New Orleans startup aims to minimize hospital wait times

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Shelby Sanderford (MBA '17) is the founder of DOCPACE, a new startup that hopes to help hospitals improve the experience of patients.

Every year, hospitals around the country lose out on millions of dollars in Medicare reimbursements due to low patient satisfaction scores. DOCPACE, a New Orleans startup founded by Freeman School alumna Shelby Sanderford (MBA '17), might just be the solution.

“Our goal is to communicate office wait time to patients via text messaging and waiting room monitors to help eliminate wait time for patients,” Sanderford said. “Very similar to what airlines do for flight status, we’re doing for appointment status.”

Through enhanced transparency, Sanderford believes hospitals can create more positive visits for their patients. She identified this problem while studying healthcare administration at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. One of her professors was the president of the city’s Presbyterian Hospital, and Sanderford had the opportunity to shadow her instructor and learn about each department and specialty.

“It was during that time that I started to hear this recurring theme of the struggle to reach the preset patient satisfaction scores, which is set by the government," Sanderford says. “But they weren’t doing anything specific to target the base problem. So I started to think about ways that they could fix this and turn things around.”

Sanderford moved back to New Orleans after graduation and began working on the project. She spent a year interviewing doctors and figuring out the legal requirements to better understand what it would take.

Sanderford soon realized she needed a business foundation, so she enrolled in the Freeman School's MBA program. Despite a full course load, Sanderford kept working on DOCPACE and continued with it full-time upon earning her degree in May 2017.

Today, she is excited for DOCPACE’s soft opening in just a few weeks.

“We are about one month away from being up in our first doctor’s office," Sanderford says. "That will be our first beta site, and we are in discussion with several other locations for beta testing as well.”

While the future looks bright for the startup, Sanderford admits there were moments of adversity along the way. One issue centered around patient’s location service rights.

“That was the first hiccup moment," she says. "We built this thing, but just to get user adoption was going to be a challenge. We sat back and thought about what was the main value we had to offer and how could we just deliver that to the patient and make it easier.”

Sanderford and her team ended up simplifying the product on the user-end and eliminating the need for location rights by incorporating text messaging.

Another hurdle involved navigating compliance with HIPPA, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996.

“The regulations are defined that you can’t breach information, but they are less so defined on how a tech startup is responsible for doing that," she explains. "On the one hand you’re trying to protect people’s information as much as possible, but then you’re also trying to run a lean startup that probably can’t afford to have a full-time security officer on staff.”

Through her New Orleans healthcare connections, she eventually found a firm in Washington D.C that helps tech startups move into the market in a HIPPA compliant way.

“If everything was easy, there would be other people doing it," she says. "There’s a reason for all these challenges.”

For aspiring founders and entrepreneurs just getting started, Sanderford says perseverance and the ability to take criticism are the two most-essential qualities.

“A lot of times what makes an entrepreneur successful is that they believe so strongly in their idea they won’t let anyone stop them," Sanderford says. "I truly think that’s an important characteristic to have as an entrepreneur because it’s what makes you persist till you see success. With that said, when advice comes my way, I always try it on because you really don’t know what’s going to work until you try it.”

Even when people kept telling her what was wrong with her idea, Sanderford found inspiration in their words.

I think it’s important to realize that you need those people to play devil’s advocate and force you to see things from different perspectives," she says. "All of those comments have not only truly helped me refine the DOCPACE product but also fired me up to show them DOCPACE can be successful. The devil’s flames fuel me.”