

Taking inspiration from her journey, a Shrewsbury business owner is using coffee to empower women in Burundi

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Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian uses coffee to empower women in Africa



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Growing up in Burundi, a small country on the African continent, Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian learned as a young girl how coffee can transform a life.

Through the revenue from coffee beans Niyonzima-Aroian's grandfather sent her mother to school. She became the first person in her family to do so.

With help from her parents, Niyonzima-Aroian left the poverty-stricken country, located directly south of Rwanda, to earn a degree from the University of Nebraska and a master's at Northwestern.

Niyonzima-Aroian now lives in Shrewsbury. Her journey to Worcester County and ambition to help her country arose — in part — through the coffee bean, which Niyonzima-Aroian points out is a seed from a cherry.

Through her family's experiences, Niyonzima-Aroian saw an opportunity: Use coffee to provide women with knowledge and power.

“Even today, I go to meetings in Africa and they look at my workers, if they are male, that’s who they talk to. They don’t even talk to me. They think the guy is the decision-maker,” Niyonzima-Aroian said. “I knew my mom was someone very powerful behind the scenes. So I thought, if I could empower those women who are behind the scenes, we’re going to empower the community. We’re going to truly alleviate the poverty.”

In 2008, Niyonzima-Aroian began a non-profit aimed at alleviating poverty in her home country of Burundi.

Since that time, Niyonzima-Aroian has implemented several methods to help the people of Burundi. Most recently it’s been in the form of coffee. She purchases hundreds of thousands of dollars in coffee from Burundi farmers and then imports the beans as JNP Coffee on to local roasters such as Acoustic Java in Worcester or Aero in Northborough as well as larger companies like Peet’s Coffee.

In celebration of Black women coffee owners for Black History Month, Peet's Coffee has released Jubilant Blend, a medium roast created with JNP Coffee beans sourced from Burundi, blended with beans from Brazil sourced by another Black woman-owned coffee business, BD Imports.

"We've been selling to local roasteries for a long time," Niyonzima-Aroian said. "But you never know. I guess I'm supposed to be in this. I didn't even drink coffee growing up."

Niyonzima-Aroian introduction to the coffee industry came in the early 2010s on a trip to Burundi.

By chance at a coffee shop, she connected with a man who her grandparents helped raise.

Niyonzima-Aroian hadn't seen him in years because of Burundi's civil war.

The two discussed a possible coffee venture.

"I thought he was dead because of the civil war," Niyonzima-Aroian said. "He came to me and he said, 'Can you help me?'"



Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian walks through Burundi looking at the coffee cherry trees.

Niyonzima-Aroian was so convinced she stopped working as a telecommunications specialist and went all-in on coffee.

“I’m going to help this kid,” Niyonzima-Aroian remembered saying. “I’m already helping people I don’t know with the non-profit, why not help someone I know?”

By 2014, the partnership brewed a 2014 Cup of Excellence winner, rated as the best brew in the country.

Soon after, a group of women in the country approached Niyonzima-Aroian.

Niyonzima-Aroian said it’s common in Burundi for women to handle nearly every step of the coffee supply chain — from planting to picking — but they never see money at the end. That’s in addition to providing all the care to children.

“It’s because they aren’t the ones who actually take the cherries to the wet mills. Most of the time the men will have bicycles or kids can actually carry it on their heads,” Niyonzima-Aroian said. “They won’t necessarily get rewarded. So I started getting involved.”



Through JNP Coffee, women in Burundi have an outlet to sell coffee.

Wet mills are a critical stage of the coffee-making process marking the location where the coffee bean is separated from the cherry.

By 2018, Niyonzima-Aroian and her organization contributed more than \$250,000 to women in Burundi. But it wasn't enough. She wanted more. Instead of

paying them, Niyonzima-Aroian envisioned empowering them even further.

“When they received all this money, most of them use it for immediate needs,” Niyonzima-Aroian said. “I said, ‘We need do something so they can actually save.’”

So Niyonzima-Aroian helped bring programs to Burundi to help individuals learn how to save money.

One of the groups of women who took the class, with the help of Niyonzima-Aroian, built a wet mill about two years ago.

“When we talk about success and impact for me, there couldn’t be any bigger impact than that,” Niyonzima-Aroian said.”

Some of the coffee prepared at those wet mills now travels the world through JNP Coffee. The beans land in local coffee shops like Acoustic Java in Worcester.

Each bag purchased and cup sold is more momentum to empower women in Burundi.

“I really believe, if you can help the women, you’re really empowering the whole community,” Niyonzima-Aroian said.