Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

Recording Date: July 31, 2018
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

Jessica Markowitz

SUMMARY

Jessica was just 11 years old when, in 2006, she founded Richard's Rwanda, inspired by Richard Kananga, a representative from the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission in Rwanda who stayed with Jessica's family in Seattle in 2006. In addition to the history of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Richard told sixth-grader Jessica about the difficulties Rwandan girls her age had staying in school, and Jessica was moved to create a non-profit that has gone on to fund scholarships for more than 85 girls in the East African country. As of 2017, the organization has started focusing on a metalsmithing vocational program to help young women find sustainable employment. Now an NYU 2018 graduate, Jessica is spending the next year as a JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corps fellow in Budapest, Hungary, where she'll be working with the local Jewish community acting as an advisor to the BBYO Hungary chapter and working in the local JCC.

Jeff Schwager: Do you want to turn this stuff around or go without it then? I like the other smell, I like that. Yeah, but it's good. Item. Works well, I think. How long are those?

Lisa Kranseler: Probably about 30 minutes. Jeff, would you say 30 minutes?

Jeff Schwager: 30 to 45? Yeah. Okay. Sure. Okay, I'll get these here for now. Can we put this on this side? No, no. You also don't have to. It looks good in frame. Also, if you want, you can take out the other ones or not. It's a shame we don't get distracted by this. Um, it actually looks really good in frame. Okay, we'll leave it there. That's true. We will leave it there then. Uh, apparently, we want you to sign a release form. Sure do. We don't need two, do we? No, no, I just had several copies. There you go. Sure.

Lisa Kranseler: Well, I'll probably have your number.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. And this is if I set this here. Is it in frame? Yes, it is, but not in a really obvious frame. Doesn't matter. But I like to pretend that I don't need the water bottle. Just frame this one.

Lisa Kranseler: 9109665.

Jeff Schwager: Tell you what I'll do. I'll move this just a little bit.

Lisa Kranseler: Right.

Jeff Schwager: Center, you're just a little bit better. You might need a water bottle during the interview, though. We don't want, like, a Marco Rubio moment. Yeah, well, I'll be okay. I think we're good. Um, we're low on batteries on this, I think. Really? I think that's what it was indicating. I just charged it. Well, maybe I'm wrong. Isn't that? That's low battery crap. Oh, this is embarrassing.

Jessica Markowitz: So you've been interviewing everyone?

Jeff Schwager: I have, you're the last one I heard.

Jessica Markowitz: Sorry.

Jeff Schwager: No. That's okay. Somebody had to be the last one. Well, the hard one was the first one. The first one was because I wasn't prepared. Okay. It was Carrie Brownstein, who's the star? Portlandia. And she's in the band Sleater-Kinney.

Jessica Markowitz: Oh, I love that band. Okay.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, so we had to.

Jessica Markowitz: Watch that show, but that's cool.

Jeff Schwager: We had to arrange it through her agent. And so, like, the day before, they said, Oh, can you do a phone interview tomorrow?

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. Oh, boy. Celebrity style.

Lisa Kranseler: All right. I'm gonna need me in here. Okay.

Jeff Schwager: Sounds good. Um, yeah.

Lisa Kranseler: Just turn the volume.

Jeff Schwager: As soon as he tells us we're ready to go, we'll be ready to go.

Jessica Markowitz: No worries.

Jeff Schwager: Where did you go? To college.

Jessica Markowitz: NYU.

Jeff Schwager: NYU. Yeah. My parents both went to NYU. Yeah, that's where they met.

Jessica Markowitz: That's so.

Jeff Schwager: Cool. Yeah, Oh, it's just back there. It's cool.

Jessica Markowitz: What were they studying?

Jeff Schwager: Chemistry. Chemistry geeks.

Jessica Markowitz: It's not me. Not the geek part. The chemistry part.

Lisa Kranseler: Just one reminder. But if you could. In the beginning.

Jeff Schwager: Sure. Yes.

