

ROOTS

Newsletter

Spring 2025

For **Friends of SYV Family School**



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COVER ART BY MARISOL MILLS, '22



Letter from the Editor

Spring is in the air!

Dear Alumni,

Welcome to the spring edition of our quarterly ROOTS alumni newsletter.

As the season blooms to life on Figueroa Mountain Road and the poppies burst into a blanket of orange on the face of Grass Mountain, there’s an unmistakable energy in the air—one of gratitude, growth, and significant momentum.

This spring feels especially meaningful as we continue to ride the wave of our 50th anniversary celebration. This year has truly been a magical time filled with reconnection, reflection, and a renewed sense of pride in all that our school community has accomplished over the decades. From small gatherings to inspiring stories shared across generations, this milestone has left us deeply inspired and more united than ever.

In this issue, we’ll recap the fantastic night of Bounty of the Valley, visit more alumni voices, celebrate our graduates, and share our financial standing as the school year closes. Whether or not you joined us for any or all of the celebrations, thank you for being a part of the family. We can’t wait to carry this spirit forward, and we’re so glad you’re on the journey with us.

Sincerely Yours,

Leanne Elliott
Alumni Relations

Oh, What a Night!

The Bounty of the Valley was dressed up in school history to celebrate this year's theme: 50 years of planting seeds. On Saturday, April 5th, more than 250 alumni, friends, current families, faculty, and staff gathered on our school's campus to remember the past, honor the present, and look ahead to the future.

It was a truly special experience to look around and see five decades of family gathered together on a warm spring night under handmade tartine flags, pennant banners, and handmade quilts from years past. As much as we have changed over the years, you could still feel the spirit of the founding families that came together as a community to build a school where childhood is honored and education is an adventure.

The evening began with a shuttle ride for guests from Dunn Middle School. Once on campus, guests gathered at the 'memories' table, where photos and memorabilia dated back to 1976. Guests enjoyed charcuterie and passed appetizers, a photo bus, a cocktail cart, a silent auction full of generous donations from our SYV community, and art pieces from our students.



The party moved inside the tent on the Big Field, and guests enjoyed a buffet dinner, and maraca party favors handmade by our talented students. The MC for our live auctions was alumni Dad and actor, Reed Diamond, who flew in from Canada to be with us for this special occasion. The dynamic duo of Reed and auctioneer, John Glines helped net a record-breaking number that spoke volumes about the health and vitality of the school. We're grateful for our passionate supporters, along with our alumni and current families.

While the evening was about reflecting on the past, we didn't miss the blessings and bounty of what we have today, and the renewed assurance of what is possible for the next fifty years. We sincerely thank the Bounty committee, the numerous volunteers, and the staff and faculty who put in countless hours to make this event

possible. We also give a special thanks to our event sponsors: GPM Pavement Management, Hometown Insurance Services, Pork Palace, Ramsey Asphalt Construction, the Sternberg Family, and Two Wolves Wines.





Bounty OF THE VALLEY

Thanks to the incredible generosity of our community, this year's fundraiser was a resounding success. The funds raised are vital in bridging the gap between tuition revenue and the actual cost of running our school.

Tuition covers only about 80% of our annual operating expenses, and the support of donors—those who give above and beyond—allows us to continue offering exceptional programs, maintaining small class sizes, and supporting our dedicated staff.

We are deeply grateful for each contribution, which directly supports the vibrant, values-driven education we proudly provide. At this year's Bounty of the Valley, there was proof of lasting commitment in the attendees, including more than 75 current parents, more than 75 alumni parents, and at least 58 community members, including grandparents of current and alumni students.

We continue to be grateful for our community's generosity, which ensures that we will be a vital resource for a unique and child-centered educational experience for the next fifty years.

If you would like to be a part of our story and legacy, but have not yet had the opportunity, [please consider giving today.](#)



\$467,073

TOTAL DOLLARS
RAISED



5

EVENT
SPONSORS



251

TOTAL
ATTENDEES

\$171K

LIVE AUCTION
DOLLARS



\$197K

PADDLE RAISE
FOR SPECIALTY
PROGRAMMING



Your Immediate Impact

Because of your generous Bounty contributions, we were able to offer free speech and language assessments to our current student body.

34%

ALUMNI
ATTENDEES



Isabel Huerta, Class of 2012

Building Community, Leading with Curiosity, and Staying True to Her Roots

When Isabel Huerta reflects on her time at SYV Family School, the memories are warm, vivid, and woven with deep meaning. “One of the biggest things people are searching for is a village—but they don’t always know how to be a villager,” she shares. “At Family School, we learned how to be great neighbors and friends. We learned how to lean on each other.”

