



VIP TRANSCRIPT SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN ORNELAS



Lauren Ornelas is the Food Empowerment Project's founder and serves as the group's volunteer executive director. An animal rights activist for over 20 years, she is also the former executive director of Viva!USA, a national nonprofit vegan advocacy organization.

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CONNECTING THE ISSUES OF FOOD JUSTICE

STEVE PRUSSACK: Hi everyone and welcome back. I'm your co-host Steve Prussack. Welcome to another session on Veganpalooza 2013. We're really excited about our next guest. It's Lauren Ornales. Lauren Ornales is the founder and director of the Food Empowerment Project, a vegan food justice non-profit seeking to create a more just world by helping consumers recognize the power of their food choices. The Food Empowerment Project works in solidarity with farm workers, advocates for slave-free chocolate, and focuses on access to healthy foods in communities of color and low income communities. Lauren was previously head of Viva! USA, where she investigated factory farms and ran consumer campaigns. A real honor to have her with us today on Veganpalooza. Lauren, welcome to the show.

LAUREN ORNALES: Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

STEVE: Thanks so much for being here with us. We're going to talk about some of your core issues and how you got involved in all this, but why are you devoting to this? Why is it that the topic of food justice is so important for us to learn more about?

LAUREN: I think that there are a lot of issues that move me, the injustices that take place in the world from the diamond industry to clothing to all sorts of things that just impact me a lot. Trying to figure out ways to make a difference in them can be sometimes difficult. When I look at food, it's something that we all do several times a day, and that these food choices can have such a powerful impact not only on our local community but our global community as well. It just seemed like a great way to tie in issues that we can all make a difference on that personally I feel very passionate about, from veganism to things like water privatization to the issues of the worse forms of child labor taking place in the chocolate industry.

STEVE: What are the core issues? Many of us are aware of some of the issues, but what's at the top of the list of what we should be aware about what's going on with our food distribution and all these different things happening?

LAUREN: The core issues for Food Empowerment Project are veganism, which I'm sure that all the people participating in this are very familiar with, so I won't go into that. But we are a vegan organization for ethical reasons. Because of this, our whole organization is pretty much based on the ethics of food. So as an organization that encourages people to be vegan, we know that that means that we're encouraging them to increase their fruit and vegetable intake. And because of this, we want to make sure that the people who produce our food are also treated and their rights and their dignity upheld. So that's why one of the other core issues that we deal with is the rights of farm workers. Going from there, really that then encapsulates all of our food choices, so slavery and the worse forms of child labor taking place in the chocolate industry. Then our other focus is access to healthy foods in communities of color and low income communities, which you kind of hinted on when you're talking about food distribution. In the United States, and actually globally, as I've talked about this globally I've realized it's not just in the U.S., that you have communities of color and low income communities not having the same access to healthy foods as higher income communities do.

STEVE: Right, so what are some of the things that you're doing to help those communities? I know that even organic is a big issue, that they don't even see organic foods in some of those communities.

LAUREN: Exactly, and that's one of the interesting things. So our work, we work on environmental justice principles in our work. We kind of do what the communities want us to do. Our focus is really that the communities should have the loudest voice in what's taking place and how they are actually having access. So what we've done is we started out in Santa Clara County, which is known as the Silicon Valley

in California, where we surveyed high income and low income areas on the access to healthy foods. We found 50% more liquor stores in the lower income communities. Higher income communities had 14 times more fruits and vegetables than the lower income communities. We also surveyed for access to meat and dairy alternatives as well, not only because they're healthier but also for us as an ethical organization, we feel that everybody should have the right to eat their ethics. So we also surveyed for those and again found that these communities don't have high access to these types of foods either. When you consider that a lot of these communities are lactose intolerant, it increases the level of injustice that's taking place, so what's available for them is food that's going to make them sick. You brought up organic. We did focus groups in San Jose, where some of the most impacted communities were, and organic came up time and time again because people are aware. These communities are aware that chemicals are on their food, and they don't want to be ingesting chemicals. Who does?

