

Rebel Yell!

The Satya Interview with Lauren Ornelas

Lauren Ornelas has been an animal and social justice activist since her high school days. She founded Viva!USA (Vegetarian International Voice for Animals), an organization that started in the UK whose mission is to campaign on behalf of animals killed for food. Their latest campaigns, which are based on the

really understand what chicken was until she told me, and I didn't want to eat it anymore. When I was younger, as with most kids, I didn't have much control over what I ate, but by the time I was 16, I made a decision that I could never eat another animal and was happy to eat peanut butter and jelly every day—so I didn't *have* to eat animals. I also saw a PETA commercial on cosmetic testing, so I knew there was somebody else out



group's own factory farm investigations, focus on kangaroos used in the soccer cleat industry; the factory farming of duck meat; and the living conditions of both pigs and dairy cows.

Lauren Ornelas recently took some time to chat with **Rachel Cernansky** about her thoughts on activism and history as an activist, and about some of Viva's current campaigns.

What got you started as an animal activist?

I went vegetarian when I was young, according to my mom I was four or five. We were eating chicken—I didn't

there like me—I'm from Texas, so being a vegetarian was kind of an odd thing.

A teacher in high school did a presentation on wildlife management, giving excuses as to why hunting was necessary. I raised my hand—I felt there was another side of the story, that there was another way to do it without having to kill the deer. My teacher said, "Tell someone who cares," and I said, "I don't know anyone who does." The next day he actually brought me an article about a group called Voice for Animals in San Antonio that had just staged an anti-fur protest. So I got in touch with them and went to their first meeting and never stopped doing activism since.

Wow, that teacher...

He ended up telling me I was going to go to hell by the time I graduated high school because I said he shouldn't do dissection. (He was a science teacher, so he felt very strongly about dissection.) He was probably one of my biggest opponents in high school, so it's really funny that he's the one who got me connected with the animal rights group.

Did your work with groups in college help to shape your activism?

I started an animal rights group at my university and found it to be the best way to reach a small audience. I went on to start Action for Animals in Austin because so many non-students were coming to the campus meetings, I felt like we needed to have two groups to fit both needs.

I think that was probably the most useful for me—running my own organization and doing all the different events, what I'd call "seasonal activism." We protested circuses when they came to town, anti-fur, anti-vivisection stuff, we always did the Great American Meat-out. So it was a useful way of getting myself educated in all the different issues, as well as different types of activism.

What do you think is the most effective form of activism, in terms of getting attention?

We need to use all the tools available to get the word out for the animals. I don't feel we're in a position where we know the one way that's going to achieve animal liberation or lessen animal suffering.

Personally, I feel that veganism is the best way for activists to spend their time, because we're able to tell people about an issue that affects the animals directly and that they can do something about immediately. I find a lot of times that when we tell people about issues affecting animals, they instinctively want to know what they can do. On some issues, such as research, there may not be something they can do directly, other than writing a letter. But by changing their eating habits, they can do something immediately, and by encouraging them to spread the word, they can also change other people.

What does being vegan mean to you?

To me it means doing what we can to eliminate animal suffering.



Kangaroo skin is used to make soccer cleats, threatening them with extinction.

Are humans a part of that picture?

To me they are. It's hard because I know that some activists feel this is a radical concept, but personally, the way *I* live my life, I do want to include how humans are treated in the actions that I take, the purchases that I make.

Can you talk about some of the civil disobedience you've done?

I've used civil disobedience to try to stop hunts in New Mexico, against fur and vivisection, and I participated in a slaughterhouse blockade in California (although I wasn't arrested for it).

One of the most interesting arrests that I've had was in a clocktower at UC Berkeley. We asked everybody to leave, barricaded a door and dropped down a rope to an activist who was on the ground.

He climbed up the rope and dropped an 80 foot banner against vivisection. Although we were only able to keep ourselves in the tower for a number of hours, he was able to stay up there for about a week; it gained a lot of exposure for animals used in vivisection. It was really funny because they also started focusing a tiny bit on veganism because they were very interested in what he was eating when he was up in the tower. So Clif Bars got some exposure [laughs].

Let's shift to your work with Viva, a group that originally started in the UK. What sparked the effort to give Viva a presence in the U.S.?

Juliet Gellatley, the founder of Viva, asked me to start Viva!USA when I was still with In Defense of Animals. What

attracted me to Viva was the fact that their campaigning style was consistent and seemed to be effective, and, most importantly, it focused on animals who are killed for food.

I found that their campaigning style was very positive, and I liked that half of everything they did focused on youth. I think that is critical because they can affect a lot of change right now—you always hear they're the future, but I see youth as the now *and* the future.

How would you describe Viva's campaign approach?

