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Interview with Justin Van Kleeck

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **JUSTIN VAN KLEECK** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of **Our Hen House**, for the **Our Hen House** podcast. The interview aired on Episode 194.*

JASMIN: Justin Van Kleeck is an activist who is currently based in Harrisonburg, but he is moving soon to Chapel Hill. And he'll talk a little bit about that and about why. And he's doing such important work: community building, and thinking in a much broader sense about how we're going to change the world for animals. And he is implementing his own history, growing up on food stamps. He's also implementing his own thought patterns about the local food movement and his anti-consumerist mentality. And I found Justin fascinating and brilliant, and I think you will too, so here is Justin Van Kleeck.

Justin Van Kleeck has a PhD in English, but left academia, in part to work on veganism, the environment, and other social justice issues. He is a freelance writer and editor, who has written for blogs like Sustainablog, PlanetSave, and Eat Drink Better. He has experience with education and community organizing, including the annual event, Vegan Night Out, in Harrisonburg, Virginia. All of his work, much as his life, centers on and starts with veganism and animal rights, and from there, extends to environmentalism, sustainable and local food production, and individual empowerment, education, and economic and social justice, to name but a few. Despite all of that, Justin is an extreme and unapologetic introvert. He and his wife Rosemarie and their furry kids currently live in Harrisonburg, Virginia, but are on their way back to Chapel Hill, North Carolina this fall.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Justin.

JUSTIN: Hello.

JASMIN: I almost called you Justin Van der Kleeck, but it's actually Justin Van Kleeck.

JUSTIN: Yeah, last time I checked.

JASMIN: I think maybe you should consider changing it, 'cause I think I have the "der" in my phone already.

JUSTIN: Well, we actually, when Rosemarie and I got married -- my wife -- we actually considered what our -- some potential last name options would be. So, I'll take that into consideration. We're still toying with the idea, so--

JASMIN: What -- did you have any possible last names?

JUSTIN: Beaumange which is the French word for vegan, I understand. “Ent” was high up there, so “Ent” from Lord of the Rings. And then Ahimsa was one that we talked about, so we threw around some options. Van der Kleeck was not one of them. But...

JASMIN: Well, see? I aim to please. My work here is done.

MARIANN: I know, I think it should shoot right to the top of the list. Can we move on now?

JASMIN: I guess we can. Are you impressed?

MARIANN: With what?

JASMIN: With all of the work that Justin Van Kleeck has done here in Harrisonburg.

MARIANN: Vegan Night Out is really amazing. It’s -- I’m incredibly impressed that there is so much going on here.

JASMIN: I am too. Can you just tell our listeners who don’t know yet what Vegan Night Out is?

JUSTIN: Definitely. So, Vegan Night Out is sort of based on the idea of dinner and a movie for vegans. So, that was really kind of the core of the idea. But the way it works is that various local restaurants participate with specials on vegan meals or opportunities for activities in the area. And then after that, we all come together at a local theater and watch a free film screening or, in this case, have a free film as well as an amazing keynote talk by Jasmin and Mariann.

JASMIN: Ooh, the hens.

JUSTIN: Yes! And so, not sure how I managed to work that one out, but I’m so amazed to have you two here speaking to our community. So, there’s been a definite growth in interest in veganism and the awareness of veganism and just vegans coming together in the area over the past few years. And Vegan Night Out is really a celebration for people who are already living a cruelty-free lifestyle, but then also an opportunity for people who are not yet doing it or committed to it to get out and go vegan, even if just for one night, and to kind of get a little bit of a taste for what vegan living is like.

JASMIN: So to speak.

MARIANN: I love what you’re doing for vegans here, and for vegan wannabes and for vegan maybes. How about the restaurants? How do the restaurants react when you broach this idea to them?

