



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Evan, a former Film and Media Studies major who's now the CEO of a biometric sensor company forging a new path in wearable technology.



Evan Strenk:
CEO
Milo Sensors, Inc.

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I'm the CEO and co-founder of Milo's Sensors, Inc. We're creating the next generation of wearable sensors that allow us to read molecules without accessing the blood. Our first sensor reads blood alcohol concentration through your skin, so you can just put on a wristband and see your results right on your smartphone. The wristbands answer a problem with breathalyzers, which people find socially awkward, inaccurate, or hard to remember to bring. The wristbands give people an easy, discreet way to check their phones for their blood alcohol level reading. It's great for the average person who might go to the funk zone or a party and wants to make responsible decisions surrounding drinking. It's the first glimpse into where wearables are going in understanding the processes of your body. There are other mole-

cules that come out of your skin—lactic acid, blood sugar—that we hope to read in the future.

I really enjoy building things, ground up, and seeing them become reality. I've always been someone with lofty goals and, when working for other companies, was constantly frustrated by the slow pace and the obstacles to get approvals. At Milo, the team can make a decision in the morning and be testing it that evening. I like the fast pace. It's fun.

How did you get to where you are?

Going into college, I thought I wanted to be a film producer. My uncle is the executive producer of Fam-

"Faith is letting a sure thing die for a maybe."



ily Guy, so I had some really cool opportunities to see what the entertainment industry is all about. I always loved photography, filmmaking, and graphic design. So I came in as Film and Media Studies and up until late in my third year I thought I was going into that industry. But I also had this goal for myself all through undergrad to create a product or a brand or a company. I came up with hypothetical brands, including a clothing line and headphones, which didn't work out. I realized that while I liked the hands-on creativity of the major, I wanted to take it in a different direction. As I was nearing graduation, I looked for a job that would give me experience and upward mobility and ended up at Deckers doing shoe design.

I was living in IV and my housemate, a UCSB grad student, was talking about the New Venture Competition (NVC) through the TMP program. I had never heard of it while in undergrad. For the NVC, you come up with a startup idea.

His team had the idea for an earring that would read roofies, which sounded interesting. I volunteered to do their marketing and business development. At the first meeting, it became clear that from the marketing perspective, an earring couldn't capture as large of an audience, and a team member from the material sciences, Bob, pointed out that from the technical perspective, it's not actually possible to read roofies—it's too low of a concentration coming out of the skin. We were at Pizza My Heart, looked around, and said, "How about alcohol?" The NVC was in six months and we knew that to win, we needed a prototype to prove the technology was possible. So we created a prototype—ugliest thing ever, but it worked. It was all nights and weekends, a creative outlet. I was still really invested in Deckers. Then people dropped out and our team was suddenly just me and Bob.

The NVC is judged by all sorts of local investors as well as people in

the TMP program. We didn't just win—we won multiple categories. It gave us a little starting money and three months free rent at the UCSB CNSI (California NanoSystems Institute) incubator space. There's a wet lab there, which gave us a place to test and order chemicals—you can't just order chemicals to your home garage without raising eyebrows. At CNSI, we get access to a \$100,000 machine we'd never be able to afford on our own and there's space to run the business side of things. The best part is that paying for the space we use means we own all the intellectual property we create, which is critical when it comes to getting investors.

We put the NVC money into doing the Citrix Startup Accelerator program, and got some more money out of completing that. Then we had interest from investors and took the dive, quit our jobs, and went for it. I became CEO, Bob became CTO, and our two person

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team is now a team of eight people, over ten investors, four advisors—it’s a village now.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

I got internships over the summer. And they were all over the place. One was at a recording studio. Another was at a record management company. Then it was creating electronic instruments. That one included mechanical and electrical engineering and made me realize I liked building things. All those experiences gave me a taste of the real world. They shaped the mentality that if I wanted to go and work somewhere, I could just walk in the front door and ask for a job. That’s how I got my position at Deckers. I knew someone who interned there for a specific team, asked for the introduction and in my last quarter of my senior year, I was doing classes two days a week and working three days a week at Deckers to prove myself. I was a temp employee there, not earning benefits, for sixteen months. A really long time. But I worked hard and made sure that I was always filling a need, then got a full time offer.

Aside from those internships, I paid my way through school, so I always had a job. I was an RA for two years in the residence halls. I’ve worked at Blenders and Dairy Queen. I think working shapes your appreciation for a job. How to know what’s a good job, what’s a bad one. And just how to excel in different things. Some of my friends had their first ever job after they graduated and I don’t think that sets up your framework as well. If I were talking to a freshman who had never had a job in their life, I would tell them to go get a part time job doing anything.

What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

In my last two quarters, I took two graduate courses in Media Arts and Technology (MAT), doing computer synthesis and data visualization. It was very hands on. I got in because I approached the professor. I had this idea that if GOLD didn’t let me sign up for a class, then I couldn’t take it. But that’s not necessarily the case. You can always ask for opportunities. I wish I’d known that earlier.

People sometimes wonder, considering what I do now, if I wish I’d ma-

jored in science. I can obsess over the cool stuff we’re doing at Milo, but I wasn’t a fan of the sciences in the classroom, and science is only one part of the company. I do the brand cohesion in our company, a lot of the graphic design, and work with our software developer on the look and feel of the app. Those things require an eye for creativity that was in line with what I was seeking in and out of the classroom, but there was really no major that would have gotten me here faster. The thing is, you can’t teach entrepreneurship.



“You can always ask for opportunities.”



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www.facebook.com/AskJoeGaucho

If an alum's story is meaningful to you, consider reaching out with questions using the contact information provided.

I'm pretty confident about that. Honestly, what I've learned with Milo is stuff I never would have learned in school. I think I would have eventually been in a startup, and I got to enjoy my major for four years.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

I didn't know it at the time, but Santa Barbara is a very affluent area for businesses and entrepreneurs and investors. There's money to be had for the right team with the right idea. Bob, the other founder, and I comment all the time that if we were some startup in the Midwest, we wouldn't be where we are, we wouldn't have raised the money that we've raised. Location is very important for that. For anyone interested in entrepreneurship, this is a very good place to be. Plus, you have opportunities like the New Venture Competition as a starting point for ideas.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

I quit Deckers when we had a very small amount of investment promised through a handshake. It was a very risky move. But I didn't want to regret letting an opportunity pass me by. A quote popped up in my life during that time that stuck with me: "Faith is letting a sure thing die for a maybe." And that was exactly what was happening for me. But I knew that even if it failed miserably, the things I would learn from it would outweigh the feelings of failing and the failing itself.

And for any entrepreneur out there, if you want to start a company, buckle up, because it's definitely a lot of work. It's not for everyone. But if you've got the drive, it can sure be a great ride.



Evan welcomes Gauchos to contact him via email for questions about his journey to start Milo Sensors. Requests to review resumes will not receive responses.

contact@milosensor.com

Find out more about Milo Sensors at www.milosensor.com



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