



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 645, Interview with Dash Meizler

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Dash.

Dash Meizler: Thank you so much. The pleasure is mine, thanks for having me.

Mariann: I'm very excited to have you, I don't know a lot about your work and I'm really eager to find out more. But, actually I'd like to start off with a story I read on your website about your experience slaughtering chickens, which ultimately led to your going vegan and having a different awareness about animals. Can you tell us that story?

Dash: So, both my parents were poultry farmers and growing up I got engaged in the poultry business. I have four other siblings, but growing up I was the one who was invested into the business as my other siblings were into different ventures.

So, this means that I witnessed all kind of horrible methods we do with the animals, with the birds. I remember this specific scenario where this little guy was given a lot of medication, so that... because the whole aim is self-centered for the farmers, they want profit at the end of the day. So they fed this little guy with a lot of medications so that he could grow so fast. And at the end of it this guy couldn't move. The legs he had couldn't support his own weight. So whenever they brought food to the paddocks, you saw that other birds would run over him, because he was too heavy. So if that guy couldn't come and the farmer wouldn't come and carry him to where the food was, he wasn't going to eat. And in many cases, there are other guys like him all the time.

Another scenario that I kind of remember is when, during the de-beaking process, because here it's different by the African tradition, how they do it. They get a knife, dip into hot fire, and then cut off the beaks.

Other scenarios where they give out medication. It's given to the hens and it causes them to lay very huge eggs. A lot of times when they lay huge eggs the intestines come out along with the eggs. Some of the farmers, at times, they could separate these birds from their other friends. At other times they put them

back and the rest of the hens would peck at the bottoms of these hens. And by the end of the day, they would die.

So when I searched my memories and more things came up plainer and plainer and plainer. And by that time I had no idea about veganism or animal rights. So, because I was the child (of the owners), I was more into the business, I was head of it. So I started not doing slaughter. Because when the time would come, I never felt I had the right to tell who should die and who should live when people came into the houses to take (a bird). So I kept myself from slaughtering and I only did marketing. But then I think also with time, it came out as, “okay, I'm not doing this anymore, I think I've had enough of this”. But at the same time I'm quitting this whole thing, I'm not vegan. And I don't know any idea about veganism.

And so, in that whole process, I tell my siblings, “I'm quitting this whole thing. I'm quitting the business, blah, blah, blah.” And that's the same time I lose my mom.

After that time, I was with my friend Ayunda watching some videos from the Middle East. And they were slaughtering, you know, they were killing people. And I tell my friend, “I never want to die like that.” He's not vegan (either), but he told me, “well that's the same way you kill the birds”.

This hit me differently, because I was like, “oh.” It (really made me) think. So I go on the internet...I don't know how things came about (but) I learned about veganism and what it's about. So at this time, I'm saying, “I'm going vegan” and I (learn about) animal rights. But in a real sense I wasn't vegan, I was vegetarian. Of course, I couldn't tell the difference between the two. So when I tell my sister that I'm going vegan and she's like, “oh, so you're not going to eat eggs and milk”. So that's when she told me that vegans are not supposed to consume eggs and milk. So that was big...then I quit them because I already knew the history between eggs and what we do. What the egg industry is doing to the birds. I already knew, I was already part of it. So that made me (make) a big, a big change. So yeah, that's roughly, that's the whole thing about me.

Mariann: That's an extraordinary, it's an amazing story. Did this cause a rift between you and your family? Were they angry at you?

Dash: Yeah, of course, because now at this time, when I was in charge of the business and my mom...so this same time when I'm going vegan is the same time I lose my mom. So that means, I'm totally and entirely responsible for the business, for the family business. So I'm telling them I'm quitting. At first, they

think it's something I'm messing around with, but then they get to see that I'm serious.

So it brought a very big rift because now there's no one else in charge of the business. And the business is failing, so what now? I'm quitting. So this brought a very (big rift)...because now there is no more income and the business failed. It closed, it shut. When that happened, there was no one else (to take over) because my two big brothers one was in the nonprofit world, another was in procurement. And then my sisters were too young to carry the business on. And my dad was occupied in something else. So, this caused the business to fail completely.

So that means that (I'm going) home, (at) this time I'm trying to figure my life out. I don't know what (is going to happen) next (with) me because this is the only business that I entirely know how to run. I never ran another business.

