Gail Gilbert was doing everything right, yet things were going terribly wrong.

“I was in a hopeless state of mind, body and spirit. I was desperate,” Gilbert recalls. “I was a single mother, and had lost a life that I was working hard to build. I was doing everything I thought I was supposed to do: I went to college, I had two degrees, I was taking care of my family the best way I knew how. But something was wrong, something wasn’t working and I lost it all. I found myself living in my four-door Honda with my kid and my cat and my dog and nowhere to go. When a person finds themselves with life stacked against them, it feels like there’s no way out.”

Enter Partners for Change, a Livermore-based nonprofit dedicated to offering a hand up, not a hand out.

“When I first started, I didn’t see a way out. I was like, ‘How is coming to the sessions and talking about poverty going to help me get out of my situation?’ I’m hungry and I have no roof over my head,” Gilbert says. “What I can tell you today is that it all started with that gift of desperation. I was willing to go to any length to get out of that situation. I just needed somebody to point me in the right direction.”

Since its 2015 launch, Partners for Change has been not only pointing people in the right direction, but walking alongside participants as they learn to become self-reliant.

Executive Director Shana Peete says, “We feel a heart connection that is strong enough to take on one of the most daunting challenges that our community and our country faces – and that is poverty. Partners for Change comes together to empower people with life skills like communication, budgeting and goal setting. We surround people working to lift themselves out of poverty with the support of volunteers from the community.”

The “partners” in the program are the mentors, called Allies, and the mentees, called Change Leaders. Each session of the program consists of two phases: during the first four-month phase, Change Leaders learn new life skills, ranging from how to recover from trauma to how to dress for a job interview; during the second phase, Change Leaders work with their Allies to put this knowledge into practice, set life goals, and work toward attaining their goals.

“This is an 18 to 24-month process with a loose completion date that fits the needs of each participant,” Peete says. “As such, it’s tricky to say when a session is ‘complete.’ The process is not short, and it’s only sometimes sweet – it’s often filled with challenges as well as successes. It’s not a linear process, and we have to be ready to experience the ups and the downs together.”

Partners for Changes hosts a dinner and graduation for the Change Leaders. The most-recent graduation, for Session 4 participants, took place on October 23 at Livermore High School.

“We’re here to celebrate second chances, redemption, hard work and the spirit of commitment,” said keynote speaker Livermore Mayor John Marchand. “It takes a lot of people to make a self-made man or woman. Success is about partnerships, relationships and working together. The Partners for Change program demonstrates that you are not alone and that community is here to help you succeed. Luck equals skills plus opportunity; if you have the right skills, when an opportunity presents itself you can create your own luck. What Partners for Change is doing is teaching the skills you need so that when an opportunity presents itself, you will succeed and you will create your own luck. We have faith in you and we wish you success.”
While stereotypes of those facing poverty or homelessness are not uncommon, Peete understands the depth and complexities of the issues, circumstances and individuals involved.

“If I get knocked down again or if I’m not able to thrive in that same way, I have a clear working model for recovery.”

“There are people who fly under the radar needing our help. Poverty doesn’t always present in ways you can readily see. It’s important that we are open to learning specifically what it looks like in our community and finding real ways to root it out while empowering the people it affects directly,” she says. “Poverty is an issue that affects us all, directly or indirectly. We define poverty as not having ‘enough.’ Our starting point in this conversation about poverty is financial, but we believe it extends beyond finances to include relationships, mental health, physical health, etc. When we look at poverty this way, we are able to see that we all experience poverty in one way or another in our lives, and it is an ‘us’ issue, not a ‘them’ issue.”

When Jill Miller recently found herself struggling with three significant life challenges – a mental health issue, underemployment, and what amounted to a divorce – she decided to check out Partners for Change.

“I was in survival mode, not knowing how to start over again,” Miller says. “My biggest question was whether I could rebuild my life here in Livermore, or needed to relocate and go somewhere else. It’s daunting when you’re that low.”

She decided to go all in and, after completing the first phase, spoke at the October graduation.

“The main reason I thought I could do this program is because the Change Leaders drive the change. They set the goals, and the Allies come alongside to support the change,” she says. “The greatest change so far is that I’ve learned that I have something to contribute. I’m not just a statistic or a problem to be solved. I can rebuild my life right here in Livermore, and don’t have to move away from family and friends. And if I get knocked down again or if I’m not able to thrive in that same way, I have a clear working model for recovery.”

