

# Celebrating 25 Years of Rancho Cielo

By Adam Joseph, Rancho Cielo

**"F**rustration." That's the word John Phillips uses to sum up what it felt like to send 18-year-old kids to prison for life during his 21 years as a Monterey County Superior Court Judge.

"If only we could reach these kids earlier, they might have ended up in college or starting their careers," Phillips says. "After a while, I stopped feeling good about my job. I didn't feel like I was actually making a difference. So, I decided to do something about it."

That moment of disillusionment became the spark that lit a movement. Twenty-five years ago, Phillips — retired from his roles as a prosecutor and judge — leased the 100-acre site of the former Natividad Boys Ranch. With help from the local construction industry, he launched a nonprofit now known throughout Monterey County and beyond: Rancho Cielo.

What began as a modest dream — just a few classrooms to give kids another shot — has since grown into a full-fledged educational and vocational campus that now serves more than 200 students each year. The mission? Equip at-risk youth with the tools, confidence and opportunities to change their trajectory.

"We had no idea how much this was needed," Phillips admits. "The private sector and local business community blew me away with their support. It wasn't just about money; they came



to the campus, got their hands dirty and mentored our kids. It was incredible."

Support didn't just come from the sidelines. Leaders like Don Chapin, president of the Don Chapin Company, rolled up their sleeves and got involved from the very beginning. Chapin has served as Board Chair, donated funds and labor and personally mentored students. He remembers the early years vividly, especially the moment students moved from the crumbling Natividad Hospital building into the first remodeled structure on Rancho Cielo's 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."

That building, once an overnight juvenile detention facility, now houses the Silver Star Youth Program. It was a complete overhaul: control stations were

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torn out, outdated security hardware was dismantled, showers and toilets were removed, walls were rebuilt and new infrastructure was installed—nearly all the labor and materials were donated.

"The transformation was huge," Chapin recalls. "Nobody could have imagined this. But growth and success breed more growth and success. That's really what this is a testament to: A community got together and did what government

could not."

Today, Rancho Cielo is more than a school. It's a launchpad. It's an opportunity. It's a place to reinvent yourself. Every graduate earns a high school diploma and leaves with a job or plans for further education. More importantly, they leave with a sense of self-worth and hope. And they can see a clear path to success that previously didn't exist.

"Our mission to empower youth and transform lives keeps growing stronger," Rancho Cielo CEO Chris Devers says.

And that mission has never been more relevant. In a world where young people face increased pressure, greater risk and fewer support systems, Rancho Cielo offers something genuine: structure, mentorship, job training, community and all the resources needed to break barriers towards success.

Over the past 25 years, Rancho Cielo has partnered with local businesses, mental health professionals and civic organizations to build a comprehensive network of support. Students receive on-site counseling, career readiness training and connections to employers.

"(The students) develop a great deal of self-esteem and self-confidence they never had before," Judge Phillips said at the 2025 graduation ceremony (77 students walked, making it Rancho's largest class yet). "To me, that's more important than just the diploma."

It has and still does take a village to run Rancho Cielo, which is why celebrating the 25-year milestone alongside the community that helped

turn this idea into a perpetually evolving reality is so important.

Rancho Cielo's 25th Anniversary Celebration on Saturday, Oct. 25, will be a day to recognize not only the nonprofit's growth but also the positive impact it has had on many young lives and Monterey County.

Longtime bluesman Chris Cain and Santana vocalist Tony Lindsay will perform a Tribute to Ray Charles, while John Nava & the Latin Jazz Collective are set to kick things off. The culinary experience will feature dishes from top local chefs, including those from the American Culinary Federation, Cultura, Folktale Winery & Vineyards, Salt Wood Kitchen & Oysterette, Santa Lucia Preserve, and Rancho Cielo's Drummond Culinary Academy Students.

Folktale Winery & Vineyards, ROAR Wines and Talbott Vineyards will pour fine wines, and Alvarado Street Brewery and Other Brother Beer Co. will offer craft beers.

While Rancho Cielo was born out of frustration, it thrives because of belief in the potential of youth, in the power of community and in the idea that a system that once failed can be rebuilt into something better. That belief continues to drive the work today—and it's worth celebrating.

Rancho Cielo's 25th Anniversary will be held on Oct. 25, 2025, at the Sally Hughes Church Amphitheater, 710 Old Stage Road, Salinas. Visit [ranchocieloyo.org/rancho-cielos-25th-anniversary-celebration](http://ranchocieloyo.org/rancho-cielos-25th-anniversary-celebration) for tickets and more information. 🌱