Professor Eilon Vaadia is fascinated by the brain — not what can go wrong with it but what enables such a complex, delicate structure to function well for as long as it does.

As director of the new multi-disciplinary Edmond and Lily Safra Center for Brain Sciences at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he and his team are doing groundbreaking work on how the brain works and how to restore function impaired by illness or injury.

His colleagues are working in fields as diverse as neurobiology, physiology, psychology, engineering, computer science, music, and language. “This approach is the trend in the world, but Hebrew University can take credit for starting it 21 years ago,” Vaadia said, referring to the HU’s Interdisciplinary Center for
Neural Computation, the precursor to the new center.

On a visit to the United States earlier this month organized by the American Friends of The Hebrew University, Vaadia met with supporters in a number of East Coast communities. He was accompanied by Howard Gases, the executive director of the newly established New Jersey office of AFHU.

In West Orange, Vaadia visited Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation to discuss a possible collaboration, and later talked with NJ Jewish News at the offices of benefactor Mel Wallerstein.

The university has drawn up a $150 million budget to finance construction of a new building on the Edmond Safra Campus in Givat Ram in Jerusalem. It will house 28 laboratories for an even broader coalition of researchers and Renaissance-minded post-graduate students. It also plans to develop an endowment fund to sustain the center’s long-term work; one third of that budget is still to be raised.

British architect Norman Foster is designing the building. Ground breaking is scheduled for Dec. 12 of this year? 12/12/12, Vaadia pointed out with a grin.

Wielding his laptop, the tousle-haired 67-year-old professor showed plans for the new building. A canny salesman as well as a scientist, he pointed out that while the center has been named to honor major benefactors Edmond and Lily Safra, there is still a naming opportunity for the building itself.

When asked how he could combine his academic work with fund-raising and promotion, Vaadia said, “Oh, that’s easy: I give 100 percent of my time to my research, and 100 percent of my time to fund-raising.” He said he is inspired by a vision of Israel not as a place of conflict, but a place where wonderful discoveries are made.

Vaadia was at his most passionate talking about the center’s staff and its students. Over the past five years, 60 doctoral students have been accepted, one third of them from other countries.

Vaadia, who holds the Jack H. Skirball Chair and Research Fund in Brain Research at HU, has led work on brain-machine research and the development of a robotic arm driven by the patient’s brain. Other colleagues have developed an implant inserted through the ear that can simulate sight; still others are working on the connection between neural function and music, language, and art.

Scientists with the center, which was established in 2009, are also exploring ways to help people with conditions ranging from Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease to post-traumatic stress disorder and dyslexia.

Vaadia said his own interest in the field started very early. “I knew from when I was eight years old that I wanted to study the brain,” he said. By his second year as a student at HU, majoring in biology, he realized the answers didn’t lie in just one area of expertise. He persuaded his professors to let him cobble together an extraordinarily broad path of study.

Gases said later that with the expansion outlined by Vaadia, the Safra Center is destined to become a global leader in the quest to alleviate many neurological diseases and injuries.

To find out more about the center and AFHU, contact Gases at 201-399-3701 or Hgases@afhu.org.
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