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INTERVIEW WITH DANA ELLYN

We talked about the vegan movement; about her art changing perspective in people; what can be tricky with the sudden increase in vegan products and how does she feel when someone says they feel bad watching her art.

VeganOrigo: When did you first encounter veganism?

Dana Ellyn: I was a vegetarian at heart when I was young. I had to eat everything that was placed in front of me, but I always made a fuss about it. I always analyzed my food, cutting it into little pieces. I checked every part of it, making sure it was not bleeding and that there were no “animal-like” parts in it, such as tendons, bones, veins, etc. Later, as an adult, I made the decision with my husband in 2001 to become vegetarian, and it is much easier, when a couple is on the same diet. I tried veganism a couple of times, but not whole-heartedly. About 5 years ago, I finally decided to complete the transition, and I know I will be vegan for life.



V: Where do you see yourself in the movement now?

D: It wasn't my goal to be seen as an activist when I started painting about animal rights and vegan/vegetarianism. I was just painting about my feelings on the subject, as I was educating myself on animal rights and all the evils of the meat and dairy industries. I immediately saw strong reactions to my art, however, and I realized the impact it could have. The more heavy-handed, the more "disgusting" my paintings were, the more attention they got. I had so much to say, and in time I had to learn how to paint with the intention of getting the message through, but still not so strongly that people would turn their heads away. Sometimes if I soften the message, people say, "now I see what you are talking about". Lots of topics for my paintings are from childhood. I paint now how I felt back then, eating animals with my innocent perceptive.

Turning to veganism from being a vegetarian is also a big inspiration for me. While I was vegetarian, I never understood why some vegans make fun of vegetarians. Once I looked at veganism more closely and learned about the issues with the dairy industry, I understood why people were giving me a hard time. The dairy industry is as bad as the meat industry. So, after doing all my research on the topic, I knew that I had to become vegan. Many people understand why people don't eat meat, but they don't get why you don't drink milk, or what is the problem with cheese.

So I had to paint on this topic and the message is out there now.



V: When did you start painting?

D: As a kid, I always did art, that was my thing. I grew up in a small town where everyone had their own role at school; Dana was ‘the artist’, Suzie was ‘the basketball player’, Beth was ‘the science geek’, etc. I was very fortunate, because my parents encouraged me, bought my art supplies, and sent me to art classes. I heard from many people that their parents wouldn’t allow them to go in that direction, but I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. I went to an academic college (George Washington University in Washington DC), where I majored in fine arts and history. What I learned is that you don’t grow up to become an artist. After college, you have to get a job. I had very good jobs in the corporate world and I did my art on the side. I was 30 when I met my husband, and he was a catalyst, not just for my becoming vegetarian, but also to my taking my art on another level. He was a full-time painter, still is. I am a full-time artist as well now.

So the short answer is that I was always doing art, but I have been doing it full-time for 17 years now.



V: What did you paint before going vegan? What has changed?

D: In my early stages, I was very traditional, very realistic, nothing too exciting. After meeting Matt, I found my voice in critical, meaningful art. One July, we started to do one painting each every day of the month to document each day's news, and we did that for 10 years. I included politics, veganism, and animal rights activism. The project was called "31 Days in July" (310 paintings by Dana and 310 paintings by Matt).



V: What is your message?

D: The simple question I ask is "Why do we love some animals and eat others?". I know I am not the only one to use this, but I think this is the biggest message. Everyone you meet has a dog or a cat, and they say, 'Oh, I love animals', but in my life as a whole I try to be consistent and not be a hypocrite, and the message is to encourage others to do the same. A pig or a cow is as smart as a dog, sometimes even smarter, and I help people make that connection. Even if they don't become vegetarian, at least they get the awareness that there is an issue here.



V: What is the reaction from people when they face this message?

D: People's reactions are mixed. Some people just respond with "I know, but...", which is very frustrating. We all hear people say, "but cheese is delicious, and it is impossible to give it up". It is true that cheese is addictive and the most difficult thing for most people to give up. But it's not an excuse. I want to say, 'try harder!'

I am the type of vegan who will encourage and congratulate someone who is making serious efforts to eat less meat. Although I would obviously prefer they never ate meat, I look at it as a step in the right direction. I've learned that making someone feel bad about their choices is much less effective than educating them about how they can make better and more informed choices.



V: Many people think it is very difficult, but when you make up your mind and do some research in the beginning, it is simple. You use the same move to grab a vegan shampoo in the store instead of a non-vegan.

D: It is also about where people live, but where I live, it is not difficult. It is accessible, there is always food to be found, there are always products to be found. In some rural areas, it would be more difficult, but since I live in the city, it is easy. When we travel to different parts of the country to visit family, it can sometimes be a challenge to find as many options. When we travel (and even when we are home), we don't tend to go out to restaurants a lot. The grocery store always has vegan options. Besides, I love to cook and the food I make at home tends to be better than anything we can find eating out - if I do say so myself (and my husband agrees).

V: Do you paint about eating habits in other cultures as well?

D: I have been very fortunate to travel a lot, and I am not shocked by other places, but seeing it in person can still be surprising. Every time we travel, new paintings come out of it. Actually, most of our travels have been painting trips, so we definitely react on the spot. I am also kind of looking for it: “What can I find in the market today that makes me surprised”?