Partners for Change works with a host of volunteers and community organizations including Open Heart Kitchen, local schools districts, Las Positas College, the Livermore Homeless Refuge, and Arukah House.

Dougherty Valley High School sopho-
more Aditya Melkote was recognized at the graduation for collecting, repurposing and donating used electronic devices and school supplies to Partners for Change. “This wonderful young man had heard about Partners for Change and wanted to find a way to connect with and serve children in our community who can benefit from a little technical support,” Peete says. “He launched a drive to help make sure that children in our community and program would have access to devices to make learning easier and, even, dare I say, enjoyable.”

Partners for Change welcomes volunteers for everything from transportation and childcare to serving as Allies, and appreciates donations of any amount.

“As the African proverb says, ‘If you want to go faster, you go alone; but if you want to go farther, you go together,” Peete says. “I hope our participants take away that they are an important part of a loving community that is dedicated to using its energy to make our members’ efforts improve their lives to go beyond what any one of us would be capable of alone.”

For many, including Miller and Gilbert, that hope has led to a new reality.

“Two years ago, I was desperate, tired and weary. I didn’t know how to seek my way out, and I got stuck,” says Gilbert. “Fast-forward, I was able to make decisions based on the information I learned about myself and about the direction I wanted to go. My son has graduated from high school and I’ve received a promotion at work. Today, I am hopeful, full of life and expectant.”

To learn more, visit www.pfctv.org, email director@pfctv.org, or call (925) 583-1635.

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CUDA RIDGE

Larry Dino lost his childhood and best friend, Bill Maciel, to brain cancer, just as harvest started. It was a huge loss, as Bill had been part of the Cuda Ridge story from the beginning. Says Dino, “Bill and I have grown up together and we have been best of friends throughout our childhood and adult lives. Bill has been battling brain cancer for 16 months and lost the fight on 10/10/18 at 10:10 AM. Bill played an important role in my amateur winemaking days and in the early days of Cuda Ridge Wines. Bill and I did home winemaking in 2005 and 2006 where we made Barbera, Syrah, and Cabernet Sauvignon in my garage in Livermore. We threw harvest parties and shared the fruits of our labors with family and friends. When we started Cuda Ridge Wines in 2007, Bill helped with harvest and winemaking activities at our small commercial winery at the time. Bill, and our friend Mike, made a Sangiovese and Zinfandel at the winery. We released a 2007 “Renegade” Zinfandel which was Bill’s wine! Bill and Mike also made a unique Sangiovese and Malbec blend which we ended up naming S&M (Sangiovese and Malbec). To this day, Cuda Ridge Wines still produces the S&M which is released each Valentines Day. If you look at the back labels of our S&M and Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon, these are the whimsical write-ups of Bill Maciel. To my good friend, this toast is for you! RIP.” We heartily join the toast.

OCCASIO

We’ll end with the ever-philosophical John Kinney of Occasio: “As for defining moments—that is a tough one. Too many passings this year.”

This year, though, has seen the gradual completion of plans to integrate Sidewinder into the Occasio brand. Kinney shares, “We have received label approval for the Grappa and the Eau de Vie, and the bottles have been delivered. However, harvest got in the way of bottling. We also received formula approval for our first gin, but have to wait until the season is over before we can turn attention to it. In the meantime, we have a barrel of bourbon and a barrel of rye aging in the cellar. And, we are filling our first few barrels of brandy. Long wait time for this. Next year will see the bottling of our first Tawny Port—ten years (has it been that long?)!” Yes, it has.

Kinney feels the addition of the Posada food truck, which has to be a defining moment for Eduardo and his entire team, will greatly benefit the neighborhood. The Posada food truck will be stationed at Sidewinder, and will provide much-needed food for the many wineries, breweries and distilleries in the area. Says Kinney, “We plan on trying a few new things with food, cocktail, and wine pairings. We also have developed local sources for grains and malting, and intend Sidewinder to be ‘local’, i.e., California regional, much like Occasio remains hyper local.”

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Kinney, ever the historian, reminds us that the valley remains underplanted. “I would like to see 10,000 acres eventually—the water and land can support this. What worries me, however, is that acreage is actually down somewhat over the past decade.

So, no defining moment. Just evolution.”

With that, may all your evolutions be memorable, and may you celebrate your important moments knowing you are part of a big, beautiful and caring community.