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VINTNER, ENTREPRENEUR AND PHILANTHROPIST: RICHIE HARKHAM IS A FORCE

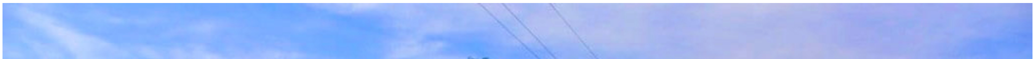
By Alexandra Cain

Richie Harkham has packed enough into his life so far to fill 10 lifetimes. From establishing a world-renowned winery, to investing and establishing life-changing charities in Africa and Myanmar, Harkham is a true entrepreneur. He has also faced excruciatingly tough times, which have only cemented his love for life.

Harkham's entrepreneurial inspiration came from his family, which was in the fashion game. "I would watch my dad and my uncles do business deals; I loved the rush of how they made it all happen."

He started working at just 12 years old in a bakery in Sydney's eastern suburbs. "I was a bagel boy making $4.50 an hour; I thought I was killing it. But I always wanted to have my own business, so I started a vending machine business when I was about 14. I would buy water for 30c a bottle and sell it for $2 a bottle."

It was the start of something great. Subsequently, Harkham ran a second-hand book shop after he left high school as well as a range of businesses including a laundromat because he couldn't find anywhere to do his washing. "That's what entrepreneurs do. We see opportunities other people don't and we take risks to make it happen."



Wine is about finding the right balance, says Harkham. Credit: Daniel Honan

The venture produces just 20,000 bottles a year, with every vintage allocated before it's even bottled to buyers right around the world and is the nation's only completely kosher winery.

"We were the first winery in the Hunter Valley to make natural wines, with no additives, chemicals or preservatives. My grandma Aziza Harkham used to make natural wine for her family in Israel in 1950s, with no electricity or running water, storing the wine for the family in clay pots under the house."

"We try to catch a time and place in each vintage in every single bottle. Wine making is a new challenge every year. If you put your ear to a vat, the wine is alive. It's gurgling, it's fizzing, it's changing. So, it's my job as a winemaker to find complete balance in that wine," he explains.

These days, the wine business is just one string to Harkham's bow. He also buys and grows amazing businesses, such as Melbourne's power management company Energy Alliance.

Harkham's first foray into charitable endeavours was a movement called Beat the Streets when he was young. "My friends and I would make food packs and go out to feed homeless people. It all started because a homeless guy used to live outside my house in the city. In the beginning, I wanted him to go away, but after a month we started talking, then I started giving him dinner. After six months, I let him sleep downstairs. Every person has a story."

Handpicking in Aziza's Semillon vineyard during vintage in the Hunter Valley

His next charitable venture in 2011 involved travelling to Africa for the first time to build boarding houses for girls who were victims of female genital mutilation.

By 2013, with Harkham overseeing the construction of a boarding houses from Australia, he travelled to Kenya where he met a young girl called Lucy. Her father couldn't afford to keep her and sold her to an older man for a cow but her mother and teacher saved her.

"I was so touched by Lucy's story, I made a documentary called *A Day in the Life of Lucy*, set up a GoFundMe page and raised enough to build two boarding houses."

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Then, in 2014, Harkham suffered a near-death motorbike accident that left him unable to walk for four years. In Germany for experimental surgery, he was one of numerous people to receive a transplant after the parents of a young boy who was hit by a car and left brain dead magnanimously turned off their son’s life support so others could live.

“His story inspired me to want to help change the world.”

Harkham subsequently established his charity, Hark Angels in the boy’s honour, which has sponsored the education of many children. Its goal is to build 100 schools in the poorest places in the world and the charity has successfully built eight of these Hark Angel schools in Myanmar so far.

The Hark Angels charity aims to build 100 schools in the poorest places on earth.

Back home, he is a director of WILL2LIVE – a charity serving a thousand meals a week in Sydney’s CBD and inner west.

"WILL2LIVE is also about to open a cafe for homeless people in which they can learn a trade and skills and where there’s a laundromat so they can wash their clothes.”

Harkham, who plans to give away 70 per cent of his wealth, says NAB Private Wealth have been supportive throughout his journey thus far.

My private banker Kim, Patrick and the team are so reliable. “It’s vital to have a great relationship with your bank. I couldn't ask for a better partner."

Harkham takes part in a year 2 class at a Hark Angel school in Myanmar

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