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## Conservation lab saving art

### Heather Becker has transformed a small business in Chicago into an art trauma center

Melissa Harris

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**Heather Becker**, CEO of the nation's largest private art conservation center, has developed a daring method of finding customers. Without requests for her services, she dispatched two conservationists and a freezer truck to New Orleans in search of relics damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

After Katrina came the California wildfires and Iowa floods. Becker's conservators donned air respirators and Tyvek suits to avoid inhaling toxic mold spawning inside several art museums. At one site, after 15-feet of water receded, her team dug textiles out of mounds of washed-up river mud.

Becker's vice president, **April Hann**, doubles as the Chicago Conservation Center's "disaster response director."

"Every time I watch some tragedy on the news, I think, 'Oh, I bet I'll be going there soon,'" Hann said.

Running a full-service art ER became possible in 2003 when Becker used a \$1.5 million Small Business Administration loan to buy the company from founder **Barry Bauman** and then gradually doubled the staff to 26.

Becker transformed the business from a lab specializing in paintings to a multidisciplinary center capable of handling clothes, sculptures, furniture and canvases. She also advertised that the center could repair heirlooms that need not be signed by the likes of Renoir.

But she has never restored art herself. She rose through the ranks on the administrative side.

After graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Texan spent nine months studying in Italy, where she met a conservator restoring a fresco in a chapel in Umbria.

"I watched him rolling the swabs, touching the surface and lifting the dirt and grime," Becker, 42, said. "It was an eye-opener to a whole industry I had never discovered before."

She returned to Chicago and began looking for a job to supplement her income from selling her own paintings,

but she did not want to work in a gallery or museum. Friends pointed her to the Chicago Conservation Center.

"You know, I really don't have any positions, you're not trained, but I do have a secretarial position," Becker recalled the center's founder saying. "I said, 'OK. I can do that.' I learned to type really fast, and this was back in the typewriter days."

Becker is best known for her company's restoration of murals in Chicago schools. She wrote a catalog and history of the works, which was published in 2002.

Two years later, LaSalle Bank hired the center to restore its fire-damaged 4,500-item art collection, including many rare photographs.

"We were escorted into the 29th floor," she said. "We had hard hats on. We had headlights on and hard shoes and protective clothing. You walk in and you're surrounded by pretty much blackness. There is broken glass everywhere. Furniture is decomposed. Black streaks are all along the walls. It's daunting."

During Katrina, Hann said, Becker functioned "like a dispatcher," fielding calls from insurance companies, scheduling pickups, reserving hotel rooms and rotating staff to avoid exhaustion. Hann said she talked to Becker at least 20 times a day.

Hann said the company's size means it can help "clients with everything they need, instead of being selective with items."

And the art world knows this.

**Bille Wickre** leads the art department at Albion College near Battle Creek, Mich. In 2006, a steam pipe burst in the building holding the college's rare print collection. The temperature rose to more than 200 degrees. Windows broke. It looked like it was raining indoors.

"I called both the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago, and both said, 'The Chicago Conservation Center is the only place that can handle this for you,'" Wickre said. "They were like miracle workers. The next day a truck was here with three people to help assess. We ended up sending the whole collection with them."

Melissa Harris, who has covered three hurricanes but, unlike Hann, never witnessed floating artwork, can be reached at [mmharris@tribune.com](mailto:mmharris@tribune.com) or 312-222-4582.

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