

# Compassion, Confidence, and Hope

*Diane Rodriguez's Vegan Story*

I've totally turned my health around in just a few months on a vegan diet, but that's not why I decided to stop eating animals --- it was just a wonderful side-effect. I'll tell you more about that later, but let's start at the beginning.

I've always loved animals and refused to touch raw meat. I didn't see much raw meat growing up because we ate mostly processed food and lots of MacDonald's meals. It didn't bother me to look at a piece of cooked meat because I didn't think about it being an animal. In fact, I'd try just about anything (even lizard, when visiting Costa Rica!)

Then, at age 21, I saw a whale being dismantled. That really, really bothered me. I decided to stop eating animals. It wasn't hard for me to give up meat, but I had no idea what else to eat. I got a couple of vegan cookbooks and tried some recipes, but I had never learned to cook, had no idea what those ingredients were, felt lost at Natural Pantry, and the foods seemed kind of strange to me. So I gradually went back to my old eating habits, again eating processed meats that I could pretend weren't from animals.

Fast forward 8 years. . . After teaching in the Bush for 5 years I finally reached the point where I had seen too many animals killed. I didn't want any part of that, so by the end of the school year (2010) I had again decided to become vegan. I spent the summer with my parents in Wasilla and heard about the Food for Life classes from a

friend. I wasn't particularly interested in the health aspects but I wanted to learn how to prepare vegan meals so I signed up for the class. I became vegan the day after the first class, on June 18, 2010.

This time it was easy! Finally, I actually learned to cook. I liked the food I tried in class and then I made all the recipes at home, plus many more. I spent every afternoon cooking and discovered it was fun. My mother took the class with me and enjoyed my cooking, too. I'm not great at following recipes so I had a few disasters, but I had enough successes to replace my old meals with new, healthy, plant-based meals. Now I'm right at home in the kitchen, cooking beans from scratch, and I've discovered I really LIKE my own cooking.

As a teacher, education is very important to me. In addition to attending the class, I've educated myself about nutrition and the broader effects of our dietary choices by reading *The China Study*, by T. Colin Campbell, Ph.D. and *The Food Revolution*, by John Robbins, both fabulous books. Now when someone asks me a question, I have the answer! My knowledge gives me confidence and courage, grounding me in my decision to eat a vegan diet and preventing me from harboring doubts caused by other people's misunderstandings and fears.

Now about the wonderful "side-effects." I've lost 70 pounds so far, and still losing. I still have a lot to lose, but now I actually have hope that I can achieve a healthy, normal weight. I used to be on several diabetes



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medications. Now I'm off those medications and my blood sugar is NORMAL! I'm also off my cholesterol medication, and my cholesterol is lower than when I was on the medication! I used to have severe psoriasis on my arms, and now it's almost gone. I can get down on the floor with my students and get back up again. I have more energy. My hormones have become balanced and my body is functioning normally.

Before making this dietary change, I gained more every year. I'd tried all sorts of diets and every time I started one, I'd get sick. My

doctor had been recommending a gastric bypass for years, but I just didn't feel good about doing that. Since I couldn't seem to lose weight and didn't want to have the surgery, I had given up. I had lost all hope of ever losing weight. Now, miraculously, that's all changed. By deciding to eat in accord with my values, I've also discovered the *healthiest* way for me to eat. I've gained confidence, seeing that I can take charge of my health, and hope, that I will achieve my normal weight.