



RANCHO CIELO

Summer 2026



PHOTO: Juan Avila Photography

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Rancho Cielo Celebrates Another Historic Graduation!

Once again, Rancho Cielo's annual graduation ceremony marks a defining milestone in our organization's history. This year, we proudly celebrate more than **90 students** earning their high school diplomas, our largest graduating class ever.

Each graduate has demonstrated remarkable determination and commitment to achieving this important accomplishment. Their success extends well beyond graduation day. Nearly every member of the **Class of 2026** has already secured employment, obtained an internship or enrolled in college. Many of those pursuing higher education have earned college credits before graduation through our **dual-enrollment partnerships** with **Hartnell College** and **Monterey Peninsula College**, giving them a meaningful head start on their academic journeys.

Rancho Cielo's career and technical education programs continue to evolve and thrive through the strength of our community partnerships. This year, our **Classic Car Restoration** students are presenting a rare **Rolls-Royce Phantom II Continental** at the prestigious **Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance**, showcasing their professionalism on a world-class stage.

I am equally proud to share that our revitalized **Ag Tech & Mechatronics** program helped pave the way for Rancho Cielo's establishment as a chapter in the **Future Farmers of America (FFA)**, powered by **John Muir Charter Schools**; our students delivered an outstanding performance at the **Salinas Valley Fair**, placing 7th overall in **Goat Showmanship**.

None of these achievements would be possible without the extraordinary individuals, industry partners and community members that support our mission. I extend my deepest gratitude to our **Board of Directors**; valued academic partner **John Muir Charter Schools**, **Monterey County Probation**, dedicated teachers, vocational instructors and staff as well as community partners, volunteers and donors—thank you for believing in our mission and investing in our students' future.

Poet **Arthur O'Shaughnessy** famously wrote, "We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams." As our graduates embark on the next chapter of their lives, I hope they carry that spirit with them. The future is theirs to shape, and the possibilities before them are limitless.

Chris Devers, CEO



Rancho Cielo's Milestone Graduation

On Friday, June 12, Rancho Cielo marked a historic milestone when 93 students received their high school diplomas in the largest graduating class the nonprofit has ever seen. Held in partnership with John Muir Charter Schools, the commencement brought together graduates from across Rancho Cielo's vocational programs and Silver Star Youth Program in an emotional celebration of perseverance and possibility.

CEO Chris Devers opened the ceremony by framing the day as the realization of the organization's deepest purpose. "Everything we do at Rancho Cielo is about today," he said. "The one objective for our strategic plan is that 100% of our graduates will sustain a fulfilling career five years after graduation. That's what this [graduation] is all about today."

Founder Judge John Phillips spoke to the campus's unique spirit and the students who have shaped it. "I think the kids here appreciate that we built this campus," Phillips said. "Built by the community, and it isn't mandatory. I'm really proud of these kids. I see how hard they work. I see the self-esteem, the confidence, the pride they start taking in themselves and the positive outlook they have now, going out into the next stage of their life."



Auto graduate Izabelle collects her diploma from John Muir Charter Schools CEO RJ Guess (middle). Rancho Cielo founder, Judge John Phillips (right), flashes a congratulatory smile. **PHOTOS: Juan Avila Photography**

Alumni speaker Anabel Guzman, a 2012 Silver Star graduate who now works as a respiratory therapist at Natividad Medical Center, delivered one of the ceremony's most moving addresses. Having navigated foster care and probation in her youth, she spoke with hard-won authority. "I'm here to remind you that your past does not define your future," she told the crowd. "Those choices led to trouble and probation. I thought my mistakes would define me forever. I then realized that sometimes the lowest moments in our lives become the turning point that changes everything. For me, that turning point was Rancho Cielo."

The ceremony's emotional peak came when Jose Manuel Mendoza-Avina, a Construction & Sustainable Design Academy graduate, took the podium as student speaker, a surprise to his father and grandmother seated in the audience. Despite growing up without his mother and falling in with the wrong crowd, Mendoza-Avina found direction through Rancho Cielo's construction program, the Ranch Cast podcast and AIM Youth Mental Health's Ideas Lab. "If you can take one thing from my story," he said, "Things take time, and sometimes things do not go as planned, but don't give up."



"Things take time, and sometimes things do not go as planned, but don't give up."