Lisa Kranseler: Okay, great. She'll tell you. Okay. Okay.

Jeff Schwager: I got it. We're gonna use that in the video.

Lisa Kranseler: Okay.

Jeff Schwager: We're gonna have you say item 23. No, I'm Jessica Markowitz, founder of Richard's Rwanda. Okay. And I am an Agent of Change. Ah.

Jessica Markowitz: Got it.

Jeff Schwager: Sue Bird said it. So you know you'll be in good company. New Subaru.

Jessica Markowitz: Is who?

Jeff Schwager: Sue Bird.

Jessica Markowitz: Sue Bird. Yes.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. I don't know who. Like some people know.

Jessica Markowitz: Some people know I do. Okay, I can say that.

Jeff Schwager: So can you move this?

Jessica Markowitz: Oh, I need to put this on.

Jeff Schwager: Uh, no, I'll just leave it there. You don't.

Jessica Markowitz: Oh, cool. Okay.

Jeff Schwager: How is this going to be blocking the microphone? Should we keep it away from the microphone? No, it should be just fine. Okay, so I'm thinking we can do. Thank you. You can just start that if you don't have to worry about it. So it's charging. Just set it wherever it is running? It is now running. Okay, so put it wherever you think best.

Jessica Markowitz: That's audio.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, it's just audio backup in case something goes wrong. Smart. Tell me when.

Jessica Markowitz: You don't want that in the footage.

Jeff Schwager: Later, we'll get footage of you riding a scooter.

Jessica Markowitz: Around.

Jeff Schwager: The office. Is that not the coolest thing?

Jessica Markowitz: It is cool. It's electric. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. You could use one of those in Budapest.

Jessica Markowitz: I bet they use them all over Israel.

Jeff Schwager: Is that right?

Jessica Markowitz: And the bikes? The electric bikes. But that to me seems silly, because then why do you have a bike?

Jeff Schwager: I have a neighbor who has really helped with the hills.

Jessica Markowitz: True.

Jeff Schwager: I have a neighbor.

Jessica Markowitz: Whose whole point is the exercise for me, at least. If I'm going to get on the bike.

Jeff Schwager: You gotta my neighbor's bike. The electric motor is just powered by you pedaling. Yeah. So it's not like you can just stop.

Jessica Markowitz: Okay. So it's interesting.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. There are so many different.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. It's crazy. Mhm.

Jeff Schwager: Are we are we rolling? Um, we are, but we're waiting an extra minute.

Lisa Kranseler: Sorry, I stuck.

Jessica Markowitz: Something in the microwave.

Lisa Kranseler: So you could chat for as long.

Jessica Markowitz: As you want.

Lisa Kranseler: No beep beep beep.

Jeff Schwager: Okay.

Jessica Markowitz: There is somebody.

Jeff Schwager: On.

Jessica Markowitz: The.

Jeff Schwager: Other side of that white wall. It doesn't.

Shmuel: It's diffuse enough. It doesn't affect the lighting. Okay. For filming purposes.

Jeff Schwager: So, how long are you back in town?

Jessica Markowitz: About three weeks. Oh, yeah. Very nice.

Jeff Schwager: And I'm off to Budapest.

Jessica Markowitz: Yes. Stopping in New York for orientation. And then.

Jeff Schwager: How's the weather in Budapest?

Jessica Markowitz: I have no idea. I would assume.

Jeff Schwager: The first thing I would look for.

Jessica Markowitz: I mean, I know it's cold. Yeah, I lived in Berlin, and I know that it's going to be, like, similar in the winter. Um, but it should be nice until the end of September. I think we'll see. But I'm not going for the weather.

Jeff Schwager: Yes, it's cold.

Jessica Markowitz: But that's okay. It's supposed to be a very cool city. So.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Jessica Markowitz: So we'll see.

Jeff Schwager: Do you speak? No.

Jessica Markowitz: Um, it's not a requirement.

