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Interview with Ruby Roth

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **Ruby Roth** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 186.*

JASMIN: Right now I'm so excited because we have Ruby Roth on our podcast. And Ruby is of course a well-known children's author who has a brand new book out called *V Is for Vegan* and she's going to talk all about it. And also, she's been the object of the media's attention for a while now and it hasn't always been rainbows and flowers. It's been a little bit controversial, which is so hilarious to me because Ruby is this incredibly kind and soft-spoken woman. And you're going to hear how she wound up at the center of this huge controversy. And she's going to tell you about her brand new book which, even if you don't have a kid in your life, you're going to want a copy for yourself because it's kind of fantastic. We just got ours in the mail and we *love* it. So, here we are with Ruby Roth.

Featured on CNN, Fox, Today, and other major media outlets, Ruby Roth is the world's leading author and illustrator of vegan books for children. Vegan since 2003, Ruby was teaching art in an afterschool program when her students' interest in veganism inspired her to write *That's Why We Don't Eat Animals* in 2009, the first book of its kind in children's literature. *Vegan Is Love* and *V Is for Vegan* followed. Today, Ruby's books have been translated into multiple languages, including German, Italian, Korean, French, Polish, and Slovenian. Ruby has received international attention for her sensitive yet frank advocacy of a vegan diet and lifestyle. Complementing her degrees in art and American studies, she has researched animal agriculture, health, nutrition, and the benefits of a plant-based diet for over a decade. Ruby lives in Los Angeles. For more information and to sign up for Ruby's newsletter, go to wedonteatanimals.com.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Ruby!

RUBY: Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

JASMIN: We're so excited to talk to you. We've seen you all over the place, and it's thrilling that you have this incredible book coming out, and we couldn't be more thrilled about it. Tell us about *V Is for Vegan* and what inspired you to write it.

RUBY: Well, it is basically veganism in 26 sentences. It's the first ABC book for this exploding population of vegan kids. It's bright, it's funny, it's written in rhymes, and I promise it will lead to laughter and learning. And I was inspired to write it because this population *is* growing so fast. And I'm sure a lot of the listeners saw the Google trends, and just the

numbers are exploding, and it's because of all of the activism that all of us have been doing. And I wanted to provide a resource, the first ever ABC book for this new generation.

JASMIN: Well you've really penetrated the mainstream with veganism. It's amazing how far you've gotten with that. I have a question somewhat unrelated to veganism though: are you able to just wake up in the middle of the night and start rhyming? Did this kind of take over your life? Because I find that when I start rhyming for some reason I can't speak in regular sentences.

RUBY: Yeah, it was really fun. And we definitely came up with some non-children's appropriate rhymes through the whole process, and I thought "that would be a really fun book to do -- the adult version."

JASMIN: That would be excellent.

RUBY: But it didn't start off as a rhyming book. I didn't plan it that way, but kind of imposing that rule on myself made it even more creative. I had to really think outside the box in order to fit all of these concepts in.

JASMIN: Yeah.

MARIANN: So, you've rapidly become one of the real spokespeople for vegan parenthood and go-to people for advice on vegan parenthood. And so, I'm curious what advice you would give to parents on helping to keep kids committed to veganism even when they may be the only vegan they know or the only vegan in their classroom.

RUBY: Well, I'm going to be writing way more about this in my newsletter, so people can sign up at wedonteatanimals.com to continue the conversation. But I will say that one of the most important elements is really fostering a sense of group identity in the home. And some of the most successful schools in America do this for their students by creating an atmosphere on the walls and on the school shirts and in discussions that reinforce the values that everyone is supposed to be sharing together. So, if we were to do this, to parallel their strategies in our homes, it would involve way more discussion and sharing with kids what we're learning about animals and the environment. And I think that a lot of people, all of us vegans, we're always researching and learning more things, but we forget to include our kids in the conversation. And they are really interested. They're eager to learn these things and they're eager to be told things that no one else knows. And I just really think it's important to share and create the sense that we belong, and that there's a group that we belong to and there's shared values. So, this is -- I have t-shirts and prints on my site, and I didn't just create them just to be cute, but there's a reason behind those. And I feel that it's important to create an atmosphere that really supports your kid because they might be the only one in their classroom and that is hard. It takes some grit, and I can see it in my own stepdaughter. She's totally comfortable in her classroom, even when she's the only one. She's got a real strong sense of purpose because we really foster that here at home.

