



Our Hen House

CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS

a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization

Interview with Lizbeth Pratt

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published July 12, 2014

*Following is a transcript of an interview with **LIZBETH PRATT** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 235.*

JASMIN: So excited about our guests today. We're going to be starting with an interview with Lizbeth Pratt. And Lizbeth, we invited her onto the show. She lives in France, though she's from the United States. And she has such an incredible going-vegan story and such a wonderful transformation story about how she really went from becoming a rancher and a farmer to just being an animal activist and a vegan. And she even transitioned her business into a vegan business. So I think you'll really enjoy hearing what Lizbeth has to say.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. And I think you'll really want to go visit her business.

JASMIN: Yeah. I do. I definitely do. Let's hear from Lizbeth Pratt.

Lizbeth Pratt spent her youth on an Ohio farm until her father bought a large cattle ranch near Hinsdale, Montana. In 2001, she and her husband bought a small country property in southwestern France where they eventually opened Camp Biche, and you should visit online at campbiche.com. It is a weeklong luxury fitness boot camp which evolved from serving a meat-centric diet to a vegan one while Lizbeth went from rancher to animal rights activist.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Libby.

LIZBETH: Thank you for having me.

JASMIN: We are so excited to talk to you today, and I know that our listeners are gonna get a lot out of hearing about your story. And you have a fascinating one. I'd kind of like it if you started at the beginning. We don't talk to too many people who grew up on farms and ranches. Can you start by telling us a bit about your childhood?

LIZBETH: Well, I was raised on a farm near Dayton, Ohio. My family still owns it. And my father had a small herd of cattle, I think he had 50 head of mother cows. And he had a flock of sheep, there were 30 sheep there. And it was a nice little small farm. And the thing that I didn't understand really was I was raised around tons of animals. One time we had 14 dogs there running around 'cause my mother would take in strays. She loved dogs. I had two pet turkeys, I don't know how we got those. They were free ranging. I was totally surrounded by nature and animals and I loved them. I have what could be called a fetish for sheep because I was raised with -- we always had orphaned lambs in the spring that we bottle-fed. But I never, ever toyed with being vegetarian because my family just always was in the

cattle business, starting in Ohio and then when I was 15 my father bought a huge ranch up on the Canadian border in northeastern Montana and started raising cattle as a major business. But I never saw them hauled off. I never put the mothers crying -- when the calves were hauled off, the mothers cry for three days. I never put that together until I was vegan and was more aware.

MARIANN: Did you actually live on the ranch in Montana?

LIZBETH: I didn't live on the ranch in Montana except in the summers. And then after I graduated from college, I went and lived there for a year with my brother.

MARIANN: So eventually you ended up in France though, right? And can you tell us about when and why you founded Camp Biche?

LIZBETH: Well, I ended up in France because my husband and I lived in San Francisco. We were both option traders, we were on the floor of the Pacific Option Exchange. And those people you see yelling and screaming on the nightly news for orders, that was us. And my husband never took a vacation, and so I even went on my honeymoon alone. And after that -- because in that business you're either making money and you can't leave or you're losing money and you can't leave. And because we were in the same business, he could watch my positions, so after I went on my honeymoon alone, every year I would go to France for a month on vacation. And the thing I liked about France was that the countryside reminded me of my childhood in Ohio on the farm, which is totally all developed around there now, but here it still exists, small family farms. And so what happened was a colleague of his died in mid-sentence at the age of 42 while talking to my husband on the floor of the Exchange. And my husband came to me after I think it was six years of me going on my month-long vacation every year to France, he said, "I'm going with you, I don't care how much money I lose." And so I thought, "Aha! Let's look for a little farm." And as I told you, I have this affinity for sheep. I didn't really eat lamb. It wasn't -- if someone served it to me before I went vegan, I would have eaten it, but I would never order it off a menu, just 'cause I didn't like the taste of it. And in France, we bought this little farm and I just thought, "Well, I have to have animals on it," and so I bought two orphaned lambs. And from those two I raised a little flock of 30 sheep.