JUSTIN: Well, surprisingly well. There are already a number of restaurants here that are vegan-friendly, all the way from a little bit to very vegan-friendly. Our favorite place is a local Ethiopian restaurant, Blue Nile, and they have a separate fryer for vegan and non-vegan things going in there. And one of the owner’s daughters is vegan, one of the servers is vegan, so they’re extremely aware of just the questions that vegans ask and the needs that vegans have when they come in to eat and feel safe. And so we feel very comfortable going there when we choose to go out and eat at a local restaurant. And you can -- even though Harrisonburg is in the middle of fairly rural Virginia in a very large farming community, there is an amazing number of vegan-friendly establishments if you want to go out to eat, and also too I would say just a lot of, a surprising amount of interest in it here.

JASMIN: And I know that one of the points of having Vegan Night Out is that you are hoping to make it replicable so that people in other cities could do it as well. Can you explain?

JUSTIN: Definitely. I think Vegan Night Out to me feels like a very fun way to bring a vegan community together and also invite the rest of the community in to learn more about veganism. And just in speaking with people that I know through kind of the vegan networks and stuff like that, it seemed like there was interest in taking that model and doing it elsewhere. So, I think it is very easy to both replicate but then also kind of expand on. So, there are lots of ways that you could do it, but still kind of focusing on food and then some sort of main event or activity, everything from a food crawl if you have local restaurants that are vegan-friendly that are kind of close together to just a big community potluck or something like that. But again, the real idea is kind of for people to get out one evening and have fun and celebrate being vegan. And there's lots of flexibility with that but that really is kind of the heart of the mission of the event.

JASMIN: How can people find out more about bringing a Vegan Night Out to their city?

JUSTIN: Yeah, so the website for Vegan Night Out is vegannightout.wordpress.com, and that has all the information about what is going on this year. But there's also a page on there called VNO DIY, which is essentially information on do-it-yourself Vegan Night Out. And I've also put together a brief, but also I think a helpful, kind of starter pack or a field guide for putting on a Vegan Night Out, that has everything from schedule to potential budget to template letters for press releases and requests to companies for products. And that was one thing I did not mention, but I worked really hard to get product samples from companies and also books from publishing companies that are vegan-friendly, and really trying to find ones that the company itself is representing the values of going vegan. So, it's not like they may just have one vegan product in a line of lots of other non-vegan products, but they're really taking veganism as the focus of their business.

So, this year, we have just a huge stack of books to give away for door prizes. We have product samples from everywhere from Raw Revolution to Primal Strips, and we have coupons from Field Roast and a few other amazing companies. So, I'm really excited about the ways that Vegan Night Out can be a center for bringing together all this information and resources, and then of course just getting out and having fun.

JASMIN: It sounds like it can really be tailored to people's individual communities, and I love that. Can you tell me a bit about Harrisonburg and what it's like here, outside of the vegan world, let's say?

JUSTIN: Sure. Harrisonburg is a very interesting place. I know I've been really speaking about the vegan stuff going on here. But Harrisonburg is nestled in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, which has mountains on either side. It's very picturesque in a lot of ways, but it's also primarily a farming area traditionally. Hundreds of years back, this is -- the primary activity here has been farming. So, as I'm sure most people know, farming has taken a lot of strange paths and turns over the past few hundred years or so. And so there's lots of industrial farming going on. There's also lots of small scale farming going on, and a lot of that is animal agriculture based.

So, kind of outside, in the area where all this farming is going on, obviously is not the most vegan-friendly of places. So, you really kind of have to see that Harrisonburg, and the vegan stuff going on here, is happening within this context of a lot of animal farming. And to me, that makes it all the more important that we create safe spaces for people who are interested in vegan or going vegan, to live and to go out and have community, because otherwise it can be very overwhelming if it feels like the vast majority of what is going on here is about animal agriculture. So, carving out a small niche for vegans within that can be both -- is really

important, but also it can be really empowering when you find another vegan or you find this group that is actually here and trying to live vegan. It can be quite remarkable I think.

JASMIN: A lot of what you are talking about and what you're doing and what you're working on and what you're thinking about and what you're writing about is indeed remarkable. And I'd like to get personal now. This is the Barbara Walters moment. We were just at lunch and you were telling me a little bit about how you grew up, and I'd love for you to elaborate a little bit on how your experiences as a child really informed your advocacy today.

