

THE FIGHT FOR **40 BILLION**

The Voice of United Poultry Concerns; Karen Davis, PhD

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"I want a world where ethics and intelligence come together on behalf of making the best possible life for every being in every habitat on the planet."

Dr. Karen Davis and Florence
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THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Karen Davis, PhD, founder and president of United Poultry Concerns, shared the story of the organization's beginnings and mission, her affinity for all birds, succinct advice for animal activists, and what motivates her in a wide-ranging, captivating interview. Karen said she has had an affinity for birds since childhood, but had no personal experience with chickens or turkeys until adulthood. A combination of circumstances led to the founding of UPC – her growing interest in farm animals combined with personal time with her landlady's chickens, and a stint as a volunteer at Farm Sanctuary brought about a decision to form an organization to focus on the plight of chickens and turkeys. She formed it in 1990, after receiving conflicting recommendations about its chances for success. One view was that it was difficult enough to get people to care about big animals, like whales; no one was going to care about chickens. The other view was, "Go for it! Don't wait! Do it now!" So she did. As Karen

explained, "My lifelong affinity for birds was completely galvanized by meeting chickens and turkeys, and getting totally immersed in the animal rights movement in the 1980s, and realizing this was really my calling."

She took all the skills acquired earning a PhD in English at the University of Maryland, not to teach college English, but to advocate for poultry. One of her landlady's chickens had been left behind when the others were sold. Karen found this chicken crippled, dirty, and small, and called her Viva. "She was very instrumental in my decision to focus my increasing attention on farmed animals, on the largest number of land animals being farmed, who happen to be chickens. Back then it was maybe 7 billion in the United States; now it's 9 billion. 40 billion worldwide. . . . I was just completely enchanted by chickens. I was moved by them at some very visceral level. Some very primal level."

She immersed herself in the subject spending hours at the largest agricultural library in the world, the Beltsville Agricultural Library outside Washington, DC. Her research has been utilized in UPC campaigns, and in the numerous books and articles she wrote and continues to write to this day. Karen noted that her background in writing and research has served her well in new endeavors. UPC, which became a bona fide 501(3)(c) nonprofit in October of 1990, dedicates itself to promoting the compassionate and respectful treatment of chickens and turkeys and other domestic fowl, and focuses on food production, science, education, entertainment, and human companionship situations. What most people don't know is that poultry in this country are still not protected by any humane laws.

From its inception, UPC has had support and encouragement from a plethora of animal rights activists. *Poultry Press*, its primary publication, went from being two 11 x 17 double-sided, photocopied pages to a full-fledged print and online magazine. From a small, rented facility with a few sanctuary chickens in a Maryland suburb of Washington, UPC has grown to an owned facility in Machipongo, VA, housing both the UPC offices, and a sanctuary for some 170 birds. The irony is, one of the largest poultry producing counties in the United States, Accomack County, is directly to the North, with facilities owned by Perdue and Tyson.

Karen stated that their focus is still the same as it was when they began 29 years ago. The staff is small, stable, capable, and committed. The internet and social media have changed the way they conduct business, to some extent. Of course, they are fighting an uphill battle. "Poultry are still the largest number of land animals – 9 out of 10 land animals slaughtered each year in the United States for food – who are not even covered by something so minimal as the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act." Referring to poultry, Karen added, "What we're saying is, we believe it does not help them, first, to not have any identity at all in all of agribusiness. It doesn't help them to be known as the animals who aren't even considered worthy, if you want to put it that way, of being covered by this so-called Humane Methods of Slaughter Act."

In addition to launching a campaign in 1994 to replace classroom chick-hatching projects with humane alternatives, UPC has been in the news for its campaign to replace the Kaporos chicken-abusing ritual, performed by some Orthodox Jewish communities prior to Yom Kippur, with non-animal symbols of atonement. The ritual involves swinging a chicken overhead while repeating a chant, then slitting the bird's throat as a symbolic act of passing the practitioner's due punishment onto an innocent victim. Karen and UPC also educate the public about the egg industry's practice of starving hens, known as "forced molting," and debeaking. Many of you are familiar with the concept of "phantom limbs," the lingering pain that is felt where a severed limb used to be. Davis has shared findings by Ian Duncan of the University of Guelph in Ontario, showing that birds experience phantom limb pain when part of their sensitive beak is amputated. Karen said, "When birds are debeaked, it isn't just the agony to their beak but to their whole face. All the nerves in their faces. Then they can never adequately preen themselves or eat properly."

