



RANCHO CIELO

Summer 2025



PHOTO: Juan Avila

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Rancho Cielo Celebrates Largest Graduation in 25th Year

This graduation season marks a milestone for **Rancho Cielo**—our largest graduating class ever, **77 students** strong! Each graduate has demonstrated incredible hard work, dedication and persistence in reaching this milestone. Even more inspiring: nearly every graduate has secured a job, internship, enrolled in college or technical training or joined the armed services. We couldn't be prouder.

Thank you to the many individuals and partners who make our work possible. To our Board of Directors, especially **Board Chair Pete Scudder** and **Founder Judge John Phillips**—thank you for your leadership and unwavering support. To our partners at **John Muir Charter Schools**, led by **CEO R.J. Guess**, and **Monterey County Probation**, led by **Chief Jose Ramirez**, your collaboration is vital to our success. To our incredible teachers, instructors and behind-the-scenes staff, you are the heart of Rancho Cielo. And to our industry partners, volunteers and donors, thank you for investing in our mission and the youth we serve.

This is also a landmark year as we celebrate Rancho Cielo's 25th anniversary. From our newest **Classic Car Restoration** program in partnership with **Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance**, to the launch of the **Ford Automotive Career Training Program** with **Salinas Valley Ford**, to our internationally award-winning **Healthy Home**, our programs are evolving to meet the needs of today's workforce.

What makes Rancho Cielo special is that every student chooses to be here. That choice—to invest in their future—is powerful. With hard work, perseverance and the support of this community, our graduates can achieve anything. Congratulations, Class of 2025!

Chris Devers,
CEO



2025 Graduation

Rancho Cielo's Milestone Graduation

“For many of us, this path wasn’t the one we expected,” student keynote speaker, Daniel Cortez (right), said. “Life threw us challenges, and we faced some hard choices. But here’s the truth: We didn’t give up. We showed up. We put in the work. And today, we’re graduating—not because it was easy, but because we earned it.”



“Let your past and your present be a badge of honor,” keynote speaker, Salinas Police Chief Carlos Acosta (left), said.



“[The students] develop a great deal of self-esteem and self-confidence they never had before,” Rancho Cielo Founder Judge John Phillips (right) said. “To me, that’s more important than just the diploma.”



PHOTOS: Richard Green

2025 Drummond Culinary Academy Awards Ceremony

Last month, 25 Drummond Culinary Academy (DCA) students earned certifications in Front of House, Advanced Front of House, DCA and Advanced DCA for their hard work, dedication and skills in delivering 30 Friday Night Dinners, in addition to hosting 60 community events.

“A person does not change in one giant leap, but across a million little steps,” Jacob Flores, DCA Student Keynote Speaker, began. “This is a quote from a favorite author of mine, Brandon Sanderson, that sums up what Rancho Cielo and the incredible Drummond Culinary Academy and staff have done for me and all my classmates today. Step by step,

over the past year, we have honed our culinary skills and our customer service skills.”

Case Manager Josh Cash offered sage advice: “As you all embark on this next part of your journey, remember that you have a community of supporters behind you. Push yourself, reach for your dreams and make a positive impact on the world.”



On June 7, the 2025 Drummond Culinary Academy Awards Ceremony celebrated 25 students who have demonstrated excellence in the culinary and service industries. PHOTO: Tiffany Harbrecht

HAIRCUTS, FORMAL WEAR & SENIOR DINNER, OH MY!



PHOTOS: Maria Marquez

At Rancho Cielo, we believe every student deserves to feel celebrated, seen and supported, especially as they reach the remarkable milestone of graduation. This year, thanks to the generosity of the community, we were able to make that belief a reality in ways that truly touched the hearts of our students.

Professional haircuts, formal clothing and senior prom celebrations—things many take for granted—became accessible and meaningful moments for our graduating class. More than 30 students received fresh, professional haircuts thanks to the incredible kindness of Ricky from South Bay Barber Institute and Erica from Blond Me Hair Studio. What may seem like a simple haircut proved to be a powerful gesture, boosting self-esteem and helping our students walk a little taller. Adding to the excitement, Project Prom: The Bella Zoe Experience brought prom dresses, suits and accessories directly to our campus. Our students were able to choose the perfect outfit for their graduation and our first-ever Senior Dinner, Rancho Cielo’s version of a senior prom. For many, it was the first time they had the opportunity to dress up. The inaugural Senior Dinner was more than just a festive evening—it was a heartfelt send-off, lovingly planned by the Rancho Cielo team with John Muir Charter Schools. It was a night filled with joy. As one senior put it, “It was such a fun way to wrap up our senior year.”

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Fundraising & Development



Veggie Box & BBQ Fundraiser

10 Years of Building Skills
& Feeding the Community



Rancho Cielo \$25 Veggie Boxes are packed with fresh produce!

Purchase Yours TODAY!

Order Deadline for Veggie Boxes: August 1

Tri-Tip BBQ Lunches: August 8



Please support Rancho Cielo by ordering veggie boxes for yourself or sponsor boxes for families at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Monterey County, Food Bank for Monterey County, the Salvation Army or Second Harvest Food Bank.

