

Miami entrepreneurs sell sleep in a bottle

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Joe Rimkus Jr. / Miami Herald Staff

Lullaby Lemon dream water in a display case.

Pull up the covers and get ready for a bedtime story.

It's the tale of four young Miami entrepreneurs who put a good night's sleep into a bottle and sold it to Wal-mart and Walgreens.

The story ? It's true.

The idea that Dream Water will relax you and lull you to sleep? As with almost any natural supplement, experts say they really don't know.

The story began one night five years ago, when Vincent Porpiglia, a Florida International University business student, tossed and turned in bed, as he often did.

"I got to thinking about energy drinks and how successful they were," said Porpiglia, 25. "I realized there are tons of sleeping pills out there, but there is really no sleeping drink."

So he came up with the concept of Dream Water. "And the same night, I thought of the name," he said. The next day, Porpiglia got to work on the components of the drink.

Fast forward to April 2009, when Porpiglia had produced a 20,000-bottle test launch at a South Florida production facility and was shopping the product to potential investors to bring it to market.

Looking for financing in New York, Porpiglia walked into an investment bank and met David Lekach, who grew up in Miami-Dade and had also suffered from sleep problems.

Porpiglia gave him a bottle to try, and a good night's sleep later, Lekach was sold, and began calling family and friends.

The ownership group grew to include four, all with ties to Miami: Porpiglia; Lekach, 31; brother Joseph Lekach, 25; and family friend Adam Platzner, 31.

"We all left our day jobs and started the company," said Chief Executive David Lekach, whose family, founders of South Florida companies Parlux and Perfumania, also invested in the company. In all, Dream Water raised more than \$1 million, and the Lekachs now own a majority of the company's shares.

Dream Water hit the market in 2009 at Duane Reade, a New York pharmacy chain. It has been at a third of all Wal-Mart stores since September 2010, and at all Walgreens stores since November

2010. Most recently, the airport retail group Paradies began selling it at its 300 stores, including at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, bringing the product to a total of 10,000 stores nationwide, Platzner said.

Marketed as a dietary supplement, the \$3, 2.5-ounce shot is made of a “proprietary sleep and relaxation blend” of three natural active ingredients: GABA, 5-HTP and melatonin.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulates all nonalcoholic beverages, including Dream Water. But similar to its regulation of foods, the FDA does not review the product’s effectiveness or safety prior to marketing — instead, the manufacturer is responsible for marketing a safe product, said FDA spokeswoman Siobhan DeLancey. Labeling must also be truthful and not misleading, she said.

Dream Water’s principals say their product doesn’t knock you out like a drug, and that its effect on individuals varies, depending on body chemistry.

“If it helps take the edge off, it has done its job,” David Lekach said. “If it makes you fall asleep, it’s done its job really well.”

Dream Water does not disclose the proportion of each ingredient, only that their combined amount is 150 mg.

“That is the problem with these kinds of supplements, because they only give you the total amount, and you really have very little basis to know if the amount of each individual ingredient is at a dose where you may get a therapeutic effect,” said Paul Thomas, scientific consultant with the National Institutes of Health’s Office of Dietary Supplements.

Melatonin, for example, has been proven to be useful for insomnia and jet lag, in doses of between 0.3 mg to 3.0 mg, Thomas said.

GABA and 5-HTP are neurotransmitters. GABA has a calming effect and has been used for relieving anxiety; 5-HTP has been used for treating sleep disorders and depression, he said.

Yet how effective are the three combined ingredients?

“As far as we know no science that has looked at these three ingredients together,” Thomas said.

What we do know is that restful sleep — vital for good health — is a problem for many.

Research from the National Institutes of Health shows that as many as 70 million, or one-third of Americans, may be affected by chronic sleep loss or sleep disorders, at an annual cost of \$16 billion in health care expenses and \$50 billion in lost productivity.

But among the challenges Dream Water has faced is fighting the stigma of traditional sleep aids.

“Getting sleep is fundamental,” said David Lekach. “We came to market with a mainstream product and one that is socially acceptable.”

The product is sold in two flavors: “snoozeberry” — blueberry/pomegranate — and “lullaby lemon.” Dream Water is manufactured at two facilities, outside Dallas and Tampa.

So far, sales are on the upswing. Dream Water generated \$2 million in revenue in 2010, and the company expects to generate \$5.5 million to \$6 million this year, with hopes to reach profitability

by the end of this year, Lekach said. Its staff has 15 employees, including the four principals.

For now, the Miami company's owners say they are working and traveling nonstop to spread the word about their product.

"We work very hard," Platzner said, "so other people can sleep."