Karen is the author of many books, articles, essays, and published letters. Her new book of essays, *For the Birds: From Exploitation to Liberation*, is coming out this year. She talked specifically about *Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look at the Modern Poultry Industry*. First published in 1996, *Prisoned Chickens* appeared in a new edition in 2009. About the book, Karen stated, "I wanted to write book that would be something that people in our movement could read and get a clear picture of what this industry is about, how it developed, what the birds suffer in terms of production diseases, how they're treated. The so-called broiler chickens on the one hand and the egg-laying chickens on the other hand. The parent flocks and what they go through. The whole picture, but I wanted it to be in a form that was

accessible, that was readable, and that infused a caring attitude into a scholarly, but not an overly-academic, type of work."

As an activist, she said the most difficult challenges she faces are, "Knowing what these birds are going through 24/7 everywhere. The entire planet is blanketed with avian agony. It's not only birds, of course. It's the pigs: it's the whole scene." On the other hand, "The



Sugar, rescued from a "Perdue" chicken shed

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Amelia

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easiest part is certainly just being with the birds that we have the good fortune to have in our presence every day in our sanctuary. To be in their company. To share our days with them. To be able to help them. To be able to experience their exuberance."

She went even further, saying, "This is the work I want to do. It's not just any work. People say to me, 'How do you stand doing this? Don't



From rotting in cages to roosting in branches, former battery hens enjoy life at United Poultry Concerns.

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PRISONED CHICKENS

An inside look
at the modern
poultry industry



POISONED EGGS
REVISED EDITION



KAREN DAVIS PHD

you get sick of it? Don't you get tired of it? Aren't you just depressed all the time?" "Yeah, I am depressed all the time. I am angry all the time. I am in a state of grief all the time. What helps me is to put my feelings into productive work. I look forward to getting up every day and getting to work."

Karen has daunting goals for the future. "Well, I would say, first, for the world, I want an ethical vegan world. There's no question about that. If I could pass a law that would completely prevent human beings from abusing animals I would. I would support it if it could be implemented. I want a world where people respect the other lives that we share, both other than human as well as human. I want a world where we could go far in having a more respectful, a more caring, a more just world for all concerned. So that's what I want to see." She commented further, "I want a world where ethics and intelligence come together on behalf of making the best possible life for every being in every habitat on the planet. As far as United Poultry Concerns is concerned, I will work to expand what we're doing. To educate people about who chickens are, who turkeys are, who birds are, and by extension – who animals in themselves are, as far as we can know. When they're not being degraded and subjected to indignity and physical and mental abuse. Who are they? I want to expand people's understanding of who they are, who they were meant to be until we got our clutches on them. And who they have a right to be. My hope is that we can learn to appreciate birds and other animals without viewing them from a purely exploitative point of view." Her passion is palpable.

In response to the accusation that vegans are pushy, Karen's response was on point, "Every social activist in the world for any cause has been accused of being pushy. And what people enjoy today as their rights were won by somebody else. Someone that was pushy. Someone who inserted themselves into the sclerotic mainstream conventional way of thinking and insisted upon another point of view. And people laughed at them and scorned them."

Her response to those who say, we need to worry about humans first, before we think about animals was, "They'll say, 'I care about humans.' One answer I have for that is, if you really care about humans, and you should, you should never want any human being to ever have to walk into a slaughterhouse and spend their day terrorizing and killing their fellow creatures and being steeped in blood all day. And having to take drugs so they can stand doing that work or taking all of the violence they've done all day to get a paycheck back into their home to their spouse or their children."

Karen shared her advice with fellow animal advocates. "Be strong and affirmative for animals. Don't apologize. Don't start off by saying I know a lot of people think I'm crazy for caring about a chicken type of rhetoric. Stand up for what you believe. Stand up for the animals. We're all they have. If we cringe and act apologetic on behalf of ourselves or our cause or for the animals for whom we have chosen to speak, that is a betrayal to the nth degree." With that, Karen Davis goes back to work.

For more information on United Poultry Concerns, please see:
www.upc-online.org/

Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs:
An Inside Look at the Modern
Poultry Industry
by Karen Davis, PhD., Book
Publishing Company