



# MODERN LUXURY HOUSTON

## The Soul Searcher

Dan Oko | Photo: Julie Soefer | April 1, 2013

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You've probably never met Robert Jensen, the CEO of one of H-Town's oldest, richest and most global companies. That's because you're breathing.



Kenyon boss Robert Jensen, photographed at his firm's world headquarters near Bush airport, is a top expert in disaster response and mass-fatality management.

Early on Jan. 16, an Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group calling itself the Masked Brigade overran a natural-gas complex at Ain Amenas, a remote outpost in southwestern Algeria. A century-old, Houston-based firm known as Kenyon International Emergency Services, whose work is often cloaked in deep secrecy, scrambled teams out of Texas, the U.K. and Lebanon; it activated 60 employees to help authorities and corporate interests prepare for the aftermath of the horror at the edge of the Sahara. According to dispatches, the Algerian Army lay siege to the Islamists, who had taken 23 hostages, including managers, security specialists, technicians and engineers from oil giant British Petroleum. In the ensuing battle, 81 perished, including three Americans.

After the firefight, Kenyon quietly got down to business, sifting through debris, locating victims and supporting authorities in identifying and repatriating the remains of the dead. For, despite being headed largely by ex-military, and regardless of its close ties with Interpol, Kenyon is not in the business of making war. The private company, unknown to most Houstonians, primarily assists in dealing with mass fatalities.

So when Kenyon puts boots on the ground, it shows up not with soldiers or mercenaries, but rather with social workers, medical experts and forensic specialists, who operate phone banks, offer counseling, set up morgues and investigate disasters. Kenyon serves about 450 clients worldwide, ranging from major airlines and energy companies to municipalities and foreign governments. In existence for 107 years, Kenyon today also helps with media outreach. But its specialty is locating and identifying dead bodies, securing death certificates for people killed overseas, returning remains home, and making sure personal effects get back to families and loved ones. When disasters strike, in the form of oil-field accidents, earthquakes or tsunamis, Kenyon does the sometimes gruesome work of restoring order after chaos.

It's a tough job, but somebody has got to do it, says Robert Jensen, the surprisingly youthful 47-year-old CEO. A straight talker who still manages to display a laconic sense of humor, Jensen this day has just returned from Algeria. Dressed in jeans and a white Oxford, an artsy bracelet hanging from his wrist, Jensen holds forth in the company's north Houston headquarters, not far from Bush Intercontinental Airport, a convenient place to hire a private jet or catch a commercial flight to the next hot spot. Other offices in London, Beirut and Hong Kong reflect Kenyon's global reach.

Jensen got his start as a deputy sheriff in northern Cali after studying criminology at California State University, Fresno, and soon joined the Army. His unit assisted after the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, which killed 168 people and injured scores more. In 1998, after running military mortuaries as an officer in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, Jensen joined Kenyon, becoming CEO in 2003; by 2007, he had acquired 70 percent of the company, and he took it private. "I've been doing this for most of my adult life," says Jensen. "I don't keep a scorecard, but I would be happy to never go to another bombing. I would be happy not to do like I [did] last week... in Algeria. I'd be happy to never have to tell a family member this process.

"Unfortunately, the world... is not going that direction," he adds. "It's going the other direction."

A tour of the offices and supply hangars reveals cages stacked with possessions gathered from airline crash sites, which will be returned to survivors or destroyed, pending the outcome of various lawsuits. A suite of photography equipment, linked to company computers, allows Kenyon to snap pictures of items for identification purposes, while a cabinet off to the side holds empty jewelry boxes and polished containers. (Jensen prefers elegant packaging over plain paper or cardboard boxes for presentation of the effects to families.)

