



Our Hen House

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Interview with Erica Kubersky

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **ERICA KUBERSKY** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 243.*

ALESSANDRA: What better way to wrap up Episode 243 than with the vegan shoe guru herself, Erica Kubersky? Erica is the cofounder of a little NYC shop called MooShoes, a veritable hub of stylish, comfortable, and compassionate fashion. In this interview, Erica will fill you in on the benefits that non-leather shoes have on animals and the environment, and perhaps inspire you to update your shoe closet. Check out Erica and her fantastic foot fashion at [mooshoes.com](#).

JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Erica.

ERICA: Thanks for having me.

JASMIN: We are so excited that you exist. I'm just putting that out there. This is like vegan fashion royalty, vegan foot fashion royalty.

MARIANN: I know, and vegan foot fashion is a very important thing.

JASMIN: It is! Definitely, and we're all sporting our MooShoes shoes today.

MARIANN: Which I not only get compliments on, but every time I do, somebody says, "But they're not vegan." Like, they think I suddenly became not vegan.

JASMIN: Like, well, surely you wouldn't --

MARIANN: The foot exception.

JASMIN: Right, exactly. Well, that actually brings me to what my first question to you is, because I'm sure it's a question you get asked first all the time, which is, what are they made of?

ERICA: Yeah, that is definitely our first question. Our shoes, the shoes that we carry at our store, the ones that look and resemble leather and suede are made from synthetic microfibers, so there's no vinyl in them, so they're gonna breathe and stretch just like leather shoes would.

JASMIN: Okay, and the next question I frequently get is, well, I've been to Payless and these other kind of cheaper stores, and I know they have these 10, 15 dollar shoes that I've gotten as well, I admit.

MARIANN: I've gotten many.

JASMIN: Yeah! I have as well. But MooShoes has a much higher quality feel, and I know it's all ethically sourced too, which we'll get to in a minute. But what would be the difference between, say, something you would get at Payless for 10, 15 dollars and a higher quality shoe such as the ones you carry at MooShoes?

ERICA: Well, just Payless is fine and I've shopped there and that's great.

JASMIN: Yeah! They have a lot of vegan shoes.

MARIANN: Yeah, seriously.

ERICA: But for us we look to carry shoes from manufacturers that care about the product that they're putting out there, so they're really looking into the materials they're using, they're sourcing the highest quality materials, they're careful as to where their shoes are made. They're careful about production, they're not just making massive amounts of shoes.

MARIANN: I think it's such an important addition to the panoply of vegan products that we finally have shoes -- well, not finally, they've been going on for a while -- but we have shoes that are as high quality as anybody's.

JASMIN: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm going through the trajectory of questions that I get, but I know that the next question is frequently, "Well, they've gotta wreak havoc on the environment." Can you speak about the environmental impact of leather production versus the --

MARIANN: I hear that all the time!

JASMIN: Yeah.

MARIANN: And people seem to think that leather is this completely innocent product. What's the story?

ERICA: Yeah, as if the skin straight from animals is something anybody would want to wear on their feet.

MARIANN: It just falls off --

ERICA: Yeah, they're like, "Please, have this. Here you go."

JASMIN: What's up with the eco practice of your shoes?

ERICA: Yeah, well all of our shoes, the shoes that we manufacture ourselves, we get the material from Italy, and they're all actually far more biodegradable than leather. Actually most of the materials we use are at least 80% biodegradable, which is very unlike leather where like you were saying, once they're tanned and the whole process of that makes -- I mean, I don't know exact numbers, but makes these shoes very toxic to the environment. The process by which they're made, the people that work in the factories, the pollution that they cause is just --

MARIANN: Yeah, and I actually hadn't thought of that. I mean, I knew that the process for making them, for making leather, is very toxic, but I hadn't thought of the fact of the biodegradability, that they don't -- 'cause even I, I guess, was caught up in thinking of them as this "natural" product, but they're not really, by the time what gets done to them gets done.

ERICA: Yeah, because they're coming from animals that are living on factory farms.

MARIANN: Right, yeah, it's just piling the problems onto each other.

JASMIN: Oh, that's actually a great transition into talking about what leather actually is and how it's produced, and we have a video that we're going to show. And this is hard to watch, I admit, but I think anyone who's ever wondered, like, "Well, what *about* leather production?" and that's most people, including a lot of vegans and vegan-leaning people I know, so just try and take a look at this video -- it's not that long -- and then we'll find hope afterwards in vegan shoes.

