

NEWS

Aliso Viejo company wins entrepreneur award

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Charles Dunlop, right, with his brother and Ambry Genetics co-founder James Dunlop. COURTESY OF AMBRY GENETICS

BY MARIE EKBERG PADILLA / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

After working with some of the top academic and commercial laboratories in the world for about a decade, Charles Dunlop wanted to launch his own research facility.

So in 1999, Ambry Genetics of Aliso Viejo was born.

“I wanted my own lab where my friends and I could have our own playground to build new useful things,” he said. “Politics in academia are famous, so my vision for the company was to create a politics-free environment, in the mold of the ideals of academics.”

And his vision paid off.

Ambry Genetics recently was one of the winners of the EY Entrepreneur of the Year 2015 Awards in Orange County. The 500-employee company, which was co-founded by James Dunlop, won in the biotech/technology category.

The awards recognize business leaders who demonstrate excellence and success in the areas of innovation, financial performance and commitment to their businesses and communities. The awards program, which recognizes business leaders in more than 145 cities in 60 countries, will recognize its national winners at the annual awards gala in November.

“It feels pretty darned good to have other business leaders recognize our achievements,” James Dunlop said. “We are true entrepreneurs, having raised a very small amount of money from only friends and family to start Ambry. So to be noticed, let alone recognized for being quality, is awesome.”

Recently, Ambry Genetics was inundated with patient samples when they launched their first to-market cancer panels.

Charles Dunlap, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer, said if he had utilized his company’s system, it was through the use of those same cancer panels that Charles Dunlop said. If he did, he would have discovered his own cancer much earlier.

“If I had known I carried a mutation making me prone to prostate cancer, we would have monitored my health closely and I wouldn’t have needed to go through chemotherapy and all the grueling things that have happened over the last nine months,” he said. “I’ll forever feel stupid that I did not test myself in my own lab.”

We asked Charles Dunlap about his company and himself.

Q. What is Ambry Genetics?

A. Ambry is a complete genetic services company that offers innovative testing for many inherited conditions involving oncology, cardiology, pediatrics, pulmonology and neurology with over 300 products on the menu.

Q. What has been some of your major innovations and contributions to the genetics industry?

A. We were the first to offer full gene sequencing of the cystic fibrosis gene. We were the first to offer gene panels to check for genes contributing to a disease, the first to offer Next-Generation Sequencing and the first to offer clinical exome sequencing that is similar to a human genome project for an individual person. We also took the issue of gene patenting head-on and opened up competition in this segment. And we did all these things responsibly and ethically.

Q. What is your professional experience?

A. I studied physics at UC San Diego, but through undergrad pulled 10-hour days at The Scripps Research Institute in a Molecular Neurobiology Laboratory. It was one of the prestigious gene hunting labs focused on neurological genes and new technologies. I started as a dishwasher and worked obsessively, rapidly rising through the ranks, involved in just about every project going on around me, even those outside my immediate lab. Loved that job with all my heart, it was the most fun I've ever had, on par with learning how to surf in my early childhood. Lab work is super interesting, and for whatever reason I was given natural abilities to understand it.

Q. How is your business involved in the community?

A. Ambry supports numerous foundations and causes, including Global Genes in Aliso Viejo, Susan G. Komen and other advocacy groups. In 2006, we created the Maui Ola Foundation to help children with genetic diseases by giving them a chance to surf – this can be a natural treatment for people with cystic fibrosis.

Q. What are some future plans and research project underway?

A. To keep doing what we are doing. Morphing, seeing things anew, evolving, growing and launching more and more products that can help more and more people.