So this has me coming back home and they have prepared meat and blah, blah, and they're mocking and all that. And at that same time, I'm still staying with them at home. And the questions from my parents, are like, "what are you going to do now? This is what you had. I can't help in anything else." That's what my dad is saying. "This is the only business you know, try to figure your life out."

So this means that, I'm in a new era where I have no idea (what to do so) my next idea is to start looking for jobs. I'm on the internet, I'm trying to figure out animal-related, you know, animal activism in my area. And there was completely nothing around me in Uganda, no organization does animal rights activism. So I decided to leave home and I'm like, "let me just, you know, try my luck wherever." Because at that time, there was too much strain in my family.

Yeah, there's no way I can tell my dad, like, "I (need) capital, I need to start this." There's no way he's going to say yes. You know, because quitting...it is an opportunity you've missed to them, they see it as a business opportunity. But it is something I've had enough of because (I'm having) nightmares (from) the time I spent there. I witnessed every kind of horrible, horrible thing imaginable.

But because I was born into it. Right from the moment I was born to the moment I quit, that was the business I was in. So that means I have zero knowledge about anything else. So it was really a very, very tough time.

Mariann: Yeah, it sounds like an enormously tough time. And it ultimately led to the Podrska Foundation, which is what we're going to be talking about. Am I

pronouncing that right? PUD SCRA? Oh, po·dr·ška. Can you just tell people briefly, and then we'll get into a lot of detail, but tell people briefly what the foundation is.

Dash: So, Podrska, it's a Croatian term that means support. So I (came up with the name) after the soccer World Cup finals, where we had Croatia and France at the finals. So, I chose Croatia because the Croatian team was the underdog and no one ever (thought they would) reach the finals (but they) did. So that's why I chose the Croatian term because (the team) was an underdog and it rose up...it never won the cup but I think it's enough.

So, it was the same thing with the journey that I wanted to create. I know it's not going to be an easy journey. And I may not win the whole, everyone's heart, but at the end of the day, I'm going to create that great impact that I want. I may not be able to live to see the results but the seeds that we plant will create the change. So that's a whole story relating it to what we are trying to do. So Podrska Foundation is a vegan based foundation that looks at both humans and non-humans.

So with the non-humans specifically, we kind of center (our) focus on the farmed animals. Why farmed animals? Because each and everyone here who's trying to fight for the animals, they are fighting for the wild animals. No one's taking their time to look into the farm animals. And with our human bits, we are looking at kids and children and women.

However, we have various projects, but every kind of project that we do is strictly vegan based, no matter what kind of people it's trying to reach. Because the whole idea is to create...we envision a world where both humans and non-humans can coexist peacefully. So the whole idea is to help the humans make informed choices that ethically support and improve the lives of the non-humans.

Mariann: I love the way things are really interwoven, showing the benefit to each. A lot of people, when confronting poverty and vulnerability among humans, think that incorporating animals is just too hard. Why do you think that it's important to do them both?

Dash: Because the whole idea is coexistence and (living) peacefully and we all have to benefit each other. For example, if you look at how the animal industries are approaching world hunger today (by building) large (factory) farms and (they) are failing.

With all of our projects, we are looking at providing people with meals and these foods are completely plant-based. And we are giving them food and we are telling them that the reason why we are giving you these foods is because we don't want (to cost anyone their life). Because we also want you to respect the other animals. So at the end of the day, they're getting the information, they're saving a life and they're surviving.

You look at another project, whereby we are supporting women who are badly off. And we are telling them, “you're (in a) bad situation financially. How can we help (and) at the same time (help animals)?” This is easy, let's get animal free, cruelty free products, raw materials, make our clothes out of this and sell this. So at the end of the day, you're uplifting lives. You're telling people, “This product you're trying to buy is cruelty free.” And someone who made this product knows that they can't make this bag out of a crocodile skin, out of a snake skin, out of a cow skin because these creatures, they are sentient beings. They need a life. So they're deciding to do this. You're creating a weighing scale and you're putting everything at balance. At the end of the day, no one is suffering.

I'm happy because I'm putting on a cruelty free item and there's an animal at the same time (that) I'm advocating for a life to be spared. So it's basically, it's logic! At the end of the day, it's just simple logic. Only that we are, people are just failing to, first to choose.

