Shihab blazes path as entrepreneur

By Jacob Barker

Saturday, September 21, 2013 at 2:00 am

Penelope Shihab has faced more hurdles than most entrepreneurs.

As chief executive officer of MONOJO Biotech, Shihab had to worry about more than finding capital, generating cash flow and hiring the right people. And the additional complications inherent in a high-tech company — commercializing research, winning regulatory approval, finding investors for a risky venture with low up-front cash flow — represented only a few of the roadblocks in her way.

A native of Jordan, Shihab ventured into uncharted waters when she sought to establish a high-science biotech company in the Muslim country.

“The first barrier is being a woman,” Shihab said. “The second barrier is financing.”

In a culture that is still male-dominated, women are not encouraged to leave the home and work, much less to get scientific degrees and solicit investors to launch biotechnology startups.

Nor are there many — Shihab says none — biotech companies in Jordan. And that means there are no investors there with any experience putting capital into those companies. Good investors don’t bet on what they don’t know.

But Shihab eventually found her backing, which also helped her find Columbia.

Last year, MONOJO quietly launched its U.S. spinoff: Columbia Biotech, Housed in the University of Missouri Life Science Business Incubator, Shihab has been building relationships with MU researchers, U.S. investors and the Mid-Missouri business community. It’s here MONOJO plans to launch its first commercial product, a line of cosmetics and skin treatments using proteins from camel milk.

“Columbia would be the first testing market,” Shihab said.

Shihab hopes to launch the cosmetic line, known as “Skinue,” in the coming months. The products in the line use a protein in camel milk that has antimicrobial properties. The company has found applications in acne cream, dry skin applications, anti-wrinkle cream and sunscreen.
“This is a high-end product,” Shihab said. “It’s not something they find in Walmart.”

It’s not the cosmetics that are the most exciting applications for MONOJO and Columbia Biotech. It’s the science behind them. The proteins the company is studying have shown potential as treatments for gastrointestinal ailments and might even hold anticancer properties.

In the meantime, though, the company needs cash flow. The cosmetics require limited testing and can be brought to market relatively quickly. The potential disease treatments, on the other hand, would need to go through years of regulatory scrutiny and clinical trials.

Shihab is actually launching Skinue in the United States before its debut in Jordan, hoping to build the product’s brand value by getting American consumers to buy it.

“Whatever you do in the U.S., if you do it well, ... then it’s easy to get in” the Jordan market, Shihab said.

Of all the countries in the Middle East, Jordan has one of the closest relationships with the United States, and many of its products find their way to Jordanian consumers. Give a Jordanian shopper a choice between a local product and a U.S. brand, and she will almost always opt for the American product, Shihab said. So while the U.S. market is much larger and offers more potential demand for the skin products, Shihab said, it could also serve to legitimize Skinue in her home country and other foreign markets.

For Shihab, MONOJO and Columbia Biotech’s success is about more than profits and a return for her investors. She wants to inspire women in her country and encourage high-tech entrepreneurship to further Jordan’s developing economy.

“There are scientists, but they do only teaching and research in the universities,” she said. “No entrepreneurs.”

She hopes the success of her company will blaze a path that other Jordanians will follow — entrepreneurs and investors alike.

“This is big for us,” she said. We “will be the leading company. People will follow it.”

MONOJO was founded in Amman, Jordan, in 2005, after Shihab finally found an investor willing to back a woman-led company in the speculative biotech sector. Samih Darwazah, the founder of Jordan-based multinational pharmaceutical firm Hikma Pharmaceuticals Company, decided to gamble on MONOJO.

Before Darwazah founded Hikma in Amman in 1978, he received a degree from the St. Louis College of Pharmacy. A couple of years ago, in St. Louis for a speaking engagement, he met Kelly Gillespie, the head of Jefferson City-based Missouri Biotechnology Association.

That connection and the biotech research assets in Missouri that Gillespie showed Darwazah eventually led to Shihab’s introduction to the area. When MONOJO was looking for a base to
launch U.S. operations and develop research collaborations, Darwazah pointed her in Columbia’s direction.

“She fell in love with Mid-Missouri, and it’s a testament to kind of the international landing pad that” Jake “Halliday is running down there at the innovation center,” Gillespie said, referring to the MU Life Science Incubator.

