

Interview with Angel Flinn of Gentle World



In our last issue (Vegan Views 124 p.3) we published Angel Flinn's inspirational article *The Vegan Evolution*. Angel is the outreach director of Gentle World ('for the vegan in everyone'), and for this issue we asked her to tell us about Gentle World and the work that they do.

Gentle World was founded in 1970 and became a non-profit educational organisation in 1979. They have centres on the Big Island of Hawaii, and (since 2000) the North Island of New Zealand, and their core purpose is to help build a more peaceful society - by educating the public about the reasons for being vegan, the benefits of vegan living, and how to go about making such a transition.

Gentle World is also a vegan community, and its member-volunteers have given seminars, private consultations, cooking classes, and video and audio lectures, all free of charge, as well as meals to thousands of people. In addition to their educational programme, they have rescued, fostered and re-homed many abandoned and abused animals. They have also offered free vegan meals to shelters for abused women, the homeless, and people with AIDS.

They have published two cookbooks *The Cookbook for People who Love Animals* (1981) and *Incredibly Delicious: Recipes for a New Paradigm* (2000). And they have taught people how to prepare delicious, nutritious, plant-based food and how to grow their own fruits and vegetables veganically - without the use of animal-based fertilizers and soil amendments.

Their monthly email newsletter and website <http://gentleworld.org> carry an ever-growing stream of articles on a variety of vegan topics. These are just some examples: *A Beginner's Guide to Vegan Advocacy*, *Life in a Vegan Community*, *Vegan Education in Animal Farming Country*, *Freedom's New Frontier: A Guide to Animal Rights*, *Are Anti-cruelty Campaigns Really Effective?*, *Nutritious and Delicious Sprout Salads*, *Tantalising Tahini Recipes*, *A Beginner's Guide to Travelling as a Vegan*, *Is your Alcohol Vegan?* and *Good Nutrition for Healthy Vegan Dogs*.

Gentle World are also dedicated to providing an example of how to move towards a more sustainable, communal, self-sufficient lifestyle, including how to live more harmoniously with nature, other animals, and one another. "We hope to inspire others to understand the vegan ideal so that we may create a more peaceful world together - not in some distant tomorrow when the lion lies down with the lamb. But today, when we do."



How does it work having centres in Hawaii and New Zealand, over 4,000 miles apart? Do some people travel between the two? How many people live permanently at these centres, and what sort of activities take place at them currently?

Maintaining the two locations makes it possible for us to reach out to people from many different countries, since both Hawaii and New Zealand are popular destinations for travellers from all over the world. All of Gentle World's full-time members (of which there are 12) travel between the two centres, with some people staying longer in one location or the other. Each individual is responsible for his/her own airfare, as well as living expenses, which are lessened by the lower cost of communal living.

We're sometimes asked how we feel about the environmental impact of air travel, which is certainly a valid concern. However, we believe that any negative impact caused by our travel is offset by the positive effect of our educational programme. One carbon footprint calculator online states that "most people can save twice as much carbon by going vegan than by not flying". In addition to attempting to spread the vegan message in two hemispheres, we strive in a myriad of different ways to demonstrate how to live in an ecologically sound manner. Amongst other things, we never use a clothes dryer or air conditioner, we drive as little as practically possible, we re-use and conserve everything we can, we catch rainwater and use alternative forms of energy, and we don't commute.

During the New Zealand summers, most of us reside in Shangri-La (our NZ centre) from January until the end of April. Some people go earlier, and stay a bit later, to open up and close down [the gardens](#), and generally organise everything before and after the centre is closed for the winter, when we return to our centre in Hawaii, where our educational programme continues until the end of the year.

One of our main activities is hosting visitors, and this is one of our most rewarding forms of outreach, because of how effective it is in helping people to understand and embrace veganism, not to mention [the appreciation we receive](#) from people who have the opportunity to experience the way we live. This is especially true for those who get the chance to visit Shangri-La, which is an absolutely enchanting environment. The natural beauty attracts many people who wouldn't necessarily seek to be hosted by a vegan community, but even in these cases, the most important aspect of their visit ends up being their education about veganism. Almost magically, this often tends to come naturally as people settle in to the experience of [living in a vegan culture](#), where everyone around them already accepts veganism as being the foundation of our ethical standards.

