



# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 644, Interview with Gwendolyn Church

**Jasmin Singer:** Welcome to Our Hen House, Gwendolyn.

**Gwendolyn Church:** Hi, Jasmin. Thanks so much for having me.

**Jasmin:** I am really excited to talk to you for so many reasons, but I got to chat with you a few weeks ago because you're also in the flock. And so, as I was talking to you and getting to know you a little bit, I just kept thinking, "oh, I wish we were recording."

Because what you do is so different and so cool and SO important as we'll talk about. So much to dive into here, I'll start with this. Who is Phillip and how did this all start?

**Gwendolyn:** Phillip is the first little fish that I ever rescued. So he is a betta fish and he was a, we call them a store rescue. Essentially, I had read on this website Reddit that people had some luck rescuing a fish from a pet store because they found a sick fish on the shelf who wasn't doing well and then asked the managers if they could take the fish home.

And so I thought that sounded really cool. And I had this whole plan that I was going to set up an aquarium and get it cycled and established and ready for a fish. And then, maybe see if I found one and it kind of went the opposite way. I went to the pet store to look at aquarium equipment and I stopped and looked at...you know, we've all seen those horrible betta displays.

And so I stopped and I looked at that and most of the bettas on there actually looked pretty good, but there was one little guy in the back who was just super skinny and pale and his little fins were all just rotted away and gone. So it was really, really clear that he was going to die. And so I pulled him off the shelf and approached the manager to ask if I could take him home and they let me adopt him for free, which was great.

And then I frantically got all the aquarium equipment together and came home and did...Pretty stressful couple of weeks for me of establishing the aquarium with him in it. And he survived and he did really, really well. And was the motivation for everything else that we're doing now. So that's why he's in the name.

**Jasmin:** So what is a betta fish and why are they so particularly vulnerable?

**Gwendolyn:** Bettas are just a species of tropical fish. And a lot of people will say beta fish, I just grew up saying betta. So I've always said betta, but beta, betta, the same type of fish. They're a tropical species from east Asia and they were originally domesticated for fighting because they're incredibly aggressive and territorial fish. And so now they've been selectively bred for generations to just be beautiful. We've all seen the really bright colored fins and kind of flashy appearance of them. And so that makes them really interesting to people and really fascinating and fun to keep as kind of like a decoration in many ways.

And unfortunately, what that means is that the pet industry, much in the way that the animal agriculture industry does, to maximize profits, they sell hundreds of thousands of bettas. and because they're so aggressive, the pet stores will keep them in these individual plastic cups when they're for sale.

That's just basically the worst environment you could ever keep a fish in. And so it means that a lot of them die on the shelves. A lot of them die in transport. A lot of them die at the farms that they're raised at. And unfortunately, on top of that, they're also marketed as a beginner fish.

Because most other fishes that you see at the store, they're in like a big wall of tanks or something, but bettas are in these little tiny cups. And so they're marketed as a fish that could be bought, put into a bowl and who will do fine. And because they're fairly resilient species, a lot of people will buy them and put them in a bowl and then they suffer extensively because of that.

**Jasmin:** If I had rescued betta fish, I think I would name the fish Betta Midler. I just wanted to say that

**Gwendolyn:** That is a perfect name. Maybe we will name the next one who comes in.

**Jasmin:** Please do, oh my God.

Okay. So how big is the sanctuary now and where are you at in the nonprofit process?

**Gwendolyn:** The sanctuary itself is fairly small. We fit in that category of a micro sanctuary. It's a single room at my house that has crept out into other areas of the house. We have a stock tank in the garage and then four tanks in our kind of kitchen/living room area, as well as a single fish room that has a bunch of aquariums in it. So size-wise, it's not huge, but we do have just over 30 aquariums and ponds and over a hundred fish residents of quite a few different species.

So it looks quite a bit different than your kind of classic farmed animal sanctuary or animal rescue set up. And as far as the nonprofit goes, we're putting our board together and in the early stages of drafting bylaws and doing all of that to try to incorporate as a 501c3 this year.

**Jasmin:** So, how are you supporting this? Because it doesn't sound inexpensive.

**Gwendolyn:** It's not inexpensive, that's true. A lot of it is the initial cost. Once you have an aquarium up and running, it's not too expensive, but setting up the aquariums is fairly expensive. So I fund a lot of it myself and then we have quite a few generous people who will donate here and there to help support certain intakes and things.

