

# Golden State innovation, ASU roots

## From billion-dollar biotech deals to award-winning wines, these ASU alumni are shaping California's future

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News  
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### Story by Ed Leibowitz

For ASU graduates, California has long been a place to build careers — and scale them. From the Bay Area to San Diego, Sun Devils are shaping industries across the state. Here are three alumni making an outsized impact.

### Mark McKenna and a \$10.8 billion breakthrough

One evening in 2023, four private Gulfstream jets lay idle at San Diego International Airport, each containing a pharmaceutical executive waiting to take Mark McKenna, '02 BS in marketing, to dinner and talk about acquiring his company.

Four and a half years earlier, McKenna had been named CEO of Prometheus Biosciences, which was developing a personalized therapy for inflammatory bowel disease based on patients' genetic profiles. Merck Inc. ultimately acquired the company for \$10.8 billion. Jetliners began playing a pivotal role in McKenna's career at its earliest stages.

"I originally went to ASU to study aeronautical engineering," McKenna says, "and realized that that field was more of a hobby for me."

Flying back home to California during Thanksgiving break, the ASU first-year student was introduced to a more promising way forward. "I had a chance encounter with a guy who worked for Johnson & Johnson," McKenna recalls, "and he said, 'Hey, why are you focusing on airplanes? You should be in business. Here's my card. Call me when you get done.'"

McKenna switched his major to marketing, and when he graduated from ASU, began work in sales and marketing at Johnson & Johnson, then moved on to Bausch + Lomb. A decade later, he ended up running all U.S. business for the optical company.

While at ASU, McKenna also met his partner in life. Like her future husband, Sheri Andrews, '02 BS in marketing and BS in finance, was a first-year student at ASU's [W. P. Carey School of](#)

## Business.

Last spring, Mark and Sheri were back on campus when the W. P. Carey School and [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#) announced the establishment of the [McKenna Life Sciences, Business and Entrepreneurship Program](#), launched with generous funding by the couple.

“There’s a gap that exists in academia in terms of developing life science leaders that are ambidextrous,” McKenna says. “There is no playbook to start a business, but it is critical to have the financial acumen along with the science side to be successful.”

The McKenna program is designed to teach graduates in the sciences how to raise capital, run a profit or loss statement, and understand all the other elements that go into actually running a successful business.

“Our aim is that, say, 10 years from now, some of the best entrepreneurs in the biotech sector are going to come from this program at ASU,” McKenna says.

In 2024, McKenna launched San Diego-based [Mirador Therapeutics](#). Like Prometheus, the new company will again draw on each patient’s genetic information to more effectively target the sources of their suffering, in this case, the immune reactions that cause inflammation and fibrotic diseases.

At Mirador, McKenna is intent on building another successful company, but he says his prime focus is on the ultimate beneficiaries of his products.

“If you think about the impact of some of the treatments that we’re developing now,” McKenna says, “we are the best hope for these patients to avoid the hospital, to avoid debilitation and in some cases, even to avoid death. For me, I’m in the ideal profession because you can do well, but you do well by doing good.”

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—

**Mark McKenna**

Founder, Mirador Therapeutics

## **Sean and Nicole Minor and their California vines**

Well before Sean Minor and Nicole Fregosi graduated from ASU, it became apparent that wine would play a central role in their shared future. Nicole comes from a large Italian American family where delicious wine is often part of a nice dinner.

Four decades later, Sean, '88 BS in finance, and Nicole, '89 BA in communication studies, are the proprietors of Sonoma-based [Sean Minor Wines](#), whose product is distributed in all 50 states.

By the time the Minors launched their winemaking operations in 2005, the price for a very good bottle of California cabernet had been climbing steadily toward \$50 a bottle. The couple aimed to make affordable vintages with a taste and feel well above their modest price points.

“For the second year in a row, all 12 of our wines have been rated 90 or above by the leading reviewers,” Sean says, “and they range anywhere from \$15 to the upper \$20s.”

