SOCIAL Ritmo
PERSONAS & PERSONALIDADES

JAKE
“ME GUSTA LA NATURALEZA, ME SIENTO PARTE DE ELLA”

KHEEL

BILL CLINTON / NATY ABASCAL / HILLARY CLINTON / FRANK RAINIERI / MAR FLORES / DANNY FORSTER
KATHLEEN MARTÍNEZ / CARLOS FORERO / SANTIAGO CALATRAVA / CLAUDIO SILVESTRI / OSCAR DE LA RENTA
“YOU CAN’T LOSE HOPE BECAUSE YOU LOSE ONE BATTLE, YOU HAVE TO HAVE PERSEVERANCE.”

2010 appears as though it will be a positive year. One of the goals that we propose for the new year is to embrace the protection of the environment. In order to do this requires great human sensitivity, Jake Kheel, Environmental Director for Grupo PUNTACANA is responding to the cries that Mother Nature is making. A young American that fell in love with the Dominican Republic, Jake Kheel believes it was destiny that brought him to Punta Cana, a destiny perhaps inherited from his relative, Ted Kheel, one of the founders of PUNTACANA Resort & Club. At 16 years old, he decided to come to the country as a volunteer to realize community work in a rural part of the country and since then has made a series of visits that concluded in his presence in Punta Cana, where he currently resides. Today, his environmental passion has earned him great recognition for his contributions in the environmental field, which he realizes not only in the tourism sector, but also in different sectors that require immediate attention. With a personality that is simple, determined, positive, cautious, he promotes specific actions through his work with a sense of urgency, based in the ideals that arise in the natural manner in the life of Jake.

Jessenia Montes de Oca, photo Jochy Fersobe, production and styling Reading Pantaleón clothes: Chakabana by Cristian Lagares, Kenneth Cole, Fayonnnable y Tommy Hilfiger, location: Puntacana Resort & Club.
RS: What do you like about being the Corporate Environmental Director for Grupo PUNTACANA?
JK: I like to see results. The problem with most environmentalists is that they are very theoretical, telling people what they should and should not do, and how everyone else should live. We are turning theory into practice.

RS: Why did you decide to stay in the Dominican Republic?
JK: I think it may have been my destiny to come here, because it was a huge coincidence that I came here in the first place. I love the people of this country and the potential here in the sense of solving environmental challenges. If not, I wouldn’t be here. In Punta Cana I have a very good quality of life so it’s easy to stay. People that live here, live their work.

RS: Do you get satisfaction in providing your grain of sand in support of the sustainable development of Punta Cana?
JK: I have always believed that Punta Cana is important on a global scale because it is one of the most important tourist destinations in the Caribbean, the Caribbean is one of the most important tourist destinations in the world, and the tourism industry has an economic impact that is global in significance. Using this logic, Punta Cana is one of the most important places in the world! PUNTACANA Resort & Club has served as a model for sustainable tourism for the world. So we are more than a grain of sand, we are a pot of sand.

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RS: What has it meant to you to live in the Dominican Republic?
JK: It’s been incredible! I love this country. I have been to Pico Duarte, to the Bahoruco Mountains, I live in Punta Cana, and I get to visit the Colonial Zone in Santo Domingo. It’s a country with a lot of amazing attractions; it’s not a limited country at all. I live here because I get to have new experiences.

RS: Would you say you know this country better than you know your own country, the United States?
JK: Similar. I love my country as well. I have been to over 20 National Parks there. When I take vacation, I often go visit my country, though you would say I am always on vacation because I live at the beach (laughs).

RS: What do you do in your free time?
JK: I live in PUNTACANA Resort & Club, at my job, so there isn’t that much free time! The advantage I have is that I am doing what I love, something I am passionate about. My job is not boring; it feels like something I would always love to do. But I always try to stay active and exercise. I also read and write a lot.

RS: What do you write about?
JK: I write essays about my experience here, other ideas I share in articles and publications.

RS: How is your life ecologically-speaking?
JK: I try to live what I believe in. I don’t like people that only tell you that you should live one way or another and don’t do it themselves. We implemented a large-scale recycling project and I was the first one to do it in my own house. The company that manages our water and electricity knows me well (laughs), because I am always calling them about my energy and water bill. I have implemented
new technologies, use solar hot-water heaters, and try to be conscious of the types of clothes and products I buy and their impact on the planet. There is no perfect person, and I am certainly not a perfect environmentalist, but I try to live my experience.

