

Sleep becoming big business for local company

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By Stacie Spring, Tribune |

A local small business has grown by 800 percent in the last seven years, perhaps leaving the term small business behind.

Valley Sleep Center, owned by Lauri Leadley, began in 1990 as an at-home provider of a test that measures oxygen levels in blood. Now focusing on sleep problems, the center had more than 8,800 referrals this year alone, a major increase from fewer than 1,000 in 2004. The business that started in Mesa now has five locations throughout the Valley that diagnose and treat thousands of people of all ages, pediatrics through geriatrics.

While there are some commonalities between successful small businesses, there isn't a holy grail to that achievement, said Gary Naumann, a professor at the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University.

"There is no substitute for hard work," Naumann said. "Some people think that everything will just flow because, 'I'm in business for myself.' That is not the case."

A lot of hard work is how Leadley started her business.

"I literally started this business out of my kitchen," Leadley said.

Leadley's business started very small, but with additional training and education, she added more services.

"Successful business owners know how to do things," Naumann said, explaining that business owners don't just sit in an office. "They roll up their sleeves and know how it works. Unsuccessful ones don't know the details."

Before starting her business, Leadley was working for a physician whose patient needed an oxygen test, but couldn't make it into the office. Leadley went to the patient's house to conduct the test on her lunch break and quickly realized there was a need for at-home oximetry tests. From there her business was born.

During the initial growth of her business, she found that many doctors would also ask if she performed sleep tests. In 2000, she trained to become a registered polysomnographic (sleep testing) technologist.

After briefly working for two sleep centers, Leadley added sleep testing to her business and it became Valley Oximetry Sleep Disorders Center. In 2010, the word "oximetry" was dropped and it became Valley Sleep Center.

Part of what Leadley credits to her success is her personal challenges. She was diagnosed with Burkitt's lymphoma, a fast growing cancer, in 1992 while she was pregnant with her third child.

She made the decision to take chemotherapy during her pregnancy and calls her now 19-year-old son an "absolute miracle."

"Those challenges made me not so afraid of failure," Leadley said. "When you have death staring you in the face, money is nothing. It makes everything else seem easier."

That's a skill that Naumann said is essential for business owners.

“They need the confidence to make it work,” Naumann said. “‘Woe is me’ isn’t going to work. The successful ones take issues on, often one at a time.”

Another reason why Leadley’s business experienced growth the past few years: social changes for Americans.

Obesity and stress are stressors that can lead to sleep problems, Leadley said.

“There has always been a growing need,” Leadley said. “People appreciate their health and health insurance.”

The economy has changed perspectives on health, Leadley said. It makes people realize the value of family.

“Sleep apnea can take 15 years off of someone’s life,” Leadley said. People want to be able to be there for their family. Often times, people will want to use their health insurance benefits while they still have them, she said.

Helping people get better is something that Leadley takes personally.

“It’s our job to take a grumpy, tired person and turn them into a happy one,” she said.

Sleeping disorders can make people exhausted, unmotivated and feel hopeless, Leadley said.

“Whatever life gives you, you can overcome it,” Leadley said.

Leadley, who also was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, knows what it’s like to be a patient. She tries to make her office and testing rooms more hospitable than a traditional clinic based out of a hospital.

Patients are provided with their own room and bathroom, even a shower. Amenities like cable TV and Wi-Fi Internet access gives patients a feeling more like home, Leadley said. Most similar facilities have at least two patients share a bathroom and don’t provide such a homey feel.

“Typically, the tech to patient ratio is three-to-one,” Leadley said about other clinics. “We’re 2-to-1 or sometimes even one-to-one.”

Leadley credits most of her success to the people around her: her employees.

“Our success has been the people who are a part of our team,” Leadley said. “Success begins and ends with people.”

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