



# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 670, Interview with Liz Ross

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

**Liz Ross:** Hi! How are you doing, Jasmin?

**Jasmin:** I'm doing really well. Thank you for being here. I know you're extremely busy and I have so many questions for you. So just to get started, from a thousand feet high, can you give us a brief idea of what Rethink Your Food is and then we can get into some details?

**Liz:** So Rethink Your Food is a fairly new organization, and our aim is to promote a plant-based diet to Caribbean people. In the Caribbean region and in the diaspora.

We have found that there is a lack of programs and initiatives that promote a plant-based diet. There's also a lack of initiatives that work with people who are committed to investing in healthier communities, as for example, leaders in the food service industry and leaders in the health and wellness industry.

And thirdly, I don't know of any website or hub in which you can have a centralized location for information, where people can use as a resource to get information that supports a plant-based food system. So this is all where Rethink Your Food comes in.

Now, added to that, why the Caribbean? Well, first of all, I was born and raised in the Caribbean. And when we look at the population size, we can see that...the United Nations says that there's about 44 million people living in the Caribbean. And if we look at the United States, it's about 4 million Caribbean immigrants. If we add their offspring, people who were born in the United States, who are of Caribbean heritage and connected to their Caribbean heritage, we can probably safely say that that's doubled. Now if we use that same pattern in Canada, in the UK, in Spain and in France, the number turns out to be about 50 to 55 million

people. So that's like a seriously huge population where there is not a lot of outreach going on.

If we look at California, we can see that, I think, the size is about 40 million people. If you look at the African American community or Black/African American, which includes Afro Caribbeans, that's about 46 million people in the United States. So that gives you an idea of how big this is.

Now when it comes to health, you can also see, just like other parts of the world, that Caribbean people have to deal with issues around health that is food related. Just like any other part of the world, and the United States, we have our share of heart disease and diabetes. That's basically one of the top five causes of death and health problems.

If we look at the fishing industry, we can see that the eastern part of the US, which is actually called the Western Central Atlantic region, which starts from the coast of Virginia all the way down to Florida and then going east into the Caribbean region, that is one of the most heavily fished areas by the industrial fishing industry.

And as your audience knows, that has caused a lot of destruction to the flora and fauna, a lot of depletion of certain fish species. So that also is impacting the lives of people in the Caribbean as well.

Most Caribbean countries usually import about 70% of our food. And some of that meat, dairy eggs is actually from CAFOs, factory farms in the US and even as far as New Zealand. So that gives you an idea of how we ourselves are involved and affected by this global food system that we have.

And lastly, when you look at climate, as we saw with Hurricane Ian, which again affected Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean. I mean, Puerto Rico is still trying to recover from their last major hurricane. You see an increase in hurricanes and storms, not only in the number, but in the severity. So you're seeing more flooding, more damage to the infrastructure, ie. damage to the economy, damage to food crops, and not to mention all the stress that people have to endure as they're living through this.

Some countries are in what's called the hurricane belt, so they usually have to deal with the effects of that. And that's usually Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cayman Islands, Bahamas. So this is like literally the right time to start talking and including a conversation about transitioning to more of a plant-based food system. And like nobody is doing this. Like literally.

**Jasmin:** Well, it sounds like you're doing it! And you're right, it is the right time and the right moment, and it certainly has the right audience on the other end of it, just waiting for these advocacy efforts of yours.

And essentially you're asking people to rethink their food, which is also the name of your organization. So what approaches have you found to be effective in reaching out?

**Liz:** So we're a fairly new organization and we just launched a program, it's not a year yet, and it's called the Vegan Caribbean Kickstart, which one can access on one of our two websites, [vegancaribbeankickstart.com](http://vegancaribbeankickstart.com).

So first of all, I'll tell you, it's been very successful. It's not even a year yet, and we've had about 13,000 people that have signed up. So we'll definitely get to 15,000 within 12 months, which was my goal. So we'll definitely get to over that. And 85% of the people who participate do identify as people of Caribbean heritage, of which 73% live in the Caribbean. And of the total Caribbean population of people who sign up, 77% live in the Caribbean. We've had over 21 countries participate and most of that... I think, what, we have about 19 Caribbean countries that have participated? And the reason for the kickstart is it is an efficient way to reach large groups of people who live on an island separated by the ocean.

