



Wine's Most Inspiring People 2023: Susana Cueva Drumwright — Mentoring Disadvantaged Students Through Stanford University

· Elizabeth Hans McCrone



By Elizabeth Hans McCrone

Vida Valiente. In English, it translates to Valiant Life.

According to Susana Cueva Drumwright, co-founder of [Vida Valiente Estate](#) and its corresponding [Vida Valiente Foundation](#), the term also refers to a valley, a summit or the bridge in between. It's a concept, she says, about the ability to embrace life's challenges as well as those moments that define our successes — an apt name, she believes, for the winery and the foundation she holds close.

The Vida Valiente Foundation

Vida Valiente Estate is located at the base of Glass Mountain in the renowned Napa Valley town of St. Helena. Susana and her husband, Hayes Drumwright, began producing world class Cabernet Sauvignon from the famed obsidian soils in 2019, with the expert assistance of winemaker Sam Kaplan and his wife, Nancy.

But it's the work of the Vida Valiente Foundation that is closest to Susana's heart, and to which she is most aligned.



The purpose of the foundation is, in partnership with [Stanford University](#) and other corporate enterprises, to fully fund the tuition of talented, first generation, low-income and otherwise disadvantaged students every year for the first four years of their enrollment, enabling them to realize their dreams of attending a prestigious American university.

In addition, Vida Valiente scholars attend regular, offsite meetings with winery and foundation personnel who mentor them and provide opportunities to connect with company CEOs, internships and stipends (to be used for introductory investment accounts through a partnership with [Stash](#), an investment platform for beginners).

Matching students with mentors

For tech executive, vintner and philanthropist Cueva Drumwright, the creation of the winery and work of the foundation stemmed from her own experience growing up as a first-generation American daughter of a Mexican father and Guatemalan mother.

"My parents worked to provide limitless opportunities for me," she declares. "This is my return gift. It's me wanting to honor those who came before us — and lifting those to come."

Cueva Drumwright envisions more than financial support for the students her winery and foundation are assisting. Their background stories are often wrenching tales involving poverty, homelessness, foster care and (sometimes) abuse. That each has risen above their past enough to gain admission to Stanford is compelling, but according to Cueva Drumwright, it's not enough.

"There's something known as Imposter Syndrome," she explains. "The sense that you don't really deserve what you've achieved because of where you've been. We want our scholars to know that they're not alone, that you can use that [feeling] — in conjunction with working as hard as you can — as fuel to move you forward."

To that end, recipients of Vida Valiente scholarships are introduced to role models, from the business community, who have struggled themselves and yet created a path forward in spite of less than ideal beginnings.

Leaders, Cueva Drumwright points out, who are successful, but equally empathetic and vulnerable, such as Jennifer Friend, the CEO of [Project Hope Alliance](#), an endeavor to end homelessness in Orange County; or Adriel Lares, the CFO of Stash, the financial services group that teaches money management through small, first-time investments.

"We want to emphasize to our students that you're going to pivot," Cueva Drumwright predicts. "You're going to make mistakes, but you're going to pick yourself up. It's important to show yourself some grace."

Funding the dream

Cueva Drumwright's philosophy and project are off to a roaring start. In the fall of 2022, the Vida Valiente Foundation welcomed its first class: 33 students who will be mentored throughout their initial four years of matriculation through Stanford.

In those years, numerous mentoring opportunities will be made available to them, including an off-site visit this February to [Andreessen Horowitz](#), one of the world's leading venture capital firms, where they will meet with company leadership and discuss internship possibilities.

"Internships help you to learn to work with people," Cueva Drumwright expounds. "It's about learning the soft skills you won't necessarily learn in school."

The Vida Valiente Foundation is partially funded by the winery's flagship wine, a \$250 Cabernet Sauvignon blend called [The Movement](#). One hundred dollars from each bottle sale goes directly to support the work of the foundation.

Additionally, the foundation raised \$535,000 from its first annual auction, which took place in Cabo San Lucas in December. Husband Hayes Drumwright could not be more excited about this accomplishment, according to a press release sent out by Vida Valiente. "With the \$500,000 raised this weekend, in addition to the self-sustaining funds from our wines, our goal is to help 100 students in the next two years," he said in the announcement. "Long term, we hope to have thousands of graduates who actively provide leadership and opportunity to our scholars."

For Susana Cueva Drumwright, it's all about the ability to make a critical difference in another's life at a time when it really counts. "There are people whom you come across that take a chance on you, and that can really change the trajectory of your life," Cueva Drumwright observes. "We want to expand [our students'] view about what's possible."