We create campaigns based on our own investigations of factory farms. We started out with the duck campaign which is what Viva/UK had done—they were successful in getting all factory farmed duck meat pulled from the shelves of Harrod's department store and all stores to stop selling from ducks who had the tips of their bills cut off. So we did our own investigations on duck farms, and although some leaders in the animal rights movement in the U.S. told us that our campaigns were not going to work, we were able to get Trader Joe's and some other grocery stores to stop carrying duck meat from the farms we investigated.

How are Viva investigations conducted?

I go out to the farms and videotape the animals. I do a majority of our investigations personally, but sometimes we are sent video footage from anonymous sources.

Can you talk about Viva's current kangaroo campaign?

The main industry pushing the slaughter of kangaroos for their skins in Australia is the soccer cleat industry. Adidas makes the majority of cleats, so they are the primary users of kangaroo skins. We don't think any life should be taken for a shoe, so we're encouraging them to switch to synthetic.

There's a couple reasons why we're focusing on the kangaroo in particular. One is that the way they're killing them has the potential to cause kangaroos to become endangered; they are allowed a

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quota of 6.9 million, which is the biggest land massacre. We've got an opportunity to try to stop that and feel we need to jump on it, so to speak. They're targeting the larger males because they have more skin. If they shoot a mother kangaroo and there's a baby, they bludgeon or decapitate the baby and take the mother and use her skin.

In addition, they do these kills at night, so hunters can't tell the difference between protected kangaroos and those that aren't. We've got video footage of a hunter accidentally killing a protected kangaroo. And the red kangaroo, who is *not* protected, is currently being killed three times faster than it can reproduce. Their average age was 12 in 1960, now it's two, so we have concerns about the future of the red kangaroo.

Why are kangaroos specifically used for cleats?

They claim that kangaroo skin is lighter, and that it can mold better to a person's foot. But synthetic materials are available that do the same thing. Nike makes a synthetic kangaroo leather shoe; even Adidas uses the synthetic, but they have not switched entirely. So the technology is out there, Adidas is just not choosing to use it.

Do you do any work with other kinds of activists or put energy into other movements?

My organizing time has always been for the animals but I participate in other social justice issues. In Texas, the KKK would always reserve the State Capitol on MLK Day, so we would protest against them, and I always try to march when I'm in town in the gay pride events, and the anti-war events as well. I feel those issues are equally important, and if we could get everybody in the world to see the connections of oppression I think we'd be in a lot better shape.

How can we close the gaps that exist between the different activist movements that hinder their individual growth?

One way is to always be understanding. Sometimes we get our defenses up. I think animal rights people get their defenses up when I talk about my boycott of chocolate that isn't fair trade or organic because of the slave situation in Africa. And unfortunately, that is what the other side gets when they hear us talk about animal rights issues or vegetarianism—they feel, "I'm already a good person, I'm already doing a good thing and here you're trying to tell me that I'm not." I think our approach has to be understanding, and that we're not asking them to become—although we'd love them to be—animal rights activists. But instead for them to just acknowledge the connection and make the changes that they can in their lives, to be consistent in not allowing oppression or exploitation in their lives, to take a look at what we're saying in terms of how the animals are treated. I think that if we could get past these defenses, most of them would go vegetarian.

And just to add, I think it was really neat, the United Farm Workers (UFW) recently sent out an email alert about how dairy workers were being treated in Oregon, and in their sample letter they included a statement about how the

cows were being treated. Cesar Chavez ([who founded] the UFW) was vegan, so there must be some people within that organization who understand these connections—their focus is the workers but they weren't going to ignore how the cows on the dairies are being treated.

I understand you have concerns with wine and chocolate?

I boycotted grapes for pretty much my whole life because of the UFW—I found out much later than everybody else that the boycott was over [laughs]. I boycotted raisins, grapes, and wine as part of the grape boycott—again, just like an animal, they're all the same thing.

It's funny with chocolate because there has not been a request for a boycott of chocolate, I think it's just people kind of doing it on their own. In a TV segment, a worker in Africa was asked what he would say to westerners who eat chocolate and he said, "Every time they bite into that piece of chocolate, that is my flesh and suffering that they're biting into"—and that's exactly what a non-human animal would say. I didn't see how I could eat chocolate again if I knew people were being treated in such a way.

What's your favorite vegan ice cream?

Can I get two?

Why not...

I like Soy Delicious, Cookie Avalanche. My other favorite is Soy Cream by Double Rainbow, Cookies 'n Cream—so they're the exact same things, but they're both so good. I'm pretty much a French fry and popcorn kind of girl, those are my two favorite foods.

What gives you hope?

Young people. Every time I go to a conference or do outreach, the compassion of the young people inspires me to continue. And they always give me hope, they always want to know what they can do and they have this compassion in their hearts and this eagerness to do something, and that's what the animals need. ■

To learn more about Viva!USA, visit www.vivausa.org or call (530) 759-VIVA (8482).

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