JUSTIN: Definitely. Well, as a child, I was an animal lover, and always felt very connected to animals. But I grew up in a single-parent household on food stamps, always kind of figuring out how to pay the bills, finding creative ways to get past some bills and kind of make the household stay together. And so living that way, it really made me aware of the disparities between -- that people of different incomes have to food, and also the challenges that people of lower income face when it comes to having more opportunities to eat the food that they want.

And so, to me that really starts with, in a lot of ways, looking at our food system, which has been created such that those disparities are really -- become a central part of it, so that the wealthy have access to the foods that they want to eat, which, thanks to marketers and thanks to kind of the way that our American narrative has gone, is largely about eating animals. And then, for people who are lower income, they have much less choice, and a lot of times that means eating food that is unhealthy, it means eating food that has been produced in strange and scary ways. And also, there's a lack of access to nutrition education, to cooking education, and to alternative ways of eating, other than the one that they've always known, which is about just thinking about the dollar when it comes to making food choices. And unfortunately, thanks to the industrial food system and subsidies and things like that, the foods that are more accessible and that are less expensive are oftentimes the ones that are not healthy and not very friendly for animals.

MARIANN: I just think there's nothing more important than vegans doing everything we can to correct the misimpression that is being put out there so frequently, that veganism is for the elite. And I love putting it together with thoughts about how to reform the food system. You mentioned that here in the Shenandoah Valley, there are a lot of small farms, and I'm sure the whole local movement is very powerful here and you've talked about that to us. And I'd like to hear your thoughts on how the good things from the local movement perhaps can be separated from some of its infatuation with foods of animal origin.

JUSTIN: Yeah, definitely, that's a great point. And that is something I've witnessed working in the local food kind of system here coming from a vegan perspective. And you really notice that so much of locavorism and the whole local food movement is about animal products. And I think there's a lot of really useful information and kind of practices coming out of local foods, but unfortunately nowadays, pretty much anywhere you go, local foods are borne on the backs of living beings. And that to me is vastly unethical but also vastly unsustainable. There's no way to realistically think about creating sustainable food systems that involve animal agriculture. And whichever way you look at it, from cost to scalability to the basic ethics of using animals for food, local food cannot escape that if it still is continuing to use animals as kind of the main part of it.

And people are just as excited about local bacon as they are about bacon from the grocery store. There's no real difference in the consumption habits. It just is a matter of feeling less bad about this morally problematic product because you're feeling better by saying "oh I'm shopping local" or "the farmer is smaller, so it's not quite as bad." But ultimately the consumption habits

are the same. You're still eating bacon, or people are still eating bacon or hamburger or milk or whatever. They're just not feeling quite as bad about it.

So, I really think that thinking about questions of sustainability and thinking about knowing where your food comes from and knowing how things are produced is something in the local foods movement that is really useful to me. I'm very interested in empowering people to shift from consumers to producers, because if you're relying on someone else to produce things for you, that gives you a very limited amount of control and say and kind of awareness of what goes into making those products. So, I'm very interested in things like gardening, crafting, making things at home, educating people to cook, all of these things that we used to know about but we've kind of lost that knowledge and we've lost that experience as our society and especially our economy has shifted more towards consumption as the primary ways in which we interact with the world.

So, a few decades ago, everyone had a garden in their backyard, and producing food close to home was something that people just took as a given. Nowadays, you have to go out of your way to find community gardens or to learn how to grow a tomato plant in your backyard. And that to me is a real tragedy because even if I'm a vegan and buying nothing but produce, I really never know what that farm looks like that the tomato came from. Or I can maybe know something is organic and know that they're not using pesticides and things like that, but if I'm buying berries from a berry farm, do I know if they use bird netting or do I know what their practices are for how they produce that food? So, this is just an example of where thinking only as a consumer, you give a lot of that opportunity to make ethical choices away to someone else. And so I'm very interested in finding ways to empower people to have the ability to make those choices by taking the production back and by bringing production close to home, which is a big part of locavorism, and the local foods movement is kind of shopping closer to home.