Jeff Schwager: They all speak English.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. Um, certainly all the staff. And then some of the teens may have some better English than others, but they still speak English. Or at least some. But, I think if they made it a requirement to know Hungarian, they would not get very many fellows. Right. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: So a lot of Hungarian studies programs are going on.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: On an individual.

Shmuel: Hebrew. Uh, Intro Hebrew, and he had done Russian studies, including Hungarian, and some of the stuff he told me about Hungarian just makes your head.

Jessica Markowitz: I know.

Shmuel: It's.

Jessica Markowitz: Very hard. It's one of the hardest, apparently. So I'm not diving into that. I'm still trying to get fluent in my Hebrew, so I gotta start there.

Jeff Schwager: What did you major in?

Jessica Markowitz: I majored in politics and mostly like US law. Um, and I was focusing specifically on social justice, politics, and how the law and the constitution have affected minorities in history. And now.

Jeff Schwager: Um.

Jessica Markowitz: So it's toying with the idea of law school, but we'll see. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: I have a cousin who went to NYU.

Jessica Markowitz: Really great school. Yeah. Very hard, I think.

Jeff Schwager: Cool was that. Are we rolling?

Shmuel: I think you can now start.

Jeff Schwager: So let's start with you saying.

Jessica Markowitz: Oh yes. Okay, so my name founded and I'm an Agent of Change. Is that right?

Jeff Schwager: Correct.

Jessica Markowitz: And look at you know, oh, you want to do it.

Jeff Schwager: Or is she looking at me or the camera?

Shmuel: Um, for this, ideally, the camera for this.

Jeff Schwager: For the rest of it, you can look. Okay. Yeah.

Shmuel: And then pretend the camera isn't there.

Jessica Markowitz: Right. And then I'm talking. Yeah. Of course. Okay. Okay. My name is Jessica Markowitz. I'm the founder of Richard's Rwanda. And I am an Agent of Change. Great. Cool.

Jeff Schwager: So tell me about Richard's Rwanda. What is it?

Jessica Markowitz: Yes. Richards Rwanda is a nonprofit that was founded in 2007 to help give girls educational opportunities in a rural village in Rwanda called Nyamata.

Jeff Schwager: Aha. And you founded it in 2007, which means you were three years old?

Jessica Markowitz: No.

Jeff Schwager: Not quite. My math is bad.

Jessica Markowitz: Um, yeah. So Richard's Rwanda was founded, actually, in 2006. Um, when a man who was from Rwanda was going around the United States working for the Unity and Reconciliation Commission, and he was a Rwandan who went back to his country after surviving by living in Uganda. And he came back and worked for the government to help go into schools and rebuild reconciliation and bring the country back to a better place by working with the youth. And so Richard actually came and stayed in my home here in Seattle while I was attending Seattle Girls' School, and I was just starting sixth grade. I was very excited about my education and all of these cool opportunities I was getting as a young girl. And Richard, when he stayed with my family, told us that the most vulnerable population was the young women and girls. And the biggest issue post genocide was education. And the fact that many girls could no longer afford to go to school and could no longer be a priority because they had to survive and take care of their families, and many became heads of their households. And so hearing this at that age of 11 and having been raised in Tikkun Olam and knowing about the Holocaust, I went back to my school and I started Richard's Rwanda. And that's where the name came from, from Richard, this Rwandan activist. And so it kind of all began there, and we started raising small funds for girls to go to school. And Richard connected us to about 20 girls in this rural village. And it just continued to grow from

there. And that summer, my mom and I went and we just took a trip to this country, and we met the girls. And that's where it all began, and it continued to go back and raise more money and send more girls to school. And we started to bring more and more people over from the United States to help teach English and learn about genocide and the importance of education. And now, 12 years later, we've sent about 90 girls to go to school, and we've brought over probably around 100, both adults and young students, over to Rwanda. And that's what Richard's Rwanda is.

Jeff Schwager: So you were how old when you started?

Jessica Markowitz: So I was 11 when Richard came to stay with my family, and I'm now 23. Just turned.

