

The Kids To Take A Chance On, Part Two: Vida Valiente Scholars As A New Iteration Of Philanthropy Through Wine

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About a year ago, I wrote about [wine and philanthropy through the example of the Vida Valiente Foundation](#), which provides financial support for first-generation college students who have been admitted to Stanford University. “The Kids to Take a Chance On” was in the title of the article, though the focus of the piece was more on the Foundation’s emergence and support from within the wine industry, namely through co-founders Hayes Drumwright, Susana Cueva Drumwright (who was recently named [one of the wine industry’s Most Inspiring People](#)), Sam Kaplan and Nancy Kaplan, and their joint efforts at Napa-based Vida Valiente winery.

A year later, the first cohort of Vida Valiente Scholars are midway through their first year at Stanford. As a follow up to “The Kids to Take a Chance On” part one, I was curious to check in with them, and see how things are going.

For most of the students, the transition to college in Palo Alto, California was already a monster leap: being first-generation students means that college wasn’t necessarily something that was normalized within their families or social circles, and all of the helpful tips and guidance inherited from parents or older siblings for navigating a successful college experience had to be learned — introduced, even — from scratch.

It could be daunting indeed and at Stanford, no less, where the acceptance rate for new students is less than four percent. Students had already been admitted before they learned about the Vida Valiente program, which may account for what struck me as a

notable lack of “imposter syndrome,” which is defined as someone feeling inadequate despite a track record of competence. The students I interviewed, in marked contrast, were confident in their place at Stanford and their ability to succeed. “When you manage to get into a place, you deserve to be there,” summed up Alyna Lu, originally from Atlanta, Georgia.

It was, in a word, refreshing and unlike other perspectives I’ve witnessed from young people in similar situations. These students believe in their own capacities and ideas, despite their being “outside the mold” of many of their peers around campus.

That’s what makes the microcosm of the Vida Valiente Scholars reverberate for the wine industry today, and for our broader future: the industry needs to attract people who are “outside the mold” generationally and demographically, for whom wine consumption may not have been normalized earlier in their lives, who confidently bring their fresh ideas, tastes and economic contributions to the table, literally.

Here are excerpts from my conversations with the students that struck a chord, as they continue to navigate a campus environment that may have been entirely unfamiliar six months ago when they arrived, and where they’re now gaining obvious traction.

“The connections I never thought I’d have”

The learning curve for the Vida Valiente Scholars is steep, with landmarks constructed to assist their climb. Landmarks range from instructional dinners to teach the etiquette of formal dining, all the way to an in-person visit earlier this month to venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz on Sand Hill Road in Menlo Park, California. The purpose, in the first instance, is to raise students’ comfort level in possibly unfamiliar situations and, in the second instance, to show them the full range of what’s possible in their careers and lives.

“I’m blown away at the opportunities we are having,” said Alyna Lu of her group’s experience touring and listening to speakers at Andreessen Horowitz. “I’m given the connections I never thought I’d have. Being in that space encourages you to be as innovative and creative as [the speakers] are. Who you surround yourself with makes or breaks you.”

Grades and a declared major course of study are some variables to college success that's defined traditionally, but students are seeing that those are probably not the most important variables; human connections, your network, and who you can ask for help matter even more.

“There is a sense of wanting to belong”

The opportunities presented to the Vida Valiente Scholars level the playing field between them and the vast majority of other students on Stanford's campus, said Elijah Williams, a first-year student from outside Richmond, Virginia with a particular interest in political science and criminal law. “The scholarship is an opportunity to be introduced to these resources in a more equitable way,” he said.

The Vida Valiente cohort is also like a “built in” community of people who are experiencing the new college environment together. First-generation and/or low-income students “share similar backgrounds and experiences of how we grew up,” Williams said. “There is a sense of wanting to belong. We're flourishing through the challenges we've been through as [first-generation students] at Stanford. It allows us to have this community on campus that I think is really important.”

“I'm surrounded by people who recognize my struggle”

Vida Valiente Scholar Melissa Nguyen recognizes a sense of “validation by people in these higher positions who take time out of their day to share their perspective and opportunities, and allow us to ask questions. I just felt like, thank you so much for validating our concerns and listening to us. All of us are starting from scratch, for the first time, with our families.”

Vijay Pande is a general partner at Andreessen Horowitz who met with the students earlier this month and spoke with them about his own journey. He sees their shared background as an advantage of hustle, curiosity, and a desire to get in there “and push beyond where they're starting from. They're hungry. They're not as afraid to roll up their sleeves and do hard work. They're eager to make the most of their opportunities,” he said.

“I actually think, broadly speaking, that people are capable of way more than they realize, and for underrepresented minorities it's even moreso,” Pande said.

“Surrounding them with people who have done this helps them see that if we can do it, it can be done. You're in the middle just like the rest of us.”