



Our Hen House

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Interview with Leanne Mai-Ly Hilgart

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of interviews with **LEANNE MAI-LY HILGART** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 226.*

JASMIN: Episode Two brought us Leanne Mai-ly Hilgart, the founder of Vaute Couture, need I say more? This is how fashion truly has a conscience.

MARIANN: So amazing.

JASMIN: Yeah, Leanne, you're doing such amazing work.

LEANNE: Thank you.

JASMIN: And before you tell us about Vaute Couture, I understand that you actually started doing this as a kid. You kind of started your career as a child. Tell us about that.

LEANNE: I love it. Let's see. So when I was eight, I made art with my friends and we sold it door to door to raise money for the local animal shelter. I'm pretty sure that we actually spent more money making the arts and crafts? But luckily my parents let me give all of the donations that we got to the local shelter, which I later volunteered for. But yeah, I have just always felt like we were kind of doing something to the animals that no one was talking about, so when I was ten I ended up picking my social studies fair project to be on factory farming, vivisection, and the fur industry. I just wanted to know. It's one of those things where you're like, how does this happen? How do we get food on our plate? How does the girl down the street end up with a rabbit fur coat? Obviously rabbits are dead. I didn't know anything about anal electrocution or fur farms, but I knew that something just wasn't right.

JASMIN: I had fur as a little kid, as a first grader. I remember I had this little muff.

MARIANN: Yeah, I had fur muff too. Maybe it was the same muff.

JASMIN: Maybe it was.

LEANNE: Oh. I've been thinking about making faux fur muffs. I just think -- well, brightly colored ones. I like them when they look *really* fake. But I just really like a '40s, '30s, '20s vibe. Maybe you guys would have to rock that, for sure.

MARIANN: I would love -- absolutely.

JASMIN: We'll wear it for every episode.

LEANNE: Awesome, like this. You should just stand here like this. Totally.

JASMIN: That's normal and natural.

MARIANN: Absolutely. It'll bring back our childhood.

JASMIN: Exactly.

LEANNE: Yeah. Or you can hold your hands together inside one.

MARIANN: Aww!

LEANNE: It would be Our Hen House muff.

JASMIN: And it's also like gay rightsy in that way.

LEANNE: Totally! Yeah, wow, maybe.

JASMIN: I'm thinking of a joke right now, but I'm not gonna make it.

MARIANN: Oh, thank God.

JASMIN: I'm just gonna keep it in my head.

MARIANN: I can assure you that anything Jasmin has edited is well worth editing.

JASMIN: Well, she's talking about muffs. Anyway...

LEANNE: Sorry. I realized I said that.

JASMIN: No. We're gonna move on.

MARIANN: Let's move on.

JASMIN: So why did you decide to start Vaute Couture?

LEANNE: That's a good question. I guess the shortest answer is that originally I wanted to be a school principal.

MARIANN: You wanted to be in charge! No teacher for you.

LEANNE: Well, for me, I really wanted to encourage people to become more leaders and innovators in their community and I feel like the school systems really focus on just following rules. And people who are more innovative tend to be treated like they're being bad, which I thought was really interesting because then you end up kind of fulfilling that.

MARIANN: So true.

LEANNE: So when I ended up in the school system teaching a little bit, I just didn't feel right. So I had to think like, what is it that's super natural for me? What is it that feels like this is what I'm meant to do? And for me, it was running campaigns for animal rights in college. And I loved it so much and the biggest part for me was when I would get people to think about where their heart's already open. Like, if I talked to people on campus and said, "Do you just miss your dog? Do you just miss your cat?" And we said, "okay, so your heart's

open there. So why don't you come with me to the Chicago Animal Care and Control? In the snow! I'll drive a 12-seater van. I'll have everybody help me change lanes 'cause I'm a really bad driver, let alone in the snow in the worst, worst traffic!" We'd go and hang out with the homeless dogs and cats. So you take it from where their heart's already open, take it to other animals like that animal, and then from there I'd sit down with them after and talk about how three to four million healthy dogs and cats are put to sleep every year just because people aren't adopting and they're also not spaying and neutering. So then I took it from one animal they have a connection with, to multiple animals, to the action they can take to become a proactive part of their life and of their community. And then I would ask them, "hey, we're bringing Howard Lyman on campus. Why don't you guys come help us with the meat-out and with listening to this guy who used to be an ex-cattle rancher and why he's now vegan?"