And then we have a small following on Patreon who very generously donates to us each month, which helps hugely with things like veterinary bills and all of that.

**Jasmin:** And what is your Patreon for someone who is so moved right now?

**Gwendolyn:** On Patreon it's Friends of Philip Fish Rescue.

**Jasmin:** Do you do adoptions? And if so, tell me about that. What do you look for in adopters?

**Gwendolyn:** We do adoptions and it really depends on the species because, with fishes, it's kind of funny that it's not just like, you're taking care of a single species and so you need to decide that care.

There's over 33,000 different species of fish. And of course we don't have nearly that many in captivity, but the ones that we have...we have over 20 species of

fish here. And so the requirements for someone to adopt a betta and for someone to adopt a goldfish are going to be radically different.

But the big things that we look for in an adopter. Initially, it's someone who just wants to adopt a fish. That's a big starting point because you don't find that very often. People don't think that adoption is really an option for fish. So that's step one. And then we ask for a photo of their aquarium, information about the other animals living in the aquarium, information about their background in fish keeping and what they know about things like the nitrogen cycle and water quality, and information about the maintenance routine for their aquarium. And then they're general plans for the fishes and things. We have certain tank size requirements and that kind of thing, but that's really just a very basic starting point. So it's a bit more of a conversation a lot of the time.

**Jasmin:** And I understand that you have a lot of support from family. I'd love to hear about what that process is like. Cause I think it's fascinating and I mean, "mom, dad, fam I am going to start a fish sanctuary." Tell me about your family and where they fit in.

**Gwendolyn:** That's a really funny process, I guess, because who starts a fish sanctuary, right? But I do have a wonderful, incredibly supportive family.

My fiancé is so incredibly supportive of the entire thing. We just moved to Reno and we bought this house and the whole time we were talking about the fish room, we'd already decided there was going to be a fish room and all of that. And so he's incredibly supportive. He helps to feed the fishes and take care of things at the sanctuary and that kind of thing.

And then my oldest brother is actually going to be on our board. He has a small, little family of rescued African dwarf frogs that live with him. So they're a little extension of the sanctuary out in the bay area. My other older brother created our logo and was really supportive in that way and has helped with a lot of the artistic aspects of things.

And my younger brother is just always super supportive and excited to hear about stuff and same thing with my parents. I was renting from my parents before we moved to Reno. And so I started this fish sanctuary basically in their house. I had a separate unit, but I filled it with aquariums. And how many landlords are going to allow that? Really not very many. And so I'm very, very lucky to have such an incredibly supportive family.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, absolutely. I love that so much. I love the brother joining the board, too. So you told me about the OG fish. Where are you getting your fish now? Like where are they coming from? How do they wind up in your fish family?

**Gwendolyn:** The two main sources, if you will, of surrenders are pet stores and individual caregivers. So, of course, we have the very strict policy that we never purchase an animal. So we're not going to go to a pet store and buy a fish. That is very counter to what we're working on.

But most pet stores, whether large or small, do you have a policy around sick animals and what they're allowed to do with them. And so quite a few stores, if you see someone on the shelf who's sick and not doing well if you ask the manager about that animal, they may or may not let you adopt them. I've heard of people having luck doing this, even with like small mammals and reptiles.

I've only ever tried it with fishes, but that's where our store rescues come from. And in particular bettas, because again, they're in those awful little cups. You can find them there on the shelf very easily, pick them up and take them to a manager. So that's where most of our bettas come from.

And then for our other small tropical fish and goldfish species, most of those are caregiver surrenders of people who, for one reason or another can't or don't want to keep their fishes anymore. And so they reach out to us, or sometimes I'll see fishes listed on Craigslist and things and reach out to them and have them re-homed to us that way.

**Jasmin:** So how do the rescue and sanctuary for aquatic animals differ from that for terrestrial animals?

**Gwendolyn:** In quite a few ways, really. Of course the obvious one is that you have to have a whole bunch of aquariums and a whole bunch of water for the aquatic animals, but there's quite a few different considerations with things like water quality and the effect that has on animals.

