

AN IMMIGRANT SONG:

Two Brazilian brothers set on disrupting the environmental consulting industry—may just do it

Iris Environmental Laboratories

by Allyson Markey



Rod (left) and Rick Eustaquio, the brothers behind Iris Environmental Laboratories.

I was very jet lagged when I spoke to Rick and Rod Eustaquio, the co-owners of *Iris Environmental Laboratories*, a full-service environmental laboratory testing and consulting agency based in Union, New Jersey. I had just flown back from the East Coast, and the searing California sun had turned my office into a broiler. I was afraid that without a strong cup of coffee, and an A/C unit, I wouldn't be able to pay attention to the phone interview.

But with Rick's first enthusiastic, Brazilian-accented "Hello!" I knew our conversation was going to be fun. And within the first minute of speaking to the brothers Eustaquio, I felt like I could leap tall (OK, maybe small) buildings in a single bound.

Iris Environmental specializes in mold and asbestos laboratory analysis and field inspections. The company's goal is to turn the environmental field on its head by providing all field work and laboratory services under one roof.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAT GUIMARAES

"I would say that in the past two years we've proved our way of doing things works," Rod says in an almost academic tone. "We save our clients time and money. Our job is to make their lives easy, period."

THE BROTHERS EUSTAQUIO

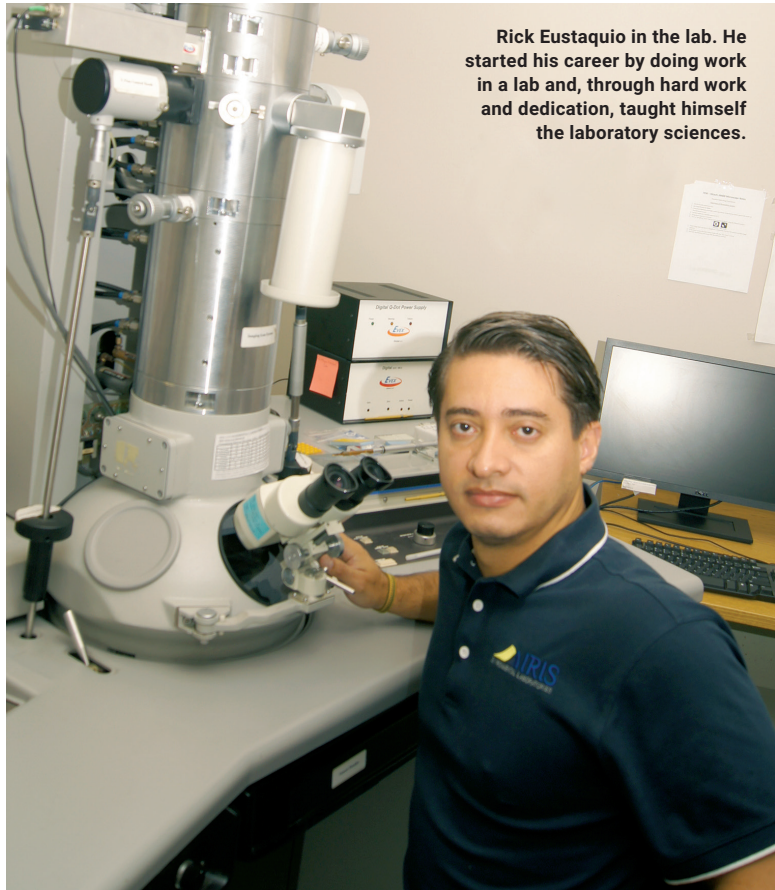
To understand Iris Environmental is to understand the history of the Eustaquio family. Rod, the tenacious elder brother by a decade and Rick, the outspoken younger brother grew up in Minas Gerais, a state in southeastern Brazil. The coffee and milk-producing area is a hub for architecture and colonial art, and is marked by mountains, valleys, caves and waterfalls. It is also one of the country's economic hubs. "I think growing up there made me passionate about the environment," Rick says. "Beauty was everywhere."

