuses.

But there was a bit of a snag when Harvard's administration threatened to shut them down for conducting an unauthorized business. Kopko and his business partners surveyed more than 200 Harvard students, because, as he explains, "the opponent willing to do more research usually wins." It took nine months, but Kopko finally won approval from the administration.

Then, The Harvard Crimson ran an editorial condemning DormAid's cleaning services as divisive and classist. Critics saw DormAid as another way to separate the haves from the have-nots on campus. The controversy attracted national media attention, including mentions in The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and even "The Daily Show" on Comedy Central.

"After The Crimson ran their story, I got out of class and had a phone call from AP and Reuters," recalls Kopko, now CEO of DormAid. "The press just swarmed in." Thanks to his maturity and confident interview skills, Kopko turned a potential public relations crisis into a growth opportunity for DormAid.

Since gaining approval on Harvard's campus, DormAid has expanded into 20 other units and plans to add hundreds more for the next school year. Other plans include adding a DormAid bedding product line and a student capital branch which would allow students to borrow money based on their career potential rather than their parents' income. Each campus has its own president responsible for operations and local marketing efforts. Currently the top three markets are Boston University, New York University and the University of Miami.

Roy Moran launched DormAid at the University of Miami two years ago. He says, "the success at Miami is due to the

presidents feel a sense of pride in ownership and that reporting hours online through an honor policy has never been an issue. "We make them understand that we look for results—who can do the most with the fewest hours?" he explains.

One president who has demonstrated major results in her first year is Stephanie Stein, a senior at the University of Pennsylvania. An English and cinema studies major, Stein handles scheduling, marketing and operations on Penn's campus, as well as remotely managing cleaning services at several campuses in Boston. Stein says it has been "very interesting for me to see a small company grow and develop. Being involved with DormAid led me to

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foundation [I built] with the administration and students before the school year." Moran also brought DormAid to Emory University when he transferred a year later, but strong sales at Miami continue under his successor.

"It was tough to make the transition to Emory," Moran remembers, "but I sat down with the administration and the school newspaper to get to know people as quickly as possible."

Moran began marketing DormAid at Miami the summer before his freshman year, and Kopko says that many of his unit presidents are freshman. He enjoys working with young students who have fresh ideas and aren't jaded by the working world. "I love that they're ready to change the world," he says.

Robert Cecot, Kopko's roommate and DormAid's chief operating officer, says that unit

my decision to apply to graduate school for an MBA."

The busiest time for promoting DormAid is, naturally, during freshman move-in, when presidents and other representatives talk up parents and hand out flyers to build their customer base. "I personally have slept on Aerobeds in the dorm room of at least three presidents," recalls Cecot. Traveling to other campuses builds camaraderie, as does the annual presidents' training retreat each summer. After an interview in their headquarters and off-campus apartment near Cambridge, Mass., Cecot and Kopko were off to New York City to meet with colleagues at New York University and other area campuses. They also keep in touch through conference calls and online communications.

"At the end of the day, this business is really fun," says Kopko. ■