By paying attention to every detail, maximizing resources and cultivating strong roots, James Mayer has built a small, but prosperous olive oil company in Yolo County. He’s applying many of the same principles to his work with California Forward with the goal of improving state government. As the president and CEO of California Forward, Mayer leads a non-partisan group that partners with government agencies, other non-profits and lawmakers.

“It’s a pretty comprehensive effort—legislative reform, working to improve the election process, the budget process, and working with local government to put in place the best delivery systems,” Mayer says. “Collaboration takes a lot of time. It’s easier to go alone, but you can’t go as far.”

Mayer started his professional career as a journalist. He was a senior writer at The Sacramento Bee for nearly a decade and is most proud of his reporting on California’s water issues.

“It wasn’t so much one story as it was many stories over time, building an understanding with readers about our relationship with the waterscape,” Mayer says.

While Mayer enjoyed journalism, he felt called to contribute to California’s political discussion, rather than just write about it. Sac State introduced the master’s degree program in public policy and administration at a perfect time. As a member of the inaugural cohort of MPPA students, Mayer found the classes enriching.

“It was a lot of fun because we had good professors that were excited about starting a new program and doing something that they thought would create a stronger nexus between the University and the capital,” Mayer says. “It was a good fit for me and I learned a lot.”

Mayer made his first foray into the non-profit sector with the Little Hoover Commission. He started as a project manager and worked his way up to the executive director position.

“It was a fabulous experience,” Mayer says. “As a journalist you get an external view of government. My experience at the Little Hoover Commission gave me a deep understanding of government from the inside.”

In 2008, Mayer co-founded California Forward. Just as in his journalism career, Mayer’s goal isn’t to bring down politicians or unearth scandals, but instead to make government work efficiently for its citizens.

“In the post-Watergate era, a lot of people who went into journalism thought they were going to be muckrakers,” Mayer says. “I was drawn to the noble goal of finding truth, but I was just as interested in writing about things happening in the community and good storytelling. Whether it was trying to explain challenges in the community or successes in the community, I enjoyed both.”

After long workdays, the family orchard provides a welcome retreat. Mayer and his wife Andrea planted olive trees in 1999 on their property near Woodland. They began producing Frate Sole (Italian for Brother Son) Extra Virgin Olive Oil four years later.

The Tuscan-style oil has garnered several awards, including gold medals at the Los Angeles County Fair, and supplies local restaurants. The Mayers’ son Sam is studying agricultural engineering with plans to carry on the tradition.

“It gets a little bigger every year,” says Mayer, who volunteers on the Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District Board of Directors. “We don’t have it on the fast track. The goal is to grow it slowly. It’s a nice alternative to golf and it’s something we can all do as a family.”