FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **T o m W e b b**

Interview Date: 05/16/2019

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Sugar Land, Texas

14 Pages
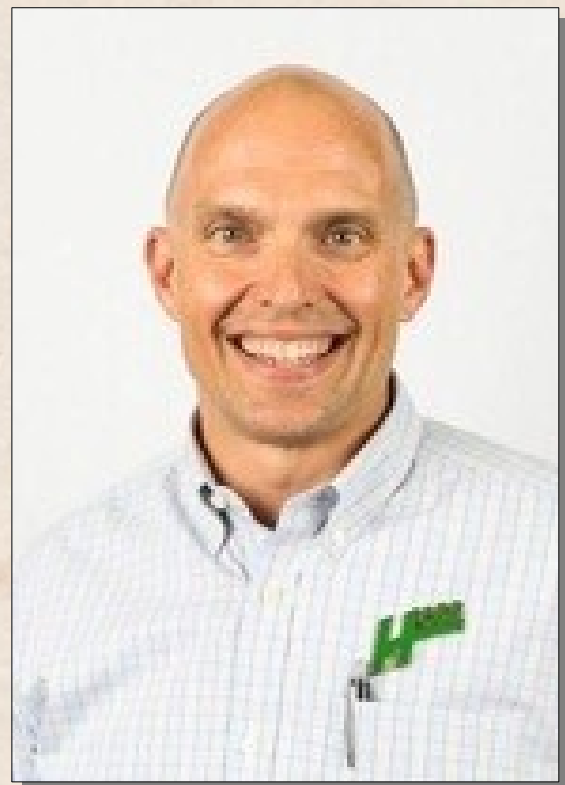
Transcript

GOODSILL: Tom, let's start with date of birth.

WEBB: I was born July 2, 1970 in Chicago, Illinois, where I spent the first 12 years of my life. My father was a United States postal employee. They have a U. S. Postal Academy's Leadership Institute in Washington, D. C. and dad took a one-year assignment to be an instructor there. Moving to Washington, D. C. in the 6th grade was at a formative time of my life. It made me pay attention to things in the political world that I hadn't before. I remember that year vividly. My father decided after that year that he wanted to move someplace warm. That's what brought us to Houston.

GOODSILL: What are your parents names?

WEBB: My father's name is Tom (Thomas) Webb. My mother's name is Marsha Medeen. She worked in the insurance industry as a claims adjuster. My mother had a great career and my sister is now in the middle of a great career in that field as well.

GOODSILL: What kind of skills do you need to be a good claims adjuster?

WEBB: Attention to detail is most important. I've gotten to know other claims adjusters and I think that's a consistent way to describe their personalities. My mother and my older sister both have an amazing ability to look at something and break it into its components. My mother and my sister are both very detail oriented.

I went to Klein Forest High School, in the Champions area. Then I attended the University of Houston and studied psychology. I was into computers at a very early age. I was in honors classes for all math and science classes. It was clearly my path. In a little bit of a rebellion in college I chose to be a psychology major. I AM very people-oriented so that does make some sense. I eventually came home to the math/science world in software development.

GOODSILL: Did you do any education after the University of Houston?

WEBB: No, learned it all on the fly. When I graduated I knew that I didn't want to stay in the world of psychology and didn't want to continue in higher education, so I took a role with a software company in Houston that didn't require a technical degree. (Not HCSS) I was a technical support analyst. That software company developed software for car dealerships.

When the dealerships ran into problems with their software, they would call into our support desk. They would get hold of me or one of my colleagues and we would get them unstuck. I loved dealing with technology. But it was a relatively large company of about 3,500 employees and I decided I wanted to look for something smaller. That's when I found HCSS.

HCSS stands for Heavy Construction Systems Specialists, Inc. Our founder, Mike Rydin, started HCSS in 1986. His is a great success story. His idea was to write PC software for the construction industry. He had a background as a programmer at a construction company. In 1986, writing software for the PC was quite a risky proposition. The technology of the day was the mini-computer. PCs were a toy. They didn't even have a hard drive. He took the risk, wrote the software, and it took him two years to get two customers. I often think how easy it would have been for Mike and his wife Sophie, with two little kids, to give up. You can imagine the stress of having only one or two customers. I have great appreciation for the fact that if they hadn't persisted, we wouldn't be here now.