So obviously the internet is one of the best ways, and most cost effective ways, to introduce people to the benefits of a plant-based diet. It includes a sample menu plan with recipes that are culturally appropriate to living in the Caribbean, and it also includes an email series. Now, the purpose, in addition to obviously trying introducing people to a plant-based diet, is also to encourage people to experience shopping, whether at the market or grocery store, or picking food from their garden. To connect the experience of cooking, to connect the experience of communing with others throughout that process. To finding meaning in the larger context of celebrating our heritage foods, while at the same time knowing that we are part of a process of transforming certain aspects of our food system. Because people need to find meaning in what they're doing and diets don't work, we know that, so we want to have it more inclusive and have the language tailored to how people can find meaning, and we can talk about that later, in the program itself.

Now, the other purpose of the program is to put Rethink Your Food out there. To say, "Hey, here we are!" Some of our participants, they actually work for the government, and I know that because they email me, Some of our participants also they're educators, so they work in universities and schools.

And the program is about bringing forth our visibility so that we could start building popular support for institutional change when we implement our other programs.

**Jasmin:** Wow. There's a lot there. That's amazing!

Just real quick, I noticed that you developed a lot of the recipes for the Kickstart yourself. What are some of your favorites? Make me hungry!

**Liz:** Okay. So heritage foods is a big thing. We are proud of our heritage and we are proud of the fact that Caribbean food makes up a number of different cultures, historically, that have come together. Of course, not all of it has been good because of colonization, but this is not about a decolonized diet. This is about really celebrating our heritage and the foods that we have.

That comes from an influence of Africa, depending on where you are, India. Basically half of the population in Trinidad is from India through historically indentured laborers and then immigrants later. And also you have the European influence. You have English, Spanish, French, and Chinese, and to a much lesser degree, Lebanese and Syrian. And that really makes up Caribbean culture.

So one of my favorite foods is what they call breadfruit oil down. And they call it oil down because it has a lot of coconut milk and sometimes it's sautéed with a lot of oil. And one of the things about my program is that you use either no oil or a small amount of oil when you're sautéing, so we have like a dry sautéing. And the breadfruit, which you get, if you're in the United States, mostly in Caribbean markets or Asian markets, you cook with tomatoes, you cook with onion, garlic thyme. You also use culantro. You can use that. Culantro is sort of like cilantro with its smell and taste, but much stronger. And the green leaf looks kind of grassy and the shape of like a feather.

So that is one of my favorite dishes. And what I do is...usually it's cooked with salted pigtail and of course I'm not doing that. But when you cook that in a little bit of coconut milk and you pair it with, let's say, one of our traditional dishes, which is red beans, or red peas, and dumpling. We stew sometimes with dumpling and some corn and callaloo, which is another traditional dish. Callaloo bush is actually part of a root vegetable called, we call it dasheen or here, I think it's called eddoes. And we eat the bush itself. Well we call it the bush, but it's the the leaves, and that makes a fantastic dish.

Now another one of my favorites is corn soup. And the way we make our corn soup in Trinidad is not like you make the corn soup here. We actually add a

small bit of yellow split peas, we add pumpkin to it, and we sort of puree a little bit, so it'll become thick and then we add the other ingredients. And we also add chickpeas, which we call chana. And also ground provision like potatoes or eddoes and so on.

You know, one thing I like about Center for Nutrition Studies, which is actually the only nutrition based program that I have seen, and they are one of our sponsors as well, is when they talk about the food groups, they include grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds. But they also include a category called provision and that is important in our diet because ground provision is a very big part of tropical diets. And it is very nutritious and it is very filling.

**Jasmin:** Everything you just said sounds absolutely incredible. So kind of related, how do you counter the argument that letting go of ancestral foods is letting go of your culture?

**Liz:** Yeah.

**Jasmin:** I'm just curious about your take on that and also what you would say is the true heritage diet for folks from the Caribbean.

**Liz:** Right. I think there's a difference between when you're talking about a US focused argument, and food system and culture, and how vegans or animal rights activists respond to that versus what's going on in the Caribbean and different cultures. And sometimes I think it's easy to assume that the lens through which people in the US are living is the same outside.

So, for example, when I was on the farm in California, there were a lot of non vegans that talked about a decolonized diet. And that actually included, to them, meat. It include buffalo instead of cows...or elk. And what is actually good is that you have US focused activists who are countering that by talking about a decolonized diet that does not include that.

My audience is very different from that. Because even though the history is connected, in some ways, around chattel slavery and the brutality that has occurred with that, what happened after is very different.

So for example, in the Caribbean it's 99% Black and Brown people . So we don't have a dominant culture that doesn't look like us that is controlling different aspects of our systems. Our police force is Black and Brown. Our judicial system, lawyers, judges are Black and Brown. Our politicians are Black and Brown. Our teachers, our health industry, it's Black and Brown.

