

PROFILES

Israel's most powerful woman in biotech

By ISRAEL21c staff January 22, 2008

She visits with foreign dignitaries regularly and closes multi-million dollar deals. But by the end of the day, on this particular day, she runs home to Tel Aviv to make sure that her two children have jelly doughnuts in time for the Chanukah holiday.

Giving everything, and compromising on little, is Nava Swersky Sofer, the president and CEO of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's technology transfer company, Yissum. Part of her success in life, she admits, comes from being a bit unconventional.

Shortly after she got her MBA at the age of 25, she was scooped up by one of the world's most powerful drug companies Ciba-Geigy (now Novartis), at the company's worldwide headquarters in Basel, Switzerland. She became a VP there, and joined a group of traditionally minded middle-age men.

"I was so different that they accepted it. I was female, I was Israeli, I was young, and I was just *so weird*," Sofer tells ISRAEL21c.

The Israeli, whose family came originally from South Africa, does have a somewhat unconventional past. By the age of 20, she already had a law degree from Tel Aviv University.

And not long after her army service, where she was a captain and practicing law, she decided on Switzerland, at one of the world's best business schools, IMD. The international flavor appealed to her.

"I didn't have a grand plan. I ended up in pharmaceuticals by chance. It was an interesting opportunity," she says of the Ciba-Geigy recruitment just after her studies. Later Sofer moved to California where she joined Sanderling Ventures as a partner. This is a leading Californian healthcare VC with over \$1 billion under management.

She then went on to found her own VC firm, Columbine Ventures, in Israel.

Some women get ahead by acting like men. This wouldn't be Sofer's story. "I fed my children in the boardroom," she says. Balance is what she aims for in work and in life. And exactly at a time in her career when she had every opportunity at her fingertips, she decided to focus on strengthening Israeli society, through Yissum.

Two years ago Yissum's chairman, Giora Yaron approached her. "He convinced me that it was time to give back a little," says Sofer.

With her wheels set in motion, she joined Yissum, a "private enterprise with a public goal," she says. Since she took the post on, revenues are up some 25 percent, and the vast majority of this money gets funnelled back into research.

Yissum is the company that markets Hebrew University's research and inventions, with the most well known to date being the anti-cancer drug Doxil, Exelon for treating Alzheimer's disease and dementia, and the famous long shelf life cherry tomatoes. The list goes on and includes hundreds of technology licenses and spin-off companies.

Israel is a world leader in technology, and its biotechnology research is world class, whether it is inventing new drugs, novel drug delivery methods or new medical devices. Much of this innovation starts in the "incubator" of the Jerusalem hills, home to Hebrew University.

"Yissum is one of the leading tech transfer companies in the world," says Sofer, from her office nestled among the pines. "We rank among the world's top 15 tech transfer companies, and are number 12 in biotech patents, just under Harvard. Not bad considering that our net research budget is 10 percent that of most US universities."

More than 40 percent of all biomedical research done in Israel occurs at Hebrew University, according to official government statistics. "No two other Israeli universities put together reach that level," she says

Last year, revenues from technology at Yissum capped about \$40 million. This compares to the money earned by MIT's tech transfer company, about \$35-40 million.

Among all the great innovations, what are Sofer's favourites? A couple of newer companies would include Novogali, a drug delivery technology for eye medication, she says, and Collplant, which produces human collagen in a plant system.

There is also Nanolymp, which can deliver medication orally and bypass the liver. Hebrew University's Prof. Simon Benita developed the research. "I think it is one of the most exciting technologies," says Sofer.

From recruiting one of the best in the business, to bringing steady revenues back to the institution and country that feeds it, what are Sofer's thoughts on Yissum's success?

"I think that the university places the highest importance on academic excellence. The president has declared numerous times that he wants it to be among the top 20 in the field of biotech.

"If you set this goal, maybe you are more likely to get there," concludes Sofer.



© 2001-2004 ISRAEL21c.org. All rights reserved.