I joined the company in 1996 when it was 10 years old. By then it had proven itself to be a viable business. I missed the early days of "don't cash that payroll check because there isn't enough money in the account at the moment to cover it" (laughs). When I joined the company, it had 16 employees.

GOODSILL: When you are writing software for the construction industry, what exactly is involved?

Heavy Construction Systems Specialists, Inc., Sugar Land, Texas

Mike Rydin founded HCSS in 1986 and moved the company HQ to Sugar Land in 2009.

WEBB: That's a great question. Ours is a business-to-business software company. We write software for businesses not for consumers. We pick a problem to solve and a technology to solve it with. Historically, most technology companies have been what most people call a single technology shop. By that, I mean they use one programming language. They solve all their problems the same way. We try to be creative in our technology approach. We use a variety of technologies; we try to pick the right one for the job. When you walk through our development building, there are people who are programming in many different languages, which is an unusual thing. We are very flexible in the technology we choose to utilize. We view that as a competitive advantage.

Construction as a whole involves three big markets. One is residential home builders. Second is commercial buildings. And third, there is heavy construction or civil construction. We specialize in civil construction so most of our customers are civil contractors who do earthwork, paving, or building bridges, tunnels, dams, and power plants.

GOODSILL: Would a company like Fluor Daniel be a customer?

WEBB: A part of their company IS a customer of ours. Fluor is an interesting company because they are really diversified and work across multiple industries. Another good example in the Houston area is Williams Brothers Construction. Most of the work on US-59 or I-45 is done by a company like that.

What we do is help the construction company with everything from bidding a project through running a project. We don't touch any of their accounting. If you were to walk into many of our customers offices, you would see all the departments in the company using our software except for accounting. The project managers and project engineers use our software for daily costing, staying on top of safety issues, constant updating of the construction plan, and the equipment in the company. They use our software to manage their maintenance programs, their work orders for repairs in the field, and their fueling operations. Our software tracks all their heavy equipment needs for fueling and maintenance on an ongoing basis.

All these businesses need this kind of organizational help. It is fascinating how the construction industry has so many needs that are out there ready to be filled.

GOODSILL: I read a book about the skyscrapers being built in New York City just before the Depression. The construction managers had to manage all the logistics of putting up multi-story buildings in a busy city on a deadline. They had to get the materials and the workers ready on the right day, couldn't be three days ago, couldn't be three days from now.

WEBB: That is it! Having been in the construction industry for 23 years, it is one of my big passions. I never thought when I was a student that I would want to be in construction. Why would I want to be out in the heat, tying rebar? But there is so much more to construction that that!

We started a movement at HCSS a few years ago called "I Build America." A number of us in senior roles of the company want to help the construction industry take pride in what they are doing on a daily basis and recruit more people into the industry. The industry is hurting for people now. There is a dramatic under staffing in construction and it is causing big problems.