JASMIN: Yeah, and Howard Lyman, he has an amazing story.

LEANNE: He has an amazing story. And for me I realized that people might not necessarily want to go from being -- for me to just be like, "why don't you come see this cattle rancher talk about veganism?" But if we start first with, where is it that their hearts are already open? And say, how do we connect that to multiple animals that are like that animal? And then how do we connect that to feeling like a proactive part of your life, to then other animals and continue to widen that circle of compassion but also become a proactive person in your own life and in your community? So for me, that was my natural voice in activism. And I ended up realizing it was essentially marketing if I thought about it in real world terms. So I got a marketing internship at this place called Sitter City. It's like a match.com for parents and babysitters. And I had so much fun doing grassroots campaigns all over the country. And from that, I realized that if I was working instead with grassroots groups that were doing something for animals, my life would be all connected and so much fuller. And the CEO was really young, and she was making an impact on so many moms' lives without even really trying to. And I thought, this is where my activism can be tenfold, where every time I create a process with a business, it will be exponential.

JASMIN: So you already had this business knowhow and clearly you went into modeling. I'm having a hard time connecting.

LEANNE: All right. So yeah! Okay, so modeling happened kind of on accident. And this is one of the things that I really believe, is that all the things that accidentally happen in your life, you do them because you're pulled towards them or because they come into your life and they just feel right as part of your adventure. But then those things, you add them up in a way that only you can, and then you can serve the world with who you are using these tools that only you have. And so I'm 5'5". I'm not even tall, but for my -- I was taking an acting class for fun. It was on camera. And this guy in my class was like, "hey, Ford Models are seeing you." And I was like, "Why would they see me? It's a 5'8" height requirement." He was like, "You look taller. I didn't realize. Why don't you just go in anyway?" I went in; they signed me the next day. So from that, I just ended up being able to model through Ford in Chicago, where I'm from, and then also in Asia. And I got to live in my mom's country.

MARIANN: Was that your first introduction into fashion?

LEANNE: Yes.

JASMIN: Well, except for, you used to make clothing.

LEANNE: Oh. Well, yeah, okay, sure. But it wasn't -- all right, so my start with fashion is not what you would think for a fashion designer, 'cause when I was a kid I would make my own puffy paint t-shirts that were statement tees about animal rights. I made a shirt once --

JASMIN: Oh, about animal rights, 'cause I had the puffy paint tees. It was the '80s.

LEANNE: Yeah.

JASMIN: But they had like hearts and rainbows; that was the extent of my social consciousness.

MARIANN: I don't know what puffy paints are made of.

LEANNE: Pretty sure mine had hearts too.

JASMIN: Maybe they were rainbows for gay rights, though.

LEANNE: Right. Perhaps you were doing your own social justice t-shirts. But one of the t-shirts I made was the title from that social studies fair project. So it was "Being cruel isn't cool," a very 10-year-old slogan.

MARIANN: I like it.

LEANNE: Thanks. But I sold it to a t-shirt company who ended up selling it nationally. And a friend of mine, Lagusta, who owns Lagusta's Luscious, vegan chocolates upstate, the most amazing ones. Have you guys had them?

JASMIN: Lagusta's Luscious, I have.

MARIANN: They're amazing.

LEANNE: They're incredible, right?

JASMIN: They're all slavery-free and fair-trade and vegan and good.

LEANNE: Oh. Yeah, handmade and beautiful.

JASMIN: And she has a chocolate vagina.

LEANNE: She does! Those vulvas, right?

MARIANN: I think that deserves an explanation.

JASMIN: Yeah. That's the first time I said "vagina" on our TV show, not the last.

LEANNE: Yeah. We actually would make some of those for *The Vagina Monologues* when I was in college. We'd always sell, make our own chocolate vaginas for the monologues.

MARIANN: Apparently it's a whole thing, but I didn't even know about it. Chocolate vaginas.

JASMIN: Moving beyond chocolate vaginas, which is a sentence I never thought I'd say, so you used to make clothes as a kid. Now you have this background as a business person, and you're modeling. How did you connect the dots to make these clothes and these coats?

LEANNE: Yeah, so basically when I started doing the marketing and then I realized the CEO was really young, and I thought, this is what I've gotta do. I have to figure out where the parts of my life add up to making it possible for me to be the biggest tool I can... hah, the biggest tool I can... for the animals.

JASMIN: Yet another joke.

LEANNE: I always wanted to be a tool, clearly!

MARIANN: What's going on here?

