

ANSWERS for Needy Moms

Susan Andersen Establishes Scholarship Program

By Melba Newsome



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In 2005, Susan Andersen’s 22-year marriage was coming to an end. Oddly enough, this trying time in her life prompted her to reminisce about her days as a student at UNC Charlotte during the early 1980s. “I loved my time at UNC Charlotte,” she says. “There was nothing around us but corn fields and farms. The nearest McDonald’s was five miles away and Eastland was the closet shopping mall.”

Yet Andersen’s college experience almost never happened.

Poised to graduate from Myers Park High School when her parents divorced, she suddenly had no money for tuition and her plans for college were almost derailed. When she received a four-year scholarship from the Charlotte Organization of Insurance Women, she made a pledge to pay it forward one day. That day came in 2005.

1984 GRAD

“When I went through my divorce, I realized I was very blessed, but a lot of single moms struggle if they don’t have an education,” explains Anderson, who graduated from UNC Charlotte in 1984 with a degree in business administration. “The idea came to me to make good on my promise to help other women attend college.”

Photo by Wade Britton

Using money from her divorce settlement, she established an endowment for the Andersen Non-Traditional Scholarship for Women's Education and Retraining. It is possibly the only scholarship that targets moms and their children. "A lot of single moms live at the poverty level or below. By supporting the moms, we increase the family's earning potential and opportunities for the children," she said.

The Foundation of the Carolinas selects the recipients and administers the ANSWER scholarships as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Scholarship recipients must be at least 25 years old, raising K-12 school-age children and pursuing a four-year degree or a two-year nursing degree in a Charlotte-area college. The amount of the scholarship is based on financial need and is paid directly to the university, for tuition and fees. To date, 17 women have received 30 scholarships. Nine have graduated, five are currently in the program and five more have gone on to get their master's degree.

The scholarship has been awarded to women enrolled at Queens University, Belmont Abbey College and Winthrop. But as a 49er, the UNC Charlotte recipients are especially close Andersen's heart.

SEARCHING FOR HELP

In 2006 Marie Dingle was a 40-year-old widow with two small children when she became one of the first scholarship recipients. "I couldn't figure out how to work, go to school and see the kids, so I looked for all the assistance I could find," said Dingle. "My ANSWER scholarship was \$500 a semester. Every little bit helps." Dingle graduated in 2009 with a degree in social work and is currently pursuing a master's in Library Information Studies through UNC Greensboro.

Andersen initially provided all of the scholarship's funding but as the program grew, she sought additional contributors. So far, the endowment has received a \$10,000 grant from the Leon Levine Foundation and a \$1,400 grant from Myers Park United Methodist church. "I never really thought I'd be a philanthropist," she said with a laugh. "We're helping one family at a time break the cycle of poverty."

Melba Newsome is a Charlotte-based freelance writer.

Continued from p. 29

to people involved with Five Ventures. "They had a competition for students, so we went into that. Even as a student, I'd had a federal grant through the missile-defense agency."

Although it was a difficult time — Shane was writing his dissertation as well as trying to run the company — he found the competition rewarding, even above the \$5,000 prize. "We got some valuable resources — an advisory board, our intellectual-property attorney and other attorneys as well," he said. "Some of those folks, we still use their services today."

A Hickory native, Shane especially likes the resources the university makes available to entrepreneurs. "For the first couple of years, we were under the university's umbrella, which gave us a good rate to lease an office and equipment. They worked with us not only through Five Ventures but also as an incubator."

Services came in such areas as accounting and legal help, and he's thankful to the university and the program. "They were giving the time to help the young folks out. The five-member advisory board (at Five Ventures) agreed to serve for a couple of years. It was incredibly invaluable. It was an A-plus experience for us."

HEPATOSYS (2009)

HepatoSys, formed in 2005 through a collaboration between UNC Charlotte professors Mark G. Clemens and Charles Lee, has won more than \$2 million in grants from the National Institutes of Health. It is developing methods to make more organs — especially livers — available for transplants.

Clemens, a biologist, and Lee, a mechanical engineer, are among five employees of the young business. Clemens explains the importance of the work. "There are about three-to-five times as many liver patients who need transplants as there are organs available, and many die waiting for an organ."

That's in part because organs currently used for transplant come from "brain dead" donors. But Clemens explains that there is a much larger segment of donors who die from cardiac issues. The problem is that the organs start deteriorating as soon as the blood flow is interrupted. "What our

technology does is it takes those organs that have been damaged and allows them to recover function so that they can then be used as donors for transplants. We could very substantially increase the number of organs available."

"We make devices that can move less than the width of an atom."

The company also has expanded the technology to restore function to liver cells sought by pharmaceutical companies to test new drugs. "Right now the most common reason for a new drug to fail clinical trials is they have liver toxicity," Clemens said. "Drug companies spend huge amounts of resources testing for this toxicity. But there just aren't enough human liver cells available for testing." He said if HepatoSys is successful in making more liver cells available for testing, it could improve functionality of drugs and make them cheaper.

UNC Charlotte's tech-transfer office encouraged the researchers to form the company and to enter Five Ventures. "At the time, we were realizing that our real strength was in the technology," Clemens said. "As part of the competition, they provide you with coaches with business expertise. That was very attractive with us."

The coaches encouraged Clemens and Lee to develop a business plan. "We were a little bit clueless as to how to put that together," Clemens said. "One of our coaches helped us put it together, and the (Small Business Innovation Research) grant got funded. Without the coaching that we got through Five Ventures, we wouldn't have achieved that."

The boost hasn't stopped, either. The company has gotten a lot of exposure, which will help when it solicits private-equity investment. "When we get to that point, we have a head start," Clemens said.

Arthur O. Murray is a Charlotte-area freelance writer.