



VENTURESOME VISIONARIES

MEET FOUR ENTREPRENEURS WHO BUCKED CONVENTION, IGNORED THE NAYSAYERS, AND MADE IT BIG DOING WHAT THEY LOVE

BY KIMBERLY OLSON

TENA CLARK HAD A WHITE-HOT CAREER, writing top hits for artists like Aretha Franklin, Chaka Khan, and Patti LaBelle, and contributing songs to television shows and movie soundtracks. Then, in 1997, she decided to walk away from it all and try something new.

She wanted to launch a company that would use the power of music to connect people to company brands. “Everybody laughed at me, because they thought I’d lost my mind,” says Clark, in her silky Louisiana drawl. “Why in the world would I give up a lucrative career to start a renegade company, selling music and doing deals? A lot of people just didn’t get it, and I had a lot to prove. But I knew in my head that this was going to work.”

Clark certainly knew something about branding. After all, she’d penned music for ad campaigns like “Have You Had Your Break Today?” for McDonald’s. “I don’t believe there’s any better way to create loyalty than through emotion, and the best way to emotionally connect with people is music,” Clark says.

“I thought if we could give consumers something they love and create an environment that they enjoy, then it would be a win-win.”

More and more women like Clark are striking out on their own. In fact, the number of women-owned companies is now growing at twice the rate of companies led by men. Clark ultimately launched DMI Music & Media Solutions, a full-service music and entertainment producer that would create branded listening experiences.

Disheartened by the downward tumble of the music industry, Clark wanted to turn things around, flip them upside-down, and create a whole new model. “My goal had nothing to do with saving the world,” she says. “I approached it from a capitalist standpoint—how can I still do what I love and make a living, when everything is drying up around me? I wanted to distribute music in places where nobody ever had before. Why did it have to be, at the time, in record stores that people buy CDs? Why did it have to be on the radio that you break an artist or hear music?”

Changing the conventional mindset wouldn’t be easy, but it was a task Clark was eager to take on. Her Louisiana childhood had nurtured both a love of music—her songwriter mother exposed her to everything from big band, to gospel, to R&B—and an intense entrepreneurial drive. “My dad came from nothing, and he became a successful oil entrepreneur,” Clark says. “If I would try something and it wouldn’t work, he’d say, ‘Girl, don’t you cry about that. Just get up, dust yourself off, and try again.’”

As DMI got up and running, Clark saw no boundaries. The company—equipped with a state-of-the-art recording studio—has developed brand campaigns around chart-topping artists, created interactive videos, and produced concert tours. And Clark’s team has proven masterful at using technology to create fun, lively interactive experiences. “So much of what we do now is online, whether it’s microsites or webisodes or contests,” she says.

DMI has attracted clients like Toyota, Disney, and General Mills, and even programs President Obama’s music for Air Force One. The company also specializes in multicultural marketing,



Tena Clark, *CEO and chief creative officer*
DMI Music & Media Solutions, Pasadena, CA



Colleen J. Payne, *president*
MCI Diagnostic Center, Tulsa, OK

to help brands connect with African American, Latino, and Asian audiences. “Five years ago, we were asking, ‘Why are the budgets so small for women? Why are the budgets so small for African-American and Latino initiatives?’ But now, the budgets are what they should be, so it’s very exciting and we’re doing a lot of fun projects.”

Now, 15 years into her audacious experiment, Clark is helming a company that’s successful by nearly every measure. And she never really minded the naysayers. “I’ve been a salmon swimming upstream my whole life, and I love that direction,” she says. “If you’re not living your truth, you’re wasting life. I love seeing what we do every day. I love my guys coming up with great new ideas. I love to see a brand happy with that. I love seeing young people come up through the company and do really well.”

AGAINST THE ODDS

When Colleen J. Payne was in her early 30s, she too started getting a bit restless. A skilled nuclear medicine technician, she loved her job, which involved using state-of-the-art technology to examine the functioning of patients’ internal organs. But she dreamed of doing something bigger—something that would have a greater impact.