But again, a lot of that has to move away from the consumption model to production. And there's no way obviously that you can go a hundred percent, and it does not make you a bad person if you still want to eat oranges or that sort of thing.

JASMIN: Chocolate!

JUSTIN: Chocolate! Chocolate is a great example. But even making small changes can have huge impacts. Shifting even a small part of the amount of money that you spend or the time that you spend or the amount of the things that you put into or onto your body, small changes like that can make big differences, but also can really empower you to start thinking very differently, and not just take this model of how you should interact with the world as a given, even if you're vegan.

JASMIN: We talked earlier about the replicability of Vegan Night Out. Do you think that what you're talking about, as far as people growing their own food, is this replicable on a very large scale, or is there perhaps a hint of elitism in what you're saying now?

JUSTIN: I think currently there is, which is unfortunate. But we've seen agriculture, sustainable agriculture, plant-based agriculture, happen on vastly different scales. Urban agriculture is a real growing trend these days, and people are taking over vacant lots and turning those into community garden spaces, or people are finding ways to grow even a small bit of food on balconies in apartments. And there's this vast amount of green space that we just take for granted as, oh, grass should go there. But actually, no, what if we turned a median strip into edible landscaping? Or what if the green strip behind our apartment building was actually, a portion of that was turned into a garden? You can grow a lot of plant food on a very small space,

and we're really not utilizing urban space especially very well for food production, because again, we're used to just being able to go get any food we want anytime we want at the grocery store. But rethinking kind of how we use that green space would open up a lot of opportunities for growing more of our own food. And also too, a lot of it is education. A lot of people have no idea what a tomato plant looks like growing or how to care for one.

JASMIN: It doesn't grow in a plastic container?

JUSTIN: No, unfortunately. But that was one of the most fascinating things for me as a vegan, was getting into gardening and actually learning about how the things I was eating, I ate, were growing. And I think that it can be very enlightening and also bring a closer connection to food and also make us more sensitive to what it is that we put in our bodies, the closer we get to those foods, which starts at that seed really.

JASMIN: So, you have a baking company, with your partner Rosemarie, and it's called Sunberry. And what I love about Sunberry is -- well, I'm sure I'll love the concoctions, which I hope to sample later on today. But in addition to that, you're really bringing together a lot of what you're talking about now, a lot of your ethics, a lot of your advocacy, into a cookie, basically. Can you talk about what Sunberry is and what your hopes were and are for it?

JUSTIN: Yeah, so Sunberry Baking Company was something that we did here for a few months. We had to kind of stop production for a little while because we lost kitchen space and family life kind of took over, but we are still sharing information. So, Sunberry for us was primarily educational. It was not so much about selling products or whatever. It was really educating people about some of the sweeter things that are available when you go vegan.

And so, you're right. There is so much more behind food, and I like to say that every brownie has a story behind it. And for us, we really wanted that story to be positive, ethically sound, sustainable things. So, we sourced almost exclusively organic products, fair trade products. Everything of course was a hundred percent vegan, and we also worked in as much local as we could. But thinking about it from a sustainability level and thinking about the types of practices that we wanted to enforce, we chose organic or fair trade over local if the local product was not grown pesticide-free, not grown in sustainable ways. And for us, it was really showing people that you can have these products that make you feel good, even when they taste good.

And in addition to that, one of the things that we were most excited about was actually sharing our recipes with people. So, on our website, we had a vast number of the recipes that we would make, available totally for free for people to do at home. And we would always share recipes with people if they asked us for them when we were at an event or something like that. And we really were most excited, not when someone came up and bought a brownie or a cookie from us, but when they told us, "hey I made this at home; my husband loved it!" or "my family loved it!" That was the most exciting thing for us because, again, people consuming something from us or buying something from us was nice because they're learning more about veganism. But actually seeing people going forward and doing it themselves is just the most amazing experience I've ever had. And seeing that they can do it, but then also learning more about the organic and the fair trade and seeing that veganism can be attainable, that it can taste good, and that it can be ethically sound, is to me a really, really exciting opportunity.

