Mansour A. Ojjeh SBA’74, and brother, Karim Ojjeh ’88, international business entrepreneurs, manage TAG, Techniques d’Avant-Garde, a large enterprise headquartered in Luxembourg. The TAG Group, founded in 1974 by their father, Akram Ojjeh, was formed to link new technologies to the economic development of the Middle East. TAG was originally formed to concentrate on aeronautics, real estate and other various businesses. Today, the company continues to pursue its diversification by orienting its international strategy toward high profile and technological products, such as Formula One (McLaren) and Aeronautics (TAG Aviation). McLaren, formally known as TAG McLaren, is one of the top teams in Formula One. Not only does it hold an impressive number of Formula One World Championships (both as driver and constructor) but also builds high performance sports cars. The first of those cars, the famous McLaren F1, was built in the early 1990s. An icon of high technology, it is still considered amongst its peers to be “the” benchmark when new cars are tested. Lately, McLaren has produced the SLR, a more “every-day” car that aligns itself with the origins of Mercedes— but with 722 brake horsepower under the hood. TAG Aviation is the European leader in the operation and management of private business jets. It has a fleet of its own and has lately purchased Farnborough, an airport just within London. TAG Aeronautics is the exclusive agent of Bombardier’s private executive jets in the Middle East. Karim is an accomplished racecar driver. He has won a number of single seater races and has participated in the world-famous “24 hours Le Mans” for 4 years. Karim’s wife, Anne Marie, is also a Menlo College alum.
An Interview conducted by President Tim Haight

TH: As you know, we are rebuilding Menlo College, with an emphasis on business, new ventures and entrepreneurship and with a focus on the international perspective. We are going back to our roots as a preeminent business program and taking advantage of our global stature as well as our location within Silicon Valley, so we are very pleased to have friends such as you, successful alumni we can point to as products of a Menlo College education from that time.

How did you learn about Menlo, and why did you choose to attend college here?

Mansour: It was by accident. I tried to get into Stanford, but I applied too late. Stanford suggested I go to Menlo and then transfer. I ended up staying at Menlo because I liked it.

Karim: I learned about Menlo through my older brothers. I liked the school and the environment, and that was sufficient. I wanted what is very particular to Menlo: a very low ratio between students and professors. I didn’t want to go to a college where I would only be referred to by a Social Security number.

TH: Once you came to Menlo, which professors made the greatest difference in your life and which classes did you find most beneficial?

Karim: If there was one particular person that gave me a lot of confidence, it was Herbert Ludwig, who was in the computer information systems. He had a lot of passion for his students and his work, and he was an absolutely great person. The person who influenced me the most was Diane Harvey. She would try to push you to your limits. She was just a fantastic teacher. There was also a professor of American history. Had it not been for him, I probably would not have gone to law school.

Mansour: Judge Russell was a great professor. I studied business law with him. Another professor who was extremely tough but very interesting was Craig Medlen, the economics professor. Pat Tobin was really sort of a catalyst for the foreign students at Menlo at that time. He brought everybody together—the foreign students and American students.

What was fantastic about Menlo—and still is—is sense of community. MANSOUR OJJEH

Before I came to Menlo, I had never lived in America. But I felt very comfortable at the college because a big part of the student body was foreign born. I met a lot of friends from South America, the Middle East and the United States. It was a good melting pot. A lot of these people are still friends. What was fantastic about Menlo—and still is—is sense of community. To be able to go to college in an environment where your professor is accessible to you any time—after class, before class—is really unusual. Nowadays, at larger schools, it’s often very impersonal. You don’t even see the professor in class. It is all via telecommunications. I’m really happy I didn’t have that.

TH: In terms of your personal success, what was it at Menlo, from an academic or professional standpoint, that gave you an advantage?

Mansour: I always knew that I wanted to get into business. Menlo did a perfect job of providing me the base I needed to understand balance sheets, property law, business law, macro- and microeconomics, credit and banking, and so forth.

Karim: I was studying computer information systems, and it helped me to become organized. For law school at Santa Clara, it was an advantage.

TH: Were there any defining moments that you can recall that really warm your heart?

