

Breaking Through

More women are getting technical educations, but few wind up heading tech firms.

By Andrea Quong

Laura Demmons found a new passion.

Laura Demmons' office is a workman-like place with equipment deployed in various states of experimentation; rubber-topped bottles of water samples from distant corners of the earth line a counter, ready for taste-testing. With her chestnut hair swept into an imposingly smooth twist and slate-blue eyes set off by a smoky silk jacket, Ms. Demmons projects an elegance that seems at odds with her surroundings.

The atelier-office, in fact, is ground zero for Sunnyvale, California-based Sylvan Source, a scrappy startup she founded in 2003 to design painstakingly engineered water purification appliances.

The Virginia-born entrepreneur professes an affinity for all things technical, dating back to her Hewlett-Packard days in the 1980s when she managed a team of software engineers. "I went from not having a technical background to just diving into the deep end in software, working with programmers...and finding out that I probably liked working with scientists and engineers almost more than anything else I had ever done in my life," she says.

Later, she moved up the corporate food chain and marketed everything from interactive TV to servers and storage, and helped to quadruple HP notebook sales to \$2 billion. Interestingly enough, Ms. Demmons majored in journalism at the University of Oregon, paying her way with profits from an ad agency she ran. But instead of getting a newspaper job, she did a stint as a sales rep at Eastman Kodak before going to HP.

By 2001, after 12 years at HP, she was running a product design and marketing company in San Francisco, but her heart wasn't in it. "In the car, you have time to think: Is this really what I want to do? Is this going to make me happy?" Ms. Demmons, then 37, recalls thinking during her daily commute from Menlo Park.

Then Ms. Demmons found something she



From left: Indu Navar, CEO, Serus; Laura Demmons, CEO, Sylvan Source; Kristin Asleson McDonnell, CEO, LimeLife; Lissa Morgenthaler-Jones, CEO, LiveFuels; Mary Tagliaferri, President, Bionovo.

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could be passionate about: clean water—an area of immense global need. With the help of Gene Thiers, then senior director of technology commercialization at SRI International (today, he's Sylvan Source's CTO), she honed in on a vision to develop a household water purification appliance that required no filters, membranes, cartridges, cleaning, chemicals, or maintenance.

Clean water is estimated to be a \$400-billion global business, but it's a sector that sees little in the way of technological innovation, analysts say. Sylvan Source's team of engineers came up with novel technology that removes contaminants through a four-step degassing, distilling, demisting, and condensing process—all without filters that must be cleaned or replaced and with less water wastage to boot.

"There are variations of different technologies, but real innovations are quite rare or don't happen that often," says Renee Chu, program manager of Frost & Sullivan's environmental practice. "So it's interesting to

see how things will work out for companies such as Sylvan Source."

"Sylvan," which means pure or natural, applies as much to the company's unique technology as it does to Ms. Demmons' approach to business. The company weaves together Ms. Demmons' personal and professional lives, and is based on relationships of fairness and trust. Friends and family members, including her husband, parents, and a cousin, invested in the company, which has raised \$4.5 million altogether since its founding.

Ms. Demmons has also poured more than \$300,000 from her 401K, savings, and mortgage into the venture, so no one's more interested in seeing it succeed than she is. Right now, plans call for expanding the use of Sylvan Source's technology from the household to large-scale water treatment plants and even bottled water. Meanwhile, the company is looking to partner with a major home-building firm—progress that could please institutional funders. **RH**

The credit I can take for myself is that I do my best to listen.

Laura Demmons, CEO, Sylvan Source

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