10,000 Degrees celebrates Napa students achieving American Dream

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Luis Angel Gomez-Avila and Leidy Tovar, two speakers at the 10,000 Degrees Napa Changemakers Celebration, pose for a photo at the Performing Arts Center at Napa Valley College on Thursday, Oct. 23.

Brett Marsh/Register

“Go back to college bro.”

These were the pointed, but encouraging words that Luis Angel Gomez-Avila, an ambitious young Napa student, said he received from his best friend amid profound personal and financial difficulties.

Gomez-Avila was one of the two young speakers at Thursday's Napa Changemakers Celebration, a donor event at Napa Valley College for 10,000 Degrees, a Bay Area-based nonprofit organization that helps students from low-income backgrounds get to and through college and into sustainable careers.

“I was a student who lacked confidence, direction and support, but never willpower,” Gomez-Avila told the audience at the school’s Performing Arts Center.

Gomez-Avila, a current 10,000 Degrees recipient, was one of two speakers at the event, the organization’s first in Napa, along with organization alumna Leidy Tovar.

The Changemakers Celebration drew a crowd of around 100 donors and student “scholars” from the organization and featured a multi-course dinner.

Cinthya Cisneros, a 10,000 Degrees alumna and owner of La Cheve Bakery and Brew in Napa, served as the co-emcee along with Teresa Foster, a community activist and the producer and host of the award-winning TV show, “Charlando con Teresa Foster.”

“Today, now more than ever, we need education,” said Kim Mazzuca, the President & CEO of 10,000 Degrees, in an initial address to the dining audience from a podium set up in the Performing Art Center’s foyer. “It has the

unparalleled power to break down barriers, to see and love others, and to unite us around a common purpose."

Mazzuca thanked donors, board members, and educational partners for their commitment to 10,000 Degrees, which she said has awarded nearly $700,000 in scholarships to Napa students since 2018.

The organization's work has garnered significant attention this fall after it received $42 million from the MacKenzie Scott and the Yield Giving Foundation.

Mazzuca cited Scott's belief in the "multiplier effect" — the compounding impact of a single unexpected act of kindness toward a stranger of different backgrounds or beliefs, as a powerful impetus for donating to help those in need.

"Imagine now, for each student who receives a scholarship — who is thriving because of your generosity," she said. "Imagine how they will go on to give."

The event featured a $25,000 matching challenge by The Isabel & Michael Mondavi Foundation, where every dollar raised beyond $100,000 would be matched, dollar-for-dollar, up to an additional $25,000.

More than $160,000, including the matching donation from the Mondavi Foundation, was raised during the Napa Changemakers Celebration.

But it was the evening's personal stories from the speakers that appeared to have the biggest impact.

On paper, Gomez-Avila is a quintessential American success story. Raised in Napa by Mexican immigrant parents, he graduated from Napa Valley College with an Associate of Science in Business Administration. He is currently a third-

year transfer student at Saint Mary's College of California in Moraga.
But his journey to this point belies his past personal and financial challenges as a first-generation student.

In his speech, Gomez-Avila described being overwhelmed and directionless during his first year at Napa Valley College. He choked up as he described how the financial difficulties his family faced and his mother's mental health issues, both of which required his attention and care, caused him to drop out of school.

"I didn't think I'd get so emotional," he said, as he recomposed himself and received enthusiastic applause from the attendees.

Gomez-Avila's experience with the challenges of completing higher education for low-income students of color in Napa County was hardly an outlier.

Mazzuca, in her speech, cited statistics on the huge disparity in college graduation rates between low-income and more affluent students, which have repercussions for personal and professional outcomes throughout their lives.

"Yet we know that college graduates live statistically healthier, happier and more prosperous lives, vote and volunteer more, raise second generation college students, and inspire others to see the world of possibilities," she said.

She encouraged the audience to look at the speakers and their experiences receiving support from 10,000 Degrees as an impetus to continue to donate to the organization.

According to its website, 10,000 Degrees supports 16,000 students and alumni in 8 Bay Area counties. One-hundred percent of students are from low-income backgrounds; 93% are from communities of color, and 92% are first in their family to attend college.

In 2025, 10,000 Degrees awarded its student recipients $9.6 million in scholarships, as well as an additional $73 million in free financial aid.