Jose Mendoza-Avina
Class of 2026 Student Speaker

2026 Drummond Culinary Academy Awards Ceremony



19 (the largest number yet) of the Drummond Culinary Academy students pictured above have summer internships with some of the most prestigious spots in the region. **PHOTO: Tiffany Velasquez-Walker**

Beneath the spring sky in Salinas, 30 young people stepped forward to receive something they had earned through months of early mornings, long service hours and the quiet alchemy of becoming. Students of Rancho Cielo's Drummond Culinary Academy (DCA) were awarded their Front of the House and Back of the House certifications, marking culinary competency and a transformation in character.

The class had worked together, staffing 75 highly elevated and successful events—nearly 90 if you count the in-house Friday Night Dinners—serving guests from across the community with a professionalism that belied their years. But the numbers only tell part of the story.

"They worked long hours with intense focus and commitment, and supported each other with respect and kindness," said Wanda Straw, DCA General Manager, addressing her students at the ceremony. "And along the way, 22 DCA students finished their high

school credits, and 19 are going on to paid summer internships sponsored by Monterey County Hospitality Association (MCHA) at some of the most prestigious properties on the Peninsula."

Rancho Cielo CEO Chris Devers, who has watched many cohorts come through the program, was unequivocal in his praise. "It's one of the most powerful teams I've seen in education," he said.

That sentiment was echoed by Rancho Cielo Founder Judge John Phillips, who has long held the program close to his heart. "This is the most productive class that I can remember us ever having," he reflected. "The thing that impresses me so much is their positive attitude." For the students themselves, the program delivered something deeper than a certification. It delivered a new understanding of what they are capable of.

Student speaker Aszhari Salas gave voice to that realization with eloquence beyond her years. "Our chefs pushed

us to be better every day, and even when the pressure felt overwhelming, they believed in our potential," she said. "We learned that culinary is not only about cooking and serving food, it's also about passion, creativity, hard work and heart."

Student Natalia Villagomez put it plainly and powerfully: "This program teaches you how to be responsible, and it prepares you for the real world. I have realized that trying uncomfortable things can often lead to growth. I am the person I am today because of Rancho Cielo."

The chefs who guided them were equally moved. DCA Executive Chef EJ Jimenez, whose kitchen these students called home for the better part of a year, spoke with distinctive warmth. "We gave you guys a lot of challenges, and you continue to impress us," he told the graduates. "You guys keep me young, you guys keep me honest, focused on what's actually important, and I get to continue to be the person that I want to be."



"We are bigger than who we once were," keynote student speaker Efrain Villa-Valdez said. "We have dreams now." The DCA grad landed full-time job at the Sardine Factory.

PHOTO: Tiffany Velasquez-Walker

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Rancho Cielo's Ag Tech Program Hits its Stride



Last March, Rancho Cielo became its own Future Farmers of America chapter, powered by John Muir Charter Schools. From left: Ag Tech Instructor Matt Marshall; Ag Tech students Eddie Chambers and Jasmin Serrano; Deputy Director, John Muir Charter Schools at Rancho Cielo Mirel Mejia.

It's a sunny May afternoon, and three goats are getting blow-dried near their pen at Hope, Horses & Kids, Rancho Cielo's onsite nonprofit partner. In a few hours, they'll head to King City for the FFA Goat Showmanship competition at the Salinas Valley Fair, with Rancho Cielo Ag Tech students Jasmin, Juan and Gonzalo walking into a show ring for the first time.

Guiding them is 17-year-old Eddie Chambers, a 2026 Ag Tech graduate who's shown animals since age eight through 4-H. He knew what the younger students didn't yet: Showmanship is built in the unglamorous hours before anyone is judging.

This year, at the CA State FFA Leadership Conference, Chambers accepted Rancho Cielo's official National FFA charter membership, powered by the nonprofit's educational partner John Muir Charter Schools. He also earned his CA State FFA Degree—the association's highest honor, reached by only about 3% of its 100,000-plus members—putting him on track for the American FFA Degree, given to just 1% of members nationwide.

The goats placed seventh overall in showmanship. The next day, Jasmin,

Juan and Gonzalo sold them at the Junior Livestock Auction, with proceeds going back into their education. Students who skipped the animal track still brought home results: 21 Still Exhibit entries—from a succulent table-and-chairs set to wine barrel gardens—earning two Best in Shows, more than 10 first-place ribbons and four second-place ribbons.

Behind the momentum is Matt Marshall, who took over the Ag Tech program last year and has since built out Rancho Cielo's FFA chapter. Marshall holds a

degree in Agricultural Science from Cal Poly and a Master's in Agricultural Education, and also teaches at Hartnell College.