As a software company we have a waiting list. We could hire 100s of people if we wanted to because everybody wants to be in technology. But so few people say I want to be in construction as a career. And that's a shame.
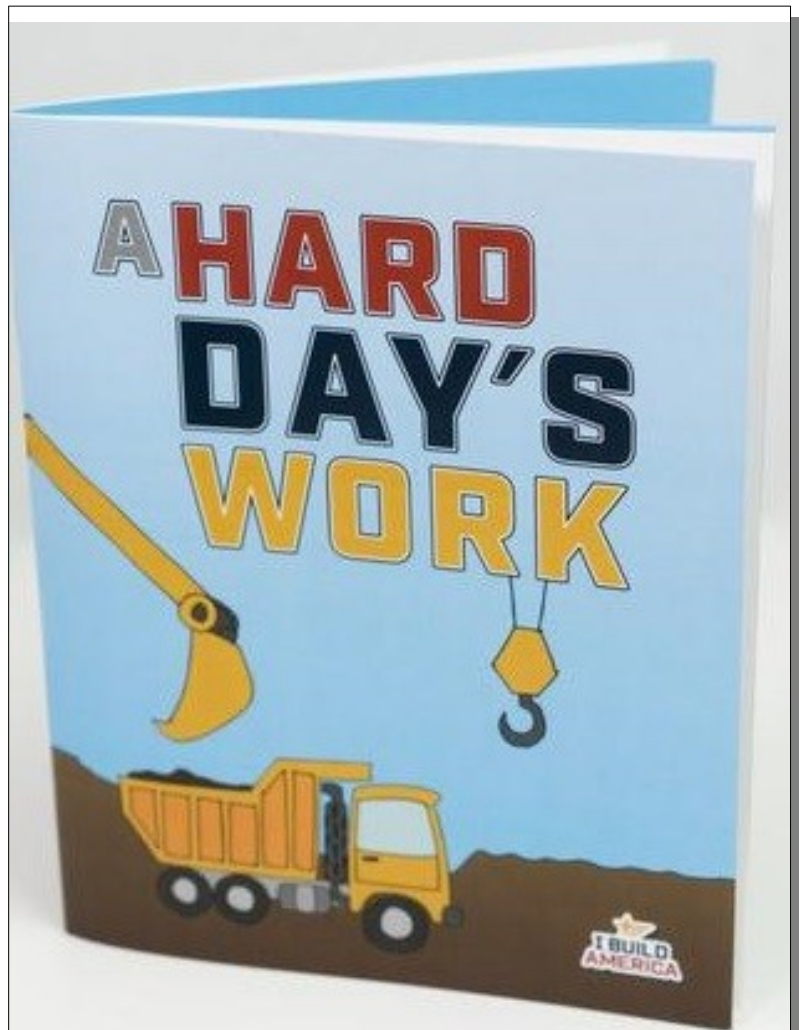
Children's book tells the story of Emily bringing her dad to her school's Parent Career Day. Her dad works in the construction industry and tells the class about the many ways he and others help build America. He talks about the importance of roads, bridges, building foundations, dams, and stadiums.

Construction is the reason we have our modern way of life. We turn on a faucet and water comes out. It took a construction company to build all the infrastructure to make that water come out of a faucet on-demand. It took public agencies to fund it.

For the "I Build America" movement we make videos, we do social postings, to help make heroes out of construction workers. We have some employees who wrote some comic books and coloring books for kids on what it means to be a construction worker. There's a really cute book, "A Hard Day's Work," that is a story about girl who has a father who is in the construction industry and how proud she is of him.

GOODSILL: That's a great way to educate people. Did you ever read Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel? It's a children's book first published in 1939, during the Depression about a hard-working steam shovel digging out the foundation for a huge New York skyscraper. Mike and his steam shovel get dug-into the basement and can't get out. So end up happily living down there. It's a glorification of the work ethic in the construction industry.

WEBB: And the industry needs that. The construction industry needs to take more pride in the work that they do. As a country we need to celebrate them more.

When I first started working at HCSS I did a job similar to the one I had at the other company, which was technical support. I had to learn our software and be available to help people when they had issues. What was unique about being a tech support person at HCSS was that Mike was very focused on giving our customers a different experience than what they were used to. Let's say you were sitting in front of your computer, trying to put a bid together, and you were getting an error message. You don't know why, and you can't get your work done. The normal way you would interact with the software company is you would call the help desk and describe the problem. The person on the phone would walk you through a couple of things to test what is going on, and if it was something they could fix in the software, they would fix it. But if they determined it was hardware, such as your PC having a problem with your video card, they would say, "I'm really sorry. It's your PC. It has a problem with the video card. Good luck." And hang up.

Mike was insistent that this person is stuck so you do everything you can to help them. Even if that meant you are fixing stuff that we don't have any control over. I fell in love with that. It was what connected me to the company more than anything. At my previous job I would have to say, "I'm sorry. I can't help you. It's not a problem with our software. It's a problem with something else."

That drove me up the wall. I had no job satisfaction with that type of response. At HCSS even if it took me 3-4 hours to help somebody fix something that wasn't our problem, I would be ecstatic.

Because we were so small, I also got the chance to be involved in everything. I could go work with the salespeople and help them. That also really appealed to me because I was curious. I wanted to learn more about the business. I wasn't told that my job was to be in support. I was told that if I saw something I could help with and I had time to help, then go do it. It was a breath of fresh air for my career.

