

Making A Difference

An Interview with Eric Esrailian

EDITORS' NOTE Eric Esrailian is a health sciences clinical professor of medicine at UCLA. He attended the University of California at Berkeley and graduated with a major in integrative biology and a minor in English. He subsequently graduated from the Loma Linda University School of Medicine and completed a residency in internal medicine at the University of Southern California. He was named intern, junior resident, and senior resident of the year during all three years of his residency training.



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He completed his gastroenterology fellowship at UCLA where he also obtained a Master of Public Health degree. He is also a graduate of the Executive Program in Management from the UCLA Anderson School of Management. Esrailian served on the Medical Board of California from 2010-2011 after being appointed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. In 2012, the School of Medicine awarded him the Lincy Foundation Chair in Clinical Gastroenterology. He is closely involved in strategic planning efforts for UCLA Health and the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. He also works to facilitate community engagement with a number of other schools and departments within the UCLA campus and its Los Angeles community partners, and he was on the UCLA campus steering committee for the Centennial Campaign. In 2020, he launched the UCLA Leaders of Tomorrow series to emphasize essential leadership skills through some of the most influential and successful leaders in the community. In 2017, the university designated Esrailian as a UCLA Optimist – among its notable alumni and faculty dedicated to solving the world's problems. He is also one of the co-founders and the founding president of the California Institute for Immunology and Immunotherapy (CIII). In 2025, he received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. Esrailian is also very active in the entertainment community, responsible for tens of millions to charitable organizations, and is a trusted connector in Hollywood, lending an “invisible hand.” Esrailian and Academy Award-winning actor Christian Bale recently co-founded “Together California,” an organization that builds foster homes for children in LA County. On the investment and charitable front, Esrailian has also worked with Laura Dern, Barbra Streisand, Leonardo DiCaprio, executives like Jim Gianopulos and

Mark Gordon, and many others. Additionally, Esrailian produces films with a focus on human rights issues, most notably, *The Promise* by Terry George, starring Oscar Isaac and Christian Bale; and the educational companion documentary *Intent to Destroy* with Joe Berlinger, which was nominated for an Outstanding Historical Documentary Emmy. In 2021, Esrailian was honored by Pope Francis at the Vatican with the Benemerenti Medal for his humanitarian activities around the world. Esrailian is on the board of

the Museum of Motion Pictures Board of Trustees, the Board of Directors of the Hammer Museum, and both the Board of Directors and Governors of the Motion Picture & Television Fund. He has co-chaired the Academy Museum gala. Esrailian is on the board of the Clooney Foundation for Justice, and also co-hosted their annual gala along with George and Amal Clooney, Darren Walker, and Bryan Lourd.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I have been incredibly fortunate in my life. My parents always prioritized education and service. As a child of immigrants and the great-grandchild of Armenian Genocide survivors, I have always been grateful for my opportunities. I always loved science, but I also was fortunate enough to excel in humanities. I went to Berkeley as a pre-med student, and while my plan was initially to double major in biology and English, I had an opportunity to graduate early, so I ended up minoring in English. Ironically, I am using English now more than ever in my administrative, creative, and business roles.

In medical school, I learned how to help one person at a time. I had first been introduced to public health at Berkeley, but as part of my postgraduate training at UCLA, I was also able to obtain a Master of Public Health (MPH) in graduate school at UCLA. Public health helped me start to think about how to make an impact on more people in my community – and possibly even around the world. My coursework was excellent, and it also introduced me to financial accounting and management principles. I was already at my dream institution, and I just wanted to learn how to do every job I do even better. Thankfully, without being a full-time student, I was able to complete the Executive Program at the Anderson School of Management at

UCLA to supplement what I had learned with my MPH.

I was fortunate to be introduced to investing by my parents at an early age. I started with the stock market and moved into tech and then real estate investing as soon as I was able to – real estate became a key pillar of what my family does now in the investing world. My parents were my first teachers, and they continue to teach me to this day. I am truly blessed. Over the years, the most brilliant, successful, and influential mentors, friends, and partners from the business world took me under their wings and helped me to learn and invest together across so many different industries – including Kirk Kerkorian, Vatche Manoukian, Anthony Mandekic, Mike Milken, Ray Irani, Joan Payden, Patty Glaser, Carolyn Rafaelian, and Noubar Afeyan – to name just a few who have been transformational in my life in many ways. My inner circle has been a “Who’s Who” of so many phenomenal people, and I have such gratitude for them every day. At UCLA alone, I have also had the unique benefit of learning from dynamic leaders in the fields of academia and medicine, and the list goes on including Chancellors Gene Block and Julio Frenk, Gary Gitnick, Alan Fogelman, Dale Abel, Johnese Spisso, John Mazziotta, and Steve Dubinett.