STEVE: What are some of the tools that you find are inspiring people? If we're talking about veganism and plant-based diets, how have you found in your career and your organization is the best way to spread education and inspire people to make these changes when they're so conditioned?

LAUREN: I think that everybody, what's going to impact everybody, is going to be a little bit different. The strategy that we use in our organization is really what's happening to the animals and that they personally have the ability to change this. They have the ability to not participate in the type of suffering that takes place. When I investigated farms in California and other parts of the country where cows are raised for their milk, I witnessed mama cows and the babies crying to each other. In different parts of the farm, you could hear them bellowing back and forth to each other. When a lot of people hear it, and again, not everybody, but a lot of people have that internal feeling, that desire to not want to cause harm, this impacts them. It may not be an instantaneous thing where they then change their diet immediately, although thankfully some people do, a seed is planted, and over time I think a lot of these people who are more open to recognizing that they can make differences with their choices, that they can make choices that aren't that radical and extreme when you compare it to what's happening to animals, that they will make a compassionate choice not to participate in the suffering that takes place toward animals.

STEVE: How are things like the ag-gag bill, maybe we can touch on that, how is that impacting as a roadblock to you getting this message out because of the laws that are in place now?

LAUREN: It hasn't impacted our work. We know that it's impacted and can potentially impact the work of other organizations. I don't do as many investigations as I used to, and I still would. But that's not the focus of our work. But I guess I try not to think about those things and just kind of push ahead with the work that needs to be done and really rely on focusing on corporations and the things that they can do, as well as people not only making choices in their own lives but continuing to talk about these issues and not just feel like it's my personal choice, but to make sure that they talk to other people about the choices that they've made and why. Because I think that a lot of issues, the one-to-one contact we can have to people is very powerful.

STEVE: Are you finding strategies like leaflets, flyers, film clips, what are some of the strategies that you're using in your organization?

LAUREN: In terms of promoting veganism, if that's what you're referring to, I speak on the issue. We have very researched and written out information on our website that a lot of people come to us once they find and talk to us about it. But our biggest project that we're doing in promotion of veganism, we haven't launched yet, but we will soon, which is trying to reach those people that have just gone vegan or who are interested in going vegan, and keeping up with them for at least a year after they've made this decision, and sending them monthly information, talking about all sorts of issues, clearly animals and how

they are in a more natural situation and really trying to get to know these animals as individuals as well as what's happening to them in factory farms, including nutritional information, environmental information, different types of questions and answers that can help them through the process, to kind of hold their hand for at least a whole year. Because a lot of people will go vegan in an instant, maybe, once the horrific conditions of the factory farms or slaughterhouses reaches them, but some don't always stick with it. Our goal is to make sure that those people who are inclined to go this way stick with it, and we kind of want to be there with them every month. We're going to be serving them at the beginning and at the end of this program that we're starting called Food Chain.

STEVE: Wow. So the website is www.foodispower.org for our listeners, right? That's the Food Empowerment Project, so they can click over there to see all of these programs and all the different things you're doing. You mentioned earlier about the slave-free chocolate trade. For those of us not aware, what exactly is going on with that?

LAUREN: Just like a lot of people say, when I first went vegan in the late '80s, a lot of people weren't aware of what was happening to animals and how they were being raised and killed for food. It's kind of the same thing with the chocolate industry. It's not as if there's going to be a label or some type of tag on the candy bar that explains where even the chocolate came from and how it was procured. So what we have is an issue where a lot of people don't know what's going on. In West Africa, in countries such as Ghana and the Ivory Coast, you have approximately 1.8 million children who are victims of the worse forms of child labor, some including slavery, where they get to the farms in a variety of ways. They can be sold into it from a family member, they could be so poor in a nearby country that their family thinks that they're actually going to earn some money and be able to help the family, to actually being stolen from marketplaces and trafficked over. These children are sometimes locked in at night. A lot of times if they don't move fast enough when they're carrying the heavy cacao pods, they're beaten. They are carrying machetes, some children as young as seven years old. Many of the children who have been photographed have scars on their bodies from cutting the cacao out of the trees and using these really hazardous equipment, just like farm workers in the United States that are exposed to agricultural chemicals. So you have an industry in West Africa where these children, and some adults obviously, are treated in this manner.

