## **History of an Activist**

From a talk by Vonnie Thomasberg, President Emeritus and Founder, Animal Rights Coalition, given in October 2008

When I was trying to decide what to say to you today, I finally decided to talk about my journey as an activist.

How do we differ from others that don't feel that obligation to society? Is it nurture or nature?

My own story begins with having a mother and fraternal grandmother as role models. In spite of the fact that they had little themselves, they were compassionate to all living creatures, especially the vulnerable. I didn't realize what I was witnessing at the time of course.

The earliest recollection that I have of my grandmother was her making sandwiches and coffee for people that I had never seen before. We lived near a train track in the Dinkytown area and I guess our house was marked in some way so the men riding the rails looking for work during the great depression knew they could get something to eat at our house.

My mother volunteered even though it was during the depression and then during World War II. People were working extra hard to make it. I went along with her and helped hand out food and gas rationing stamps during the early forties. I think that this was the basis of my volunteerism. Several years went by as I finished school, married, had children and then I found myself again volunteering, first in the school lunch program at my kids' school, then as room mother for several years, then the PTA Board.

Discrimination was so imbedded in our society and particularly the suburbs. I worked with the Civil Rights Commission in Bloomington where we lived and worked to integrate the neighborhoods by holding neighborhood get-togethers and also visiting the model homes where discrimination was rampant. Realtors actually ran from the building when people of color entered, prices were inflated on the homes, and they were never asked to sit or offered a tour of the building sites. It was a horrible situation but we more or less shamed them into doing the right thing. There was a lot of "street theater" involved in this endeavor.

My husband and I were one of the first families in Minnesota to adopt a racially mixed child who we added to our family of four kids. I often wondered if it was the right thing to do but he is now in his fifties and seems none the worse for wear although there were many incidents of discrimination directed towards him and the whole family.

Political activity then beckoned me. I served as precinct chairman for several years, was the county secretary, and was on the State Central Committee. Our home hosted a spectrum of activities from putting lawn signs together to campaign kickoffs. My husband became mayor in a Republican-dominated city and together we saw many good things happen. I am proud of many things that we accomplished, but the thing that I am proudest of is that we were the first community in the state to ban the leg-hold trap. The night of the meeting the council chambers and hallways were packed with people and

Channel 4 actually showed up. Subsequently FATE worked using the Bloomington ordinance as a model and got leg-hold traps banned in 33 communities throughout Minnesota. It was an ongoing battle for several years as the DNR and trappers tried to overturn the ordinance, but finally gave up after several attempts.

During this time I became deeply involved with the Peace Action Coalition to stop the war in Vietnam. We worked hard to bring celebrities to a great gathering of thousands of people to the Met Sports Center in Bloomington. Of course there were local marches and protests and the big March on Washington in the late 60's. As an aside, you know that animals, both wild and domesticated, suffer terribly during war. That is why I still work with Women Against Military Madness.

The vulnerable animals never left my mind, but I didn't know how to start being active. Over a couple of years I got the neighborhood drug store to stop selling live animals and birds, got the Ben Franklin Store to stop selling fish and turtles, the high school to stop the live goldfish swallowing at one of their festivities, and put a stop to a long-time speaker appearing at the junior high level who called himself a conservationist, but really was a trophy hunter.

It dawned on me that I was eating animals – how could that be? My oldest daughter had read a book on how animals are used by humans and we talked about it. My three daughters and I became vegetarians on the spot. Not so easy then, but we turned it into an adventure. We made our own soy milk and had to go to a warehouse in St. Paul where tofu was made and we filled our buckets with warm, fresh tofu. The only veggie restaurant was the Mud Pie. It was soon joined by the Blue Heron. Both had excellent food.

I attended two Vegetarian Conferences in upstate New York during the late 70's. There I met all the people that would become the basis for the grassroots Animal Rights Movement.