Jeff Schwager: Wow. So most 11-year-olds are not out starting nonprofits. What inspired you to want to take that on at the age of 11?

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah, I will say it wasn't a nonprofit until eighth grade, so I was 13. Um, and it kind of was intertwined then with my Bat Mitzvah project, and that's when it really became a nonprofit. And we applied for official 500 and 1C3 status. Um, but I'm definitely not like other 11-year-olds, not just for this, but, you know, I've always had a bit of spunk. And I think that came from the family that I'm from and that I was raised in. My father is South African, and my mom was traveling the world from a young age. And so both of them have really shown me what's possible in life and the importance of being globally aware, as well as, I think, my Jewish education. Um, just the small things of Hebrew School and also having a great uncle who survived the Holocaust, these were all very important lessons for me that showed me there is so much to be done, and it doesn't really matter how old you are, because I had a community and a family that would support me, which is exactly what happened. And so my middle school got involved, my friends and family, and it became a whole community movement that made it be able to last until today.

Jeff Schwager: Um, and so it's an ongoing charity now.

Jessica Markowitz: Yes. So Richard's Rwanda is still a 501 C3 sponsoring several girls to have scholarships to go to school. But we're in a bit of a transition mode where we are in the midst of launching a social enterprise. And so as the organization grows, and I've grown, and my co-founders and friends have grown. We've realized that we want to shift into a space of more sustainable business. And so we've come up with an idea of metalsmith jewelry, which is breaking a gender barrier. It's not very popular in Rwanda or in East African jewelry. And so by bringing in a new form of jewelry and style into the East African market, we thought it could be a really great opportunity for sustainable employment opportunities for women. So shifting the focus from education into employment so that it's a well-rounded, sustainable kind of cycle for women who are living in poverty.

Jeff Schwager: And is that going on now, or is that?

Jessica Markowitz: So I was just in Rwanda about a week ago, and I was spending time there with two of my colleagues and my mother to help build the social enterprise. So we're still in the transition mode, and we're still finalizing our concept and our business model, but we hope to launch in the winter, and hopefully have our first product so we can start selling and create this business.

Jeff Schwager: And where will you sell?

Jessica Markowitz: So I think we're going to start with targeting the United States market, because we have such a strong network and community of people who know about us here. And eventually the goal is to have, you know, shops in Rwanda and for it to be made by Rwandans, for Rwandans. And there's a large market there as well. But we just wanted to start within the United States for now. Exports are very popular right now to be done. You know, the government is supporting exports. And so we're hoping that that's kind of the best way to start. But we'll go from there.

Jeff Schwager: And what does it cost to send a girl to school in Rwanda?

Jessica Markowitz: It costs $40 for a young girl in primary school, which means elementary school, to go to school for an entire year. And that includes her uniform, her lunch, and her shoes. Um, a small fee for bathroom use $40. And so the reason why this all began and was so popular at my middle school was because, you know, we were coming from very privileged backgrounds, and $40 may have been the cost of our shoes. And to know that somebody was being disadvantaged by their opportunity to go to school because of $40 was something we felt like we could really make an impact with. And so $40 was for a girl to go to primary school, and for a girl to go to a great private boarding school. It was around $250, which was still something that we really could raise the funds for. And knowing that it could go so far for one young woman was really a big deal for us.

Jeff Schwager: That's amazing.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Well, congratulations on all you've done with that. It's remarkable. Thank you. Tell me about your first trip to Rwanda and what it was like for you to see that culture. What did you notice at the time, and what struck you, and how has that evolved over time?

