

–an **EVEN** exclusive interview –



with

## lauren Ornelas

**Founder & Executive Director, Food Empowerment Project**

*lauren Ornelas is the founder/director of [Food Empowerment Project](#) (F.E.P.), a vegan food justice nonprofit seeking to create a more just world by helping consumers recognize the power of their food choices. F.E.P. works in*

*(In Her Image Photography)*

*solidarity with farm workers, advocates for chocolate not sourced from the worst forms of child labor, and focuses on access to healthy foods in communities of color and low-income communities.*

*While lauren was the director of **Viva! USA**, she investigated factory farms and ran consumer campaigns. In cooperation with activists across the country, she persuaded **Trader Joe's** to stop selling all duck meat and was the spark that got the founder of **Whole Foods Market** to become a vegan. She also helped halt the construction of an **industrial dairy operation in California**. She served as Campaign Director with the **Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition** for six years and has made a **TedX** presentation, The Power of Our Food Choices.*



**EVEN: How did veganism become part of your life?**

**lauren:** I really appreciate how you worded this question, as indeed it does become a part of your life. Growing up in Texas in the '70s, I'd often see cows along the highways. I made the decision to go vegetarian when I was in elementary school because I knew that by eating cows I'd be tearing those families apart. But for a variety of reasons I was unable to stick with it.

When I was in high school I got in touch with a local animal rights group and learned about veganism and, well, animal rights. And I have been actively involved since 1987.

For me, knowing what happens to non-human animals at the hands of humans has been something I could never unlearn or not want to know, as knowing allows us the ability to work towards changing it.

**EVEN: Who was an influential person in your life earlier on that led you to veganism?**

**lauren:** I would say that not wanting to eat animals when I was young led me to that path and no one necessarily influenced me. I would thus probably have to say that animals were the biggest influence on me because I didn't want to hurt them.

**EVEN:** What advice would you give to a vegan advocate wanting to become more of an activist?

**lauren:** Do it. Figure out what you like to do and where you feel you can make the most impact. I would strongly encourage



*Monthly outreach at the Petaluma Poultry Slaughterhouse*

anyone wanting to become an animal activist to read *Striking at the Roots* by Mark Hawthorne to help them on their path. The book interviews activists from all over the world who use a variety of tools to make a difference for the animals.

**EVEN:** What do you think makes veganism hard for people?

**lauren:** I think there are a variety of things.

One is that in the US we are very much geared towards individual needs and wants, which allow us to look past anything that is not about ourselves. People say that it is their right to eat “meat” without thinking about how it impacts others.

I also think convenience is a big issue.

If it isn't convenient to be vegan, then people think that is a good excuse not to be.

Our society isn't quite focused on what truly matters in this world – it is mostly about that next house, that next car, etc., instead of doing what is right by even our own conscience.

Of course you have a lot of communities of color and low-income communities who do not have access to fresh fruits and



*Child of farm worker with new backpack from F.E.P. 2015 School Supply Drive*

vegetables. In our work at F.E.P., we know that some are immigrants who, after moving here, are being forced to eat healthier foods. Many are working several jobs to make ends meet and happen to live closer to a liquor store or fast food outlets with unhealthy foods. In Santa Clara County, CA (also known as Silicon Valley), we found that higher-income areas had 14 times more access to frozen vegetables than lower-income areas.

The reality is that it is difficult for many to eat healthy, much less vegan, which is why we actively support and work on living wage efforts for all.

**EVEN: What, in your opinion, is the most misunderstood idea about veganism?**

**lauren:** For some reason they have it in their heads that it [*veganism*] is about telling someone not to do something instead of recognizing that it is more about encouraging people to eat more in tune with a belief (that many of them probably hold).

Many don't realize it is about compassion.  
In other words, to not harm others.

**EVEN: What one thing from your thinking in childhood do you wish you could change?**

**lauren:** The belief I had back then that justice always prevails. It is not true, and justice is something that we all have to fight for together.

**EVEN: If you were to mentor a younger person today, what guidance might you offer? What encouraging words might you share with a newbie?**

**lauren:** I would encourage them to be kind to themselves and kind to others.

To do this, they need to understand that everyone makes changes in their lives when it is right for them, and the more we provide them with accurate information and tools to make a difference, the more open they will be to learning and making choices that do no harm to humans or non-human animals.

I would remind them that starting now, and for the rest of their lives, they have the ability to create positive change in the world and to plant seeds to help others to do the same.

**EVEN: Do you have a favorite vegan meal or food you can tell us about that really makes veganism work for you?**

**lauren:** Ironically, I am not much of a food person as I see food more as a tool for social change. And I guess that is one of the reasons why veganism works for me. I love animals and empathize greatly with their pain (whether it is physical or psychological), and by being vegan, I am not contributing to the suffering of those who I truly care about.

**EVEN: What one thing makes veganism worthwhile for you?**

**lauren:** Living my ethics and being true to myself.



**EVEN: Any opinion or insight on the future of veganism in today's world?**

**lauren:** The word vegan should not just be used when referring to people who choose not to eat animal products because being vegan includes doing our best to abstain from participating in the other ways animals are exploited, including animal testing,

wearing them, etc. Clearly there is a lot of buzz about the word vegan these days, which is great, but I think it is imperative that we keep the dialogue about this word focused on what it truly means. Veganism is simply about one's ethics and not contributing to the suffering of others.

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Learn more about F.E.P.'s work at [www.foodispower.org](http://www.foodispower.org) and [www.veganmexicanfood.com](http://www.veganmexicanfood.com)

Watch lauren's TEDx talk on [The Power of Our Food Choices](#).

**You and your food choices  
can change the world. – lauren Ornelas**