Of course, for terrestrial animals, it's important that they have access to fresh air that they're able to have a safe, clean, warm place to sleep and areas with enrichment and areas to explore and exercise their natural behavior. And all of that is the same with fishes, but it's compounded by the fact that they are in this very strictly enclosed area.

You can take like a goat or a cow out of their pasture and take them for a walk and interact with them that way but to remove a fish from their environment is very stressful. So they're in this kind of enclosed world and you have to be cognizant of that and really know that that's all that they have.

And so the importance of water quality in fish keeping and providing sanctuary to fishes or home to fishes is just so incredibly important. They live in the water, they poop in the water. They eat in the water, everything happens in there. And so without a thorough understanding of something like a thing called the nitrogen cycle, it's basically impossible to keep fishes healthy and safe in a humane way.

So the consideration of water quality is just a whole new thing that you don't ever experience with terrestrial animals, other than, of course, that they have access to clean water. So that's pretty huge. And then the other aspect is the sheer number of species that you may be looking at. On a farmed animal sanctuary, you may see five to 10 or 12, or somewhere in that kind of range. Like, that many species. But with aquatic animals, it's very, very easy to have 20 species or more and all of whom have very radically different care needs. Like the needs for a goldfish compared to a cory or a catfish are so, so different. And those fishes can't cohabitate. And so, it's an interesting understanding of the species and there are different needs that you need to be aware of.

**Jasmin:** I'm sure you're learning a lot as you go, too. I think a lot of us know that there are a lot of misconceptions about fish and other aquatic animals, but we don't necessarily know a lot about what really is known. Can you tell us what the misconceptions are particularly about the sentience of fish and how we should be thinking about these animals?

**Gwendolyn:** The sentience thing is always so sad to me because we have abundant, scientific evidence that fish are sentient, that they do feel pain and that they have experiences.

And many of them have very long memories. And so the simple misconception that fish don't feel pain is still so tragically prevalent in a lot of areas. And I think it can't really be overstated how wrong that is. There's tons and tons of studies that show that fish feel pain and that they have memories and that they will avoid negative experiences.

And that's a pretty solid baseline that we use for a lot of other animals. But for some reason, there's this kind of attitude that when something happens with a fish, there must be something wrong with the test. And that it's kind of a fluke.



Like there was a study recently that showed that cleaner wrasse have self-recognition. They passed the what's called the mirror test. And once that study came out, there started to be all of these articles also coming out saying, "oh, is there something wrong with this test?" And that's the same test that we've used to determine that all sorts of species have that same kind of self recognition.

So there's this ongoing kind of prejudice against fishes as being a less intelligent animal or something like that. But the reality is that fish species make up over 60% of the known vertebrate species on earth. And so when we look at kind of the scale of these assumptions, we're assuming that 60% of vertebrate species on earth can't feel pain or that they're not sentient, or that they don't have experiences. It's a pretty sad reflection on kind of our hubris in many ways, I think.

**Jasmin:** Completely. It is difficult to wrap your head around, really. So let's talk about personality. How do the personalities of the fish who you've gotten to know differ from one another?

**Gwendolyn:** They can differ pretty dramatically. We have fishes who are outgoing and just in your face, hoping for food constantly.

We have fishes who are incredibly shy. We have everyone in between. In general, our fishes are very curious and very active in part because they're kept in environments that allow them to exercise some of those natural behaviors. But personality wise, you can see a huge range. We have fishes who are very sweet and calm, and then others who are much more feisty and aggressive.

And that's even just in the same species that we have. We used to have a betta, she passed recently, who was incredibly social, which is unusual in that species. And she lived in one of our community tanks for her whole life, because if she was not in the community tank, she was visibly depressed. She wasn't active, she was less interested in food and she was hiding more. But in the community tank, she was always out and about interacting with the other fishes. She would come right to the side to see us. And, the more time that you spend around fishes and just like with any animals, the more apparent it really becomes that they do have their individual personalities and interests.

**Jasmin:** So the next question I have for you, I want to start by telling a story. And I already told you this story when we were talking, for the flock, but it's a bit of a confessional. Don't you love when vegans confess things? Like, I mean, it happens to all of us all the time, but...and I think that we've also many of us, including vegans have had our history with fish, and maybe even pet fish.

