
Jessica Markowitz

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SUMMARY

Jessica Markowitz is a NYU graduate with a strong family background in science. She founded Richards Rwanda to empower girls in Rwanda through education, inspired by a personal connection with Rwandan activist Richard. Their experiences volunteering in Israel deepened both their Jewish identity and their commitment to global social justice and community service.

INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA MARKOWITZ

XX: So let's start with you saying—

JM: My name is Jessica Markowitz. I am the founder of Richard's Rwanda and I am an Agent of Change.

XX: Great. So tell me about Richard's Rwanda. What is it?

JM: Yes. Richard's Rwanda is a nonprofit that was founded in 2007 to help give girls educational opportunities in their rural village in Rwanda called Miamata.

XX: And you founded it in 2007 which means you were 3 years old.

JM: Not quite.

XX: Not quite! My mouth is bad!

JM: Yes. Richard's Rwanda was founded actually in 2006 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 that went back to his country after surviving by living in Uganda and he came back, worked for the government to help going to school and rebuild reconciliation and bring the country back to a better place by working with the youth. And so Richard actually came and stayed at my home here in Seattle while I was attending Seattle Girl's School and I was just starting 6th grade, I was excited about my education and all these cool opportunities I was getting as a young girl and Richard when he stayed with my family and I 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 it 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 tecure alam 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, we just took a trip to this country and we met the girls and that's where it all began and continued to go back and raise more money and send more girls to school and started to bring more and more 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 got over probably around 100, both adults and young students over to Rwanda and that's what Richard's Rwanda

is.

XX: So you were how old when you started it?

JM: So I was 11 when Richard came to stay with my family and I'm now 23 just turned.

XX: 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?

JM: Yeah I will say it wasn't a nonprofit until 8th grade. So I was 13 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 501 C(3) status. But I'm definitely not like other 11 year olds not just for this but I've always had a bit of a sunk and I think that came from the family that I am from and that I was raised in. My father's 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 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.

XX: And so it's an ongoing now>

JM: Yes. So Richard's Rwanda is still a 501 C(3) sponsoring several girls who have scholarships to go school; but we are 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 realize that we want to shift into a space of more sustainable business. And so we've come up with an idea of metal smith 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.

XX: And is that going on now or is that?

JM: 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.

XX: And where will you sell?

JM: So I think we're going to start with targeting a 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 is 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, the government is supporting exports and so we are hoping that's kind of the best way to start, but we'll go from there.

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

JM: So 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, her shoes. a small fee for bathroom use and so the reason why this all began and was so popular at my middle school was because 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 really felt like we could 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 school, boarding school it was around \$250 which still really was something that we could raise the funds for and knowing that it could go so far for one young woman was really a large deal for us.

XX: That's amazing! Congratulations on all that you've done with that, it's remarkable.

JM: Thank you.

XX: 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.

JM: So my first time going to Rwanda I was 12. I just turned 12 and it was 2007 and the genocide had only ended a few years

ago, it was 1994. And you could still kind of feel remnants of war and tension, but you could also see that there was a lot of rebuilding going on. 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 10,000 people alone were killed inside that church and to be there at this age and see the proximity of the 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 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 kind of shy and kept their head 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 my first trip and I could barely stand up which is why in many of the photos I was sitting in chair because I was very sick but it just showed how important it was for me to be there and I don't get sick anymore not, but after my first time I really felt like I was learning about this community and why it was so important.

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

JM: Twelve times.

XX: So once a year.

JM: Yes.

XX: And have you seen an evolution in the country?

JM: So Rwanda has changed immensely since I've been there. It is one of the top economies in all of Africa. It 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's 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 our business came from because we no longer what 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 the government and the young people, we decided that we should also become something different as the country grows and we grow.

XX: So is your goal ultimately to hand it off entirely to Rwandans? ____ be involved.

JM: Absolutely. 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 specifically this project 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 need to be there because we've accomplished our goal.

XX: So the new setup would be that the women would create the jewelry, sell the jewelry and the proceeds from that will the fund education?

