

EVEN Interview with Karen Davis, PhD

President and Founder of United Poultry Concerns

[United Poultry Concerns](#) is a nonprofit organization that promotes the compassionate and respectful treatment of domestic fowl. [Karen](#) is the founding editor of UPC's quarterly magazine *Poultry Press* and the author of several books including *Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look at the Modern Poultry Industry*; *More Than a Meal: The Turkey in History, Myth, Ritual, and Reality*; and *The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale: A Case for Comparing Atrocities*. Karen Davis maintains a sanctuary for chickens, turkeys and ducks on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.



EVEN: How did veganism become part of your life?

Karen: I grew up in a meat-eating household in Pennsylvania. Although I have always loved animals and hated animal cruelty, I ate animal products so unthinkingly that, while arguing at the dinner table with my father about hunting, it would be over a plate of dead animals who were invisible to me as beings who had once been alive and had died a horrible death.

In the 1970s I read an essay by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy called *The First Step*, in which he described his visits to Moscow slaughterhouses and argued that the first step toward a nonviolent life was to get the animal bloodshed out of your system. I stopped eating meat. Yet even after that, I was oblivious to the sources of dairy and eggs. I didn't think "cow" or "chicken" while consuming those products.

In the 1980s, Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation*, and *The Cookbook for People Who Love Animals*, published by Gentle World in Florida, opened my eyes to the animal suffering embodied in eggs and dairy products. One day, I sat in my car at an Italian restaurant in College Park, Maryland, bawling my eyes out because I could no longer have pizza with extra (or any!) cheese. Then I went inside, ate rigatoni, and never looked back.

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

Karen: I would advise this person to get involved with one or more animal rights organizations and start acting! I think it's important to expand one's personal dietary ethic to a public outreach effort. The very word "advocate" means taking a public stand and making a case for what one cares about and wants to accomplish. National organizations like **United Poultry Concerns, Mercy for Animals, PCRM** and others produce a range of handout brochures, posters, videos and other material for an activist to educate her/himself and others. Understandably, many people are shy about confronting the public. Learning to talk comfortably with people may take practice.

There are many ways to advocate for a vegan diet and animal rights, and many channels of communication. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that people love Personal Stories. By framing your advocacy message in the form of a Personal Story of how you became aware of animal suffering, and what led you to change, you engage people's interest without threatening them. You show people by example that it's possible and liberating to change one's habits into something new and better.

EVEN: What makes veganism hard for people?

Karen: People regard meat – all animal products, but especially meat – as the most substantial food. The smell of roasted flesh is irresistible to most people. Throughout history, people around the world have celebrated victories, holidays, weddings, and other special occasions over a large roasted animal or several large animals on the table. Everything else – bread, condiments, vegetables – surrounds the meat whether in a sandwich or on the dinner table. People raised on meat are afraid if they stop eating it, they will be emotionally and nutritionally deprived. They fear they will not feel full anymore, psychologically or physically.

This is a legitimate fear since for most of us, whether alone or with family and friends, eating is one of the most important ways, if not *the* most important way to relax, relieve stress, and experience pure pleasure. To be confronted with the thought of having to turn the pure pleasure of eating and sharing meals into a tension-filled, nerve-wracking experience, adding to the stress of life instead of reducing it, daunts many people. They don't want to have to explain to their friends why they're not ordering lobster anymore, or why they're asking the waiter if the pasta has eggs in it. They don't want to turn the dinner table into a food fight with their family.

These concerns make it hard for people to want to become vegan, even those who genuinely care about animals and want better health. Media advertising associates happiness, sex appeal, fun, family and friends with animal-based meals and dining enjoyment. TV ads say over and over that children don't like vegetables and will only eat them hidden in processed meat products. And though food is everywhere in our society, grabbing a tasty vegan meal at a fast-food restaurant or finding a good vegan option at a better restaurant is almost impossible. All of these things together make it hard for people to go vegan.

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

Karen: That vegan food is not hearty. That eating vegan is not an emotionally satisfying experience. That vegan food is flavorless and lacking in calcium and protein. That you can't grow big and strong and be athletic and have fun on just "lettuce." That it's "just vegetables." Most people have no idea how delicious well-prepared vegan food is, because they've never had any.

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

Karen: I wish that in childhood I had made the connection between meat and animals, but I didn't. As a child, I didn't think about animals in relation to eating.

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

Karen: I would encourage the younger person to eat a wholesome vegan diet and not gorge on potato chips and vegan junk food. I would encourage a person still living at home with parents who may not (yet) be vegan to be firm in their commitment and to educate themselves about vegan nutrition and share the information with their parents. I

would encourage the person to offer to cook the family dinner once a week and to do everything possible to make being vegan an affirmative, pleasurable and fulfilling experience. I would encourage the person to be firm but friendly about their decision to be vegan, and never forget what animals go through in order to become “food” that nobody needs.

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

Karen: Although I grew up eating meat and liking it, when I decided to become vegetarian in the 1970s, I switched easily to pasta dishes. Pasta to this day is my favorite food – heaps of linguini with stir-fry mushrooms, spinach, broccoli florets and olives in marinara sauce or toasted sesame oil & tamari sauce. Dining out, I love Indian food, Italian, and Chinese. Some people say it’s difficult to be vegan while traveling, but there is almost always one or more of these restaurants nearby. Even if you happen to be at a restaurant without a single vegan menu option, you can still put together a vegan dinner based on what is there. Creativity and courage are important to being a successful vegan.

EVEN: What one thing makes veganism worthwhile for you?

Karen: I became vegan because I did not want animals to suffer and die for my appetite. Keeping faith with animals by respecting them and not eating them is the single most worthwhile decision I have ever made. For me, being vegan is the opposite of renunciation and “doing without.” It’s a totally positive, deeply satisfying diet and dietary decision.

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

Karen: There are so many forces at play, it’s hard to predict how well a vegan diet and lifestyle will fare in a world with an expanding human population already close to 7 billion people, in which analysts say that the number of animals raised for food is likely to double from 50 billion to 100 billion land animals, by 2050. This estimate doesn’t even

include the megatons of fish people are eating and that are increasingly being factory-farmed in filthy, disease-filled aquaculture tanks.

One thing is clear: there is no way that people can consume the number of animals and amounts of animal products that are being consumed in today's world, and yet somehow, magically, eliminate factory farming. This is a pipedream. Even "free-range" and other animal farming practices and conditions that are represented as alternatives to industrial animal farming involve mass production of animals, breeding, shipping, slaughtering, culling, and mutilation.

My opinion is that the future of veganism in the world depends upon going vegan, purchasing vegan food and other vegan products, building the vegan economy, and getting others to join you. There has been progress over the last twenty years, thanks to dedicated vegan-animal rights activists around the world. Even if we don't succeed in changing the world, being vegan and an animal rights advocate is the right thing to do.



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