MONOJO will likely manufacture its initial inventory near its headquarters, closer to its primary research lab and supply of camel proteins, Shihab said. However, it’s the new connections Missouri has to the Middle East and North African markets that hold even more value, Gillespie said. If other Missouri companies want to break into markets such as Saudi Arabia, they now have an avenue through Shihab and Darwazah’s regional connections, he said.

“The name of the game in the life science world is collaborations and connections,” Gillespie said.

Shihab is already working with researchers from MU’s medical school, studying some of the potential pharmaceutical applications from MONOJO’s research. The connection with MU will make it easier for domestic clinical trials, when it gets to that point.

“When you’re solving these big puzzles, you’ll find four of five pieces in your own backyard, but you’ll search the world over to find that one missing component that tips you over the end and allows you to enter the marketplace,” Gillespie said.

For Shihab, the biggest challenge now might be balancing her time. Between running the company in Amman, which also does contract research for other companies, and the fledgling U.S. operation, she’s already stretched pretty thin. She is also finishing up a doctorate from the University of Cambridge in England, which has partnered with the company.

If that weren’t enough, she has a husband and four children. “I run the two companies and the family,” she said.

She’s willing to do it, she said, because she wants to see Jordan’s economy develop and become a regional leader. If MONOJO succeeds, she hopes other innovators will follow.

“The investors will also be encouraged to put in money” in high-tech ventures “because they will see the profits,” Shihab said.

For Mid-Missouri, it’s another country where MU scientists can develop contacts as they research biotechnology applications and seek to commercialize their findings.

For all their differences, Jordan and Missouri do have one important similarity, Gillespie said.

“Jordan itself is kind of like the state of Missouri,” he said. “It’s trying to figure out how it can succeed in the global economy.”
Scientists to learn the art of communicating clearly

By Crystal Thomas

September 20, 2013 | 7:45 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Scientists earning a Ph.D. and graduate degrees will gather in the MU Student Center this weekend to learn one more thing — how to best communicate their research to anyone who wants to hear it.

The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology is hosting a conference Saturday about science communication — the ability to explain research in simple language.

With the public interest and tax dollars supporting research, scientists increasingly see the need to be able to explain their discoveries in a comprehensible, nontechnical way, said Hannah Alexander, associate adjunct professor of the MU division of biological sciences.

Alexander said that unlike many other scientific conferences, which focus on scientific skills or conducting research or publishing studies, this one will spotlight the art of breaking down the science into layman's terms.

"We want to concentrate on the one skill you need to do in any career in science," she said.

All 125 people scheduled to attend are graduate and postgraduate science students from across the country.

The conference is a marathon of speakers and networking — 19 speakers give scientists a few sessions to choose from over the course of the all-day event.
American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology public outreach coordinator Geoffrey Hunt said the conference is an avenue for career exploration as well, exposing scientists to opportunities outside of only doing research.

"We're trying to show people that they can have success outside of the lab," he said.

*Supervising editor is Allie Hinga.*
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Dye to be poured into stormwater sewers at MU

By Crystal Thomas

September 20, 2013 | 7:27 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — A dye being poured into the sewers near MU's Swallow Hall could mean a yellow discharge turns up in a small part of Flat Branch.

MU spokesperson Christian Basi said the dye will be poured to track whether MU had mapped stormwater drainage systems correctly. This check is one of the steps to prepare the area for Renew Mizzou, construction projects surrounding Pickard, Swallow and Jesse halls beginning in the spring.

The dye, named Uranine, is safe to human and aquatic life and is approved by the Department of Natural Resources, Basi said. It will dissipate into the water, but it may show up in Flat Branch.

Basi said it is highly unlikely the dye will get into drinking water. The amount of time the dye stays in the water depends on how much is used and how many times the test must be done to get accurate results.

"We always have used the minimum amount of dye," Basi said. "It all depends on the test."

Supervising editor is Allie Hinga.
The University of Illinois and a community college in Champaign are opening food pantries to meet what they believe is a need among college students.

