UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

February 21, 2018
Sonia Fernandez

More Problems, More Opportunity

Kevin O'Connor — entrepreneur, venture capitalist and erstwhile CEO of data aggregation and visualization company Graphiq — has been awarded the 2018 Venky Narayanamurti Entrepreneurial Leadership Award. O'Connor, whose company was recently acquired by Amazon, was recognized for his decades as a tech entrepreneur during a ceremony Wednesday, Feb. 20, at the Fess Parker Resort in Santa Barbara.

Presented by the UC Santa Barbara College of Engineering, the Venky Award is conferred on individuals who have demonstrated success in high-technology leadership, particularly those who have been influential on the Central Coast or who have an affiliation with UCSB. O'Connor is the 19th recipient of the annual award.

"As entrepreneurs you know that in the end, it's the team," UCSB College of Engineering Dean Rod Alferness said to the roomful of innovators, inventors, advisors and executives. It's the team that counts, he said, and the Venky Award recognizes the kind of leadership that can bring a good team together.

For O'Connor, who brought his Graphiq team to the event, success in tech entrepreneurship is indeed about the people with whom you take on projects, and those who listen to all your ideas — good and bad. His earliest tech entrepreneurial team endeavor was DoubleClick, an internet advertising company he started in 1995 that rode the rising tide of the world wide web and its commercial opportunities.

“This is going to be big,” O’Connor recalled thinking about the early internet, when it was just becoming the information superhighway promised by faster speeds and better navigation capabilities. “This is going to be a technology where every man, woman and child will have access to the world’s information, and for free.”

Google would acquire DoubleClick 12 years later, in 2007.

Meanwhile, O’Connor, who had been living and working in the Midwest and East Coast, moved across the country to California. He landed in Santa Barbara, where he approached entrepreneurialism from a venture capitalist’s point of view, providing seed money to technology companies in Southern California such as Procore and Meetup.

In Santa Barbara he also found many like-minded individuals, and was invited to judge the tech business plan contest that is the UCSB Technology Management Program’s (TMP) New Venture Competition, as well as lecture to up-and-coming tech entrepreneurs participating in TMP. He broadened his reach by writing a book in 2003, “Map of Innovation: Creating Something Out of Nothing.”

In 2009, once again seeing opportunity in the struggles of the internet, O’Connor founded Graphiq, a data aggregation and visualization company that analyzes and contextualizes complicated data. In 2017, Amazon acquired the company to augment its virtual assistant, Alexa.

“My perception of business is really very simple, which is: You discover a big problem, the bigger the opportunity, and you come up with the most efficient way to solve it,” O’Connor said. “And when you do that, you create an enormous amount of value.”

The Venky Narayanamurti Entrepreneurial Leadership Award is made possible through an endowment to the UCSB College of Engineering that honors Professor Venkatesh ‘Venky’ Narayanamurti, a former dean. Narayanamurti’s tenure as dean was distinguished for its leadership and support of the development of a thriving local entrepreneurial economy, as well as for a dedication to infusing an entrepreneurial spirit into all aspects of the College of Engineering and UCSB.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.