My goal is to use the argument of speciesism. A few years ago, there was the horse meat scandal (traces of horse meat found in the beef supply). There was such a strong outrage from meat eaters, which means that people are upset by the idea of eating horse, while they happily fill their face with meat from cows every day. When I visit another country, I know that people eat different types of animals, like when I see rabbit in France, I know they eat it there, it doesn't shock me any more than the eating of any other animal. But a meat-eating American, for example, would most likely react negatively, since they see rabbits as cute little pets or backyard wildlife. One of my favorite paintings was made after a trip to France. The title is “An American In Paris”



V: How was it in China?

D: Yes, we saw some “things” in China too. Little kittens tethered on a string, being sold for food. Live frogs for sale at Walmart. The list goes on and on...



V: Meet your meat! – What does that mean to you?

D: It humanizes something that is not human. Puts a face to it. Shows them to people as sentient beings. If you met them in person, will you still eat them? Telling them face to face, “you look delicious”. It is cultural in this country that we don’t see the slaughter; we don’t see the animals in their original form before being packaged. You remove yourself from the source. You don’t see the face, you don’t see the blood, you don’t hear them scream. You just go into a clean, neat grocery store and get a pink, packaged thing called meat. I try to fill in those steps people are not seeing.

V: How do you see the movement? What it was like when you started and what it is like now?

D: First of all, it is impressive to see how much it is progressing, how mainstream it is now. The direction is good. There is more publicity about what goes on in this industry.

My only concern about the movement is health. I eat healthy. We eat a whole, plant-based diet. We eat fake meat about once or twice a year, usually as part of the holidays. We don’t buy “products”. There are so many types of vegan cheese, vegan meat, etc., but these fake things are not healthy. They are products, not food.

Veganism is not primarily a health movement, it is primarily a movement for the welfare of animals. But I wish there was more focus on personal health as well. If you eat vegan junk food, that is your choice. From the point of view of saving animals, it doesn’t matter if you are healthy or not. My concern about the vegan movement is that it’s so product-oriented, which can cause a lot of health problems and weight issues. I fear it will harm the movement if, a few years down the road, research about vegans reveals that vegans are not healthy as a group due to poor eating habits. We can encourage a lot more people to make the switch to a vegan lifestyle, if they see healthy vegans eating real food.

That said, I’m 100% happy that all of these products exist. I always prefer someone reaching for the fake meat and fake cheese rather than eating the real thing and harming animals. But do it in moderation. Be sure to take care of yourself too!

V: It is an interesting point of view! When I do interviews with doctors, they always highlight that health benefits are associated with the whole, plant-based diet.

D: Yes, there is a difference between being vegan and being plant-based. The first is the perception of those names. 'Vegan' unfortunately sometimes carries a bad connotation for some people. And, as I said before, vegan food (products) can be unhealthy. I prefer the term 'Plant based' because it narrows the definition of foods away from chemical laden fake foods to a healthy whole, real food diet.

V: What has changed in your life since the transition?

D: I feel super healthy and happy. I appreciate hearing that I look young for my age. As I am self-employed, I have time and I love cooking. I feel very fortunate that I can feed myself and my husband really well by taking the time to shop for fresh foods often and take the time to cook well balanced and delicious meals..

V: What does super healthy mean to you? What do you eat?

D: I only eat vegan cheese like once a month or once every other month. We don't buy any fake meats. We eat a whole-foods, plant-based diet. We stay away from 'products'. We eat beans, rice, grains, vegetables, fruits. My husband always says how lucky he is to get these healthy dishes 3 times a day. I love preparing these dishes, and it makes me feel good to eat like that. I am thankful every day that I have the money, time, and all the things I need to make this happen.

V: Do you have any favorite recipes?

D: I love putting bok choy, arugula, cabbage, spinach, and whatever greens we have in a bowl. I boil mushrooms, peppers, seaweed, and leeks into a broth, and I add some noodles and pour it over the greens. Then, top it with some scallions and nuts. We have this every couple of days, and we love it.



V: Do you have any book you can recommend for those who are not yet vegan, but like the idea and need more information?

D: For me, “Eating animals” was the one that most helped me make the connection. It is not a vegan book, the author is not vegan, it’s not even about going vegan, but when you read it, you just can’t ignore what you learn. You simply can’t unknow stuff. I read it at the right time, and I went vegan the day I finished reading it (or perhaps somewhere in the middle of the book).

V: Do you like seeing your art shared?

D: Yes, and I like it when people already know that a painting is Dana Ellyn. I love when people share them (as long as they give me credit!) I love that I can be a visual voice for this movement. I like that with this topic, you are actually changing people’s mind. At the

very least people say, “I feel bad when I eat meat” and I am like, “Good!”???? When I was only making political art, I was not changing anyone’s political views. Now I hear people saying that they stopped eating meat, drinking milk, etc. It brings me happiness that I can bring some awareness.



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With **Mariia Goldschmidt** from Tofu family, about being a fit mum and raising a vegan child.

With **Jo Frederiks**, about art and veganism

Dr Ruth Heidrich: A 36-year vegan survivor of Stage 4 breast cancer, and the first vegan to do the Ironman Triathlon. At the age of 83 she is still in perfect health and living an active life. She was also featured in the Forks over knives documentary.

We have created the **biggest list of vegan related books** if you need more information about veganism, looking for mouth-watering recipes, tips for raising vegan kids or children books for the lil ones.

If you are new to veganism, you might find this article useful: **Vegan Starter Kit**.

