How OSU, Bobby Kennedy and a lot of heart helped Husnu Ozyegin change the world
How not to answer a really important call

I had wanted to talk to Husnu Ozyegin, the 1967 OSU engineering alumnus, Turkish philanthropist and billionaire, since 2007. When he finally called me one recent afternoon, I hung up on him.

In my defense, I only did it because my iPhone said the caller was "Unknown" and the connection was terrible. As soon as I killed the call, I had one of those bad feelings way down in my gut. I checked the time. It was 11 p.m. in Istanbul.

"No way it’s him," I thought, confident that the dropped call was from a good friend who works in federal law enforcement and always shows up as "Unknown." My buddy was on the road; he would call back when his connection improved.

My first knowledge of Ozyegin had come five years ago when I read a New York Times article that described how a new breed of international billionaires from once-destitute nations was making a huge impact with generous and effective philanthropy.

Ozyegin was the writer’s featured billionaire-giver and down about 20 paragraphs in the story there it was — a mention of how he had he set off "to Oregon State University" in 1963.

I assumed it was a mistake but some quick research revealed that yes, he had graduated in 1967 and had even been ASOSU president his senior year. I talked to alumni from that era and they all remembered him — many had known him personally — but none seemed to know what had become of him.

What a great story this could be. I really wanted to talk to this man.

I tried for months to get through to him by phone or email, but I never got an answer and I stopped trying, figuring it wouldn’t be in anyone’s best interest for me to be perceived as harassing him.

Years passed. In early June, interim engineering dean Scott Ashford was touring Turkey and got an appointment to see Ozyegin in his corporate office in Istanbul. At my request, Ashford asked if he’d agree to a Stater story. Ozyegin said he would but wanted to do the interview in writing.

I put together some questions and Ashford forwarded them through proper channels to Ozyegin’s assistant. I was a little bummed at the prospect of trying to capture such an amazing story without actually speaking to my subject, but I thought it would be worth a try. Weeks passed with no answers. I figured either he was too busy or, worse yet, I’d blown it with my five, single-spaced pages of questions.

Deadline approached. I and Stater designer Teresa Hall started looking for a different cover story.

When my iPhone rang a second time that afternoon only seconds after I’d hung up on “Unknown” the first time, I looked at the screen, saw "Unknown" again and this time was positive it was my buddy.

“Hey,” I answered in my most unprofessionally casual manner. “What’s up?”

The voice — simultaneously gruff and friendly — came booming through the tiny speaker.

“This is Husnu! Husnu Ozyegin! I am sitting here looking at your questions and I said to myself, ‘I like these questions and I want to answer them, but I don’t want to do all this writing.’ It’s very late here. And then I saw that I had your cell phone number down here and I said to myself, ‘Hey, I’ll just call this guy and see if he wants to talk to me.’ Do you have time to talk to me?”

Ever the smooth operator, I was too startled to answer immediately. (He was probably thinking, “I finally get time to answer these questions and it turns out there’s an idiot running my alma mater’s alumni magazine.”)

“Hello?” he said. “Hello? Is this a good time?”

I assured him that it was indeed a good time, but I was singularly unprepared. I couldn’t find the patch cord I use to record telephone interviews. I dug around in my computer case for my backup microrecorder, then managed to drop it and its battery fell out. I frantically put it back in while I searched my iMac for the questions. “Just bear with me,” I said. “I’m not really prepared.”

“I could call back,” he said. "No!" I almost shouted as I turned on the recorder, switched the iPhone to speakerphone and placed it next to the recorder. "OK," I said, “Testing, testing.” The flickering LEDs showed that the recorder was at least picking up something.

“I’m ready,” I said. "OK, Mr. Ozyegin, let’s talk about how you got from arriving in Corvallis with $100 in your pocket to making such a huge difference in the lives of your fellow Turks.”

One hour and 44 minutes later, this gracious, passionate, affable man said he was having fun talking to me but it was nearly 1 a.m. in Turkey and he had to go to work that day.

He thanked me for giving him so much of my time.

I thanked him and told him I hoped to meet him in person someday.

The story starts on page 20.

— Kevin Miller, ’78 editor, Oregon Stater
Husnu Ozyegin, here with some of his Fiba Group colleagues in Istanbul, says the key to much of his success has been his ability to hire good people who have great educations, strong experience and the courage to take action. PHOTO BY DAVID TURNLEY; COURTESY HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL
Long before he knew where in the world Oregon was, Husnu Ozyegin started getting ready to use his OSU education to make himself a better man and the world a better place.

