

'The animals can't wait'

How one Portland woman has dedicated her life to saving animals from slaughter

"Once I learned the truth of the multibillion dollar meat and dairy industry, I couldn't keep eating animals and live with myself."

- Dani Rukin

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STAFF WRITER

Dani Rukin's legs are a little shaky as she approaches the front doors of a Safeway in Southeast Portland. She glances down at the sign in her hand – a picture of a bloated pig carcass covered in mud, captioned: "It's Not Food, It's Violence" – to draw on the strength of her purpose. She cuts through the crowded supermarket until she arrives in the refrigerated meat section, filled with the neatly packaged product that Rukin is there to stand against. She positions herself in the middle, blocking a small section, facing outward and begins to speak. Her voice is strong and she projects; only if you're listening carefully can you hear the slight waver, the tiny tremor of fear. She speaks in clear sentences, with no script, beginning with: "A year ago, I stopped eating animals. I'm just here to share my experience." A fellow activist stands by, recording the whole thing with an iPhone.

She goes on for a solid three minutes. People pass by with a curious ear but mostly ignore her. One man approaches with a smirk and reaches for the ribeyes that she stands in front of. A voice comes on the loudspeaker paging a manager to the meat section. Still, Rukin continues. "Every one of these

packages were once living beings – before they get here, they've been imprisoned, mutilated and violently killed." Her voice never breaks; her resolve seems to gain momentum with each word she speaks.

Eventually, a manager approaches – an apologetic blonde woman who encourages Rukin to stay and shop, but asserts she cannot continue to record video. Rukin will later reveal that a manager always shows up "within five minutes, usually faster." The meeting ends politely enough, but on Rukin's way out, she holds her sign up defiantly, shouting "It's not meat, it's violence," to the cans lined along an empty aisle. As she departs through the sliding doors, people can be heard clapping in the background.

This is not the first time Rukin has done what is referred to as a "supermarket speakout" – she's become a bit of a seasoned expert, but said that each time, "I'm scared, very scared. But I say screw the fear and do it anyway. The animals can't wait. Compared to what they go through, I can experience a little discomfort and fear."

Nothing too bad happened this time, but in the past, Rukin has experienced the range you'd expect to find in a grocery store – the ones who troll her by calling her a "he," the ones who say "mmm, bacon," the ones who yell and make fun. "One guy got aggressive

one time in the parking lot and tried to take my phone," she recalled. But there are the good ones too, the ones who call her a hero and give her a discreet thumbs up. Rukin knows she probably won't convert anyone to quit meat on the spot; her purpose is to use the meat section as a platform to speak against the horrors of animal agriculture, and to let shoppers know that there are alternatives to meat in their grocery stores. "Everyone is asleep," she claimed. "I want to wake them up, to disrupt."

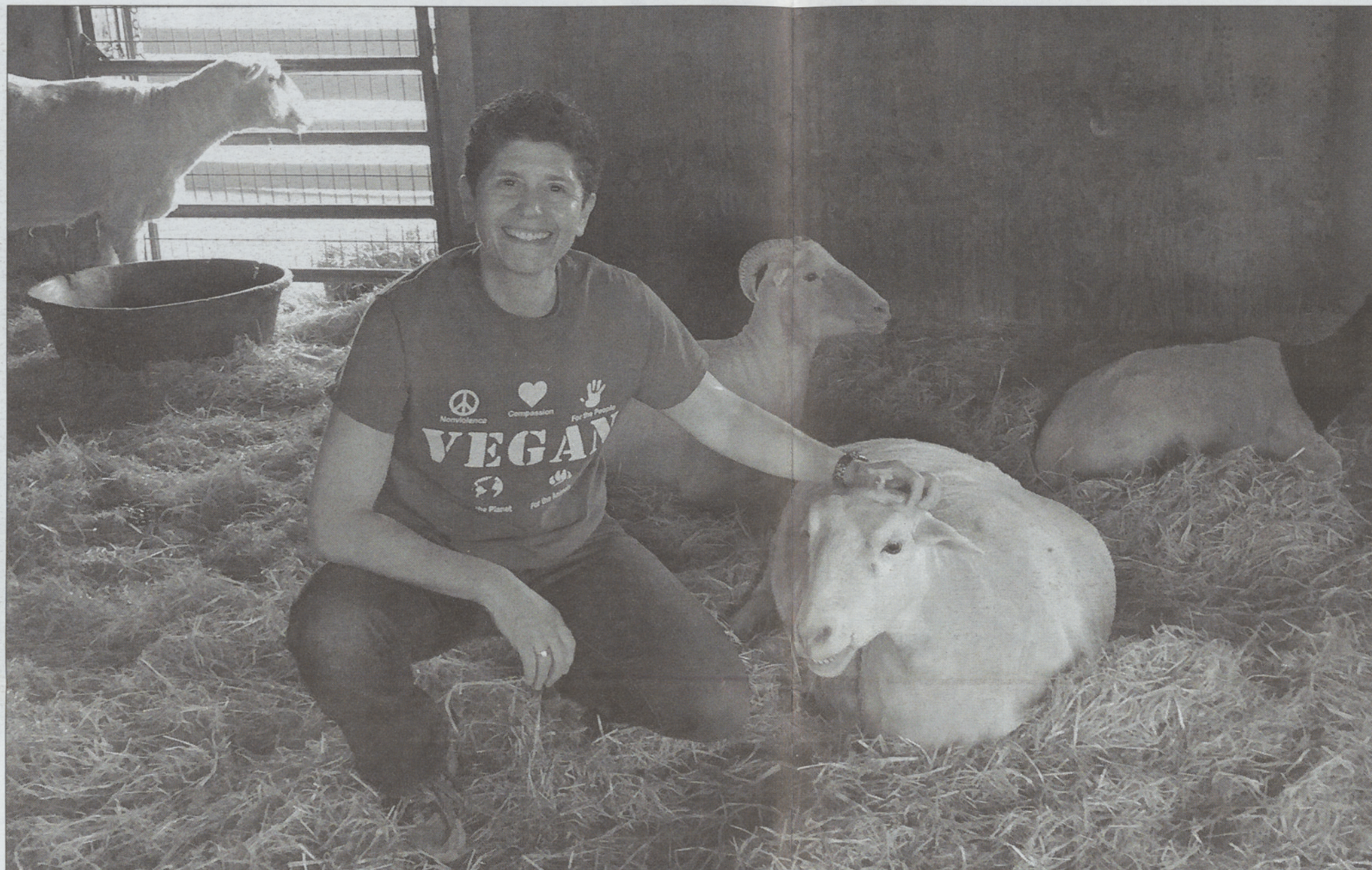
Rukin is a disruptor, and she has joined forces with nonviolent animal rights activists in Portland and around the country to shed light on an issue that, in her opinion, people are blind to.