STEVE: What are some of the things you guys have done as an organization to help advocate for this abuse?

LAUREN: What we try to do is we try to help consumers. Our tagline is "Because your food choices can change the world," that we want people to see that they can make these choices in their lives and have an impact. So we created, because if you look at the back of the chocolate, it doesn't tell you the country of origin. So we created a list on our website of chocolate we recommend based on the sourcing of the cacao. To be on our recommended list, the company, except for a few exceptions, cannot source from West Africa. The list includes the recommended companies, also the companies we do not recommend, and we explain why we don't recommend. We want to be fully transparent to people using our list. So a company may not be recommended because they're currently sourcing from West Africa, they may not be recommended because they're not going to tell where their chocolate's coming from, or because they don't respond to us. So one of the campaigns that we created is on Clif Bar that makes primarily vegan products where they will not disclose to us the country of origin where they get their chocolate from. So we have a petition that we're asking people to please sign and let Clif Bar know it does matter to them, that they do want to know. Being transparent is what can cause a lot of corporations to make changes in their supply chain, and that's what we're hoping to do as well.

STEVE: You're doing some incredible things. For everyone listening or those at a later date, what are some of the steps we can take to get involved with some of your campaigns and fighting for these causes?

LAUREN: We have an email alert list that we encourage people to sign up for. We only send out about once a month. Of course, we also have a Facebook page and a Twitter account. So we encourage people. We're an all volunteer organization, so we encourage people to please volunteer their time. Of course, I don't know if this is okay to say or not, but obviously donations are welcome. We're learning that being an all-volunteer group that not being able to have any paid staff is delaying some of the progress in our efforts. In terms of the individual choices, obviously if you have access to healthy foods in your area, going vegan is a great way to begin to make a difference. Buying organic does not change the living conditions of the farm workers, but at least it's one less bad thing to happen to farm workers when you buy organic. Using our chocolate list to make sure. Write companies. We actually, our chocolate list also has an app, and on the app you can immediately contact these companies as well to let them know that you want them, encourage them to change suppliers or to become transparent. We have found companies are responding to us now after hearing from customers. Boycotting companies. There are some companies out there that are very well-known for different types of injustices, so we encourage people to just be more aware of where their food choices come from. Clearly nobody's perfect. There's always things that can happen, but as long as we strive to do our best to make sure that when we buy food and when we do these types of things, when we eat out, that we're doing the best that we can to live by our own ethics.

STEVE: Incredible work, Lauren. At this point, we'd love to go more into your back story. This is Veganpalooza, and we'd love to hear the story of what inspired you to become vegan. What happened in your life? Did you grow up vegan?

LAUREN: No, I'm actually from Texas, so vegan is not something, especially in the late '80s, that was very popular. I actually went vegetarian when I was five, according to my mom. She told me where chicken came from and I didn't want to eat chicken anymore. But given the circumstances, I was able to stick with it. I know that even in my autograph books from fifth grade, there are comments about me being a vegetarian, which I didn't at the time really understand what it meant. But as I got older, again my circumstances changed. I did go back to consuming animals. By the time I was 15 or 16, I went vegetarian, and by the time I was 17, I got connected with a local animal rights group and learned more about what was happening. I saw *The Animals Film* for the first time where they show a chick being debeaked. Around that time was when I actually went vegan.