The Newman Shares food pantry at the university's St. John's Catholic Newman Center isn't sure how many students need more food than they can buy, the center's Sister Maryann Schaefer said. But the school administration believes there is a need, particularly among graduate students and upperclassmen — students who have moved out of dorms and in many cases no longer have parental financial support.

"We're figuring somewhere around maybe 30 percent of your upperclassmen and graduate students," she said. "The trend is they stay in a dorm facility for two years and then they move out into an apartment, and that's where the difficulty begins."

Campus food pantries have opened in recent years around the country to help students who don't have enough money to cover their expenses and keep themselves well-fed. In many cases they have spouses and children, too.

The University of Missouri, University of Arkansas, University of Mississippi, Auburn University and other schools in Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Oregon and West Virginia have opened or are considering opening their own food pantries.

Some schools pay to help keep the pantries supplied, while many rely on donations and volunteer hours. In Champaign, the Eastern Illinois Foodbank is helping provide food.

Parkland College, which is across Champaign from the University of Illinois, draws many poorer international students taking less-expensive classes they hope will help get them into the university, Schaefer said. Many lack the money to take care of all their expenses.

That food pantry is under construction and is expected to open by Thanksgiving, The (Champaign) News-Gazette reports (http://bit.ly/18fFyOj). It's expected to be open one day a month.

The Newman food pantry will be open two nights a month.

On the opening night this week, Schaefer said, two families came by to get food.
“Both students were from Parkland,” she said, adding that she anxious to see how widely the services will be used. "We have no idea, and we sit and wait."
Wellness Center, MSA team up to simplify off-campus housing search

By Steven Chaffin, Jr.

The Wellness Resource Center is leading an effort to make selecting off-campus housing an easier process.

The Missouri Students Association, led by Sen. Christopher Kemp, has been collaborating with the center to raise awareness and improve the project, which will be featured on iOS and Android platforms.

The project is expected to become fully functional next semester and is headed by Off-Campus Student Services Coordinator Dionne George.

“The website is what we’re mainly working on now, and the app is in the later stages,” George said. “For the website, we’re going to have an advanced search feature where students will be able to select certain fields that they want to search through.”

The new service will enable students to access important information, including apartment complexes’ websites, leasing office phone numbers and photographs.

“I’m providing all of the data that needs to be inputted into this program that is being created by the Division of IT,” George said.

The Division of Information Technology’s primary involvement is in creating a foundation through which George can easily manage, add and remove information as necessary.

Board of Elections Commissioners Chairman David Wettroth, who was another MSA consultant on the project, said that this new program would reach beyond facts and numbers, and it seeks to provide other resources for a student’s benefit.

“We have resources for how to deal with roommate situations, how to deal with your landlord, and soon, by next semester, a map showing where everything is,” Wettroth said. “It’s a good tool to use to plan out what you’re thinking.”

George said that she has no intentions of this new feature taking the place of old-fashioned consultations but sees considerable value in it.
“I think it’s going to be a great tool for (students),” George said. “With this app, students can sit down, take the time to be proactive and look at what their options are, and after we have some form of a consultation and give them things to think about, they can move on to the next stage of narrowing down these housing options.”

MSA’s role in this project is still undefined, but it could go in many different directions, Wettroth said.

“There are many different ways that MSA can be utilized to help with this — by promoting it, teaming up and talking about it, through some kind of Q&A they have, or just the senators telling their friends,” Wettroth said. “I think there’s a good partnership there, and if they utilize it correctly, this will take off with flying colors.”

George said she is not worried that students will not take advantage of it and said she is confident in her and her staff’s ability to keep the database updated with the latest information.

Kemp said that the ideas for a more straightforward housing search process came almost simultaneously from MSA and the Wellness Resource Center, leading to their decision to join and work together on the project.

“My job is to represent what students want out of the app and website,” Kemp said. “I was brought onto the project because this is geared towards students…. It went along with our wider effort of trying to do something about affordable housing and making sure that off-campus housing and in Columbia in general is meeting students’ needs.”

Kemp said the reason the project will not be implemented until next semester to ensure the app does not have bugs. When the app releases, it will be full-functioning.

“There is a consensus that it is hard to find places now,” Kemp said. “I think it’ll be well-received. Of course, we love feedback — positive or negative, we’ll look for it all.”