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Tony and Denise, center, with Future Grads members.
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Tony and Denise Lautmann: Giving Education a Helping Hand in Portola Valley

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Tony and Denise Lautmann:

Giving Education a Helping
Hand in Portola Valley

By Abbie Burgess

Denise Savoie
Lautmann and
Tony Lautmann.
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JetKat Photo.

COVER STORY

Denise Savoie Lautmann and Tony Lautmann believe in the power of education, and that a college degree can not only change one person's life but also impact their family and community. Between them, Tony and Denise raised six children in Portola Valley. They wanted to help underserved youth in the Bay Area get the same opportunities—including access to stellar education systems and the resources to get a college degree—that their own kids had. With this goal, they partnered with the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula to found Future Grads, a program that supports students to and through college graduation.

Future Grads

Students in the program receive counseling about applications, financial aid forms, and college selection. They also develop social emotional skills, including how to ask for help, access resources, and build support networks. Unlike other college access programs that only accept high-achieving students, Future Grads is open to any student at its partner high schools of Woodside, Sequoia, Menlo-Atherton, and East Palo Alto Academy who writes a short essay on why they want to go to college. Participation in the Future Grads program begins in the summer before 10th grade and continues through college graduation. Each school year culminates with an inspiring Future Launch event, when seniors announce to an audience of friends, families and funders where they have chosen to go to college.

So how did the Future Grads program come to be? Back in 2014, Tony was volunteering through Encore, an organization which matches retired



Tony and Denise, center, with Future Grads members. Image by JetKat Photo.

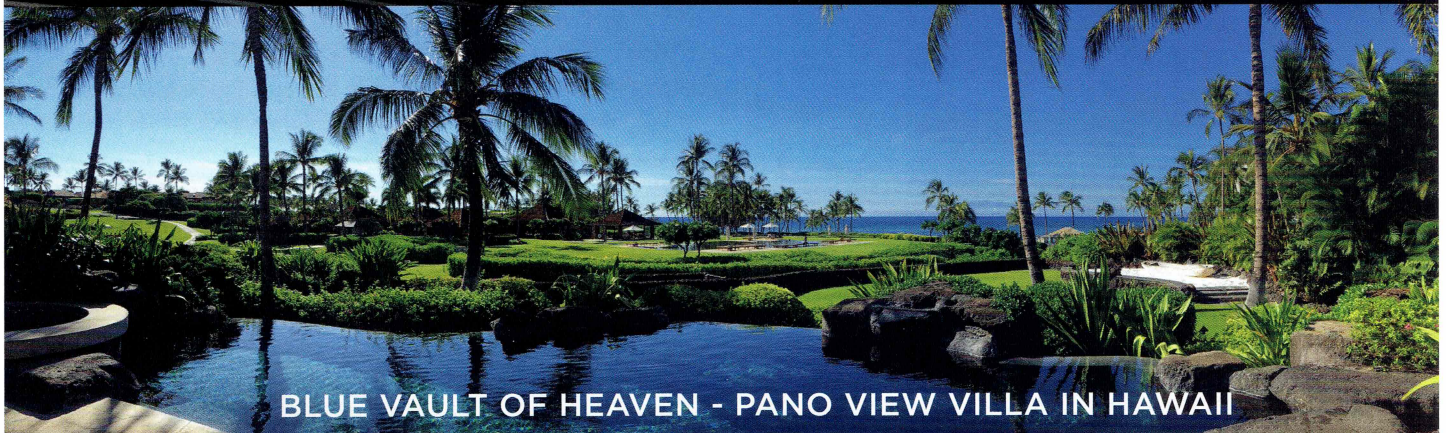
professionals with nonprofits that can use their skills. He was paired with a nonprofit in Santa Clara County that helped underserved middle schoolers improve their math skills in preparation for high school. He analyzed the data and found that there was no linkage between the program and the students' ultimate success in high school and college. He began a nationwide search for a more effective program to emulate, and ultimately found one right here in California. The Pomona-based nonprofit Bright Prospect has helped thousands of students not just graduate from high school and get into college, but also supports them all the way through graduation. Tony shares, "Many programs help kids get into college, but then provide little or no support to ensure their success, and the dropout rate is huge!" The

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Ivette Contreras and Gaby Perez (Future Grads Class of 2020) were all smiles when greeting Tony and Denise prior to the annual BGCP Partner Reception. Image provided by Denise and Tony Lautmann.