STEVE: Then what led to a career? What made you decide to devote your life to it? Because we might have people listening in that would love to do the kind of work you're doing and devote their life to this. So what were some of the steps you took to build your career to get to the point where now you're founder and executive director of your own organization?

LAUREN: I was in high school when I got involved in animal rights, and I had absolutely no interest in going to college. It just wasn't something that interested me. I think it was just the confines. I was a rebellious youth, which I'm sure helped with my activism. But when I got involved with the local animal rights group, they really encouraged me to go to school and to learn different techniques that can help the animals, which included public speaking, debate, political science so I could learn more about how legislation becomes a law, just different types of classes that they thought could help me. So I think that was pretty much the first step. I think from then on, it was really volunteering in all the different issues that I cared about. In the very beginning, I was the type of person that would join a group, I would sign up for all the different campaigns, I wanted to help with all of them, and I was involved in numerous national campaigns. I think the volunteering helped a lot, and it also helped me solidify what I thought would and wouldn't be effective for me.

Over time I realize that campaign work was definitely something that interested me the most, meaning that I support outreach and education efforts and I do them when I can, but for me I like to see tangible results. So creating and doing work where there was an end goal that I could see some type of accomplishment worked best for me. I think anybody who's wanting to do this type of work, I think just knowing that you're going to have to probably volunteer a lot and do a lot of work really hard, I think over time as I've gotten older, the years of people telling me to take time for myself and me thinking that was selfish is something that I've tried to learn and trying to be a little bit better about creating that balance in my life. But I think that any time you want to really be effective at something, you need to learn as much as you can learn and do what fits right for you so that it feels comfortable so when you're working on these issues, that it feels more natural.

STEVE: For a while, you were head of Viva! USA. Would you share some of that experience with us?

LAUREN: Sure. Hopefully a lot of people can remember Viva! USA. We did a lot of corporate campaigns. We're actually, we're the sister group of Viva! in England. They had asked me to start Viva! in the United States. We did investigations of factory farms and created corporate campaigns. Probably our best-known effort was on duck factory farms, where I investigated factory farms throughout the United States, and we created campaigns targeting different grocery store chains to stop selling duck meat. We were successful in getting a number of small chains, and then eventually getting Trader Joe's to stop carrying all duck meat. As far as I know, they still don't, but I'm not positive. We also were successful in getting Pier One Imports to stop using feathers in their product after we were able to inform them of the conditions. Probably the most well-known incident that came out of our work was that we were targeting Whole Foods market for a number of years. What ended up coming out of that was the founder of Whole Foods Market ended up going vegan after he did some reading which was sparked by dialogue that he and I had had. We also did investigations of pig farms where we try to get young people involved, and we also worked on trying to get Ben & Jerry's to carry vegan ice cream as part of our campaign on the dairy industry where we were successful in getting dairy farms closed down. A couple of dairy farms were trying to start up near our area, including one 6000 cow dairy farm, and a 1500 heifer farm, and they were trying to get permits, but we were able to galvanize enough people in the community to stop them from happening.

STEVE: It really is horrifying when we see those movies. I can't imagine what it might be like to be involved in these kinds of investigations, especially as a vegan and compassionate. What was that like for you?

LAUREN: I mentioned before when I saw *The Animals Film* and I thought I could never do something like that. Then when you're faced with situations where you're the one who has to do it, you find the strength in yourself. For me, I would go in and I would really have to harden myself. It doesn't mean that some animals didn't walk out with us at times, but to really just go in and take that footage, take the photos, do what needed to be done. But afterwards is kind of when it would actually hit me. I actually collapsed after doing an investigation of a chicken farm, just by the overwhelming number of animals, when you think about chickens who are killed for their flesh, just the overwhelming number of them and just feeling how can we stop this from taking place. But I would have nightmares of different animals on farms. I think just going through and knowing that I wasn't taking this footage just so I knew what was going on myself, I knew I was taking the footage to make sure that as many people saw it as possible, that we were going to actually try and do something to hold the industry accountable or do something to try and open more people's hearts and minds to what was taking place.