RS: What is Grupo PUNTACANA recycling program about?
JK: Recycling is one tool that is part of an overall integrated process. The most important thing for us as a company is to be part of an international movement called “Zero Waste.” The idea of this movement is that the social, environmental and economic cost of creating sanitary landfills is high, and for this reason, not sustainable in the long-term. This has been proven already. What Zero Waste communities want to achieve is to eliminate the concept of garbage. That’s the starting point. In Grupo PUNTACANA, we have a variety of different businesses, each of which requires different processes for managing waste. But we start by separating organic from inorganic waste. When you do this, you no longer have garbage, you have resources. When the inorganic materials are classified they become valuable and we are able to sell them as recyclables. Organic waste, which forms about 20,000 cubic meters a year, we convert into soil and a liquid fertilizer called “biol,” that can be used on golf courses, green areas, as well as the vegetable nurseries, which forms about 20,000 cubic meters a year, we convert into soil and a liquid fertilizer called “biol,” that can be used on golf courses, green areas, as well as the vegetable nurseries. We are able to grow fresh produce that is consumed within the hotel and sold to our homeowners. We take a problem, garbage, and transform it into a competitive advantage.

RS: In addition to the Recycling Project, you have the Ridgway’s Hawk Project. What does that consist of?
JK: This is a project made up of three institutions: the PUNTACANA Ecological Foundation, the Hispaniola Ornithological Society, and the Peregrine Fund, an international foundation. We work with the Secretary of Environment to conduct research and conservation of the Ridgway’s Hawk within the island of Hispaniola. This animal is one of the most endangered in the world. There are only 300 individuals left in the entire island, mostly in Los Haitises National Park. Dominican have hunted the hawk because they believe, erroneously, that they eat domesticated birds, such as chickens. The bird is a smaller species that generally eats smaller animals such as lizards and rats. Our project transplanted some of the hawks to diversify the area where the animal lives and to extend this area and to protect them. The reality is that Los Haitises National Park is not sufficiently protected. It is critically understaffed with park guards. By transferring the hawks to Punta Cana, we can provide better protection. We have the capacity and the infrastructure to study them as well. In May 2009, we introduced three hawks, as a pilot, to see if they would become established here. We have shown that they adapt quite well. This year we plan to bring six to nine more juvenile hawks, with the objective of establishing an established breeding population within five years of reintroductions. The project has a strong environmental component, since we are training local guides to inform the visitors about this animal. The idea is a project with social, environmental, and economic components. If the local population doesn’t understand, we won’t be able to protect the species. Similarly, we have to find economic resources so the project can sustain itself.

RS: What lessons does your ecological experience give you?
JK: First, you have to have thick skin about the conflicts you are trying to solve. The conflict between environment and development is probably the most important one that the world confronts today. It’s critical. There are a lot of economic interests involved. We know that we are going to lose some battles, it’s important to learn from those failures, as well as from our victories. You can’t lose hope because you lose one battle, you must have perseverance. Wait for the conditions to change so you can be successful.

THE MOMENT SOMEONE STOPS LEARNING, THEY ARE PRETTY MUCH DEAD. I CONTINUE TO LEARN NEW THINGS EVERYDAY. THE MOMENT I FEEL STAGNATED, THAT I AM NOT LEARNING AND THAT I AM NOT GOING TO HAVE AN IMPACT...IT’S OVER.
RS: How is life living so far from your family?
JK: I have a great relationship with my family. They come visit me or I visit them in the US. I have friends that I have met in this country that made me not feel alone. I have a family of friends here in Punta Cana, even though I am also a pretty independent person.

RS: Talk to us about your experience in the Bahoruco Mountains?
JK: I had the opportunity to do community service work in the Bahoruco mountains. I came for one year and liked it so much I decided to come back for another. We did different types of community work. By then I had already started my career in the environmental field. Right by the village I was staying at, there was a river that passed by. People told me it used to be huge, but the deforestation in the mountains has caused it to shrink. Out of curiosity, I went up into the mountains with a friend to see the deforestation. There we found an ecotourism project called Cachote that was trying to protect the forest by bringing tourists to the community in the mountains. The project in Cachote convinced me to do my Master’s thesis in the Bahorucos.