But the beautiful environment betrayed a hard childhood. Their mother and father divorced following the accidental death of their oldest brother. "Our family couldn't recover," Rod says in a hushed tone. "I don't usually talk about my childhood. We're very private people."

Following the tragedy, the family worked hard to recover. Their parents immigrated to the United States, leaving the brothers in Brazil. At the age of 9 and 19, the brothers came to the U.S. to visit their parents. And while Rod decided to go back to Brazil, Rick stayed behind. The brothers were separated.

DIVERGENT PATHWAYS

At this point, the brothers took divergent paths. Rick went to high school



Rick Eustaquio in the lab. He started his career by doing work in a lab and, through hard work and dedication, taught himself the laboratory sciences.

"We save our clients time and money. Our job is to make their lives easy, period."

Rick Eustaquio, Co-owner,
Iris Environmental Laboratories

in America. "I was never a great student. It wasn't my thing," he says with a laugh.

But he was persistent and eventually got a job at an international pharmaceutical company. The catch? "I never received a college degree. I only lasted one semester in college—there were too many distractions," Rick explains. "But I knew I could work harder than my peers, so I started on the very

bottom cleaning the lab, mopping the floors. I would go home every night and think, 'How can I move up the ladder?' I was that obsessed."

Rod, on the other hand, developed a solid background in business and law. "Not only from a startup perspective, but also storefronts and franchises," says Rick. "He gave great advice on how to revamp my business. He's aggressive and tenacious."



Iris Environmental Laboratories specializes in mold and asbestos laboratory analysis and field inspections. Here is one of Iris' inspectors performing air monitoring.

Fast forward to adulthood. Rick became disillusioned with the pharmaceutical industry. "I hated animal testing," he admits. "It's just wrong." Instead, he got a job with J&S Environmental Laboratories, a small environmental lab based in Union, New Jersey. By then, he had learned how a lab was supposed to run.

"At first I started typing and running reports," he says. "I worked my way from administrative work to going out to the field to running tests in the lab. I loved the work." After six years at J&S, he was responsible for almost 80 percent of the activities in the laboratory. "I knew I could do it," says Rick. "But I didn't think it would happen that quickly."

But while he moved up the ranks quickly, Rick didn't feel like he was being treated fairly. "I just didn't feel like I was given the opportunity to go up the ladder," he says sharply. He left J&S in 2011 and started his own environmental consulting company, BioTerra Environmental Solutions, LLC.

And while BioTerra grew rampantly, his time at J&S haunted him. "I knew if we combined everything—the

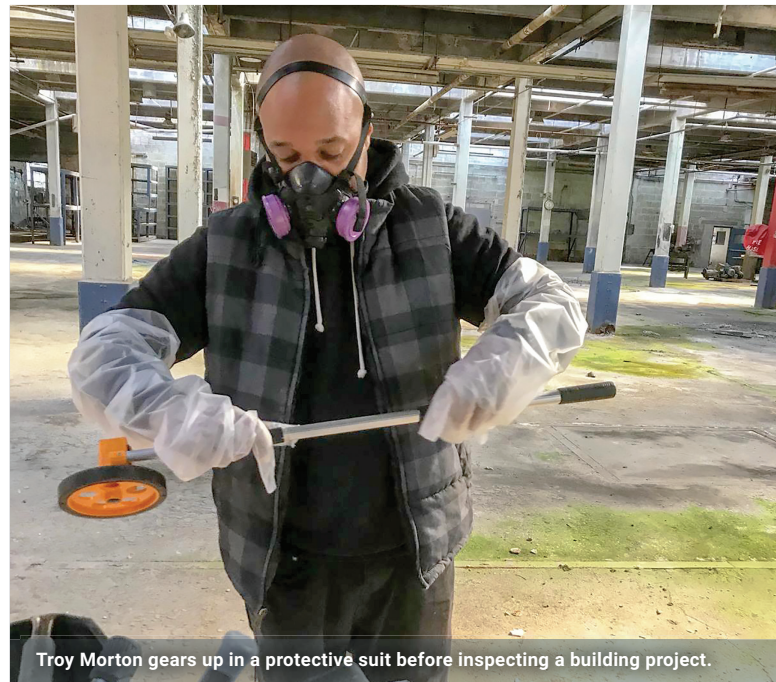
fieldwork and the laboratory analysis—under one roof, we could really be of service to our clients," Rick says. "We could streamline processes and save our clients money by being more efficient than the competition. I just wasn't sure how to go about it."