So we are talking about heritage foods and we are talking about connecting to that. Now, of course, if I told somebody in the Caribbean something about going back to our ancestors, many of them will say, “Well, you know, our ancestors ate meat.” And that's obviously a valid point. In fact, when you look at some of the very small religious groups that still connect to a blend of African and Christianity, like Santeria in Cuba. And then we have what's called the Baptist, which is not the same Baptist here. The Baptist in Trinidad is a little bit of African Yoruba traditions with Christian traditions.

They will engage in the slaughtering of animals. Just like you would see Hasidic Jews here, there's a ritual that begins with k I think...but you anyway... and then of course Thanksgiving. We can't forget that Thanksgiving in the United States is, in a sense, a ritual that we celebrate around the killing of a Turkey. So it's not just about our African ancestors or Black and Brown people.

So what I do in my work is focus on the possibilities of what we can do. And my narrative is that we are actually the ancestors that can influence generations to come. So what is our responsibility in framing and molding our existing culture so that those that are coming ahead of us can look at us as the ancestors to say, “This is the good that we have done.”

With all the information that tells us that a move towards a plant-based food system is better for the planet, is better for our health, is better for the animals. It is consistent with connecting with the land, which resonates with Caribbean people so much. And if we're saying that we're connecting with the land, what does that mean?

So it's not so much about debating whether we ate animals from our ancestors, whether they were pre-colonial or whether they were my grandparents. And I really would like to see more activists engage in those kinds of conversations about we have the responsibility, as the ancestors of the future generation, to make the world a better place. And what does that look like consistent with our values?

**Jasmin:** So, so true. So well said. You have to get a Ted Talk, Liz. \*Liz laughs\*

I hope that's in your agenda for next steps. So can you talk a bit about religious influences on diet in the Caribbean and how they can coordinate with your messaging?

**Liz:** Yeah, that's a good question. So you've seen the debates recently. I think it was last year, I saw a recent debate and I think it happened in the UK. And it

was basically about welfarist versus abolitionist. And I listened to the entire thing and what I got from it was that context makes a whole lot of difference. The people who you spend time with really makes a difference in framing your argument of whether you're a welfarist or an abolitionist.

The idea being that, and this is true, a lot of people stay vegan for a long time because they care about animals, because they empathize with animals. That's basically my moral frame and why I am vegan. However, that's not the full story.

And, for example, people come to being vegan for long term, or not eating meat and eggs and dairy, for spiritual reasons, for religious reasons. So for example, in Trinidad... Trinidad is about 50/50 people of Indian descent and African descent. And of that Indian population, they're mostly Hindus. And some of the Hindus do eat meat, but there is a population of very religious Hindus that have never eaten meat. And it's not so much because of animal rights per se, centering that the way the narrative is in the United States or the UK.

Because they still, at some sense, believe that animals aren't necessarily, for lack of a better word, equal to humans in that sense. It's more around reincarnation, and there is a hierarchy in the reincarnation process, but nevertheless, it is about nonviolence. And recognizing that these animals have feelings, which I think most people do to some degree. It's just that there is that indifference that we are trained to focus on. So that's one group.

The other group is Seventh Day Adventist. There is a lot of Seventh Day Adventists in the Caribbean and many of them transitioned from a vegetarian diet to now transitioning to a vegan diet. I think your audience is aware of the 60 year study of Seventh Day Adventists in Loma Linda, and that was actually used to help promote a vegan diet, actually. And many of them are transitioning now because of the information that we have, to a plant-based diet. And many of them are actually on my program, and I know this because they email me.

Seventh Day Adventists believe that God has... I'm not Seven Day Adventist, but their spirit and their soul is housed within their body. So taking care of their body is consistent with their spiritual experience and how they find meaning. And as you probably know, religion is a very, very strong motivator to do a lot of things, or abstain from certain things. So that's one group.

The other group is the Rastafarian community in the Caribbean, and many Rastafarians are actually pescatarian. They eat fish and plant-based. They don't eat eggs and they don't drink milk. So many of them are now transitioning to



not eating fish. So it's not really like a big transition that they're going through. However, in addition to that, Rastafarians, some of them in the mountains of Trinidad and Jamaica and St. Lucia have actually been vegan before that word came about, and they call it ital.

So you hear a lot of Caribbean people using the word ital to replace the word plant-based, to replace to replace the word vegan diet. And like Christians, Rastafarians ideas vary. You have people who are more strict and you have people who are just focusing on the diet itself and other things.

But that is another group that is very, very dedicated to connecting to the land, to self sufficiency, to communing with the community, and valuing the importance of community and how the land and her inhabitants are part of the community. And connecting their identity back to the African continent, particularly Ethiopia, but also the awareness that Africa had contributions to civilization, science, to indigenous ways of growing food, to the economy, to math. So that when you get to talking about chattel slavery, it's just that small part of their history and they are not defined by it.

