Oracle founder Larry Ellison never finished college, much less attended USC. But he donated $200 million to the school — matching the largest gift in Trojan history — to fund a cancer research center because of a relationship he developed with a USC doctor who treated his nephew and several other close friends, including Apple founder Steve Jobs.

Ellison first met Dr. David B. Agus when the tech mogul accompanied his nephew for his initial prostate cancer consultation nearly eight years ago. Agus, an oncologist who was working at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center at the time, recalled being nervous when he heard Ellison was arriving. It didn’t help that Agus was also late to the initial meeting. “When you hear Larry Ellison is coming, you don’t know what to expect,” he said.

But Ellison immediately began asking questions about the molecular biology of his nephew’s cancer and if a gene had mutated. “You could tell he had done his research,” Agus said.

Agus is still treating Ellison’s nephew, a circuit court judge in Cook County, Ill. He also has treated Jack Kemp, the late former congressman and vice presidential
candidate who also served on the Oracle board, as well as the late Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, who battled pancreatic cancer.

Jobs was also one of Ellison’s best friends. Ellison, who was named the world’s second-richest man by Forbes last year with a $50-billion net worth, would send his private plane to pick up Agus so he could treat Jobs in Palo Alto and still get back in time to Los Angeles to keep his appointments with other patients, Agus said.

“Larry is a remarkable friend,” Agus said.

About a year and a half ago, after a Japanese-style breakfast of white fish and other small dishes at Ellison’s Malibu home, Agus and Ellison were talking about new ways to treat cancer, including starting a center that would employ doctors, mathematicians and other scientists.

“How much would such a thing cost?” Agus recalls Ellison asked.

After thinking about it for a few moments, Agus said: “I bet you it’s about $200 million.”

Ellison agreed on the spot. “I almost fell off my chair,” Agus said.

“Money doesn’t mean that much to me,” Ellison said, according to Agus. “I want to see progress” in cancer research.

Ellison and other USC officials negotiated the final details of the gift before it was announced Wednesday. It matches the 2011 gift from alumnus David Dornsife, the chairman of a large steel fabricating company, and his wife, Dana.

Agus came to USC six years ago and is a professor at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and the USC Viterbi School of Engineering. He will now lead the Lawrence J. Ellison Institute for Transformative Medicine of USC, which will also employ physics, biology, math and engineering experts engaged in research to prevent, detect and treat cancer.

Ellison is a believer in multidisciplinary approaches to solving problems and, obviously, emerging technologies, Agus said.

“We’re in a new era,” Agus said. “Before we weren’t able to sequence cancer or do big data studies. We can make discovery after discovery, and the quicker we can apply them, the better.”

Ellison’s gift is among the largest ever made to a U.S. college or university. Hedge fund manager John A. Paulson gave $400 million to Harvard University in 2015, and Columbia University received $400 million from broadcasting mogul John W. Kluge in 2007.

Ellison, who is scheduled to give USC’s commencement address Friday, canceled a planned $115-million donation to Harvard University in 2006. The gift would have been Harvard’s largest donation at that time and was intended to create a global health foundation.

Ellison reneged on the gift after then-Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers stepped down, he said. “I lost confidence that that money would be well spent,” Ellison said at the time.