She wanted to launch a mobile nuclear medicine company in Oklahoma, using special vans to bring state-of-the-art cardiac diagnostics to people in the state’s underserved rural areas. But when she mentioned the idea to others, she, like Tena Clark, was met with raised eyebrows.

“People said that it hadn’t been done in Oklahoma,” Payne says. “Had I ever seen a mobile nuclear medicine truck? No. Did I know how to start a company like that? No. But I knew that I was a good nuclear medicine technologist, and I just believed.”

If something hasn’t been done before, some assume there’s a good reason. But a would-be entrepreneur like Payne is wired to see an opportunity. And she wasn’t flying blind. She had done some relief work for a company out of Dallas with a mobile nuclear unit that went into various hospitals and had seen firsthand the impact it had on people’s health.

On a salary of \$40,000 a year, Payne couldn’t afford to buy the specially equipped truck she would need, which had a hefty \$654,000 price tag. But she found a company that agreed to invest that amount if she could find five prospective clients, whether physicians or hospitals, who would sign letters of intent to do business. She soon had her five letters in hand, and before she knew it, Mobile Cardiac Imaging, LLC (now MCI Diagnostic Center) was a reality.



Leah Brown, *president and CEO*
A10 Clinical Solutions, Inc., Cary, NC



Michele Kang, *CEO*
Cognosante LLC, McLean, VA

Still, women entrepreneurs face some unique challenges. As Payne launched her business, for example, she felt tremendous pressure to project the right image.

“There’s a perception that women aren’t very smart in science and technology,” she says. “When I started 15 years ago, most of my clients—doctors and hospital administrators—were men, so I never wanted any weakness to show. For seven or eight years, I didn’t wear a dress, and that was deliberate. There were a number of biases for me—being a woman, being African-American and being in this arena, and not having the financial wherewithal at that time, but meeting with people who were making hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

But one conversation at a time, she gained credibility, and business took off. Despite the early naysayers, Payne’s company not only has survived, but has expanded far beyond her initial vision. MCI Diagnostics now runs a full-service diagnostic clinic—offering nuclear medicine as well as ultrasound, CT scans, MRIs, and even a sleep disorder center—while continuing to operate its mobile diagnostic services.

In 2003, five years after Payne’s launch, *Black Enterprise* magazine named her Business Innovator of the Year. In 2010, she was one of 70 people invited to the White House Women’s Entrepreneurship Conference in Washington, D.C., where she joined a mix

of business owners, Obama administration officials, and academics to brainstorm solutions for helping women entrepreneurs.

Having succeeded against the odds, Payne now shares what she’s learned by teaching entrepreneurship at local colleges and delivering talks, and also has authored an autobiography, *I Did It My Way and ... It Worked!* She says that while being an entrepreneur isn’t easy, she wouldn’t have her life any other way. “After 15 years, no one makes me come to work,” she says. “I still do it, because I enjoy it. People may tell you that your dreams aren’t possible, and they may not work. But do you want to live the rest of your life thinking, ‘I had an idea and I didn’t pursue it?’ You have to push ahead and follow your dreams.”

IT’S NOT (JUST) BUSINESS, IT’S PERSONAL

When Leah Brown got the itch to launch her own company, the impetus was the death of a loved one. “My uncle passed away from HIV,” Brown says. “At that time, there was not much access to health care, especially if you were in Harlem and African-American, with this disease that was taboo. We felt frustrated with the process of getting the right formularies.”

Such stories are far too common. Research shows that people of color have poorer health and consistently get lower quality medical care than their Caucasian counterparts, even when they

have the same income and insurance coverage. An attorney with 15 years of experience in health-care regulatory compliance, Brown was determined to help close that gap.

She launched A10 Clinical Solutions, Inc., hoping to push life-saving drugs to market sooner and get the industry to focus on therapeutics that would have the greatest impact on communities with health-care disparities.