Which is, I think, one of the reasons that a decolonized diet is not really something that is promoted, because you already living among people who look like you. And if you are Rastafarian, your identity goes way beyond that.

So these are three examples in which I would say spirituality and or religion can be a huge motivator in people's sustainability, in terms of a plant-based diet.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, so true. I love the way you framed all of that together.

And for listeners who are interested, we have interviewed people who represent that specific religion, all of the ones that Liz just mentioned.

So a lot of organizations that are seeking diet change focus exclusively on health or perhaps also on food justice. And though those are perhaps the primary focus of your message, you bring in strong messages about the environment and about animals as well. So I'm curious, why do you think your audience is open to these arguments while other audiences seem not to be?

**Liz:** Right. Well, it's kinda like what they say? They throw the spaghetti and see what sticks. \*laughs\*

I don't think, necessarily, just talking about health is going to be the best motivator for everybody. I mean, diets don't work, they don't. So I think it's



important to bring, even if you're talking about diet, it's the language and what you use. So for example, you could talk about diet in terms of the reasons that I had mentioned, around spirituality, diet around connecting to the land.

In my kickstart particularly, I talk about the three reasons. So I start off with diet and also give examples. I deal with the issue of protein, show that there are athletes who also are plant based. And also then I segue into the environment and how it affects the environment because a lot of Caribbean people are not aware of how it can affect our water supply, our ocean. I mean, these things are new to the Caribbean environment, hence why Rethink Your Food is there. And many of them are actually responding really well. I get emails that say, "Oh my gosh, I didn't realize that!" Because Caribbean people, we don't tend to think in terms of the consequences and actions of our diet.

And then I have a section that talks about the suffering of animals, not so much showing the goriness of it. I have a video that shows a cow in New York that escaped, jumped off of a truck, and how it was interesting that so many people rallied around this cow, to save this cow. And it showed this woman who really started to connect what was on her plate with this cow.

So those are the kinds...I actually have a section on empathy, like basic stuff. What is empathy? What does that mean in our community? And also the importance of why empathy also is about connecting with the animals.

So it's about talking about these basic ideas of kindness and love, um, and introducing people to things that they have not been exposed to, that perhaps maybe if you were living in the United States, depending on where you are in the United States, you may have been exposed to it. And in some cases you're exposed to it in a political sense, of being anti such and such off the bat, because of course everything is political in the United States, even being plant-based. Whereas in the Caribbean, we don't have that political tension going on.

So when people hear that, when they hear how it can affect their lives, when they hear about what's going on in factory farms, when they hear about, "Well, maybe we are killing animals because they have feelings and we're not realizing that they have feelings." These are just really new concepts that I'm trying to promote.

And of course, the spaghetti, some of it will stick. All of it might stick and that's great.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, totally. Now I want spaghetti. It's like I'm imagining it on the wall and I'm like, "What a waste. Give it to me!" \*both laugh\*

So tell us about the Better Menu Initiative.

**Liz:** Oh yes. Okay. So here is where Rethink Your Food comes in. This is what I call like a theory of change.

The idea is to get as much public support for institutional change. And to start getting public support is obviously to be out there and to introduce people to the benefits of a plant-based diet and engage them. So those two programs will be obviously the Vegan Caribbean Kickstart and also a video series podcast.

And I plan to have my Caribbean Veg Summit. And the Veg Summit is not like a veg fest, it's more a conference, people coming together. If you're in a health and wellness profession, if you're in the food service sector, or if you are someone who is interested about the benefits of a plant-based diet, you're going to get that information from experts.

So that's the outreach part. And then that would segue into the other component, which is the database, where I will have researchers when I get all the funding after people listen to this and they give me a \$300,000 budget.

**Jasmin:** Definitely, definitely. \*both laugh\*

**Liz:** Where researchers will...we'll have articles and data that really highlight the problems in the Caribbean and why including a plant focused food system is important. Around climate change, around the economy, around health, and a number of things, farming, a number of things. So this will be sort of like a resource center that people can use to talk to politicians or talk to food service leaders or health practitioners.

And then finally, the fourth components would be the Better Menus Initiative. And when I mean fourth, I don't mean...it can happen all at the same time. And the Better Menu's Initiative will be a program in which we will partner with people in the food service sector and the health and wellness sector who are invested in and committed to healthier communities. So those people, including people who are environmentalists, are interested in shifting our diet to a more plant focused diet and eating less meat.