Who founded the group, and how did it start up? How has Gentle World evolved over the years, and are there any specific plans for the future?

The idea for a gentle world began in 1970, in the minds of a young married couple, Light and Sun (we all choose names

that remind us of what we are evolving toward), who saw [the truth of veganism](#) and decided to live that way. [In the group photo on the previous page, Light and Sun are sitting next to Angel, who is on the far right.]

In those days, communal lifestyles were much more common, and other young people were naturally drawn to their vision of a gentler, simpler and more sustainable way of living. Those who were willing to live the vegan ideal, which at the time was a far more radical choice than it is even now, decided to live and work together as a supportive group, to make it easier to do.

Ten years later, with the publication of the first cookbook, Gentle World decided to incorporate as an educational organisation, in order to formalise the vegan outreach that had become a naturally-occurring part of their interactions with others. This vegan education evolved into [cooking classes](#) and [presentations](#), film screenings and seminars, as well as the charitable offering of nutritious meals to those in need.

Now that the internet has become such an important tool for vegan outreach, our educational efforts are increasingly being directed toward online activities, based upon spreading the information on our website, which is updated regularly with informative articles for both new and seasoned vegans. We're excited about seeing it grow in the years to come.

One of our most significant goals for the future is to acquire a bigger piece of land here in Hawaii, with enough space to allow our [veganic growing](#) and education to expand, and to provide more space and accommodations for our visitor programme, which is becoming more popular all the time. We're looking for the perfect property and, in the meantime, seeking funding to make it a possibility.



This renovated farmhouse is the community's gathering place at Shangri-La in New Zealand

What does your visitor-volunteer programme involve? Do you get many people visiting and helping?

Our visitor programme is the 'hands-on' part of our educational outreach. Visitors to Gentle World have the opportunity to live and work side-by-side with our member volunteers, some of whom have been vegan for over 40 years.

We have found that visitors to our centre are [profoundly influenced](#) by the experience of living in a vegan culture; going about the activities of the day surrounded by people of many different ages, for whom veganism is [more than just a lifestyle](#), but [an evolutionary philosophy](#) and a whole new way of approaching life and the world.

Everyone who visits leaves with a better understanding of what veganism is, and many of our guests really take the vegan message to heart and [carry it with them on their journey](#). It's very uplifting to be a part of that transformation.

To what extent are you able to integrate with local people, many of whom perhaps don't share your values?

We find that the best way to win hearts and minds is through kindness and generosity, which we practise through the sharing of our food and our knowledge. We offer free meals and education to all who are interested.

How did you come to veganism and Gentle World yourself, Angel?

I became vegan in 2000, after a few years of vegetarianism and a year or so of confused 'veg*nism'. I gave up dairy and eggs after learning how they were produced, but dwelled in the land of 'almost vegan' for a while, as I lacked sufficient conviction to give up other animal products, such as leather, [wool](#), the bone carving I wore around my neck, or the [sugar](#) and [honey](#) I turned a blind eye to.

At a festival in New Zealand, I attended a workshop facilitated by Gentle World's founders. They explained how veganism was the ethical foundation of their belief system, and pointed to their commitment to shared ideals as a reason for the group's longevity.

A few months later, I visited the community, which turned out to be the precursor to my decision to join - a move I made around six months later. My two-week stay, and especially my interactions with the two founders (who had been vegan for thirty years at that time, and have now been vegan for over forty), led to the first time I looked honestly at the hypocrisy in my 'veganism'.

