

Rancho Cielo Marks 25 Years of Changing Lives in Monterey County



After an hour of steady drizzle, the late-afternoon sun broke through the clouds, casting a golden glow over the Sally Hughes Church Amphitheater. Music filled the air, and the spirit of transformation was palpable as Rancho Cielo celebrated its 25th Anniversary on Saturday, October 25, 2025. The milestone celebrated the legacy of empowering young people across Monterey County.

Founded in 2000 by former Monterey County Superior Court Judge John Phillips, Rancho Cielo was born from a simple but profound realization. "If only we could reach these kids earlier," Phillips recalled. "They might have gone to college or started their careers. After years of sending young people to prison, I decided to try something different."

What began as a few classrooms on the 100-acre site of the former Natividad Boys Ranch has grown into a vibrant educational and vocational campus. Over the past 25 years, more than 2,250 students have found their footing there, graduating with a high school diploma, practical career skills and a plan for their future, whether that path leads to higher education or the workforce.

Rancho Cielo's success is rooted in deep community partnerships. From growers and restaurateurs to tradespeople and civic leaders, local support has shaped a model that blends education, counseling, mentorship and job training. "This celebration is about more than our anniversary; it's about the community that made Rancho Cielo possible," said Chris Devers, Rancho Cielo's CEO. "We are honoring the belief that every young person has potential, and that belief has changed countless lives."

During the event, founders John and Patti Phillips were recognized alongside longtime champions Ted Balestreri, Susie Brusa, Bert Cutino, Bill Hayward and others whose dedication helped bring the vision to life. "Twenty-five years ago, [Rancho Cielo] was nothing," said





supporter Joanne Taylor, who helped fund the Ted Taylor Vocational Center. "Look at [Rancho Cielo] now. It's helped thousands of lives, and it keeps growing."

That growth is embodied in alumni like Rudy Jimenez, owner of Green Thumb Farms in San Juan Bautista. "Rancho Cielo was a place where I could focus on my education instead of giving up on it," Jimenez said. "[They] never gave up on me. I was held accountable. Today, I live with that same discipline in my life." His heartfelt words drew a standing ovation.

The celebration culminated in a lively performance by blues legend Chris Cain and Santana vocalist Tony Lindsay, whose soulful rendition of Ray Charles' "America the Beautiful" had everyone dancing beneath the open sky. Guests dined on exquisite dishes from local chefs and Rancho Cielo's own Drummond Culinary Academy students, accompanied by regional wines and craft brews.

As Rancho Cielo looks ahead to its next 25 years, its mission remains dedicated: to equip at-promise youth with the training and trust they need to build better futures. On this late afternoon autumn day, as the sun dipped behind the hills, one truth shone brightly: Rancho Cielo isn't just celebrating its history, it's continuing to shape it.

Rancho Cielo's upcoming Culinary Round Up fundraiser will be held at the Portola Hotel & Spa at Monterey Bay on February 22, 2026, with proceeds benefiting their life-changing programs. Details at ranchocieloyc.org.