STEVE: Being involved in this for so long, since the late '80s, what have you seen with the vegan movement, how it's evolved? Are you finding that people are becoming more aware and more compassionate in their choices?

LAUREN: I think that we can look at just the fact that vegan is used almost like something that everybody knows, that it's in movies, it's on TV, you have more and more vegan options being available, the fact that my family no longer cringes when the word vegan comes up. Before I think they thought it was a fad that I was going through, some type of phase that I was going through. Now they're the ones emailing me articles about veganism because it is so much more widespread. We've got a lot more to go, and I know that we as a movement will do it. But there are striking differences, and most of all it's just people being more knowledgeable about what's happening to animals. Again, not just farmed animals, but all animals used and exploited at the hands of humans.

STEVE: I can remember the same thing early in my vegan life. My parents thought it was a fad, and they hoped that I would go back to eating real food again.

LAUREN: Yeah, it's so funny how we think about it. A lot of talk has been going on lately about lab grown meat or stem cell meat and how people are saying it's gross and they would never eat it, and I'm always just amazed that people gnaw on the leg bone of a chicken and slurp at their veins, and somehow that's not gross. There's some type of disconnect.

STEVE: Exactly. You mentioned your family. Maybe we could talk a little about that, how it is for you with friends and family, with your lifestyle. Obviously we're not on the mainstream as the life that we choose. First of all, your family. How have they reacted? Have any of them changed their diet based on you? What's your family life like? And then we can talk more about friends and things like that.

LAUREN: Sure. My mom raised my two sisters and I on her own, and I think that's where my concept of family and why I'm so, when I got involved in veganism it was so much about protecting the family, comes from. But they, no, none of them are even vegetarian. I think I'm responsible for some of that. I think screaming and yelling at them when I was a teenager about how selfish and evil they were probably didn't get me very far. But I think that now, decades later, they talk to me about these things in a different way. They say things like, "Oh, I'm buying cage-free," or they're trying vegan chorizo. They'll talk to me more about it whereas food was kind of a taboo issue for so long with me and them. But I think that now, and they're still making apologies, like, "Oh, I just had chicken. Sorry about that." They're understanding that it's not just, "Oh, I ate a tomato." We're talking about a sentient being when I hear these words. So I think there is some thought to them now, and they are telling me more when they're trying different products, different vegan products, which I'm very excited by.

STEVE: How about friends? How do you navigate these social circles of everything is geared, especially in the United States, around eating: barbecues, holidays, everything like that. What's it like, what's your experience with friends and things like that?

LAUREN: I admit that a majority of my friends tend to be vegan, but more in the work scenario or even with the Food Empowerment Project, we're a vegan organization but it doesn't necessarily mean that all the organizations that we work with are necessarily vegan or even vegetarian. So that does sometimes come up. But more than not, the response I usually get when we do the access work, we're just going to begin doing more access work in Vallejo, California, which is not too far from San Francisco, and the reaction we've gotten from the community groups that we're working with there, like, "Yep, of course." They know that being vegan and not consuming animal products is healthier, so they get it on that level. My fondest memory is my boss that I had before making a reference to something condescending to me about not eating meat, and because she offended me, she then decided to not eat meat for six months. I

tried to do what I could to get her to offend me again so that she'd go vegetarian for another six months, but it didn't work out. But it was just the consciousness, and she and I had to travel for work. We went to India, we went to Hong Kong, we went to China, we went to Germany, and so a lot of times, we were in situations where food was an absolute big problem for me in terms of what would I eat and putting my foot down with certain things that I would not sit at the table if they were to eat. I ate a lot of Top Ramen in China, and in India, actually. So it came up more in those circumstances, and it was always interesting, even in China when we met with workers at a high-tech facility, were very, very gracious and kind to me in making sure that where we ate didn't even accidentally put pig oil in my food so that I could stick with my vegan diet.

