More than 30 years ago, two young people from Turkey—then strangers—embarked on a new adventure as graduate students at the University of Nevada, Reno. Neither spoke much English nor had much in the way of financial resources, but they brought with them their determination and a dream that launched their entrepreneurial vision into a global high-tech aviation and aerospace company.

Today, Fatih Ozmen ’81 M.S. (electrical engineering) and Eren Ozmen ’85 MBA own Sierra Nevada Corporation (SNC), an international aviation and aerospace engineering firm that is designing and building airplanes and spacecraft, among many other products, services and capabilities. With a recent $5 million gift to establish the Ozmen Center for Entrepreneurship at The College of Business, the Ozmens are paying it forward to the students at the university who helped their dreams take flight.
When we arrived in the U.S. from Turkey to further our education, we didn’t have any resources or connections, but we did have a powerful drive to make an impact,” says Eren, SNC’s president and CFO. “Today we are still both passionate about giving back, in particular to the institution that helped us fulfill our American Dream. Earning advanced degrees at Nevada shaped both our professional and personal lives. We want to be sure it can do the same for many other young people who, like us, are pursuing their dreams.”

The Ozmen Center opened in September 2014. The Ozmen’s vision is to encourage collaboration across educational, professional and geographic boundaries. It is open to not only University students, but also to faculty, members of the Nevada community and beyond.

“Our goal for the Ozmen Center for Entrepreneurship is to expand and nurture an entrepreneurial culture, both on campus and throughout the community,” says Fatih, who serves as CEO of SNC. “We see the center as an entrepreneurial ‘hub’ that increases business opportunities and creates a robust exchange of ideas that stimulates job growth and benefits for our community, our state and society at large.”

University President Marc Johnson says the new center gives Nevada students the opportunity to move beyond classroom learning and come together to test their ideas, work on something creative and turn their ideas into businesses. Beyond the campus borders, the center will benefit the community, region and state through the development of ideas that translate to job growth.

“Experiential learning is a really important part of creating a successful graduate who not only has the knowledge they need to excel, but the confidence to put their knowledge to work,” Johnson says. “This is a tremendous contribution to what we call the entrepreneurial ecosystem of northern Nevada.”

The goals of the center include inspiring idea creation, entrepreneurship and innovation by promoting and supporting existing entrepreneurship activities and programs; collaborating to conduct and publish entrepreneurship research; facilitating entrepreneurship academic courses, professional education and training; and supporting innovation and new enterprise that drives economic growth.

The center supports existing programs and activities within The College of Business, including an undergraduate minor in entrepreneurship open to all University majors, a graduate emphasis in entrepreneurship and the Sontag Entrepreneurship Competition and the University’s Entrepreneurship Club.

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opportunity to work on an aircraft carrier for a special project. That experience sparked my enthusiasm for aviation, and not long after that, I became the owner, with Eren, of Sierra Nevada Corporation. Today, we’re considered one of the world’s top 10 most innovative companies in aerospace, and the University of Nevada, Reno played a big part in that role.”

Eren says the MBA program from Nevada provided her with the financial skills and business savvy necessary to succeed. “I had the confidence to become a leader at a very young age,” Eren says. “The training I received at Nevada, especially in my initial classes with Dr. Berch Berberoglu and then as a graduate assistant for Dr. Nazir Ansari, has served me very well over the years as SNC has grown with the acquisition of many other companies. Today, I’m proud to help lead a world-class company that has been recognized as one of the country’s top-10 fastest growing private companies. I’m proud to call the University of Nevada, Reno my alma mater.”

When Eren and Fatih first acquired their business, it was a small engineering firm with 20 employees. Today, SNC is based at its Sparks headquarters, but has grown its workforce to more than 3,000 personnel with 31 locations in 17 states, and three locations in Europe. Many of their employees are University of Nevada, Reno graduates.

“Nevada grads have the skills that we—and most other companies—value most,” Eren says. “It’s not only their professional knowledge, but also the ‘softer’ skills like collaboration, communication and critical thinking, and that’s true across all disciplines. We have grads working in every area of the company, from engineering to business strategy to human resources and everywhere in between. All of our Nevada grads share a sense of pride in their work and preparation for the challenges of the 21st century workplace. With the Ozmen Center, we hope to give many other students the training that SNC continues to benefit from every day.”

Chris Howard, director of the Ozmen Center, said the center serves as a bridge between the University and the entrepreneurial community. “We are focused on helping students and the community move their ideas into action,” Howard says.

Student Nolan Nicholson says he has been stopping by the Ozmen Center since the day it opened. “I like that the Ozmen Center is the physical home of something that, until now, was just a loose collection of people’s ideas scattered across the University,” Nicholson says. “It truly is a center, not a place overly occupied with
Nicholson says the center has also helped him design and launch a business, Nitrair, an entrant in this year’s Sontag Entrepreneurship Competition and the team’s design project for chemical engineering.

“I’ve read and borrowed books on cold calling and business-model generation. I’ve had help from the center’s staff in finding potential customers and people who can help us understand our market,” Nicholson says. “But most importantly, I find this place totally invigorating. I come in here bummed out about whether our technology and our business are even remotely feasible. But being here among people with contagious energy, here with people excited to offer their support and mentorship, and here with my fellow Sontag competitors is like an instant shot in the arm.”

SNC has received numerous awards for innovation, growth and employee satisfaction, including World’s Top 10 Most Innovative Companies in Space by Fast Company, ranking among the U.S. Top 10 Fastest-growing Companies by Inc. for revenue growth for billion dollar companies, ranking second on the list of the Top 50 Fastest Growing Woman-Owned Companies in North America by the International Women Presidents’ Organization and one of the Greater Reno-Tahoe Best Places to Work in 2009, 2011 and 2012.

“We are extremely proud and fortunate to count the Ozmens among the University’s distinguished alumni,” Mosier says. “It has been an inspiration to follow their success story and watch them return to campus countless times to generously pay it forward.”

—Roseann Keegan