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Family Matters: This power (washing) father and son finally adjusted to working together. Now they face a new challenge.

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To a window washer, social distancing is part of the job.

Hanging off the side of a building, glass separating the technician and the inside offices — it's a job that adapts well to the era of Covid-19. So long as clients are still paying for the service, that is.

That's the challenge facing KEVCO Building Services. Kenny Cohn, president of the family-owned Gaithersburg company, says the next few months for his business hinge on whether the residential and commercial customers prioritize window cleaning, garage cleaning and power washing services. So far, business has remained relatively stable given the environment. Bookings are down around 15% — some postponed, some canceled completely.

But Kenny built the company with conservative growth, with little debt weighing on his mind as revenue slows.

"It's serving us well now," he says. "This is a time that will definitely bring us closer together."

Kenny launched KEVCO in 1988 after years washing windows in college. He kept up the gig as a part-time job once he graduated and decided to pursue it full-time shortly after marrying his wife, Evalyn. Once their son, Robert, was born, Evalyn left a teaching career to help with the business.

What had started as a residential client list expanded to include commercial properties around Greater Washington. Now, the family counts JBG Smith Properties, JLL, Foulger-Pratt and Cushman & Wakefield, along with Dulles International, Reagan National and BWI/Marshall airports among its clients. At Dulles, KEVCO's crews handle cleaning the control tower windows, balancing 350 feet in the air to do a job with one of the best views in the region.

And then there were the years KEVCO held the contract to wash the windows at the U.S. Capitol. Robert was just 6 at the time, and it would have been hard to find a cooler place to visit his father on the job.

"This was before the statue was on the rotunda up there and we got to go up and stand on the roof," Robert Cohn remembers. "It was very cool."

A close second would be the time a young Robert got to sit in one of the justice's seats at the Supreme Court building — a client they still work with today.

Over the years, Kenny and Evalyn expanded the company's offerings, adding the power-washing and garage-cleaning segments, which now make up roughly 40% of KEVCO's revenue.

And while Robert grew up watching his parents work, like many children of small business owners, he didn't immediately want to join them on the job. After graduating from Penn State University in 2011, Robert took a job at commercial real estate data outfit CoStar Group Inc.

"I worked a summer or two at KEVCO when I was in college, but my dad never really said, 'You need to do this,'" Robert says.

In January 2019, he had enough experience to feel comfortable joining the family business and came aboard as head of business development. Taking what he'd learned from CoStar, a company he describes as having a fast growth track, Robert



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Robert Cohn, left, KEVCO business development manager and Kenny Cohn, the company's president, are rising to a new challenge.

got to work swelling KEVCO's infrastructure and increasing its presence networking with commercial clients. In 2019, the company saw its highest revenue in its history, and this year was on track to be another growth year. Now, the goal is to keep the ship steady.

Kenny says they are seeing an uptick in power washing and garage cleaning in advance of buildings reopening. But he's nervous about the fall.

"For exterior building services, if these buildings don't get repopulated until June or July, they're going to come to us and say, 'Maybe we don't really need the fall service,'" Kenny says. "Without bodies in the seats, they don't need anybody. It affects us, it affects the pizza place down the street. Cleaning crews don't need to clean as much."

To help counter that potential hit to the commercial business, Robert has been working to push residential cleanings in creative ways. That includes KEVCO's latest nonprofit partnership, donating a percentage of proceeds from all residential cleanings to Gaithersburg's Manna Food Bank. The company put targeted Facebook advertising behind the campaign and, in early May, had seen a noticeable increase in residential appointments.

It's one small part of the strategy KEVCO will execute over the next year to keep up its corporate social responsibility while maintaining the family's overall goal for getting through the pandemic — to keep staff on payroll.

"Our frontline workers want to go out there and work and earn money for their families," Kenny says.

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