

ST. LOUIS CHARACTER



DILIP VISHWANAT | SLBJ

BY BRITTANY NAY

A young Lisa Vallino could often be found treating her brothers with a toy first-aid kit. Caring for others was in her blood. “I always knew I wanted to be a nurse,” Vallino said. Today, the St. Louis native has built a million-dollar medical business as the CEO of I.V. House – in an effort to care for people of all ages, as she’s always done.

Vallino, 54, earned her nursing degree at Southeast Missouri State University and began her career at SSM Cardinal Glennon’s emergency department, where she served in roles including staff nurse and assistant head nurse for 17 years. Through the years, Vallino saw patients and nurses struggle with intravenous (IV) care. About 70 percent of patients require IVs during hospital stays and more than 30 percent of those fail, according to a 2004 article, “Intravenous catheter complications in the hand and forearm,” in *The Journal of Trauma Injury, Infection, and Critical Care*. Vallino wanted to find a solution. So in 1991, while still a nurse, she and her mother, Betty Rozier, founded I.V. House. “I.V. House has always been about patient safety and nurse efficiency,” Vallino said, who continued with her nursing career another nine years before turning her attention full-time to I.V. House.

I.V. House developed the UltraDome, a clear, plastic IV site protector designed to shield, secure and stabilize the catheter hub and loop of tubing at an IV insertion site. The UltraDome features soft foam edges for patient comfort; a universal design to fit hands, feet and scalps; and different sizes for babies, children and adults. The product allows easy visualization of the IV insertion site for frequent checks by nurses without disturbing the patient; eliminates exposed looping, which is a primary cause of IV dislodgment; and maximizes dwell time, which minimizes the need for painful new IV insertions. The company also developed the UltraDressing, a fabric that fits like a glove to hold the UltraDome in place, eliminating the need for tape and preventing skin irritation and IV dislodgment.

I.V. House’s latest product, the TLC (Touch, Look, Compare) UltraSplint, is an ergonomically designed arm board with see-through openings that allows nurses to touch, look and compare the IV insertion site with the opposite extremity to identify differences in appearance, such as size, color and temperature.

I.V. House products hit more than 5 million units sold and are used at more than 300 hospitals worldwide, including all of St. Louis’

major medical centers. “Most of our profits have gone back into I.V. House to help build the business,” Vallino noted.

The company’s medical products have garnered honors, including the International Design Excellence Award from the Industrial Designers Society of America in 2002. In an effort to be socially responsible, Vallino said I.V. House’s products are manufactured at Lafayette Industries in St. Louis and Webster Enterprises in North Carolina – facilities that employ adults with disabilities.

Sara Owens, assistant nurse manager of vascular access at St. Louis Children’s Hospital, said Vallino is endlessly passionate. “She’s been on a mission to keep pediatric patients safe from harm for many years now,” Owens said. “Her valuable experience as a pediatric emergency room nurse has given her the opportunity to see firsthand the complications that can occur from peripheral IVs. Her innovation and drive helped her get to where she is today.” Owens also called Vallino a tremendous health care partner. “She listens to her clients and solicits feedback on how to make her products better, and she always follows up and delivers high-quality products.”



The I.V. House UltraDome, TLC UltraSplint, and I.V. House UltraDressing.

Vallino is dedicated to improving the quality of care for patients and the overall efficiency of nurses — and after 25 years and 5 million units sold, she said I.V. House is just getting started.

Where did you get the idea for the I.V. House medical product? When I graduated from nursing school in 1983, we were using steel butterflies as the IV catheters, and if they were moved it would cause a hole in the vein. So we would protect the steel butterfly with a makeshift cover using the package it came in to keep it from moving. Then we moved to over-the-needle IV

catheters, and it was just a little plastic catheter that was left under the skin. We put a Snoopy bandage on it and told the kids Snoopy was sleeping and to leave it alone. Then they started making the packages soft and we couldn’t use them to protect the IV, so we moved to urine cups — we would cut them in half to cover the IVs. Then one day, I saw a nurse open the butterfly needle and throw away the needle just to get to the package to put it over the top of the IV. So she was throwing away a perfectly good product just to get to the package. That’s when I asked my mom to help me with the development of I.V. House.

What were some of the challenges of starting your own company? We consider ourselves a leader in the protection of IV sites. There aren’t a lot of other major medical distributors that focus on the protection of the actual IV site. We fashioned the first pediatric I.V. House product after the shape of half the urine cup and a little bit of the packaging. Then we got design and utility patents with St. Louis intellectual property and patent attorney Grace Fishel. Later, we created an adult version of the I.V. House with Metaphase Design Group in St. Louis.

How do you get your products to hospitals? We have been going to vascular access and nursing conferences across the nation for 25 years. When we exhibit our products at these conferences, the big thing I always tell people is that we are all about improving patient safety and nurse efficiency. We sell to more than 300 hospitals in the U.S. We’re in 60 percent of the freestanding children’s hospitals in the country. All of St. Louis’ hospitals have our products — mostly for pediatrics. We have about 30 customers in Canada, as well as in the Philippines and Australia. We’re also focusing more on the international market, and working with distributors in Korea, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

How has your business grown, and what’s next? We started with one product, and now we have 20 products. We started with the dome (for pediatric patients), then in 2000 we discontinued it because we created the new and improved UltraDome, which has a foam pad under it. In 2008, neonatal nurses wanted smaller ones, so we came out with two smaller sizes. We also have the UltraDressing. Our most recent product is the TLC UltraSplint, which is now on the market.

What is your favorite part of running your business? It’s fun bringing a new product to market. It’s a lot of work, but it’s fun deciding what materials to use, and working with the nurses, who are an integral part of our product development. We have focus groups during dinner meetings with nurses from St. Louis and nurses who we meet at conferences and have become our friends through the years. They ask questions and give input on the product, and we change it to their specifications.

Tell us about your volunteer work. In December of 2007, my niece was diagnosed with a glioblastoma brain tumor and was treated at St. Louis Children’s Hospital. She underwent radiation and chemotherapy and was tumor-free for several months. In March of 2009, the tumor came back with a vengeance, and we lost her in July of 2009. So we started Taylor Rozier’s Hope for a Cure Brain Tumor Foundation (taylorrozier.org). We have raised more than \$400,000 for pediatric brain tumor research and donate all profits to Dr. Joshua Rubin’s lab at Washington University. He used our funds to support the lab’s Legacy Program, which strives to deeply understand individual tumors as complex multi-clonal and multi-domain tissues, to map treatment effects on tumor evolution and discover mechanisms of resistance. This year, the foundation’s annual dinner dance and auction fundraising event will be Aug. 13.

WHERE YOU CAN FIND LISA VALLINO

- ▶ Cheering on the Blues at Scottrade Center
- ▶ Camping at Elephant Rocks and Mark Twain state parks
- ▶ Enjoying dinner at Charlie Gitto’s on The Hill
- ▶ Watching a St. Louis Cardinals game at Busch Stadium
- ▶ Attending nursing conferences across the nation
- ▶ Traveling to tropical beaches around the world