



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Announcing the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vamos Afuera, LandPaths' ground-breaking program that actively creates outdoor experiences and spaces where the Latinx community feels safe, while growing a sense of belonging in nature and a desire to steward the land.**

SANTA ROSA, CA.—December 9, 2020—The most recent wave of Black Lives Matter movement and protests have pushed many organizations and individuals to grapple with issues of racial justice, power, privilege, equity, and white supremacy within their structures.

LandPaths began reckoning with issues of race, representation, and equity within the white-dominated space of the conservation movement early on, a grappling that launched Vamos Afuera con LandPaths in 2010.

This year, we celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vamos Afuera, our groundbreaking program that connects Sonoma County's Spanish-speaking community—who have been historically ignored by and excluded from the conservation movement—to nature for culturally relevant outdoor experiences. For ten years, LandPaths has actively created outdoor experiences and spaces where the Latinx community feels safe, while cultivating a sense of belonging in nature and a desire to steward the land.

“Working with Vamos Afuera, I saw how the families I worked with created a healthy relationship with nature, expanded their social networks, and enjoyed opportunities that are not usually available to similar communities in other regions,” says Mike Varela, former director of Vía Esperanza Centro de Educación. “LandPaths' efforts are truly wonderful and will enhance the relationship between humans and the environment.”

Each year, Vamos Afuera has grown in scope, getting dozens of people young and old onto LandPaths' preserves like Riddell in Healdsburg's Dry Creek Valley, Rancho Mark West, and the Grove of Old Trees, and partner properties like Gualala Point Regional Park and Point Reyes National Seashore for overnight camping and nature immersion.

“What a fantastic resource for our Spanish-speaking comunidad,” said local businessowner and Healdsburg City Council member Osvaldo Jimenez, who attended one of these outings in 2019. “Spend the day with amazing folks at LandPaths learning about mycology in my native language at Riddell Preserve in Healdsburg!”

In September 2016, Vamos Afuera took the first 49 participants to Yosemite for multi-day immersion in nature. With generous support from the Sonoma County Community Foundation,

the Yosemite trips have happened every year up to 2020, when it was put on pause due to the coronavirus pandemic.

### **Building Equity Began at Bayer Farm**

In 1999, LandPaths launched the first free outings programs to get local residents out on protected land in Sonoma County. Turnout was great, but it was quickly made clear that the outings were not reaching the Latinx community.

“When we initially tried to convince the Spanish-speaking community to participate in our hikes our outreach efforts failed miserably,” says LandPaths’ Executive Director Craig Anderson.

Determined to make inroads, in 2004, LandPaths received a grant from the State Coastal Conservancy to work on internal issues of diversity. The staff completed diversity and equity training, gaining insight into why the outreach hadn’t worked. It really came down to trust. The Latinx community didn’t know LandPaths; Traditional methods of outreach didn’t work.

LandPaths made the decision to build relationships and trust by pursuing a place-based and community-based approach. In 2007, LandPaths broke ground on land owned by the City of Santa Rosa, with support from the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District. LandPaths’ Bayer Farm, a unique partnership that brought nature to the heart of a predominantly Latinx neighborhood with few parks or opens spaces, launched a new era in the organization’s history.

At that time, Magdalena Ridley, a community organizer born and raised in Roseland, was hired by LandPaths, taking the lead on Bayer Farm. With the help of volunteers, including local teens, she literally planted first seeds on the farm, which became a thriving community hub.

In 2010, Ridley launched a new Spanish language outings program, naming it *Vamos Afuera con LandPaths*. Bayer Farm became the primary hub for outreach and *Vamos Afuera* grew in popularity, getting people young and old outside to LandPaths’ Grove of Old Trees and eventually Rancho Mark West, Bohemia, Riddell, and partner open spaces such as Taylor Mountain and Healdsburg Ridge.

“Bayer Farm became a portal to other preserves,” says New Audiences Manager Omar Gallardo, who began managing *Vamos Afuera* in 2012.

“Our engagement with the Latinx community continues to increase,” says Craig Anderson. “It is no longer isolated to just one program. Close to 50 percent of our staff is now bilingual and progress towards equity runs through the organization. Bayer Farm was the bridge. It didn’t just allow Roseland to connect to the land. It allowed LandPaths to connect to Roseland.”

Now nestled within LandPaths’ Branching Out Conservation for Everyone initiative and managed by Senior Bilingual Field Specialist Guadalupe Casco, *Vamos Afuera* has continued to expand. Just before the coronavirus pandemic forced most of Sonoma County to shut-down, Casco was on the brink of launching a *Vamos Afuera* docent program to create opportunities for Spanish speaking volunteers to lead outings. When safe to do so, the docent program will resume, the first of its kind in Sonoma County.

“Vamos Afuera has been successful because LandPaths values self-reflection and we are committed to equity,” says Senior Bilingual Field Specialist Guadalupe Casco. “Rather than being discouraged by challenges, we look inward to opportunities for change and to understand how we can better meet the needs of the community.”

Most importantly, Vamos Afuera is only the beginning of LandPaths’ work to increase opportunities for all under-represented communities to feel a connection and sense of safety and belonging in our beautiful local open spaces, whether through a paddle down the Russian River, making nature art along the banks of Mark West Creek, studying fungi in the wilds of Riddell, doing volunteer trail work at Lafferty Ranch, or reaching the top of a local summit.

Vamos Afuera was LandPaths’ launching point for building a broad and inclusive community connection to nature. We are committed to broadening that impact over the next decade to every person who yearns for healing with and on the land—especially Sonoma County’s BIPOC community who have been historically excluded from that positive connection because of systemic racism and white supremacy.

**To set up interviews about Vamos Afuera and LandPaths commitment to equity in the outdoors, please contact Communications Lead Leilani Clark at [leilani@landpaths.org](mailto:leilani@landpaths.org) or 707. 332.4736 (cell).**

**\*High resolution Vamos Afuera photos available upon request.**

### **About LandPaths**

Established in 1996, LandPaths is a nonprofit organization with the mission of fostering a love of the land in Sonoma County. Diverse by design, Landpaths achieves our mission through three initiatives: rooting youth in nature, branching out conservation for everyone, and growing community with nature. We inspire people to experience the beauty of Sonoma County, understand the value of local open spaces, and participate in stewarding the land. *More info at [landpaths.org](http://landpaths.org).*