

A Philadelphia CleanTech Start-Up Story: Interview with Social Entrepreneur, Elinor Haider, CEO of NovaThermal Energy

Susan Stavish 23 October 2012

Introduction

While creatively addressing the environmental challenge of global warming, NovaThermal Energy is a sound, profitable business strategy with numerous exit options. Working out of GoodCompany Ventures' incubator site at 1650 Arch Street in Philadelphia, Elinor Haider has been leading an emerging company that has won the Global CleanTech Cluster Association's Top 30 Later Stage Award, Artemis Top 50, CTSI Top 15 Utility Solution, and PACT Cleantech Company to Watch. Under Elinor's guidance, NovaThermal Energy (NTE) has secured over \$1.3 million in grant funding. This fall, NTE will embark on a \$1 million Series A enterprise capital raise. In mid-August, I sat down with Elinor to learn a bit more about this exciting, home-grown Philadelphia social entrepreneur. At the time of this Journal's publication, Elinor will have transitioned to a position with Veolia Energy, but remains an NTE shareholder. Chief

Technology Officer Jimmy Wang will serve as interim CEO while the search is on to replace Elinor. I will enjoy following Elinor as she continues making a difference in the energy efficiency space, and watching NTE as it enters its next chapter.

SS: Elinor, I have enjoyed learning more about NovaThermal Energy and its breakthrough role in the CleanTech industry. I am fascinated with career paths, particularly those of social entrepreneurs. What experiences, both work and personal, have you drawn on to become a leader of this company?

EH: My skills are the intersection of real estate, finance and government. For an engineered, capital intensive, energy efficiency building solution like NovaThermal's, this is the necessary skill set to bring a technology to market, particularly when operating with such a lean team. I have always been motivated by mission, so when I transitioned out of the Nutter Administration, I sought a position at a clean tech company where there would be a social as well as financial impact.

SS: What were the most vexing challenges you faced to get to this point?

EH: Definitely installing our first U.S. project, a commercial scale system at a City of Philadelphia Water Department facility. Contrary to the usual rule of thumb, that took almost three times the projected timeline. We struggled through Department of

Energy's Buy America waiver process, manufacturing delays in China, and challenges getting work visas for our Chinese engineer, in addition to the usual cost overruns and commissioning glitches.

SS: What are the top three challenges you face going forward? What don't you know that you would like to know?

EH: Time is our biggest challenge, as it relates to cash flow, sales cycle and negotiations. I'd like to fast forward 10 years to see the hundreds of installations of our wastewater geothermal technology throughout the U.S.

SS: Can you speak to the power of networks on your journey? Which organizations have helped you the most and in what ways have they helped you?

EH: Meidlinger Partners, a local water venture investor has been our biggest champion.

They are generous with their networks and strategic counsel. Karen Meidlinger is also on the Board of GoodCompany Ventures, where we utilize the incubator office space, as well as a member of the GoodCompany's class of 2012. The GoodCompany mentorship through Garrett Melby's leadership and my excellent peer group was unparalleled to any of the other "accelerator" programs in the market.

Companies similar to NovaThermal Energy, such as Black Gold Biofuels, have successfully been through the GoodCompany program. Emily Landsburg, Black

Gold's CEO, has also been a strong mentor and supporter, both personally and in her company's path to success.

SS: You are a mother of three small children with a supportive husband. Do you have an opinion about women striving to "have it all"? How do you rate the experience of entrepreneur versus employee as a mother?

EH: While entrepreneurship can provide flexibility when raising a family, it does not have any of the traditional support systems—for example, no structured maternity leave or uninterrupted vacations. If your company is early stage, there also can be a high level of personal financial risk. On the other hand, having the ability to control your own schedule can be the most critical component to a successful family life when both parents have demanding jobs. I do not think it is possible to "have it all"—there are always accommodations when juggling professional, civic and family demands.

SS: Five years from now, where do you see yourself?

EH: I hope to be enjoying a successful exit from NovaThermal, while serving as a senior leader in another clean energy company. I have met some outstanding energy entrepreneurs over the past three years, and I hope to continue to work with them in some capacity.

SS: What advice do you have for women pursuing social entrepreneurship?

EH: 1) Have a detailed 24-month financial strategy,

because everything takes twice as long as your business plan (at least!). 2) Invest in the support network you need to ensure your success. This may mean hiring additional caretakers at home. 3) Identify a few members of your advisory board before launching. Their guidance will save you time in the long run!

Susan Stavish is an independent consultant and an advocate for entrepreneurs who attempt to meld doing well and doing good. Kathryn Stavish, a sophomore attending the Academy of Notre Dame in Villanova, transcribed the interview and provided editorial assistance.