[Video:

Hi, I'm Stella McCartney for PETA. If you're like me, you've sworn off fur because you know about the gruesome ways animals suffer and die for fur fashions. What about leather? That's something people don't think about as much. Anyone who cares about animals or the environment should become informed consumers on this issue. It's widely known why I don't use fur, but please let me share with you why I made the decision to shed leather. Our aim is not to tell you what to wear, but to give you the facts so you can make an informed decision next time you're considering buying leather.

In the US, most animals whose skin is turned into leather suffer extreme crowding and confinement, deprivation, castration, branding, tail docking, and dehorning, all without any painkillers. In slaughterhouses as you can see here, animals often have their throats cut and are skinned and dismembered while they're still alive. Leather isn't a byproduct. It is the most important co-product of the meat industry, which means that buying leather directly contributes to the horrors of intensive factory farming. Millions of animals die for the sake of fashion every year. In India, which is where most of the world's leather comes from, cows are often marched hundreds of miles to slaughter through dust and extreme heat without a drop of water or a single bite of food. Workers break cows' tails and rub chili pepper into their eyes in order to force them to get up and keep on walking after they have collapsed from exhaustion.

In order to produce animal skins, companies use tons of toxic chemicals that can end up in nearby soil and water supplies. The toxic groundwater near tanneries has caused health problems for residents in surrounding areas. The CDC found that the incidence of leukemia among residents near one tannery in Kentucky was five times the national average. Arsenic, a common tannery chemical, has long been associated with lung cancer in workers who are exposed to it on a regular basis. Studies of leather tannery workers in Sweden and Italy found cancer risks between 20% and 50% above normal rates.

As a designer I like to work with fabrics that don't bleed. That's why I avoid all animal skins. Please join me in exploring the huge variety of fashionable shoes, belts, purses, and wallets that aren't the product of a cow's violent death. You can buy cruelty-free fashion all over the

place now since the demand is always increasing as people learn the dark truth about the fur and leather and exotic skins trade. Please visit peta.org for more information, and thank you.]

MARIANN: That's really brutal.

JASMIN: It's really, really hard to watch that, I know. And I remember when I learned about this, my mind was blown. Did you have a similar experience when you learned what was going on?

ERICA: Yeah. For me, it was, I went vegetarian as a kid from eating a cow and the wheels started turning in my head. And I was a kid so I wasn't connecting that many dots, and so it wasn't until somebody a year later was like, "Oh, well, you know that you're not eating meat but your shoes are made from cow." And then that --

JASMIN: And thus began MooShoes.

ERICA: Yes, kind of.

JASMIN: Wow, I mean, it's true. Sometimes it just literally takes somebody going... and then, boom, your whole world changes.

MARIANN: Well, sometimes it takes more than that, but what's really interesting, I think, that that video pointed out is that people tend to think of leather as a byproduct. "So they're killing the cows anyway, so why not use it, what the hell?" But it really is, it's an important economic factor in the cattle industry. I mean, the cattle industry would not be profitable if it weren't for leather.

ERICA: It's their highest source of income. All these factory farms benefit most from the hides that they sell.

JASMIN: Well, another thing that was mentioned in the video was that there are so many alternatives on the market now. Like we talk about every week on our show there is an alternative to every kind of cruelty, and certainly --

MARIANN: Yeah, shoes we've got covered.

JASMIN: Absolutely. Let's talk about some of the shoes you brought here because they are as delicious as some of the decadent food that has been brought onto our show in the past. So what have we here? Yeah, let's start at this end right here. Those are so gorgeous.

MARIANN: Yeah, they're beautiful, oh, my God.

ERICA: Yeah, these are some of our top sellers. These are from Cri de Coeur, which is an all-vegan company. And just the materials that people are sourcing now are just unbelievable and fun. These are probably one of the shoes that we sell most to people who aren't even vegan who just want a cool pair of shoes.

MARIANN: That brings up an interesting point. Are a lot of your customers not vegan?

ERICA: You know, we don't know.

MARIANN: Oh, that's true, you're not gonna ask them.

JASMIN: You don't take their cholesterol on the way in.

ERICA: Our vegan detector's been broken for a while. But I do think just judging by their reactions, most people are excited to be there, like, same way I am when I go to another vegan business I've been hearing about, probably the same reaction I had when I went to Vegetarian Shoes 15 years ago.

JASMIN: Yeah, Vegetarian Shoes!

MARIANN: Yeah, I'm sure when people come in from places where they don't have vegan shoe stores and they arrive at MooShoes, it's an exciting moment. It's like going to the shrine!

ERICA: Yeah, 'cause it's hard, you're going into a store and having to -- on top of shopping which could just, is a hassle, and then having to ask a million questions...

JASMIN: Exactly, but that's like when you go to a vegan restaurant and you think, "Oh, my God, I can eat anything here!" it's kind of the same thing.

