



EXPLORING WOMEN: FRANCINE LEFRAK

Francine LeFrak is changing the way one approaches “giving back.” She is a philanthropist with a hands-on approach who works tirelessly to help end violence against women and support education and empowerment of women around the world. She was born into a family that imprinted upon her the importance of giving back.

LeFrak's hard work and vision have taken her on a global journey as an award winning filmmaker, business woman, and staunch supporter of women's rights. She followed her heart in starting a nonprofit organization, Same Sky that educates and trains Rwandan, HIV-positive women who survived the genocide to become artisans and work within their communities. Their philosophy is that "the best philanthropy is a good job."

I had an opportunity to interview LeFrak and learn about her commitment to empower women through work and education. I am impressed by how much she has been able to accomplish in a relatively short time since founding Same Sky in 2008, and how important it is to bring about change by working as a collective.

THE INTERVIEW

What drives you to want to create opportunities for women?

"3.5 billion people in the world are living on less than \$2 a day, in America 46 million people live below the poverty line. With globalization and the Internet, we can no longer close our eyes to extreme poverty. We have to act now. When the genocide in Rwanda happened in 1994, reports from the International Criminal Tribunal stated that 1 million people were murdered within 100 days. The report detailed that more than 250,000 women were raped, and of the survivors, approximately 70% were





infected with HIV/AIDS. I knew I couldn't stand by and do nothing. I also knew that helping people 7,000 miles away would work best by working on the ground. In Rwanda, we implemented community-driven initiatives that provide education, training, and the dignity of work. We pay the women directly for their work –we pay them 15-20 times the average Sub-Saharan wage.”

Prior to founding Same Sky which causes were you involved with?

“I’m the former chair of the Women’s Leadership Board at Harvard’s Kennedy School, which advances issues related to women throughout the world. The women who make up the Women’s Leadership Board (WLB) are the architects of the roadmap to gender equality. The group is a real model of the transformative power of women working together. I’m also involved with UN Women for Peace, Women Moving Millions, and the Soulful Economy, which seeks to empower women through ethical fashion.”

Tell me about your first experience with “giving back” that left an impression on you and how it has impacted the work you do today?

“When I was a freshman in college, I tutored impoverished girls in struggling neighborhoods. I started doing the film Prison Stories: Women on the Inside. That project instilled a moral imperative to do something that uses my talent and assets,

which eventually led to Same Sky America. We now employ women who are just getting out of Hudson County Jail and working to reenter society.”

Do you believe that philanthropy or “giving back” should start at a particular time in life?

“For me, philanthropy started the day I was born. My family has always put philanthropy at the forefront of their mission — we are very involved in many different foundations, universities, cultural, and health institutions. My father devoted his life to creating affordable housing in New York City. But my family used traditional means of philanthropic aid — I am trying to break into a new model of aid called philanthro-capitalism. My strategy is for outdated philanthropic models to be renewed. For profit, for benefit is a new model where you don’t need to be rich to have a positive impact on the globe. I also believe in sustainable models of philanthropy that give a hand-up, not a handout, and the tools for people to lift themselves out of poverty.”

Do you come from a family of strong women?

“I believe it is empathy that brought me to where I am now. My mother and sisters are also strong women, and we were all taught the importance of giving back from a young age. We were also taught to acknowledge how lucky we are. As we go about our daily lives, it is easy to forget — or perhaps to push aside — the knowledge that there are other people, all over this planet right now, who will never have the opportunity to live the life that so many of us take for granted. But I believe with that privilege comes great responsibility.”

Do you believe women make the best role models for other women?

“Yes, I do. When women are empowered, they give to something larger than themselves. Women reinvest 80 percent of their available resources



into their families, where men only reinvest 30 percent. Women investing in women, especially through education or providing jobs, leads directly back into communities, the economy, and the future.

But we need to focus our attention on how to build this trend. How do we keep the momentum of women helping women? Because the fact is, even as we give more and do more, the need is still huge. Women are 60 percent of the world's hungry. Women are at least 56 percent of the world's trafficking victims. Girls make up 57 percent of the world's children not in primary school."

In your opinion, what are the responsibilities associated with Philanthropic endeavors?

"I have always been of the belief that the best philanthropy in the world is a good job. Therefore, I believe in sustainable community-driven initiatives. We provide our collectives of women with education and training, the dignity of work, as well as a platform for the sale and distribution of their products. This leads to direct results.



For example, when you purchase a Hope necklace, it buys an artisan's child education for a whole year. This includes the uniforms and the books, which amounts to a whole year of school fees. Or when you purchase a Sky Necklace, it buys an artisan's family food for an entire month."

Same Sky organizes events around the country where supporters can meet the artisans and purchase their beautiful jewelry. I have had the pleasure of attending several of these events and meeting some of the people behind this beautiful jewelry personally. I found the women to be inspirational and positive in spite of the dark years of suffering and horrors they lived through.

I admire LeFrak tremendously, not only for her work and success, but for her humility and kindness. She is gracious and generous with her knowledge and her time and is a

wonderful role model for women. She motivates and inspires those around her to become involved in a greater cause.

The Same Sky foundation is more than a network of people who support a cause; it is a family that comes together because of Francine LeFrak.