LEANNE: So I worked really hard at being the biggest tool that I could be. Put that into a sound bite.

JASMIN: That could be our message tee in puffy paint.

LEANNE: Absolutely. And so I went back to school to get my MBA. I knew I needed to fill out accounting and finance understanding 'cause I didn't really have a background in that. Then I was modeling in Hong Kong the summer after, and just running through every concept I had never really given a full chance to. And outerwear, since I'm from Chicago, and it's like the worstest, coldest winters ever --

MARIANN: Hah!

JASMIN: Even when compared to --

LEANNE: The winter we had here! Listen. Yesterday my mom was sending me a text message of the six inches of snow they got yesterday. It was March. Like, whatever, so...

JASMIN: Okay. All right, Miss Windy City.

LEANNE: I know, I know. But I can up you on that for sure.

JASMIN: All right, you win.

LEANNE: Definitely, it's much, much colder in Chicago, so...

MARIANN: It's a competition I want to lose.

LEANNE: Yeah, I think when you lose you win that competition.

JASMIN: You know who actually wins? Eliza from the Sea Shepherd.

LEANNE: Oh, yes.

JASMIN: It might be colder in Antarctica.

LEANNE: That's probably true.

MARIANN: It's possible.

JASMIN: But then again, she should totally have a Vaute Couture coat to keep her warm.

LEANNE: Yes, she should! Absolutely. We're doing the down alternative too. Those would be really good for her.

JASMIN: The down alternative!

LEANNE: They're made of 100% recycled plastic bottles. Those would be good ones. I have a full-length with a hood and it's like a helmet thing almost, and I wore it during the Vortex.

JASMIN: Now I want to know more about your materials. But first you have to get me up to how Vaute started.

LEANNE: Okay, sorry. Let me finish. I'll wrap that up real quick. So basically, I was going through different concepts. And I thought, originally when I looked at coats, I was like, "oh please, there's not a big enough market for that. If I told anyone I was making vegan coats, they'd look at me like I'm crazy." But I realized something really important. I realized that if I focused on taking animal fibers out of the equation -- 'cause fashion is plant fiber, synthetic, and animal. If you take a whole third of that out of the equation, now I'm looking at a problem from in an invention standpoint. My parents are both science people, so if I look at it from that standpoint, not from a design standpoint, but saying, problem solving wise, I now have to look at it completely differently. And whenever things are good enough, people don't try to reinvent them. And the wool coat with a silk liner was always good enough. But I had to say, I can't use wool. I don't want to be wearing animals at all, so instead I'm gonna look at this from a completely different standpoint. And if I can do that, create something that's actually better than wearing animals, we can say, you don't have to wear animals. There's no need for it.

JASMIN: Well, let's just pause for a second and talk about wool for just a second, because it is something that -- I think a lot of people have a wool coat to keep them warm. And that's the first thing that I think Vaute Couture really did reinvent on such a massive level. But wool production --

MARIANN: But I think you really have to sell the idea that wool should be replaced because most people don't realize how much cruelty there is in wool production.

LEANNE: Absolutely. Most people don't know that at all. But that being said as well, that's why it's so important to create something that's better, so that they can see that it's the future of fashion, and the future of lifestyle, to be eating and dressing vegan, not just an alternative that you have to choose, that if we say there's this better option out there that's actually higher tack and actually warmer for you, then there's no reason why -- I have lots of women in the coldest cities who they're like, "I love fur," but they love my coats because they're really warm.

MARIANN: Yeah, I totally agree. It happens with food too. We can't just tell people that you should feel guilty and you should eat bad food or wear ugly clothes for the rest of your life. We have to make that case, but I do also think it's important that we let people know how much sheep suffer in the world.

JASMIN: We have some video of this, I think.

LEANNE: Most people have no idea.

JASMIN: They have no idea what goes on with these animals. And they think that they just sort of naturally shed this.

MARIANN: In fact, these Merino wool, they grow way, way too much wool. They're bred so they grow so much wool that they get these infections with these flies. And then to prevent that they end up cutting their skin.

