

Start-Up Assistance for Newcomers

“Switzerland needs entrepreneurs. It’s where the future lies.” Such, in a nutshell, was the credo of William A. de Vigier (1912–2003), who established the foundation of the same name that awards up to five highly valuable advancement awards of 100,000 Swiss francs each to young Swiss entrepreneurs.

Text: Sabine Windlin

When he created the W. A. de Vigier Foundation in 1987, canton of Solothurn-born William de Vigier wanted to provide something that young entrepreneurs with good ideas so often lack, something indeed that he had also lacked when setting up his own company Acrow Engineers Ltd: the necessary start-up capital.

Despite facing difficult conditions at the outset, the three-man operation founded by de Vigier in London to manufacture flexible metal scaffolding would go on to become a respected company with a listing on the London Stock Exchange. It was soon operating on a global basis, and continually expanded. At the peak of his entrepreneurial activity, William de Vigier presided over a global steel conglomerate that employed more than 12,000 people. He was a member of over 30 company boards and received numerous honors, for example he was named a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in 1978. Throughout, de Vigier retained close links

with his home town of Solothurn right up to his death in 2003. The W. A. de Vigier Foundation, managed by a 10-strong board of trustees to ensure fair and competent assessment of all project applications submitted every year, is another success story. So far, more than 50 young entrepreneurs have received sponsorship grants, of whom 36 continue to be active in the market. Moritz Suter, chairman of the board of trustees, considers this “an excellent result given the number of entrepreneurs who start off successfully but then fall by the wayside.” Five previous prize winners went on to win a Wall Street Journal Technical Innovation Award, while another three succeeded in selling their start-ups to major companies for significant sums. This shows that award winners are not short-term dreamers living in ivory towers, but potential engines of the economy possessing foresight, business acumen and persistence. We take a look at the five prize winners for 2007. www.devigier.ch



Christian Schaub, 37, and Corinne John, 31

A Building Block for a New Generation

For the layman, understanding proteins, knowing the forms in which they are found in the human body, and using this knowledge to manufacture protein complexes artificially in laboratories might reasonably fall under the category of abstract rocket science. But for biotechnologist Corinne John and engineer and technology manager Christian Schaub, it's part of their daily routine. Both are employed by the start-up firm Redbiotec.

Based on the pioneering discovery of MultiBac by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich, which has been made available exclusively to Redbiotec, they are able to manufacture not only individual proteins, but also large quantities of protein complexes, artificially in the laboratory. Such complexes can have exactly the same effect as proteins in human cells, but also perform completely new types of function. The Redbiotec company thus has an important basic technology at its disposal, which will make it

possible to develop and produce new cures for life-threatening diseases such as cancer or Alzheimer's over the next few years. Unlike the products currently on the market, this new generation of protein-based pharmaceuticals should be able to treat human ailments in a more targeted and efficient way – and in some cases cure them completely. A long road lies ahead before this vision can become reality, however. The innovative Swiss company is looking to shorten this road by means of an intelligent business model. For now, it is producing customized protein complexes and cutting-edge technology for the production of proteins for direct clients in the pharmaceutical and biotech industries, as well as for university research. Meanwhile, the danger of their discovery being copied has been averted, since MultiBac, as well as any further developments, are protected by patent rights.

Redbiotec AG, CH-8952 Schlieren; www.redbiotec.ch

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