Mariann: I totally agree. I love the way you put that. It's just simple logic and yet so many people can't see it.

Dash: You look at the situation we are in now, why I'm saying it's logic. The whole COVID stuff. Things are getting...you know, the whole lockdown and so on and so forth with the COVID stuff. It's logic-where it came from and how we can better prepare (for) the next one. And (we shouldn't) have to spend even a minute explaining it. So, yeah.

Mariann: Yeah. Tell us a little bit more. You mentioned food distribution. Tell us a little bit more how that works. What kind of food distribution do you do and what kinds of foods do you distribute and where?

Dash: We have a variety of food distribution projects. There is one that happens in schools and that is called the vegan schools feeding program. Now this feeding program goes to schools that don't offer a meal to their kids in a day. So you find that already (getting) to school is a problem, and you find that most of these schools (might be) very cheap, but they have to pay something.

And, at the end of the day, parents can't afford to pack lunch, breakfast or anything. And the school itself also can't afford to provide a lunch. So this means that the kids are going to spend the whole day hungry. At the end of the day, them studying is going to be useless because they are studying on empty stomachs. It's no way for them to process.

So what we (did is) we launched this project. And before we launched that project, we talked with the school administration and the schools themselves, where we are launching this project and (explain) why we are having plant-based foods and why we are not having any kind of milk, why we are not (serving) meat, why we are not (serving) chickens.

So we hold it under the vegan school campaigns. And we're like, we are going to be providing, let's say, close to...we have two schools signed up and we provide 400 meals each day. So the whole idea is we talk to them and we are like, "Hey, this happens from Monday to Friday because that's when kids are at school and we are providing them lunch. So we are doing this because we want to save animals. The reason why we are not giving you meat is because we believe that this animal's right is to live."

However, every time when you're talking to people about the ethical bits, people here, that's an experience...very few people, especially with our local communities, very few people are going to understand the ethical bits. So they are going to listen to you more when you're talking about the health aspects, because we have high rates of hypertension, blood pressure, diabetes and so on. So that's my ongoing way of (talking to) the rural kind of environments because that's what they listen to.

And another thing is that, with this kind of rural environment, these people already can't afford the meat. Not by choice, but (for) financial reasons. So at one point it's kind of easy for them to disseminate that information. You're like, "Yes, I understand you're going to eat meat once in a year, maybe the Christmas season but what's the use of you keeping your body so clean and safe. And just this one time, you turn it into a tomb of diseases and so on and so forth."

So that's the one project we have that's called the vegan school feeding project. And then another project we have it's called a compassionate feeding program. So with the compassionate feeding program, this happens around town in slum areas and it's basically for people living in slums and people who have to forge to find a meal, for their kids especially. Because there's (a) high number of kids on the streets.

So what we do is that we ally with our local councils and we are like, “We want to be providing food on such and such dates.” So this food, it's always warm, of course, warm and hot. And we provide with this meal, with the compassionate feeding program we (provide) white rice, cabbages, avocado, grains like amaranth and so on, and then rice. So we package it and we (distribute) the packages.

However, with the vegan school campaign, we give posho, beans and rice. So for Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, it's beans and posho, (posho is maize flour, when it's crushed) and then (the other) two days it's rice. So that's cheaper, we tried to make it more cheap because we have high number of kids you need to feed.

And with our compassionate feeding program, this basically is supposed to provide 300 meals a week. That's for a hundred people that we take it every week, whereas with the school program, it's about 400 meals a day. So we have to make it as cheap as possible so that (we can) feed (a large number of) kids in the school.

Mariann: Of course, of course. So in, in a lot of instances, is the food that you're giving people really in a line with traditional diets? Because I would assume that traditionally there's not a lot of meat in most African diets. Is that true?

Dash: So basically, the way I do my activism is that I never bring in any kind of Western world kind of alternatives. Because if I try to bring them in this diet, it's going to bring up excuses for their prices because they are so damn expensive. So the whole idea is when I'm promoting veganism, I try to promote it in a local context. Because I need people to understand it in a local context, not in a European context. Because sometimes people will say, “Oh, that's a European context. Veganism is from the Western world.” You know, and then they forget that 99% of our staple foods are vegan. So the problem is like from schools, you look at kids like myself, I was in boarding school, for the first 18 years (of my life). Of course, I started boarding school when I was six years up to the time when I was 18.