STEVE: I was going to bring that up. So travel and eating vegan, how that's been and how, especially in other countries, how that is to try and get a vegan meal.

LAUREN: In India, people always think it'd be very easy, but when we were in Delhi, it was very hard to find food that did not have any dairy in it. I had my vegan passport, so it had what I was in all the different languages, but it was still pretty difficult. That's why bringing my own food with me helped a lot. Like I said, oatmeal and Top Ramen were some of the easiest because all I knew I would for sure have access to would be boiling water. When we went down to Bangalore, it was a little bit easier because they didn't have as much dairy, and in places like Germany, and I know in Germany, Berlin, they have lots of vegan options, so we were primarily in areas not as affluent, so we'd have to find grocery stores that at least sold pasta and pasta sauce, so that was something I could eat in a little hotel room.

STEVE: Maybe you can talk a little about your plans for the future, your Food Empowerment Project and some other things that you might have coming down the road.

LAUREN: Sure. We have Food Chain, which I mentioned before. Hopefully we'll be launching that in the next few months. We hope to get people to subscribe. So if you go to our website soon, we hope to have information there, or if you know somebody who's just gone vegan or is just interested in going vegan, that they can subscribe to. Again, they'll get one issue a month through the mail for a year, because we want to find out what's effective and what's not for people when we talk about veganism and the different things from different recipes to how we talk about the issues about animals and the environmental impact. We also have our work that we're going to be doing in Vallejo, California. We're partnering with one of the founding members of the Black Panther Party, David Hilliard, as well as with Vallejo People's Garden, which is run by a Filipino woman. Vallejo's incredibly diverse. The county is considered a very agricultural county, but Vallejo itself is very urban, so we're going to be starting our access work there and we're really looking forward to that. Again, with everything we do, we're looking for volunteers. Most of the biggest projects that we have, a couple months ago we did a school supply drive for the children of farm workers, which we'll probably be doing again next year. We do our part in trying to help the farm workers who, again, don't get paid much or treated pretty horribly, and so we're trying to do our part to assist them the best way that we can. We also have a website veganmexicanfood.com, and we also have our regular website foodispower.org, where we always encourage people to donate their recipes to us. I do not cook, and so we're always happy to have them because people give us their recipes that we like, and we credit the people and have a photo up on our site as well.

STEVE: Great. So the best way to get in touch again is foodispower.org. Is that the best way to sign up for the emails and everything like that?

LAUREN: Yes, it is.

STEVE: Great, Lauren. Anything we didn't touch on that you wanted to tell everyone during Veganpalooza this year? This was pretty comprehensive, but if anything else that you wanted to mention?

LAUREN: Sure. All of these issues, we know it can be overwhelming, and if you're involved in animal issues at all, you know that it just seems like, ugh, the suffering is everywhere. But the thing is trying to seek out the different things that we can do to make a difference helps make it less overwhelming. To make sure that we're not contributing to the suffering of animals by going vegan, to make sure that we're not buying chocolate that comes from the worse forms of child labor, to make sure that we're not buying from certain companies that have horrible human rights abuses. The little things that we can do, the little stands that we can take, and that we can talk to other people about make it feel less overwhelming. So I think that more than anything, we want people to look at these food choices as a way to make a difference and not something to be scared of, not something to feel oppressed by, but instead something we can stop some of the oppression with.

STEVE: That about covers it. Thank you so much, Lauren. Lauren Ornales of the Food Empowerment Project. Lauren, thanks for being part of Veganpalooza and being on the call with us today.

LAUREN: Thank you so much, and thanks everybody for wanting to be a part of this great event.

STEVE: Thank you so much again. Lauren Ornales, Food Empowerment Project at foodispower.org. I'm your co-host Steve Prussack. Thanks for being part of this session of Veganpalooza, and we'll see you in the next one.