Deliveries August 19 & 20
or easy pick up on August 22!

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Rancho Cielo is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Federal Tax ID #77-0555859



Save the Date!



Rancho Cielo's 25th Anniversary Celebration

An unforgettable day of food, wine, music and festivities
to honor our legacy of building skills and transforming lives.

October 25, 2025 ~ 2 pm

710 Old Stage Road, Salinas, CA | Details at ranchocieloyc.org



25 Years of Building Rancho Cielo: Don Chapin Reflects

Don Chapin, president of the Don Chapin Company and a longtime community leader, has been one of Rancho Cielo's strongest supporters, spanning over 25 years to before it was established. He has served for three years as Board Chair and continues to lead as an active board member. Chapin has consistently donated funds and services, and he has mentored our students and hired our graduates. Chapin has many memories about the early years. What stands out the most? Getting the students into the first remodeled building on the Rancho Cielo campus. That was the turning point when kids were relocated from the old Natividad Hospital area to the new campus. "It was the beginning of the future," Chapin says. "Some people were standing in our way back then, but they all seem to have slowly gotten out of our way, and we made that happen."

Today, that first remodeled building on campus is where the Silver Star Youth Program operates. Originally built as an overnight juvenile detention facility for boys, it had a central control station where guards managed locks on every door. Then, it sat empty for two decades.

"The internal detention system had to be taken out," Chapin explains. "The guard station had to be taken out. All the showers and old toilets were taken out. A tremendous amount of work was involved in converting the overnight detention facility into a school." The transformation took months and involved complete demolition and reconstruction, including new Sheetrock, rewiring, lighting, roof and gutter repairs and the replacement of the entire heating system. Nearly every service required for the project was donated. "It's all kind of surreal to a certain point, because I don't think anybody ever intended or ever thought that [Rancho Cielo] would be as big as it is, or that it would be as accepted as an important part of our community," Chapin says. "But growth and success breed more growth and success, and that's really what this is a testament to: A community got together and did what government could not do and put together a system and a program that changes the lives of young people in our community that was substantial."



Don Chapin (fourth from the left) in 2017, participating in the groundbreaking on the Ted Taylor Ag Vocational Center.



Neuroscience is Changing Literacy at Rancho Cielo



From left: Jodi Amaditz, Executive Director, Chartwell Teaching Institute; Marilu Gorno Tempini, MD, PhD, UCSF Memory and Aging Center; Andrea Hartsough, Associate Director, CA Institute, UCSF and JEDI Program Lead, UCSF Dyslexia Center; and Francesca Pei, Chief Operating Officer, Multitudes, ALBA Language Neurobiology Lab, UCSF. PHOTO: Tiffany Harbrecht

At Rancho Cielo, a groundbreaking partnership with the University of California, San Francisco's (UCSF) Dyslexia Center is transforming literacy education for underserved youth. This collaboration is part of UCSF's larger Bench to School initiative, which applies cutting-edge neuroscience to support vulnerable student populations and help dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

In 2024, UCSF partnered with the Chartwell School, the Chartwell Teaching Institute, and John Muir Charter Schools to deliver targeted reading interventions at Rancho Cielo. In just five weeks, students demonstrated measurable improvements in literacy, with many experiencing this for the first time. Two instructional tracks were created: one for decoding and phonics, and another for reading comprehension, including vocabulary and cross-linguistic strategies. Tools like STAR scores and the

Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) helped place students in skill-appropriate groups.

These interventions are informed by neuroscience. Reading is not an innate brain function—it must be learned through structured instruction, especially for students with dyslexia or other learning differences. Dyslexia, which affects up to 85% of incarcerated youth, impacts core skills like phonological processing and memory. With targeted support, however, students can overcome these challenges.

The success at Rancho Cielo also contributed to the development of Multitudes, a universal digital screening tool created from UCSF's longitudinal research across more than 75 California schools. Culturally responsive and launching statewide in 2025 in English and Spanish, Multitudes helps identify learning differences early and equitably.

This year, the Rancho Cielo program expanded to 10 weeks and added a new focus: sleep.

In partnership with Ohana Mental Health, UCSF researchers are investigating the impact of sleep on cognition and learning. The updated program also includes streamlined tablet-based assessments and bilingual instruction tailored to each student's unique language profile.

Rancho Cielo students in the Silver Star and Culinary programs are learning to read through real-world applications, like decoding recipes or mastering industry-specific vocabulary, making literacy both practical and empowering.

This initiative is more than a reading program—it's a model for educational equity.



SCAN TO READ MORE ABOUT MULTITUDES

Correctional Training Facility Inmates Raise Funds For Students

On April 19, the Alternatives to Violence (AVP) Inmate Activity Group at the Correctional Training Facility (CTF) in Soledad raised nearly \$17,000 for Rancho Cielo. The funds were presented during an official ceremony attended by Warden Borla and the AVP Food Sale Team.

The AVP program at CTF, active since 2006, trains inmates to facilitate experiential workshops focused on nonviolence, empathy, and self-awareness. About 30 men currently serve as facilitators, many of whom were deeply moved by Rancho Cielo's mission.

