

# HS Juniors Positioned for Future Business Success

## NONPROFITS: Junior Achievement, Local Businesses Connect with Students

■ By KAREN PEARLMAN

There was a time when **Diego Laroya** didn't have much interest in studying or furthering his education. The Lincoln High student said he didn't care whether he passed or failed his classes, didn't pay attention to lessons and often slept through lectures.

"My mentality throughout high school was if I failed a class, I did not care," Laroya said. "My brother and younger cousins looked up to me, but I had to want to change for myself."

Laroya found the impetus to change this year when **Junior Achievement of San Diego County** came along with a pilot program called JA Fellows. The program, launched in January and championed by JA CEO **Sidd Vivek**, offered Laroya and more than 30 of his classmates the opportunity to connect with local businesses in the real world.

The students were celebrated and some shared their success stories at the JA Fellow Spring Semester Showcase, held June 10 at **Lincoln High**. The event drew family members of the students, friends, volunteers, JA leaders, Lincoln staff and a slew of local business leaders, including **Irwin Jacobs**, co-founder of **Qualcomm**.

The JA Fellows program was designed to connect 11th grade students to San Diego's business community through a year-long leadership and work-based learning experience similar to **LEAD San Diego**. The program provided the Lincoln students with the foundational knowledge of the local economy, personal finances, career pathways and work-readiness.



**Diego Laroya**  
Lincoln High  
Student

The program met five days a week for a full semester providing classroom-to-career skills through experiential programming with partners like **Life Science Cares** and **Reality Changers**.

The students had weekly lessons and were provided tools, using Common Core-aligned curriculum from partners in a variety of industries in San Diego. One to two days a month they were able to go onsite and do job shadowing at companies representing high growth industries and career pathways.

They also will be getting paid, work-based learning opportunities during the summer and fall of their senior year.

### Connecting with Social Capital

The program connected students with social capital through industry mentors, financial capital through scholarship and paid work-based learning opportunities – and real-world experiences directly connected to San Diego's



**Irwin Jacobs**, co-founder of **Qualcomm**, and **Sidd Vivek**, CEO of **Junior Achievement of San Diego County**, take a moment to pose at **Lincoln High School** after a cohort of juniors at the school are lauded for the **JA Fellows Spring Semester Showcase**. Photo by Karen Pearlman

industries.

Businesses including **Cox Communications**, **Deloitte**, **EY**, **HawthorneCAT**, **LPL Financial**, **Mission Fed**, **Pepsi**, **Qualcomm**, **Vertex** and **Wells Fargo**, reached out to partner with San Diego's Junior Achievement and Lincoln High staff to give students real-world insight.

"At the start of my junior year, I started realizing how important school was," Laroya said. "I joined the JA program, knowing I wanted to do something in my life, but I didn't know how."

Laroya, who has long had an interest in food and cooking, was connected through the JA Fellows program with **Maya Madsen** of **Maya's Cookies**.

### Lessons in Entrepreneurship

From Madsen, Laroya learned how she grew her local startup selling in local farmers markets and turned it into the nation's top Black-owned gourmet vegan cookie business.

"I learned about money management and customer service and how to be an entrepreneur -- and I found out that that doesn't happen overnight," Laroya said. "Maya's story resonated with me and I saw how she started from scratch. And if Maya can do it, so can I."

The program is exactly what the students at Lincoln need to prepare for

the future, said co-principal **Melissa Agudelo**.

"We know what these kids can do," Agudelo said. "We know that talent is equally distributed; we know that opportunity is not.



**Melissa Agudelo**  
Co-principal  
Lincoln High

But it takes people like Sidd and JA who are willing to step up, and show up, every day here, to say, 'We see the talent, yep, it's clear, it's right there. We just need to make sure that the opportunity is showing up

for them, too.'"

Agudelo called the group of 36 students who graduated from the program "remarkable," but said that "there are another 1,400 out there ready for what these students killed it at... This is what our kids are capable of. The sky is the limit."

**Lori Williams**, the college and career pathway coordinator at Lincoln, said the cohort that will be in the graduating class of 2023 has a huge advantage. "They're learning financial literacy, personal and global financial literacy, learning how our global economic system works. Not just how it works from a textbook but actually talking to bankers, talking to business owners, learning how entrepreneurship helps to feed our economy.

Laroya said the connections forged also gave him the impetus to start

paying attention in class. "I felt motivated to learn and I started turning my assignments in on time."

Laroya said that his career as a restaurant owner is now in sight. "JA has given me all the resources that I need, all that's left for me now is how to build it."

Lincoln co-principal **Stephanie Brown** said that **Kaiser Permanente** recently donated \$50,000 to the program, earmarked for the students to buy some professional clothes to get them ready to fit in to the business world.

"So you can go on an internship and you feel a sense of belonging, that you do belong there," she told the students. "Because you do belong there." ■



**Lori Williams**  
CTE Coordinator  
Lincoln High

### Junior Achievement of San Diego County



**FOUNDED:** 1950  
**CEO:** Sidd Vivek  
**HEADQUARTERS:** Grantville, San Diego  
**BUSINESS:** Nonprofit  
**REVENUE:** \$3 million  
**EMPLOYEES:** 27  
**WEBSITE:** www.jasandiego.org  
**CONTACT:** (619) 682-5155

**NOTABLE:** Since being established in 1950, more than one million students in San Diego County have gone through JA programs.