So that means that every day I had to eat beans and maize flour or rice. So when I'm out of school and you're telling me that beans are high in proteins, I'm like, “ugh! Come on, I've been eating beans for the whole of my life.” So these kids want to change to something else.

There's that transition, that nutrition transition, and they're attaching it to financial status, attaching it to parties, to a good life. They think, like, you go to a party without meat, it's not a party. So that's one of (the) other problems. So, back to your question, yes all the meals that we give (are) a hundred percent (traditional) and vegan based.

When we have maybe a food sampling event, then we try to put in, something extra, you know, for the people to get excited. Because also we are trying to point to a local context and we need to mix our local food with something international, you know? And this excites them. And like, "Wow! You can eat potatoes in this way. You can eat rice in this way. You can prepare..." So we just prepare it differently than how they make (it) traditionally but then, at the end of the day, it's still the same type of food.

Mariann: It's still a traditional food. And I've heard a lot of people talking about that approach as being a decolonizing approach to diet. That going back to traditional diets and not incorporating a lot of Western foods is really a de-colonial kind of approach. Do you think of it that way?

Dash: Yeah, because you look at how meat came into our context, you know. Because back in the days (of) African traditional society, yes there was hunting. But then meat wasn't consumed on a daily basis. And it's after the slavery, the trading comes in, colonialism comes in and they're introducing this other kind of cash crops and so on. Then trading comes in they start to consume meat, and they start attaching it (to a wealth) status. So, like I say our type of food, it's a hundred percent vegan because look at my tribe and their type of food, specifically matoke. Matoke are unripe bananas, but then they are steamed with beans. Then, you look at even some of the nomads that we have here who live on pastoralism, they don't even put on animal skins. They put on cotton, some kind of clothes. You never find them putting on a cow. They are nomads, they rear animals but then you can never find them putting on an animal skin. You find them putting on cloth, just tying themselves here, covering only this part. I mean, it's a cotton cloth. So you just move on to what colonialism is doing, they are trying to kill a crocodile and then they are making something out of it and then someone wants a Chanel bag and because someone wants all of that...it's killing us.

So the whole idea is we're trying to promote veganism in an African context level, rather than on a European context level. (Trying to do that was) damaging us because at the beginning of it all, like when I was starting with Anonymous for the Voiceless. I had zero experience, and this is in 2019, I had zero experience (with) activism and I'm trying to do activism, but in a European context. So we move onto the biggest mall in the city and we went to do

activism because we have seen that's how Europeans are doing it and were literally arrested for it. We had to run for our lives. Of course, I didn't understand the language they were speaking, but my other colleague was understanding. He was like, "Hey, Dash, you need to run. These guys are coming to arrest us."

Mariann: So, you were handing out leaflets, you were talking to people?

Dash: No, we were trying to do a Cube.

Mariann: Oh, okay. A cube, yeah.

Dash: And then they we're like, "Hey, what you're trying to do is bad for our business." People actually beat us up and there's nowhere we could report (it). Because you look at here, especially, well, not everyone, but literally most of the police are corrupt. They all just want someone pay something or "I'm not going to give attention to you." So that means that we had to rethink, because even though this is where we (wanted) to do a cube and we had to pay for security for people to gather. Just in case, because we were next to a small butcher. So we had to pay for our own security.

So you look at (it and) some things are worth it, yes? But then others are not because we as activists, we have to also consider our lives. Because once something happens to my life, there is no other me who is going to come up and fight. You know, that's one minus (when) instead it should be one plus. So that means we had to sit down and think on how best we can promote veganism (and) at the same time protect (ourselves). Another thing we have to do is we have to balance the humans and non-humans. You're like, "Ah but Africa, you have so many problems. Why are you focusing on animals when people are dying in the war? Why are you focusing on animals, why are you having a sanctuary when people are hungry?"

So that's why we are like, "Hey, let's uplift poverty, let's uplift animal lives, let's uplift education for kids, let's uplift animal rights at the same time."

Mariann: I love that approach. It's so positive and you can reach people who you wouldn't otherwise reach. It's a, win-win, it's good for everyone, both the people and the animals. Can you talk a little bit about agriculture? Because a lot of what goes on, in the talk about vegan agriculture and raising plants, and it has to do with people are always saying, "well, in Africa, they couldn't do that because you have to graze animals, there's land that you have to graze animals

on, but you have another project, I think it's called Project Grow, that is really focused on vegan, on plant-based agriculture for Africa. Is that true?