One day he would be his nation’s richest citizen. His trademark combination of clearheaded capitalism and pragmatic generosity would provide life-changing opportunities to hundreds of thousands — if not millions — of his fellow Turks.

He would even build — from the ground up — and staff a state-of-the-art undergraduate and graduate institution that re-visions higher education, recently graduated its first seniors and will soon have more than 6,000 students, making it Turkey’s fourth-largest private university.

But at this point he was just a 10-year-old boy with a plan.

He told his father, a medical doctor laboring in the battle against tuberculosis, that he wanted to leave home, travel 350 miles to Istanbul and enroll at Robert Academy, a prestigious prep school founded by Americans in 1863.

Young Husnu’s parents agreed, and soon he was learning how to deal with homesickness in one of the world’s most exotic cities.

“Istanbul was where I learned to stand on my own two feet,” Ozyegin said in a deep, caramelized rasp during a telephone interview from the city where he lives and runs Fiba Group, a $6 billion international finance, retail and renewable energy conglomerate.

“I had a small budget to live on, but I had a great eight years at Robert Academy. I had pretty good grades (eighth in a graduating class of 82), I played basketball and volleyball and did all the sports, and was president of the student body my senior year — getting some early training for Oregon State without knowing I was ever going to Oregon State or what or where Oregon State was.

“I was confident, I was bold and I think, for my age, I was sort of a risk-taker. I was very social and I ventured to do things.”

Here he paused and chuckled affectionately at the memory of his audacious young self.

“I thought I could do anything and everything I desired to do! Even though I didn’t do everything very well, I tried to do everything. I was in the drama club; I played Cassius in Julius Caesar.”

As the end of his eight years at Robert neared and it was time to find a college, Ozyegin joined the one-quarter of his classmates who wanted to continue their studies in the U.S.

His father had told him the family already had enough doctors so he should be an engineer, lawyer or businessman. Engineer sounded good. He applied for and won admission to many well-known U.S. engineering programs.

None of them offered him a scholarship.

“I could not have asked for money from my father to go to school in the United States,” he said. “I was in the corridor at school one day and my math teacher saw me there, sort of confused. I was thinking, ‘What am I supposed to do now?’”

The teacher knew of a university in Oregon where they taught engineering and the Interfraternity Council offered scholarships to two foreign students each year. Recipients received free room and board but had to live in a different fraternity each quarter. The idea of all that packing and unpacking didn’t faze Ozyegin.

“I didn’t have many clothes so that was easy,” he said. He especially liked hearing that international students paid in-state tuition at this mysterious Oregon State place.
outstanding senior — husnu ozeygin
ASOSU President, ASOSU First Vice President, Sophomore Class President, Freshman Class Sgt.-at-Arms, Treasurer Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Blue Key, Alpha Delta Sigma

student teaching...the big
"Tuition at that time — you won’t believe this one — was $32 per term. Minimum wage was $1.05. So you could work for 31 hours every term and basically pay for your tuition. America was much richer then than it is today. A student cannot do that today."

He did have one important question.

"That was the first time I had heard the word, ‘Oregon.’ I said, ‘Where is that?’ My teacher got a globe and showed me. He said, ‘It’s a state between Washington state and California state. It’s on the Pacific Ocean and it’s a beautiful state.’"

"I was very happy that I could go to the United States."

He spent a month with his family back home in the port city of Izmir. His father gave him $1,000 to get him to Corvallis and help with his first year’s expenses. Through a separate foreign exchange program, a family in Newport agreed to be his American hosts.

"I took a boat from Izmir to Venice, and then went by train to Le Havre, France. Except that I stopped in Paris for three days. An 18-year-old in Paris! I went to the Moulin Rouge one night. I went on to Le Havre, which was where all the boats left to go to the U.S. and Canada."

The cheapest ticket he could buy would get him to Montreal. It would be no luxury cruise.

"With seven other people I slept — on the lowest deck you can imagine,” he said, then laughed. “It was right next to the engine and these guys were snoring all night and making all kinds of noises.”

A New Yorker he met on board invited him to visit his family in the city for a couple of days. There he bought a Greyhound ticket for $99.99 to get to Portland. Classes wouldn’t start for five weeks. His American hosts, lawyer Ken Litchfield and his wife Frances, picked him up at the Portland bus station and drove him down the coast to Newport.

“They were quite important to my life,” Ozyegin said. “I called Mr. Litchfield my American dad. He used to take me salmon fishing on Yaquina Bay."

