



Entrepreneurs

Reinventing The Pole

Jenna Goudreau, 04.15.09, 4:00 PM ET

A writer turns entrepreneur when a debilitating disease lands her in the hospital for months at a time. Her innovation may be the next big thing in patient care.

When Cari Ugent entered Northwestern Memorial Hospital on the eve of her 30th birthday in 2002, she wasn't looking to become an entrepreneur--she simply wanted to survive.

Ugent had been admitted for a stem cell transplant, a risky procedure that was the last stand in her battle against non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the oft-fatal cancer she had been diagnosed with nine years earlier, just before her senior year in college.

Yet it was during her two-month stay in the oncology ward that Ugent, formerly a writer, had a bright idea that would re-shape her life. She would design a brand-new, patient-friendly IV pole.

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"I wanted to make [life] a little easier for any patient after me," she says. "I want [Safepole] to be the new standard."

The idea came as a direct result of Ugent's illness--or rather, her treatment. The stem cell procedure was far more grueling even than the chemo and other experimental therapies she had already endured. Forbidden to have flowers, balloons or any visitors except her family, Ugent suffered through fever spikes, voice loss, rashes, a 30-pound fluid weight gain, pneumonia and muscle spasms--plus diarrhea and frequent vomiting.

But oddly, what bothered her most was the IV pole. Top-heavy and easily upset, it was connected to four infusion pumps, each with a power cord that snaked around the room and had to be disconnected every time she needed to use the bathroom. She constantly worried that the six lines carefully stitched into her arms, chest and jugular would rip out if the pole fell or its wires became tangled. The pole also collected dust that could cause dangerous infections.

When she complained to the hospital staff, they heartily agreed with her but could offer no help--except to place a portable toilet next to her bed to forestall accidents. So Ugent set out to invent a better IV pole. Using a sterilized computer, she began to research the current device's history, drawing new designs and at one point calling a patent attorney from her bed.

In fact, the project became almost as therapeutic as her treatment: focusing her energy on the redesign allowed Ugent to forget about her condition and how awful she felt. "I didn't know if I'd make it out alive," she says. "I needed a distraction, and it felt really good to funnel my energies into something that could possibly make some change."

Nor did her dream die when the transplant succeeded and Ugent left the hospital. But, in many ways, she was exchanging one battle for another--that of the entrepreneur. Plus Ugent's entrepreneurial battle was complicated by the year-long process of regaining her physical strength.

It took Ugent two years to get her first order, from the University of Chicago's hospital for children, and the journey there was arduous. She had to find industrial designers and manufacturers and come up with just the right name. In the end, she rejected "Companion" in favor of "Safepole."

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Focus groups made up of hospital employees and patients examined early prototypes, finally applauding the third, which was tip-proof, sleek and sturdy.

But producing the pole was not without its challenges, either. A mis-manufactured part in an Asian plant almost doomed the entire project. The handlebar wasn't produced to Ugent's specifications and had to be remade, causing a delay in the launch and canceled orders.

She also had to hire staff--her brother signed on as salesman--and, when funds from her family and friends ran low, she had to seek out venture capital money.

All the while, Ugent was living in a Chicago apartment close to Northwestern Hospital while she worked toward recovery. With Ugent unable to care for herself, barely able to walk or make a bowl of soup, her mother took a leave of absence from work and moved in with her daughter to help get her back on her feet.

Looking back, Ugent recalls the waves of uncertainty she continually felt. "I was about to throw in the towel several times," she says, "but once I got to the point when I wasn't terrified of failing, that's when things turned around."

Now she can be more optimistic. Safepole LLC is going well, with Ugent as chairman and majority holder. And Ugent is hoping to turn the corner to profitability in early 2011.

Investor Philip Bligh, one of two "angels" who together put in almost \$1 million in return for a minority interest, says sales volume is good and he expects "robust" growth. The device is now in over two dozen hospitals in the U.S., Canada and the Caribbean. Although the recession has pinched hospital budgets, she is marketing her pole to all hospitals, especially to divisions where it's most needed: oncology, cardiology, pediatrics and ICUs.

Ugent is not only helping hospital patients, but also the beleaguered local economy. After the manufacturing fiasco in Asia, she has begun moving production back to nearby Rockford, Ill., to prevent future glitches. She warns other entrepreneurs to think twice before going global.

"Manufacturing overseas can be challenging, especially for a start-up, since there are so many variables and so much to learn--then tack on language, time and cultural barriers," she says. "We are optimistic that we can bring all our manufacturing to Illinois in the near future."

And next up for Ugent and Safepole: more innovations in in-room hospital equipment.

To fellow female entrepreneurs, she recommends doing what the hospital stay taught her. "I'd say to myself, 'It's another day down. I made it through today.'" Start-ups are very much the same, she says: "Trust yourself. Sometimes that means not knowing the answer, then finding it."