So one example would be if we were to work with a vocational institution or school, we would work with them over time, a number of years, to switch out

some of their animal products to plant-based products over time. And it depends, the process depends on the school, how people respond and how far they are willing to go.

But you can't get that if you don't have public support. And hence why it is so important to have this Vegan Caribbean Kickstart. It's similar to Veganuary, but I can't stress the importance of the beginnings of having a program like this. Because I think I mentioned to you, we've had about 13,000 people who have signed up. And of that 85% are people of Caribbean heritage, and of that, at least 70% of them live in the Caribbean, 22 countries. This program is English speaking, and later I would like to actually have a Spanish-speaking and a Haitian Creole component of the kickstart.

The other thing about the Better Menus Initiative is, as I work on pilot projects I would like to start when I move back to Trinidad. I am a citizen of both the United States and Trinidad and Tobago. There are key countries in which I would like to work with people around the menu change program because once those key countries start implementing programs and people see the success, then you have that domino effect. And what that can lead to then is more institutional change from a government level.

So for example, we have what is called CARICOM. CARICOM, which is like Caribbean Community Coalition something...And what that is is a coalition of government leaders in the Caribbean region who come together to discuss policy change around our economic prosperity, around trade among the countries and also around health and climate change.

So the Better Menus Initiative also has that component of being used as a reference to put forth to having more institutional change and talking to a body in which everybody is there at the same time. You have a centralized location in which they can collaborate to make change. So that tells you how big that is and how powerful that is.

You know, once we build that grassroots support, whatever that number is, whether it's 3% or 30%, we will find out.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, definitely. And I was going to ask you this at the end, but it feels more relevant right now. How can people support your efforts and find out more about Rethink Your Food?

**Liz:** Yes, so we have the Vegan Caribbean Kickstart website, which has been up for a year. And the main website is Rethink Your Food Inc. Or

rethinkyourfood.org. So people can go to that website. There's a contact us section, so they can go there and send me information. There's also a donate button and they can also see the Caribbean Kickstart program that will go into the website, but also the other two programs that we plan to launch, which is the Caribbean Veg Summit and also the Better Menus Initiative, once we get funding for that.

Now with the Better Menus Initiative, I am not. Project management is my thing, and I'm not into reinventing the wheel. So I have actually been talking to about five major vegan animal rights organizations who already have a menu change program and I will be collaborating with at least one of them, but most likely two of them because they've offered their services to collaborate with me during the pilot program.

In that way, I'm not reinventing the wheel and I'm working with people who actually have resources, like tons of resources already. So I'm really, really, really excited about that. And I like the fact that in this nonprofit world that we have, that we can collaborate with each other and work with each other. And these people have volunteered their support and their time, and I think that's fantastic.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, totally fantastic.

Well, switching gears, tell us about your experiences at UC Santa Cruz.

**Liz:** Yes, so I was on a farm...well UC Santa Cruz Center for Agro Ecology and Sustainable Food Systems. It was a 10 month program at that time, now I think it's two or three months and it was fantastic.

I wanted to learn how to farm. My brother is a farmer by the way. We actually have 300 acres of agricultural land in Tobago. So I come from a family of farmers and subsistence farmers. My grandfather was a subsistence farmer. And I also wanted to learn more and expand my existing knowledge on understanding the issues that farmers and farm workers face. And it was an amazing program. The nice part of it, of course, is...so Santa Cruz is hilly and UC Santa Cruz is on a hill, so I can literally get out of my cabin, we had cabins, and walk down to the edge of the hill and see the ocean a mile away. And I can pick the sweetest strawberries in the world. Just sit there and eat, and that's really, really amazing. I mean, the food, the soil was so healthy,

**Jasmin:** I should tell you that I lived in Santa Cruz for about two years when I was the senior editor of VegNews and VegNews was located there. And so I

lived downtown, but I have been to UC Santa Cruz and it's just one of the most beautiful places on earth.

**Liz:** Oh my goodness. It's a 30 acre farm, and it's like heaven. Like, it's so amazing. Did you get to see the cabins?

**Jasmin:** No, but I know what you're talking about, but I didn't get to go there, but I did take lots of hikes on the campus.

**Liz:** Okay. Yeah, so it was really nice.

I can take this different ways, but I will say this...coming back to the vegan animal rights world and our food system.

What I have noticed with some people, first of all, I'll say that because you are vegan, that doesn't mean we need to know everything about our food system. That's just not fair. And it's not something that we have to...I mean, other people are in other institutions and they don't have to know everything about everything in the world, right? \*both laugh\*

But somehow we have to come up with all the solutions and know everything. And I think that's part of the whole speciesist mindset of normalizing a specific way of thinking. And anything that comes that's new, your body and your brain just starts to think of all these things, these double standards. So I'd like to say that. However, for organizations and people who are actually talking about our food system. And when they're talking about things like going plant-based is about, for example, pro justice. And they talk about how if our food system was all plant-based, that we will end world hunger is literally showing a lack of understanding of what's going on our food system.