“My American mom, Frances, would cut my hair in the garage and I used to wash their cars. I got used to the American way of doing things. I learned how to drink milk for breakfast, lunch and dinner. You know, all the customs, like eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch. And soup!"

“They were Presbyterians so I attended Christian church with them on Sundays,” he said.

Although he was writing home with weekly reports, he left out that part.

“We are all Muslims back here. I didn’t tell my dad I was going with them and learning how to sing all the Christian songs they sang in church.”

Again he laughed and then, as if traveling back in time to when he stood next to the Litchfields in the Presbyterian church in Newport, he burst into song:

“Onward Christian soldiers, marching off to the war!”

Soon the five weeks were up and it was time to head over to Corvallis.

“I couldn’t believe the school when I first arrived,” he said. “A beautiful campus, all green! I believe the football stadium would have been the largest stadium in Istanbul and in Turkey at that time. I couldn’t believe that in a town of 25,000 they put a football stadium like that. When I saw Gill Coliseum I couldn’t believe that either. A basketball court with a capacity of 10,000? It just amazed me.

“I was the only undergraduate Turk as far as I can remember, but people were incredibly friendly to me. I felt very much at home. When Thanksgiving came, two or three guys asked me to go to their homes and have dinner and spend two or three days with their families, but I went back to Newport and spent it with the Litchfields.”

Classes at Oregon State were easy at first because he had studied similar material at Robert. He got right into student politics and was elected sergeant at arms of the freshman class. He’d arrived on campus with $100 left from his dad’s original $1,000, and his parents sent him $20 every month or two for spending money, but he was now expected to make it on his own. When his first summer break came in 1964, he returned to the Litchfield home and went to work holding a surveyor’s transit for the city of Newport during the day and busing tables at a seafood restaurant at night and on weekends.

“I was making 60 bucks a week, so I made 700 or 800 dollars that..."
summer,” he said.

During his sophomore year he pledged Sigma Alpha Epsilon. “I have my SAE pin and my SAE beer mug,” he said. The mug bears his OSU nickname, “The Mad Turk.”

He got himself elected sophomore class president. He had a rich social life and plenty of fun.

“Very much so. I lived like an American because I had no chance to speak Turkish with anyone. I got used to all the American ways.

“I liked the blind dates,” he said, noting that his tight budget limited a typical outing to burgers and a movie, at least until his summer work let him save enough to pay for an occasional dinner for two at a restaurant. With that in mind, might any of the women he dated back then be surprised when they see how he has done in life? He laughed heartily.

“There will be more than one!” he said.

He also liked fraternity and sorority parties and football games.

“We had pizza and beer. We went to the Rose Bowl and from there we went over the Mexican border to Tijuana. We did everything a college kid should do. I never had a bad experience on campus. Nobody knew where Turkey was, whether it was in Africa or Asia or the Middle East. But I didn’t blame them because I didn’t know where Oregon was when I first heard of it.”

Ozyegin had at least two jobs every summer, an engineering-related one by day and usually something more menial by night. He saved some extra cash and then let a Corvallis used-car salesman teach him an important lesson about being careful when making big purchases.

“It was a blue ’55 Ford. I think I paid him $145 for it, but when I got it 100 yards off the lot, the transmission fell out! I went back and he told me he was sorry but I had driven it off the lot and now it was mine.”

In the spring of 1966, having remained active in student politics, he ran for student body president and drew so much support that he got enough votes in a four-way primary to win the job without a general election. The Mad Turk had risen to the top.

“I felt so strong at that point that if I — at that age — could come back to the United States during this election year, I would feel I could beat both Romney and Obama,” he said. “I’m just kidding, but you see what I mean.”

The crowning moment of the Ozyegin administration — and a turning point in his life — came when he made yet another bold move by inviting Sen. Robert F. “Bobby” Kennedy to visit OSU during a western trip to test support for a run at the U.S. presidency. Kennedy enjoyed rock-star status among young voters and was a much sought-after speaker on campuses.

“I wrote him a letter saying, ’I found out you were going to California. You should drop by. The student body at Oregon State University, the faculty and the whole Corvallis community would love to hear what you have to say.’”

As would happen so many more times as his life unfolded, Ozyegin’s willingness to just give something a try paid off big-time.

“He landed at the Corvallis airport in his 737, and I and my vice president greeted him. I introduced him at Gill Coliseum before thousands of people (a crowd estimated at 8,000 dwindled to 5,000 by the time Kennedy arrived nearly two hours late, but it was still a mob scene) and then Bobby and I got into a convertible and we went through the streets of Corvallis greeting the public. He was very charming, a great orator.”

