



The woman who built a biotech business from an EU science contest

Andrea Stephany Diaz founded a startup to improve lung-cancer diagnosis after participating in a 2022 European event for young researchers.

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Andrea Stephany Diaz gushes with enthusiasm when talking about how she created her own biotechnology company two years ago at the age of 24 in a bid to revolutionise the detection of lung cancer.

‘I’ve always had a passion for science and human health,’ said Stephany Diaz, who was born in Venezuela and has lived in Europe for the past 13 years. ‘Even in high school, I was dreaming about being an entrepreneur and setting up my own company one day.’

EU inspiration

The idea for her biotech startup, called [OncoSwab](#), was born in September 2022 at an EU event for talented young researchers. Aptly named EU TalentOn, it was held in the Dutch city of Leiden over five days.

The [event](#) placed 104 participants from around Europe into teams and challenged them to come up with the best scientific answers to pressing societal challenges including soil pollution, climate change and cancer.

In short, EU TalentOn sought young people who wanted to change the world. Stephany Diaz applied and won an invitation, attending through the final two days on the weekend of 17-18 September.

‘I had this huge desire to impact patients’ lives,’ she said. ‘My life changed after that weekend. My life is before EU TalentOn and after EU TalentOn.’

Road to success

Lung cancer is often diagnosed late, helping make it the leading cause of cancer-related deaths worldwide, according to the [World Health Organization](#). Smoking is the main cause.

Stephany Diaz’s professional path to fighting cancer is far from direct.

She moved from Venezuela to Madrid, Spain at the age of 12. Following a degree in biochemistry from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, she began a Master’s in molecular biotechnology in the city and worked as a research assistant focusing in part on regenerating blood vessels after stroke.

After joining a German biotech company in Hamburg that developed stem cells for medical research, Stephany Diaz began working for herself on science-communication projects.

At the same time, she regularly jotted down notes on her phone about business ideas and opportunities that caught her attention in daily life.

Talent time

Then came EU TalentOn.

With a vivacious personality and love of talking, Stephany Diaz was chosen at the event to present her team’s idea in the beating-cancer category: what if a Covid-like test for lung cancer could be created? The team won the award for best pitch.

But something else happened: Stephany Diaz met like-minded people and – most significantly – Dr Pablo Lara, a cancer scientist from Leiden University.

She also encountered others who mentored her.

‘I was hungry to create something innovative and, after the TalentOn, I literally couldn’t sleep thinking about the problem of lung-cancer diagnosis,’ said Stephany Diaz. ‘Pablo had the same feeling and we immediately started talking almost every day.’

She described Lara as a typical genius scientist who comes up with ideas and experiments.

Partnership drive

The partnership proved invaluable to bring her dream of starting a company closer to reality. Still, getting the business off the ground was a tough effort well into 2023.

‘It was just me and Pablo,’ said Stephany Diaz. ‘Those first months were absolutely the worst. We were called crazy. For six to eight months, we kept getting rejected from everywhere.’

They stuck with it and eventually founded OncoSwab, received funding and began moving their lung-cancer screening idea forward.

Now, they’re working with lung doctors in the Netherlands, Switzerland and the US to detect lung cancer from nasal swabs. This may determine whether a patient requires a more complex computed tomography, or CT, scan.

‘Our goal is to really make lung-cancer detection as widespread as breast-cancer screening,’ Stephany Diaz said.

She declined to comment on the company’s technique because it is at the pre-commercial stage.

Now a Spanish citizen, Stephany Diaz feels a sense of both urgency and fulfillment in her current work.

‘I literally feel like I use every corner of my brain in my company and every skillset that I have,’ she said. ‘I get to be creative if a problem comes up and brainstorm with my team.’

Stephany Diaz spoke at the [European Research and Innovation – R&I – Days](#) on 20–21 March 2024 in the Belgian capital Brussels and said she’s drawn to such occasions.

‘I love to talk to others, I love to network, I love to meet people and I love to listen to other people’s stories,’ she said. ‘And it turns out that’s somehow part of my job now.’

The views of the interviewee don’t necessarily reflect those of the European Commission.

More info

- [EU mission on cancer](#)
- [European Research and Innovation Days 2024](#)