And I think when you're talking about that, it's important that we have to educate ourselves because what happens is that we end up disconnecting ourselves from the food justice world that understands that we already have an abundance of food to feed the entire world. Now, given that some of that is animal products, but the fact is that we have a supply of food products that can feed the world, but we also have hunger, we have issues with hunger and lack of access to healthy foods. We have an economic system in which the United States dumps their surplus food into places like Africa and India and other places putting the price down, where farmers who have cash crops like wheat and corn can't afford to get a fair price, and so they become poor.

Most of the small farmers in the world are actually on the poverty line, particularly in the global south. Now, the other idea is about cheap food. Now, on the one hand you have people can't afford the food because of lack of access on the one hand, but also because it's too expensive. But on the other hand, if you lower the price of food, then farmers aren't going to be paid a fair wage and their farm workers aren't going to be paid a fair wage.

So the economic system that we have is problematic. And I think when we say things like, "If all the food is going to be plant based now it'll end world hunger." I think it shows that, to many food justice people, that we are siding and buying into the narrative of Monsanto now Bayer or um, Cargill and all those companies that are actually promoting this sort of scarcity narrative that we see.

And as a result of that scarcity narrative, where are they going? They're going into Black and Brown countries and now using their land, whether if it's for factory farms or whether if it's for wheat or whether if it's for the soy to feed, they're still promoting that. And now if you're arguing that we're gonna run out of food, which is debatable, but if you're arguing that we're gonna run out of food, that's one thing.

But if you're arguing that we need more food and if we have all plant-based food that we can now feed everybody else, that's just simply, it's not even real. It doesn't even make sense when we know that even in other parts of our system, we have a hierarchy and we have haves and have nots. I mean, the food system is just a replication of other parts of...you know, our healthcare system, you know, in which there are people who have access to better healthcare than others.

Does that make sense?

**Jasmin:** So it makes total sense, and I'm trying to wrap my head around this.

I'm wondering if you can give any tips to animal rights activists who bring in issues of world hunger into their messaging so that they aren't kind of getting trapped in this very problematic messaging around world hunger.

Like how should it be communicated, especially for animal activists?

**Liz:** So if you are not in a space in which the debate is around world hunger, which is basically talking about, in my opinion, and in the opinion of, pretty much the food justice world. And when I mean the food justice world, I'm

meaning the farmers, the small farmers who are experiencing the problems and the non-profits who are working with these farmers.

I think if you are not knowledgeable of that, then stay away from the issue. Talk about the diet, talk about animal suffering, talk about factory farms, talk about those kinds of stuff. We don't need to try to cover everything, when we don't know

**Jasmin:** To your point before about how we're supposed to know every single in and out.

**Liz:** Yeah. And don't buy into that.

Yeah. Okay. It looks good on your website. And it looks good when people are looking, but it also comes across as insincere. And unfortunately, the animal rights world and the food justice world are at odds.

**Jasmin:** Hmm. And that is unfortunate, isn't it? Cuz there seems to be a lot of common ground.

**Liz:** Yeah, there is. There is. And that's, you know, we can talk about that in a minute, but going back to your question about what we can do, I would say stick to what you know, and if you are in the world that is dealing with food justice issues, which there are vegan nonprofits who are doing that, then educate yourself in the category.

Whether if it's farm workers or whether, if it's the supply chain, or whether if it's restaurant workers or whatever it is, just become knowledgeable and listen to the people who are being affected by it. Don't just put up a website, anyone can get data on the internet to support anything. So don't just, "Oh, okay, I need to show that it's this, so let me just go find something. And Oh, okay."

Yeah. So I think sincerity is really, really important and I really think that the more sincere we are, we don't look like we have just one agenda and we're just interjecting all kinds of other things because of that.

**Jasmin:** So let's go back to the common ground issue. Just to reiterate, we mentioned that there is certainly common ground, a lot of it, I think, between food justice activists and animal activists.

And you mentioned, and I've experienced, that there is a divide there. So what is that about and how do we bridge the divide? Or do we bridge the divide?



**Liz:** Yeah, that's an interesting question and we have to understand that people in the food justice world, some people, not everybody, because some people in the food justice world are vegans. But the ones who are not vegan, we have to understand that they buy into the same speciesist mentality that the rest of the population who are non vegans do. So the outreach, in my opinion, isn't that much different around why we should move towards a more plant focused food system. And depending on who it is, the conversation may change.