Eventually I moved into a leadership role within our support group. I started to work with other people on how they could grow their skills. I found that I really liked doing that. It gave me the chance to invest in people and help them develop in their careers.

Around 2000 I had the opportunity to start our first ever internet-based work. I was doing software development for the internet and writing code that became websites, which was fun. The websites were used for marketing and generating sales for the company. It was ahead of its time. Mike wanted us to be on top of all that and was a leader in that.

The other thing I did was writing software for our customers to use on the internet. We wrote a website called Bidhistory.com. Customers could log in to the site where we had harvested all the bid results for all the states and they could search to see who won the bids. They could see how many bids their competitors had won or how many they had won. If they were trying to analyze where their competitors would be on the next bid, they could see the history of the bid and make an informed decision. This was a subscription service which was moderately successful but not as successful as we wanted and the maintenance of it became quite the task, so we eventually stopped doing it. It was very innovative for its time and was early in the subscription game.

Parallel to this we started to develop our second product which is called Heavy Job, which is a job costing and daily information system for the construction industry. The early 2000s to the mid-2010s marked the era of expanding our product portfolio and creating more things for our customers to use.

At one point, Mike asked me to lead our development group, so I did that. I started our professional services group which is our implementation team that actually goes out and helps customers at their offices. I loved that because we were a small company I had the opportunity to learn from our founder. Mike spent a lot of time coaching me, helping me see the big picture of what we were doing and why we were doing it.

This is probably the right time to come back to my degree in psychology. Mike studied philosophy. We both like clever approaches to people problems. It was not an accident that we incorporated innovative employee-engagement activities at HCSS. A psychology person and a philosophy person were working together to determine how we could grow the company we wanted. We wanted to empower our employees.

What I like to say about HCSS is we have a very simple business strategy. We feel that if we make our employees happy, our employees will make our customers happy. And if our customers are happy, everything else will work out. It will drive profitability. There is a lot of angst about that from business-y people. "How do you see that reflected on the balance sheet? How do you see that in your profit margin?" We have a philosophical approach to thinking about it in general and are not so worried about the numbers. The numbers will come if your people are happy.

GOODSILL: What are some of the things the company does to make the employees happy?

WEBB: We have a variety of amenities. I'll start with the ones that I think make the biggest difference. We have a profit sharing program which is formulaic, so the employees know how it is done. I see other businesses that say they do profit sharing but it's random.

GOODSILL: "We will give you a bonus at the end of the year, but you won't have any say in it and nothing you do will directly affect it?"

WEBB: Exactly. That unreliability doesn't help employee morale. Our program is across the board for every employee. At the end of the year, every employee can get profit sharing that is the same percent of their salary as every other employee. And it's very consistent. This creates a trust between the company and the employees. We also have an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan) so every employee of the company is an owner in the company.

The physical amenities are plentiful. We are very big into wellness. We have a gym, a basketball court, a track, a trail that goes around the office, and sit/stand desks, treadmill desks, and bicycle desks.
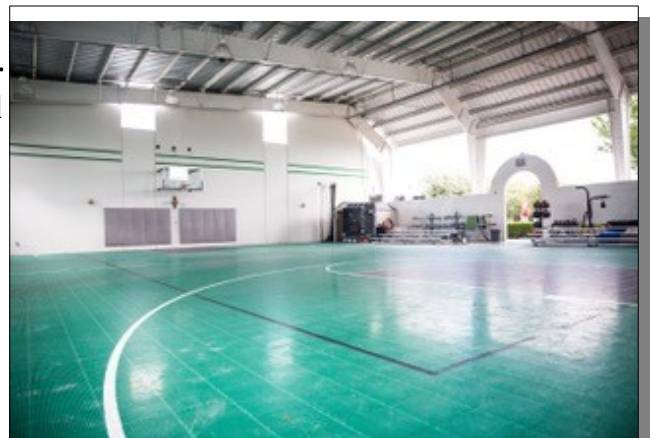
HCSS used the employee basketball court was for logistics during Hurricane Harvey volunteer recovery operations in 2017.