Bright Prospect model was not only a proven success, it was extremely efficient from a cost standpoint. And best of all, the organization offered to train any teams that wanted to adopt its program. So Tony helped initiate a pilot program for the nonprofit he was already working with.

In 2015, Tony says he convinced Denise that they should independently fund and start a similar program at Woodside High School, where Denise's two youngest children had attended school. They had seen firsthand the wide gap between the privileged and underprivileged at Woodside. Rather than go it alone, Tony approached the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula (BGCP) to see if they had any interest in partnering. The organization agreed, stipulating, "Yes...if you are willing to do it at four of our high schools and not just one."

In 2016, Future Grads welcomed its first class of high school sophomores; those students are now sophomores in college. The program has been a huge success with a 100% high school graduation rate and 91% college attendance. Future Grads participants have been accepted at institutions including Berkeley, UCLA, UCSD, Cal Poly, UC Santa Cruz, UCSD, and Stanford, among others.

"Future Grads has changed the way we serve students and families," says Esmeralda Ortiz, BGCP Senior Director, High School & Postsecondary Success Programs. "We are not only helping provide access to higher education but we are ensuring students successfully complete their postsecondary education all while keeping the families involved through the process."

How to Help

Tony and Denise raised enough funds for the first two classes of Future Grads to be funded for the entire eight years of programming (tenth grade through up to five years of college). In the Fall of 2018, they received the Association of Fundraising Professionals' Outstanding Volunteer Fundraisers of the Year Award for their efforts. They have continued to work side by side with the BGCP in their quest to support additional Future Grads classes, including hosting parties at their home (in non-COVID times), and talking at length to anyone who is interested in helping underserved children in our community. Future Grads is currently serving 403 students per year and aims to increase impact over the next four years. Many generous donors choose to support one or more students in the program by pledging \$2,000 per student per year for the entire eight years that students are members of Future Grads (\$2,000 is the approximate cost per student per year to run the program).

"An impactful way to help is to volunteer as a one-on-one coach with a Future Grads senior to assist them with college and scholarship applications," Tony suggests. "These are first-generation college students-to-be who have no one experienced at home to assist and guide them." Employers, take note: Future Grads is also a source of new, diverse talent for companies offering summer internships and full-time job opportunities. Each summer, Future Grads holds a week-long Summer Academy for their new students to provide training on college knowledge and lessons. Additionally during the summer, a pre-college bootcamp is offered for rising college freshmen to orient them to their new challenges. During the school year, high school students are taught social and emotional skills needed to succeed in high school, college and beyond. Tony and Denise normally attend all of the summer and school year sessions so they can get to know each of the kids personally. This year, "The BGCP staff created virtual versions of our programming that have remained solid and impactful. The kids are still engaged, learning what they need to succeed," says Denise. Tony and Denise both lament, however, that they really miss the impact of meeting in person with the kids.

"Their passion for the students and the program is felt by all, and we are so deeply appreciative of their partnership," says Peter Fortenbaugh, Chief Executive Officer of BGCP. "And they bring joy and fun wherever they go."

At Home in Portola Valley

Tony's and Denise's passions for working with youth precede their work with Future Grads. Denise was a Brownie Leader and softball coach in Portola Valley when her daughters were young. Over nearly a decade, she and her daughters volunteered for numerous local charities through the National Charity League. Tony coached youth sports in Portola Valley and East Menlo Park, and worked with underserved youth in East Palo Alto and Redwood City with a program called 180 Degrees.

"We live on Willowbrook, and the Town and the Open Space District trails are literally right outside of our front door!" exclaims Denise. "We feel like we really live out in the country, far away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the world." Their acre lot is filled with beautiful gardens, where the couple enjoys tending to their hundreds of roses. "Our oodles of flowering plants and shrubs make us feel like this is truly our little slice of heaven! We share the property with dozens of oaks and other towering trees, reminding us of our property's history."

