Into the wilderness

Ethan Perlstein never planned to be an entrepreneur. Ever since his college research internship, in a lab at the National Institutes of Health, he had dreamed of becoming a professor at a high-powered research institution. After completing his Ph.D. in molecular and cellular biology at Harvard and earning a Lewis-Sigler fellowship at Princeton, he seemed perfectly positioned to take that next step. “I was in the academic 1%,” he says. Apparently, the academic 1% isn’t good enough. When his 2-year job search yielded no offers, he was stunned and unprepared. “I was in an existential rut because I hadn’t thought of a plan B,” he says. He was “in the wilderness.”

He started conducting his own research—a hybrid of a legacy project from his postdoc and some new exploratory work—at a bench he rented in a facility in Berkeley, California. He supported himself by consulting for a startup company developing a science-crowdfunding platform, and he lived off savings he had set aside during his postdoc. He branded himself an “indie scientist,” a label he confesses is nebulous. “The indie label is really more about a spirit than a set of specific practices. It means doing things in an unconventional way and considering and being open to doing things that are not just the standard way of doing things,” he says. The emphasis is on working “outside of the academic and industry monoculture.”

In search of a clearer path, he brainstormed with his brother, a legal entrepreneur. He also “turned to Twitter as a source of solace and support—and as an opportunity to learn, … what would a plan B look like?” On Twitter, he commiserated with others who were struggling in the academic market and connected with rare-disease advocates. He found people he could bounce ideas off as he wrestled with his next career move. “I really feel like [Twitter] made my transition possible,” he says.

Over the course of about a year, his new venture took shape: Perlstein Lab—PLab for short—a for-profit, public-benefit corporation that aims to develop treatments for rare diseases. In 2014 he incorporated, brought in $2.2 million in investments, and hired three Ph.D. scientists and a few other research staff. PLab is currently targeting two diseases, Niemann-Pick Type C and NGLY1 deficiency. Using genetic models in a variety of organisms—yeast, nematodes, fruit flies, zebrafish—PLab aims to identify candidate treatment compounds for each disease, which can then be refined and taken to the clinic with partner companies.

Perlstein never imagined himself as a startup CEO, but now that he’s doing it, “I couldn’t be happier,” he says. “I feel like we’re able to blend the best of basic and applied science. … There are certain parts of academia that I miss, but the parts I miss the most I’ve tried to recreate here: things like journal club, happy hour, places where you can just kind of nerd out and be self-indulgent about the science.”

Despite now being officially corporate, he hasn’t given up the indie-science spirit. In the long run, he hopes PLab will be successful enough to allow him to “do what I really wanted to do all along, which is to build a truly independent science institution.” He imagines something akin to the Santa Fe Institute, where researchers can go on sabbatical, interact with new people, and engage in interdisciplinary work. “But that’s kind of a long-term fantasy,” he says.

One year in, PLab is not quite out of the startup woods. “We’ve survived the birthing process, so at least there’s that,” he says. “We’re showing the first signs that we can stand up on our own two feet.” He’s optimistic about the company’s future, but knows from experience that he ought to hedge his bets. “Things could sour quickly,” he acknowledges. Still, “maybe I’m just saying it, but I think we’re in a tentatively firm position in terms of happiness, subject to contingencies.”

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