We invest in these, so our employees have the opportunity to be healthy. Many people think we offer these things because it saves us on insurance. I hear that often. The reality is it might save us on insurance, and if it does, it is a fraction of the insurance costs.

The reason we do it is we care about our employees and we want them to be healthy. The fact that my coworkers are healthy, and we are doing everything that we can to lead them toward a healthy life is worth every penny of what we invest from a wellness perspective.

My story on wellness is pretty interesting. When I was in college, I had a pretty high metabolism as you might expect. I didn't have good eating or exercise habits. I spent the next ten years with my metabolism slowing down but not adjusting my eating and exercise habits. Every year I would put on 10-15 pounds. In my late 20s, we had twins and I was tired and put on more weight. I woke up one day in my early 30s and realized I'm over 300 pounds. This isn't the right thing for me. I had lost weight and gained it back again, several times, and finally realized enough is enough. I started a process over the next 18 months where I lost 130 pounds and went from not able to walk much to running 1/2 marathons and eventually a marathon. It changed my life dramatically.

HCSS employee gym and weight room.
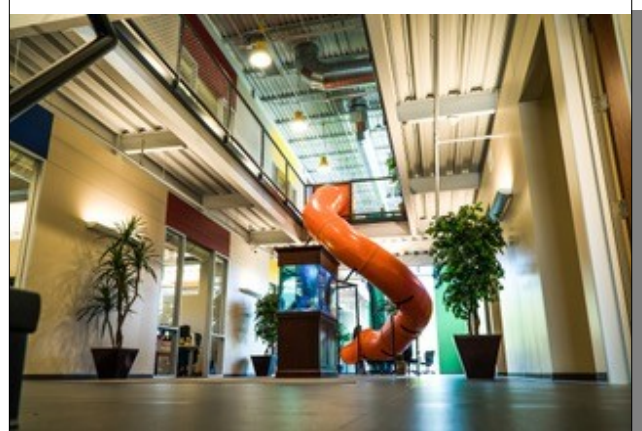
HCSS slide installed in the main building lobby.
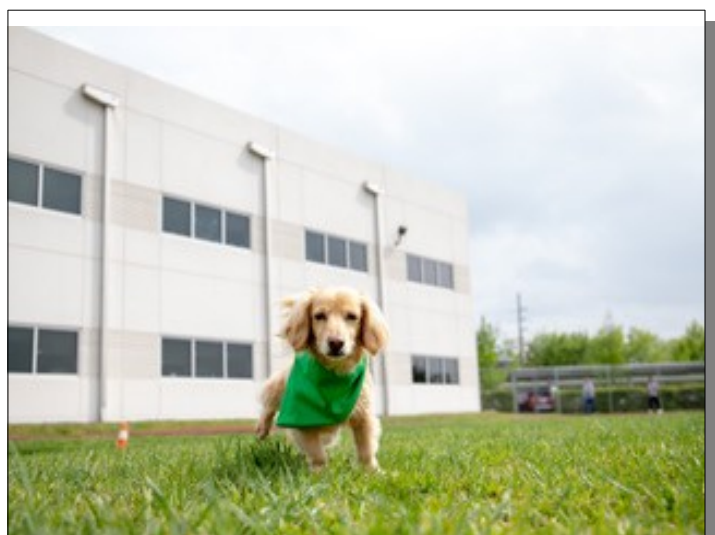
HCSS employees enjoy bringing their dogs to work. Kennels are in the extreme background.

GOODSILL: Wonderful story, Tom! Tell me about the dogs on campus.

WEBB: We want our employees not worry about things when they are here. So we do a variety of things that we think helps them not be as concerned.

We installed really nice dog kennels, so you can bring your dog to work. It has so many benefits. I bring my dog to work and it has the intended benefit of my not worrying about her if I have to work a little late. She's not going to be home alone, waiting for someone to be there to play with her.

The other benefit is during the day I'll move around and let her out with her dog friends. They run around and have fun. Because there is a community of people who have dogs here, I get to know employees that I probably wouldn't get to know well otherwise.

GOODSILL: You can let your dog out with some of her doggy friends and when break time is over, they go back in their kennels. Later someone else can come let their dog out during their break so the dogs get to go out multiple times per day?