Beyond medicine, I also feel blessed to be involved in many different aspects of my home institution – UCLA – and to be able to work with its leaders to support all of the different missions of the whole university. I am now also able to be more involved in thinking about innovation and technology development in medicine for patient care and research by being a co-founder of the California Institute for Immunology and Immunotherapy. My other incredible founders and partners include Mike Milken, Arie Beldegrun, Gary Michelson, Meyer Luskin, and Sean Parker.

Did you always know that you had a passion to pursue a career in medicine?

I have always loved science. I wanted to be a doctor for as long as I can remember, and I feel so honored and privileged to be able to help people in this field – both directly and indirectly. I have also always loved technology and innovation. As I mentioned, being a doctor allows you to help a patient in front of you, and you can make an impact on that specific patient and his or her loved ones. I always hoped to be able to help and impact as many

people as possible, and the different opportunities I have had now enable me to do so. It is such an exciting time to be involved with science and medicine. I also always loved writing and storytelling. All of my worlds come together now these days in everything I do.

What inspired you to get involved in film production?

Many of my friends have been extremely successful, knowledgeable, and influential in filmmaking – and in the arts, in general. In approximately 2010, Kirk Kerkorian talked to me about his long-standing wish to make a film about the Armenian Genocide, but his main objective was to get the Armenian Genocide recognized by the United States government. He wanted us to do it together and to build a team. He was one of the most successful and legendary Armenians ever, and he felt the time had come. Earlier in his life, when he owned a movie studio multiple times and had the opportunity to make a film, he ultimately decided not to move forward, as it did not make sense as a business decision for a company with various stakeholders. When we started digging into the idea with other studio executives and filmmakers, the marketplace was even worse at that time for an independent historical drama set in the early 1900s on such a serious issue. However, Mr. Kerkorian was not deterred and bravely viewed it as a philanthropic project – to not only donate any proceeds from the film, but to donate the entire final budget amount to philanthropic organizations. He did not view it as the usual commercial film project. He viewed it as a tool for education, advocacy, lobbying, or whatever else was needed to get the United States to recognize the Genocide. He was truly inspirational and remains an inspiration for me every day. We also talked about making a parallel documentary for more of the historical facts because so much about the Genocide could never be fully captured in a feature film. Creating the complementary projects together with such brilliant filmmakers, actors, and crew enabled all of us to cover some important historical ground. His vision was to make a film that was a throwback film to the ones he remembered growing up like *Gone With the Wind*, *Dr. Zhivago*, and *Casablanca*. He wanted to have a love story. He was actually insistent on that specific concept. He wanted to have the great actors of our day involved, and he wanted it to be a truly international cast. I will never forget those conversations, and it was important for all of us to stay true to his vision and the mission he wanted accomplished. At the same time, he knew that it was all a long shot even with his support. We often talked about the difficulties that dedicated people had for decades while trying to get the U.S. government to recognize the historical facts, so he also wanted us to work with those organizations, lobbying groups, etc. to develop a combined strategy. That ended up being the social impact campaign we created with so many people.

In just a few sentences, it is impossible to explain the wisdom and foresight he had and what an incredible man he was. I said multiple

times in the early days, “Why don’t we just give the money to charity?” He insisted that he already had done that on a massive level, and we still would, but he wanted to make the films and give money to charity. He wanted to build a visual museum that could be accessed for many years to come. I learned so much about the filmmaking process and the potential to have social impact from so many great people, and any project I have worked on – or will work on in the future – will be influenced by these experiences.

These days, *The Promise* and *Intent to Destroy* are taught by leading organizations like the USC Shoah Foundation, by teachers and genocide scholars, and in schools around the world. In 2019, the United States Senate and House of Representatives recognized the Armenian Genocide, in 2020 UCLA also helped with the Library of Congress, and in 2021, it was finally recognized by the Executive Branch and the President of the United States. The government of Turkey still does not recognize the Genocide, and there have never been reparations.

“I am literally standing on the shoulders of giants.”

What was your vision for creating “Together California” and how do you define its mission?

