

# The Kids To Take A Chance On: Wine Philanthropy, Revisioned

The people behind the newly-established Vida Valiente Foundation take that theme of wine philanthropy, particularly through education, another step forward: they are wine industry veterans who support first-generation students through their college career and beyond, whether or not that career is in wine.

The mechanics of the Vida Valiente Foundation are simple, as I outline in detail below. But the context for their program, and its execution, is not. Credit for the successful execution of the program goes to the four founding principals of the Foundation, whose own life experiences reflect an appreciation for the challenges of balancing humble origins with top accolades and — most tellingly — the tumultuous ride in between. “How to navigate the tumult” between a humble beginning at one end and professional success on the other is, for me, the meat of the Foundation’s program, and the biggest reason why it will succeed moving forward.

Here are four points worth noting about the Foundation. The mechanics are stated simply but, when teased out just a little, a dynamic web of complex significance emerges. Tracing that complex web outlines one of the most interesting developments of wine philanthropy in recent years.

## **The students must already be admitted to Stanford.**

Currently, Stanford’s acceptance rate for first-year students sits at just above five percent. The Vida Valiente Foundation aims to support 25 of those students with scholarships for each of their four years of college.

“Five percent” is just one of a daunting number of statistics for the pool of applicants. Foundation co-founder Susana Cueva Drumwright, whose upbringing mirrors many of the students she hopes to reach, graduated with a 4.0 GPA from a high school with a

464 to 1 student-to-counselor ratio. The odds against them don't stop once they're admitted, either: 90 percent of first-generation low-income students in the US take over six years to graduate, and 33 percent drop out after three years.

Newly-admitted students at Stanford, who are first-generation in college and from low-income households, are a winning population that have already beaten the odds. If there was a bet to place — in terms of investing in young people with resilience, bravery, grit and intelligence — the good money is on them. Co-founder Hayes Drumwright points out that the name of the foundation, Vida Valiente, translates to living a valiant or brave life, and continually doing things that might be difficult. Other people (including those at the Foundation) are betting on the students to live a brave life, while the students are also betting on themselves at the same time.

### **Vida Valiente Scholars are first-generation students from low-income households.**

Being a first-generation student means that they are the first in their family lineage to attend college, which by implication means that a college education wasn't normalized for them. They figure out the process for themselves, often without much guidance or the benefit of insider knowledge from parents or older siblings: how to apply, for example, what scholarships are available, which schools are better for which type of learner, how to choose a major, and how to establish healthy relationships with professors and staff.

The learning curve of normalizing a college education is steep and never-ending, and many students are without the luxury of focusing on “just” going to class and doing homework. They often hold jobs to cover expenses and send money home, for example, which also distracts from time spent on extra-curricular or social situations with their peers.

### **The Vida Valiente Foundation awards last-dollar scholarships.**

The need to hold down a job while going to college is one reason why “last dollar” scholarships are so important. The scholarships remove at least some of the anxiety and concern of there being enough money to make it all the way through, while enabling the students to shift time and attention to succeeding in the coursework itself.

## **The Foundation offers a built-in leadership program.**

The built-in leadership program could be the biggest game-changer that the Vida Valiente Foundation offers. Without a doubt, the financial support from the Foundation is essential for the students' peace of mind. But so too is the cultural and social support for navigating college and career, particularly when neither pathway is familiar, normalized, or highly populated with immediate-access role models from their youth.

Vida Valiente's program involves off-site trainings with fully present leaders/mentors whose expertise extends far beyond wine to include areas like technology, finance and construction as well. "Our ask of the leaders is to be engaged, and not just talking at the students," Susana Drumwright said. "To share meals with them, engaging and interacting with them. We've had a lot of interest from leaders, wondering what the longer-term relationship looks like."

All four of the Foundation's founders cite the role of mentors and a kind of "informal leadership training" that facilitated their careers. Winemaker Sam Kaplan's resume, for example, includes 100-point wines and top bids at Premiere Napa Valley, in partnership with the Drumwrights at Memento Mori Winery since 2010 before founding Vida Valiente in November 2021. That success follows his childhood on the edge of a reservation in Oklahoma, mentorship by Gary Andrus of Pine Ridge, and "in the vineyard" training in Spain and the Willamette Valley before landing in Napa. One hundred dollars of the \$250 bottle price for Vida Valiente's The Movement will directly support the Foundation.

Kaplan's ethic echoes the founders' belief in Vida Valiente and their students. "So often we forget how it all happens, that it just doesn't happen magically," Kaplan said. "The wine business for me has always been about working my a\*s off. I started at the bottom, and worked as hard as I could to learn."