Brown says the biggest challenge as she prepared to launch was financing the endeavor. "It was a matter of mortgaging my house, tapping into my 401(k) plan, and all those crazy things," she says. "When I was doing this, I thought, 'I'm insane. I'm a single mother with two children to feed, and I'm going into significant debt here.' But I did it on a belief that this company was serving a good purpose."

While women launch nearly half of all new businesses in the United States, early-stage capital remains largely out of their reach. Angel investors doled out \$17.6 billion in 2009, for example, but only 9.4 percent went to women entrepreneurs. According to the Center for Women's Business Research, just 3 to 5 percent of women-owned businesses receive venture funding.

Those figures are especially disheartening when you consider that women-owned start-ups like A10 Clinical Solutions

doing?" Brown says. "So a lot of the challenges were in building credibility—just taking on studies and doing extremely well."

Despite the bumps, Brown believes that women are perfectly suited to entrepreneurship. "Women—and minority women specifically—are extremely tenacious and creative," she says. "We're able to turn impossible situations into something viable. We've been the ones who've had to give birth, take care of the family, and take care of our bosses. We're a multitasking breed of the human race, and I think we're fabulous."

Brown's hard work certainly paid off. The company's first big client was Merck—which remains a client to this day—and others soon followed. In alignment with her mission, A10 Clinical Solutions does much work on infectious disease, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, which all have a disproportionate incidence rate among communities of color.

The company also conducts research for the government, such as a study of Gulf Coast children who might have been exposed to toxins while living in trailers following Hurricane Katrina. "Those babies are children now, and they're presenting with acute pulmonary and cardiovascular problems," Brown says. "They affect children of color mainly, and we're collecting information that will help FEMA and American Red Cross prevent some of these issues from occurring again in natural disasters."

Historically, people of color have been sorely underrepresented in clinical trials—something that Brown is trying to change. Clinical trials carry a stigma that dates back to the 40-year-long Tuskegee study, in which researchers intentionally withheld penicillin from African-American participants who had syphilis. "Communities of color have really shied away from participating in these studies, but they're so important because of the genomic effect of drugs," Brown says. "A drug that would work with me, an African-American woman, might have a different disposition for a white male or an Asian woman."

Many have tried to boost participation in trials and failed, so Brown has taken a different tack. She cofounded a nonprofit called Diversity Alliance for Science, which develops minority-owned businesses in the life sciences. "Entrepreneurs may have had a thriving business in office supplies before the economic downturn, and our organization helps them retool to sell clinical supplies," Brown says. "Then they have a more marketable business

and gain awareness of minority health care—and that hopefully spurs their employees' and their families' involvement in clinical trials."

Brown's executive and clinical teams came from various industries, which she says ramps up the innovation at A10 Clinical Solutions—and the business world is taking notice. In February, she was invited to the Pioneers and Patriots forum in Washington, D.C., where she and other business leaders met with White

ARE WOMEN THE NEW JOB CREATORS?

According to research by Babson College, if women entrepreneurs in the United States had the same start-up capital as their male counterparts, they would add six million jobs to the economy within five years—two million of those in just the first year.

Meanwhile, a report by the Immigration Policy Center reveals that immigrant women play a bigger part in building the U.S. economy than many realized. In 2010, 40 percent of all immigrant business owners were women.

Because women-owned companies will play a vital role in our economic recovery, the Obama administration has rolled out a number of initiatives to support them via the Recovery Act, the Small Business Jobs Act, and other legislation.

generally outperform those helmed by men. Research shows, for example, that female-led tech companies launch with one-third less capital on average, but have annual revenues 12 percent higher than those run by men.

Like Colleen Payne, Brown found that she had to overcome some preconceptions to sell her services to prospective clients. "You don't see many black women in this business, and the fact that I was not a physician might make people think, 'What is she

House officials and members of Congress to discuss policies that might benefit entrepreneurs.

Next on the agenda? Brown is thinking big. “Our goal is to go international, because that’s where our clients are,” she says. “So we’re full-court press in putting those global alliances together.”