JASMIN: So it's interesting. You actually wound up raising sheep in France, so you brought that with you when you were in France. And your life was certainly centered, more than most, I would say, around animal consumption. So I'd love to just kind of jump into why you first considered veganism.

LIZBETH: What happened was in 2010, January of 2010, my father was diagnosed with colon cancer, and our chef at the age of 42 was diagnosed with sarcoma. And that same month I had to go to my doctor to have her sign off on a physical because I was running the Paris Marathon, my first marathon, at the age of 51 and I needed the insurance waiver. And so I started talking to her, and when she found out -- now, this is a doctor who only deals with -- I mean, she's in the countryside so a lot of her clientele are farmers, and sheep are big business here. I mean, you raise sheep here over cattle. And she told me, the first words out of her mouth when I told her my father had colon cancer, she says, "You have to stop eating red meat." And I said to her, "Okay, even young lambs?" 'Cause here in France, you eat them at four to six months old, they aren't as old as in -- and I was thinking there was some connection between the fat of the animal, an older animal would have more,

older fat, that was the cancer connection. And she said, "Yes, even young lambs. You just cannot eat any more red meat because of the colon cancer that your dad has." So I said, "Okay, I can do that." And I happily told my husband that we had to quit eating the lambs, 'cause we were eating them at Camp Biche.

And we were killing them in what I considered a very humane way. We only killed two at a time. We found someone with a gun and a silencer, which is illegal in France to do -- hope I don't get arrested for telling this. And we would separate them away from the flock, and we fed them for two days really great grains and they were thrilled. And we believe they didn't know what was hitting them because the other one didn't cry when the first one fell down. And we thought this was incredibly humane. I mean, I don't think this is humane now, but at the time, I did it this way because I didn't want to send them to an abattoir or a slaughterhouse. I didn't want them going in a truck. I knew intrinsically that they would be stressed and I didn't want that. And I didn't really want to eat them, but my husband said, "Well, they've gotta pay for themselves." And the only way for an animal to pay for itself is to really give its body up. And so anyway, that's what happened, and so I was thrilled when I had an excuse not to eat the lamb.

MARIANN: Can we just take a step back? Your chef was at Camp Biche and that was the place that you founded, it's a luxury spa?

LIZBETH: Yes, it's a luxury fitness boot camp. Clients stay there for a week.

MARIANN: Your diet at that point at the spa was quite meat-centric, is that right?

LIZBETH: Oh yes. We advertised the fact that you came and you lost weight because you ate the French way. You ate foie gras twice a week, you ate cheese every other day, and we served our own lamb.

MARIANN: And so eventually the fear of the colon cancer helped lead you to information that led you to consider veganism for yourself?

LIZBETH: It was like a perfect storm that hit me. And so I had to start boning up on my cooking skills 'cause I didn't have my chef anymore. And so I was going through the Cordon Bleu chicken chapter and I purchased two chickens from a local farm who was selling them in the market. Supposedly they had been killed the day before. They're clean but their head's on it and their eyes are still there and their feet are there. It's the whole body that has been cleaned off. And I bought them on a Saturday morning at the market, and on Sunday my husband opened up the refrigerator and said, "My God, these chickens are rotten, they stink." And I said, "Oh, you're just smelling the cheese," 'cause in France if you open up a refrigerator with French cheese in it, it really stinks. And on Monday morning I went to work with the chickens and they were totally rotten. And I threw them in the garbage, and their little glassy eyes were looking up at me and I had this thought come over me which was, "I'm sorry you had to die for nothing." And then I think all day I started thinking, "Well in reality they *are* dying for nothing." Even if I ate them they were dying for nothing, they were only dying for my pleasure. I wasn't quite putting that into words but I had no urge to eat chicken or fish that I was still eating because I wasn't eating the red meat.

