

Forbes

How A Napa Valley Wine Helps First-Generation Students At Stanford

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There's no shortage of wine producers or industry initiatives that give back to their local community, or that donate to important charitable causes. But the direct impact on individual lives that the [Vida Valiente Foundation](#) is having is particularly impressive. Since its first vintage in 2019, \$100 of every bottle of Vida Valiente's \$250 "The Movement"—a Cabernet Sauvignon crafted from both estate-grown fruit in the Crystal Springs area of the St. Helena AVA, as well as Cab from Oakville's To Kalon Vineyard and High Ranch, in Coombsville—goes to the Foundation.

It's excellent wine, and a serious amount of money donated per bottle, to support a goal that is both impactful and, for Vida Valiente's founders, deeply personal: The Foundation funds last-dollar scholarships for first-generation, low-income students at Stanford University, and also provides them with mentorship and an impressive infrastructure to help them over the course of their college careers and beyond.

"Our scholars all have insane backstories of overcoming obstacles most of us only read about," explained Susana Cueva Drumwright, who co-founded Vida Valiente with her husband Hayes Drumwright, as well as 100-point winemaker Sam Kaplan and his wife Nancy. Her mother was born in Guatemala and sent to the United States as a teenager, eventually finding work as a nanny. The guidance and mentorship of her employer proved to be instrumental and,

combined with her mother’s ambition and pride in her family, formed the inspiration for the Foundation all these years later. “While [many of the Foundation’s scholarship recipients] have dealt with homelessness, abuse, losing parents, and so many other hardships, the thing that strikes you when you read their applications and meet them is how they have persevered through life, school, and crippling adversity without almost any help. They figured out how to become valedictorians, apply to college, secure four to five different financial aid packages to get themselves to college, mostly by themselves.”



Sam Kaplan, Susana Cueva Drumwright, and Hayes Drumwright with three Vida Valiente Foundation scholars. [-] COURTESY OF VIDA VALIENTE

On top of that, she added, “They come to Stanford alone. They feel alone. Their roommates [often] come with a network from their parents, mentors, extended family. I recognize it, because I didn’t grow up with that built-in network either. Vida kids stand tall on their own two feet as best they can in a completely new, incredibly intimidating world.”

Knowing from personal experience how critical an infrastructure is, the founders made sure that the Foundation doesn’t just offer money, but also a community full of other scholarship recipients who, despite different nationalities, religions, and stories, have dealt with similar difficulties. “The Foundation is here to level that playing field,” she continued. “Vida focuses on giving them something we believe is more important than just about anything when embarking on an adult life: Access. We focus on opening doors to that access—to peers who also struggled to get there, to leaders with similar backgrounds who give the scholars access to their own huge networks, and to us.”

She continued: “Hayes and I talk with them before big interview opportunities, about investing in themselves before trying to help everyone else (as they are often accustomed), about how their stories are special and set them apart, and so many different things. They have everything you could ever want in a great leader. They have grit, authenticity, vulnerability, and a willingness to help others and never judge. If we can give them access and lift them up with our networks, that is a gift money can't buy.”

Still, funding the scholarships is expensive—more than the proceeds from The Movement alone can fund. Which is where Vida Valiente’s Napa in Cabo auction weekend comes in.



Vida Valiente's "The Movement" Cabernet Sauvignon COURTESY OF VIDA VALIENTE

Last month, 120 guests, collectors of Vida Valiente, as well as Memento Mori, the other highly acclaimed wine from the Drumwrights and produced by Sam Kaplan, spent a weekend at the Montage Los Cabos for several days of golf, wine dinners, and, finally, a Day of the Dead-themed gala that culminated in a live auction that raised \$1.25 million dollars for the Foundation.

Guests bid on lots that included everything from a table for ten at Elton John's annual viewing party for the Oscars and a VIP experience at the Kentucky Derby, to entire barrels of 2023 Vida Valiente The Movement and much more.

An impressive swath of the Napa Valley wine community also got involved. "The wineries that joined us for Napa in Cabo this year were incredible," Hayes Drumwright said. "Lokoya, Vine Hill Ranch, Continuum, Memento Mori, Burgess, and MAXEM all poured insane wines. Many generously poured 100-

point wines at the dinner. That in itself is unheard of, but what most people don't understand is each winery contributed almost four cases of wine to the event. Those who attended probably consumed over \$3,000 worth of wine (each!) over the weekend.”

He added: “I honestly couldn't believe how giving and generous each of the wineries were. On my first phone call or text, each of them said yes. They brought an amazing amount of their best wines, contributed to auction lots, and I won't say Bruce Phillips's name [of Vine Hill Ranch] because he wouldn't like it, but *some* even donated enough to fund multiple scholars through all four years of their undergrad journey at Stanford. I remember that specifically, because Susana and I got pretty choked up in that moment.”

Justifiably so: The long-term impact that the Vida Valiente Foundation is having—thanks to the efforts of the Drumwrights, the Kaplans, their guests and clients, as well as the generous support of some of Napa’s top wine producers—continues to grow, and is helping more and more students each year.

“We have a serious focus on using [much of the money raised in Los Cabos this past February] to enhance the mandatory leadership offsite we do with all the scholars this coming October,” Susana Cueva Drumwright explained. “There will be three classes at the next one with over 110 scholars in attendance...In addition to this, we left this Napa in Cabo event with over half the attendees asking us to hold a spot for them next year. We will be able to accept 65 couples (130 people total) to next year’s Great Gatsby-themed event, which will be held on January 23rd to 26th at the Montage in Los Cabos. Knowing we are building a consistent event with incredible attendance allows us to safely accept more scholars into the program each year. We get close to 100 applications and can only accept 35 to 40 kids per year. Obviously, we would love to know we could consistently raise \$2.5 to \$3 million a year and accept all of them. That is what we are working towards.”

It's a goal that has been a long time coming. "Sam [Kaplan] and I always knew we wanted to do a project owned by [our two families], focused on allowing Sam to develop new sites exactly how he wanted to," Drumwright said. "It took Sam over five years to find the site for what has become our Vida Valiente Estate wine. We planted a year after securing the property, and had family and friends do a planting party for four rows of the vineyard. Susana's (now late) mother Julia was able to plant with us, which made it incredibly special. For Julia to be able to plant roots in this site, side by side with her daughter, who was in so many ways living out Julia's hopes and dreams, ignited something in Susana. We both knew we wanted to give back, but that moment gave Susana clarity. Her mother had sacrificed so much, being sent to the US when she was only 16 years old to hopefully give the next generation a chance for a fulfilled life. When Susana articulated a plan to create something that would eventually help lift thousands of first-gen kids to accomplish their dreams, it all became so clear. We decided on the name describing our purpose, applied for 501c3 status, began investing in our sites, and never looked back."



The 2024 Napa in Cabo auction raised over \$1.25 million for the Vida Valiente Foundation. JOHN & JOSEPH PHOTOGRAPHY

Today, with the generous help of Stanford—the university was, Susana Cueva Drumwright said, “Just incredible from the first moment we reached out...and we are so grateful to have them join this Movement”—the Drumwrights’ and Kaplans’ clients and collectors, and the larger Napa Valley wine community, the impact of the Vida Valiente Foundation is significant and expanding. It’s not only aiding students to maximize their potential right now; it’s also helping them build the foundation for successful, fulfilling, and impactful lives for decades to come.