He treasures his memories of that day, and he carefully kept copies of photos and news accounts of the visit. One image from the next
day’s Oregon State Daily Barometer shows the dashing young Turk chatting with the senator like a young confidant as the two approach Gill Coliseum. The headline below reads simply, “Bobby And Husnu.”

Soon Ozyegin was about to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. He applied to Harvard Business School with a lot of extracurriculars and an unimpressive GPA. Once again, what to do?

“I stuffed all my application packets with pictures of me and Bobby,” he said. He also included a strong recommendation letter from OSU President James Jensen, but he figures the clincher for Harvard was the collection of photos showing the popular senator and Harvard alumnus with his young Turkish friend.

Ozyegin spent a summer in Seattle helping design freeways by day and — as always — working a second job at night.

“It was at a primitive call center and I worked from 6 p.m. until 11 p.m. and if you can believe this, my job was to get people to agree to an appointment with an aluminum siding salesman. They would give us one page of the Seattle phone book and tell us to call everyone on it.

“Imagine this: It’s 10:15 at night and I’m calling this guy. I’m waking him up, or he’s probably taking a shower or doing something else he doesn’t want to be interrupted at. He probably lives in a concrete house and I want him to buy some aluminum siding.”

Ozyegin learned about trying to make a sale against tough odds. He learned about dealing with rejection. And he learned something else.

“I learned many new cuss words during my tenure at the call center. I heard them all and even to this day, I can cuss better in English than 90 percent of Americans.”

His vocabulary thus expanded and a little money saved, he loaded everything he owned into his red VW Beetle (well-used but in better repair than the lesson-teaching Ford) and headed off to Massachusetts.

“Obviously, Harvard Business School was very different from Oregon State,” he said. “People were — let’s just say — not as friendly, maybe a bit stuffy on my first impression.”

Just as classes started he was called into an office and told he wouldn’t be getting his expected student loan because Harvard didn’t give unsecured loans to foreign nationals with Ozyegin’s immigration status.

He did what he had done before and would do many times again, asking someone familiar with his abilities and work record to bet on his success. Ken Litchfield back in Oregon readily agreed to guarantee his loan. He could stay at Harvard.

Ken and Frances Litchfield, longtime leading citizens in Newport, have since died. While hosting Husnu the Litchfields visited his parents in Turkey and they in turn visited the Litchfields in Newport. The Litchfields took in several exchange students during their lives, and had four children of their own: Carol, Ralph, Ruth and Rich. Carol Litchfield Clark is a 1967 OSU home economics grad, and one of Ken and Frances’ grandsons, Stephen Litchfield, earned an OSU engineering degree in 1992.

While Ken Litchfield’s help eased his financial panic, Ozyegin soon found that classes in the Harvard MBA program were much tougher than his undergraduate classes at OSU. He was acutely aware that he lacked the experience of many of his classmates who had already worked several years in the business world.

Harvard was also much more expensive than Oregon State, on and off campus. He worked at a small grill that served sandwiches and the like on weekends when his dorm’s cafeteria was closed. He flipped burgers and wiped up messes for $1.85 an hour while many of his classmates “were off wining and dining in Boston.”

Soon another important lesson presented itself. As his second year approached, he could apply to take over the grill and act as its owner.

Why work for someone else if you can manage well, work hard and make a lot more money?

“The guy who ran it before me had 13 employees,” he said. “He hired a guy to come in and clean it up at night. I did the same job with three employees and I did all the cleaning. He said he had made $1,200 during the year. I made $8,000 in the year I had it.”

Leaving Harvard with his MBA in hand, he worked in the U.S. for three years before returning to Turkey in 1973. Soon he ran into an old Robert Academy...
Ozyegin was 29 and became an active board member, helping open successful new branches by traveling to their locations and working to hire good employees.

“He saw that I was working hard and doing good things, so he appointed me to be president of the bank at the age of 32,” he said. It was Turkey’s 16th-largest private bank when Ozyegin took over; seven years later it was fifth-largest. At 39, his friend put him in charge of an even larger bank that was not doing well and he turned it around and made it highly profitable.

Ozyegin asked his old friend for a 1 percent ownership of the bank but was refused. Time for another lesson: What looks like a setback can be the start of a great success.

“At that moment I decided to form my own bank,” he said. “Every time I see him I thank him for turning down my request.”

Then 42, he went to government officials to ask for a bank license. Knowing he did not have enough personal capital to satisfy them, he reminded them that he had always managed banks in ways that were responsible and helped strengthen the Turkish economy. Also, he sold his two homes and moved his young family into an apartment to raise more capital.