In my case, I had a fish, a pet fish when I was a kid in the eighties. So therefore I named my fish Debbie Gibson, and my brother had a fish who he named Tom Seaver, who was a major Mets player, on the Mets. Anyway, I don't really know why this happened, I'll need to ask my mom, but there was a point where we have the fish in the aquarium that we had and my mom suggested that we give Debbie Gibson and Tom Seaver away to her friend who had a pond with fish in it. And I don't really know why I said yes, because I really did love Debbie Gibson. But I said yes, I like to believe that it was some kind of compassion feeling, but I'm not sure. I was probably just, you know, being a brooding tween or something. But in any case, Debbie Gibson and Tom Seaver moved to my mom's friend's pond. And we went to visit them like maybe a year later and they were enormous. Like they grew like 500 times the size of what they were in our little aquarium.

And I have to say, I hate when people use animals as a metaphor. So I'm not going to do that here. I'm not going to say the whole thing about how we adapt to our environment, however, small or large. But I am going to say, quite literally not metaphorically, that when I saw how big they had become, I realized how small I was keeping them.

So, with that in mind, what are the common mistakes that people make with pet fish? And I'm curious if you have a Debbie Gibson story of your own.

**Gwendolyn:** Oh gosh, I do. Or a similar one and I think it's interesting really, because pet fish, they are the most numerous pet animal. And so most of us do have some stories like that. When I was growing up, my family had bettas that we kept in bowls and we never really thought much of it. It was early nineties, and even in the late nineties and the internet was just a newer thing. Everything that my parents knew about fish, they had learned from books that they checked out at the library and the general attitude was that bettas do great in bowls, and that that's perfectly acceptable for a fish.

And my parents, and my mom in particular, took very good care of those fish. My mom was constantly changing their water and giving them the best care that we knew how to at the time. But that myth still persists today. And you still see fish for sale to go into bowls and things in the store.

So as far as common mistakes, that's a huge one, getting the environment wrong. A betta should not live in a bowl. And a goldfish certainly should not live in a bowl and no fish ever should live in a bowl, really. And so it's so incredibly important if you're interested in bringing a fish into to your home, to very thoroughly research the needs of that species. But then to also do all of that research with a very critical mind and perspective, because you'll definitely still



find websites that say that fish will do great in bowls or say that a 15 gallon tank is fine for a goldfish and things like that. And it's really important to just take all of that with a grain of salt and do a lot of critical thinking and realize that this fish is going to live their whole life in the environment that you provide them.

And that it's our responsibility as caregivers to give them the best environment that we can. So that's absolutely a huge one and kind of hand in hand with that is, I mentioned it earlier, but there's this thing called the nitrogen cycle. Which is essentially a bacterial cycle in aquariums that processes fish waste to make the water safer for fish. And if you put a fish into what's called an un-cycled aquarium, that doesn't have that nitrogen cycle in there, the water quality is going to get bad very quickly. And that fish will almost certainly die and then can also suffer some pretty significant side effects from the accumulation of things like ammonia in the water.

20 to 30 minutes of Googling and reading about the nitrogen cycle and understanding what something called a fishless cycle looks like and what you need to do to establish an aquarium can very literally save lives and save the lives of the fish that you bring into your home. So those are the two really big ones.

The next one I would say is people housing incompatible species or what we call overstocking, which I don't really like that word, but...overcrowding an aquarium, putting too many fishes into one aquarium and putting species who aren't compatible together. For some reason, people seem to really like to keep fancy goldfish with cichlids. Which fancy goldfish are a slow moving, very kind of docile, calm species, and then cichlids are just like the opposite of that. They're fast, they're aggressive, they're nippy and they're going to just harass those poor little goldfish and make their lives miserable. Not to mention that those species have fundamentally different requirements in terms of environment.

So really just lack of research. I think people want to think that pet stores are good sources of information and they're generally not. Most pet stores, especially big box stores, have very, very little training for their employees on proper care of animals. And many of them require employees to do things like try to sell fishbowls and say that a bowl is acceptable or something like that for a fish. And we all kind of know that it's not. That's the information that you'll find in a pet store.

