

The Ranches Alumni

"Wow! This brings back memories, I was there when I was a kid in 1977. I went by the name Lee Shepherd, I learned a lot from them. It has made me the man I am today"

"This place helped me and gave me a second chance to do the things I probably would have never got to do. I met people there that are awesome. I thank everyone there, I appreciate it."

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Rekindling HOPE for At Risk Youth - Since 1944

Summer 2026 A Graduate Speaks

By Mikela Kull

Graduation is one of life's most meaningful milestones. While a diploma represents years of academic achievement, it also tells a much deeper story. Behind every graduate is a journey filled with challenges overcome, lessons learned, fears faced, and victories earned.

At The Ranches, we have the privilege of witnessing those journeys every day. We see young people grow in confidence, discover their gifts, overcome obstacles, and begin to believe in the future God has planned for them. Every graduate arrives at this moment by taking countless small steps of courage, perseverance, and determination.

We could not be prouder of each member of the Class of 2026. Their accomplishments extend far beyond the classroom. They have demonstrated resilience, character, and a willingness to keep moving forward even when the road was difficult. Graduation is not simply the end of one chapter. It is the beginning of another.

During this year's commencement ceremony, one graduate delivered a speech that beautifully captured the emotions of the day. Through letters to her younger selves, she reflected on the struggles, growth, and hope that shaped her journey. Her words remind us that every graduate carries with them every version of themselves that made this moment possible.





GREETINGS FROM THE PRESIDENT



Mikela Kull
President

There is something special about this time of year.

The backpacks come out, calendars begin to fill, and the excitement of a new school year starts to settle in. It is a season filled with fresh beginnings, new opportunities, and the quiet reminder that every day is another chance to grow.

As I walk around The Ranches, I cannot help but think about how much our kids have already accomplished. It is easy to celebrate the big moments, like passing a class, earning a good grade, or preparing for another 4-H season. Those milestones are certainly worth celebrating. But some of the victories that mean the most will never appear on a report card or receive a ribbon.

Sometimes the greatest accomplishments look like a young person choosing to talk through their emotions instead of shutting down. They look like asking for help instead of trying to carry every burden alone. They look like learning to trust, to forgive, to believe that tomorrow can be

different from yesterday.

Many of the children who come to The Ranches have spent much of their lives simply trying to survive. Before they can fully focus on algebra, history, or preparing for a future career, they first have to discover that they are safe and valued. They have to learn healthy ways to cope with disappointment, fear, and uncertainty. They need caring adults who will patiently walk beside them, encouraging them every step of the way.

That is why our work extends far beyond academics. Every counseling session, every mentoring conversation, every shared meal, every devotional, every opportunity to try something new is part of helping a child heal. Whether they are sitting in a classroom, working with an animal, learning a trade, or talking through a difficult day with a trusted staff member, they are building skills that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

One of the greatest blessings of my role is having the opportunity to watch this transformation unfold. I have seen young people who once doubted themselves begin to carry themselves with confidence. I have watched children discover talents they never knew they had. I have seen hope replace fear and possibility begin to take the place of discouragement. Those moments never grow old.

As we look ahead to this new school year and another 4-H season, I find myself filled with anticipation. Not because I know exactly what our kids will accomplish, but because I know they are capable of so much more than they often believe. With every lesson they learn, every obstacle they overcome, and every opportunity they embrace, they are writing a new story for their lives.

Thank you for making that story possible.

Your prayers, your generosity, and your belief in this mission allow us to continue providing not only an education, but also the tools, encouragement, and support our residents need to find lasting hope and healing. Thank you for believing in these young people, even when they are still learning to believe in themselves.

It is a privilege to walk alongside them, and I cannot wait to see what this next season holds.

Sincerely,

Mikela Kull - President

MikelaKull@theranches.org



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When I sat down to prepare for this speech, I was convinced that I needed to have some grand advice to give to everyone about how we all move forward. If I'm being honest, I don't think any of us has much of an idea of what our future really looks like. I began to think about what younger versions of myself thought about where we would end up. I think they would be surprised but proud of how far I've come. Instead of trying to come up with advice to you all, I thought I'd give advice to younger me instead. As I read these letters that I wrote to them, I hope you are able to relate and think of what you would say to younger versions of yourself.