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. So my first time going to Rwanda, I was 12. I just turned 12, and it was 2007. And the genocide had, you know, only ended a few years ago. It was in 1994. And so you could still kind of feel a remnant of war and tension, but you could also see that there was a lot of rebuilding going on. Um, but at that young age, I did notice, you know, I visited many memorials and the school where we were kind of based out of in this rural village, there was a church where, you know, 10,000 people alone were killed inside that church. And to be there at this age and see the proximity of this school to this church and the damage and trauma that was affecting not only the whole country, but each individual person was very visible and was traumatizing, you know, to see, but really important because that's why you could understand why I could understand how education could be transformative for each young woman after going through an experience like that, being orphaned by it, being just a baby when the genocide was going on, education was a way out and was a way to grow and to create their own sustainable families and lives. And so my first trip, I got to meet like 12 young women that we were sponsoring, and many of them were very shy and kind of kept their heads down. And I'll never forget that, because over time, slowly and slowly, they would look me in the eyes, and they built confidence after knowing that they were being invested in and that, you know, they were powerful women who just needed that chance to go to school. And I was actually very, very sick on my first trip, and I could barely stand up, which is why many of the photos I'm sitting down in a chair, because I was very sick. Um, but it just showed, you know, how important it was for me to be there, and I don't get sick anymore now, but after my first time, I kind of, I really felt like I was learning about this community and why it was so important.

Jeff Schwager: And how has Rwanda changed in the years you've been going there? How many times have you been?

Jessica Markowitz: 12 times been yeah.

Jeff Schwager: So once a year.

Jessica Markowitz: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. And have you seen an evolution in the country?

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. So Rwanda has changed immensely since I've been there. Um, it is one of the top economies in all of Africa, has the highest percentage of women in the parliament. It's growing exponentially. They're doing business all over the world with different people. And the construction is insane. There are so many new buildings and projects, and opportunities for young Rwandans. So the country has definitely changed. And it's kind of where our idea for a business came from, because we no longer want to be a charity model. We want to be something that's really sustainable and doesn't need our help. The entire point is that it's owned by Rwandans. And so that's kind of where our evolution came in as well, with the country and with these changes within, you know, the government and the young people, we decided that we should also become something different as the country grows and we grow.

Jeff Schwager: So is your goal ultimately to hand it off entirely to Rwandans?

Jessica Markowitz: Absolutely. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Won't be involved.

Jessica Markowitz: I mean, I think our goal and my friends and I, who are kind of helping to run this transition right now, we want to stay involved for as long as we can in international development and in creating impact. However, if we are involved in this project specifically until the end, you know, have we really accomplished our goal? Because I think our goal isn't to implement our ideas and be in charge of this entire thing. It's just to be a helping hand to help provide that opportunity, and then for it to become sustainable without us. It's about young women who don't have the chance. And so once the chance is given, we no longer, you know, need to be there because we've accomplished our goal.

Jeff Schwager: So the new setup would be that the women would create the jewelry, sell the jewelry, and that the proceeds from that would then fund education.

Jessica Markowitz: So, it's kind of a two-tier program. One would be vocational training. And so vocational training is very big right now in Rwanda and actually all over East Africa. Um, because just like in the United States, you graduate from school, not everybody's going to college, and not everybody can find a job. And so vocational training is kind of this bridge between school and employment. And so we want to have a vocational training program that offers a new program that we saw is not available, which is metalsmithing doesn't have to be jewelry, but just to start with working with metalsmiths. And specifically, there are no women in the trade. And so bringing women into that, giving them potential to not necessarily, again, do jewelry, but just to be in that industry, whether it be, you know, building pots or pans or steel for doors or whatever it may be. And then there may be some that would then be interested in jewelry, which is how we would hire our women. So it would start with vocational training. And that's the impact piece. And then the second piece would be the business, which we would reinvest and would be revenue that could then go back into the business. And then those women are making an income higher than a dollar a day, something much more sustainable. And then inevitably that would go towards, you know, their children's education, etc.. But the main goal is to have vocational training which provides employment. And then this business piece, by having a market both here in the United States and in Rwanda, would be able to help create revenue that we could reinvest into the vocational training program.

Lisa Kranseler: Mhm.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Um, and so aside from going into metal smithing, what do the girls who are like that, that you're helping? What sorts of things do they end up doing after they get through with school?