**Jasmin:** Speaking of pet stores, where do aquarium fish come from? Are they bred? Are they captured?

**Gwendolyn:** Really it always kind of depends on the species. That's going to be the answer for a lot of those. Most freshwater fish, about 90% of freshwater fish are bred in captivity for the aquarium trade. Those fishes come from enormous fish farms that are usually in the Southeast Asia area and then shipped around the world. And so you think of something like a factory farm, you think of something like the fish farms that we've all seen for the fish that people want to eat? It looks very similar to that, it's just that the fishes are smaller. And so they're bred en masse at these large farms and then shipped all over the world. Of course, some completely unknown number die in transit being shipped from the farms to the distributors, from the distributors to the stores. Most of these fishes, when a store or something places an order, it's an amount by weight. So if someone wants a thousand neon tetras, the distributor knows roughly how much a thousand neon tetras weigh. And they'll just scoop all of those little fishes out of this enormous tank and send them on their way. So that's where a lot of freshwater fishes come from.

Saltwater is its own monstrosity, unfortunately. Most saltwater fishes are wild caught. And so those guys come from the tropical areas. Hawaii has a huge problem with people capturing their reef fishes for the aquarium trade. And so does the Philippines. Anywhere with reef ecosystems, it's almost guaranteed that there are people there catching fishes for the aquarium trade.

The demand for saltwater fish for the aquarium trade is enormous. And I think it's something like 90% of those fishes die within the first year of capture. Because they're ripped from their wild home where they have their families and their lives. And then they're put into bags and shipped all over the world and then put into someone's home aquarium where hopefully that person did the research and has it established correctly, but it's pretty brutal on both sides, really. The freshwater farming and the saltwater wild capture. Then there's some overlap on both, some freshwater fishes, like pea puffers are frequently wild caught and things like that.

But, farms and wild capture, unfortunately.

**Jasmin:** Well, this might be a silly question, but do you develop personal relationships with individual fish?

**Gwendolyn:** Yes, definitely.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, I mean, I guess I could have asked it differently. I'd love to hear about some of those relationships.

**Gwendolyn:** Yeah, absolutely. It's kind of interesting because, of course, a relationship with the fish is going to be a bit different than a relationship with a dog or a cow or an animal who you can cuddle.

But we do know that fishes recognize their caregivers and they will respond to that. Most of our fishes, very quickly after arriving, they come to recognize me and they recognize my fiancé and they'll respond specifically to us coming into the room to see them. There are quite a few fishes who we have who are very skittish, but if I'm reaching into the aquarium to do something, they're much calmer and they're less likely to run away than if someone else needed to. We don't frequently have other people reaching into the aquariums.

But if the vet is there or something, the fish are much more afraid of the vet than they are of me because they see me every day and they learn to know that I'm not there to catch them or anything like that. So we definitely can develop those one-on-one relationships.

Especially you see it most with some of the more sensitive fishes. Like we have a cichlid named Sam, who's very, very shy. She's very skiddish. And when someone walks into the room, she swims away and hides very quickly and it takes her a minute to kind of scope things out and come out to make sure that everything's okay. But if it's me or my fiancé, she comes back out much faster and she'll be out watching us where if there are other people in the house she's basically hiding and doesn't want to see people. So it's pretty remarkable to see the way they recognize people.

**Jasmin:** I have a friend, who's a vegan animal rights person, who I think recently got into very similar type of rescue, sort of by accident. She was at a pet supply store, buying some things for her dog. There were some fish who looked really sick. And she basically was like, "you're giving me those fish." And the owner was like, "okay." That was the beginning for her and then she figured it out. I definitely need to connect you two. But if anyone is listening to this who is considering fish rescue, what is your basic advice?

**Gwendolyn:** The big thing is to research the nitrogen cycle and to have a really good understanding of what it takes to create and maintain a healthy aquatic environment. Without that you're, it sounds very dramatic, but you're nearly doomed to failure and you're putting the fish very much at risk.

And so that's absolutely the first place to start. Without that, there's just really no way to humanely and safely keep aquatic animals. So definitely starting there and then really that same species-specific research. Knowing what species

you are interested in rescuing and which ones you have the space for, because a betta can do very well in a five or 10 gallon aquarium, which most people have space for pretty easily. But an animal like a common goldfish needs to be kept with at least one other goldfish and then those two fishes will need a hundred gallons. Knowing exactly what you're prepared for and knowing what all of that is going to take, both in terms of the financial cost and the space and all of those things. And the time commitment.

