



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 682, Interview with Gwenna Hunter

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Gwenna.

Gwenna Hunter: Thank you so much for having me again!

Mariann: I should say welcome back. You were on not that long ago, I think it was episode 558, and I highly recommend to anybody listening to check out all of the information there about your many projects in the LA vegan scene.

But today we really want to focus on a new project, which we're super excited about, and that's the Vegans of LA Food Bank. People know what a food bank is and I could ask a lot of general questions about why food banks are important, but I know this issue is personal for you.

I've heard you say that you actually grew up in a food desert. You didn't think of it as a food desert when you were growing up, but thinking back on it, it's pretty clear to you. Can you share some of those experiences with us?

Gwenna: Yeah, absolutely. So like you said, I grew up in a food desert, but I never knew that it was a food desert until I got involved in the vegan movement.

And I'm like, "Oh wow. That was totally me." We had a supermarket when I was growing up called Fazio's, they ended up closing down and we never got another one and there weren't any for miles. But that was just, to me, the way of life. That wasn't weird, it wasn't discussed. No one was talking about it. It is just how it was. And we just accepted it. And this is in Cleveland, Ohio, by the way.

So yeah, I was used to that. And so growing up and living in Cleveland, living in different cities, I remember living walking distance to a supermarket when I first left Cleveland to move to Miami. And I was like, "This is amazing!" I could walk to the supermarket and it felt like a luxury.

Mariann: Yeah, walking into a supermarket actually is luxury. That's a great thing to be able to do and it's too hard for too many people.

So one of the solutions that we've heard proposed for this is food banks because we can't necessarily persuade supermarkets to open up in every neighborhood. And when you can't, there have got to be other ways to bring people food.

So for those who aren't that familiar, tell us what a food bank is and most of all, who it is that they're reaching and why they are so important to these people.

Gwenna: So a food bank, basically, is a brick-and-mortar facility where people can come and get free food. You just show up.

Now, some are different. Not all have the same level of qualification. Some are mandated by certain grants and certain federal agencies, and so they have to comply with certain things. But for our food bank, the only thing we ask is, "How many people are in your household?"

They don't have to show any identification. They don't have to show proof of income. They don't have to do anything other than show up and be human.

And I won't even say be human. Like if a cow showed up, I'm like, "What do you need?" *both laugh*

Mariann: I hope you're keeping food there that is appropriate for cows, just in case. *both laugh*

It's really, really important for people to have food that's accessible to them. And before we get into more details about the food bank, it's also so important to point out that accessibility isn't the only issue for people, when it comes to having access to healthy food and being able to eat in a way that serves you.

What are some of the other barriers? One that always occurs to me is time. It takes a lot of time to make good food.

Gwenna: It does. It does. And you know, it doesn't always have to, but as you said, you really want some good cultural food. Yeah. You're gonna need all types of ingredients. And seasonings sometimes are expensive. My goodness! Especially if you want to get organic seasoning.

So yeah, those are definitely huge barriers. And also information. I know we're in an information era, but people pick and choose what they want to focus their

attention on and diet isn't always that thing. And digging deep isn't always that thing.

There are so many distractions. I know I definitely get distracted by so much information and what's going on here, and AI over here, and robots over there, and it's like, you know what... *laughs*

Mariann: The other thing with information about food, too, is that there's so much contradictory information out there, and there may be a lot of information out there, but it sure isn't all true. *laughs*

It's hard to parse through it.

Gwenna: And most people, and I gotta put this in a way that is compassionate, maybe it won't sound compassionate, but I do feel compassion because I have been this person in this particular area. Most people don't want to do the work or do the research, and also most people believe what they've been taught. Who doesn't? And you can't fault people for that.

You're told to go to school and get good grades and listen, and then you do that, and then you find out that you've been lied to. So I know for me, when this thing cracked wide open and I realize that you didn't need animal flesh for protein, I'm like, "What?!"

And then I found out that the meat and dairy industry provides funding for public schools, and I'm connecting all these dots and my mind was just completely exploding, and I was angry and I was upset. So it takes a lot of bravery, in my opinion, to investigate and get the truth because sometimes I think there's a little bit of an imbalance that comes with getting all this new information and realizing that you've been lied to your whole life. It's a huge betrayal.