LEANNE: They slice their skin so that they scar them, so they have scar tissue so they won't have the bugs seeding and living in their skin. They do that without anesthetic obviously. And when they're shearing they do it to be as efficient and effective as possible, always cutting off slabs of skin. But they're factory farmed, and they're slaughtered after. To me, if there's an animal where, if the way that they're being part of production is to produce a fiber or a material, like eggs or like milk or like wool, it's like, those are things that they're not only slaughtered at the end. They're continually going through a really incredibly cruel process. It's not meant to be cruel. This is the thing that also I find really important to say is that it's not like we're saying, "oh, there are some really bad guys, and they are just trying to be cruel." No, no, no. It's industrial revolution meant. We tried to make everything into machinery, everything into cogs, pieces of a machine, and that means increasing profits and decreasing costs. And so animals don't belong in that machine. They just don't.

JASMIN: And now, what I think is so fantastic is that there are alternatives to everything. We were just talking about pigs, and we were talking about coconut bacon. Have you tried it, by the way?

LEANNE: I haven't yet.

JASMIN: I'm just dying to, but of course we've had soy bacon and that. But also with clothes, there are alternatives. What do you use instead of using wool?

LEANNE: So after eight months of fabric research, I just quit everything, quit the contract, quit my MBA, went home and was like, "I need to figure this out." So I ended up realizing that if I worked with high tech mills that Patagonia and North Face work with, but work at their highest tech sustainability materials, that are made of recycled fibers and recyclable fibers, we could then be working with things that they send into space and that they send to the Arctic explorers, but do it in a way that's never been constructed before with finishes that have never been used before. So you get the look and feel of a winter dress coat, but the warmth and protection of a Patagonia or sports coat. And that's there in what our offering is to people who know. Whether they care or not about animals, they have this option. And then we can use that, again like I said where you open -- you find where someone's heart is already open, then we can welcome them into learning more about different things and the awareness of their lifestyle.

JASMIN: It's just amazing.

MARIANN: I love it. I always tell my students when we start talking about wool production that nobody climbs to the top of Mount Everest wearing wool or fur.

LEANNE: They don't.

MARIANN: Or any animal products. They wear these great modern fabrics.

JASMIN: Or fur products.

LEANNE: They might have their fashionably faux fur muff, for sure.

MARIANN: Those ones fall off the mountain and they're never heard from again.

LEANNE: Yeah, sure.

JASMIN: It's true.

LEANNE: They don't. The Arctic explorers, what they wear is high tech materials. And we use the ones that are also made of recyclable and recycled fibers. So like I said, our warmest down alternative full-length coat is made from -- encased in a shell and a liner that's 100% plastic bottles recycled. They're recycled in Italy right by the recycling plant where it's a mechanical process. There's no chemicals even used for the recycling itself.

JASMIN: Wow. So it's all very eco-friendly too.

LEANNE: Yeah, I try to be as eco-friendly as we can be. And also, it's local production, so that also the workers are treated fairly too.

JASMIN: Okay, so we're talking about all of these clothes and all of these alternatives, but what I think is particularly unique about your line, Vaute, is that it's really, really attractive.

LEANNE: Oh, thank you.

JASMIN: As we mentioned, you had this fashion show last year at New York Fashion Week, the first all-vegan label to have its own show. And can you actually show us what you're wearing?

LEANNE: Sure. I just brought a couple things that we just shot for spring. So I love vintage and --

JASMIN: Spring! I'm so excited about the idea of spring.

LEANNE: Yeah, I know. Today actually feels a little bit like spring.

JASMIN: I love that dress.

LEANNE: So this is just a little -- it's actually inspired from a vintage '40s piece that I got in Paris.

MARIANN: Yeah, I can see that.

LEANNE: And it's 100% organic cotton. The spring and summer's so easy to do vegan, 'cause it's just organic cottons, and then our satin's made of recycled plastic bottles. We're gonna be doing gowns next spring. And then I also have -- we do a lot of wax canvas, 'cause it's a great leather alternative. Doesn't look like a leather alternative in bright yellow, but I kind of love yellow so much. So we're doing this like trench.

MARIANN: It's adorable.

LEANNE: And it's waterproof. So what's great about wax canvas, it's made by a family upstate. This one's a little bit not my size, but this is the sample. And then it just keeps you waterproof, windproof. It's actually really warm. Yeah, so we have these, and then we do bomber jackets and stuff in the brown and black waxed. And it's a fabric that's originally meant for farmers, outdoorsmen, hunters. You can't even put it in the wash. You have to just hose it down 'cause it's super sturdy and super rugged.

MARIANN: You're right. I've seen that fabric in the brown, and it looks so much like leather, only kind of more beautiful. And the texture is just so interesting.

LEANNE: Sure. Thanks, yeah.

