Fueling CRISPR: The nonprofit dedicated to sharing ‘bits of useful DNA’

When Feng Zhang was a graduate student in the early 2000s, he helped make a groundbreaking discovery: Light-sensitive proteins from pond scum can actually be inserted into brain cells, giving scientists the ability to control parts of the brain with nothing much more than light.

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So many labs clamored to use the technique that sharing vials of DNA that encode these light-sensitive proteins became a regular lab chore. Every few weeks, Zhang sat down to help print shipping labels and stuff a batch of envelopes.

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Zhang deposited the DNA coding for CRISPR at a small nonprofit called Addgene, located a mile down the road from MIT. Now, he no longer had to personally FedEx CRISPR tools. Scientists could order them straight from Addgene’s website for $65 a pop. Addgene’s whole purpose is to share bits of useful DNA.

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Addgene grew steadily at first, reaching more and more scientists every year. Then came CRISPR. “The year of CRISPR we took a very large increase,” says Joanne Kamens, Addgene’s executive director. The company has shared CRISPR components from Zhang’s lab more than 42,000 times, with more than 2,000 institutions in 62 countries. They account for four of the top 10 all-time most popular items available on Addgene’s site.

“If Addgene didn’t exist, our entire lab would be fulfilling these orders,” says Zhang. The nonprofit has also helped CRISPR become one of the fastest-spreading biotechnologies ever.

Read full, original post: The Little-Known Nonprofit Behind the CRISPR Boom