I still felt so alone, as I am sure that all of you have experienced that feeling, and needed to find a local animal group to work with. I figured that if a person could make a difference on their own, belonging to a group would make you even stronger. Luckily, my mom picked up a Fund for Animals brochure at Southdale. I contacted them and soon was attending meetings and feeling like things were taking off – but they weren't. The local leader of the group didn't want the group to be active, so a few of us dropped out. I am sure she was relieved to be rid of us. We dropouts decided to organize a gathering of representatives from local groups and interested individuals.

About 30 of us met at the Powderhorn Park Building. We were hoping that an umbrella organization could be put together so that we could work together to stop duplication of efforts and also support each others' efforts and campaigns. That went over like a lead balloon. There were three of us felt that felt it was worth a try anyway. We began meeting regularly about once a week. Soon four more were added to our little group. We needed a bank account so we each threw in \$25. We wrangled over a name, logo, color of stationery, and most importantly, the mission statement. After several failed attempts as a true coalition, we finally had to admit that others definitely were not interested in a coalition. As a result we became another animal group. Now what? It

was then we decided that the three areas of animal exploitation that were not covered locally were animals used in experimentation and testing, animals used in entertainment, and animals used for food. So that became our focus.

We set up a calendar for the year 1981 and applied for non-profit status. This all turned out to be a tremendous amount of work and very time-consuming. If we had realized what we had gotten ourselves into – who knows? But ignorance is bliss. It was decided to have two big events with a lot of little ones in between. National Day for Lab Animals was April 24<sup>th</sup>. It was a cold, windy day, but we turned out enough people to march from Northrop Auditorium to Diehl Hall where hideous addiction experiments on primates were being done. There were people from all over the state and some from Wisconsin, and there were enough people to join hands around the entire building. The media chose not to attend.

You have to realize that there was little interest by the public or the media in such a radical notion as animal rights. Those two words were not ever said or written by the media – with one exception, the *Minnesota Daily*. They gave us great coverage whenever there was an event on campus.

The second event was a national three-day conference in September. The contacts that I had made in New York were excited that things were happening in the Midwest and came as speakers and panelists along with local activists and a great program was put together. It was grueling work – the hotel didn't want to serve vegetarian food, but we won that fight. Can you imagine having that happen now? The conference was a success – I think about 150 people attended from all over the country. We were on the national scene. We held subsequent three-day conferences in 1983, 1985, and 1987. Each one was better than the previous one.

ARC's numbers grew. We finally felt like we had made it. We published a newsletter and had a mailing list of about 600. We held monthly meetings at a park building. The office was in my basement. I was so enthused about the difference that we could make for animals that I gladly worked the 25 to 30 hours a week in addition to my full-time job.

I am sure that you are aware of the stages that social justice movements must go through, including ridicule, communication, and acceptance, in that order. The time I have been talking about up to now is the ridicule stage. We are currently in the acceptance stage.

After a few years in my basement and in park buildings I decided if we were serious that the office would have to be moved. We rented a wonderful storefront on 35<sup>th</sup> and Hennepin. Before long our monthly meetings numbered 50 to 60 people and we had to move from that space to the Uptown Office Park which we made three moves in. We were living hand-to-mouth and would for many years to come. I am so happy to see that now ARC again has a storefront

Several effective committees were formed: the Speakers Committee, the Letter Writing Committee, the Conference Committee, and the Special Events committee. All were very active and made a real difference.

Some of us continued to attend national conferences and meetings which added to our visibility and our knowledge.

We participated in many national campaigns. The biggest one was a four-city nationwide campaign called Mobilization for Animals. ARC was the organizer for Minnesota and had a wonderful turnout. Chicago had the second biggest turnout and New York City claimed the most people.

We participated yearly in national events such as Meatout on March 1, National Day for Lab Animals on April 24, and Fur Free Friday the day after Thanksgiving. Among other activities we had the conferences, concerts, vegan food served at such places as Peavey Plaza during the lunch hour, and protests and marches at several events and companies that exploited animals. We traveled throughout the state to speaking engagements, mostly at colleges.