It was around six months later that I found myself volunteering at the Hawaii centre, where one of the founders was delivering a powerful presentation. She said one thing that I will always remember the essence of: 'I can't stop the animal industry from killing, and torturing and enslaving animals ... But I can stop myself from being a part of it.' All of a sudden, my determination that I already **was** vegan just dropped away, to be replaced by a deep understanding of what being vegan really means. I was left with a feeling of such relief, such freedom, and such gratitude for the realisation that I had the power to liberate myself from the guilt and confusion that was stopping me from moving forward.

In the twelve years since, my understanding has continued to deepen and expand, and it has been a great privilege to spend my time and energy helping others to have the Gentle World experience.



Members live in small homes or caravans near the farmhouse

The word 'Gentle' makes one think of a very peaceful, non-aggressive approach to life. Does this name 'Gentle

World' influence how the group operates, and does it tend to attract gentle people and gentle thoughts too?

We hope so! As we are all human and none of us has been 'raised' in a gentle world, it is sometimes challenging, but has gotten much easier with the years of practice. We frequently receive feedback from people who are drawn to the name, as though it speaks to their own inner desire, and from those who describe experiencing a feeling of calm here that they describe as 'other worldly'. I think, if we were honest, we would all agree that a gentle world is what we are really longing for.

As you can tell from the names we choose for ourselves as individuals, we believe strongly in the power of names as a tool for creating the reality through which we experience our lives. The name 'Gentle World' is intended to bring out the gentle nature inside us all. Although we all (sadly) find it necessary to hide our gentleness from time to time (especially when interacting with others who don't understand the importance of living peacefully), we firmly believe that our true nature is gentle, and that this is a necessary quality to consciously cultivate, if we ever hope to have a truly peaceful existence. It helps to have a reminder of that on a daily basis.

You've written articles in support of the abolitionist theory of animal rights, and in one interview you said: "I'm inclined to believe that our biggest obstacles are not only the big money behind animal exploitation, but also the big money behind the animal welfare business." Can you explain that a little, and is it your own personal opinion or is it shared by most or all of the others at Gentle World?

We have an article on our website called [Making a Killing with Animal Welfare Reform](#) that explains this specific idea in detail. However, this is not an original concept! In recent years, I've learned a lot from reading the work of [Gary Francione](#), who has written extensively about this subject. Anyone interested in exploring this issue can learn all about it by reading his blog and his books, especially *Rain Without Thunder*, which explores how dramatically the animal movement (which was rights-based at its inception) has shifted from its original approach. In my opinion, the abolitionist approach is really a return to the original goals of the animal rights movement, before it was corrupted by this manufactured idea that welfare reform is the way to create 'real change for animals now'.

Gentle World has never been involved in animal welfare, as our approach has always been to teach people about the necessity of veganism, which transcends the animal treatment issue and goes straight to the heart of using animals in the first place. We all feel sad about the fact that so many people who devote their time and energy towards animal advocacy appear to be backing away from promoting a strong vegan message. A more ambiguous, welfare-based approach might appeal to the mainstream, but obscures the essential point behind a veil of confusion. If we don't make the vegan message central to our advocacy, how can we ever expect to see a vegan world?

Gentle World obviously believe that presenting people with delicious vegan food is an important part of promoting veganism (Lee Hall, who we interviewed in V.V.122, has made this point - that vegan cookbooks are "a real part of politics, a real contributor to animal rights theory"). How do you go about that, given that your two centres are a little isolated? And are you able to grow a large percentage of your own food both in Hawaii and New Zealand?

We try to grow a lot of our own fruits and veggies in both locations, which is easier for us in New Zealand because we



A Hawaiian rainbow over Gentle World's veganic garden

have more space there. In Shangri-La, in addition to our garden greens and other veggies, we have enough space for multiple fruit orchards, large corn crops, lots of squashes and potatoes, and even watermelon! Here in Hawaii, although we are limited by the size of our current property, we have the advantage of being able to grow fruits and veggies all year round, and so we're looking forward to finding a bigger piece of land so that we can expand and start to be more self-reliant with regard to produce. Even so, we do manage to grow all our own greens (which is a lot!) as well as other crops, including corn, cucumbers, squash, peppers, tomatoes and even eggplant and soybeans. We also grow pineapples (which are sweet and delicious), bananas and papayas, and have some coconut palms that are promising a harvest soon.

