

A hauly-jolly season for trash mogul

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One man. One truck.

That's how John Griffith described his start as owner of a trash hauling company.

Wednesday, it was scores of men and a fleet of trucks.

Griffith was one of the men, giving some of the regulars a day off.

His company has grown since he started in 1999 as Alpine Disposal. Now, he's CEO of Alpine Waste & Recycling, which a spokesman said is the largest privately owned waste disposal company in the Denver area.

Wednesday, Griffith was likely the highest paid trash hauler in the Denver area. He was wrestling bins, hooking them to the hydraulic lift and holding the grab bar as truck driver Nick Mayorga drove to the next stop.

"I work one day a year, just like Santa Claus," Griffith joked.

His gloves looked new.

"They're leftovers from last year," he said.

Griffith launched his business with one employee and two customers.

When Alpine started, "we ran it out of a 700-square-foot house," he said. "There was a vacant lot next door where we parked the truck."

It still caters mostly to businesses - Walgreen's, Wild Oats, Starbucks - and hauls 5,000 bins a month.

The business, headquartered in Commerce City, has a fleet of 32 trucks and more than 60 full-time employees.

"We just built a 31,000-square-foot recycling center," Griffith said.

The day after Christmas is the busiest. Drivers were doing two routes - the one scheduled for Tuesday, Christmas Day, and the one for Wednesday.

Griffith, 37, grew up in Texas. He came to Colorado to go to college.

"I went to the University of Colorado, and never left," he said.

Asked how he got into the trash business, Griffith said, "Just lucky, I guess."

After graduating college with a marketing degree, he worked as a retail manager. But it wasn't for him. A friend was working at another job when a major trash hauler offered a job. The friend wasn't interested, but thought Griffith might be. He was, and was hired, starting in sales.

When the company was sold, Griffith found it hard to get into another line of work. So he opened his own company.

He likes to get out to show the guys he's not afraid to get dirty. It's also his way of showing his employees he appreciates them.

As Mayorga drove through drifts of snow, Griffith said, "We do a lot of plowing."

At one stop, he used a coal shovel to scoop a path to the bins.

"No one plows for the trash man," he said.

Mayorga appreciated the help.

"I'm a student of history," Mayorga said. "It reminds me of Caesar when he came to the head of his army to break a siege. It's a morale booster."

Mayorga said if he takes a lunch break, it's usually for a convenience store sandwich.

But not Wednesday.

"I'm buying him lunch," Griffith said.