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Landing in Lakeland

Damien Lamendola Traveled the World Before Bringing WellDyneRX Here

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LAKELAND | Damien Lamendola took a circuitous and impressive route to Lakeland, and he thinks it's an ideal location for his ambitious business plans.

Lamendola, 54, is owner and chief executive of WellDyneRX, a company that manages prescription health benefits for unions and employers. It competes with companies such as Caremark.

Spawned in the Denver area, WellDyneRX last year expanded to a Lakeland branch that beat out many much bigger cities to become the firm's East Coast presence.

It's one of the few companies in the economic turbulence of the last two years to have been hiring here.

At its location near Interstate 4 and County Line Road, WellDyneRX now employs more than 50 full-time in Lakeland and more than 200 people between the two locations.

"It will be growing to 650 to 700 in Lakeland in the next two years," Lamendola said. "There are pharmacy positions, shipping, and call center operations are half of it, helping customers with questions. There are IT (information technology) positions, a couple of finance people, account management. It's a variety."

So why Lakeland?

"We're growing so fast, we needed additional capacity and backup so in case of a disaster we could continue to fill prescriptions, and we wanted an East Coast presence," Lamendola said. "We started narrowing it down and ended up in Lakeland. I call it the



SCOTT WHEELER | THE LEDGER
DAMIEN LAMENDOLA brought his company from Denver to Lakeland last year but the Louisiana native traveled the nation and Europe before settling here.

three Ps -- people, place and Polytechnic."

He explained each:

People. "We talked with employers in the area at Publix, Lockheed Martin, other places, and they told us there are great work force people here."

Place. "It's extremely convenient to get here. You've got Tampa or Orlando, nonstop flights. Up to (Washington) D.C., you've got to go through Atlanta first. This is also an attractive place to bring people to, like CEOs and VPs."

Polytechnic. The University of South Florida, Lakeland branch, was renamed USF Polytechnic in 2008. "When we were on the drawing board a year and a half ago (for Lakeland), looking at IT and other disciplines as we continue to grow, we look at students we can hire from," Lamendola said. "For future projects, having advanced capabilities is important for us. (The university) puts Lakeland in a different light. It's not just a stop between Tampa and Orlando. It's becoming more of a high-tech center."

Lamendola said he and his wife of 33 years, Debbi, are also personally happy to be in Lakeland.

INSURANCE DATA

The core of WellDyneRX is drug benefits. "That means that if you have insurance, you go into a pharmacy with a prescription, hand them a medical card, and they say, 'You owe us \$20.' The way they know is companies like us," Lamendola said.

"We provide two things. One is data from our system. There are many things to check in one second - which is the right drug, interactions (with other drugs), and so on. If it's a brand-name drug, it costs maybe 100 dollars, but you pay 20. The second thing is financial, collecting from the employer and paying the drug company."

And there are other functions of the firm.

"Another part of WellDyneRX is, if you're on chronic medication, we give you the option of mail order," Lamendola said. "It's more efficient and saves a little money. That's one of major functions in Lakeland.

"Another company we have is US Specialty care for specialty drug distribution. A third is CF Services, providing drugs for about 70 percent of cystic fibrosis patients, an operation out of Denver."

He said the company is also invested in wellcenters - workplace clinics with larger employers for routine medical issues and to work closely with employees with chronic conditions like diabetes or high blood pressure.

WellDyneRX either owns the clinic or manages it and employs the staff.

"It can save larger employers 15 percent on their insurance," Lamendola said.

LONG, WINDING ROAD

As for that long route to Lakeland:

As an undergraduate, Lamendola - born and raised in Louisiana - earned a chemical engineering degree at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, La. He graduated in 1977 and went to work for Monsanto in New Orleans. He went to night classes to earn a master of business administration at Washington University in St. Louis.

"I wanted to be diversified (at Monsanto), including agricultural and industrial products, and eventually got into prescription drugs," Lamendola said. He was a production engineer, then a supervisor, starting up chemical plants.

He moved to Fayetteville, N.C., to be production supervisor in herbicides, then to St. Louis in manufacturing, managing 28 facilities around the world. There, he went into marketing for agricultural products. Still with Monsanto, in business development, he moved to Brussels, Belgium, from 1990-92.

"It was quite an experience, launching new products globally, mostly in Europe and Africa," he said. "It was a time of European unification, the Berlin Wall coming down. I traveled through western Europe five days a week. Really, it was there that I got an appetite for entrepreneurship, launching new products."

He next went to Chicago to be marketing director with the Nutrisweet division of Monsanto, then to Atlanta. In 1996, he moved to San Diego to be director of sales and marketing for Nutrisweet and became VP for one of three divisions, in charge of strategy.

As Monsanto was about to be sold, Lamendola left after 20 years and joined Elan Pharmaceuticals, in San Diego. It had an operation in Denver that he ran. He bought it out in December 2002, and today it is WellDyneRX.

The company is located at 500 Eagles Landing, near I-4 and County Line Road, after moving from a temporary location on Main Street.

Susan Cain, chief executive officer, has been working with Lamendola for 10 years. "He always says we work with him, not for him," she said.

"The first thing that comes to mind about him is he has extremely high moral character, both in business and family life," Cain said. "He's extremely trustworthy and expects that level of ethics from employees. I think that's what's kept me here 10 years.

"If I could sum him up in one word, it's 'driven.' "

And that's driven him a long way, literally and figuratively.

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