

Robert Kenyon

Biotech Alum Works His Way Up the Manufacturing Ranks at Biogen IDEC



Robert Kenyon (Class of 1996)

Changing people's lives – it's what Bob Kenyon does for a living. No, he is not a superhero from Krypton, or a billionaire philanthropist. Kenyon, a Middlesex alumnus, is the Vice President of Manufacturing for Biogen IDEC.

Twenty-one years ago, unemployed and unsure of his next step, Kenyon enrolled in MCC's Biotechnology Program, opening a window into a world of opportunity he never knew existed, leading to a successful and rewarding career with an industry leader.

For more than 30 years, Biogen has been developing, manufacturing and marketing drugs to fight neurodegenerative, hematologic and autoimmune diseases like multiple sclerosis, hemophilia and ALS.

"It's easy to lose sight of things when you sit through 12 meetings in a row. But then, a little boy comes in and tells us one of our drugs is making it easier for him control his hemophilia and is allowing him to be a regular kid, and you tear up a little," Kenyon said during a recent interview in his Cambridge office.

"That's what it's about – a little boy who just wants to play soccer like the other kids. It is about the patients."

Kenyon wasn't always so passionate about the biotech industry. His career path had a rocky beginning before leading him to Middlesex. "It all started with some guy on Jackson Street in Lowell saying, 'Hey, you should go into biotech'," Kenyon said.

He graduated from Chelmsford High School in 1985 and enrolled at the University of Lowell to study business. He dropped out after his sophomore year and went to work as a finish carpenter, building houses with his brother, Bill, until the economy crashed.

His father, a program manager at Raytheon, got him a job on the assembly line building missiles. Four years into that gig, defense spending dried up and he found himself taking advantage of the Economic Dislocation and Worker Adjustment Assistance Act, a federal program for dislocated defense workers.

Following extensive aptitude testing, his counselor (that guy on Jackson Street), suggested Kenyon look into biotechnology. The federal program offered to pay for him to enroll in MCC's Biotechnology Certificate Program.

The first of its kind among two-year colleges in Massachusetts, the Middlesex Biotech Program was established in 1990 at the urging of U.S. Sen. Paul Tsongas. There are currently 200 students enrolled in the program, which has been awarded a Platinum endorsement from the Massachusetts Life Sciences Education Consortium.

"It was a small group of students, we all got to know each other well," Kenyon said of the certificate program. "The foundation we received at Middlesex was very helpful. It was set up to really help us understand what is done in the business."

At the conclusion of the six-month program, in October 1994, he was placed in an

internship on the manufacturing floor at Biogen. Eleven months later, he was hired full time, working the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. overnight manufacturing shift. There were 30 people working in manufacturing at that time. Today there are 1,000.

Kenyon continued his education, earning his associate degree from Middlesex in 1996, and in 2000 his bachelor's degree in biomedical laboratory and clinical sciences from Boston University.

"Middlesex really set me up well – it was a fun way to go to school," he said. "I was learning concepts about the business in the classrooms and in the labs, and then going to work at night and seeing it all in practice. That made it more interesting and made a big impact on how I was able to learn.

"I really took to manufacturing – this intersection of biology and engineering," Kenyon said. "It was like I had found my home."

Kenyon worked his way up the ranks at Biogen, becoming Director of Manufacturing in March 2004. Four years later, he was part of an interesting experiment: He was asked to trade jobs with Director of Quality John Dirienzo. Kenyon went to quality, Dirienzo to manufacturing.

"It was like bizarro world," Kenyon said, laughing. "It was really eye-opening and a great education to see the business from the quality side," he said.

Two years later, Kenyon was named Director of BioPharm Development, working on the development of drugs like Avonex and Plegriety, both used to treat re-occurring multiple sclerosis. In August 2013, he was named Vice President of Manufacturing.

"In my mind, I'm still the guy in the plant pushing buttons and pulling levers," he

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Kenyon describes biotechnology manufacturing as “the intersection of biology and engineering.”

said. “I find it super easy to relate to the manufacturing associates because I did it for so long.”

“Bob Kenyon is the prime example of how far a Middlesex Biotech graduate can go,” said Dr. Mariluci Bladon, Biotechnology Program Coordinator. The program in which Kenyon enrolled 21 years ago continues to be a popular and practical choice for students intrigued by science, she added.

“Interest in the program has increased significantly,” said Bladon. “Every day we are accepting new students, and they are aware of how strong our program is. Once they graduate, we are proud to have 100 percent placement in the biotech industry.”

Displayed prominently on the front of Kenyon’s desk at Biogen headquarters is a large, magnetic red, white and blue pinstriped ALS awareness ribbon. Scientists at Biogen work every day to develop new and better treatments for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), a disease that took the life of Kenyon’s brother Bill in March. He was 53-years-old and his death had a profound impact on both Kenyon’s personal and professional lives.

“It suddenly became very real to me, what we do every day,” he said. “I had access to world-renowned experts in the field and I learned everything I could about the disease.”

Working in pharmaceutical development and manufacturing, Kenyon often heard people complain it took too long to move drugs from development, through clinical trials and regulatory hurdles, to market. Rationally, he knew it was a complex process – there is a lot of biology involved.

“I know it is actually striking how quickly we work to get drugs to patients, but it is too slow for some,” he said. “It was too slow for my brother and for the first time I felt that in a very real way.”

Bill’s death changed the way Bob Kenyon approached his work. “It was profound for me. I had a new commitment to timelines,” he said.

Kenyon has seen the biotech industry grow dramatically in the last two decades, from a boutique industry to one of massive global proportions. When he started at Biogen, the company had 250 employees. That number has grown to 7,500 with locations in Cambridge, North Carolina, Denmark and soon Switzerland.

“The increased quality of life we have been able to give patients living with diseases like MS was unimaginable 20 years ago,” he said. “The impact of biotech on the world has been extraordinary and it will only get more dramatic in the next 10 years.”

Kenyon added he would love to see Biogen be the company that cracks Alzheimer’s disease, an ailment he says will see significant advances in treatment in the next few years.

He urges today’s biotechnology students to work in manufacturing if they are interested in the engineering side of things because, “Knowing the business from the operations side is paramount to being a successful engineer.”

For those interested in the research laboratory side of the business, he suggests staying in school, earning post-graduate degrees and building their academic backgrounds.

And on a larger scale, Kenyon takes great pride in the work Biogen IDEC has done in the last two decades, developing and manufacturing drugs that have changed the lives of millions of patients.

“No one would think that is what is going on in this two-story building on the corner of Binney Street,” he said.

– Jennifer Myers

For further information about MCC’s Biotechnology Programs, contact Dr. Mariluci Bladon, Program Coordinator, at bladonm@middlesex.mass.edu