And then another big one is, unfortunately not everyone has access to it, but if you can find a specialized aquatic veterinarian in your area, that is huge. You'll find so much terrible misinformation online about fish health and fish care. A lot of stores sell over the counter antibiotics, that aren't super regulated or anything, that are put into aquariums. And you don't really know how much medication you're using, you don't actually know what treatment you're trying to use or anything like that. If you can have access to a veterinarian who really knows what they're doing and can come in, the same way you would with any animal, that puts you at a really, really good advantage and gives you and your fish the best chance of success.

**Jasmin:** And, by the way, can someone with a cat successfully have rescued fish?

**Gwendolyn:** Yeah, I would say so. I say this as a person who does not have a cat, but my brother has a cat and their little frogs do great. And there's no risk of the cat getting to the frogs. The big thing is that you want to, of course, prevent the cat from being able to get into the aquarium.

A very sturdy lid is a good idea. Whether or not you have a cat, there are all sorts of very sad stories of fishes jumping out of aquariums because they don't totally recognize that they're in this enclosed box and that there's not water to jump to on the other side. So a lid is a good idea anyway, but it'll also keep your cat out of the aquarium.

You also don't want the cat drinking the aquarium water and things like that. So a sturdy lid should protect your fish and your cat.

**Jasmin:** Very good. Okay. Well of course the aquarium trade as problematic as it is, is only a drop in the bucket, so to speak, compared to the situation for the fish that people eat. Can you give us a quick overview of the problems that fish and other aquatic species face?

**Gwendolyn:** Gosh, it's, heart-wrenching. It's kind of is that same captive bred versus wild capture challenge that you see in the aquarium trade. Where fishes who are raised in captivity for food face all sorts of problems and very similar ones that you see in large scale terrestrial, animal farming. You have overcrowding, filthy conditions, rampant disease, lack of enrichment or ability to exercise natural behaviors. You have all of these problems and then on top of that, you have the problem of water quality. These fish are living in and breathing their own waste, each other's waste, and there's no escape from it. Really it is very similar to what you see in the factory farm model. Of huge, huge, huge numbers of fishes kept in these industrial fish farms.

And on top of that, there's no legal protections for fishes. I don't think any of us would say the legal protections for any terrestrial animals are good, but there's no minimum size. There's no requirement for water quality and testing. And all of these things are generally unregulated and awful for the fishes.

It's very common to see rampant disease and health problems effecting farmed fishes. I don't know if you've seen the undercover videos, but there are some undercover videos of the farmed fish world. And you'll see fishes with their skin hanging off of them because they have horrendous parasites or bacterial infections.

The overuse of antibiotics continues into the fish world too. And it's really a problem there as well. Along with that there isn't any kind of standard for how these animals should be slaughtered. And so a lot of them are killed through suffocation of just being removed from the water. Maybe they're put on ice or something, and just left to suffocate, which is the equivalent of killing an animal, killing a terrestrial animal by drowning.

It's a truly awful painful way for these animals to be killed. And so it's really, truly awful. There's no understanding that. And that's just in the fish farming world which a lot of people consider to be quote unquote, better than wild capture. Because, of course, wild capture has the huge problem of bycatch. Where, unfortunately for the fishes, I should say sea turtles and dolphins are much more personable and well-liked than fishes. And so when we talk about wild capture fishes by-catch is usually the big thing. The kind of standard method for a lot of wild fish capture is bottom trawling, where they use these enormous nets that can be several miles long and they'll drag them along the bottom of the ocean and destroy whatever ecosystem is there. Catch fish by the hundreds of thousands, and then haul these fish up out of the water to generally die by suffocation. There's no other way. Or by crushing, because they're trapped under their fellows and are crushed. And so it's another awful, horrible way for these animals to be treated and for them to die.

And every single one of those fishes is an individual who wants to not be going through that, of course. And it's incredibly, incredibly cruel.

**Jasmin:** Is there any awareness among the many people who keep fish that maybe they shouldn't eat other fish? Is this a way into people's hearts or are we just continuing on with that good old cognitive dissonance that humans are so damn good at?