Isabel’s reflections reveal a profound appreciation for the close-knit, values-driven environment she grew up in. She speaks fondly of a school culture that nurtured emotional intelligence, embraced curiosity, and encouraged students to show up authentically. “It was a place where no question was a stupid question,” she says. “We were taught to tap into multiple strengths: connect, be curious, and work through disagreements—which is so important in life, not just in school.”

Two teachers, in particular, had a lasting impact: Karen Johnson and Cynthia Devine. “Karen was such a safe person for my mom when she was still learning English,” Isabel recalls. “She helped my family feel seen and supported, even beyond the classroom.” Her connection to Karen, who taught her in the ocean-themed Blue Door class, helped her overcome early shyness and feel at home, even while navigating a new language and culture.

Cynthia Devine, an art teacher and creative mentor, also helped Isabel step into her confidence. “She called me a Renaissance woman,” Isabel laughs. “She saw all the pieces that make you who you are and uplifted them.” Through theater-art fusion camps hosted in Cynthia’s home, Isabel discovered a love for storytelling, performance, and expression—seeds that would bloom in unexpected ways later on.

After transitioning from Family School to Santa Barbara public schools, Isabel quickly found herself thriving. “The accelerated math at Family School gave me a huge head start,” she notes. At San Marcos High School, she threw herself into student government, community service, and even



Pictures courtesy of Facebook, LinkedIn, and Isabel Huerta.

Flamenco dance. “I loved school. I wasn’t naturally smart—it took work—but I knew how to ask for help and build connections. That foundation came from Family School.”

Isabel carried those skills to UC Berkeley, where she double majored in Legal Studies and Ethnic Studies, minored in Race and Law, joined Greek life, and served in student government. “At first I thought, ‘How am I going to make a 40,000-person school feel small?’ But because of my experience in a small school, I knew how to find and build community.”

The ability to build community and a fearless curiosity propelled her quickly after graduation. From development work at Berkeley to a leadership role in the California Governor’s Office as Deputy Director of Digital Communications, Isabel credits her Family School roots. “I had impostor syndrome applying for this job,” she admits. “But I wasn’t afraid to be wrong. I was adaptable. I had “soft skills” that gave me an advantage in every room I’ve been in.”

Looking back, Isabel’s message to current students and families is clear: “So much of your success will come from knowing how to connect with teachers, mentors, and peers. Cultivate those relationships. Stay curious. And don’t be afraid to take up space.”

As she continues traveling the state and supporting the state’s initiatives, Isabel carries Family School’s legacy with her—not just in her work, but in her way of being: grounded, open, and deeply connected.



Our Honorees



Ken & Lloyd Mills

A Legacy of Community and Education

Ken and Lloyd Mills moved to Solvang in the summer of 1972, instantly feeling at home in the Santa Ynez Valley, where they settled in to raise their three children, Bonnie, Chris, and David. Their deep commitment to education, the arts, and community service left a lasting imprint on this Valley they so loved. Over the decades, they dedicated themselves to enriching the lives of others, whether through their leadership in local organizations, their support of schools, or their passion for outdoor adventures.

Together, Ken and Lloyd nurtured a love for the arts in the Valley, supporting outdoor adventures and preserving our natural environments. The Mills family passionately supported the SYV Family School before and after their granddaughter, Marisol, attended, and they became an integral part of our campus development. Among their many early contributions, they sponsored the construction of our Blue Door building.

Ken and Lloyd Mills embodied the community spirit, leaving a legacy of generosity, leadership, and adventure. Their dedication to our school family, outdoor education, and natural environment greatly enriched our school, ensuring their influence will be felt for generations.



David & Jan Crosby

Champions of Music and Education

Known for his legendary music with The Byrds and Crosby, Stills and Nash, long-time resident and music legend David Crosby and his wife, Jan, were passionate supporters of music and musical education in the Santa Ynez Valley. The Crosbys were advocates for progressive education, and their son Django (class of 2006) attended SYV Family School.

David's generosity led him to perform live frequently and host concerts that helped fund instruments for local schools and music programs throughout the Valley, giving countless children access to the transformative power of music. The Crosbys were supporters of the SYV Family School even in the years after their son attended, making it possible to keep programs like music and art as an integral part of our curriculum year after year.

David's commitment to fostering creativity in young artists reflected his lifelong love for music. Through his contributions, both on and off the stage, David Crosby left an enduring legacy in the Santa Ynez Valley and in the history of SYV Family School—one of inspiration, generosity, and a belief in the power of music to shape lives.