Dear little me,

I know you're only six, and the world feels really big right now. I am writing to you from when we are 19. That probably sounds super old to you, but I still remember exactly what it feels like to be you. I remember how scared you are sometimes. You try to be brave at school, but your stomach feels tight when you walk into class. You hear kids whisper or laugh, and even though it's not about you, it feels like it is. When they say mean things or don't let you play, it hurts more than you know how to explain. You start to ask yourself, "What's wrong with me?"

I want you to know that there is nothing wrong with you. Being bullied is confusing. It makes you doubt yourself. You start to believe the words they say. You look in the mirror and wish that you were different. You try to be quieter, smaller, less noticeable. You think maybe if you change, they'll stop.

But there's something I've learned at 19. People

who bully are usually hurting inside. Their words are loud, but they're not true. The way they treat you says more about them than it ever will about you.

I know learning English feels really hard right now, too. When the teacher talks fast, it feels like your brain is running to catch up. You are scared to raise your hand because what if you say it wrong? What if everyone laughs? You feel embarrassed when you can't find the right word. You feel behind. You feel different.

But let me tell you something: one day English will feel natural. You'll read books, and you'll understand them. You'll write full essays. You'll even write letters like this. The thing that makes you feel small right now will become one of your strengths.

Learning two languages will make your brain stronger and your heart more understanding. The doubt you'll feel won't last forever. You are stronger than you know.

Every day that you walk into school, even though you're scared, that's courage. Every time you try to say a new word, that's bravery. Every time you keep going, even when you want to cry, that's strength.

At 19, you're still learning. You're not perfect. You still have moments of doubt, but you also have confidence that you cannot even imagine now. You have friends who see your heart. You speak up more. You believe in yourself. And most importantly, you survived the hard parts. So, when you feel scared, hold on. When someone is mean, tell a grown-up that you trust. When English feels impossible, keep trying, one word at a time. Remember, you are not weak, you are not too



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different, you are growing. I am so proud of you for not giving up.

Dear 12-year-old me,
You're at the age where everything feels bigger than you. You are starting to understand the world a little bit more now. You notice things that you didn't when you were six. You hear the tone in people's voices. You see the stress in people's faces. You feel the tension in the house even when nobody explains it. You know when something isn't right, and even though no one says it out loud, you carry it in your chest like it's partly your responsibility.

It isn't.

At 12, you feel small in so many ways. Small in school when other kids seem more confident. Small when you compare yourself to people who look like they have everything figured out. Small when adults talk over you like your opinions don't even matter.

But here's what I know at 19: you weren't small. Just growing.

The doubt you feel right now is loud. You question whether you're smart enough, strong enough, interesting enough. You overthink things you said days ago. You replay conversations in your head. You wonder if you're too sensitive. You wonder if you care too much. You do care a lot. That is not weakness.

You are also starting to see that the world isn't as simple as you thought. Families aren't perfect. Adults don't always have answers. People carry their own wounds. Some days feel heavy because

you're watching people you love struggle, and you don't know how to fix it. You don't have to fix it. I wish you understood that sooner.

It's not your job to hold everything together. It's not your job to shrink yourself so others feel more comfortable. It's not your job to be the strong one all the time.

At 19, you realize something important. The hard things happening around you didn't break you; they built your self-esteem. They taught you how to read a room. How to comfort someone. How to survive uncomfortable situations. Those skills will matter one day. You won't feel small forever. You'll grow into your voice. You'll learn that your thoughts deserve space. You'll start to choose people who make you feel seen instead of invisible. You'll understand that doubt doesn't mean you're incapable. It just means that you care about doing things right.

Right now, it feels like you're in between everything. Not a kid, not an adult. That in-between stage is uncomfortable, but it is also where you become who you're meant to be. Be patient with yourself. You are learning how the world works, and you are learning how strong you actually are. And even when you don't feel it, you are enough.

Dear 19 year old me,

This next chapter of my life feels a lot like standing at the edge of a long dirt road—wide open, a little uncertain, but full of promise. I may not know exactly where it leads, but I know I've got to take that first step and keep on walking.



