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## Entrepreneur: Husband-and-wife team marry skills, passions to build companies

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Dr. Vernon Rowe and Elizabeth Rowe sold their first biotechnology startup in January to a San Diego-based drug development company and already are creating another concept.

The husband-and-wife team launched Verrow Pharmaceuticals Inc. in 2006, when Vernon Rowe discovered a way to reformulate contrast dye so it doesn't harm kidneys; about 2 percent of patients experience kidney problems after receiving these dyes. They also manage an independent practice, the Rowe Neurology Institute, in Lenexa.

The couple faced a steep learning curve as they managed both businesses, meaning a lot of quality time together at work. But they said the trick behind balancing their businesses and their relationship was to find a cause they were both passionate about.

"It's not a problem coming up with ideas; it's picking the ones that are really important and will improve the world somehow," Elizabeth Rowe said. "(Those ideas) are the most fun because you feel the best about what you're doing, so you're willing to work all of those crazy hours."

She admitted that talk about work spills over at the dinner table, but it's always been that way. Since the couple met one summer while conducting research at Duke University, they've been bouncing ideas off each other.

"It's our life. It always has been," she said. "Back when we had two separate academic careers going, we were still talking about it all of the time at home."



ADAM VOGLER

Elizabeth Rowe and Dr. Vernon Rowe, co-founders of Verrow Pharmaceuticals, are partners in life and in business.

Even as they sit working on their computers at the same table, Vernon Rowe doesn't think of it that way.

"I wouldn't call it working," he said. "It's like, 'Wow, this is such a privilege.'"

They generally see eye-to-eye. What works, Elizabeth Rowe said, is each having a separate role. While he was practicing medicine at his office, she worked with Verrow full time as COO, managing a small team of scientists and working through the details of the research.

Vernon Rowe has a medical degree, and Elizabeth Rowe has a doctorate in biochemistry, both from Duke. The two were a dual hire in 1977 at the University of Kansas Medical Center, where they both held professorships before Vernon Rowe set out to start his practice. At the time, she was conducting research for the Kansas City Veterans Administration Medical Center, which provided some financial stability.

"Going out on your own, it's always a scary thing," Vernon Rowe said. "We weren't independently wealthy. We had to go to the bank and borrow money."

Later on, when he discovered that some treatments led to kidney damage, and how to prevent this, they launched Verrow Pharmaceuticals. Although he still won't call himself an entrepreneur, Verrow was able to further research the product to the point where it was able to sell the concept to Ligand Pharmaceuticals for \$2 million.

"A lot of this is the hard knocks school of life. ... It turns out you have to have some business sense," he said. "I'm the guy who wants to solve a problem that then is perfectly happy turning that solution over to somebody else to commercialize while I've got another problem to solve."

As COO, Elizabeth Rowe's MBA and research knowledge helped bring the dye concept closer to commercialization. Vernon Rowe said that bringing together good advisers and team members was also crucial to the process. An early mentor, Dr. Geoffrey Hartzler, was a board member but later became their first angel investor.

Ultimately, Vernon Rowe said, the secret to their success is commitment.

"You have to have a balance in your life. ... But you have to be in it with your person for the long run," he said. "Life is short. If you want to pick a problem, pick a big one, and never give up."

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