

MARCEL VAN POECKE:

‘New entrepreneurs need

Alumnus Marcel van Poecke has created two awards with the aim of supporting enterprising students and researchers with starting capital for their start-ups. ‘Of course, I am hoping that some fantastic companies will have come out of it in a few years.’

TEXT ANJA JANSSEN

‘I myself went into business when I was about 30,’ says Marcel van Poecke, an investor in the energy sector. ‘At the start, you need a helping hand as an entrepreneur. A grant can be that helping hand.’ Van Poecke (WUR Forestry, 1985) and his daughter Heleen van Poecke want the AtlasInvest Entrepreneurship Grant to support start-ups working in the Wageningen domains. ‘I think we should do more to help start-ups in the Netherlands. They have a lot of added value for society,’ says Van Poecke.

SUSTAINABILITY AWARD

His new grant covers two categories. One is for the best business idea and the other is for the best initiative targeting sustainability. The first Sustainability Award - in 2020 - went to Mylium, a company that develops leathery materials made out of fungal mycelia. The Start-up Award went to the Wageningen start-up Greencoverly, whose founder Carlos Cabrera and his team won 35,000 euros. ‘We are going to use it to set up our own lab and buy a membrane separation unit,’ says Cabrera, who did the MSc in Biotechnology in Wageningen and got his PhD at Delft University. ‘We shall use that unit for a new application of our technology to extract food ingredients from pectin-rich waste streams such as orange peel. This way we can speed up our devel-



Alumnus Marcel van Poecke and his daughter Heleen van Poecke.

PHOTO VAN POECKE

opment and explore a new market at the same time.’

‘I am an active investor myself, partly through our investment company AtlasInvest,’ says Van Poecke. ‘So I see how important start-ups are for innovation.’ One of the problems for start-ups is getting hold of starting capital. ‘Often they can’t go to banks and there are very few venture capital

funds for risky investments in new companies.’ But a grant isn’t all you need, Van Poecke stresses. For start-ups to find investors or partners, they also need to network and let people see what they do. That is why the selection process for this grant takes the form of a pitch competition. It was Van Poecke’s daughter Heleen who came up with the idea of the competition.

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'She saw this at Harvard Business School. When she told me about it, I said straight-away: wow, what a good idea.' Once Van Poecke had consulted University Fund Wageningen (UFW) about it, Heleen worked out the details together with UFW and Start-Hub, the organization that supports new entrepreneurs. Heleen is on the jury too.

IN THE OIL BUSINESS

Van Poecke went to Wageningen to study Forestry with the idea of becoming a forest manager. 'But the closer I got to graduating, the clearer it became that there were very few job opportunities.' So he specialized in business management and went on to do an MBA at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. 'I ended up in the oil industry, although I was totally unprepared for it. I got a job with Calpam as an assistant marketing manager. In the first year, I still wanted to go into forestry but there were no interesting openings there and I started to find the oil business more and more interesting. After that I never looked back.' In 1993, Van Poecke established the refinery company Petroplus, together with Willem Willemstein, who he met on his MBA. Petroplus was highly successful. It went public and was sold in 2007 for 700 million dollars. In that same year, Van Poecke started AtlasInvest, which focussed on investments in the energy sector. 'And I have also been a partner at Carlyle in Washington for seven years now,' says Van Poecke, who invests billions for this investment company in energy companies worldwide outside the United States.

INTERNATIONAL TAKE

His Wageningen education laid the foundations, according to Van Poecke, for his entrepreneurial talent and his international take on society. 'Wageningen is very inter-

national. When I was a student, that was quite unique and it was a huge eye-opener for me. I did internships in Indonesia and Denmark, which was tremendously enriching.'

Van Poecke had long harboured a wish to support his alma mater, so he joined the Wageningen Ambassadors, a group of successful alumni with a soft spot for Wageningen. A few years ago he also financed a study through UFW, on the use of emissions rights to maintain the tropical rainforest in Congo-Brazzaville. With this new start-up competition too, Van Poecke seeks to give back to the university. 'I have

much to thank Wageningen for. And the Wageningen issues, such as the food supply and sustainability, are becoming more and more important. As an investment company with a focus on the energy sector, we have put the energy transition and sustainability high on our agenda.' Van Poecke was inspired by the first edition of the competition. 'This is just a start. If you want to have an effect, you have to do this over a longer period. Then it can grow. And I thoroughly enjoy seeing what sorts of good ideas emerge from it. Of course, I am hoping that some fantastic companies will have come out of it in a few years.' ■

'Start-ups have a lot of added value for society'



PHOTO GUY ACKERMANS

ATLASINVEST ENTREPRENEURSHIP GRANT

The AtlasInvest Entrepreneurship Grant is one of University Fund Wageningen's named funds. With its Start-up Award, it supports entrepreneurs with commercially promising solutions to global challenges. The Impact Award rewards social and public initiatives by entrepreneurs related to the environment and sustainability.

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