"People don't make the connection," she said. "They can eat a steak while petting their dog." At 56 years old, she looks 10 years younger, with a short haircut and chirpy, melodic voice. She has energy like a laser beam trying to shoot right through you. Her vegan journey began a year and a half ago, with an imprisoned elephant named Kavaan. In her mission to free this lonely elephant in Pakistan, she began to "make the connection."

That connection – the word she most frequently uses when describing her activism – is now the thing that drives Rukin's life.

Rukin get's cozy with some of the residents at Farm Sanctuary, a rescue, education, and advocacy center for animals in Los Angeles.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DANI RUKIN



"It's this realization of something deep down that you've always known – that animals are sentient beings who want to live, and we have been conditioned with propaganda to think the way we treat them is normal and acceptable. It isn't. If people knew how these defenseless beings were treated. Paul McCartney said, 'If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be a vegetarian.'"

The world, it seems, is beginning to arrive organically to this message, albeit slowly and selectively. Animal rights causes spring up and quickly earn the ire of the public, from SeaWorld's downward spiral to the cancellation of the Ringling Brothers centuries-old circus and the killing of a beloved lion, Cecil, by an American dentist in Africa. The modern era has produced groundbreaking documentaries and journalism that propel campaigns and petitions to end the suffering of (some) animals (see "Blackfish" or "The Cove").

Additionally, the relatively new realization that animal agriculture is a leading cause of climate change is creating a coalition of activists to stand up to animal exploitation (You can read more online about "Cowspiracy"). Indeed, environmental groups have begun adding

meat reduction to their platforms in an effort to curb greenhouse gas emissions, albeit with caution. When Rukin and other animal rights activists set up at the March for Science on Earth Day, people were angry, feeling as if their message was being coopted. "The minute they saw our signs, they'd look away. Some of them even yelled at us for hijacking their mission," she said with an astonished laugh. "You can't call yourself an environmentalist and eat animals."

Even with the realization that meat consumption is harmful to the environment and, obviously, to animals, the truth is a tough pill to swallow in a society that has been reared in a carnivorous culture.

Bala Seshasayee, an engineer in Portland and an animal rights activist, puts it another way: "It's so widespread that we don't even think about it. It's hard to come to terms with the fact that you're contributing to cruelty."

He goes on: "Everyone wants to think of themselves as a good person – we are the hero in the movie in our heads. When we hear information that makes us the villain, it's easier to dismiss it and keep watching the movie."

Seshasayee and Rukin work the circuit



PHOTO COURTESY OF DANI RUKIN

Rukin doing street activism with the international animal rights organization, Anonymous for the Voiceless.

in Portland to disrupt, to change peoples' perceptions of eating animals. They do outreach events, pass out leaflets, talk to people, write "Go Vegan" in chalk on the sidewalks. The going is not always easy.

"People in my life just dropped and dropped. Good friends stopped talking to me, avoided me, unfollowed me or unfriended me on Facebook, saying 'I love animals, I just can't look at this,'" Dani recounts. "Whereas, to me, I was saying that I love animals so I must look at this. Therein lies the difference."

Her lightbulb moment, her moment of connection, has led her around the country, to the home of musician and vegan Moby in California, to animal rights conventions and grocery stores along the way. She shares all her activism, including vegan recipes, on her Facebook page, and it's easy to see why people may have unfollowed her. Her posts are often provocative and sometimes graphic. Some are undercover videos of factory farms, others are from so-called Animal Saves, wherein activists stand outside a slaughterhouse to bear witness to the pigs and cows that are on their way to certain death. They give the animals water and kindness, as well as shoot extensive, gut-wrenching video footage. Rukin's captions, once she uploads the videos to her Facebook page, usually say something along the lines of: "If you can't

look at this, how can you eat it?"

Recently, Rukin and fellow protestors took their activism to the streets of local Portland restaurants on Valentine's Day, when she knew couples would be enjoying their romantic dinners. While standing outside the famous Beast Restaurant off Northeast Killingsworth Street. Rukin and her group of renegades were introduced to head chef Naomi Pomeroy when she went out to address them. Their discussion was polite, as always, Pomeroy even posted a message of thanks on Rukin's Facebook page the following day, promising to consider some alternatives. "She was truly engaged and cared about our right to speak out," Rukin said of Pomeroy. That is the kind of civil discourse Rukin is after – waking people up, forcing them to examine the truth behind what they eat. Once they begin to see, she said, "It's like dominos falling."

As more people are turning toward veganism for the first time, usually with a skeptical eye, Rukin will be there. This is the fight of her life.

"It wasn't enough for me to not eat them – I am a person who stands up for what's right, for social justice. Not eating animals is a matter of justice. Oppression is oppression."