"Rancho Cielo is doing the work we wish had been available to us earlier in life," one participant said. "Supporting their mission is our way of giving back and paying it forward."

The connection between AVP and Rancho Cielo is rooted in shared values—offering second chances and building brighter futures. AVP Program Coordinator Frances "Pinkie" Weesner, who began facilitating workshops in 2013, emphasized the humanity that connects all participants: "Life has taken us down different paths, but we are all one in our humanity."

With support from local partners like Salinas Costco and Salinas City BBQ, the food sale became a true community effort. Costco employees baked pizzas on-site, while the BBQ team served smoked meats to CTF participants.

"It was a great experience working with AVP," said Costco Operations Manager Francisco M. Montejano. "To be a part of this impactful event is an honor." The fundraiser stands as a powerful example of transformation—inside and outside prison walls—and of what's possible when compassion, rehabilitation and community align.



The Alternatives to Violence Inmate Activity Group at the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad presented nearly \$17,000 it had raised for Rancho Cielo.

Graduate Spotlight: Melissa Torres



Melissa Torres '25 (Ag Tech) holds up a recent project that required her to employ knowledge in wiring LED lights, soldering, woodcutting and art.

PHOTO: Adam Joseph

Melissa Torres clearly remembers the moment a teacher at her former high school told her she'd never graduate on time. After the COVID shutdown, returning to in-person learning triggered severe anxiety; her mental health worsened to the point where she began skipping school, unconcerned about falling behind.

When someone suggested Rancho Cielo as an alternative educational pathway, the Ag Technology & Mechatronics program was the only one with an open spot. Despite having no idea what Ag Tech was, she enrolled.

"I started to like it," Torres says. "I got more involved, and I find working with light circuits interesting."

More importantly, Torres received support to help manage her anxiety. Now, she's often the first to volunteer when a public speaker is needed. Additionally, after nearly

two years of commuting daily from Greenfield to Rancho Cielo, her dedication has paid off. The 17-year-old recently earned her high school diploma and was awarded a car through the RIDE (Rancho Invests in Driving Equity) Scholarship program to use for transportation as she enters her next chapter.

"Melissa has been a real blessing to our Rancho Cielo community," Ag Tech Case Manager Karina Carrasco says. "She demonstrates strong leadership and is always eager to participate. Her amazing mindset allows her to make the most of every opportunity and connect deeply with others."

This fall, Torres will begin studying at Hartnell College and plans to pursue a career in psychology.

"I love psychology—it's one of my passions," she says. "I'm fascinated by the human mind. I want to start at Hartnell and then transfer to a university."

Carrasco adds, "She has a brilliant future ahead of her. It's been an honor to witness her incredible growth. Melissa has shown remarkable resilience in overcoming life's challenges."

Student Spotlight: Efrain Villa-Valdez

Efrain Villa-Valdez initially came to Rancho Cielo for Auto & Diesel Repair about a year ago, but seized the opportunity to switch to the Drummond Culinary Academy when a spot became available.

"Everything happens for a reason," Villa-Valdez says.

The 20-year-old expresses his love of cooking and learning everything about cooking. He's also passionate about picking up skills in many other areas, including filmmaking.

"Efrain is a great example of someone who appreciates what the culinary program has to offer and then immerses himself in the opportunities it affords," says DCA General Manager Wanda Straw.

"Whether in the front of the house or back, Efrain focuses on what is needed to make a situation successful and then performs to the best of his abilities. His determination and commitment make him a culinary standout."

Before finding stability at Rancho Cielo, Villa-Valdez bounced between Reno and Salinas, struggled with the law and other things. It was difficult for him to see success in his future.

"My mother was doing hard drugs back in the day and in and out of rehab, so it was very hard back then, especially bouncing back and forth between places, not really having a place to live," Villa-Valdez recalls. "As a kid, I lived on the streets, hotels, motels, cars. It was a real struggle. So, this right here, Rancho Cielo, is a blessing."

This summer, Villa-Valdez looks forward to interning at the renowned Sardine Factory, where he's excited to learn from local culinary guru, Sardine Factory owner, and DCA founder Bert Cutino.



DCA student Efrain Villa-Valdez is thirsty to learn everything about the culinary industry, including front-of-the-house and restaurant management. PHOTO: Adam Joseph



RANCHO CIELO

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TASTE OF MARKON

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25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

October 25



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RANCHO CIELO'S
UPCOMING EVENTS

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Student Enrollment

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831-444-3561

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831-444-3530

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ONE LETTER, MORE IMPACT: DONATION ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you to all our donors for your continued generosity and support. Your contributions truly have a significant impact on our students, and we are incredibly grateful. To better serve you and operate more efficiently, we're updating our donation acknowledgment process. **In January, we will provide a single, comprehensive tax acknowledgement statement for the previous calendar year, summarizing all donations made during that year.** This statement will include all the details you need for tax purposes. This change helps us reduce administrative costs and paper usage, allowing more of your donation to support our mission directly. Of course, if you ever need a receipt immediately after a donation, we're happy to provide one—just let us know.

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