Mariann: It sure is.

And I think always one of the best ways to reach people on anything is with food, because people love food. And that's exactly what you're doing. You're trying to reach people with healthy food. Advice always comes better when it's accompanied by something to eat.

So tell us how it works, and let's get into the details.

In order to found this vegan food bank, you actually partnered with an already established food bank, is that right? That seems like a great way to start. How did that work?

Gwenna: 100% correct. And what's crazy is I would love to be the genius in this and say, "Oh, I thought of this." I did not.

Cat meowing in the background.

Sorry, my cat is wanting attention. *laughs*

Mariann: Oh, believe me. Mine will be here soon. So, everybody out there, you'll just have to listen to the cats from time to time. *Gwenna laughs*

Gwenna: But anyhow, what ended up happening...because I was looking to partner with either a YMCA, or a church, or a community center, someplace that has space...and the more I investigated on what I needed, the more I started getting a little bit nervous because I'm like, "Oh God, I do need to get trucks. I do need freezers and refrigerators. I do need a huge space. I need somebody that's going to go in this truck and pick up this stuff. I need somebody that's got the muscle to move all this stuff around." And the tab was getting very expensive and I'm like, "I might be out of my range here,"

But I knew this was a divine implant to have a vegan food bank. I know this is what I'm supposed to do, but I'm a universe person. So I'm like, "You know what, Universe, I'm thinking too hard. This is stressing me out. I don't wanna make the wrong decision. I need this to fall into my lap and I need it to fall into my lap gently. I need to recognize it when it appears, and I need it to be a beautiful experience cuz I deserve this. I deserve to not stress out and work hard. I deserve this to just come to me."

And so I literally let it go. Within a few weeks, maybe two to four weeks, I ended up meeting this gentleman that needed help with some...he was doing a vegan thing at USC and wanted my opinion and assistance on some things. We met for lunch and we're talking and he's like, "Yeah, I have a food bank."

And I'm like, "oh," and the light bulb still didn't go off. I'm like, "Okay. That's cool. I'm trying to have a food bank too, but all vegan."

And he's like, "Instead of you starting from scratch cuz it's so much, why don't you just partner with me and just take over part of my food bank? And you can have your vegan food bank."

And I'm like, "What?!" And at this, I heard angel wings. And doves, I saw doves. Harps and angel singing and I'm like, "This is the one!" *laughs*

Mariann: Yeah, that's an amazing story.

So where is...I don't know whether it's his or his organization's food bank... How often does it distribute food, and then what is your way of participating?

Gwenna: So the food bank is called Hope on Union. That is the actual brick-and-mortar, Hope on Union. And they operate every Thursday.

So they distribute every Thursday for two hours, and there are hundreds of people that show up. Because you think, "Oh, two hours, that's a really short window," but the amount of people that show up, we wouldn't be able to serve everybody if it was like eight to five.

And so I take over once per month, every third Thursday of the month. I have my own freezers now, and I can't even use words to describe how amazing this partnership has been. I mean, it's still a human experience. There are still little bumps in getting to know people's personalities and sharing the power and the knowledge, but it's really turned into a family type of experience and has taught me a lot about partnering and partnerships and collaborating with people. And using your compassion and kindness that you like to use on people to go vegan. Using that in relationships as well, using that with human beings, which is an issue that I do have in the vegan community, is most of us, a lot of what I've seen, people tend to compartmentalize their compassion for animals and openly brag about how they hate people or they don't like people.

And I get it because I'm an introvert by heart. . I have probably a two-hour window of being in a social situation and it's like, "I gotta get outta here!" So I understand. But we really have to watch is disliking and cursing our own species.

Mariann: Yeah, I totally agree. And even if we continue to feel that way, we gotta pretend we don't. And hopefully by pretending we'll get to a better place, with at least some people.

I'm so impressed that you are able to work with people so smoothly when they aren't vegan, and you're vegan, and that isn't getting in the way. Has that caused any problems, that the rest of the food bank is not on board?

