A Silicon Valley venture capitalist who is a USC alumnus and his wife are donating $50 million to a USC brain research institute in hopes of treating such disorders as Alzheimer’s disease, autism and traumatic brain injuries, university officials announced.

The gift from Mark and Mary Stevens will support the USC Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute being named after them, an interdisciplinary unit that includes medicine, biology, computer science and pharmacology and other departments at the university.

Mary and Mark Stevens are giving $50 million to USC brain research. Courtesy of the Stevens family

Donations to Southern California colleges
Southern California colleges that received the most funds from donors in 2014 (in millions)

University of California

Los Angeles $768
San Diego
Santa Barbara
Irvine
Riverside

University of Southern California $732

Caltech $113

The institute’s leaders, neuroscientists Arthur Toga and Paul Thompson, and their research team moved from UCLA to USC in 2013 in what was described as an academic recruiting feat.

In an interview, Mark Stevens said that he and his wife consider neuroscience to be “the next great frontier in medicine and science.”

Stevens said he has “a front row seat” to the toll of such neurological diseases as Alzheimer’s, from which his father suffers. “If you look at the spectrum of neurological disorders, I would argue that it touches more families than cancer and heart disease. It touches youth and it touches old age,” said Stevens, who also noted that friends’ children have autism.

Stevens, 55, earned bachelor’s degrees in electrical engineering and economics from USC in 1981 and a master’s in computer engineering there in 1984. He later received an MBA from Harvard. He became one of the managing partners of the Sequoia Capital fund that bet on Google and other emerging tech firms. He now runs his own venture enterprise, S-Cubed Capital. An Atherton resident and USC trustee, he is on Forbes magazine’s list of billionaires.

The couple previously donated about $35 million to USC for such causes as a center for nurturing inventions and a program to help student athletes with their studies. They also have given large amounts to Santa Clara University, where Mary Stevens is an alumna and a trustee.

USC President C.L. Max Nikias said that the Stevens’ new gift will “be very transformative for the future of work in the institute.” Expanding what he called the couple’s “spectacular philanthropic legacy,” it will establish an endowment to help fund salaries and fellowships, he said. The specific terms of the gift were not disclosed, but Nikias said that it would be paid in full “over a short period.”

Toga, who is institute director, said the donations will, among other things, support research too preliminary to qualify for federal grants. “It really puts us in a strong position in terms of developing the intellectual cadre that makes you thrive and compete for grants,” he said. The institute has an annual budget of about $11 million, mainly from federal funding and foundation grants, and employs about 130 faculty, researchers and staff, Toga said.

Institute researchers are participating in an international effort combing through many thousands of brain scans and medical and genomic data to hunt for causes and possible treatments for schizophrenia, depression, multiple sclerosis and other brain diseases.

In 2011, USC launched a campaign to garner $5 billion in donations by 2018, on top of the $1 billion already given to the school that year. Before the Stevens’ announcement, USC said it had received more than $4 billion of the overall $6–billion goal.

At its start, that fundraising campaign was the most ambitious in American academia, but since has been surpassed by Harvard’s $6.5–billion goal by 2018. Stanford University in 2012 ended a campaign that originally sought $4.3 but received $6.2 billion.
Silicon Valley venture capitalist Mark Stevens and his wife, Mary, have donated $50 million to endow the University of Southern California’s Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute, which will be named for them.

The gift, announced today, is one in a long line of science-related donations that have captured the hearts and dollars of major philanthropists in the last year.

“Mary and I have a burgeoning interest in neuroscience,” Mr. Stevens said. “It’s one of the last great frontiers in medicine, and the brain is kind of the last big complex area of research.”

Mr. Stevens added, “My father has Alzheimer’s and one of our sons is dyslexic, so this is also personal for us.”

The Stevenses are longtime supporters of USC. They gave $22 million to the university’s Viterbi School of Engineering in 2004, and other donations over the years. Mr. Stevens, an alumnus, has also served on the university’s Board of Trustees since 2001 and on other university committees over the years.

Long Relationship

The latest gift came about through the long friendship between Mr. Stevens and the president of USC, C. L. Max Nikias. The two men first met in 1994 when Mr. Nikias, then a USC professor looking to start an institute on digital media and the future of the Internet, contacted Mr. Stevens for help getting seed money from Silicon Valley companies.

Their shared background in engineering — Mr. Stevens earned, among other degrees, a bachelor’s in electrical engineering from USC in 1981 — helped forge a long and trusting relationship.

During a casual conversation last summer, Mr. Nikias told Mr. Stevens how excited he was about the institute, which he had lured away from UCLA in 2013.

“I was just telling him how enthusiastic I was about the work of the institute, and it resonated with him,” said Mr. Nikias.

Mr. Stevens said he and his wife wanted their next big gift to go toward medical science, so he asked to learn more about the project. Mr. Nikias organized a briefing in November with Arthur Toga and Paul Thompson, who lead the institute.

“Mark understood very well the technology and the sciences behind this, so it was not a hard sale for me,” said Mr. Nikias.

It also didn’t hurt that Mr. Toga and Mr. Thompson had separately just won grants from the National Institutes of Health for their work.

Big Data

In addition to their shared interest in brain science, Mr. Stevens and Mr. Nikias were intrigued by how scientists at the institute were extracting and using “big data” in their neuroimaging work.

“As engineers, this appealed to his background and mine,” said Mr. Nikias.

Mr. Stevens said he hopes the gift will help scientists better understand brain function and how it relates to other parts of the body in enough detail that diseases such as Alzheimer’s and common neurological conditions like learning disabilities can be detected and addressed at an early age.

“Our understanding of the brain right now is very coarse. It’s like looking at the earth from far away and seeing only the outlines, when what you really want to be able to see are the details,” he said.