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. So many, many of our girls ended up going to university in Kigali. One of our young women, named Grace, got a scholarship to go to Earth University in Costa Rica, which focuses on agriculture. So there are opportunities out there, but it's very difficult and it's very competitive. And so, you know, other young women find jobs, whether it be in the village or maybe they find a job in Kigali, could be working for a shop, or maybe, you know, like basket weaving, collectives are very popular. But again, the income is not so high. And the goal is to create sustainable employment. And so there are those jobs out there in Rwanda, of course. But is it getting to the women in these rural villages? Not necessarily. And so that's kind of where this business idea comes into play.

Lisa Kranseler: Mhm.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Can you tell me just one success story, one kid who you've worked with? Yeah.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. So, um, the young woman, Grace, I was speaking of, she was actually born April 5th, which is two days before the genocide began in 1994. And she lost both of her parents. Um, was an orphan by the, you know, by the genocide. And her aunt raised her, and she worked very hard in school. But then, you know, she didn't have the funds. And so that's how she became one of our young girls that we supported. And so Grace excelled in school. She worked very hard. She became the head of her class, where she was then able to go to a better school for high school, and still in the village. Um, but this was a private school and provided her with incredible opportunities. And Grace continued to excel. And that's where she got the scholarship to go to Costa Rica for university, which is a huge deal for a young girl who was orphaned by the genocide and grew up in this rural village. And Grace actually came to the United States when we were in high school. And she came and spoke at all of our schools because Richard's Rwanda created several chapters all over the city of Seattle. And that was kind of one of our big goals was to raise awareness and go speak and not just raise money, but also educate our own youth and our own peers. And so Grace came and she stayed with my family, and she went and spoke all around the city. Um, she stayed with many young people who were involved in the organization, and she was just an incredible example of how education transforms a life. She was my age when we started, and now she's this incredibly accomplished young woman who is studying in Costa Rica. So that's one life. But that's one big change, then. To me, that's all that really matters in the end.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. And Richard, is he still around?

Jessica Markowitz: Yes. So I actually I see Richard every time I go. And I was just with him and his two daughters, and I am honored and lucky enough to have one of the daughters named after me. Um, and I was just with baby Jessica. And the other girl is Tracy. And I still visit with Richard, and he's an activist himself. And he's amazing. And he's a part of my family, so I see him every time that I go.

Jeff Schwager: That's great.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um. I'm curious how the poverty that you've seen in Rwanda affects your view of what's going on in the US. Um, and, uh. Yeah. Take that.

Lisa Kranseler: Sure.

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah. So I think one of the most important things I learned growing up is that there's change to be made around the world and in your own backyard, and I grew up watching my own mother create change in our own local community. And she has her own nonprofit that is getting young people to understand compassion and the importance of change, one block away from where you live. Right. So we were helping to clean up homes nearby. We were going and working with students who were truant, and we were, you know, peers and the same age as them. But we were seeing that we're all people and that, you know, they grew up in the same community as me. But less opportunity don't mean they aren't deserving of it. So my point is, I grew up seeing poverty for sure in my own community. I went to Garfield High School, and there was very clear segregation, and it was clear which students were well off and which weren't, and who had more resources. And there was change going on within my own school. You know, student to student. And Seattle has its own issues. The United States has its own issues. Um, and so I think for me, growing up and seeing this extreme poverty in another part of the world just reinforced my awareness of poverty everywhere. So although I was leaving my home and seeing it in a completely different continent, it didn't take away from the fact that I was still learning and constantly seeing it in my own community. And actually, when I went to university in New York City, I continued to pursue this within my academics, and I started working in criminal justice and mass incarceration, which inevitably is linked to poverty and inequality in the United States. And I actually got to go and work in Rikers Island Prison and really learn about what's going on with our criminal system. And this was only reinforced by the things I was growing up with. And that's why I became interested in school, because it was linked to what I was learning about as a young girl.