Our Honorees

Jim Clendenen

A Legacy of Wine and Generosity

The legendary winemaker Jim Clendenen founded Au Bon Climat in 1982. He pioneered a new era of winemaking in Santa Barbara County, earning him international acclaim, including Winemaker of the Year by Food & Wine and the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who of Food and Beverage in America.

Jim and his wife, Morgan, contributed to the SYV Family School each year as they donated a special lunch to the school's auction, an event that raised essential funds and brought us together around their shared love of food, wine, and education. Their support also extended to the school's Cuvees wine program, which produced both the Habits of Mind and Legacy vintages. Morgan played a key role in its inception, and Jim's deep winemaking expertise shaped its success. Their children Knox and Isabella attended the school, further solidifying their connection to its mission.

The Clendenens' belief in fostering creativity, curiosity, and resilience in young minds continues to shape the school's mission. Their generosity has left an indelible mark on the SYV Family School, ensuring that future generations can access an enriching and inspiring education.



Dr. Louie Netzer

A Foundation of Love and Community

Dr. Louie Netzer was more than a beloved physician; he was a visionary, a healer, and a force of compassion in the Santa Ynez Valley and beyond. His impact stretched far beyond his medical practice, shaping the very fabric of the community through his instrumental roles in founding the SYV Family School, Friendship House, Country Medical Clinic, and the Side Street Cafe.

Dr. Netzer and his wife, Helen, are among the names found in the original articles of incorporation of the SYV Family School. They were part of the seven core families who had a vision for a school that supported an enriching environment and interactive curriculum.

Later in life, when most would have settled into retirement, Louie journeyed deep into the Amazon, founding Bolivia's Rio Beni Health Project. Speaking to students and teachers at Dunn Middle School in 2001, he shared his simple yet profound philosophy: "I happen to think that relationships between people—from friendships to love—are far and away the most important thing in the world."

Louie's legacy lives on, not just in the institutions he helped build but in the countless lives he touched with his unwavering belief in the power of love and community.





Pictured above: Red Door students rocking the stage in our all-school Spring Production of *Stormy Creek and the 7 Drillers* — an original adaptation of *Snow White* written and produced by our talented Theater Teacher, Kyser Whitney.

CURRENT EVENTS

SYV Family School Rodeo
Rodeo, sack race, dinner, desert, and dancing
Thursday, May 1, 2025
5:00– 8:30 PM
Alisal Guest Ranch

Teacher and Staff Appreciation Week
Monday, May 5 – Friday, May 9th

Special Persons’ Day
SYV TFS Campus
Friday, May 9, 2025
10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Graduation Ceremony
Honoring our 2025 Graduates
Wednesday, June 4, 2025
12:00–1:30 PM
On Campus Celebration
Open to current and alumni families

Staff Spotlight: Lissa Samuel

Certain educators’ influence stretches far beyond the classroom, whose presence, passion, and dedication shape lessons and lives. Lissa Samuel has been one of those rare and extraordinary people at SYV Family School.

For 28 years, Lissa has been a beloved teacher, mentor, and adventurer, inspiring generations of students with her deep love of science and boundless enthusiasm for learning. Her belief that children learn best through hands-on discovery has guided everything she does—from immersive classroom experiments to unforgettable outdoor education journeys. Whether leading explorations through the Green Door classroom or setting off on a Purple Door adventure, Lissa always manages to make the world feel like a place of endless wonder.

Her impact, however, goes far beyond field trips and lesson plans. Lissa has helped shape SYV Family School’s spirit, infusing our community with curiosity, creativity, and care. Her legacy is alive in the sparks of excitement she ignites in young minds, the confidence she nurtures in her students, and the traditions she helped to create and carry forward.

Though she is now stepping away from full-time teaching, Lissa’s presence will continue to be felt in every corner of the school. Her lessons and her love for learning are woven into the fabric of this community. While this marks the close of one beautiful chapter, it is not goodbye.

Lissa, thank you for generously sharing your heart, joy, and wisdom. You will always be a part of the SYV Family School story. We look forward to your future visits and continued presence in our school’s life. You are, and always will be, part of our family.





Stay Tuned!

Our Roots newsletter is taking a summer break to make new memories in the sun. We'll be back in the fall!

In the meantime, we're still in the office and we'd love to hear from you—share your alumni updates, photos, and news by emailing alumni@syvfamilyschool.org.

Pictured above: Katherine Isaacson, '25 presenting the closing monolog in the all school Spring Play.