MARIANN: And I assume you do most of your business online.

ERICA: No, it's about half and half.

MARIANN: Really? Because shoes are something people like to buy in person.

ERICA: Yeah, and I think we're lucky enough to be in New York, where a lot of even people who aren't from New York make their way to New York at some point.

MARIANN: Sure. I know every vegan I know who's visited the city, the first thing they're gonna do, they're gonna go to MooShoes.

JASMIN: Well, let's talk about these shoes. So these are lovely. They're very feminine, I would say.

MARIANN: They're a lot smaller than my feet. They're adorable.

JASMIN: Yeah, they're pretty. Like, you could just sort of imagine these guys walking down the street.

MARIANN: They're very light.

JASMIN: So what are these?

ERICA: These are made by Novacas, which is our in-house brand. So we -- they're made in Portugal, they're shoes that Sarah and I, my partner --

JASMIN: Your sister, right?

ERICA: Sister/partner.

JASMIN: Partner actually has a few different meanings, so we'll call you sisters.

MARIANN: Business partner/sister? These are wood, right?

ERICA: Yeah.

JASMIN: Those are great.

MARIANN: So tell us more about Novacas.

ERICA: So it's a line of shoes that we started. We started about 10 years ago but with a very small production. We just were feeling like we didn't have enough control as to what was available and what we could sell. So we had no idea but we just started googling shoe manufacturing.

MARIANN: You guys are amazing. You just like started a shoe store, started a shoe company.

ERICA: Or we're naïve.

JASMIN: But speaking of Novacas do you know who's wearing Novacas today? I am. Would you like to see them?

ERICA: I would.

JASMIN: Okay. Can you move those guys? Check it out.

MARIANN: The most spectacular shoes in the world.

JASMIN: These are the most spectacular shoes I've ever put on my feet in my life.

ERICA: Oh, they're happy to be there.

JASMIN: They are. They're actually going to become tap shoes sometime soon, but anyway I just wanted to have that moment of showing these. But moving beyond just Novacas we have Brave GentleMan. These are going to be the next shoes I own by the way.

MARIANN: Those are nice looking shoes.

JASMIN: Tell me about Brave GentleMan.

ERICA: So we've known Joshua Katcher who does Discerning Brute for years and we've always talked about collaborating, and we finally just decided to do it. He had the style vision and we kinda had the --

JASMIN: And what a style vision it is.

MARIANN: Brave GentleMan, it's also a clothing manufacturer, right?

ERICA: Yeah, he does amazing -- we just collaborate on the shoes, but yeah his clothes are --

JASMIN: Men's fashion is very evolving.

MARIANN: That's so great because they probably would not have been able to bring out this shoe line without your -- so I love the idea of this collaboration and that it's getting such

beautiful shoes into the world. Those are sweet. These are not a -- I guess you wouldn't call it a faux leather.

ERICA: They're canvas.

MARIANN: But what would you call like a --

JASMIN: Synthetic microfiber.

ERICA: I don't mind faux leather.

MARIANN: Thank God because --

ERICA: I know Joshua uses the term "future leather."

JASMIN: Future leather!

MARIANN: Future leather, I like that.

JASMIN: Do you ever just say "pleathuh"?

MARIANN: Yeah, pleather.

JASMIN: No, not pleather. Pleathuh.

ERICA: I mean, I gave up leather a long time ago and my mom's from Brooklyn so that came out of her mouth often.

JASMIN: No, I've met your mom, she's the type of person who would say "pleathuh."

MARIANN: Yeah, but it comes from "plastic leather" and plastic is used, but they most certainly are not.

JASMIN: Let's move onto the next shoes as well because --

MARIANN: Are we stopping here?

JASMIN: Yeah, well, I want to get to all of --

MARIANN: Canvas.

JASMIN: Yeah, so these are more like a canvas. They're very light, like I could just sort of --

MARIANN: These are kind of very ambi-gender.

ERICA: Yeah, I think that's the whole thing behind this company, Good Guys, another all-vegan company, all made in Portugal, very like -- all their shoes -- like, that shoe goes from a women's 5 to a men's 13. So they just make it the same style for everyone.

MARIANN: These seem like they would be very comfortable.

JASMIN: Let's move onto these.

MARIANN: All right, all right!

JASMIN: What's going on with these guys?

MARIANN: Those are a different -- feel this fabric! It's fabulous.

JASMIN: Well, no, it feels like I want a blanket made out of this.

ERICA: We'll see what we can do.

JASMIN: Okay, could you? Thank you. I know people. Okay, so tell us -- these are Novacas again and these are like a little wedge I guess.