Now, having said that, I think many people in the food justice world, it's safe, just like people in the animal rights world who are actively, they have nonprofits or they're doing outreach, then that's a different standard in which people are informed and they're taking action to do something. So perhaps we can talk more about issues around what kind of food system are we looking at and not contradicting ourselves by having those very fundamental systems, like for example, domination, of which we talk about dominated by a small handful of multinational corporations, dominated by our economic system, dominated by a political system which is in bed with multinational corporations.

The idea of racial dominance and all these kinds of dominance that we food justice activists are working towards, let's not have that spill over into how we are working towards a food system that includes equity. And for us to do that, we have to have a conversation of how we dominate animals.

We have to have a conversation about speciesism. I would like to see more of a conversation in which we can talk about that and really address the double standard that we see when people feel that when we are talking about building a plant-based food system. It doesn't mean that, number one we have all the answers, and it doesn't mean that therefore if we're not there yet...

So for example, one of the common things is that people who actually have access to going to the supermarket and eating plant-based foods or going to Whole Foods will bring up, for example, poor people, people who don't have access, as I would say, unfortunate as a front. To not deal with the issue of speciesism.

So they bring that up, which I think is unfair. However, what I usually say is just like, for example, if we are working towards an equitable and fair system for farm workers, we are still going to a grocery store, here it's Publix, in which if we picked up an apple, that apple actually might be from a farm worker who was abused.

So because we are living in the system, that doesn't mean we cannot fix it. I mean, the fact that we're working towards the system mean that we are living it and in some degree we are perpetuating it. But for some reason, if we're vegan, there's this narrative that we have to come correct. So I think we have to really talk about those discussions and say, "Well, okay, you're saying it for this, but you are doing the same thing. I mean, we're all working towards a fair food system, so let's really talk about the issue. Let's talk about the fact that, and it's okay that you don't value the animals. You don't value the fact that this is one component in which you have a free pass, so to say, when it comes to creating a system that's more equitable, in which there's less dominance. And let's have a conversation about that." You know, it's not about we got you or it's not about your wrong or right. Let's just have a conversation about what that means and what that looks like and how we can do the best in the situation that we're in as we're focusing on working towards a plant-based food system.

So, for example, in Trinidad, I'm not gonna be going to talking about fisher folk and telling them not to fish. First of all, it's dangerous if I am going to people and telling them, or in some sense they feel that I am a threat to their economy. That can be dangerous for my life. In the United States, we have the privilege of having to dialogue with not necessarily having to have our lives threatened physically in some cases. Whereas some places that, you know, you have to watch what you're saying.

But apart from that, and I'm not saying fisher folk are dangerous. What I'm saying is that, you know, it's about how our system, how do we work towards the system? And that will take a while and, okay, fisher folk have their fish. I'm not working to end their fishing, I am working to focus first on the bigger fish, which is industrial fishing, CAFOs, a system.

Could you imagine if we just focused on factory farms and crashed that system, how much of an effect that will have in people's minds? I mean, and pretty much when you look at any social movement, you don't necessarily always focus on your end result in the beginning.

So for example, Cesar Chavez, they actually focused on one wine company to squeeze that wine company out and boycott that company. And then when other wine companies saw it, they were like, "Okay, we need to have a discussion. We need to bring them to the table." When it comes to the LGBTQ community, it was first domestic partnership because we couldn't get gay marriage. So, you have to understand how social movements work, and we have to understand that our allies can also be people who eat animal products.

**Jasmin:** Yeah. So, by the way, don't be too jealous, but I got to meet Dolores Huerta a couple weeks ago.

**Liz:** Oh, nice! Nice.

**Jasmin:** Yeah. At the National Women's Hall of Fame induction, she was introducing someone. I was very excited.

And just going back to what you said about dialogue and conversation, it's interesting that you're bringing up the LGBTQ movement because I also am an activist in that space and I in fact came to the animal rights movement by way of the AIDS awareness movement.

And I just keep thinking about the dialogues and the conversations that I wish could be had now between LGBTQ activists and LGBTQ activists. Cause I know that every social justice movement has divisiveness and maybe it's because of my age, just as like a Gen X person and being able to sort of understand where both perspectives are coming from. And then there's that like, threat of cancel culture and...

**Liz:** Cancel culture is huge!

**Jasmin:** Yeah. And this is just a general statement, but we need to get better at communicating with each other within the worlds that we exist in or like nothing is going to change.

