

The Stanford professor who rejected one of Elizabeth Holmes' early ideas explains what it was like to watch the rise and fall of Theranos

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Elizabeth Holmes.HBO

- Dr. Phyllis Gardner, a Stanford Medical School professor, was skeptical of the Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes early on, having rejected Holmes' idea for a patch that could deploy antibiotics.
- Gardner has followed along with Holmes and Theranos since then and raised her concerns with reporters, including [The Wall Street Journal's John Carreyrou](#), who quoted her in his bombshell 2015 article questioning how well the company's blood-testing technology worked.
- But for Gardner, the story isn't over. "I just want her convicted," she said of Holmes. "All I want is to see her in an orange jumpsuit with a black turtleneck accent."
- Theranos is the focus of "[The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley](#)," a documentary debuting Monday at 9 p.m. ET on HBO.

[Dr. Phyllis Gardner](#), a Stanford Medical School professor, was used to being approached by entrepreneurial students looking to make a dent in the biotech world.

So when [Elizabeth Holmes](#) approached her after arriving at Stanford in 2002 with an idea to build a patch that would scan the wearer for infections and release antibiotics as appropriate, Gardner tried to explain to her why that might not work. Practically, the antibiotics Holmes wanted to use needed to be given at higher doses than a patch could deliver, Gardner said.

When she saw that she wasn't getting through to Holmes, Gardner pointed her in the direction of other people to help, including Gardner's husband.

"She was going to make it work and follow the model of 'try it until you succeed,'" Gardner said. "That is so completely ridiculous in terms of healthcare."

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From left: Phyllis Gardner, the director Alex Gibney, the Theranos whistleblower Tyler Shultz, and the producer Jessie Deeter at the San Francisco premiere of the HBO documentary "The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley" on March 11. Courtesy FilmMagic for HBO

That approach worried Gardner even then.

"When you have people's lives at risk, you don't do that," she said.

Shortly afterward, Holmes dropped out of Stanford. In 2003, at age 19, she founded the blood-testing startup [Theranos](#).

Theranos [went on to raise more than \\$700 million from investors](#), eventually racking up a \$9 billion valuation with its big vision to test for several conditions using just a small sample of blood.

Over the following years, Gardner would hear rumors about what the company was up to from people who had worked there. Theranos particularly attracted younger people coming out of Stanford.

Gardner came back into the Theranos story when Richard Fuisz, a family friend of Holmes' whom Gardner had met when she worked in healthcare at ALZA, reached out to ask for her opinion of Holmes. She was frank with him.

"I don't trust her," she recalled telling Fuisz. "I don't know what she's up to."

Theranos and Fuisz eventually went to court over a patent dispute, a difficult experience for Fuisz and his family. Gardner and Fuisz stayed in touch, eventually connecting with Rochelle Gibbons, [the widow of Ian Gibbons](#), the chief scientist at Theranos who killed himself [in 2013](#).

The group would text about what they were hearing about Theranos, especially in light of the company's [partnership with Walgreens](#), in which it set up clinical labs in certain pharmacies in Arizona to perform its finger-stick tests.

By 2014, Holmes was being featured on the covers of business magazines and included on lists of top executives. Gardner wasn't pleased.

"I was just barfing all over the place," Gardner said.

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Stanford students would ask to invite Holmes to speak as a female founder, but Gardner wouldn't allow it.

"I support women. I always have. I've gotten in trouble for it. I've pushed hard," Gardner said. "But I'm not going to support a fraud - I don't care what your gender is."

Then in October 2015, The Wall Street Journal's John Carreyrou published his first article [raising questions about how the company's technology worked](#).

The day the article broke, Gardner, [who was quoted in it](#), was at a [Harvard Medical School board of fellows](#) meeting. Holmes had been [appointed to the board](#) that summer, so she was there as well.

Holmes and Gardner sat on opposite sides of the room, Gardner recalled. She said she didn't speak to Holmes that day and kept her distance.

Holmes sat through the day of meetings, [took a break to go on CNBC's "Mad Money"](#) to dispute Carreyrou's reporting, and then came back for dinner. Holmes is no longer on the board.

Last June, Holmes [stepped down](#) as CEO of Theranos, remaining with the company as a founder and the chair of the board. She was charged with wire fraud by the Department of Justice; she has pleaded not guilty.

By September, [Theranos had officially shut down](#), and its investors lost the hundreds of millions they'd bet on the company.

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For Gardner, the story still isn't over.

"I just want her convicted," Gardner said of Holmes. "All I want is to see her in an orange jumpsuit with a black turtleneck accent."

Her rationale for her dislike is simple.

"You put people in danger," Gardner said. "I don't forgive that."

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