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2015 Women Who Mean Business

Cate Dyer, founder and CEO, Stem Express

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Cate Dyer wanted to do more to help patients. But caught up in the bustle of daily life and her job at a Bay Area bioscience company, she found herself postponing her dreams. Then she broke her leg in a fall down the stairs.



DENNIS MCCOY | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Cate Dyer, founder and CEO, Stem Express LLC

“It was the universe’s way of shutting me down,” she said. “It was then that I decided I should do something different.”

Being sidelined gave Dyer a chance to formulate a plan. In March 2010, she launched **StemExpress LLC**, a company that provides human

blood, bone marrow and tissue to medical researchers.

By getting specimens to researchers more quickly and in larger quantities than was previously available, Dyer's work can shorten the length of a research study — from years to months in some cases. And that means new treatments may reach patients sooner.

She started StemExpress with just \$9,000, running the business out of her Placerville home. She quickly found that there was indeed a demand for the company's products. Several new clients contacted her each week, without any active marketing, as word about StemExpress spread along the scientific grapevine.

The company ranked No. 363 last year on the Inc. 500 list of fastest-growing private companies, with 1,315 percent growth over three years and revenue of \$2.2 million in 2013. And it ranked No. 35 on Inc.'s list of the fastest growing women-led companies in the country.

StemExpress has a spacious facility in Placerville that includes offices, a laboratory and a donor room. It's opening a branch in Washington, D.C., in the next three months and is looking at the possibility of a site in Europe as well. With a staff of 29, she expects to have more than 40 employees by the end of the year.

"What she's created is very impressive," said Rich Foreman, CEO of Apptology. "She's grown that to an amazingly solid business in the region."

Foreman said the achievement is even more noteworthy because Dyer "boot-strapped" the company, starting with a small amount of her own money rather than investor funds.

At the same time, Foreman said, Dyer has shown a commitment to her local community, where StemExpress has given an economic boost to Placerville and El Dorado County. Dyer could have moved the business to Silicon Valley, he noted.

But Dyer is committed to the Sacramento area. She is involved with the

Sacramento Regional Technology Alliance, participating in women-in-tech dinners, speaking as part of the “Succeeding in Sacramento” series and serving on the organization’s MedStart CEO forum aimed at improving health care through technology. She’s also a board member of the Sacramento Metro Chamber of Commerce.

Cary Adams, chairman of SARTA’s MedStart, called Dyer a “valued member” of the CEO forum.

“Cate has found out how to make money and build a business in the regenerative-medicine space ... by meeting the research industry’s ever-increasing demand for cord blood and similar products,” Adams said. “By supplying that need more efficiently, Cate and StemExpress are helping to speed many new cures to market.”

In 2003, when attending Santa Barbara Community College, Dyer planned to become an emergency medicine physician. To gain experience, she worked in the trauma center at Cottage Hospital in Santa Barbara. She later she graduated from California State University Sacramento with a degree in sociology, still planning to go to med school.

But she began to see flaws in the health care system and didn’t think she could make much of a difference as a doctor.

“The more I worked in the emergency room, the less I was sure I wanted to be an emergency room physician,” she said. “I realized I had to come at it a different way.”

She also began to see flaws while working in tissue procurement at the Bay Area bioscience company. The problem: how the lack of human blood or tissue specimens was slowing down research.

For example, a scientist studying eye disease might turn to a transplant bank for human eye tissue, Dyer said. But the transplant bank only deals in healthy tissue; diseased tissue is more difficult to obtain.

StemExpress works with hospitals to procure human blood and tissue.

The company has clients worldwide; many are at major medical universities.

Dyer said StemExpress has had a number of buyout offers. So far, she has turned them down, concerned that a new owner would restrict the availability of StemExpress products.

Dyer said she would rather make the products widely available in order to foster healthy competition among researchers. "I want to fuel the research," she said.

The essentials

Age: 36

Education: A.A. in biology, Santa Barbara City College; B.A. in sociology, California State University Sacramento

Personal: Lives in Placerville; committed but unmarried; has a horse, a mule and two dogs

Advice to younger women: "Dream first, figure out the details as you go."

Biggest whoops: "Trusting people without merit."

Something about you that would surprise people: Majoring in sociology, rather than in a scientific field

A tough balancing act: Dyer said she finds it hard to say "no" to researchers who come to her with requests for a certain number of tissue samples in a tight timeframe. After all, the progress of medical research is at stake. Still, she carves out time to spend on her hobbies, riding horses or dirt bikes."It's a balance," she said. "It's tough."

Fantasy career: Country singer