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Grant to help bioscience startup move toward commercialization

BY KEVIN TAMPONE

JOURNAL STAFF

ROCHESTER — Diffinity Genomics won a yearlong grant worth more than \$700,000 that will help the startup bioscience firm to continue refining its technology.

The company, based in Rochester, is commercializing nanotechnology-based products used in the extraction and purification of substances like DNA and in other laboratory tests. The firm received \$100,000 in financing in 2009 from the Seed Capital Fund of CNY, LLC.

The fund, which provides financing for early-stage companies, is based in Syracuse. Individual investors in the fund added another \$200,000 in financing for Diffinity last year.

The firm should have its first product on the market later this year, says Robin Hodownes, vice president of sales and marketing at Diffinity. The \$700,000 in funding the company won in September was a federal Small Business Technology Transfer Program grant from the National Institutes of Health.

The grant will fund further work on Diffinity's technology. It will provide for some additional research, allow the company to begin scaling up its manufacturing operations, and fund exploration of additional applications for the technology.

The firm's initial market will be life-sciences researchers and other scientists, Hodownes says.

The initial product, a tip that fits onto standard lab equipment used in DNA analysis, separates impurities from DNA samples. The surface of the tip itself absorbs the impurities, according to Diffinity.

The purification process is an initial step in DNA analysis, Hodownes explains.

Although the company's initial focus is on the research market, Diffinity eventually plans to sell its products for use in point-of-care applications. That space, however, is regulated and so the firm will aim its first products toward researchers, Hodownes says.

Diffinity has 10 full-time and part-time employees. The firm does not release sales projections, Hodownes says.

The company's CEO, Jeff Helfer, has 33 years of experience in medical-product development, manufacturing, new business development, and regulatory affairs. Previously, he co-founded and was CEO of Myotech, LLC, which formed to commercialize an alternative human heart pump.

Helfer was also vice president of engineering at Biophan Technologies, Inc. and helped develop new technology that led to partnerships with Boston Scientific Corp. and Medtronic, Inc. He was also a program director, director of new business development, director of regulatory affairs, and director of engineering at Johnson & Johnson and worked for Eastman Kodak Co.



Matt Mazzo, co-op student lab technician, purifying a PCR sample using a RapidTip. Diffinity Genomics won a yearlong grant worth more than \$700,000.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DIFFINITY GENOMICS

Lewis Rothberg, Diffinity's co-founder and chief technology officer, developed the company's technology at the University of Rochester with Huixiang Li.

Rothberg is currently a professor at the University of Rochester. He has served in the past as a member of the technical staff at AT&T Bell Labs and his worked has

been incorporated into products from firms like Sony and Lucent Technologies, according to Diffinity.

He holds a bachelor's degree in physics from the University of Rochester and a doctorate in physics from Harvard University.

Contact **Tampone** at ktampone@nybj.com