JASMIN: Such an exciting opportunity. And when I hear you talk, it's so inspiring to me. And I think, this is a man who has given so much thought to these issues. I have a feeling you wake up in the middle of the night and you write and you think, and you wake up Rosemarie and you talk things through. That's just my suspicion. Am I right about that?

JUSTIN: You're pretty close. We're a very close team. I'm a little bit more of the public face of the operation, so even though I'm an introvert, I get to do the public relations duties. But this is something -- we're both ethical vegans. We both went vegan for ethical reasons, and we're both very interested in making the world a better place for animals, and also empowering people to feel like veganism is realistic and that it is the right thing to do. And so, yeah, these are things that we constantly talk about. And just figuring out how to survive in the world as a vegan can sometimes be very challenging. And the question is, there's so much tragedy going on; how do you respond to that? And I like to find ways to respond that are empowering others to make a difference, because it's very easy to kind of get caught up in the overwhelming suffering that happens in the world. But finding ways to respond to that that are positive and that are empowering, to me, feels like, not only a more kind of healthy way to respond, but also to me the only really way that I could survive.

JASMIN: Well, it's interesting that you should say that because I agree with you. Obviously, we are indefatigably positive and sometimes it is more of a strategy because that we know will get us through this day, this week, and this world. But you mentioned to us that you've had an interesting evolution of your own activism. And I think that this is something that a lot of our listeners will be able to resonate with, because a lot of people come to us and they say, "oh my God, I just learned what's going on with animals, and I just have no idea what to do!" And I watch them -- frequently -- I watch them as they come into their own activism. Sometimes it's immediate, and sometimes there's many, many phases that happen before they ultimately become the strong activist that they are. Can you tell me a little bit about how your own journey has evolved thus far? Of course, it's still evolving, as we all are.

JUSTIN: Yeah. I always say that veganism is a process. It's not a stasis point. It's not somewhere that you attain to and your life is kind of static from there on. My evolution as a vegan has been a very interesting process. For the vast majority of my time as a vegan I was much more the quiet vegan. I focused on living in ways that I felt were ethically responsible, but not really focusing so much on then advocating for that or kind of speaking to other people about that quite so much. And it was a slow process for me, but I started finding opportunities to actually tell other people about it, not when they asked me, but finding ways to actually educate people about it, because this is something that more and more we're recognizing that there's no real other way to go about living if we want to make a difference, but also to sustain ourselves for very long.

And it's something that I've felt very passionate about because I care about the type of world that we're creating for animals, the effects that we're having on domesticated animals, on wildlife, on the environment. All of these things fit together and so, just really reflecting on that and feeling more and more that there was an imperative for me to share my lifestyle and kind of my principles and my ethics with other people, and make them aware of this growing movement that is the vegan and animal rights movement.

And so, just in the past few years I've really shifted from being kind of the hermit to looking out and actually interacting with the community more and recognizing the power of grassroots activism, of working in a community, and working with people and helping them to see what veganism is, what vegans look like, and just kind of answer general questions and things like that, but also organize people to come together who are interested in veganism and share that positive energy.

And I'm also always working as you mentioned kind of, writing and working on a larger, less personal level, kind of getting ideas out there and lending my voice to the discussion. But really, it's just a matter of shifting and seeing that for me, and I think kind of at its heart, veganism is an

active thing. It's not just a matter of kind of taking a negative approach and saying, "I'm not going to buy this, I'm not going to eat this," but actually recognizing that the ethics are at the heart of veganism. And with that comes an imperative to make a positive difference and make a more ethical system.

JASMIN: Wow, that's really well said. And --

MARIANN: Just another vegan out here in America.

JASMIN: Just another guy, just another guy.

MARIANN: It's really kind of amazing...

