

# Educational equity nonprofit to host 'Changemakers Celebration' at Napa Valley College

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10,000 Degrees volunteers and staff hosted "10,000 Degrees Money Matters: Budgeting for College" workshop at Napa High School last year. On Oct. 23, the nonprofit will honor local success stories during the inaugural Napa Changemakers Celebration at Napa Valley College.

**10,000 Degrees / Courtesy photo**

10,000 Degrees, a Bay Area educational equity nonprofit, will be hosting its first Napa event, the “Napa Changemakers Celebration,” on Thursday, Oct. 23, at Napa Valley College.

The event will feature special presentations by 10,000 Degrees alumna Leidy Tovar, student Luis Angel Gomez-Avila, and 10,000 Degrees Napa advisory board member and business owner Cinthya Cisneros.

“10,000 Degrees facilitates that mentorship that sometimes our parents or family cannot guide us through,” said Diego Avina Hernandez, a Napa resident originally from Guadalajara, Mexico, who is currently studying finance and

international affairs at Napa Valley College.

The 10,000 Degrees alum spoke of the importance of its mentorship to support Napa's Latino student population, especially for those who grew up often feeling locked out of academic and professional opportunities in Napa and beyond.

For many first-generation students, Hernandez said, their parents often don't understand the academic and financial aid systems in the U.S. enough to help them. Often this is also due to parents themselves not having a college education.

His father moved to Napa to work in the vineyards before the pandemic; Hernandez, his mother and his sister followed in 2021. Hernandez studied at Napa High School and was enrolled in the school's English Learning Development (ELD) program. It was through the high school's ELD program that Hernandez initially heard of 10,000 Degrees.

It wasn't until the autumn of 2024, during his first semester at Napa Valley College, that Hernandez said he reached out to 10,000 Degrees. He was struggling academically and socially. After a 20-minute session with a counselor from the organization, Hernandez said he already felt the organization understood what he was going through and how to offer step-by-step support.

"They hear you," Hernandez said of his experience with 10,000 Degrees. "It's not only giving money to students so that they can finance their education, but also guiding them through college life and finding mentors."

10,000 Degrees has helped Napa students from low-income backgrounds thrive since 2018 by providing students with the necessary resources to get to and graduate from college and enter meaningful careers. In addition, the organization has awarded nearly \$700,000 in scholarships to Napa students.

"10,000 Degrees' students and alumni serve as living examples of the impact a college education can have on a person's life and community," said Katrin Ciaffa, the regional director of 10,000 Degrees for Sonoma and Napa counties. "We're incredibly excited to shine a light on those Napa students and alumni when we host our very first Napa Changemakers Celebration."

Now, Hernandez takes it upon himself to encourage other Latino students that he meets to join 10,000 Degrees, offering anecdotes about his experience with the organization and advice on how to ask for help.

Armann Gir, another 10,000 Degrees alum, told the Register that he shared Hernandez's view of the unease of being a first-generation college student navigating academic life and financial obligations. As the oldest of four brothers, he also expressed struggling to deal with the pressure of being a role model.

"I have to figure it out, and everyone follows in my footsteps," he said.

Gir, who was born in Vallejo and now studies pre-Law at UCLA, was introduced to 10,000 Degrees during his junior year at American Canyon High School when a representative from the organization visited his algebra class.

Knowing how difficult it was to pay for college, Gir said that during his senior year, he applied for and won a 10,000 Degrees scholarship that provided a \$500 per semester grant to cover school expenses.

Gir first attended Napa Valley College, where he was connected with a 10,000 Degrees advisor who walked him through steps on how to navigate campus life, understand financial aid packages, and write compelling essays for college transfers. By his second year, he became more involved on campus, taking on roles in clubs focused on immigrant advocacy and pre-law, as well as serving as a senator in the college's student government.

“The dream goal is to become an immigration attorney,” said Gir.

Luis Angel Gomez-Avila is a recent graduate with an Associate of Science degree in Business Administration. A Napa Valley resident, Gomez-Avila recalls that his professional ambitions and confidence were compromised by both his mother’s mental health struggles, as well as disheartening forays into finance and real estate.

His father worked in Napa’s vineyards, and it was there that Gomez-Avila's interest in agriculture, particularly soil health and regenerative agriculture, was first seeded. While working in Napa’s hospitality industry, he experienced first-hand the disconnect between the wine industry’s economic prowess and the hardship of many local families and communities who are “unaccounted for,” and for whom there is less economic opportunity.

With this realization, Gomez-Avila said he pivoted his career interests back toward the wine industry and viticulture.

“I wanted to do something more purposeful and that I was passionate about as well,” he said. “That brought me to a full circle moment.”

To support his transition and renewed career goals, Gomez-Avila was helped by a 10,000 Degrees mentor who also worked in the wine industry. He said the mentor told him that the current downturn in the wine industry was a perfect opportunity for someone like him to get in.

Gomez-Avila is now a student at Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, gaining knowledge and skillsets to prepare for a future in Napa’s growing regenerative agriculture movement.

“I definitely love it,” he said of his college experience. “I fit in.”

10,000 Degrees has not only helped students perform successfully in their academic careers but also helped them build foundational skills for working life.

“Ultimately, they catapulted me into my professional career,” said Leidy Tovar.

Tovar, who was born in Colombia, moved to the Napa Valley when she was four and was educated in the St. Helena school district.

She was an accomplished, high-achieving student, and received plentiful opportunities to apply for scholarships, of which 10,000 Degrees was one of them. Tovar used a full scholarship offer to attend Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, where she majored in Education and Global Studies.

Tovar said her scholarship was invaluable in studying in a new and challenging environment, ultimately cementing her passion for youth education.

During her senior year of college, she received an email from 10,000 Degrees offering her a post-college fellowship. After graduating, Tovar took the fellowship opportunity and moved back to California.

At the then-small organization, Tovar developed presentations on financial aid and worked with staff to connect them with students in need.

“It felt really relevant to work with an organization that was also focused on working with youth and supporting their educational development,” she said.

Tovar has since worked at San Francisco City College as a College Success Fellow, and at the Napa County Office of Education, where she worked on foster youth programming and service coordination.

“I felt like I was able to take the student-centered approach — all of the tools around presentations and working with youth and folks of different backgrounds — and implement that into my work,” she said.

Tovar said she continues to utilize her network that she built at 10,000 Degrees, “so that their services can reach more of the Napa community.”

The 10,000 Degrees Napa Changemakers Celebration on Thursday, Oct. 23, at Napa Valley College is open to the public. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit [\*\*10000degrees.org/get-involved/napa-changemakers\*\*](https://10000degrees.org/get-involved/napa-changemakers).

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Wine Industry Reporter

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