

How Rancho Cielo's Ranch Cast is Teaching Youth the Art of Conversation and More

By Adam Joseph



The first thing you notice about Michael Jacobi isn't the résumé—though it's formidable—or even the voice, honed by more than five decades behind a microphone. It's the way he listens and expands upon the subtle cues he hears. Jacobi is a radio guy in the truest sense of the phrase. An award-winning broadcast journalist, a San Francisco Bay Area Radio Hall of Fame nominee and a veteran of local radio and television who has seen formats rise, fall and reinvent themselves. He's taught performance and personal branding to aspiring broadcasters and seasoned professionals alike. He knows the craft. He knows about the industry. And now, on a high school campus in Salinas, he's helping young people discover something even more potent than airtime: their own voices.

Last fall, Jacobi launched Ranch Cast, a weekly podcast recorded on Rancho Cielo's campus, as part of the organization's After School Program. For him, it felt like a natural evolution from traditional broadcasting into the ever-growing podcast world. He saw an opening—not just to adapt, but to give back.

From left: Ranch Cast Engineer Garrett Belev, Ranch Cast Producer/Host Michael Jacobi, Portola Hotel & Spa GM Janine Chicourrat, Drummond Culinary Academy GM Wanda Straw and DCA student Efrain Villa Valdez.

"What's particularly interesting and, I think, extraordinarily valuable to the students," he says, "is that we teach the art of conversation, the art of interviewing, and perhaps most importantly, the art of listening. And you would think that everybody would know that—but everyone doesn't."

In a world dominated by cellphones, notifications and half-heard exchanges, focus has become a radical act. For Jacobi, that's where the teaching begins. The microphone is just a tool; the real lesson is presence. Knowing how to follow a thought. Anticipating the next question instead of clinging to the last one. Understanding where a conversation is going and being ready when it gets there.

"The more you practice, the better off you're going to be," Jacobi explains. "It's good to be on a microphone, but if you're interviewing someone, you have to know the

next question, not the last question. Always be ready. That's really what we aim our curriculum at."

The payoff goes far beyond podcasting. These are skills that carry over into job interviews, classrooms, relationships and even first dates. Confidence builds. Shoulders straighten. Hesitation gives way to curiosity. And there are the moments educators live for.

"I've always heard stories about the great joy and the epiphany that happens when you reach a student," Jacobi says. "And that's already happened to us a couple of times." One of those moments came when Drummond Culinary Academy Instructor/Executive Chef Estevan Jimenez appeared on Ranch Cast alongside one of his students, Kadden Bennett. Jimenez later shared that he'd never heard Kadden open up so much. Those are the transformations Jacobi watches for. "Their eyes light up," he says. "You can see when they're sold on it."

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Jacobi is adamant that Rancho Cielo students are not observers; they are collaborators. Every episode of Ranch Cast involves students in meaningful roles, learning by doing. Looking ahead, he envisions conversations that stretch across the community—politicians, local business leaders, cultural figures, anyone with a story that connects back to the mission.

So far, the guest list reflects the breadth of Rancho Cielo's community itself: local educators Dale Bartoletti and Steve

Nejasmich, founder Judge John Phillips, Rancho Cielo CEO Chris Devers, Master Gardener Julie Lorenzen, academic instructor Matt Marshall. On the horizon: voices from Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, the Raven Drum Foundation and even Def Leppard drummer and rock 'n' roll legend Rick Allen. "There are five million podcasts in this country," Jacobi says with a grin. "Whether you want to learn the cello or fix your kitchen sink, there's something for everyone. The days of interesting subjects [on Ranch Cast] are just beginning. That's what's fun and particularly rewarding."

Ranch Cast is one thread in a much larger tapestry.

Rancho Cielo's After School Program is built on moments like these—small victories that spark confidence, belonging and momentum. Since fall 2024, the program has aimed to create a safe, supportive space beyond the school day where students can



From left: Rancho Cielo Garden Manager Julie Lorenzen, John Muir Charter Schools paraprofessional, DCA student Kadden Bennett, Rancho Cielo Marketing & Communications Manager Tiffany Harbrecht, Ranch Cast Engineer Garrett Beleu and Ranch Cast Producer/Host Michael Jacobi.

receive individualized tutoring and credit recovery, college- and career-readiness support, enrichment activities, opportunities for connection, a hearty afternoon snack and care for their mental and emotional well-being. Every element works together to create stability, growth and hope.

"We've seen students make real breakthroughs," says the program manager, Terry Poole. "When they first come to campus, many are shy and standoffish. They join the After School Program to earn or catch up on credits, and through that process, they not only get caught up but sometimes even graduate sooner than they would have otherwise."

In 2025, the program expanded significantly, shaped by student interests and emerging opportunities. Alongside Ranch Cast, students can now explore introductory 3D printing, learn personal finance, develop bicycle skills and maintenance skills, and participate in equine-assisted learning and horsemanship through onsite nonprofit partner Hope, Horses & Kids.

Students can also enroll in the Student Success Seminar, a college course offered through Rancho Cielo's dual-enrollment partnership with Hartnell College. This is not only opening doors to higher education earlier, widening the lens on what's possible, but it allows students to earn credits toward

completing their high school education and college credit simultaneously.

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"These experiences build camaraderie—not just among students, but with staff, teachers, tutors and instructors," Poole says. "They create opportunities for one-on-one conversations to really understand where students are and where they want to go." A podcast might seem unlikely or, plainly, unrealistic for a small education-based nonprofit. But at Rancho Cielo, what's often considered impossible often becomes transformational.

On one hundred acres of ranch, there are thousands of stories waiting to be told, and now there is a new vehicle for voices to be heard.

Listen to Ranch Cast at 7am every Saturday on santacruzvoice.com. All previous episodes are available to stream at ranchocieloyc.org/category/ranch-cast. ☞



From left: Hope, Horses & Kids Executive Director Lori Tuttle and Hope, Horses & Kids Facilitator & Barn Manager Christy Petit.