"My goal is for [the Ag Tech program] to have a strong identity," Marshall says, describing three pillars: ag business, animal science and plant science, which double as Hartnell's three degree-transfer tracks.

"If we create that strong identity, we can create stronger partnerships and dual enrollments with Hartnell."

Students are already deepening their work with Garden Manager Julie Lorenzen and California Climate Action Corps Fellows on projects like a native hedgerow.

In California, enrolling in an ag program automatically makes a student an FFA member, no separate application required.

"Kids can pick and choose which opportunities they want to be involved in," Marshall says. "Some students want to do more plant things; some want to do animal things." Marshall's bigger vision centers on a five-acre plot between Rancho Cielo's vocational center and Hope, Horses & Kids. He calls it the "Agricenter," a hub for ag business, plant science and animal science, complete with an operational farm and a student-run

store selling farm-produced goods to the community. Hartnell, which wants to grow its own animal science program but lacks a working farm, could send students for classes and labs Marshall would teach himself, while Rancho Cielo students leave with college credit already in hand. Chambers, meanwhile, isn't slowing down. Working toward his National FFA Degree, he recently received a scholarship from the Monterey County Heritage Foundation and acquired three pigs, two of which he'll show at the San Benito and Monterey County Fairs this summer.

Marshall also mentions, almost in passing, a new internship taking shape with Hartnell and NOAA, teaching students landscape construction through environmental conservation, one more sign that this program is growing toward something rooted in land itself.



Ag Tech students Jasmin, Gonzalo and Juan with their award winning goats at the 2026 Salinas Valley Fair in King City.



LEARN MORE ABOUT RANCHO CIELO'S
AG TECH PROGRAM

Rancho Cielo Partners With AIM Youth Mental Health



Several Rancho Cielo student volunteered to participate in AIM Ideas Lab, facilitated by AIM Youth Mental Health. One of the discussions focused on destigmatizing conversations about mental health between students and their parents, encouraging an open dialogue.

When students at Rancho Cielo sat down to design their own peer-to-peer survey questions, they didn't ask about academic stress or college applications. Instead, they asked about safety and conflict at home. That difference reveals why this partnership exists. AIM Youth Mental Health and Rancho Cielo are proud to announce the completion of a 12-session AIM Ideas Lab, bringing youth-led mental health research to students who have often been excluded from the conversation. In Monterey County, young people are navigating economic instability, disrupted education and limited access to mental health support. AIM Ideas Lab brought research-based mental health education and student-driven inquiry directly into that context. Rancho Cielo student researchers didn't just learn about mental health: They questioned it, challenged it and built solutions

grounded in their lived experience.

"We never expect young people to arrive as finished experts. We expect them to grow, develop their understanding of the problem and bring their own lived experience alongside the research skills AIM Ideas Lab gives them — and that combination is genuinely powerful," says Jolie Delja, AIM Youth Mental Health Executive Director. "Working alongside Rancho Cielo to build this has been a joy for all of us at AIM."

What emerged reflected priorities that rarely appear in traditional research: Students identified community safety and family struggle as central to their mental health, and proposed peer support structures and communication tools specifically designed for students navigating instability outside the classroom.

Every session was co-facilitated by a Rancho Cielo mentor and an AIM mentor, giving students the consistency of a familiar face alongside a new relationship.

"I've learned that when students feel cared for and welcomed, they show up differently," says Rancho Cielo's Maria Marquez. "AIM Ideas Lab reminded me that connection is the foundation of meaningful mental health work. It builds trust and opens the door for deeper conversations."

The 11 student participants proposed several ways to enhance mental health support at Rancho Cielo, including making more therapists available and creating awareness posters displayed across campus.

"Our partnership with AIM provides our youth with a unique opportunity to learn about, explore and exercise their own agency," says Rancho Cielo CEO Chris Devers.



LEARN MORE ABOUT
AIM AND VIEW DATA
FROM THE IDEAS LAB

Master Designer Inspires Students to Think Outside the Box

After Rancho Cielo CEO Chris Devers crossed paths with Jeff Hoefer, a veteran industrial designer whose credits include the first iPhone and Apple Watch, the conversation quickly turned into opportunity. The result: a new 3D printing class added to Rancho Cielo's After School Program.

Hoefer, whose 46-year career spans 1,800 projects in film, gaming and product design, arrived with ambitious plans to teach CAD software and hands-on 3D fabrication. But the students had something more urgent to share. When a young person in his class disclosed that a parent was dying of cirrhosis of the liver, Hoefer knew he needed to change course.