**Liz:** Yeah. I mean, black folks been dealing with trying to deal with racism for how long now? Over 150 years.

But you know, the way I see it is that part of working towards a better system is part of being human. It really is, it has to be, it's part of being human. And I really would encourage people to really get more involved regardless of if it's LGBTQ, whether, if it's Black liberation in the US or other parts of the world, whether if it's about our food system, whether if it's about climate change.

But the reality is that there's always gonna be tension. And what I find, so for example, I get people, usually white, who say, "Well, you know, I wish I can talk to indigenous people about switching to a plant-based diet and it's so frustrating." Because many of them use the narrative about connecting to their ancestral lands and connecting back to a decolonized food system that includes, as I said before, eating bison instead of cows or elk, you know, or boar and so on.

And you know, there's the idea in the United States that if you are from specific cultures, you can't really debate or tell other people what to say. And I do think that it is true, given the context of which we live, that if you are white, or even me, a Black woman from the Caribbean, isn't going to go to the Miccosukee Tribe here, which is literally 20 minutes away from where I live, unless I am invited, to say, "Hey, let me tell you about a plant-based diet."

However, that doesn't mean that we cannot discuss and problematize the idea of using tradition, spirituality, or religion to perpetuate unnecessary violence. We can have that discussion because that connects us as human beings. We all have traditions and we can problematize that, but that doesn't mean I need to go in... And sometimes there's this idea in which people feel that they need to talk to everybody. You know, it's like, "Why can't I talk to these people?!"

Well, you know, reign it down a little bit. Maybe your notion of feeling that you need to talk to people has to do with perhaps that mentality that you see Christians do when they go all over the world. I'm not saying Christianity's bad...you know, the missionaries...I'll get in trouble for this of course. Or colonization. You know, it's this idea that now you have to go in every space.

No. Deal with your community.

**Jasmin:** Yeah, yeah. Totally. And when I was bringing up the LGBTQ issue and also kind of hearkening back to when I met Dolores a few weeks ago, it was at this like women's event, right?

And I was with my masculine presenting wife and the only butch person in the room really. And I think it's interesting, my wife and I were like, "God, this is so straight. Like this is such a straight room. Like it's the straightest room we've been in in so long!" And then when I'm in LGBTQ rooms, which is much more often, there is kind of an ageism present about older feminists. So I was sort of noting...

**Liz:** So you're the older one.

**Jasmin:** Um, I think I'm just like in the middle. And before me kind of were the second wave feminists and then after me was this sort of gender revolution and these two sides don't see each other. And I'm an Al-Anon, so I'm constantly like trying to make everyone feel better.

But um, anyway, this is a total tangent but what you're saying is fascinating and it feels like a really powerful place to end this part of the interview, though I do hope you stay on with me for the bonus.

**Liz:** Yeah, and I just wanna reiterate my mother is a staunch Catholic, so I'm not trying to knock Christians.

What I'm knocking is the idea of going into other people's spaces and having the arrogance of feeling that it is your mission to now feel that you need to change everybody who's in front of you. There are people who I know, even in my space, the Caribbean space, in which I know I can't reach. Move on, go to somebody else.

I think there's enough people who we can have a dialogue with. People who are curious, people who are interested. I see them signing up to my kickstart all the time because I collect data and I have a poll, a questionnaire in which I ask, "What are your interests? How much meat, dairy, and eggs do you eat?"

And then when you leave, you fill out a survey and I have about maybe 2% people filling out the survey. So I am interested in collaborating with people who are interested, people who are curious, people who eat meat and dairy products, but also understand the value of transitioning. They're just not there yet, and maybe they may or may not go but relax. Let's just work with...not you particularly. \*laughs\*

**Jasmin:** No, actually, I should relax. It's gonna be better for me too. \*both laugh\*

So, Liz, tell, tell us again how we can find you online and support your efforts.

**Liz:** Yeah, so, anyone can reach me at [RethinkYourFood.org](http://RethinkYourFood.org) They can donate. There's a donate button and then there's a Contact us page.

But I encourage you also in addition to that, to go through the website and see what we do and also the wonderful programs that we really would like to have. If I had a \$300,000 budget, I can hire more people and I can do amazing work because right now we are at that opening in which Caribbean people are listening because they are affected by climate change and many of them are sick because of their diets.

So we have that opening right now and they are the neighbors of the United States, so I think we don't wanna have that missed opportunity.

**Jasmin:** Mm-hmm. 1000%.

Liz, thank you so much. You mentioned that you're going to have a podcast and I'm gonna be your first subscriber and I'm sure everyone listening to this right now is gonna be number 3, 4, 5, 6, et cetera.

But I'm excited to stay up to speed on what you're working on and I invite you to come back anytime you have something going on and I really appreciate you joining us today on Our Hen House.

**Liz:** Thank you. Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.