A locker room holds go-bags packed with gear ranging from snowsuits and snacks to chemical-protection outfits and gas masks, each sorted and ready for deployment. Lined up in a storage area are portable

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tue	17	SEP	
wed	18		<a href="#">James Turrell: 'The Light Inside'</a> <a href="#">/houston/events/james-turrell-the-light-inside</a> Houston Museum of Fine Arts - 1001 Bissonnet Street, Houston, TX
thu	19		<a href="#">Perspectives 182</a> <a href="#">/houston/events/per-182</a> Contemporary Arts Museum - 521 Montrose Blvd, Houston, TX
fri	20		<a href="#">'Gifts from the Past: The Collect'</a> <a href="#">Isabel Brown Wilson</a> <a href="#">/houston/event/gift-the-collection-of-isabel-brown-wilson</a> Museum of Fine Arts - 1001 Bisso Houston, TX
sat	21		<a href="#">'Self, Model, and Self as Other'</a> <a href="#">/houston/events/self-model-and-self-other</a> Museum of Fine Arts Houston - 1001 Bissonnet St., Houston, TX
sun	22		<a href="#">'Graphic Design: Now in Product'</a> <a href="#">/houston/events/graphic-design-now-product</a> Contemporary Arts Museum - 521 Montrose Blvd., Houston, TX
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generators and fuel tanks. A meeting room holds flow charts and video-conferencing stations to manage field operations.

Redundancy is built into the Kenyon system, with similar setups at global satellite offices. Both Houston and London have virtually identical capacities down to staffing and supplies. Kenyon also maintains a 24-hour call center in the Dominican Republic. Translators, chaplains and morticians are on speed dial.

If it seems there's a lot of overhead, that's because there is. And it doesn't come cheap. Clients pay retainers of up to \$40,000 per year, which provide a sort of insurance policy, says Jerry Novosad, Kenyon president. Contracts are determined on a matrix of concerns, such as risk factors and company size, with prescribed additional fees in the case of an emergency response. These amounts are confidential but can run to tens of millions per day.

Kenyon has come a long way since its macabre beginning. In 1906, brothers Harold and Herbert Kenyon of a top London funeral home were hired to attend a train accident that killed 28, mostly Americans, when an early steam engine jumped the tracks in England. The brothers embalmed the bodies and sorted the victims' possessions, all repatriated under watchful eyes. Insurers and the nascent airline industry took notice, and it became common for "the Kenyons"—as the company reps came to be known, and are still known—to be called by authorities coping with tragedies. Company headquarters were moved to H-Town by its previous owners, Service Corporation International, the local funeral-services behemoth.

"We can't undo the event," says Jensen, who is also an author, having penned a field guide, *Mass Fatality and Casualty Incidents*, a manual for forensic workers. "The only thing we can do is not make it worse. Not make it harder than it has to be for the families, because it won't be easy. It's a transition families go through from what was normal to what the new normalcy is going to be."

Since joining Kenyon, Jensen has been involved in both headline-grabbing "incidents," a term of art he prefers over missions or jobs, and small-scale crises involving the death of an individual or two. In 2001, he led a response team in lower Manhattan after the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks. Jensen was also on hand for the aftermath of the 2004 South Asian tsunami. The company assisted the Bush Administration in its response to Hurricane Katrina, and helped the U.N. during the Haiti earthquake in 2010. Certificates of appreciation are on display along the walls of Kenyon's Houston offices, notices from a diverse group that includes Alaska Air, the South African Police Service, the Royal Thai Police, the United Nations, and Families of TWA Flight 800, the airline explosion that left 230 dead near New York in 1996.

With teams available across the globe, and state-of-the-art portable morgues ready for deployment at a moment's notice, Kenyon is able to surmount administrative roadblocks, as it did in New Orleans—where it worked for almost a week, sweeping the streets for fatalities, without a contract. Ultimately, Louisiana formalized Kenyon's position, and in the end the company recovered some 800 bodies. "One of the things that I'll never forget," he says of the megastorm, noting how the now infamous tangle of government interests complicated recovery efforts in the Crescent City. "We were there for a week just sitting with the morgue. Louisiana needed help, but half of the government teams didn't want us because *they* wanted to do the morgue."

In any case, dealing with bureaucratic red tape is by far the least profound part of what Kenyon does. Its central concern is far more basic, and, in a way, touches us all. "Death is universal," says Jensen. "It doesn't care about time. It doesn't really care about religion, gender, orientation, nationality or ethnicity. It doesn't even recognize whether you're good or bad. It recognizes all people. It would be nice if, for the living, we could do the same thing. Because death is inevitable, and it doesn't care..."

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