[Serving delicious food](#) is definitely an extremely important part of our vegan education, especially because of the popular misconception that vegan food is bland, boring, or lacking in variety or a sense of familiarity. We love showing people that they can eat an endless assortment of incredibly beautiful and mouthwatering dishes, without having to sacrifice the tastes and textures that they're used to.

There are several blog posts on our website that describe events we've done in both Hawaii and New Zealand, all of which have been very

well received. And of course, with our visitor programme, we have the ongoing opportunity to show our guests how well we eat at every meal of the day!

Each year we participate in [a major event](#) here in Hawaii where people come from all over the island. We serve our delicious food to hundreds of people, the vast majority of whom are non-vegans, and they all rave about the taste, with many of them asking us where our restaurant is! (A number of years ago now, Gentle World did have a very successful restaurant on the Hawaiian island of Maui, and that was where many of our most popular recipes were developed. 'The Vegan Restaurant' ran for two and a half years under Gentle World management, and remained vegan for several years after that, even under two new owners.)

It's true that living outside of a major population centre definitely limits the number of people we can reach with this kind of outreach, and that's one of the reasons we're becoming increasingly drawn to online activity, which is more far-reaching. But when it comes to food, a taste is worth a thousand words, or even pictures!





Summer serving food at the Kohala Fair in Hawaii 2010

Gentle World's byline is 'for the vegan in everyone'. That's a very nice concept. But how true do you think it is? There do seem to be a number of people who are positively hostile to veganism. For example, when your *Vegan Evolution* article was featured on the *Care2* website in 2009 it attracted some 670 comments, many positive but others rather less so. And you later added an excellent comment yourself: "It is regrettable that this discussion became so personal and hostile ... We can disagree, and we can even be passionate about where we stand, but it seems to me that we would all benefit from becoming more gentle, and perhaps, in that way, the discussion would be able to go further and deeper."

Yes, those forum discussions can get very unpleasant, which is why I choose to stay away from them these days, though when someone says they are going to become vegan as a result of an article, it makes all the criticism fade into the background! I try to always remember that those voices are coming from people who are constantly immersed in a culture that insists (through heavy programming that we're all exposed to throughout our entire lives) that animals are resources, and that killing and eating them is an absolutely reasonable thing to do. But when people react with such hostility, I tend to think that they're upset because they know inside that, even if we don't always phrase it perfectly, what we're saying is fundamentally true.

When we chose that phrase as our byline, as well as wanting to create an inclusive feeling that would be welcoming to our target audience (ie potential vegans, as opposed to those who are already there), we wanted to plant a seed in people's minds that the vegan concept is really not out of their reach, as they may have been led to believe.

Despite all their protestations against veganism, most people agree that killing (or causing pain and suffering), for the sake of pleasure or convenience, is not morally justified. From this point, embracing veganism as a philosophy and worldview does not require much of a leap. Veganism is a simple matter of putting into practice the values that the vast majority of us already share. We believe that there is a part of each person (however deeply buried) that is capable of understanding that concept. We hope that our site speaks to that part of everyone.

Jack Perkins of Radio New Zealand spent several days at Gentle World's 'Shangri-La' New Zealand centre in 2011. You can listen to his half-hour account of the visit (and interviews with Angel and other members) at www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/spectrum/20110626 - and there's also a gallery of photos on that page.

This is one of several Vegan Views interviews over the period 2011-2013. The others are freely available on the home page of the Vegan Views website www.veganviews.org.uk (mostly in pdf form).

Jack Norris & Ginny Messina (vegan dietitians) V.V.127
 John Davis (International Vegetarian Union) V.V.126
 David Irving (author 'The Protein Myth') V.V.124
 David Graham (Vegan Organic Network) V.V.123
 Lee Hall (author and animal rights activist) V.V.122
 Patrick Smith (Veggies catering) V.V.121