Mansour: I had a lot of moments. I don’t look at Menlo and isolate moments. I look at it and say that I spent two wonderful years there. The whole time was a great experience for me, on and off campus, whether it was a field trip with friends from school or the barbecues we had in the parks.

TH: What are the qualities you think I need to put Menlo on the map again?

Mansour: The world is changing at such a rapid pace. What is important is to keep up with it somehow. You need to keep your ear to the ground and try to follow trends in business. I also think that it would be best for Menlo to remain the size it is. Keep it at a human scale—that’s important. Students need to be able to communicate with their professors in small groups, as I did. You learn much more.

TH: If you take a look at your career, you obviously have seen quite a few changes in terms of business. Still, you have been able to adapt to these changes, and that’s the secret ingredient that we’re trying to capture at Menlo College. Our web site indicates that we want to prepare student for careers that don’t yet exist. We want to give them tools so that no matter what happens to a particular industry, they can change, be innovative, take advantage of the rapidly changing business world and still thrive.
Silicon Valley’s Business School

program and School of Business will result in a compelling curriculum and the future for Menlo scholars of a diploma of extraordinary value. It will further mean that Menlo students will achieve the balance of a meaningful education and an understanding of life’s values. With our new perspective we are full of confidence that Menlo will be delivering the finest college education, pound for pound, in the world. Your diploma on the wall will be of immeasurable value. It will be a ticket for you and your classmates to challenge the world.

The core curriculum for the financial operation of any enterprise, profit or non-profit, is accounting. This is the lingua franca, the essential guiding information for any sustainable organization. Every Menlo graduate will know their way around a financial statement the way a scientist knows the periodic table or a musician knows his scales. An accounting pedigree is the essence of a business education in the 21st century.

The athletic programs, Division III or intramural, provide opportunities for winning and learning. The values of competition and leadership are invaluable life lessons. The esprit de corps of athletics permeates the entire Menlo community.

Over the years the role of women in Menlo’s student body and faculty has been one of growth and excellence. We look forward to an even greater ascendancy of our female scholars and teachers as the College transforms itself. Menlo has been a leader in the enlistment of women in academia and the college is pledged to increasing their roles as the college assumes its new identity. We expect to be ahead of the pace of growth in encouraging the prominence of women in every aspect of the College, including sports, where we have seen the exciting influence that women in competition has had on giving leadership qualities to female students.

Through this transformation, Menlo will gain in quality and all of us will have a greater, more fulfilling pride in our association with the College and its standing in the world of academia.

If you join us in bringing Menlo to this new status, at some point you may be asking why you got into this audacious undertaking. As we achieve together, I am sure you will recognize that the effort is about all you ever wanted of your life, fulfilling your dreams by bringing about this spirit of transformational growth and creating Menlo College, Silicon Valley’s Business School as a great personal victory.

We all know this sort of change starts with money. We will need $300 million, including faculty and staff endowments, scholarships, and only then capital for facilities. We will need to endow over 50 professors spanning all fields. These professors will be the filament of the new institution, shaping the curriculum, attracting the scholars, directing the research that will bring us the prestige. Through the brilliance of these academics we will see illumination of the new understanding of business resulting from this determined effort.

The Ojjeh Brothers: Doing Global Business

Mansour: It’s important also that you teach students values. I am not talking monetary value.

TH: Values in terms of social responsibility. That’s something we strongly emphasize. Why should prospective students consider Menlo College as their college of choice?

Karim: It is one of the few colleges within the United States where you can have a full business education before you actually hit a master’s in business administration. The student to teacher ratio is extremely small, and the accessibility of the professors and their experiences in and outside of the classroom are exceptional. Also, once you graduate, you will make connections with alumni all over the world. At Menlo, you will have access to connections in the Silicon Valley.

Mansour: Menlo offers a personalized education. This is invaluable. You are not just a number in a class; you are somebody. The professor can put a name to your face. When I went to law school, after Menlo, there were 500 students in some classes. The professor didn’t know anything about you. At Menlo, this is not the case. When I was at Menlo, a professor could see if something was wrong and ask, “Are you okay?”

TH: What advice would you give me going forward?

Mansour: Business is about people. Without the right people, you will never get a good education.