



Actress Rachel Skarsten on hope, small change and grace.

By Jennifer Lee

Photography by Christopher Wahl

Audiences of CW's *Reign* know **Rachel Skarsten** as Queen Elizabeth I, the fierce scarlet-haired British monarch. Off-screen, the actress holds court as a change-maker.

"I think sometimes it's overwhelming for people to think about changing the world because there is so much left to do to make it better," says the actress, who counts among her causes the Children's Book Bank and NightLight, an international support network for survivors of human trafficking. "But small actions ripple out and reach farther than you could even imagine."

As a board member of the Nyantende Foundation—an Ontario non-profit organization that her brother Jonathan helped establish in 2010 while a student at Queen's University—Rachel is doing her small part to help children in the Democratic Republic of Congo forge their future.

Through donations made to the foundation's education fund, the cost of enrollment into academic institutions is supplemented for youth living in Bukavu and the Greater Nyantende area. Today, in partnership with 17 regional schools and universities, the charity has empowered 217 students with education.

A passionate advocate for equal rights, Rachel speaks with infectious enthusiasm when sharing her motivation. *"I've been lucky enough to grow up in a country where education is a right, but in so many places in the world, it's a privilege—especially for women. This incredible privilege—the gift of knowledge—has never been lost on me," she says. "When you are fully educated, you're armed in a different way. It changes everything. I think ignorance breeds everything bad; it breeds intolerance; it breeds cruelty; it breeds fear and then hate."*

The Nyantende Foundation is steadily growing, boasting chapters at Queen's and McGill. With plans to expand across the country's campuses, Rachel is confident in the possibility of a future where every child has access to education.

Hope is in the results. She recalls the experience she shared with a young man she helped send to university through the foundation. *"It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life," she gushes. "That's what's so exciting about kindness in any way. No other accomplishment—nothing—can give you a high like that."*

Energized by her endeavors, the actress grips tight to the knowledge that change can begin small—it can begin with helping one person. *"I don't have to change the whole world or move mountains all at once. I just have to start with one."*

Read on to find out why **Rachel** is happy to be "a single muscle in the greater body of change," as she makes strides towards closing the education gap.



Q&A

Why is “we” stronger than “me?”

I like how the words “we” and “me” are just the flip of a letter because I think the power of “we” starts with “me.” No matter how much I can do on my own, it will never be as much as I can do with others. Truly intelligent people know what their weaknesses are and aren’t afraid to admit what they don’t know. When “me” has the desire for change and the humility to admit shortcomings, “me” can seek out people who have strengths in those areas of weakness. Together, “we” set the world on fire.

What is the kindest action you’ve been on the receiving end of, and what about the gesture touched you personally?

I found out my dog Maddy has to be put down—she has cancer and is very sick. Because I’m filming, I can’t take Maddy in until the weekend when the vet is closed. The vet called me personally and said she would come in even though she wasn’t working; it made me cry. She would take time from her life to give to me. I’m always the most touched by compassion and when people give the gift of their time, as it is our most valuable and finite resource. Her small action made a great impact.

Describe the core values of your ideal Canada?

Education available to all, care for seniors, affordable and accessible health care, value of the arts, tolerance, preservation of our natural resources.

What small action have you taken in present day to help secure a brighter future for our country tomorrow?

Five years ago I made a resolution to change one person’s life... and I mean radically change it for the better. I sent a boy in the Democratic Republic of Congo to university, and now he is teaching children in his village and changing their lives. What is a cause you care deeply about and how do you want to help further it along?

I feel very passionate about education. I feel very passionate about the perseverance of natural resources and the ethical treatment of animals. I feel passionate about women... there are so many problems in the world affecting women. People say to me, “We have to focus on one thing,” I don’t think so.

Finish this sentence: Moving forward into the next 150 years, our country needs [blank] in order to build a more caring and compassionate Canada.

Grace.

To me, grace is the most beautiful word and there can never be enough of it. To love those who are otherwise deemed “undeserving,” to extend compassion to those who have wronged you, to give consideration to that which you do not understand, to show decency and humanity to those who are faceless and seemingly insignificant. I still believe grace—and ultimately love—is more radical and powerful than anything else.

Take the pledge and help build a more caring and compassionate Canada.