Gwenna: So here's the thing, it is so weird. There are about maybe five people that I work with there consistently that are employees or diehard volunteers. And I felt like in the beginning they were like, "What? Vegan?" Like they were not on board. Sonny, who is the creator of the Hope on Union Food Bank. He wouldn't be there for most of the stuff. He comes in, checks in, and he's out of there.

So I'm with everybody else and they're kinda looking at me like... You know? And I'm like, "Oh boy." *laughs*

So, it was very important for me to make sure that I was very conscious of this, to make sure that I was not showing judgment, that I was not saying things like, "Ew," because there are dairy products sometimes in the food bank.

Mariann: I would assume.

Gwenna: There are animal parts in the food bank.

It used to be a meat market.

Mariann: OY!

Gwenna: I know! The irony of it all!

Like there's an old sign that says Meat Market on the side.

Mariann: Well, isn't that a blessing that you have turned a meat market, at least partially, into a vegan space?

Gwenna: Thank you for recognizing that because I've noticed when some people come in to volunteer, they're vegans, they'll see stuff and I could see they're feeling triggered and it's like, "No, this is freaking awesome! Turning a place that was used for one thing and now we're kind of shifting the energy and using it for something else."

So thank you for recognizing that instantly, because a lot of people get triggered by that and they don't see their way out of it, and they just stay in those triggers.

Mariann: Yeah. You have to take your way out of it.

Let's talk a little bit about the food. What kinds of food are people able to find here and where do you get this food? It sounds like a huge undertaking,

particularly since, I understand, you deal with a lot of produce. Which of course doesn't keep.

Gwenna: Yeah. So the way it's set up, I work with a wholesaler to get certain things that we don't get donated.

So we work with foodforward.org and they're a food rescue program, and they get a lot of things from supermarkets and farmers' markets, and we go pick up pallets of things, and then we have to sort through it because some of it's good, some of it isn't. We sort through it and we keep what's good and we share that with our customers. And then, like I said, in addition to that, I work with the wholesaler, What's Good Produce, and there are certain things that I buy that I may realize I probably won't get through the donations.

So I usually will purchase things like tomatillos because it's a mostly Mexican community, right? So I don't wanna just give them what I think I want them to have. I mean, I'm not gonna lie, there are certain things I'm like, "Oh my God, I want them to try this," you know? But for the most part, I get them what they want and what they need.

So, tomatillos, we have cabbage, spinach, mushrooms, fruits, and bananas all the time. Always, always. Grains, lentils, beans, peanut butter. There are usually either pistachios or walnuts. Raisins are always a staple. And then I think it's been every single month we've gotten a magical experience with getting some vegan meats donated.

Mariann: Oh wow.

Gwenna: GTFO, It's Vegan, they were the first to donate physically, well, not the first, but were local, where we were able to go and pick up a bunch of stuff that they donated to us and it was absolutely wonderful. All Vegetarian Inc, they do vegan shrimp, nuggets, drums, for a lot of restaurants in the area, and they donated a ton of stuff to us. Excellent ingredients, non-GMO...

And so we donate those items as well to the customers and yeah, it's been a great experience.

Mariann: That's an amazing story that you're getting...I wanna shop there!
both laugh It sounds like you have everything that I want!

But what are the reactions of people? I'm assuming that most of the people that you serve are not vegan, or not thinking about vegan. So what kind of reaction do you get? Do you get pushback, enthusiasm, or...?

Gwenna: Most of the time it's complete cooperation.

So the way the food bank is set up, everything gets lined up in front of the food bank on the sidewalk, and we have volunteers that are assigned to each box, like each area of food, and so the people are lined up.

We open up at eight, but if you get there at six o'clock, there's already a line around the corner, like to show you how deep the need is. We open the lines at eight and they come up one by one and they decide what they want in their bags. So we let them decide and drop it in there. So with vegan food, a lot of people...

Mariann: You mean, like all the foods vegan, but you mean the vegan specialty items?

Gwenna: Yeah, all the items are lined up this way but when it comes to the specialty items, I usually will have someone that speaks Spanish. If it's something that I'm like, "This needs to really be explained just in case."

So I think we had got some Omni Meat, and these large packs of Omni Meats, we were giving those out. So our Spanish speaker was explaining, "Oh, this is vegan, it's vegan pork." He was like, "Carnitas!" and talking to them about it. And they were like, "Okay, si, si."