ERICA: Yes.

JASMIN: I know the lingo.

ERICA: You do. Yeah, I like a wedge 'cause I can't do a heel but I like a little height. So yeah, these are Novacas, these are from a faux suede.

JASMIN: They're beautiful.

MARIANN: These got many ahs and oohs when we brought them out.

JASMIN: They did.

MARIANN: These are beautiful. Are these also Novacas? They're beautiful.

ERICA: They are, that's the top shoe that just won a PETA Award.

MARIANN: Oh, nice!

JASMIN: You mentioned that your mother was from Brooklyn, I know you live here in Brooklyn as well, right?

ERICA: Mm-hm.

JASMIN: Now tell us about, you have two companion animals, one of whom is responsible for your moving to Brooklyn, is that right?

ERICA: Yes. I have two dogs and four cats. The cats had very little say on our move. But yeah my dog, we were living in just a small apartment in Manhattan, and she just became so fearful. She wouldn't leave our small, little apartment.

JASMIN: Aww.

MARIANN: Aww, she was afraid of Manhattan. Many people are.

ERICA: And we lived off of Sixth Avenue and she was just like, I'm not doing it anymore.

JASMIN: She was just like, "Look, Mom. I have this brochure. It has a park, trees."

ERICA: She was like, "You've taken me there once or twice."

JASMIN: So where are you? You're in Park Slope?

ERICA: Yeah.

JASMIN: Okay.

ERICA: So we're right by the park which has been heaven for her.

JASMIN: Yeah, we're by the park as well. It's wonderful. And did you know, little known fact, that I used to work at MooShoes? And Erica's still talking to me anyway.

MARIANN: Yeah, I've heard bad stories, really bad stories. Do you want to tell any of them?

ERICA: I mean, 'cause I'm a horrible boss.

MARIANN: No, not about you, about your employee.

JASMIN: I mean, it was a long time ago, it was back when you were on Allen Street.

MARIANN: It was kind of when I met you.

JASMIN: It was, and I was kind of going through a breakup.

MARIANN: You were working at MooShoes and you were depressed, you cried a lot.

JASMIN: I cried all the time.

MARIANN: And you carried your whale bag around.

JASMIN: All right.

MARIANN: In a burdened kind of way.

JASMIN: I actually really liked --

ERICA: Well, I mean, that's just from being vegan, right?

JASMIN: Yeah, I was just crying my tears of existential angst basically.

MARIANN: But you've recovered.

JASMIN: I have.

MARIANN: And apparently MooShoes has admirably recovered and you're actually expanding.

ERICA: We are. We are opening a store in LA, which we're very excited about.

MARIANN: That's amazing.

ERICA: We've been talking about expanding for a while and then finally we had friends who are out there who we trust with our baby.

MARIANN: What part of LA?

ERICA: Silver Lake.

MARIANN: Oh.

JASMIN: Very nice.

ERICA: Yeah, very close to the PETA headquarters, very close to lots of vegan restaurants.

JASMIN: That is so fantastic.

MARIANN: Maybe you need to get a job at MooShoes again, sweetie.

JASMIN: It's possible, but I don't think she's gonna hire me now. She knows better now, she does. But I just want to know, finally, Erica, if you could just sort of say what you think is on the horizon for vegan shoes.

ERICA: I never get the -- sometimes people still say, "Oh, vegan shoes are so ugly." And I'm like, I really just don't know what else to do for you because I feel like you come into our store and you have a choice of over 100 styles. Like, if you didn't know our store was vegan, and not everyone does, I think you would think it was the same selection as any other shoe store you'd go to.

MARIANN: I think the problem is what I was talking about before, that people see vegan shoes and just assume they're not vegan. If they look good, they assume they're not vegan. They *can't* be vegan. So that's why vegan shoes don't get the positive press they deserve.

JASMIN: Well, you are changing the world for animals by way of vegan fashion and you have really paved the way for other vegan shoe stores to open up in various pockets of the globe and that's very exciting. And I know that animal rights is like your heartbeat, and not only are you changing the world for animals but you're making us look good along the way. So thank you for all that you're doing.

MARIANN: My feet thank you.

JASMIN: And my feet thank you too.

MARIANN: I have Novacas on too but I'm not gonna show them.

JASMIN: Maybe later. They're nice, they're very nice shoes. Thank you so much for joining us today in Our Hen House, Erica.

ERICA: Thanks again.

JASMIN: It's so incredible to know that there's forward thinking and change making entrepreneurs out there, like you and Sarah as well. And our feet look so good thanks to you, and we feel good too.

MARIANN: Yeah, everybody's grateful for the way your feet look.