**Gwendolyn:** Very sadly, it's mostly the cognitive dissonance route. I've read anecdotally online people sharing, "oh my gosh, I stopped eating fish once I bought my betta because I met him and saw his personality." But, those are few and far between compared to the people who keep fishes but still eat fishes and other animals.

And a lot of it, I think, stems from the fact that fishes, as a kind of a pet, they are sometimes hardly even considered a pet. A lot of people want an aquarium because they want a beautiful thing to look at and the fishes and the animals inside that aquarium just kind of complete that picture. Where most people, hopefully, who adopt a dog, want a companion animal and many people who purchase fishes don't really have that motivation, I guess. And so for both fresh and saltwater, they're really seen as this kind of decorative object. And I think that makes it that much easier to continue to view animals and fishes as something to be consumed.

**Jasmin:** I know you were already a vegan animal rights person when Phillip came into your life, but I'm curious how he and the rest have changed your life and your worldview.

**Gwendolyn:** Yeah, pretty dramatically. So I had been vegan for a couple of years before I met Philip and I been volunteering at a farmed animal sanctuary and really loved animals and interacting with animals and I knew I wanted to do some kind of rescue and help in that way. I hadn't really considered fish as the way to do that.

And so it was a little bit, I think, of an accident in some ways that I got into fish rescue, because it was just the thing that I was able to do with the space that I had. I didn't really have the space to give a cow or a larger animal like that a great life, but I definitely had the space for an aquarium.

And so, when I first adopted or rescued Philip, I think I had a mindset very similar to most vegans where when I was thinking about animal agriculture, I was thinking about terrestrial animals. When I was thinking about veganism, it



was from that perspective. Adopting Philip and starting this kind of journey of fish rescue and working with aquatic animals really gave me a much better view of the true scale of some of the problems that all animals are facing, but aquatic animals in particular. Most farm sanctuaries are doing absolutely phenomenal work, but if you go and you tour a farmed animal sanctuary, at some point, they're likely to mention fishes. And really it's in the context of like, "yeah, and then we also donate fishes." But fishes are so forgotten in the animal rescue world, in the animal rights world and the vegan world. And of course, even more broadly, in the non-vegan world. It's heartbreaking because fishes are also the most consumed food animal, they're the most numerous pet animal, and they're second only to mice in numbers used for scientific research.

When we think of the scale of terrestrial animal farming in the billions. For fishes, that number is in the trillions. Every single year, killed for consumption and killed for research and killed as pets and mistreated as pets and all of these things. And so going through this has really broadened my perspective in that area and let me realize that there's a lot of vegans and a lot of animal rights people doing absolutely incredible work, but an area that desperately needs more help and that really needs more people working for them is the fishes and the aquatic animals.

**Jasmin:** And on that note, how can people get involved with your efforts? Because I think you're absolutely right. This is a very big blind spot, including for vegans. Many times, including for me. And I consider myself very knowledgeable and understanding of issues of animal exploitation, but there have definitely been times when I've realized I've left fishes out of the conversation and out of my advocacy efforts. It's a journey I've been on the last couple of years to put them much more front and center. And I'd love to know how people who are listening to this who are having that same awakening can reach out to you or support your sanctuary?

**Gwendolyn:** Yeah, so we're on social media. We're on Instagram and Facebook on Instagram we're friendsofphilip\_fish sanctuary. And then on Facebook, it's just Friends of Philip. So you can find us on there, follow and ask questions or reach out to me through either of those places. I try to get back to people, sometimes I get a little overwhelmed with messages and things, but I'm always happy to answer questions and offer guidance. And one thing I would say for anyone who does want to get more involved for fishes is to try to meet some fishes.

I think a really common suggestion is that new vegans go to farmed animal sanctuaries and meet the victims of these horrible industries. And it can be a little harder to meet fishes in person, but if you're able to, it's huge to be able to

do that, to get to interact with them and know them as individuals and really see why we do this.

**Jasmin:** Well, Gwendolyn, thank you so much for all that you're doing. And I hope that you'll stay in touch with us and let us know how the sanctuary progresses and how we can continue to support you. I think what you're doing is incredible, and I do have a few more questions for you, so I hope you'll stay on for some bonus content for our flock, but thank you again for joining us on Our Hen House today.

**Gwendolyn:** Of course! Thank you so much for having me.