WEBB: Yes. I'll notice that with my dog, there are certain dogs she loves to play with in the morning when she has energy, and in the afternoon when she is tired, those dogs have too much energy for her so she prefers other dogs then.

GOODSILL: Is there a vet who comes every now and again?

WEBB: We haven't done that yet. There is a vet right down the street where a number of us would take a dog to, but we haven't brought in an on-site vet.

We do have other amenities to help our employees worry less about things at home. We have a car wash service that comes out. We have an on-site mechanic that comes out to work on your car. For a while we had an on-site dry cleaner who picked up your clothes and brought them back. That didn't work out as well.

GOODSILL: The dress code probably doesn't require a lot of dry cleaning.

WEBB: It is a VERY relaxed dress code. (both laughing)

GOODSILL: You have a lot of movement and play areas and technology play areas, too.

WEBB: We do. We have video games and a piano club with a grand piano. People get together and learn to play the piano. It provides opportunities for employees to spend time with each other, time that they wouldn't normally be together. I think in general, the more you can do to exercise your brain, the better. Learning to play a musical instrument is a great way to do that.

GOODSILL: As you were working in the development department, who was handling the finding of clients?

WEBB: We have an in-house sales group. One of the things that is unique about us as a software company is we do everything in the software business in one location. By that I mean, we sell our software, we support our software, we write our software, we market our software, we test our software, and do customer service and training here. Most software companies now outsource one thing or another. We don't outsource anything, so we are able to control the quality. Many software companies don't actually get all their employees together into a single physical location. We're all on one campus. We think the benefit of doing that is that we work more like a team. At many technology companies, a lot of their staff works from home. They don't get a chance to meet each other, they don't support each other in the same way we think our employees do.

GOODSILL: Why Sugar Land?

WEBB: We started looking in 2006. We were in the Hillcroft and US-59 area. We decided that since we were a growing company with about 85 people, we needed to determine whether we wanted to expand onto another floor or do something different. We mapped out the addresses of all our employees and noticed we had an overwhelming number of employees living in the southwest area: Missouri City, Sugar Land, Richmond, and Katy. We engaged a broker who looked for options for land. We looked at properties with the broker and one of them was on the corner of West Airport and Eldridge, where the CVS Pharmacy is now. We really liked that property. Corner lots sell at a premium. We didn't need street frontage, so we looked a few feet down the road, and we purchased this property of almost 12 acres.

GOODSILL: What was the City of Sugar Land like to work with?

WEBB: They were great. We developed relationships with the Fort Bend Economic Development Council (EDC) and the City of Sugar Land. We started talking to them about the possibility of a tax abatement. We were a small software company so in our minds we were thinking they weren't going to care about us.

But they saw that we could be a future star for them in this community and promoted us to come here. They worked hard both in getting a tax abatement that would actually be of benefit to us and help offset the cost of the building. Everyone seemed excited about the possibility of a software company coming in to Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: They wanted diversification in the kinds of companies they were recruiting. They surely wanted to avoid one-hit wonder of the oil industry.

WEBB: When the oil industry crashed in the early 1980s, I think it really changed the approach of the county and the cities. It opened up the possibility for a company like us to come out here. I was presenting to the EDC this morning, and one of the points I made was that we know they saw potential in us and we hope they are proud of the work that we do. We appreciate what they did to bring us out. We were an 85 person company; we had an abatement that required us to have 170 employees at the end of the 7-year period and we have 350. So we exceeded expectations and we are happy to be a positive contributor to the community in that regard, but we are really happy in other regards as well.

GOODSILL: Some people talk about your being the Google of Sugar Land. What is the comparison?

WEBB: That name was given to us by Pete Olson, our local congressman. We use it "in quotes" because it keeps Google from being upset. What I love about it is everyone can picture a connotation of Google. They picture the fact that they are innovative, fun, and bring uniqueness to the culture. I think that's what we try to do. We want to be a clever, innovative company and in our own way, we are. We want to be a fun company that attracts people. And we want to be someone the city can be proud of.