Dash: So, about Project Grow, which is specifically focused on people who live in slums. And so the reason why we are focusing on the slum areas, is because the kind of beneficiaries we are looking at, there is a high rate of HIV for sex workers in slums. There is a high rate of domestic violence, there is a high rate of teenage mothers and so on and so forth. But then the major concept for this project, is because these people are so congested in slums. Like there's no space for them to (raise) their family, (and there are) very high rates of poverty. There is a high crime rate, it is a problem for them to find meals in a day. It's just (no space from) house to house there's just corridors, small, small corridors. Like, even sometimes I can't fit in these corridors.

So what we said is like, how can we promote veganism into this lifestyle? Because at the same time, we look at normal socio-economic problems and we see them as opportunities to spread veganism. So you look at this financial, or social problem. So how can we turn this problem into a solution?

How can you find that solution and at the same time, make it as an opportunity for us to talk about veganism in such a community? So let's introduce this project. So Project Grow specifically teaches people how to grow food in containers, polyfilm, plastics, or even old clothes. So these containers, they turn these containers, the clothes, the plastics into gardens. So you find out someone has their tomatoes, that has about 15 tomatoes, but they are (growing) in a small tin hanging on the wall. So that means that all they have to do is to go out of their house or at the window, (and) get the food and have it for their own consumption.

The whole idea is to promote veganism, that's the base, the foundation, promote veganism. Because we need to tell them why are we teaching (them) back yard farming? Because people are like, "Hey, you're not giving us chickens, you're not giving us goats. The government is giving us goats." We are like, "Hey, the reason is because we are promoting animal rights."

Because when you talk animal rights, the first thing that comes to their mind are the wild animals, or maybe dogs or cats, it's never about these animals. And then you bring it about and they are like, "ahh." Everyone gets surprised, like "Oh. This is what you're talking about."

So the whole idea is that for them, they have nutritious foods. This food is nutritious and it's fresh, which you never find anywhere...and then it's

organic...you look at the kind of things they spray on the tomatoes that are not organic. You find a lot of things that they do to the plants.

So the idea is we give about 17 types of veggies, and within those types there are five kind of spices and then two kinds of herbs. Because they are slums, there's a lot of stagnant water so there are mosquitoes, there is a lot of malaria. So we provide these plants that they plant around their houses that repel the insects and the mosquitoes and so on and so forth. So there are about 12 veggies. Like potatoes, carrots, spinach, kale, eggplants, and so much more. 12 types. Then, we look at tea spices, we look at herbs and so on and so forth. So yeah, that was idea is to help them get nutritious veggies right at their doorsteps. And those who have surplus, can also sell it to their neighbors because at the end of the day, they want income for themselves because they're living on about less than a dollar a day or (sometimes) even nothing.

So that means they have to get money out of this where possible. Those with small, small spaces, we utilize (these) spaces as much as we can for the rest of the community. And we launched that program in the first wave, I think it was 2020.

We support 10 families and then (early) last year we got a grant from Food for Life. We supported 50 families with our grant. So that means that with 50 families, about 200 beneficiaries were being provided with food, with veggies for a meal and they can get about two meals out of these veggies because they have different kinds of veggies.

You know, that means someone can have an eggplant or with kale or with spinach or coriander and so on and so forth. So, they have those meals, or then they (can) change. So that means, they can't be having that same type of meal every day. So that gives them a chance for them to have these plants last longer as they are consuming a different kind of vegetable.

Mariann: That sounds like an amazing program.

Dash: Yeah, exactly.

Mariann: It can really lift up people's lives.

Dash: Yeah, that program ended around late last year. So now we are looking into, we are looking for more and more grants and some funds so that we can do that same project.

Mariann: How do you raise money? Is it mostly, your money mostly comes through grants?

Dash: Well, me and my colleagues, we do graphic design. So the whole idea is that we have our own income planted into promoting the organization. But apparently right now, I think, we have two projects that have been funded. We have the vegan school feeding campaign the compassionate feeding program. Compassionate Feeding Program is about to end. It has been funded by A Well Fed World but it's ending...the grant is getting done this month. And then we have Magic Marble Foundation that's also helping us with the vegan feeding program at school and also the compassionate feeding program. And (that grant is) also getting done this month.