So they would try, maybe about 1% would say no, which is very small, but for the most part...

Mariann: Really small.

Gwenna: Yeah. But for the most part, people were just grateful to have so much bounty, first of all. And also we make sure we're in a really good mood because you can go to these places and people are just putting stuff and you don't care. You know, if you're in need, you'll take whatever attitude you take. But people just throw stuff in there.

With us, it's please be conscious of eye contact. Please be conscious of saying Good morning. Hello, please. Thank you. You know, put on a smile. Look what

we're doing. So to me, it's also like a little healing center. I tell people, "If you're feeling down and you need a boost, come and volunteer. It'll shift you."

Mariann: Yeah. Food activism is just so beautiful.

So much of what we do in animal rights is so burdensome and negative. It's just learning horrible things. But food activism really can bring you happiness. You're helping people, you're helping animals, you're looking at food. Who doesn't like that?

Do you have messaging at all as to the reasons why everything is vegan? I know that you're vegan for both healthful reasons, but also your passion for the animals. And I'm just wondering, is there any messaging around any of those reasons at all, or is it just you offer the food and they take it?

Gwenna: You mean am I giving out any literature or things like that?

Mariann: Yeah. Or are you messaging in any other way? Are you telling people why vegan in any way?

Gwenna: Well, initially we were giving out booklets. We were using Vegan Outreach's booklets because they have a lot that are in Spanish. And so we were doing that the first couple of months. But a lot of the people that come are repeats, for the most part, and I was kind of repeating the material. So I started working on my own, but it's on hold right now.

And so the goal for next year is to create recipes in Spanish for the items that we have and to give those out until I find some more Spanish-speaking booklets that are appropriate for this particular community and until I finish my own.

Mariann: That's exciting. I'll be looking forward to hearing about that.

Are any of your recipients...I mean, doesn't sound like it from what you said, but are any of them actually on board? Are they vegan? Do you have people coming who are vegan, who are thrilled to find this?

Gwenna: Yeah. Well, you know, it's interesting, so I volunteered at the food bank before I launched in May because I needed to get an understanding of the community. What it felt like, and how to respond to them. I needed to put my hands in it and practice and just see how the whole thing operates.

There were a couple of gentlemen, I remember there was one guy that was vegan that would come and he's like, "It's so hard to find vegan stuff at these food banks." Because he said he juices. And I'm like, "Well just hold on, I'm launching soon so I'm gonna have some stuff for you. You're gonna love it!" So it was interesting, we would talk about veganism. There are some people that are vegetarian, a small percentage, but for the most part, they eat meat.

Mariann: Yeah, I would assume so. I'm surprised...well, I'm not surprised there are any, we are everywhere but in small numbers usually. So, yeah. It's a great combination of helping people who wanna be vegan and also introducing veganism to people who it never entered their head.

So, is this it or are you planning for expansion?

Gwenna: I'm gonna let it just come to me because if I think too hard on expansion...I haven't even completed a year yet, so I really wanna master this particular area because like I said, for the past few months we haven't done a lot of booklets and things like that. But now I feel like I have the trust of the community. I go down sometimes and I say good morning to people while they're in line. "Thank you for waiting." And it's just this like kind of invisible bond and this trust that I've just started to really, really feel inside of me.

So my point in saying all this is that I'm not in a hurry to expand, but if the opportunity presents itself and it is the right opportunity, I will definitely act on it.

Mariann: Yeah. Well, I'm looking forward to that because it does seem like that's what happens to you. Things present themselves.

Another thing that I don't know a lot about, but it's on a separate topic, is the Jubilee Vegan Cafe at USC. Is that something that you're working on? Is that where you got in touch with the fellow who runs the food bank?

Gwenna: Yes. Oh my God. You connect the dots very quickly and easily because I didn't even tell you that. But yeah, that's how I connected with him because he was starting this at USC.

And he's not vegan. But what's interesting, I will tell you, is they have a church service, obviously on Sundays. They usually have like a communal meal with everyone and he said that they're now, which has been probably for the past few months now, all vegan. Not the people, but the meal is now all vegan and so I think that's wonderful.