JASMIN: So amazing.

MARIANN: ...how much serious thought is going into this, and how it's popping up all over the place and amazing people doing amazing work.

JASMIN: And I know that Buddhism has played part of a role for you in your evolution of your animal rights activism. Can you explain?

JUSTIN: Yeah. Well, I spent a lot of time years ago studying and practicing Buddhism. I would not consider myself a Buddhist today, but Buddhism, Daoism, kind of those philosophies really inform a lot of the way that I interact with the world and the ways that I go about kind of doing vegan advocacy. And really for me, a lot of it is obviously the compassion that is there and recognizing the reality of suffering, and finding the ways to respond to that that are positive, that are beneficial, but also realistic.

And I think a lot of it is that Buddhism and other traditions that require a lot of self-reflection, they really make you find out what your values are and what is important to you, and then starting from a place of relative stillness -- I would not say my core is still all the time -- but starting from a place of stillness and looking at the world and then finding a way to respond instead of just constantly having knee-jerk reactions without really putting a lot of thought into them. So I think the reflectiveness of that tradition is for me extremely helpful because that really cultivates mindfulness as a practice and as a way of beginning everything that you do in the world. And acting more mindfully I think gives us both a chance to learn what our values are, but then a better opportunity to speak and live those more consistently, and I think more in ways that more people can see and understand.

JASMIN: How can people read your writing online?

JUSTIN: Oh. Well, I'm a little bit all over the place. Sometimes doing a Google search is maybe the best way. But I've written for a few different websites pretty frequently over the past few years. My main website just for my own kind of creative writing is justinvankleeck.blogspot.com. And that has links to the blogs that I've written for before and then also just some of my other work and stuff like that, so yeah. As I said, there's not really one place that I have that I dump all my thought into, even though my little personal blog is called My Brain Dump. But yeah, I think, so probably that would be the best way, is maybe going to my website, or just doing a Google search. I'm sure you'll find those sites through doing a Google search just as well.

JASMIN: Well, it makes sense to me that your writing wouldn't be in one place because your advocacy is not in one place either. Justin is a man of wearing many different hats, but all with the same kind of hat style? That's a terrible analogy.

MARIANN: That was a pathetic analogy.

JASMIN: That was bad.

MARIANN: Yeah, I'm just very excited. One of the things I'm most excited about it is bringing, just thinking about food in this global sense and recognizing how important it is, and recognizing the good things that empower the local movement, and bringing that together with the good things that empower veganism, because too often I think they're seen as opposites just because meat has taken over the local movement. And I love that you're working on that. And I love all of the stuff that you're working on and how thoughtful you are. Just don't search for "Justin Van der Kleeck."

JASMIN: No, don't do that. Justin Van Kleeck. We are so honored to be here as part of Vegan Night Out, and we're really excited to get to know you a little bit. And I know that you're moving?

JUSTIN: Yes. My wife Rosemarie and I are going to be relocating to Chapel Hill in a few weeks. It is sort of returning to home for both of us in different ways. But we've done a lot of work here, and there's a lot of work left to be done, but this feels for us something that we're both very excited about. It feels like a great new opportunity for us to continue to do a lot of good work for veganism, but also be part of an amazing vegan community that exists in Chapel Hill and the triangle.

JASMIN: Lucky Chapel Hill. Well, thank you Justin so much for letting us pick your brain a little bit tonight. And I hope that you stay in touch, and I hope that I could twist your arm a little bit and get you to write something for Our Hen House sometime soon.

JUSTIN: Oh, I would be beyond honored, even for the idea of that. But and thank you both for coming down. I know this is a trek for you all, and this is something I never would have imagined would have even been possible in Harrisonburg, and even before Vegan Night Out has taken place, it has already been one of the most amazing experiences. So, thank you both for coming down and I've really enjoyed getting to know you both a little bit more as well.

JASMIN: Group hug, group hug! Thank you so much, Justin.

JUSTIN: Thank you.

JASMIN: That was Justin Van Kleeck.