"I need to give these kids hope," he says. So Hoefer did what great designers do: he adapted. Rather than diving straight into technical instruction, he began showing up as a mentor, sharing stories from his own journey, from studying industrial design in upstate New York to landing his first job at Atari to now, in "retirement," designing cars for Ferrari. "I always ask, 'What is it you're inspired to do?'" he says. "Find something that you're passionate about, and then it's not work." That message is already taking root. One student, Ruben, was moved to use 3D printing to design medical devices for his sister, who has a rare disease requiring a feeding tube.



Ruben Robles' disabled sister's reliance on a feeding tube, inspired the construction grad to design a 3D-printed tool (left) that makes the process easier.

"He's applying printing to something that can change a life," Hoefer says. "Ruben gets it."

Looking ahead, Hoefer plans to bring more hands-on projects to students who are ready to build, proof that sometimes the most powerful design work happens not in a studio, but in a classroom.



Joseph Trejo was among three Welding & Fabrication students recently recognized by the #liveforross Foundation, a “fund for safety awareness and vocational education,” for their dedication and success.

Recent Grad Spotlight: Joseph Trejo

It has not even been a full year. That’s the first thing that stands out about Joseph Trejo. The 18-year-old arrived at Rancho Cielo last August after attending a couple of local high schools. Trejo had not found trouble, which is its own kind of accomplishment, but he had not found direction either. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life,” he says. “I just knew I needed to figure it out.”

His mother heard about Rancho Cielo before he did. Trejo didn’t know that the Welding & Fabrication program would eventually call out to him. “After about six months, I realized I was good at [welding],” he says. “I always want to learn more. I want to learn about everything: computer technology, plumbing, electrical; I want to become a jack of all trades.” It took Trejo only six months to become good at welding, good enough to teach new students.

“Joseph is an amazing young man,” welding instructor Ty Brooks says. “At times, it is hard to believe how young he is. He has a smile on his face and a strong sense of confidence. He has a great outlook on what’s to come and sees it in a positive way. He has the will to be a hard

worker and achieve [a lot].”

Trejo is now in the process of enrolling at Hartnell or Monterey Peninsula College. From there, a UC or CSU. The trajectory exists now where it did not before, and he can see it, which is itself an arrival.

“Rancho Cielo really opened up my mind,” Trejo says. “There are so many different offerings. Also, learning a trade and how to apply those skills is amazing.”

Student Spotlight: Jasmin Serrano

Jasmin Serrano’s story began in Salinas, and it eventually returned there. She was raised on a two-acre ranch in Chouteau, Oklahoma, a small rural town outside Tulsa. Serrano learned about tending to animals early on in her life.

In June 2025, the 20-year-old returned to Salinas and enrolled at Rancho Cielo to finish high school, and the agricultural world she had always known quietly took on a formal name.

“I have had a lot of experience with caring for animals,” Serrano says. “It’s something I know well.”

Rancho Cielo’s Ag Tech & Mechatronics program has given her opportunities, she says, that she never would have dreamed of.

Most recently, she competed in the Future Farmers of America Goat Showmanship competition at the Salinas Valley Fair. Rancho placed in the top ten. She stood in the ring, composed, and did something she had not known she could do.

“I was nervous,” Serrano admits, “but I ended up loving it.

The rush of showing the goats and everything else. I am so grateful.”

She also took home a Best of Show ribbon for her work on a succulent table and chairs. She is, by all accounts, someone who wants to try everything (Jasmin appears several times throughout this newsletter). This is not restlessness. It looks, from the outside, more like hunger.

In February, Serrano volunteered for the 12-session AIM Ideas Lab, an initiative designed to bring student voices into mental health research. She showed up. She contributed. And somewhere inside those sessions, something clarified.

“After Rancho Cielo, I want to go to college,” she says. “I want to do something in mental health.”

Ag Tech Instructor Matt Marshall uses the phrase “true grit” to describe Serrano.

“Away from her family in Oklahoma,” Marshall says, “Jasmin is taking advantage of opportunities that aren’t just shaping her learning but also gaining a new perspective on life through Future Farmers of America and through the agriculture program here at Rancho Cielo. She has, without fear, stepped into new activities and been a great participant.”



At Rancho Cielo’s spring Career & Resource Fair, Ag Tech student Jasmin Serrano spoke at length with a Hartnell College representative about the RN career path, though she has a natural talent for working with animals.



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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 acknowledgment 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.

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