JASMIN: How old is she?

RUBY: She's eight now.

JASMIN: That is so interesting that you're talking about the power of community because even for adults, it's so important as vegans, as animal rights activists to be finding and fostering community. And what you're saying is a very good reminder to me that that is important at any age. When I'm around kids, like our nieces or nephews, I see them just have the ability to go find another kid their age and go play with them, which is something that we totally lose as we get older. It would be weird if I went up to another person on the street who just happened to look like they were in their mid-thirties and say, "Hey, you wanna play?" They would punch me in the face or something. But the community that kids automatically have is something that we take for granted a little bit and it *is* something we need to tap into, just as we need to tap into it with ourselves. Would you agree?

RUBY: Yes. I think that success with anything has a lot to do with group identity.

JASMIN: Aside from the obvious benefits to the animals, which is really a driving force for all of us, what are some of the benefits of veganism for kids?

RUBY: I think that veganism is really a great teacher, not only, like you said, of practical info for health and animals, but of a lot of qualities that leaders in all sectors of education and industry have stated and reported that we're gravely lacking, so, innovators, and creative and critical thinkers, and students with passion and drive and perseverance and grit. I think veganism and being in that minority teaches you all of those things. They're all things that I can relate to, and I've seen it in the vegan kids that I know. So, these are really skills and qualities that they say are more predictive of lifelong success, way more than those that we are testing kids for in schools on the SATs and other standardized tests, these character strengths that you gain. I think that's not something we often talk about, but I think it's really true.

MARIANN: I think that's such an interesting point and one I hadn't really thought of before. With your earlier book, *Vegan Is Love*, you got an unbelievable amount of press. I do a google alert for "vegan." It seemed like some days you were the only article there, there were like 400 articles about you.

RUBY: Oh, thank you.

MARIANN: And a lot of it was favorable and a lot of it was very snarky. Can you talk a bit about that and tell us what you think gives rise to the defensiveness you were seeing, sometimes even hostility?

RUBY: Well, I think that just practically, we are just at the very beginnings of introducing the mainstream to veganism. So, it's a privilege, and it's a burden because we feel such an urgency to get everything that we know out and it is just going to take time. And people think when you mention veganism that we're talking about the Standard American Diet minus meat and dairy, which leaves like nothing upon nothing. So, it's just going to take some time to let people know that we have our own pyramid and it's full of everything that we need. But I think the most fascinating part of the whole controversy over my book and the outrage was that by calling my books controversial, people were admitting on some level that what we do to animals is scary, too scary to talk about with kids.

JASMIN: It's so true.

RUBY: So, I know there's a crack that we can work through there, that people are starting to be more aware of what they're eating and what's going on in animal agriculture. And we just really have to push forward.

JASMIN: Mm. One of my favorite parts about that whole episode where every article was about Ruby Roth, Ruby Roth, Ruby Roth, Ruby Roth is that whenever you would appear in a quote or in an appearance you were just so cool, calm, and collected and everyone else was like, "Bah bah bah bah!" like all around you. And it's like, rising anxieties anybody? So that was funny.

RUBY: Yeah, I mean, it's my nature to kind of be quiet. But I think that there's something to just everybody having a few key points that they carry with them, and that's what I did. It was a few points that I wanted to get across, and no matter what they said, I was just going to take them there.

JASMIN: What were they? What were the points that you wanted to get across?

RUBY: It depended. I mean, on Fox, I knew they were going to be so radically crazy that I just wanted to make sure they knew that no matter what they said, you can't get around the fact that people are going to experience chronic disease. That's what the statistics say. If you're eating meat and dairy every meal of the day, it's inevitable. So, I just wanted to throw that radical thought out right back at them. And of course they gave me the opportunity to do that.

JASMIN: Yeah, similar to what you're discussing, many people seemed to think that information about what is happening to animals is not age appropriate for young children. How do you address such arguments?