Over the years, Christian Bale and his family have become incredibly close and trusted friends and partners on various ventures with me and my family. Throughout the process of making *The Promise* and afterwards, it was clear that Christian was such a decent person and reliable friend, and he had a sincere interest in doing something truly meaningful. Over 10 years ago, we started talking about the idea of helping foster youth in Los Angeles. He had already been thinking about the magnitude of the challenges in the foster care system for years, and this was an important issue for him. Nevertheless, there is so much inertia when it comes to trying to tackle such a complex issue. Given my experiences working with so many different organizations and launching various initiatives, we talked about trying to do something special together for our community.

Los Angeles county has the largest population of foster youth in the country, and there are almost 350,000 children in the child welfare system in the United States. Most children enter the system due to issues of neglect and abuse, and the average age of a child is eight years old – which makes them even more vulnerable when they enter foster care. More than two-thirds of foster youth have siblings in foster care, and studies show that up to 75 percent of the siblings are eventually separated. Nationwide, 50 percent of the homeless population has also spent time in foster care. Young men in California who were in foster care are also significantly more likely to become homeless.

Christian and I discussed various models of care that have been successful outside of California, and he introduced me to the remarkable Tim McCormick, who we ultimately hired as our Executive Director for Together California. Over the years, in between film projects for Christian, as well as my own work and projects, we met with various government leaders, foster youth advocates and experts, nonprofit organizations, and leaders from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to see what was possible. Our dream was to create a village where siblings could stay together, have a safe home environment, have an opportunity to go to school and to receive an education, and to have a support system that would help them have a better chance of making it in life. We met with a lot of well-meaning people, but we could not find land, there seemed to be too many barriers, and the pandemic also delayed our activity. However, along the way, I reached out to my friend Zev Yaroslavsky. He was a fellow UCLA Bruin and a former member of the Los Angeles City Council and County Board of Supervisors. Zev introduced me to Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who was incredible, and she introduced us to the leadership of the City of Palmdale. The rest is history. In 2022, we purchased a 4.67 acre parcel in Palmdale which was identified by DCFS as having a high need for successful foster families. We were particularly intentional by creating our first village in an area where it was most needed. We are building 12 individual homes licensed for up to six children each. We also are also building two studio apartments to be used for temporary housing for birth parents or transitional housing for children aging out of foster care. We are building a 1,100 square-foot community center that will house offices, child welfare specialists, behavioral health staff, and offer enriching programs and services to the entire community. Based on the notable success of a model in Illinois, the key to this model is the full-time foster parent/resource parent, whose only job is to focus on the development and support of the children, and to work and advocate for the children to ensure that they find their pathway to permanency – to return home, to return to relatives, to adoption, or to guardianship. Another key pillar of our model is the intention of creating an intentional community of care. The tagline of our organization is “a village for brothers and sisters.” We

deliberately create homes that are close to each other to provide a community support system, both for children, and equally importantly, for the resource parents. It is designed to be a constant learning, encouraging, and supportive community, ensuring that each child and family can maximize his or her potential. This sense of belonging and connectivity is about healing and inspiring the children, resource parents, and staff.

We are now under construction, and the progress is so impressive. We started with underdeveloped raw land with no infrastructure at all, and we intend to have our ribbon-cutting in 2026. In addition to generous donations from members of our community, we have also received outstanding support from LA County and the City of Palmdale. It is heartwarming to see the outpouring of support from donors and the community. Given the massive need in our home of Los Angeles County, we wanted to start here, but we hope that we can ultimately build other villages as well. We are still raising money towards our goal of making this first village a tremendous success, and we hope others will want to learn more and join our efforts by going to <https://togethercalifornia.org>.

Will you highlight your involvement developing programs at UCLA that go beyond traditional medicine?

As I mentioned, the California Institute for Immunology and Immunotherapy is one of the most exciting, innovative projects I have ever been a part of, and we are just getting started. I am at a point in my life where I want to focus on transformational projects and to work with partners who push and inspire me. We hope to facilitate cutting-edge science that will launch companies, industries, and hopefully help us cure diseases – not just manage them. It is our moonshot. Beyond medicine, by forming the CIHI, our founders group enabled the university to create the UCLA Research Park which will also house a quantum innovation hub. The goal is to produce major advances in computing, communications, sensing and other areas. Thanks to the generosity of Kirk Kerkorian, we also established The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA – based in the UCLA School of Law and now serving as UCLA's hub for human rights research, education, and advocacy. We also established The Promise Armenian Institute (PAI) at UCLA. There has been a long tradition of Armenian Studies at UCLA thanks to Professor Richard Hovannisian and his colleagues, but as a public institution – even in a city with a prominent Armenian community – the study of Armenian history, language, arts, and culture has always been vulnerable to funding cuts. It did not have an organized structure or permanence. We wanted to change that by providing long-term support, hiring leadership, and more. Both of these institutes are still in their early stages, but they have outstanding leaders and supporters at the highest levels of the university. I am looking forward to helping them for years to come. There are many other projects, centers, institutes, etc. as irons in the fire in various stages, and I am looking forward

to helping the UCLA leadership, students, faculty, and staff in any way I can.