I'd like to talk about Hurricane Harvey and what we did. This is one of the things that I'm the proudest of. HCSS has a value in our company that we want to be a significant part of the Sugar Land community. It's a tough thing to measure. Financially we contribute jobs to the community and sales tax revenue but that doesn't make us unique or significant. I'm really proud of the fact that when Hurricane Harvey hit, and this area needed help, we stepped into that role and helped. While the hurricane was still over the city, a number of us got together on a phone call and said, "This is a chance for us to do something to help." We decided we would mobilize quickly and run an operation out of here to do clean up for homes that had water in them.

Since we began talking about it when the hurricane was hitting, we were able to mobilize within three days. We had an employee who left to go shelter in Dallas. We gave him a budget of $10,000 for equipment and supplies. He rented a U-Haul, loaded it up, and drove back to HCSS.

Meanwhile another group of us were coordinating volunteers to come in and do something with the supplies when they got here. We used our basketball court for our inventory area and asked for volunteers to go into homes and clean up. Most of our employees had never done that before. We had a number of employees who stepped up and said, "I can lead that." We put them into teams. That first day we created either 5 or 7 teams of people. They put supplies in their cars and drove all over this area, looking for homes that needed work. They just knocked on doors. "Was your home flooded? Do you need us to help take out drywall? We are here to help you." Among all the volunteer organizations, e. g., Texas Baptist Men, we were one of the first people mobilized in this entire area, to help clean up homes.
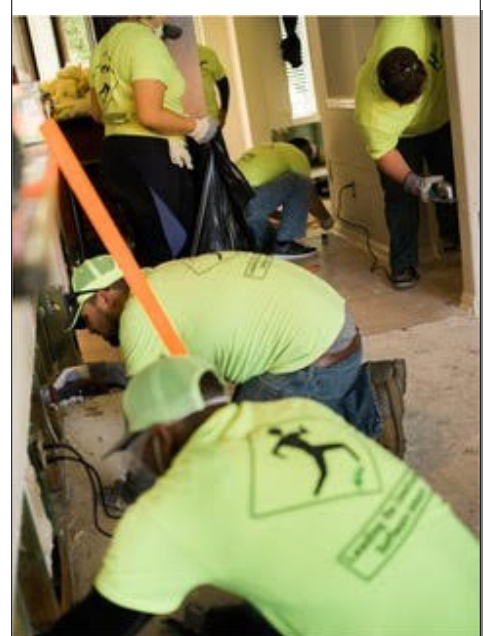
HCSS employees volunteered to help cleanup homes impacted by Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

We cleaned homes for a number of weeks with our employees and then volunteers from the community helped. A couple of days we had over 100 volunteers that went out into the community. For another six-week period, we hosted an organization called the Christian Aid Ministries. They lived in our building for about six weeks. We bought bunk beds for them to sleep on and they used our kitchen to cook. They went out during the day and cleaned homes while we worked here and then slept here in the evening. It worked out wonderfully. All in all we cleaned almost 300 homes, getting rid of carpet, drywall, and furniture that was destroyed. Those of us who were here will never forget the need. One of the things I take pride in is we DID something.

GOODSILL: You help companies coordinate efforts to build things and now you were helping your employees to coordinate the clean-up.

WEBB: We actually got to use our software for it!

I have to tell you one other story related to that. It has a special place in my heart. We initially sent one person from our company to buy supplies to start us off. We ran out of supplies very quickly. In that first week after Harvey, there were some things, such as masks, that were impossible to find in the city of Houston. We had every intention to close our clean-up operation because we were running out of supplies. We didn't want to shut down because people still needed help. I had employees tell me we had to find supplies.

I picked up the phone and called a customer in Dallas who took one of his company's trucks, bought supplies to fill this truck and sent it down here. Another customer of ours in New Jersey loaded a truck with supplies and sent it down. There was another period of time where we were about to run out of supplies and made a call to a group of students. My sons were students at Baylor University and they cleaned out a Home Depot of the supplies we needed and drove down here to replenish our supplies. For every HCSS person the community saw, there were a bunch of other people supporting the effort.

GOODSILL: And this brings up the fact that your client base isn't just local.

WEBB: They are all over the United States and Canada. When you are in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania or Orlando, Florida and you see construction going on, our software is probably in there somewhere.

GOODSILL: Thank you for your good work, Tom and for the interview.

Interview ends