RUBY: Well, the other side of it is that we're imposing an ignorance, a willful ignorance, upon them by not telling them. And I've never once seen a child overwhelmed by my books, just in fact the opposite. I think when you speak frankly to kids, they really pay attention because they feel like you're letting them in on a secret, and I experienced that with my students. They were absolutely enthralled by what I was telling them about animals. And I kept it very frank and unemotional and just stuck to the facts very lightly. And I think if you are ambivalent and you dance around the issue, they kind of pick up that this is a controversial issue and maybe they should be afraid. They're very sensitive to those energies. So, if you just speak to them like you would an adult, taking them very seriously, kids really react to that. And they were all eager to take part in something that helped animals. I mean, it made perfect sense to them. They were so full of "why?" They would ask these millions of why questions, and you can see this holy curiosity about humankind. Like, "Why *do* people do this if it hurts?" and it was amazing. So, I really think there's no universally accepted concept of childhood. And we've inherited this idea that kids are innocent and pure and must be totally protected, but we're causing harm and we're delaying the innovations and revolutions that we could be experiencing in this nation by not including our kids in the discussion.

MARIANN: I think that's such an interesting point. And I think it's so interesting that children tend to take this information very calmly, and yet as you saw, and as we all saw, adults tend to become completely hysterical at the idea.

RUBY: Yeah. Well, kids are -- they're not -- their moral compass isn't affected by profit.

JASMIN: Mm. Yeah.

RUBY: And it's not affected by years of brainwashing. Their first question's not, "Where do you get your protein?"

JASMIN: Right.

MARIANN: Yeah.

RUBY: They react with this great sense of diplomacy that's amazing, that adults don't have. We completely lose that.

MARIANN: It's really just such a telling issue, and it's really where the rubber hits the road about vegan advocacy that people are so upset that children would hear this. And as you pointed out, if it's that awful, why aren't *you* upset that it's going on, rather than just that children are hearing about it?

RUBY: Right.

MARIANN: It's such a fascinating point.

RUBY: And every parent wants their kids to eat more fruits and vegetables, so what better way than to tell them about meat and dairy?

MARIANN: Yeah, than to just tell them the truth? It's just such a -- it's a radical thought, telling them the truth.

RUBY: Yeah, it's true.

MARIANN: So, what do you say to people who contend that vegan parents are forcing their views on their children?

RUBY: I really think that kids just can't make choices if they don't know there are any. And every day vegan kids are exposed to the option of eating meat, so they're going to know it's there. It's not not there. They're not in -- we can only do so much to impose our views on our kids. I think that the best we can do is just have that influence. It's a great path to be introduced to to anyone. Whether they choose not to be fully vegan is another question. But I didn't know what the word "vegan" was when I was young and now it's in a lot of kids' vocabularies, and we're just planting those seeds as an option. And more people are going flexitarian than ever, so we're slowly chipping away at the -- and I shouldn't even say slowly, it's pretty rapid. And we're chipping away as the population is starting to be more conscious about what they put into their bodies.

JASMIN: You know, I don't have kids, and I feel like I would be so worried that they would rebel against me at some point. And obviously they would 'cause that's part of the process of growing up. But I would be afraid that they'd rebel by, "I'll show you, I'm going to go eat this steak" or something like that. What should parents do when their children say they don't want to be vegan or choose to eat nonvegan foods?

RUBY: I've heard from other vegan kids who are older, you know teenagers, over and over that the worst thing a parent could do is force it. So, I think we have to have a somewhat laissez-faire attitude even if it's not how we feel. And you certainly -- I think if you don't want to have meat in your house then that's just a rule and kids can deal with it. But if they're eating something at school, I think you just, you have to let it go, and just again, creating that sense of belonging at home and the sense of purpose and including kids in discussions about the motivations behind veganism and what's at stake. And that's really the best that you can do, and give them all the information. I believe if we give them the information they need to make educated choices, then they choose wisely.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think that one of the things that people sometimes lose sight of is that kids grow up and they become themselves, and you just can't control it. And you have to give them those choices. That's part of the joy and part of the burden of parenthood. So, you gotta hope that they make those right choices. What about the other side --

RUBY: Yeah. And I've seen it at work with my stepdaughter. We've never made veganism a forced issue here; it's what we all choose. And I've seen her offered nonvegan food at school, and even if she doesn't know I'm watching she'll politely say, "Thank you, but no thank you."

