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Research's spicy result: a start-up company

Michelli Murphy

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Aniko Solyom's start-up company, GAAS Corp., may have roots in a research lab, but it got rolling at a bus stop.

After the funding for the botanical research she worked on at the University of Arizona ended, Solyom and husband George Angeli decided to continue the work on their own.

Solyom's first step was consulting the neighbor she met daily at the elementary school bus stop — Patrick Jones, director of the UA's Office of Technology Transfer.

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Solyom was part of a UA research team that discovered the anti-inflammatory effects of oils extracted from turmeric, a spice used as the main ingredient in curry powder.

Solyom and Angeli, both graduates of Budapest University of Technology and Economics, first came to the UA in 1991 to do research on a device to measure air pollution. The couple decided to stay in Tucson after finding it to be "a much friendlier research environment than Hungary," Solyom said.

The botanical research was funded by a five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health, given for the development of the UA's Arizona Center for Phytomedicine Research. It was one of several national botanical centers created by the NIH, and was focused on researching the effects of unregulated dietary supplement ingredients, Solyom said.

"At the time, there was basically no FDA regulation," she said. "You could get a weed from your backyard, put it in a capsule and sell it as a supplement."

The center focused on three botanicals — ginger, boswellia and turmeric. All proved to have anti-inflammatory effects, Solyom said, and were chosen because Arizona has a large number of people suffering from arthritis.

The effectiveness of the turmeric oil at fighting arthritis led the UA team to apply for a patent, which was granted in April of this year. The botanical research ended with the grant in 2005, as the center's director, Barbara Timmermann, accepted a position at the University of Kansas.

But the research was too promising to let die, Solyom said.

"My husband has arthritis, so there's personal motivation to get rid of it, or at least kill the pain," she said.

At Jones' suggestion, Solyom and Angeli took the patent and business idea to Marie Wesselhoft, director of the Arizona Center for Innovation, a high-tech business incubator.

Wesselhoft was impressed with Solyom's tenacity, she said. "Most university people get used to working with grant funding, moving from project to project. Aniko wouldn't take no for an answer. She put her own resources to work."

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In a UA lab, Aniko Solyom holds compounds of turmeric, from which her company will develop anti-inflammatory drugs.

David Sanders / Arizona Daily Star

Profile

Name: Aniko Solyom

Age: 49

Job: Co-founder and CEO, GAAS Corp.

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GAAS corp. is now an affiliate client at the innovation center and is applying for federal funding, Wesselhoft said.

Clark Lantz, UA professor and lead investigator for the original turmeric research, said Solyom was noted for her thoroughness.

"She was excellent at her job" of analyzing the chemical compounds found in the plants, he said.

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