“We help our students navigate the entire college success journey, providing college and financial aid advising, scholarships, financial aid management, and near-peer mentoring to guide them with college enrollment, community college transfer support, college success, and career readiness,” Mazzuca said.

Cisneros, the co-emcee, reiterated the benefits of 10,000 Degrees’ support as helping her reach her goals in spite of coming from a less-resourced family.

“The financial support was critical — and even more so, their mentorship,” Cisneros told the audience. “Having a champion, someone who consistently checked in on me, who made me feel like I belonged in those spaces was everything to me.”

As ambitious and hard-working as she was, Cisneros herself faced seemingly insurmountable odds as the child of undocumented parents from Michoacan, Mexico.

“I hustled — doing whatever I could to be an honor roll student with a single goal: college,” she said.

Cisneros described having to make the devastating decision to forgo a place in UC Berkeley’s chemistry program due to the lack of financial aid available to her as an undocumented student.

Nonetheless, she pivoted to Sonoma State University and applied for local scholarships. That’s when she came across an opportunity with 10,000 Degrees.

Cisneros, who ultimately earned her chemistry degree in 2008 from Sonoma State University and taught the subject in high school until 2018, said that she could not have done it without the support of 10,000 Degrees.

She now wants to pay it forward to budding 10,000 Degrees recipients.

“Our family’s story has come full circle,” she said. “We are now proud to be able to provide 10,000 Degrees scholarships to other hustling students pursuing science or business in search of their American Dream.”

For Gomez-Avila's, an opportunity with 10,000 Degrees came up during a low point as a college dropout in 2020.

It was Oscar Loyola, the supportive best friend and a 10,000 Degrees alum, who urged him to return to college. Loyola, now a successful young professional in San Francisco who appeared in a promotional video at the beginning of Thursday’s event, connected Gomez-Avila with mentors from the 10,000 Degrees who helped him initiate into the program.

Finally, back in college, Gomez-Avila said that he received career readiness coaching, network building and biweekly check-ins from the organization. Its support helped him reconnect with his agricultural roots in Napa and build professional connections with, and insights from, wine industry insiders.

His father, who taught him how to graft vines and drive a tractor as a 12-year-old, instilled in him a desire to be a steward of the land and to support the working-class Napa community.

Now, Gomez-Avila is working on a startup pitch competition with the help of St. Mary’s College. His idea involves upcycling grape pomace, which he described as an overlooked resource, as a sustainable form of cattle feed.

“It has the potential to serve the community in a new way,” he said. “Just as the earth gives to us, we must give back.”

According to statistics from Ed Data, 65% of students in Napa Valley Unified School District are low-income —68% of the district’s students are Hispanic or Latino, while white students are less than 25%.

“A college degree is the single best pathway for breaking the cycle of poverty – for moving from a low- to higher-income bracket,” Mazzuca said. "Yet only 43% complete the courses required to even apply to a four-year college."

Mazzuca stated that more than 80% of 10,000 Degrees students who start at a four-year college graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years – more than double the rate of their peers.

“10,000 Degrees gave me more than a scholarship; it gave me my first job, ignited my passion for youth work and built a network I still lean on today,” said Leidy Tovar, the event’s alumna speaker.

Tovar moved from Colombia to St. Helena with her mother when she was four years old. Smart and hard-working, she received a 10,000 Degrees scholarship, which helped fund her education at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania.

After college, she joined the organization as a College Success Fellow. In that role, she supported community college students at City College of San Francisco with financial aid access.

Her experience with the organization helped instill her passion for youth education and to serve her local community. She took on a role at the Napa County Office of Education with the Foster Youth Program, supporting the coordination of services.

“I knew I wanted to return to the Napa Valley — this community that shaped who I am,” she said.

Tovar partnered with the school district, county, and other community-based organizations to help foster youth receive the tools to thrive in school. Through her help, Tovar said, FAFSA applications rose to 80% for foster youth. She also invited 10,000 Degrees colleagues to speak at events she hosted and collaborated to bring its programming to even more students. Tovar is currently a Visitation Supervisor for Child Welfare at the County of Marin.

“The scholarship I received 10 years ago truly catapulted me to where I am today,” she said. “The small Colombian girl who moved to St. Helena 24 years ago without speaking a word of English could not have even dreamed how far she’s come.”

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