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

When Michele Kang, founder and CEO of Cognosante, first launched her health IT company in 2008, the skeptics came out in force. “A lot of people thought I was crazy, that I was naive,” she says. “But a couple years later, our clients are asking for exactly what we’ve been talking about.”

Health care is undergoing a major transition, from handwritten notes in a back office to electronic records, which planted a seed in Kang’s mind. “Once you have the data electronically available, you can start doing things fundamentally differently,” she says. “You can identify fraud, waste, and abuse almost in real time. As a result, quality could improve significantly and costs will go down.”

As logical as that might sound, the industry has been slow to hop aboard. “Larger [health IT] companies have an interest in keeping the status quo, because current contracts are in billions of dollars, and there’s no incentive for them to go to their clients and say, ‘I can do this better at a fraction of the cost,’” Kang says. “But health IT is changing very fast, and you have to be agile and responsive. You have to be a couple steps ahead of the market trends and make some moves. A lot of innovation happens at smaller companies, and that’s what I wanted to do. My team wanted to build a transformative health IT company with an entrepreneurial spirit.”

The federal government began pushing for change back in 2004, under President Bush, with financial incentives being offered to doctors who would switch from paper to electronic medical records. Additional pushes to streamline and otherwise improve health IT were made in 2009, by the HITECH Act, and in 2010, as part of the Affordable Care Act.

Kang, who was vice president and general manager of Northrop Grumman’s health IT business as the rumblings of change began, spotted an opportunity. “The new regulations that are coming out had certain dates, so if you waited too long, you’d miss the opportunity to be part of that transformation,” she says.

In terms of getting funding, however, the timing could not have been worse. “Cognosante started in June 2008, and the crash was in September, so you had to be in business for two years before any bank would lend you money,” Kang says. “I started selling my stocks as I needed to, to fund the company, and when the market crashed, the stocks I set aside got devalued to half of what I was counting on. But I really believed that I was going to create something that was going to be needed in this industry, I had a group of people who shared that passion,

and the industry was ripe for this kind of approach.”

Cognosante’s pioneering technology solutions—including its expertise in implementing government-mandated upgrades—were soon in hot demand.

“We started telling our clients what they’d need several years before anyone else was talking about it, so there’s credibility and trust there,” Kang says. “What we’re doing matters to the lives

I’VE BEEN A SALMON SWIMMING UPSTREAM MY WHOLE LIFE, AND I LOVE THAT DIRECTION. IF YOU’RE NOT LIVING YOUR TRUTH, YOU’RE WASTING YOUR LIFE.” —Tena Clark

of a lot of people. Right now, we’re facilitating health insurance exchanges, so that small businesses can help their employees [choose the best] insurance.”

Cognosante initially focused on the federal government level, but much of the transformation agenda is being carried out by Medicaid agencies at the state level. So in 2010, Cognosante merged with Fox Systems, founded by Susan Fox—which had a toehold in that arena—thereby combining expertise of both levels into one company.

With about 240 employees, Cognosante plans to double its staff this year. Much of the company’s success is due to its diverse team—ranging from former government employees to people from both small and large tech firms—which understand both how to innovate and how to handle large implementations.

“I’ve put together a team that can run a \$1 billion-plus company,” Kang says. “One could argue that it’s overkill for a company of our size, but our goal is to have a very aggressive growth trajectory. All of the large technology companies are calling on us, because they need our unique vision and our capabilities to win their projects—so watch out.”

Today, there are more than eight million women-owned businesses in the United States, and that number will only continue to climb. And while entrepreneurship comes with plenty of risks, those who’ve made the leap say there’s nothing quite like the feeling of making your own way in the world.

As Tena Clark muses, “You’re able to look over your shoulder and say, ‘Wow, I really did what I loved. I created what I wanted to create. I had my ups and downs, but I had a lot of fun doing it, I made a great living, and I helped other people.’ My daughter is 25 now, and I think I’m going to look back one day, and all these young women are just going to be busting the walls down.” **DW**

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