But fate soon intervened. In 2015, Rod visited his brother in the U.S. In Rick's living room, the brothers changed the course of their lives. They had a long conversation about

scaling the business nationwide and creating a streamlined process that would make environmental sampling and analysis more efficient. Using Rick's technical knowledge and Rod's business background, they would structure and scale the business to meet their goals.

Rod thought it was beneficial to be with his brother during this time. "I always had this thing about being alone in Brazil, especially after my mother immigrated to the U.S.," Rod says. "I wanted to be with my family." Rod and his family soon left Brazil for the U.S.

Other changes were happening to the business. "Rod and I decided to add an asbestos and mold analytical laboratory into BioTerra," Rick says. "We had no idea that the owners of J&S Laboratories announced that they were interested in selling the business. But they announced their intention to sell a short time later."



Troy Morton gears up in a protective suit before inspecting a building project.

Iris Environmental Laboratories specializes in mold and asbestos laboratory analysis and field inspections. The company's goal is to turn the environmental field on its head by providing all sampling and laboratory services under one roof.



Air quality testing to check for mold in a client's building.

The timing was perfect, and Rod and Rick thought long and hard about purchasing J&S. "Rod and I decided to jump in feet first," Rick says. "I trusted my brother's insights. It's the reason I've followed his lead since I was 15."

So, in May 2016, the brothers bought J&S and combined its analytical capabilities laboratory services with BioTerra's air quality monitoring, inspection and sampling services to form a new company: Iris Environmental Laboratories.

Some work had to be done to modernize the laboratory. "Everything in the lab was pretty old school," says Rod. "The booking, writing and software were pretty artisanal." While Rick ran the daily operations, Rod brought the company into the digital age with a focus on scaling nationally. In July 2018, Iris became a franchise company and doubled the staff from four to 10 employees.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BUSINESS

"Iris Environmental Laboratories is a different type of business," Rod says. For one, the brothers made a pact to always be honest with clients. "We are committed to telling clients exactly what we are going to do, how we are going to do it and how much it will cost. No deviations are accepted," he affirms.

Secondly, they are committed to being the go-to, "one-stop shop" for the construction industry's engineering field. "Annually, we complete over 1,000 mold and asbestos inspections," Rick says. "Our staff of 10 employees is also able to conduct air quality and materials testing. We aren't limited to one test—we can do just as much as other labs."

Finally, the company is committed to philanthropy. "Some of my most vivid memories come from Hurricane Sandy," Rick says. "Unfortunately, Sandy brought us a lot of business." And while the team was working with FEMA and insurance agencies to monitor and test for asbestos and mold during the day, the brothers dedicated themselves to helping the community at night.

"We couldn't say no," Rick says. "You'd see someone whose entire life was literally washed away. They would ask for a hand moving furniture or beating down a door. And we'd help. We'd help until we couldn't move. It took a toll."

Iris Environmental Laboratories isn't like other labs. With all sampling, consulting and laboratory activities performed in-house, it is setting itself up to be an industry disruptor. Such a disruptor, in fact, that the brothers have started to franchise the idea. "We will be in all 50 states," they predict. Based on their history, I tend to believe them. 🐼

Allyson Markey, with an academic background in geology, writes both technical and inspirational articles for publications and corporations.