Over the years I have seen the movement change. One instance that I recall vividly was the time another ARC member and I were debating a couple of researchers on KUOM radio. KUOM was the University of Minnesota radio station, which sadly no longer exists. At about the halfway point in that hour I suddenly realized that ARC was not on the defensive for a change. Actually, the researchers were and that gave me a feeling of such power. That was the moment that I realized that we had moved out of the ridicule stage. The station was overwhelmed with callers and booked us for another hour to be broadcast two weeks later.

The words *animal rights* started to become accepted. Media coverage, though spotty, was improving. We were taken seriously and that felt good. It also meant that animals were gaining status.

The hundreds of small grassroots groups that were springing up across the country activated the large moneyed organizations, which had pretty much rested on their laurels for years. I am sure they feared being left behind. Sadly, many of them also took credit for victories and campaigns of the small grassroots groups.

On a lighter note, I must share an event with you. Bucky Beaver was an inflatable figure about 30-feet high. This wonderful man from England brought that inflatable to any group that could use it. Of course we could. Bucky had been all over the world. Several of us brought Bucky to Lake Harriet near the band shell. Of course we attracted lots of attention, especially from kids who dragged their parents over to see and touch Bucky. We handed out anti-trapping brochures to the adults and had fun with the kids. Soon a cop arrived and told us to move on. So we started to walk the trail around the lake. The officer said that we had to leave the area and take Bucky with us. We refused, so he said that we were under arrest. We have a wonderful video of the deflated Bucky being stuffed into the squad car. When the policeman called it in, the precinct captain told him that he had better things to do than arrest people with an inflatable beaver. End of story and a very red-faced policeman.

Five to ten years ago there was a definite nosedive in the animal movement – this was nationwide. I have kept in touch with Jim Mason, who has a finger on the pulse of the movement across the country. Stagnation set in. Now an amazing and exciting

revitalization is taking place and I believe the movement has a much broader base of support, which will make a real difference for our animal friends.

As examples of this, recently the Minneapolis City Council took some baby steps towards stopping wild animal circuses. Twenty years ago, that would have been a wild dream. We were less than pleased with the outcome, but at least it was on the agenda. I have recently heard that several large groups such as HSUS have taken Ringling Brothers Circus to court in Washington, D.C. for abusing the animals.

I attended a Minneapolis ninth ward meeting a couple of weeks ago where the director of Animal Ark and the manager of Minneapolis. Animal Control spoke. The council member wants to make the Minneapolis Animal Control. Facility no-kill. This council member is also interested in stopping backyard breeding in Minneapolis.

Many wonderful things are happening with the animal movement. Now that we are in the Acceptance Stage, dreams can really start to come true. With the advent of computers and other means of communication we can stay in touch. The atrocities that exist in the world of animals are being videotaped and brought before the public. I tell you, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Did you know that there are many spin-offs from the Animal Rights Coalition? The Humane Society of Louisiana, The Humane Society of Montana, Compassionate Action for Animals (that one morphed from the U of M ARC, to SAFE, to CAA), Chicken Run Rescue, CRY, to name just a few.

The Animal Rights Coalition has had many victories and has raised awareness because we have had a wonderful, hardworking, talented bunch of volunteers willing to put in the time and effort to make changes for our animal brothers and sisters. You need to give yourselves a round of applause.

I believe looking at the past is important. Where you have been helps you to decide where you want to go. Seeing that I am frequently asked to speak about the past, I guess that others feel the same way. My life has been blessed in so many ways and helping end animal exploitation and abuse has to be at the top of my list of things that I am proud of. I thought I could go on forever, but age has caught up with me and I am reverting back to solo endeavors. But, they are important too. It has been exciting and fulfilling working for the betterment of our animal friends. I have met some great people along the way and I treasure them all. Some have become lifelong friends. I am sure that many of you have a life's journey similar to mine. Thank you for asking me to speak today. Most of all, I thank you all for caring and putting yourself out there. The animals deserve us.

I have just touched the tip of the ARC history iceberg this morning, so I would welcome any questions that you have. And if you are interested in knowing more, perhaps reading the old newsletters and conference brochures might be fun for you.