And then we also have an upcoming grant that will go through ProVeg that's for the vegan school campaign, it will go to schools. But then basically 70%, we raise it on a personal basis, from us.

Mariann: Oh you do?

Dash: Yeah like, from our own income because, you know, it's something we are doing not because we were told, but out of passion (for) what we want to do. So (this is how) we are getting there.

And then another thing is that, most of the organizations that we are going to, to get funds, they always want something that's already in progress. Something that has been funded. So that means we have to raise money and create a sample.

Mariann: I know exactly what you mean. Yeah.

Dash: That means we have to get our own money. We sample our projects, we show, "Hey, this is what you have done so far and this is what you're projecting, and this is where we want to reach." So yes, me and my team, we use our own from graphic designing and other gigs that we raise...So we raise some money, we sample a project, so we are like, "So let's sample this project and see", and then we look for funding for this project.

So, yeah, that's the whole idea.

Mariann: Yeah, it sounds like you're doing amazing work. I do want you to tell people how they can find out more about you and support you if they wish. But, before that, I just wanted to ask you a really big question. Do you think that

Africa, in particular, and perhaps in particular Uganda, has a particularly important role in turning the earth in new directions? The West has gone so far in the wrong direction, with climate change exploding and with what we're doing to animals turning earth into...it's just, it's a nightmare, what has been done. Do you think perhaps there can be leadership from Africa on these issues?

Dash: Yeah, yeah, there is. And like, I think the ideas are already starting to come up, and they're spearheading...mostly in the climate change direction. With our (work), because me, I put a lot of a focus on animal abuse rather than the environment and that whole perspective. We kind of lack enough inspiration within our sector...But, I think, yes we can, because if you look at the kind of work that I'm doing...sometimes I think I'm doing my work and I'm like, "I'm seeing no change", you know? But then through the kind of people we serve, both on the local context at the African level and the Western world, they're like, "Hey, we are doing this because of what you are doing, because of what you're going through, you've changed lives." And, that alone, I'm like, "Hey, I need to keep pushing. I need to keep going." Truth be told, the kind of work we do keeps existing, because teaching people, going to people and telling them, "This is only good." Because world culture has made them think that animals are there for us and you're trying to change a mind, especially for the grown up minds.

But (a lot) of the time it's mentally (draining). But because we (work with) different people in different age groups, you find that a certain project that you're doing for, like maybe for teens is mentally supporting you to keep on fighting for the (projects where) you're trying to push (to change the mind of older people).

Yeah, (in) a larger context, each and every day we are growing, as in Africa, and within it people are waking up. Because now, like I said, all our projects that we do target a specific group of people. You look at the vegan school campaign, where we target. We are going to schools, so that targets mainly teens and school (age) children. Look at the street activism that we do, that measure, that focuses on the street going people. You look at for the (elderly), where we reach them through feeding programs. We are starting up clubs at universities, focused on the youth because most of the youths, like my friends specifically, I can't just go up to them and I'm like, "Hey, go vegan." The first thing they're going to do, they are going to put me into an argument, (they will be demanding) facts.

So you look at our vegan university clubs that are going to be maybe handling debates, handling, you know, our community outreach and so on and so forth. And then you look at also the very young toddlers. Because our activism begins from the age of six, with kids of six years. Where we see it's effective...we went to this primary school. And for primary school, this one has kids from

about seven years to 11 years and we talked about veganism. It was a day school, so kids went back home to their parents and they refuse to eat meat. They refuse totally, it was a very big number of kids. And we were supposed to go back to this school for more classes and to create clubs. Because after we go to these schools, we'll create clubs, create vegan clubs that give people resources- t-shirts, leaflets and more resources.

So we were supposed to go back to the school, because we had only focused on about two classes. So we have to go back to that school and engage the whole school. However, the school suspended us.

Mariann: Yeah.. I'm not surprised, I've seen the same thing happen here.

Dash: They were like, “you shouldn’t come back because parents were raising concerns.”

"Our kids are no longer eating meat and we don't want this." So when are you going to schools... What we realized (is) that we can't go to schools and (say), “Hey, we have come here, we need to talk about veganism.” That's going to be a very big no. So what we do, we have other aspects that we talk about. You talk about bullying, talk about depression among kids, anti drug abuse, life's concerns.

