

# Founders' Day 2025 celebrates legacy and innovation at ASU

By Elizabeth Schaible, ASU News  
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"Honor the past, celebrate the present and invent the future."

This motto encapsulates the spirit of Founders' Day, a signature event hosted by the Arizona State University Alumni Association to commemorate the first day of classroom instruction at the original Territorial Normal School in 1886.

On Wednesday night, a sold-out crowd of community members, business leaders and ASU alumni gathered at the Omni Hotel to celebrate these values and reflect on the university's rich history.

This year's honorees included entrepreneurs, researchers, philanthropists and medical professionals who embody the pioneering spirit of ASU's founders. Through their work, they exemplify ASU's commitment to advancing forward-thinking innovation.

"ASU provided me with a foundation in finance, marketing, critical thinking, strategy and risk-taking," said Mark McKenna, a biotech entrepreneur and recipient of this year's Alumni Achievement Award, during his acceptance speech.

"As I reflect on my journey here at Arizona State, I'm reminded of the essence of the work that we do in biotechnology — how it's good for humanity. We have the opportunity to improve patients' lives with our work and contribute to a healthier society. That is exactly what drives me every day."

Audrey Ernst, a registered nurse and this year's recipient of the Young Alumni Achievement Award, addressed the crowd, expressing her appreciation for the recognition: "Being recognized for this award means so much to me, and I feel so honored. ... Thank you to Arizona State for pushing me to become the person that I am."

Following Ernst and McKenna, William P. Carey II, chairman of the W. P. Carey Foundation, accepted the Philanthropist of the Year Award on behalf of the foundation. He spoke about the

foundation's enduring ties to the university, its legacy and its lasting partnership with ASU.

From its humble beginnings as a teachers' college over a century ago, ASU has grown into one of the nation's leading public research universities, recognized as the prototype for the New American University. Founders' Day highlights the community initiatives, research and philanthropy that have fueled ASU's rise.

On that first day of classes, Founding President Hiram Bradford Farmer welcomed 33 students. What began as a four-classroom simple schoolhouse has now morphed into a world-class institution that [serves more than 180,000 students](#).

"ASU Founders' Day also provides an opportunity to engage further in the pursuits of the institution as driven by the ASU Charter," said Ted Simons, host of PBS's "[Arizona Horizon](#)" and the evening's emcee.

The [ASU Charter](#) emphasizes both accessibility and excellence — values rooted in the vision of Arizona's state constitution, ratified in 1912, as ASU President Michael M. Crow highlighted during the event.

"The people of Arizona didn't want an elite university. They wanted a university that was democratic. They wanted a university of the people," he said.

"They wanted it to be elite in performance, but open and available to everyone. And that's what we've built. We're one of the first and largest of those that's ever been built, and because of that, I think we're going to be a powerful driver for the economic future of Arizona."

Since the inaugural celebration in 1964, Founders' Day has brought the community together to honor the vision of ASU's founders and to look forward to the university's continued growth and success.

## **2025 Founders' Day honorees**

### **[Rhett Larson](#) — Faculty Service Achievement Award**

This award is presented to an ASU faculty member whose innovative efforts and service to ASU and/or the community have made an impact and enhanced the world.

### **[Kristin Hoffner](#) — Faculty Teaching Achievement Award**

This award is presented annually to an ASU faculty member who delivers an educational experience that creates impactful, transformative narratives and expands the minds of students to help discover innovative solutions.

### **Team Limelight Rainforest — Faculty Research Achievement Award**

This award is presented annually to an ASU faculty member whose innovative research assists individuals and communities in Arizona and around the world.

### **Mark McKenna — Alumni Achievement Award**

This prestigious recognition celebrates alumni who have excelled in their professions and contributed to ASU, the ASU Alumni Association and the community.

### **Audrey Ernst — Young Alumni Achievement Award**

This award recognizes an alumnus or alumna within 10 years of graduation who has excelled in his or her profession and has contributed to Arizona State University and/or the ASU Alumni Association and the community.

### **W. P. Carey Foundation — Philanthropist of the Year Award**

The Philanthropist of the Year Award celebrates those whose generosity and philanthropic leadership further Arizona State University's mission.

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*To learn more about Founders' Day, visit [alumni.asu.edu/events/founders-day](https://alumni.asu.edu/events/founders-day).*

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## **Main image**



The 2025 Founders' Day awardees were honored at the Omni Hotel in Tempe on Wednesday, Feb. 26. Photo by Tim Trumble