JM: 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. Because just like in the United States you graduate from school, not everybody's going to school and not everybody can find a job. And so vocational training is 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 metalsmith. It doesn't have to be jewelry, but just to start with working with metalsmith 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 building pots or pans or steel for doors or whatever it may be. And then there 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 \$1.00 a day, something much more sustainable. And then inevitably that would go towards 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 could be reinvested into the Vocational Training Program.

XX: So aside from going into metalsmithing, what do the girls that you're helping, what sorts of things do they end up doing after they get through with school?

JM: Many of our girls ended up going to University in Kiale or one of our young women named Grace got a scholarship to go to Earth University in Costa Rica which is focusing on agriculture, so there are opportunities out there. But it's very difficult and very competitive and so other young women find jobs, whether it be in the village or maybe they find a job in Kgale. Could be working for a shop or maybe 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. So that's kind of where this business idea comes into play.

XX: Can you tell me just one success story, one kid who you've worked with and?

JM: Yeah, so the young woman Grace I was speaking of, she was actually born April 5th, which is two days before the genocide began, 1994. And she lost both of her parents and her aunt raised her. And she worked very hard in school but then she didn't have the funds, and that's how she became one of our young girls that we supported. And so Grace excelled through 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. But this was a private school and provided her incredible opportunities, And Grace continued to excel and that's where she got this 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, not just to 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. 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 she started and now she's this incredibly accomplished young woman who's studying in Costa Rica. So that's one life but that's one big change. To me that's all that really matters in the end.

XX: And Richard is he still around?

JM: Yes. 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. And I was just with baby Jessica and the other girl is Tracy and I still visit with Richard and he is an activist himself. And he's amazing and he's a part of my family so I see him every time that I go.

XX: That's great. I'm curious how the poverty that you've seen in Rwanda affects your view of what's going on in the U.S.

JM: 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 peers and the same age as them but we were seeing that we're all people and they grew up in the same community as me but less opportunity doesn't mean they aren't deserving of it. So my point being that 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, student-to-student. And Seattle has its own issues, the United States has its own issues 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 Riker's Island prison and really learn about what is going on with our criminal system. And this was only reinforced by the things I was growing up with and that's why it became an interest of mine in school because it was linked to what I was learning about as a young girl.

XX: How have Jewish values impacted what you've done with Richard's Rwanda and your world view?

JM: 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 in 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 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 even came from its 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. Even just having a bat mitzvah is a time where you're becoming a young woman or a young man and you know you have a responsibility now to understand what is expected of you and for me that was really helping to change the world, as small as it may be. And like I said I have family that survived the Holocaust and knowing that there are 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 that I would have started Richard's Rwanda or would have been as interested in tecune alam as I am.

XX: So is that what being Jewish means to you?

JM: I think answering the question what does being Jewish mean is tricky because I don't know if 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. I was raised a certain way but I wanted to go visit family there. I wanted to go learn about the history there and actually be there and speak the language. I think for me being Jewish means like I said it's being a part of something bigger than yourself. People interpret that in different ways. 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 would hope to follow in their footsteps. And next year I am going and doing a fellowship in Budapest because of my Judaism and just to help serve the Jewish community and it's just these small steps to be a part of the Diaspora and this big world of Judaism that is everywhere.

XX: What was Israel like for you? What did you learn there?

JM: When I lived in Israel I was 18 it was the first time I left home 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 that up from my experience with Israel is because it's so much more than the state of the Jewish people, it's this unbelievable 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 in Israel was working at this youth village and seeing all kinds of people that also share a Judaism that's different than mine but it's 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 are a lot of politics and things going on and dangerous occurrences going on all the time but there are also people who live there and they thrive, that's their life. And personally I was just inspired. I left feeling so inspired and honored to know that I always have a place there and to know that there are people working hard and fighting and doing the best they can with the situation they're in.

XX: Did the politics of the situation there affect you while you were there?