MARIANN: And what happens on the other side of the coin when things aren't so polite at school and perhaps -- what should parents do when their children are maybe being teased or maybe even bullied for their veganism?

RUBY: I think it goes back to giving your kid a really strong sense of purpose and practicing comebacks. Really, if that's an issue, then everybody needs to get together in the family and it can be a group activity. Come up with the most frequently asked questions at school or the most frequently teased outbursts, and really come up with practiced responses to them that a child can feel comfortable saying.

JASMIN: Do you have any advice for teachers who might be vegan who might want to start broaching the subject?

RUBY: I think you have to approach it with the exact same attitude you would teaching any other subject about how people live around the world. And nobody can argue with that. Even if you have to present, "This is -- some people in this culture eat this type of meat. And then other people, by the way, have no meat at all, no animals!" And I find that no parent and no principal can fault you for that.

JASMIN: Let's talk a little bit more about *V Is for Vegan* because that's coming out just in a few days on August 9th, is it?

RUBY: 6th. Yeah, 6th.

JASMIN: Oh, okay. What is the message that you hope that kids, and adults for that matter, take away from the book?

RUBY: This book is about the joy of veganism. It's happy and it rhymes and it's bright. And it's a life of heart and thought and action. And I know I just want this book to be a moment of laughter and learning for families to experience together.

JASMIN: Do you have a favorite letter from the book?

RUBY: My favorite letter is "E." Should I give it away, what it is, or should we just --

JASMIN: Yes, yes, I can't handle it! I need to know.

MARIANN: Teaser, teaser!

RUBY: "E" is for eggs, from a chicken's butt? Wow." And that rhymes with the letter that comes before. But that letter really, I think, encompasses my personality. And just I love that chicken, I love that art. I made that chicken my logo and my message of truth and humor and just the absurdity of eating animals. And I think that's all encompassed there.

JASMIN: That's great. You're such an interesting person, Ruby. What was your light bulb moment? What set you onto the animal cause and made you think, "I'm gonna write books for kids"?

RUBY: Well, I found veganism as a total health experiment, as a challenge from someone who said -- I was into social justice and politics throughout high school and college. And after college someone said to me: "Your eating habits don't match your morals and values." And that hit me really hard because I had to look at who I was and what my behavior was on the other hand. And so, I tried it and I never went back. And that moment of bringing -- you know, I always wanted to be an artist, I'd planned on that from the beginning of my life -- and the moment where all of my interests came together was teaching in the classroom and realizing that the kids *were* really interested and captivated by what I was saying. And I went to find a book that I could share with them, and all the books I found had a talking animal or a talking vegetable as the main character. And I just thought that took so much away from the emotional lives of animals and from the children's intelligence. So, I wanted to create the book that I wanted to read.

JASMIN: I love that. I love that it's sort of like when -- you know, we all are guilty of saying at one point or another "You know, someone should really" --

RUBY: Yeah, exactly.

JASMIN: "Someone should really, you know, someone should really do something about that," as we're walking away. And I think it's just so admirable and wonderful and awesome that you said, "Someone should rea-- I'm going to do this!" and you really took your talents and skills and you turned it into a way that is truly changing the world. And I couldn't be happier about your success because ultimately that's success for the animals, both human and non. And Ruby, we are so excited about *Vs for Vegan*. And we're so grateful to you for

joining us today in Our Hen House to discuss it. And I know that our listeners are going to want to buy it. So, I thank you so much. I hope that you stay in touch with us and let us know about your next project, I'm sure. It sounded like you are already working on another project?

RUBY: Yes, I have stuff brewing, so stay tuned and join my mailing list at wedonteatanimals.com. And I really thank you and everybody for their continued support.

JASMIN: Thanks, Ruby.

That was Ruby Roth. Find out more at wedonteatanimals.com.