Jeff Schwager: How have Jewish values impacted what you've done with Richard's, Rwanda and your worldview?

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah, so my Jewish values are a huge part of who I am. You ask any of my friends, and the first thing they'll say is that I love to talk about my Judaism, and it's not a religious way for me. It never has been. But for me, my Judaism is the biggest part of my identity. It's how I feel the most confident about this incredible community of people and heritage. I just last year had a reunion of 97 people from the Island of Rhodes, from my family. My great-grandmother was from Rhodes. And being there with all of these people, some of them I had never even met, and learning about where we came from, it's just absolutely incredible. And it shows perseverance, and it shows tradition and culture. And I spent a year living in Israel, and all of these experiences are because I was raised in a Jewish family in Seattle, where we have such a huge Sephardic community. Um, you know, even just having a Bat Mitzvah is a time where you're becoming a young woman or a young man, and you have a responsibility now to understand what is expected of you. And for me, that was really helping to change the world, you know, as small as it may be. Um, and like I said, I have family who survived the Holocaust, and knowing that there were people who went through these atrocities, it's up to the younger generation to keep our family going and our people going. And without my Jewish values, there is no question I wouldn't have started with Rwanda or would even be, you know, as interested in Tikkun Olam as I am. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um. So is that what being Jewish means to you?

Jessica Markowitz: Um, I think answering the question, What does being Jewish mean is tricky. Uh, because I don't know that I have one answer, but I know that I constantly pursue or think about my Judaism every day. And part of the reason why I wanted to go live in Israel was because I wanted to find out what Judaism meant to me personally. You know, I was raised a certain way, but I wanted to go visit my family there. I wanted to go learn about the history there and actually be there and speak the language. Um, and I think for me, being Jewish means, like I said, it's being a part of something bigger than yourself. And people interpret that in different ways. Uh, for me, that really means trying to leave a mark on the world. Not for myself, but for the better of humanity. And there are so many incredible young Jewish leaders who have already done so, and I just would hope to follow in their footsteps. Um, and, you know, next year I'm going and doing a fellowship in Budapest because of my Judaism. And it's to help serve the Jewish community. And it's just these small steps to try and be a part of the diaspora and the, you know, this big world of Judaism that is everywhere.

Jeff Schwager: Um, yeah. Um, what was it like for you? What did you learn there?

Jessica Markowitz: Um, so when I was in Israel, I was 18. It was the first time I left home, you know, for more than a month of time. And it was a gap year program that encouraged you to do some volunteering and then some classes. And so I volunteered at a youth village that was created for refugees coming from the Holocaust. And it's this incredible model that is now used for vulnerable children and youth and immigrants all over Israel, and they come from Ethiopia, France, Russia, and Brazil. And I got to spend time there and speak English. And the reason why I bring this up for my experience with Israel is because it's so much more than you know, the state of the Jewish people. It's this unbelievably small piece of land that has been transformed into so

many different, incredible innovations, whether it be in tech or agriculture, or education. This youth village had so many different cultures, and we all had one commonality, which was our Judaism. But there was such a passion to create community amidst all this diversity and that was my first three months living in Israel, working at this youth village, and seeing all the different kinds of people that also share a Judaism that's different than mine. Um, but is still Judaism. And then the rest of my time in Israel, I was learning and exploring and hiking and taking trips and having fun and seeing that there are obviously a lot of politics and things going on and dangerous occurrences all the time. But there are also people who live there, and they thrive, and that's their life. Um, and personally, I was just inspired. I left feeling so inspired and honored to know that I always have a place there and that there are people working hard and fighting and doing the best they can with the situation they're in.

Jeff Schwager: Um, what did the politics of the situation there affect you while you were there?

Jessica Markowitz: Yeah, I mean, I think the politics of Israel are, for better or for worse, always going to affect me. And, going back to my childhood, growing up, my mother was involved in, uh, she started a camp called the Middle East Peace Camp. And it was Jewish women, Muslim women.