



Lori and Jessica Markowitz: Two Generations, One Mission: To Educate and Empower Youth

This is the first of a two-part series on two outstanding women, Lori and Jessica Markowitz. This post will focus on Jessica, one of the speakers at the Women in Innovation Summit on September 22, 2012.

Spanning two different generations and working across two countries, the mother-daughter team of Lori and Jessica Markowitz share several inspiring qualities: Enormous heart, uncommon dedication, and the will to make a difference in the lives of youth. Jessica, now 17, has been doing so since she was 11.

Jessica Markowitz: An Early Start at Making a Difference

When Jessica was 11, Richard Kananga, a representative from the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission in Rwanda, stayed with her family. While staying at the Markowitz home, he told them many stories about the atrocities and mass genocide that occurred in Rwanda in 1994. The slaughter resulted in traumatized children, many of whom were orphaned and unable to continue their schooling. On hearing Richard's stories, Jessica did what perhaps few 11-year-olds would do: She asked him, "How can I help?" She was particularly interested in helping girls. "Boys in Rwanda are often chosen to go to school over girls," Jessica explained.

After Richard identified 22 girls who needed financial support and materials to continue schooling, Jessica set to work. She organized several classmates at her school, Seattle Girls School, and set up a charity organization called **Richard's Rwanda IMPUHWE** ("impuhwe" means "compassion" in Kinyarwanda, the official language of Rwanda). For every \$40 that the organization raises, they could send a Rwandan girl to primary school for a year. For every \$250 that the organization raises, they can send a Rwandan girl to secondary school for a year.

Today, Richard's Rwanda has raised \$150,000 and has 12 student chapters in middle schools and high schools across the country. The organization now supports 41 low-income girls in the rural Nyamata area from the ages of 12 to 17, so that they can complete their primary education and six years of secondary school. Fundraising for the organization, which involves a variety of approaches from modest (bake sales) to more major (grant writing and an annual brunch that raises \$30,000), has not been without its challenges. "One obstacle is that people didn't understand why kids would want to do this," Jessica explains. "But as people started to see our impact and we were covered in the media, it has been getting easier to raise money."

Richard's Rwanda IMPUHWE: Successes and Challenges

In addition to fundraising, every summer for the past six years, Jessica, Lori, and a select group of high school students who participate in a Richard's Rwanda chapter travel to Rwanda. To participate in the trip, students must complete an application and once chosen, raise \$3300 to pay for expenses. This year, 28 students visited Nyamata, including Jessica. While in Rwanda, they engage in home visits to meet the girls whom the organization supports, tutor the girls in English, participate in educational and cultural activities, and write blog posts about their experiences.

In addition to providing financial support for the girls in Nyamata to help continue their education, Richard's Rwanda partners with several organizations in the United States and Rwanda, including the Forum of Women Educationalist Girls School (FAWE), an all-girls boarding school in Kigali, Rwanda. "The FAWE partnership is one of the things that keep us alive. They mentor the girls and give them supplies," says Jessica. Because FAWE is located 20 minutes from the Nyamata area, FAWE students can visit the Nyamata students on a monthly basis to provide face-to-face support. In photos posted to the Richard's Rwanda website, the benefits of the support that the organization provides are evident in the radiant smiles of the Rwandan and U.S. students and adults. "The girls have grown out of their shells and become more empowered," says Jessica. Lori adds, "There have been changes in the village where they live and a huge trust factor that we've gained. We're not a one-time show. Last year the headmaster said to us, 'We trust you now. You have been here for five years.'"

As with any group of individuals who are overcoming challenges, there are individual success stories and struggles. Among the successes is Grace, a genocide survivor who was living in the forest and being raised by her aunt on a dollar a day. She was 12 when Richard's Rwanda began supporting her education. She is now 18 and doing so well academically that she is attending boarding school. Jessica and Lori are hopeful that she'll go on to attend college. And on two different years, Rwandan girls who have excelled academically have traveled to the United States and spoken at the Richard's Rwanda annual brunch. At the same time, some of the girls that Richard's Rwanda began supporting in its first years as an organization are struggling, bringing home the realization that not everyone can excel academically.

A Fine Balancing Act: Being a Teen and Leading a Charitable Organization

Back in the United States, Jessica's life in many ways is that of a typical teenager. She enjoys texting with friends and juggles cheerleading and homework. But the work of Richard's Rwanda is ever-present and she spends time virtually every day on her organization. There are speaking engagements to fill, thank-you notes to write, and a multitude of other tasks required to keep her organization alive and growing. As with other non-profit organizations, funding and sustainability are ongoing requirements.

As her mother, Lori says, "I'm very proud of her and very nervous ... She's a normal kid but there's a lot of pressure having your own organization. It's not just money. You can't just walk away. It's a relationship."

What has Jessica learned and what advice do she and Lori have for others, particularly women, who want to make a difference? "You have to be passionate about something and you have to be tenacious. She [Jessica] has learned that being committed allows you to make an impact."

Jessica adds, "You don't have to start a non-profit to make a difference. It takes a small act."

Richard's Rwanda IMPUHWE founder Jessica Markowitz is a featured speaker at the Women in Innovation Summit (WINS) 2012 on September 22, 2012, at the Intiman Theater in Seattle. To learn more about Richard's Rwanda, visit <http://www.richardsrwanda.org/>.