



An Interview with Jeff Nelson

by Mark Huberman

In the “About Us” section of your wonderful website, you indicate that you and your wife, Sabrina, were vegetarians even prior to having children. That must mean you are real veterans of this way of living. What led you and Sabrina to discover and follow this path?

In 1990 I heard John Robbins interviewed on the radio, and then read his book, *Diet for a New America*. I was very impressed with research he presented showing the relationship between animal foods and disease. Sabrina read the book next, and was horrified to learn how farm animals were treated. So for somewhat different reasons, we both decided to become vegetarian.

Did either of you suffer a health crisis like so many folks do before they are willing to make fundamental lifestyle changes?

About five years after going veg, Sabrina was diagnosed with a rare incurable autoimmune disease called Relapsing polychondritis (RP). Her immune system was attacking and destroying her body's cartilage. After a year of frequent, painful bouts where she had to take Prednisone and other meds, Sabrina happened to pick up and start reading *The McDougall Plan*. Sabrina's sister had given the book to Sabrina for Christmas a year earlier, thinking she was gifting Sabrina a vegetarian cookbook. In the book, Dr. McDougall discussed Lupus and how dairy can be a trigger. As RP is in the Lupus family, Sabrina was very interested in this, and said she wanted to “go vegan” and follow Dr. McDougall's low-fat diet. So we both did it, and to make a long story short, her RP went into remission very quickly. Her rheumatologist also complimented her when her cholesterol fell to 135 within one month between appointments.

Are you familiar with Drs. Shelton, Benesh, Esser and some of the other leading exponents of the Natural Hygiene Movement during the 1950s and 1960s? Are you aware that these folks were advocating a plant-based diet for health reasons long before most of the current leaders?

Yes, shortly after we started VegSource.com, we met people through the web who were Natural Hygienists, and first learned about the Natural Hygiene movement, players and history. It was fascinating to realize there were a group of people and an organization that had been promoting this message early on.

How did VegSource come about?

We started VegSource as our own form of kitchen activism. We felt that Sabrina dodged a bullet because we got this much-needed information, and we wanted to pay it forward by helping get this

In this issue of **Health Science**, it's my privilege to interview Jeff Nelson. He is the co-founder of VegSource, a magnificent website that is loaded with the latest news and information, videos and tips for living on not just “all things vegetarian and vegan” as the website describes itself, but so much more. On any given day, you will find high quality videos and articles highlighting the ongoing groundbreaking efforts not just of John Robbins, Drs. T. Colin Campbell, Caldwell Esselstyn, John McDougall, Michael Greger, Neal Bernard and more, but also our very own Jeff Novick and Drs. Alan Goldhamer, Michael Klaper, Doug Lisle and Joel Fuhrman.

From my vantage point, Jeff and his wife, Sabrina, have done more than anyone else to give a world-wide megaphone to our fundamental message that “health care is self care.”

As you will see from the interview, Jeff has great passion and an enthusiastic commitment to our cause and we in the NHA are privileged to call him a friend. If you have not already signed up to be a subscriber on his website, do so today by visiting www.vegsource.com. If you are in the LA area this fall, please consider attending his next Healthy Lifestyle Expo, which is set for Friday, October 18 through Sunday, October 20, 2013 at Woodland Hills, California. The lineup of speakers at these events is outstanding. Keep up to date on the event by visiting <http://healthylifestyleexpo.com>.



The Nelson Family in Palm Springs, November 2012

kind of information out to other people. We also wanted to get plant-based info out in a fun and “normal” way. Some of the veg websites early on that we came across were kind of grim and humorless, and maybe even judgmental of others. We wanted to do something different. Many of the plant-based experts and organizations we had come to admire either were not yet on the web, or the website they had was very limited. We reached to many and offered to build and host their websites for free. In this way, we were able to help many of our heroes, and we ended up hosting hundreds of websites for individuals and organizations, like Dr. McDougall, PCRM, Dr. Esselstyn, Charlie Attwood, M.D., Vegan Outreach, Farm Sanctuary, Dr. Klapar, Howard Lyman, FARM, Bill Harris, M.D., Ruth Heidrich, Jo Stepaniak, Doug Graham, VegTV, EarthSave, IVU — and a whole lot more. It was amazing and transformational, what we were able to learn from all these fascinating people and organizations.

Are you and your wife partners in the cause?

We’re partners in everything; we created VegSource together. Sabrina also bought the name of the disease she had, as a website, Relapsingpolychondritis.com. Over the years hundreds of people with this same diagnosis have contacted her, saying that her website was the only hope that they found. And hundreds have written to express their gratitude that they also put their disease into remission following the same diet.

You call VegSource “Your source for all things vegetarian?” Do you have editorial lines that you draw?

I’m not sure what you mean by “editorial lines.” We definitely have a point of view, but we don’t limit our site to our own point of view. We have experts and contributors who may write an article or blog where we may not necessarily agree with all they say. But variety is the spice of a website, and we’re a big tent. One expert may disagree with another; so what. Let the reader decide.

Is VegSource growing?

After almost 17 years on the web, VegSource continues to thrive and evolve. Like most, we’ve branched out into Twitter and Facebook, and enjoy having interactions with our visitors. And we have a big email newsletter a lot of people subscribe to as well.

What is the role of social media in disseminating progressive health information?

It’s not just progressive information, but any and all information is being spread via social media. It’s a fact of how people communicate with each other in 2013. So Facebook does play a role. We haven’t gotten much into Twitter, but plan to develop that more this year.

Based on the copy you give him on your website, you seem to have a very high regard for Dr. John McDougall. Tell me your thoughts about him and how your relationship developed.

Interview continues on next page.