THEIR JOURNEY





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I understand now that I'm going to make mistakes along the way. That's just part of life, same as the changing seasons or a hard day's work. But those mistakes aren't the end of the road—they're lessons. They teach me, shape me, and remind me to get back up, dust myself off, and keep moving forward.

There'll be opportunities that come my way—some easy, some that feel like they're asking more of me than I think I've got. But I've learned that growth doesn't come from staying where it's safe and familiar. It comes from stepping out, taking a chance, and trusting that I'll find my footing, even if the ground feels a little shaky at first.

Along the way, I've found a place I can truly call home—not just a house, but a feeling. A place where I can be myself, where I'm accepted, and where I belong. And I've come to understand that family isn't always about blood. It's about the people who stand by you, who lift you up, and who choose you just as much as you choose them.

And no matter where this road takes me, I want to walk it with integrity. I want to stay true to myself, hold on tight to my values, and treat people with kindness and respect. Because at the end of the day, it's not just about how far I go—it's about the kind of person I am along the way.

So here's the next chapter. It may not be perfect, and it sure won't always be easy—but it'll be real. And I'll keep growing, keep learning, and keep becoming someone I can be proud of, one step at a time.

As I look out at of the faces in our graduating class, I can see all of the 18 and 19 year-old faces but also

the 6-year-old and 12-year-old versions of you. We each have advice that we would give to younger versions of ourselves, but we don't yet know what advice the older versions of ourselves would give to us now. Each of our parents, grandparents, teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors would have a better idea of the advice that they wish they could give to 19-year-old them. I took the time to ask a few people in my life what they wish they could tell 19-year-old them and I'd like to share their advice.

-Always choose Faith over fear

-Work Hard, Be Patient, Be Kind, Pay Attention, Tell the Truth.

-Admit when you are wrong

-Never miss an opportunity to say thank you

-Surround yourself with people you can trust. Many people would leave you stranded in the wrong situations. Those people are not your friends.

-The truth is, we all struggle at times with feelings and fits of insecurity. While many treat them much like a 3 year old treats the "monsters under the bed" by closing their eyes and just trying to go to sleep, insecurities - like imaginary monsters don't disappear until we try, get up and turn the lights on. Once we do the work, the monsters go back to being what they've always been, figments of our imagination. I understand that it can be a bit harder with insecurities, but you still must, at some point, get up and turn on the lights to illuminate the issue.



THE RANCHES



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Congratulations class of 2026, may you always find a light to get rid of those monsters.

As we listened to these words, we were reminded that every graduate has a story worth celebrating. The accomplishments represented by the Class of 2026 cannot be measured solely by grades or diplomas, but by the courage it took to arrive at this moment.

To each of our graduates, we celebrate you. We

are thankful for the opportunity to have walked alongside you, and we look forward with great hope as you begin the next chapter of your lives. May you continue to walk in faith, embrace every opportunity to grow, and always remember just how far you have already come.

Congratulations, Class of 2026. We are incredibly proud of you.



Thank you to all the businesses, organizations, and churches that made monetary gifts in excess of \$150 during the period of April 1st, 2026 - June 31st, 2026. We deeply appreciate your commitment to children and families!

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Become a Partner

Have you ever wondered what it means to be a Partner of The Ranches? Our Partners commit to a monthly gift which allows us to provide hope for the kids in our care. The Financial needs of an organization which is dedicated to providing HOPE for "the least of these" can be daunting. By making an affordable automatic gift, each month, you can help bring HOPE to the children who, through no fault of their own, have been hurt and have lost hope.

We want to make becoming a partner as easy as possible.

You can go directly to our website at

www.theranches.org/partners

or call us direct at 505-881-3363 or 800-660-0289

or fill out the form below, return it, and we will call you.

We appreciate your continued support of The New Mexico Boys and Girls Ranches.

Help Us Share Our Story

Representatives of New Mexico Boys and Girls Ranches are available to meet with clubs, civic organizations and fellowship groups, either in person or via the web, to share our story of bringing hope to hurting youth.

If you are interested in arranging a speaking engagement for your organization, simply give us a call at (505) 881-3363 or (800) 660-0289.

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or call us direct at (505) 881-3363 or (800) 660-0289.

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P.O. Box 9
Belen, NM 87002-0009

(505) 881-3363
(800) 660-0289

www.theranches.org