So we draft letters to school administrations and we (say), “Hey, we want a platform to talk to your kids about bullying, anti-depression among teens, anti drug abuse, please give us the platform.” So when we go to the school, we talk about this. We address (the topics) we are supposed to, and at the end of the day, when you're done (with those things) that's when you bring about veganism.

So, initially we attach it to bullying. We first talk about bullying, then we share some food just so they understand. And kids are the best people you can ever work with; their conscience is so free. They aren't like with the youths... because with the youths their ego is going to block them from accessing the truth.

Mariann: Absolutely.

Dash: Whereas with the kids, they are so free, they are going to be like, “Hey, this animal is depressed. This animal is being bullied.” Because that's what they always say. Animals are bullied, you know?

So kids are going back home and they don't want to consume animals. "We don't want to do this." So parents are coming to the school administration, like, "Hey, our kids are stopping, what's happening?" So that school is like, "Hey, please don't come back to our school, we don't need your services anymore."

Mariann: It sounds like you're approaching activism with such a wise...like you've tried things that didn't work like your cube and going in and just selling veganism and then you're adjusting and working with people's attitudes and managing to survive. So that's probably the most important thing to be able to do when you're an activist is kind of make those adjustments to make it work.

But I totally agree that kids, especially in the context of anti-bullying, because of course farm animals are the most bullied creatures on earth and kids are the ones who are able to see that. So you're doing amazing work. I'm so glad we had a chance to hear about it. Before I let you go, just tell people where they can find you online and on social media, so that if they're interested, they can follow up.

Dash: Our website is podrskafoundation.org and we are on LinkedIn, we are on Instagram and we (have) Facebook. And we are there as Podrska Foundation.

Mariann: Okay. And we will put all of those links in our show notes so people will be able to find them. Dash, thank you so much for joining us today. It's really been a pleasure to hear about the work that you're doing. It's remarkable.

Dash: Thank you. Maybe one other project I didn't mention...

Mariann: Oh, sure!

Dash: It's called the Lady Project. Now the lady project, specifically focuses on women and teenage mothers. (Specifically) HIV positive women, domestic violence victims, and women (living in) strict poverty. So what we do is we teach women how to make materials like clothes, jewelry, and so on and so forth.

However, we always tell them why we are using cruelty free materials. So what we do (also), maybe say if a woman comes up and we teach her how to make clothes... We have to make sure to find a market for her clothes, for her products that she has made, because this is a problem.

We have many institutions here teaching kids and people that, “Hey, let me teach you how to sew.” So if someone makes clothes and you won't find them tons and tons of customers, they don't have a market.

So what we do as an organization, we teach them how to make cruelty free products from African fabrics and then we look for the market as an organization. So we pay the market. So money that comes (back), part of it goes to the organization and the other part goes to the women. The part that goes to the women, is for the improvement of their lives, for themselves. (What) goes to the organization, we use it to empower a new group of women.

So our plan is to have for women, a position where for two months, where we have training for women who come in the evening and then two or three who come in the morning, so it's like they work in shifts. And the weekends are for the experts, the ones who have (already) learned to make their own products. Whereas the weekdays are for lessons. And this program is hoping to resume soon because we have been down due to COVID.

And we used to rent our sewing machines and the company we were renting from sold their (machines). So now we have been off and we (haven't) had a space. So now we are looking into having a space and having our own machines.

Mariann: Well, do you think you'll ever make those products available online?

Dash: Yeah. actually speaking of that, in the past years before COVID, we had planned to have a fundraiser with an organization that's called The Sentient Project. It's headed by a gentleman in the US called Daniel Turbert who does photography. So he comes here annually. He was here last year and we had a photo shoot from the products that we made and he moved some of the products to the US. And hopefully this year we are going to have an Etsy store come up online. And also on our website, if all goes well, we should have a store online to sell this product as we are waiting for the fashion shop Kickstarter. Hopefully if all goes well this year.

Mariann: That's very exciting. We'll be looking forward to that and thank you for telling us about it. And thanks for joining us today, Dash. This has really been fascinating. I hope we can keep in touch.

Dash: Yeah, sure thing. The pleasure is always mine.