

The Magazine of the Mizzou Alumni Association

MIZZOU

Back Yard Investing

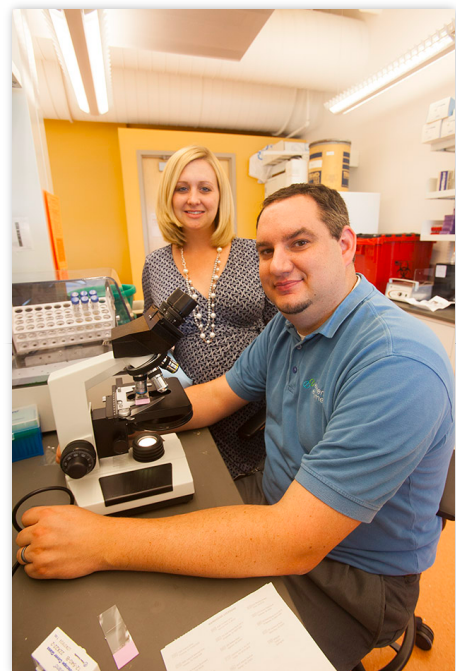
Centennial Investors puts money in Mizzou-based startup companies.

Story by Erik Potter

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Brian and Katie Thompson believed in their company. So did their friends and family, whom they persuaded to invest in it.

But by 2012, they were ready to go bigger. The husband and wife team hired two employees and caught the interest of deep-pocketed investors, including Columbia-based Centennial Investors, a group of business people — many with Mizzou ties — who act as “angel investors” in local startups. Centennial invested \$400,000 in Elemental Enzymes, a startup



Katie Thompson, BS '04, PhD '11, and Brian Thompson, MS '08, are designing enzymes that help crops grow better. Elemental Enzymes is one of four startup companies with direct MU ties that received money from Columbia-based Centennial Investors. Photo by Rob Hill.

biotech company that designs enzymes for commercial applications. Several of their agricultural enzymes for improving plant growth are in field trials.

The investment put the company on solid footing. “The [employees] we had last year would have been let go, and it would have been [just the two of] us trying to find funding from somewhere,” says Katie, BS ’04, PhD ’11, chief financial officer for the company, housed in the MU Life Science Business Incubator at Monsanto Place.

Angel investors buy equity in companies that are new and promising, yet inherently risky. Because of the high risk, the Securities and Exchange Commission restricts angel investing to accredited investors, such as individuals of high net worth or income.

Founded in 2006 by the Columbia Chamber of Commerce, which was looking for an impactful way to mark its 100th anniversary, Centennial Investors focuses its attention on science and technology companies.

Former Trulaske College of Business Dean Bruce Walker is president of Centennial Investors. Now the Lansford Professor of Leadership and professor of marketing, Walker says the investors get inquiries from about 100 companies a year. Of those, usually only two or three are funded.

“It’s beneficial to the community because it helps scientists and inventors commercialize their discoveries,” Walker says, adding that four of the 13 companies they’ve invested in have direct MU ties. “If [the companies] can stay here awhile, there’s job creation — and high-quality jobs.”

Other companies with MU ties include: Equinosis, MedSocket and EternoGen.

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