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Passion
for Education

EDUCATION EDITION

From Student to Entrepreneur:

By Tara Fort • Photo by Trisha Shaffer

Few people decide to make a radical career and lifestyle change in their 50s, but that is exactly what Valerie Wood did when she and her husband Daniel enrolled in the Viticulture & Enology (VEN) program at the Verde Valley Campus of Yavapai College (YC). The couple, who have lived in Cornville fulltime since 2009, wanted to escape the intensity of corporate America to enjoy more quality years together. Immersing themselves in the intricacies of the growing Arizona wine industry was a path they wanted to explore. Wood, who has a background with McDonald's Corporation in the Real Estate and Construction Division based out of Japan, also maintains Valerie Wood & Associates Executive Coaching business. The decision to enroll in the VEN program would prove to be a huge, rewarding leap.

The VEN program was in its infancy when the two started taking classes in 2013. Both graduated with honors and became the first student employees at the Southwest Wine Center (SWC), part of the program's on-campus experience which also includes a vineyard, a state-of-the-art winery and a tasting room open to the public. Now, as an Ambassador and Associate employed at the SWC, Wood shares her journey with others, offering a sprinkling of education about the classes and local product offerings through a unique wine experience.

As their journey continued after graduation, the Woods were captured by the entrepreneurial spirit and started Heart Wood Cellars, a boutique winery, in 2015. Although Wood jokes, "After work, I work," she considers her new life a gift. "We are literally 'living the dream' and making our own wine in the Verde Valley." Wood credits YC's distinctive program and says, "Very few colleges offer a VEN Program with certificates, a degree, and hands-on experience at the college vineyard and winery. YC is truly a VIP player in supporting the wine industry."

While Wood says the tuition is reasonable compared to other institutions, some students struggle financially. "To support the Arizona Wine industry and the VEN program, my husband and I helped start the student organization Grand Crew, and we also sponsor a YC Scholarship for VEN students to help support their dreams. The \$30,000 Scholarship supports eight student awards per year for 10 years." Wood says the rewards in her new venture have been abundant, "I enjoy learning with my husband. We are richly inspired by the level of diversity of students in the program ranging from 21-70 years old."

For more information about the VEN program, visit <https://southwestwinecenter.com>

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- Valerie Wood

Living the Dream and Paying it Forward



VALERIE WOOD