"Because we raised our kids here, we remain great friends with many of our fellow Portola Valley residents," Tony shares. While her children

Tony and Denise were thrilled to congratulate these extraordinary Future Grads at the annual Future Launch, where seniors announce their college plans. Dianne Vela (Mills College), Juliana Rodriguez (UC Berkeley), Nataly Saavedra (Sous Chef at the BGCP), and Elish Tumalan (UC Santa Cruz) were all part of Future Grads' Inaugural Class of 2019. Image provided by Denise and Tony Lautmann.



were in school, Denise volunteered in their classrooms and with the Portola Valley Schools Foundation. Until last year both Tony and Denise played softball in the local adult league, which Denise joined when it was first formed over 20 years ago. She also shares Willowbrook Neighborhood Captain duties with a neighbor.

Family Ties and Inspirations

Denise was a first-generation college student herself. She did her undergraduate work at Louisiana State University and went on to Tulane University for law school. She began her legal career at the age of 22 at McCutchen Doyle in San Francisco. In 2019, she retired after 33 years as a maritime lawyer.

Tony, a 1983 Stanford grad, went into commercial real estate. In 1990, he opened and managed the Bay Area Operations for the Staubach Company until his retirement shortly after the sale of Staubach to Jones Lang LaSalle.

"My Cajun parents inspired me," says Denise, who hails from Louisiana. "My dad had to quit school in the 7th grade to help support his family. He had a successful career as a deep-sea diver, later followed by a thriving trucking business. Even though he did not have a formal education, he was brilliant. He could find solutions to any problem and he could fix anything!" Her mother inspired her equally. "In addition to raising five kids (often for months on her own when my dad was offshore), my mom ran her own clothing store when we were growing up."

"They both taught me to value family and friends over all else, and that when someone needs a hand, give them a hand - but make it a hand up rather than a handout. This is why helping the kids in the Future Grads program is so rewarding. We are giving them a hand (and a leg!) up in life." Tony's parents were also inspirations to him. "My dad taught me a strong work ethic and helped form my moral beliefs. My mom taught me charity and the beauty of helping others. While raising four kids, she always worked as a volunteer. As a result of my parents' mentorship, my siblings and I have always tried to make the world a better place, where everyone has the opportunity to succeed."

Tony has three adult sons, Max, Nico and Zack Lautmann. Two of Tony's sons were inspired by 9/11 to serve in the military—Nico in the Navy and Zack in the Marines. Both will finish their terms of service in May of this year. Denise has three adult kids, Lauren Blocker Tyndall, Jessica (Jessie) Blocker Revilla and Ryan Blocker. Tony and Denise are happy to share that they just became grandparents for the first time.

Tony and Denise first met in 1983 on a double date—but not with each other! Denise was dating Tulane classmate Brad Blocker, a Portola Valley resident, who she later married (in 1986.) In 1983, Tony was dating his first wife, who he later married a week after Denise and Brad's wedding. Both couples settled in Portola Valley to raise their families. Brad tragically died in a skiing accident in 2008. Tony's marriage ended in divorce after 23 years. Fate eventually brought Tony and Denise together in 2009 and they got married in 2012, "in fine fashion in New Orleans," they add.

When they aren't busy with Future Grads, the Lautmanns can be found improving their golf games at Sharon Heights Golf & Country Club. That hard work paid off recently when Tony achieved a single-digit handicap. Their other athletic passion is following football. "Denise is a

lunatic about her Saints and LSU Tigers," says Tony, who is a self-proclaimed "Bay Area sports guy" who loves Stanford sports, the San Francisco 49ers, the Giants and the Warriors. Denise and Tony are both very spiritual and are constantly trying to grow in this department. Denise says that her nightly prayer list can keep her awake for inordinate periods of time!

Other shared hobbies include cooking and entertaining for family and friends and taking biking trips with Backroads travel company. They incorporate biking and wine tasting into their travel itineraries whenever they can. Their future travel will surely include the three rich cultural hubs their adult children live in: New York City, Austin, and San Diego.

Learn more about the Future Grads program and how you can support these deserving students at <https://www.bgcp.org/futuregrads>.

Future Grads Ashley Garcia (Freshman, UC Merced), Adrian Gutiérrez-García (Senior, Menlo Atherton High School – currently awaiting college decisions), and Lelani Tajimaroa (Freshman, UC Berkeley) are the best of friends, faithfully supporting each other to reach their goal of getting a college degree. Image by JetKat Photo.



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