JASMIN: Do you think that there is a shift in consciousness in the fashion industry to not be so exploitative of animal skin and animal products?

LEANNE: I mean, I think that's a really hard question to answer because in one regard, the fur industry spends so much money getting new designers and magazines to promote them that it looks like it's really popular. And yet I think there are the numbers that came out -- I don't know if I should say this or not 'cause I can't remember -- that said it was actually a little bit on the decline, actually wearing fur, which is great. But Condé Nast came to my show, and the director of the marketing team there said to me, "I love fur. Tell me why this is relevant to me." And I said, "Because I'm focusing on the future of fashion, where we don't need to wear animals ever again because we're creating something better." And she ended up thinking that was a great fit for the Game Changer campaign for Mazda6 and Condé Nast.

JASMIN: Oh, I saw that video!

LEANNE: Yeah. And so for them to realize and put vegan all over it -- they said that I was happy to say "vegan is the future of fashion." And they were very happy to put that out there in *Lucky Magazine*, *Glamour Magazine*, all the Mazda campaigns and all of that too.

JASMIN: Well, that's good.

MARIANN: And it totally is. These are archaic fabrics. To use fur is absolutely -- it's Middle Ages.

JASMIN: You had a situation where you were guest-teaching an animal law class for somebody else, and these were young men and women in the class, mainly in their early 20s as law students tend to be, frequently, not always. And they had no idea that anything was wrong with fur!

MARIANN: Yeah. They knew all about factory farming, which I was amazed at because most people are not aware of what's happening to animals who are raised for food. And they had no idea about fur, which just is -- the animal rights movement has been working on fur for a long time. But every generation has to be educated all over again. That's why it's so important. The industry will not change without people changing. It's a social movement.

LEANNE: Right. And I feel like what happens is people just fill in the blanks. I think that a lot of times, people just assume things are done properly if it's a norm. And so I remember meeting someone who -- he had -- actually it was an accidentally vegan but eco-conscious

shoe line. And I asked him how often they did events at the store, and he was like, “oh, well, actually I do a lot of marketing for Neiman Marcus’s fur department.” And I was like, “is that a joke?” And it turned out it wasn’t a joke! And he ended up telling me that he thought that they had just naturally died, and there was like an overpopulation.

MARIANN: I’ve heard other people say that!

LEANNE: So what I ended up breaking it down for him was, I said, “Listen. If you just think about it--” ‘cause this is the thing. People don’t mean to. They just fill in the blanks wrong.

JASMIN: No, a lot of people are very well-intentioned and we just have to educate them.

LEANNE: Absolutely.

MARIANN: And they’re lied to!

JASMIN: And you’re educating them so perfectly through Vaute.

LEANNE: Thanks.

JASMIN: And you actually have a store in Williamsburg.

LEANNE: Yeah.

JASMIN: So people could come visit you.

LEANNE: Yeah, it’s an awesome experience.

MARIANN: It’s a wonderful store.

LEANNE: Thank you. It’s tiny.

JASMIN: And it’s in a great neighborhood where there’s lots of great stuff to eat.

LEANNE: So much good food! Oh, my gosh. On the street, you can get cashew cheese mac and cheese with greens -- so good -- at this stand.

MARIANN: Come on!

JASMIN: Mariann really wants to eat. We were discussing that before.

LEANNE: Oh, are you guys hungry right now?

JASMIN: Well, Leanne, I can’t thank you enough.

MARIANN: Thank you so much.

JASMIN: Thank you so much for all that you do.

LEANNE: Yeah, thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

JASMIN: I hope you’ll come back and keep us in the loop about what’s going on in fashion.

MARIANN: Do you think I’m not in the loop about what’s going on with fashion?

JASMIN: I'm going to ignore that once again. Leanne, thank you so much for joining us today in Our Hen House and for all you're doing to change --

LEANNE: Yeah, thanks for all you guys are doing. Congrats on your show. It's awesome.

JASMIN: Oh, thank you very much. And you can learn more about Vaute Couture on their website, vautecouture.com, which I'm sure is going to get a huge spike in traffic right now because --

LEANNE: Oh, thanks. And we're on Instagram and Facebook and Twitter and all that stuff too.

JASMIN: Great! Excellent.

MARIANN: So Leanne, we're completely thrilled that you were able to join us. And I now want to go out and revamp my wardrobe and become stylish at long last.

LEANNE: Just stop by some time.

MARIANN: I will, this afternoon! That was really inspiring.