I think that's absolutely wonderful.

Mariann: It's amazing.

Gwenna: It's wonderful. So you can influence without, and I'm punching my fist at the screen, for those who are listening. And I get the punching, I get the urgency, because it's like, "Oh my God, what's happening right now? And we need this to stop."

But I am telling you that if you exude and give forth patience and kindness and just let people be themselves while they're around you, you can have influence and lasting influence.

Mariann: Yeah. One thing that I wonder about, I mean it happened for you, but food banks can be a difficult kind of activism for vegans to get involved in, as so much related to food can be.

Obviously, people can donate to food banks. That's one very easy way. But if you really want to get involved in running it, and it's not a vegan food bank, there's that conflict of, "Do I really wanna get involved in serving animals to people?"

What's your advice to someone who really has a passion for this kind of work and wants to volunteer but doesn't want to get caught up in distributing non-vegan food? Like is the only thing to do what you're doing, just start your own?

Gwenna: I got my experience working for Vegan Outreach and doing food outreach programs on-site. I mean, we were kind of like a mobile food bank in a sense. So we would go to different social justice organizations each month and have produce brought there and we'd sort it and put it in bags and their community members would come and get it.

So there are so many things that you can do. Food Forward is a great organization. Also, Food Cycle LA is another partner of ours that we partner with that is now donating. They donate things, and they get things from farmer's markets and also places like Sprouts and some high-end supermarkets. So they have some really amazing items as well.

So that, and then partner with someone that's already existing, because I tell you, I've been doing this now, I think this is the seventh month, the amount of information I have learned. I'm learning things I didn't know were learnable. I'm learning things I didn't know were there for me to even learn.

And that's on a business level and also on a spiritual level and emotional level, and learning how to really create lasting and trustworthy relationships. So yeah, partner with someone so you can learn the ropes.

Mariann: Yeah. When you first started talking about it and talking about the trucks and the freezers, I was like, “Oh my gosh!”

Gwenna: Well imagine how I felt trying to figure this whole thing out on my own! *both laugh*

And what's amazing about that statement you just said, because that was one of the things that was giving me a little bit of like little baby panic attacks, the fact that I needed freezers, refrigerators, and a truck and space.

And so, I'm talking to Sonny, the owner of the food bank. He literally says, “I have freezers. I have refrigerators. I have trucks.” It was almost like he was selling me! I was just like...mind completely blown. I said, “Everything that I asked for this man just provided to me.” Yeah, it's been amazing.

Mariann: Amazing. Well, I am so glad that you are here today to share it with us. Thank you so much for doing it and for sharing with us, and I'm sure, inspiring others to get involved. It's fabulous work.

Gwenna: Thank you. It feels good.

And for me, it's also healing because when I first came to Los Angeles, it was July 4th, 2014, and I came to visit a guy and things just went crazy and I found myself houseless. I had a roof—was able to always have a roof, but I didn't have a real place to stay, and I thought I was going to end up in a shelter.

That didn't happen but things were rough. And I remember one time having \$5 for the week to eat, and I had to figure out how to make \$5 stretch. And luckily the 99 cent stores here are pretty decent. But knowing what that felt like—like I know what it feels like to be afraid of how you're gonna feed, not just yourself but if you have a family.

Most of our people are like families of four and five. Like, it's enough to deal with yourself. You have gotta look at some children, maybe a grandparent or two. And so for me, this is very healing work. It heals that part of me that dealt with that fear and that anxiety of, “How am I going to eat? What am I gonna do next week?”

If you know that you're going to have food in your stomach and you can feel a little bit safe for a couple of weeks, I always say that can lead to hope. Hope can lead to accomplishing a goal. Accomplishing a goal can lead to higher levels of achievement. People don't realize if they've never dealt with food scarcity or food scariness, how fearful that is, and how that can really affect many areas of your life.

Mariann: Yeah, that is a beautiful description. A harrowing but beautiful description of the thought of being without food. And how healing it can be to know that there is some food available. And how beautiful it is that the food you're providing to people isn't a result of violence. So it really is such powerful work.

Gwenna: Thank you.

Mariann: Thank you so much, Gwenna.