RS: You are passionate about environmental protection. How and when did you become an environmentally active person?
JK: I have always been passionate about nature. I was born in Florida, in the country, and my brother and I were always outside of the house, interacting with nature. As the years went by, I began to learn about all the threats facing the environment. So I decided I had two choices: ignore these problems or dedicate my life to looking for solutions to them. A lot of people ask me how I can possibly be an environmentalist working for a private development company and I tell them I’m not an environmentalist, I’m a “solutionist.” We won’t get anywhere simply telling people what they can’t do without finding solutions. That’s what we’re trying to do.

RS: Why Punta Cana?
JK: There is nothing better for me. I have it all here. People are dedicated and committed to our community. It also has a fascinating history of integrity and perseverance.

RS: Do you see yourself living in Dominican Republic for a long time?
JK: I think so. I will continue to be interested here professionally as long until I can have an impact in Punta Cana and the country. I don’t live here just to live near the beach; I could just as easily live somewhere not as beautiful if I felt I could have a positive impact.

RS: What do you think is the biggest weakness the country has in terms of environmental protection?
JK: Corruption. This affects the environment as well. What I mean is, environmental protection requires a commitment from the community and the public and private sectors. The government is not the solution by itself but it plays an important part. If private companies, usually the ones causing environmental degradation, don’t feel that they can trust the government, they won’t support the processes that help protect the environment. This can create a competitive disadvantage for companies like us, which maintain costly environmental permits, as opposed to others that don’t bother to get their permits, which can save money. There also needs to be better management of the protected areas. This is fundamental for the development of democracy.

RS: Do you feel accomplished with all the projects you have achieved in the Dominican Republic?
JK: No. For someone that works in environmental protection, there is always more to be done. Even in Grupo PUNTACANA, which is already an example, our own president says there is a lot more to do and to achieve. We are proud of what we have achieved, but we are realists.

RS: What is the basis for the Ecological Foundation to succeed?
JK: Integrity. We look for solutions based in reality. This is a challenge that many environmentalists don’t understand. We don’t try to be utopists. Our projects reflect the reality of the challenges we face. There are always good reasons to pursue sustainable development but they have to be based in reality.
RS: What positive lessons can a person learn about environmental protection?
JK: There is a theory called “Biophilia,” that says that people, in part, feel a natural connection to nature. They find it relaxing, it helps them feel part of it. For me, contact with nature can get rid of stress, problems and gives me peace. This is a good reason to protect nature.

RS: What is the most extreme you have seen done for environmental protection?
JK: There are people that live “off the grid,” apart from society. They don’t produce any waste. They live an isolated life and they are sustainable. I don’t think this is bad, but it’s not for everyone.

RS: Where do you think humanity will end up if we don’t start to take conscience about protecting nature?
JK: I prefer not to think about that. I think it would be a much poorer existence without all those precious things in nature. Pollution impacts our health, our food, and our health. Preservation is not just a theoretical thing, it’s something tangible that affects everyone’s lives.

RS: Then, it’s worth it to do something about it?
JK: The environmentalist is either an optimist or insane. I am a very positive person and believe that we can achieve great changes. There is a consciousness that is changing around the world. It’s not longer “I want to protect the environment for my kids and grandkids,” instead, “I want to protect the environment for me!” It’s true that this will affect our kids and grandkids, but let’s talk about now. It’s already affecting us. It’s an interesting intellectual challenge.

RS: What is the most fascinating thing that nature has given us?
JK: The interaction of species, the creativity of nature.

RS: What would your ideal environmental project be?
JK: If we could convert the Punta Cana region, or the whole country, into a carbon neutral area. We would produce our own energy naturally, using new technologies, managing urban centers so we didn’t rely on petroleum. It’s a dream. The impact of energy is huge, it has a lot of environmental implications. It’s a project that would take time, but it would be something positive for private companies and for the country, for their image and economically. Others could see the example and it would create a positive chain reaction.

“URBAN LIFE CAN BE VERY ENVIRONMENTAL. YOU DON’T HAVE TO LIVE ISOLATED IN A FOREST. TO LIVE IN AN URBAN AREA CAN BE AN EFFICIENT USE OF RESOURCES AND ONE OF THE MOST ENVIRONMENTAL WAYS TO LIVE.”