JM: Yeah I think the politics of Israel are, for better or worse, always going to affect me and going back to my childhood my mother was involved in, she started a camp called the Middle East Peace Camp. And it was Jewish women, Muslim women and Christian women coming together to bring young children at the age of 5 to get to know each other and share their culture and it was an interfaith camp that was meant to lessen the tensions because even though we weren't living in the Middle East we all had connections to the Middle East, whether it be from religion or our culture. So from a young age I had an idea of what was going on and I was experiencing different cultures. I wasn't necessarily as aware as I was once I started living there but I've had family that has been in the army and when I went to Israel a big part was obviously learning about the politics. It affected me for sure while I was living there, but I actually felt it more when I was going to school in New York City. There was so much going on at university campuses such as my own that I actually didn't even feel it as much when I was in Israel, which is the ironic part of it all because a lot of Israelis like I said continue living their life because they have to, whereas in the U.S. we're all fighting over it and we don't even live there. So it's obviously very complicated but as an American Jewish student you certainly have to face it whether you want to or not, it's up to you if you want to sit back and watch or take part in the dialogue but there's lots going on more so today than when I was living there, for me.

XX: And so did you get involved in that dialogue while you were at university?

JM: At NYU I was part of a Jewish sorority and I would go to Hillel ad Chabad and I started to notice the tension my freshman year I would go to a few panels but I really started to feel it my junior and senior year. My junior year I studied abroad in Berlin and I witnessed some interesting discussions. Within Berlin it was an American student from my school who was a peer of mine

who made a very anti-Semitic comment and actually my German professor whose grandfather was a Nazi spoke up for me and agreed that it was an anti-Semitic comment while we were living in Berlin this hub of the Nazi regime, it was just, it was wild. And that was at NYU Berlin. But then I came back to school and it had just heightened and there were huge protests. There was Apartheid week every week where there are claims to the Jews in Israel having an Apartheid and I got involved, there was an organization that a student from my sorority was leading called Realize Israel which was a pro-Israel club that was not trying to fight, but just trying to promote because there's such a lack of that and it's constantly negative. And so I did get involved in Realize Israel and I helped with some of the rallies we would have. We even had a yamatz mood we had a parade or festival, whatever you want to call it. And this year right before graduation we had the rally and somebody burned the Israeli flag, a protestor, as well as stole the microphone during the Hatikvah and said free Palestine. These are just small instances but they protest all day throughout or whole parade, and there was such a lack of dialogue and no conversation whatsoever just constant fighting. And it was a shame and it made me really sad because I was about to go to Israel and going there knowing that my Jewish community and the political community on these campuses was like in that kind of turmoil. It was just very very upsetting. But I went to Israel for two months and had a great time.

XX: Yeah it is such a challenge as an American Jew.

JM: Not to take away from the fact that there are things to criticize and there are things to take action on, but not in that way.

XX: That's the challenge right we don't know quite where to stand sometimes. Yeah we could spend hours on that but let's not. What do you know about your family's history. How did your family end up in Seattle?

JM: So my mother is Sephardic and my dad is Ashkenazic. My mom's side was in Spain then after the Inquisition obviously fled to Rhodes. Many went to South Africa, the Congo and then my great grandmother was the only sister who went to the United States. And so that's how we all ended up here. But I still have relatives all over South Africa and Zimbabwe. Then my father's side my dad is South African and his father came straight from Latvia. And his mother my grandmother from my dad's side was from Russia, her parents. Totally different however, both have family in South Africa coincidentally and I loved learning about this culture and this history, especially as I grew older and started to understand how fascinating the diaspora is. And one of my favorite things that still happens today with the Jewish geography that we have is I'll meet a friend whose gramma also was in Rhodes and we found out our great grandmothers were friends and it's just this crazy connection that Jews have all over the world. I can't get over it. I think it's absolutely amazing.

XX: When we have the Gala you should definitely meet Tana Senn she's a representative with the Washington State House of Representatives. Her family was in Kenya after World War II. She'd be a good person to meet anyway. Did you have any specific heroes or role models growing up other than Matthew McConaghay?