As I mentioned earlier, Dr. McDougall saved my wife's life, so he's a hero around our house. I read a study on WebMD which looked at people who got the diagnosis Sabrina got in 1995 — 40 percent of them are dead within 10 years. And it's not a good 10 years; many people lose their sight and have other problems from the side effects of the drugs prescribed for RP. I don't know what would have happened to us if we hadn't come across Dr. McDougall's book. We first met Dr. McDougall via email, and offered to host and help with his website. He's a very friendly, open, caring guy, and our friendship developed over the years. He's also been incredibly helpful to other members of my family.



Jeff Novick working with Nina and Randa Nelson on *Fast Food DVD Series*.

You also give a lot of exposure to several of the stars of our Health Association and Movement — particularly Dr. Alan Goldhamer and his colleagues Drs. Michael Klaper and Doug Lisle. How did those relationships develop?

Many years ago Sabrina came across a book at a Health Expo called *Pregnancy, Children and the Vegan Diet*, by Michael Klaper, M.D. She bought the book, even though we weren't married yet. A few years later we heard Dr. Klaper speak here in Los Angeles, and we were highly impressed. We offered to help with his web presence and developed a friendship over the years. Regarding Alan Goldhamer and Doug Lisle, we were put onto Alan and TrueNorth by T. Colin Campbell, who told us he had experienced a remarkable recovery himself from going to their facility. Sabrina and I decided to do a fast at TrueNorth in order to write about it for VegSource. It was an amazing experience, doing a 10-day fast, and hearing Alan and Doug. If anyone I know were diagnosed with something serious, about the first thing I would recommend would be to check in at TrueNorth. It's amazing and they have remarkable results with so many patients.

You seem to have an especially warm relationship with my good friend, Jeff Novick. I see your daughters featured in his videos which you yourself appear to produce. Tell me your thoughts about Jeff and explain how that relationship developed?

Jeff Novick is one my favorite people. He's fun, he's warm, and he's brilliant. He's the Nutritional Director of "Meals For Health" — a program I'm also involved in that goes into low income communities and gets sick people well. He's the nutritional brains behind the program, and of course he's involved in so many different programs. Jeff spoke at one of our Expos some years back. He wowed the crowd. One thing I've always said is that I don't want to be in business with someone unless I'd want to go on vacation

with them. Jeff fits that requirement. I've been lucky enough to spend a lot of time with Jeff on various projects, and I like him as business partner and as a friend. Who wouldn't want to be friends with Jeff! He's a great guy.

I know that along with Dr. McDougall you also regularly feature Dr. Joel Fuhrman, T. Colin Campbell, the Esselstyns (The Dr. and Rip!) who sometimes are critical of each other's message. Has it sometimes been challenging to navigate their professional differences? How have you done it?

Critical of each other's messages? This is news to me! Just kidding. These are all professionals. Every one of them is a hero to me. There's nothing I have to do to navigate their differences. I'm just grateful to count them as friends.

Do you think, like I do, that their differences are dramatically outweighed by what they have in common?

They agree on much more than what they don't. I consider them all on the same team.

Tell me about your Healthy Living Expos. When did they start and when do they occur? How many people attend?

In 2001, we decided to have a small gathering in a restaurant near our home, for anyone who wanted to come by. A week after putting that up on VegSource, we had 150 people signed up! So we moved it to a hotel and invited more speakers. Each year it's grown, and gets better and better. Last year we had about 470 people attend the weekend. We get a lot of the same loyal guests each year, but we also get many new ones, which is heartening. More and more people want this message.

Do you and Sabrina practice what you preach?

Well, I don't consider myself a preacher, but rather a student of some very forward thinkers. That said, we usually are

eating a low-fat, minimally processed, whole food diet — plant-only, of course!

Tell me about your kids. From the videos I've seen, your daughters are very creative and charismatic in their own right. What are they up to?

Nina and Randa are 19, and this year are taking a year off school to work on their career. They've been in a number of movies, TV shows and commercials, and are currently recording their first album. They're busy girls.

What about your son? How old is he and what are his plans?

Willie is 16 and a junior in high school, who loves soccer and cross country. He's interested in film, and often helps me when shooting projects.

What impact do you think the documentary "Forks Over Knives" has had on our health movement?

Forks has certainly had a very positive impact. There are so many positive impacts that have taken place in recent years — things like Neal Barnard and Joel Fuhrman getting PBS specials; T. Colin Campbell's book *The China Study* finding its way into John Mackey's hands; President Clinton discovering Caldwell Esselstyn's book and deciding to give Dr. Esselstyn's diet a try. Seeing Whole Foods institute a plant-based employee health program, and seeing its success, is another enormous development. Having a glowing 1-hour CNN documentary by Sanjay Gupta, M.D., spotlighting Dr. Esselstyn and the low-fat, plant-based diet — and having it get huge ratings — is another big win. Having a vegan chain like Native Foods growing nationally is extraordinary. There are so many people making tremendous contributions that are having huge ripple effects. It seems like we're reaching a sort of critical mass, as John Robbins has said.

Dr. Klaper speaking at Expo



Jeff with his son Willie

Where do you see the future of health in America? Are you optimistic that with the extraordinary increase in excellent information, that fundamental change is coming — and coming soon?

Well, where I used to see a lot of resistance to this kind of information, today we're seeing a lot of demand for it. I don't know if there's going to be a "fundamental change" coming soon in health in America. But I do see enormous growth in the number of people seeking and open to this information. I think with the aging baby boomer generation, a lot of people are seeking a way to stay healthy. And many are beginning to realize that a plant-based diet is the answer to many of their questions.

Thanks for sharing your insights and great work with us.

Thank you, Mark, for all the great work that NHA does!

Sabrina, Randa, Dr. Joel Fuhrman, Jeff Novick and Nina Nelson at an Expo Cooking Demo segment