And then that night, for one month -- well I guess it was almost two months -- we had had an orphaned lamb who couldn't walk living in our kitchen at Camp Biche. She stayed in front of the fireplace, and the physical therapist would work on her whenever they walked by and the massage therapist worked on her. I changed her position every half hour. Her name was Annie. And a driver, a British driver who worked for us, he said, "I can get her to walk. I'm gonna take her home." And I said, "Well, you can take her, but you can't eat her or anything 'cause she's like a pet." And he took her, and he took her to the vet. They couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. And the same day I threw out those chickens, he called that night and said that she had died. And I was so upset by it. And I had been close to other animals that had died before, but there was just some perfect storm brewing then.

And so I flew back to San Francisco. Some friends had dinner for me, they served fish. And one of them said, "Oh, you're not eating meat anymore," and I told them why, and one of them said, "You have to read *The China Study*, it'll blow your mind away." And then the conversation just went somewhere else, nothing else was said. And I flew to Montana, and I just kept thinking, "I've gotta find this *China Study*, I've gotta find this *China Study*." I read it, and I read it while sitting in the cancer ward of the Billings clinic. And everything he wrote about, my mother's congestive heart failure, the way she ate, my father's cancer, and the patients coming in there for treatment, carrying bags of McDonald's, eating at Denny's next door, even the food that they were serving my father who had colon cancer in the hospital, pepperoni pizzas. And so there was just no denying what he was saying because of what I was going through with my father and with my mother at the time. And by the way my mother just died of colon cancer. She was diagnosed with it last August and she died in October from it.

JASMIN: I'm so sorry. It sounds like everything really came to a head for you at one time. Just the story of throwing away the chickens is incredibly powerful, and just to have *The China Study* reach you at this point in your process, I can't even imagine what that must have been like. So was that the time when you just said, "I have to change my life and just go full-on vegan"?

LIZBETH: Well, what happened was, at the end of the book, Campbell says, "Just try going plant-based" -- he doesn't say "vegan" -- "for a month, and see what happens." And what happened was amazing. I'm about to turn 56 right now, but at the time I was 51 years old. When I was 27 years old -- and my mother had breast cancer when she was in her 40s -- I found a large, lump isn't even the word, in my right breast. It was like a rectangle, probably about one and a half inch long and a quarter inch wide, and they couldn't do a needle biopsy on it. They had to do a surgical biopsy on it. And when I woke up, I just assumed at the age of 27 I thought, "well, I'm not gonna have my right breast," 'cause that's what happened to my mother. She just woke up and didn't have her breast. But I woke up, and the doctor said, "I don't think it's cancerous, we'll find out." He said, "But I didn't take it out because if it's benign we'll just leave it in there and watch it." The reason I decided to go vegan and why it changed everything was because within a week and a half that tumor, benign tumor, went away, of going vegan.

MARIANN: That's amazing. I'm so excited about what happened at Camp Biche. And I know there was a process with you going vegan and then deciding that you wanted to take your whole business vegan. And can you tell us a little bit about that and how Camp Biche looks nowadays?

LIZBETH: Okay, well, our whole business plan was based on the fact that you ate like the French and you ate French delicacies as I said before. And because all our press revolved around that, even though I went vegan I was still in the backroom eating vegan, but I was cooking all this other food and beef and lamb and cheese and foie gras for the clients. But I was having such great results going vegan, just with my weight, with the benign breast tumor thing, I decided that I was just gonna bite the bullet and live, walk the walk 'cause I believed in it so much. And so I just went vegan at Camp Biche, and I had quite a few return clients who, when they called, I said, "And by the way, we only are plant based now." And many of them said, "Well, I'm not gonna come." And so the first year it hurt us, but after that our business really picked up. And I honestly think, because I keep in touch with the bulk of my clients, we only take up to eight people a week, I believe that 30-40% of them go and remain vegan once they've been here. And our client base is 35-60 years old.

JASMIN: What would you say are attitudes in France regarding veganism?

LIZBETH: Oh, they laugh. They have no idea. Even if you explain it to a chef you're going -- they'll come out and the vegetables are cooked in butter or they can't make, I don't think -- they cannot cook without cream. And so we -- I would say that's the toughest thing about being in France is that it's very difficult to eat out and be vegan. That's the one thing I regret about it.