Once he got the license, he was able to attract more than 20 investors, allowing him to open Finansbank in 1987.

“I didn’t start out wanting to be a billionaire,” he said. “I just wanted to be the major shareholder and president of a small bank. I only opened four branches in my first five years because I didn’t have that much capital.”

One advantage of having a well-run bank with little capital was that the return on equity was high, which attracted investors. People wanted to buy shares in Ozyegin’s bank and he sold them at a premium. He took the bank public in 1990. Again his reputation attracted cash as the value of the shares he was selling tripled immediately. He bought a bank in Geneva, Switzerland. He started a bank in Russia.

“It just went on,” he said. “I hired very good people — a lot of them from Citibank — and it grew. I liked to hire people between the ages of 28 and 32 with MBAs from American universities, from good families. I figured I had done it when I was their age and they could too. It’s a very simple formula, actually.

“Just so people don’t think this was some Cinderella story, it was not all higher and higher and higher. It was a roller coaster. The year 2000 was good in Turkey, and suddenly Finansbank was valued at $711 million. Then we had a big crisis in 2001, like Greece was in three years ago, and in about 24 hours 44 private banks went under and the value of Finansbank came down to $84 million.”

Did he think he would go broke?

“I never wanted to think that but looking back, it could have happened,” he said. He eventually sold Finansbank, completing the deal in 2006. “When I signed those papers, I realized I was a billionaire, because I had made $3 billion. But these are paper billions. Nobody has that much cash personally.”

Ozyegin married his wife Aysen in 1975 and has a son, a daughter and four grandchildren. He loves to tell a story about how the American tax collectors reacted to the Finansbank news. One of his two granddaughters is an American citizen; she was born while her father was attending college in the U.S.

“When I sold Finansbank for billions, the IRS wrote a letter to her in Turkey asking her how many shares she owned in Finansbank. Of course she couldn’t read the letter because she was three years old and her father had to write them and tell them that she couldn’t answer their letter because she couldn’t read it, and that she had no shares.”

His son Murat and daughter Aysecan are American-educated, married and working in family businesses. Three of the grandchildren — one is still an infant — spend every other weekend with Grandma and Grandpa Ozyegin.

He and his wife started their philanthropy early on. Almost all of it aims to provide opportunity through education.

“Before I had my first $10 million I created a foundation and started giving small scholarships to Turkish college students to give them spending money. Tuition is free in Turkey at government schools. I worked up to 1,000 students a year, giving something like $125 a month to poor students to help them cover expenses.”

He estimates he has provided more than 10,000 scholarships, built at least 40 schools and given them to the government, and constructed more than 25 girls’ dormitories.

Ozyegin had heard that many girls from rural areas in remote provinces had no chance to advance past primary school because the high schools were all in cities and there was nowhere in those cities for the girls to live properly and safely.

“So we have built dormitories next to the schools so the girls can live in them and attend high school,” he said. The dorms are supervised by government housemasters, and because of them 5,000 girls a year can go to high school. About 40 percent go on to college.

Meanwhile Aysen got together with experts in early childhood education and started the Mother Child Education Foundation. In the last 19 years, it has trained a combined 750,000 undereducated women and their preschool children. The organization often teaches both mothers and children to read while training the mothers to teach their children. Also — with a campaign called “7 is Too Late” — the foundation pressured the government to build kindergartens next to primary schools in Turkey, raising the portion of Turkish children who get preschool education from 7 percent to nearly 30 percent. The program operates internationally and is having discussions about offering its services on American Indian reservations.

In addition to giving thousands of scholarships to students in Turkish universities and providing fellowships for Turkish students at Harvard Business School, Ozyegin in the past few years has dramatically increased his commitment to higher education.

“After I built those girls’ dorms and those...
Four times a grandfather, Turkey’s greatest education philanthropist shares a laugh with a young student at one of the schools he has built. PHOTO BY DAVID TURNLEY; COURTESY HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

Being smart is only part of the answer, he tells them.

“There were always guys in my classes who were smarter than I was. Even now I never think of myself as the smartest guy in the room. ... I try to instill in the students confidence and courage. I tell them that if they believe and they work hard — I worked very hard — they can be successful like me.

“I also tell them you have to have it in the bottom of your heart.”

Kevin Miller, ’78, is editor of the Oregon Stater. Associate editor Ann Kinkley, ’77, assisted in researching this story. Susan Young of Harvard Business School also provided assistance.