

The Sky's the Limit

Rancho Cielo Helps Kids Build Their Own Futures

BY RENEE BRINCKS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLI ULDALL

When retired Monterey County Superior Court Judge John Phillips first explored the idea of turning the abandoned Natividad Boys' Ranch into a facility for at-risk and underserved youth, he spent \$26,000 researching whether such a project could succeed.

"Even my own feasibility study said this was too daunting of a task. It seemed impossible," he remembers.

Still, Phillips pushed forward with his vision for Rancho Cielo. Nearly seven years after welcoming its first class, the 100-acre facility administers job training, life skills assistance and academic coursework for more than 100 teenage and young adult participants. Thanks to a \$1.1 million federal YouthBuild grant, construction students will break ground on a transitional housing project on the campus this fall. Plans for a vocational center with automotive repair, welding, woodworking and agricultural service facilities also are in development.

Inspiration for it all came during Judge Phillips' later years on the

bench, when the offenders he sentenced were younger and younger.

"We were sending them to prison for lengths of time, and we were discarding lives," he says. "Job training—getting young people involved in life in a positive way—was one of the few things that I saw working then, and that I see working now."

Finding initial support for Rancho Cielo was a challenge, but innovative public-private partnerships and a generous local business community got the nonprofit going. Many of those early advocates continue to be involved today. Phillips credits the late Ed Haber and John Zoller for their leadership, along with Don Chapin and John Anderson from the construction industry and hospitality professionals like Bert Cutino, Ted Balestreri and John Narigi.

"The first day we started to work on the property, I got here at 7 in the morning and there were 75 pickup trucks on the side of the hill," Phillips remembers. "They were unloading bulldozers and tractors. It was





Rancho Cielo's remarkable program, based in Salinas, inspires kids from difficult backgrounds to turn their lives in a positive direction through productive, practical skill building. Students avoid a potential future with the court system and instead develop skills from cooking to construction. The barbecue pictured was built by youth in the program.





The brainchild of retired Monterey County Superior Court Judge John Phillips (top left), Rancho Cielo was born out of his frustration with sending youth through the juvenile justice system.

(Top right) Student Jason Potts with Executive Chef Marcus D. Whisenant. (Bottom) Youth Corps Director Andrew Seminerio and participant

the whole community coming together.”

The Silver Star Youth Program was Rancho Cielo’s first, providing education, counseling and job placement services for teens—many of them first-time offenders. Rancho Cielo Youth Corps participants also receive on-the-job training and job search assistance, mainly in trades related to construction, and those without a high school diploma can earn one at the same time. Wildfire Suppression Program students work with North Monterey County Fire Protection District personnel to clear public and private lands, and they complete a targeted firefighter training program, as well.

The newest Rancho Cielo addition is the Drummond Culinary Academy. Certified Executive Chef Marcus Whisenant teaches basic culinary skills—recipe reading, sauce making and knife skills, for starters—and also introduces students to real-life restaurant opportunities through a new dining room that opens to the public for Friday evening dinners and by-arrangement private events.

Whisenant watches students thrive in his

program’s positive environment. As they learn new skills and receive recognition for their accomplishments, they develop self-confidence and enthusiastic attitudes.

“A lot of them weren’t motivated before they got into this program. They’ve come down some really different pathways,” he says. “We’re giving them a second chance.”

Inspiration for it all came during Judge Phillips’ later years on the bench, when the offenders he sentenced were younger

Jason Potts entered the culinary academy last October and will graduate in June with his high school diploma and a ProStart certification from the National Restaurant Association. From there, he’ll complete a 250-hour externship before pursuing full-time work.

“This is the best experience I’ve ever had,”

says 22-year-old Potts. “I actually feel like it’s saving my life. I want to be here seven days a week.”

Special event opportunities complement his on-site classroom and kitchen time. Over the past few months, Potts has cooked for banquets at The Inn at Spanish Bay, Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa and Hyatt Regency Monterey. In addition to networking with professional chefs, he and other program participants learn valuable life skills.

“This environment teaches me that I have to be professional, not just in the kitchen but also in school,” Potts says, explaining that Rancho Cielo staff members offer guidance while also challenging him to make smart decisions. “If I fail, it’s not that they failed me—it’s that I failed myself. I’m walking away with a whole new perspective on life.”

If not for this program, Potts suspects that he’d be in trouble and, likely, in jail. He believes that Rancho Cielo empowers students to improve their own lives as well as the communities around them.

“The kids are able to go home to all the different environments they live in and show others that there is something out there,” he says. “Maybe that will inspire other people around them to open their eyes and look at what’s best for them.”

Rancho Cielo Executive Director Susie Brusa concurs. “Once these students have a diploma, and they have these experiences, and they have some job skills, then there is less need for repeat offending,” she says. “They also feel accountable to someone besides people on the street.”

Judge Phillips agrees.

“If you get these kids at the right time, you can turn them around,” he says. “They’re sharp kids, and street-savvy. It’s about reaching them and instilling the desire in them. Turn on that switch, and they can do all kinds of things.”

To volunteer or make a financial contribution, or to hire Rancho Cielo’s student crews for building projects, visit www.ranchocieloyc.org or call 831/444-3533. The Drummond Culinary Academy Dining Room accepts reservations for Friday evening dinners and private events at 831/444-3521. ■