JASMIN: Where do things stand now with Camp Biche? Are you totally vegan?

LIZBETH: We're totally vegan. Our products are vegan, our food is totally vegan.

JASMIN: And how have the clientele evolved? Are people more accepting of it than they were when you first switched over? Have you had any return customers?

LIZBETH: They love it because I really think that people want to try veganism, but they honestly don't know how to go about doing it. And so here they are in an environment where everything's provided for them, they don't have to make any decisions for an entire week. And they're allowed to see results fairly quickly that are directly related to the veganism. For instance if people have sinus problems, you cut out dairy and within three days the sinus problems usually always clear up. I mean, I had a client who traveled the world going to sinus specialists, and within three days she said, "I cannot believe it." I mean, she was from the Middle East and she went vegan. So you can tell people things, but until they're in an environment where everything's regulated, they don't really experience veganism.

JASMIN: Can you tell us a little bit about your menu that you offer?

LIZBETH: Let's see, where do I start? For lunch, we will have a soup, so I might make a smoked cauliflower soup, with a salad, for instance with a sesame vinaigrette. And then we'll have chocolate mousse for dessert. The other night I served lentil tacos for dinner with homemade chipotle sauce and with a garlic cashew sour cream, for lack of a better word.

JASMIN: Absolutely amazing. It gives me so much hope to think of how much you have evolved in your attitudes about food but also about animals. If you went back to the old days and met yourself in your former life when you were ranching and farming, is there something that you think would have reached you? Or is it just a matter of the right moment,

seeing those chickens being thrown out, being exposed to all of this disease within yourself and your family?

LIZBETH: It was just that perfect storm. But I don't know how you can reach people who are making a living off of animals. I don't know what would change them. But every young person I meet that's either working at Camp Biche or sometimes their mothers bring them through, and they say, "I'm gonna go vegan," and I say, "That's fantastic," 'cause the biggest regret I have in my life is that I didn't go vegan when I was younger because they calculate that for every month you're vegan, two animals are saved. And when I -- I like thinking how many -- I didn't, there were 24 animals that didn't have to be tortured and die for me this year. And I think, okay I've done that now for five years, and my God, I wish I would have done that for 25 years!

MARIANN: It really is so important to remember also that as you say we may not be able to convince the people who are producing foods through animal exploitation, but we really don't have to convince them. We have to convince the people who are giving them money.

LIZBETH: Exactly.

MARIANN: And then they'll have to stop, so that happened with you and even somebody who was raised in cattle ranching. And do you think that the reason that you were able to give up the blinders you had in the past was related to just knowing all those animals when you were a kid?

LIZBETH: Well, I think every kid knows intrinsically that killing and eating an animal is wrong. I think that's why -- I was just involved with an anti-trapping initiative in Montana, and I can tell you that one of the reasons I think people get so angry and call animal rights advocates all sorts of nasty things and call us terrorists or call us every name they can think of is because intrinsically people know that killing the animals is wrong. And I think I knew that all along, but I was just never given an opportunity to make my way out of that quicksand that I was in, because the whole, every culture I was raised in, especially Montana, it's all animal-based.

JASMIN: Yeah, it is. But again, the fact that there was this, as you say, perfect storm, is something that I think that we can really latch onto as a sign that even someone who comes from this kind of history of exploiting animals as your career and in your family, part of your history, it makes me feel like we absolutely can connect the dots and create the perfect storm for way more people than just you. And I'm glad that you're out there doing it. Your story really gives me so much hope, Libby, so thank you so much for all you're doing and I think this is just the very start of your activism and your career. I'm really excited to see how your story reaches people and how your Camp Biche also reaches people. It sounds totally divine. I hope to get there someday. Thank you for joining us today in Our Hen House.

LIZBETH: Well, thanks so much. It was fun.

JASMIN: That was Lizbeth Pratt. Learn more about Camp Biche at cambiche.com.