Today, their daughter, Elle Minor, has also joined the team as a winemaker. Nicole says that she has her own ideas for the company, such as fermenting sauvignon blanc in amphorae — clay vessels often used for storing wine in ancient Greece.

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“It offers different nuances to the wine, and she’s not afraid to do that, which is great,” Nicole says.

At ASU, Sean studied finance. To prepare himself for his life’s work, he also spent time in the vineyards of a Napa winemaker.

Nicole leveraged her BA in communication from The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to shape the public profile of Sean Minor Wines through traditional media, and perhaps more crucially, online. She took on all social media duties, the label design and the marketing side of things.

“I specifically answer all our direct messaging, and I answer every message that’s on our social media platform,” she says. “I want it to come from me, not from someone I’ve hired, who wasn’t part of what I know Sean and I created from the very beginning.”

In addition to all those 90-and-over raves by the reviewers, the Minors’ wines have earned what, for its founders, may be the most important validation of all.

“It’s worked out well, because actually our sauvignon blanc is (my mom’s) favorite,” says Nicole.

## Daphne Poerio’s systemwide thinking and frontline impact

As a medical assistant at an urgent care clinic in San Francisco, Daphne Poerio, '23 BS in community health and '25 Master of Healthcare Innovation, wasn’t assigned to review patient testing protocols. However, after noticing gaps in pregnancy, strep throat and blood pressure screening, she stepped in. Her self-initiated audit led to changes in staff training and clinic procedures, reducing errors and improving patient safety.

Poerio brings a broader perspective to the role. She now applies training from both her bachelor’s and master’s programs on the front lines of patient care.

“Having both of those degrees has given me a broader perspective on patient care,” she says, “and it allows me to better understand the complexities of the organization — and to see how it all relates to us on the floor.”

She adds: “My manager at the time was very supportive. I didn’t have to convince them — rather, they were impressed that I was taking initiative to ensure accuracy and quality in our testing processes. The data I presented from those audits was used to improve staff training and refine our protocols, which ultimately helped reduce errors and improved patient safety.”

One of the reasons Poerio chose ASU for her undergraduate and master’s degrees is the university’s outreach to Indigenous students like herself. At the [Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation](#), she found a course of study whose dynamic approach to health care matched her own.

“The program focused on evidence-based practices, but also innovation and systems-level problem solving,” she recalls. “It helped me look at processes and procedures critically, and to not just follow standard procedures for their own sake, but to ask why we do them and whether they truly serve patients.”

She also benefits from ASU’s California health care mentorship program, where she was paired with a mentor in California who also is an ASU alumna.

From her ground-level perspective, Poerio has had the opportunity to analyze clinic workflows, patient education and communication among staff.

“I’ve been able to identify bottlenecks and areas where patient care could be more efficient or more patient-centered,” she says. “That mindset has allowed me to propose and implement practical improvements that make a real difference on the ground level.”

## One foundation, many paths

From billion-dollar breakthroughs to small, daily improvements in patient care, the scale may differ, but the throughline is the same. Across California, ASU alumni are turning education into impact.

Learn why Californians are sending their children to ASU at [california.asu.edu](https://california.asu.edu).

Submit your story for consideration: [alumni.asu.edu/alumni-stories/share-your-sun-devil-story](https://alumni.asu.edu/alumni-stories/share-your-sun-devil-story).

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## About the author

An LA-based long-form storyteller and podcast writer, Ed Leibowitz's work has appeared in The Atlantic, Smithsonian magazine, the Los Angeles Times Magazine and The New York Times.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



ASU alum Mark McKenna, '02 BS in marketing, is the founder of Mirador Therapeutics in San Diego. Photo by Sabira Madady

**Text image(s)**





ASU alums Sean and Nicole Minor own Sean Minor Wines based in Sonoma, California. Photo by Meghan Finnerty



ASU alumna Daphne Poerio, who earned a Master of Healthcare Innovation in 2025, works as a medical assistant at an urgent care clinic in San Francisco. Courtesy photo