Where did you develop your interest in philanthropy, and how do you decide where to focus your efforts?

I am literally standing on the shoulders of giants. The mentors, partners, and friends I have mentioned have taught me everything I know. If you look at what Kirk Kerkorian did and what Vatche Manoukian and his family have done, you can see that they have transformed – and they will continue to transform – the lives of scores of people for generations to come. They lead by example. All it takes is for one student to become educated, one doctor to cure a patient, one person who is no longer starving to have a chance at life, one priest to comfort a family in their hour of need, and one scientist to develop a breakthrough – and we can make an impact on the world. I have also been truly blessed to be able to give back in many ways specifically to the very communities that I have been fortunate to be a part of – educational institutions, the Armenian community in the United States, and Armenia itself, Los Angeles, and more. The organizations and areas of society that have touched me, and the people I care about, are always top of mind.

You have received many awards for your work, including the Benemerenti Medal from Pope Francis at the Vatican, and the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. What do these awards mean to you?

While I am truly honored and humbled to receive these types of awards, I know how preposterous it is to single me out for any award when there are so many people doing incredible things around the world to make it a better place. I was raised in the Armenian Apostolic Church, and my faith in God and the connection to the church has been the most important contributor to any success or accomplishment I have ever had. For every person who receives public acknowledgment, there are countless individuals who do God's work to help people around the world, and they do not receive any recognition.

I have made mistakes, fallen short countless times, and yet I know God has blessed me and shown mercy to me. While imprisoned for his faith after being a persecutor of Christians as Saul, the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever..." I know where any abilities and blessings I have received come from, and for me – all glory belongs to God.

There are so many people out there who also inspire me by what they do for other people around the world. It's an honor for me to be a part of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative (AHI). Started by Noubar Afeyan, Vartan Gregorian, and Ruben Vardanyan, the AHI awards the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity – it is a \$1 million prize granted to those who risk their own lives to save the lives of others suffering

due to violent conflict or atrocity crimes. AHI is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, and one of my dear friends, partners, and mentors, Mike Milken, is one of the honorees – the organization will be awarding another prize to a deserving humanitarian doing God's work around the world. Any recognition or visibility I have received makes me feel responsible to be a part of recognizing and helping others who are more deserving.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?

For me, one of the ultimate teachers of leadership skills was legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden. His "Pyramid of Success" is something I try to live by, use to teach others, and it has been an important part of my family's life for decades. Having been involved in sports and surrounded by accomplished athletes and coaches as friends my whole life, I have leaned on these lessons for leadership. The core principles seem like common sense, but when you read Coach Wooden's own words, you see how brilliantly they are put together: faith, poise, competitive greatness, integrity, honesty, loyalty, skill, and so much more, are truly critical to me and the people I look up to. I always partner and try to learn from people who are smarter than I am, more knowledgeable than I am, and those who will push me to get the best out of myself and exceed expectations. I think great leaders are not afraid to ask for help. It is not a sign of weakness to acknowledge what you do not know and to want to surround yourself with great people. I feel that leaders must be able to inspire people and to help those people reach their own potentials as well. At the end of the day, I believe a leader has to get a group, organization, company, institution, or country to move towards a certain goal and to reach a certain outcome. That could be earnings, a stock price, an accomplishment, an accolade, or a victory. However, my friend Henry Gluck has told me many times, if you are a leader who looks behind you and does not see anyone following, you are just out for a walk.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Exceed your own expectations, push yourself to always learn new things, and remember that you are always a work in progress. I never worry about other people's expectations of myself because I was always taught to set high expectations. I think it is important for people to set goals, to prepare mentally and physically for what is needed, and to not give up. Young people these days are also too worried about what others think. They are bombarded with various messages on social media, criticism, intimidating TikTok videos on "success," etc. Just remember that much of that advice and criticism is not coming from people who have really accomplished much of anything in life. Just tune it out and stay focused on your goals. Finally, I also think that everyone has the potential to be a leader. Although some leadership instincts are probably natural for a handful of people, anyone can work hard to lead and to continue to improve. ●