JM: Yes of course. I was very lucky to grow up in the family I grew up in. As I said my mother was a huge activist. And so when I was 9-years-old Desmond Tutu came to Seattle and I got to meet him and hear about his work and obviously I grew up learning about the Apartheid in South Africa. So Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela as cliché as they are it was very important to me and my family, my father, because of the South Africa connection and they to me were just the ultimate freedom fighters they were really just huge activists. And I really admire that and I got to meet Desmond Tutu at the young age I would always keep it in my mind and then when I was old enough to understand it was even more significant. Then also very very lucky the Dalai Lama came to Seattle around 2006 which is how my mom's nonprofit began, the Seeds of Compassion event. I also got to meet the Dalai Lama which is like for me I think he's just the epitome of peace and spirituality and goodness. Another thing that I don't always embody, but I certainly try to and the Dalai Lama is a huge huge role model for that. Obviously there are many incredible powerful women that I look up to and I haven't seen it yet but the Ruth Bader Ginsberg film I'm very looking forward to. She's also incredible. She was also a sister in my sorority. And she to me just shows what especially a young Jewish woman can do when there are dedicated and smart and are not going to give up. So she's absolutely amazing. And then at the end of the day it really is the people you're surrounded by. My mother is the most diehard activist I've ever met still, and my great Uncle Adam who survived Auschwitz was such an incredible spirit, he passed away when I was young but I got to meet him and his know that his legacy will forever go on through our family and I continue to listen to his testimony to remember the history and pass it on to my own children. And I look up to him for absolute perseverance.

XX: Outside of academics what is the most important thing you learned in college?

JM: That's so hard. One thing I learned in college. One of the things I learned in Middle School was confidence. I definitely credit my parents for some of it, but my Middle School really encouraged me to never let down my confidence. And in college I found that my confidence was able to help me not academically per se, but whether I wanted to join a community or I wanted to speak up I never felt afraid to. And I saw many of my peers didn't have that. And I think I had already learned confidence, but it

just grew in university. And my confidence got me internships. It got me into special events that I shouldn't necessarily be at. But I think confidence is key and you can really grow it and learn it while you are in college cause you're on your own and if you're confident you can take your academics beyond school and you're learning every day walking on the street wherever you are. Confidence is the reason I was working in a prison when I was 18 years old. You don't do that if you're a shy human being. You just go out there and you do what you want to do because you can.

XX: Absolutely. So tell me what you're going to do next. What is your career plan, if you have one?

JM: My career plan is still in the works but my senior year I spent the year interning at the American Jewish Committee and I forgot to mention in regards to my Jewish values how big of an impact BBYO had in my life. I started in 8th grade and never stopped. Still theoretically involved because my next part of my career is spending one year in Budapest with JVC/BBYO fellowship where I'll be helping to build the new BBYO chapter that's there and really just taking part in any kind of work the Jewish community needs. Budapest is the biggest Jewish community in Eastern Europe, it's huge. But there's still anti-Semitism all the time and they just elected a new government that is supposed to be interesting in regards to how they're acting towards the Jewish community. It is supposed to be quite difficult for the Jewish community based on this new government and so my role is to just be there in support and offer the background I have in Judaism and in activism and so that's next year and beyond that I really have no idea. Hope to maybe live in Israel eventually but we'll see.

XX: Do you think that your career will continue to be in the Jewish community? Is that something that you're hoping to do or do you think you're going to get out in the secular world? What's your thought on that?

JM: I'm not really sure. I really enjoy the kind of bridge between the Jewish world and humanities work. I think they're so inextricably tied and that was one of the things that I found in college and interning and working as a camp counselor is it actually wasn't just about Judaism at all. A lot of my philanthropy and my service work came up consistently and even while living in Israel it wasn't about Judaism it was about doing good. So I don't necessarily need to be working for a Jewish organization, I really love it and I obviously have my ties to it, but I'm also very interested in international development which certainly doesn't always have to do with Judaism and I could see myself either finding a bridge between the two, maybe doing both, not really sure, but they certainly don't need to be completely separate for me, my passions.

XX: And what about Africa? Do you think you'll continue to do work in Africa?

JM: Yeah. I think Africa will always be a part of my life, whether it's because of my family or because of my interests. And like I said there doesn't have to be a separation. The JDC has a youth village there that's actually the same model from Israel in Rwanda, and it started for orphans of the genocide and it's an incredible model that works beautifully for young vulnerable Rwandan children. So that's an example of Judaism and Rwanda together. But I see myself working in Africa with or without Judaism because it's a part of who I am and I think it's so important to share the privilege that we have because it's our duty.

XX: Great. Well that's it. I hope that wasn't too painful.

JM: No not at all.

End of Interview