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GRACE HIGHTOWER DENIRO

Taking Steps to Help the People of Rwanda Rebuild their Future

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AMAZING GRACE



GRACE HIGHTOWER DENIRO
TAKING STEPS TO HELP THE PEOPLE OF
RWANDA REBUILD THEIR FUTURE, ONE
COFFEE BEAN AT A TIME.

BY: GINA SAMAROTTO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: ANGELA ALTUS





GRACE HIGHTOWER DE NIRO IS ACCOMPLISHED AND IMPRESSIVE. SHE'S A DEVOTED WIFE, MOTHER, DAUGHTER AND FRIEND, A DEDICATED SUPPORTER AND PHILANTHROPIST, AN ACTOR, SINGER AND – MOST RECENTLY – SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR. CLEARLY, THIS IS A WOMAN WHO KNOWS HOW TO GET THINGS DONE.

I admit to having a split second of pause before meeting the high-profile powerhouse in her upper west side home. This is after all, the woman at the matriarchal helm of one of the country's most prominent and well-known families. Within minutes of our meeting though, any lingering concern I might have had faded away, and soon, we were deep in a conversation that felt more like a long overdue visit with a favorite college roommate than it did an interview. Despite her many accomplishments and myriad roles, Grace is utterly charming, devoid of all pretense. A completely approachable, genuinely warm and generous woman, Grace is... well.... full of grace.

After introductions and a few minutes chatting about kids, clothes, and life in general, we got down to the serious business of discussing what first prompted her involvement with Rwanda and its people, her relationship with Rwandan President Paul Kagame and First Lady Jeanette Kagame, her company, Grace Hightower & Coffees of Rwanda - and about the personal commitment she's made to help build a brighter future for the people of this East African nation... one coffee bean at a time.

During a horrific hundred-day period that began in the spring of 1994, members of Rwanda's Hutu majority murdered nearly 800,000 of their Tutsi minority and Hutu moderate countrymen, in what would be one of the world's bloodiest massacres. By the end of the conflict, nearly 20% of the Rwandan population was brutally slain and of the remaining survivors, countless numbers were displaced from their homes. The country was in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Rwandans who had lived through the genocide referred to the days prior to the atrocities simply as "before". Today, some twenty years later, there is a resurgence of hope for what is the "after."

It was 2011 when Hightower first had the opportunity to hear President Kagame speak about his vision for Rwanda. During the talk, she remembers being "immediately struck" by the clarity of the African leader's vision. "In the aftermath of such unimaginable atrocities and in the face of such uncertainty," she recollects, "President Kagame's words were so on point and powerful. I never heard a leader, especially one coming from a country that is considered third world, speak quite like that before. He talked about rebuilding a nation of sustainability through the dedication of its people. He

talked about hope. And he talked about how what he wanted for his country and what the people wanted for their country, was a hand up - not a hand out. It was an incredibly moving speech and it left me wanting to know more about Rwanda and the Rwandan people."

With the Rwandan President's words still resonating soundly, Hightower found herself planning the first of what would be many trips to the east central African country. "Visiting Rwanda for the first time, meeting the people and hearing their stories... it made an immediate and strong impression on me. This is a country that comes together despite having been torn apart. There is a sense of diligence to the people there. When you meet the Rwandan people - especially the women who lost their entire families and life as they knew it during the war - and you see how they are trying to heal and how they are working to rebuild their lives after suffering such unimaginable devastation, it changes you. When you see the desire to grow and you feel the sense of hope that these people share and when you see this willingness to make positive change, you come home and remember just how blessed you are. You find that you just don't sweat the small stuff in your own life quite so much anymore."



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Following that first trip to Rwanda, Hightower started to think about what she could do to not only contribute to the country's efforts to rebuild, but to contribute – in the words of President Kagame – sustainably.

Her answer? Coffee.

"It's funny, but you never seem to go too far from where you've been. I was raised in Mississippi by parents who were farmers; I grew up on a farm... There's a special connection you have with the earth when you make your living from the land. Rwanda's economy is based largely on agriculture and coffee is a primary crop. Starting a company that would rely on the coffees of Rwanda made good sense. We would be creating a market and that market would help create a future."

And so, Grace Hightower & Coffees of Rwanda was born.

Every bean that goes into Grace

Hightower & Coffees of Rwanda comes from the land – and directly from the hands – of a Rwandan farmer, many of them women. Already coveted due in large part to the near perfect growing conditions offered by the East African country, Rwandan coffee – and especially that exported by the cooperatives supported by Grace Hightower & Coffees of Rwanda – is further elevated by their harvesting methods. Farmers working within the coffee cooperatives harvest the beans – or cherries, as they are known at that stage of the process – by hand, without the benefit of machinery. It's then brought to the cooperatively owned washing station where it meticulously sorted four separate times, again by hand, to ensure quality. The cherries are then rinsed and laid in the sun to dry naturally. The labor-intensive process results in an exceptionally high percentage of excellent quality, clean beans that are virtually free of imperfections – what is known in the Rwandan coffee trade as "A" grade, the

only grade accepted by Grace Hightower & Coffees of Rwanda. "Just having the company dedicated to a worthy cause wasn't enough," Hightower explains, "The product had to be great quality, too. The farmers are paid a premium for the highly graded coffee. A 'fair trade' price that allows them to have a level of economic stability and a sustainable future that might not have been possible before... and we are able to source what I believe is some of the best coffee in the world."

In addition to the four coffee varieties available online at coffeefofgrace.com and through select retailers, the Grace Hightower & Coffees of Rwanda line also features gift sets where coffee is paired with colorful bags or packaged in handmade banana leaf baskets. And each time a sale is made, the future of Rwanda becomes a bit brighter. Indeed, as has been proven by Grace Hightower & Coffees of Rwanda, a strong cup of coffee is more powerful than you think.