



*In the winter issue of **Health Science**, I had the pleasure of sharing with you my January 2012 interview with the renowned Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn of the Cleveland Clinic who my wife and I had the privilege of hosting for dinner prior to his dynamic address at Youngstown State University. In this issue, I have the added pleasure of presenting my interview with his extraordinary son, Rip Esselstyn, the author of the best-selling book, **The Engine 2 Diet**. The interview took place on July 1, 2012, following the completion of an inspiring two-day, sold out health event outside of Chicago entitled Farms 2 Forks that my wife Wanda and I attended on June 30th and July 1st. The Farms 2 Forks event was inspired by the popularity of the groundbreaking film, **Forks Over Knives**, and featured not only Rip, his mom, Ann, and his dad, but our very own Dr. Doug Lisle and Jeff Novick. As you will see from the interview, “Apples don’t fall far from trees,” and Rip, like his scholarly dad and dynamic mom, sing the NHA song as well as anyone I have ever met. Attending the Farms 2 Forks event was like attending an NHA Conference and, if one comes to your area soon, make sure you don’t miss it.*

Mark Huberman

An Interview with Rip Esselstyn

by Mark Huberman

Mark: How did your Farms 2 Forks weekends come about?

Rip: The credit goes to Whole Foods founder and CEO, John Mackey. Whole Foods has close to 60,000 team members and John is intent on creating a really healthy work force. He decided to finance some week-long immersions for some of their sickest team members. His goal was to add to a culture that embraces health. For almost three years now he has been basically subsidizing teams if they want to go to one of four different healthy eating week-long immersions. My Engine 2 has one and Dr. John McDougall does one in Santa Rosa, California. We at Engine 2 took what began as week-long immersions with Whole Food Markets and expanded them to the general public in what we are calling Farms 2 Forks. This is the first year we have done these weekend retreats and we’re having them on farms so people can see where their food comes from. It’s also a great bucolic setting. It’s relaxing and it’s great. Every one is sold out and we’re going to do another set next year and we love it.

Mark: You have really put together a great team. How did you get them all together?

Rip: We definitely have the varsity here. In addition to the Esselstyns — my father, mother and sister — we have the incredibly talented Jeff Novick and Dr. Doug Lisle who form the core of our team. I met Jeff at a VegSource Conference about three years ago and we hit it off really well. I then heard of Doug Lisle and asked if he wouldn’t mind taking part in some of our immersions because I thought that the whole psychology was a missing side of the equation when it came to eating. He agreed and Jeff and Doug have been working with us for close to two years now.



Mark: Let’s shift back to you for a moment. Lots of NHA members probably know about your experience at the Austin, Texas Firehouse, a story that led to your book, **The Engine 2 Diet**. However, I think our readers would have a special interest in knowing what it’s like being the son of Caldwell and Ann Esselstyn and their influence on your voyage to the plant-based diet. Was it their influence or did you come to it on your own?

Rip: I've always completely, 100 percent admired and respected my mom and my dad. My dad has always been one of my heroes. I was never rebellious in nature when it came to them and so when he started his research around plant-based nutrition and heart disease back in 1984, I was one of his biggest fans. I personally got exposed to it when I came home for spring, summer and Christmas breaks. Unfortunately, when I was at the University of Texas eating on the athletic training table with the football, basketball and baseball players, I found myself eating steak and chicken, fried steak and baloney sandwiches, meatloaf and all that junk. It wasn't until after I graduated in 1986 and got my own place that I was able to start cooking my own foods and started changing my diet full force.

Mark: What was it, though, that allowed you to break the old habits?

Rip: I feel like I've always kind of had a pretty open mind when it comes to stuff like this and I know, especially from being an athlete, that I was very vulnerable. I'm not bullet proof, and if there is something out there that makes sense and there is science behind it — good solid science and data — then I'm completely up for listening and learning. And one of the things I'll tell you about this field of nutrition is that I am 100 percent convinced that I'll be a student for the rest of my life.

Mark: Your parents must be incredibly proud that you saw the light or made the connection when you did.

Rip: I don't think any of us ever saw this coming. My father came to this by helping people and saving lives from his background as a surgeon which led to his research into plant-based nutrition. I had the good fortune of just kind of falling into it happenstance trying to save a fellow firefighter and writing a book about it. Now my parents and I are kind of going along parallel paths but in very different ways.

Mark: How special is it to be able to work and tour with your folks?

Rip: It's very cool. As you know, my parents are almost in their 80s and I love the fact that I get to see them and hang out with them for a week at a time, or weekends at a time, six or seven times a year as they're getting older. I am convinced that they'll probably be around another 20 or 30 years, right? So I relish the time that we get to go on one of these events together.

Mark: I imagine it's pretty cool for them, too.

Rip: I know it is. Very cool!

Mark: You said your sister is involved with this, too. What's her role?

Rip: My sister, Jane, does some great presentations.



Rip with his mom, Ann.

She goes through diabetes, heart disease, and erectile dysfunction.

Mark: What's her background?

Rip: Jane is a nurse and has also taught sex education for middle schoolers for almost 20 years, so she's great in front of a crowd. She's a great teacher and has been eating plant-based basically as long as I have. She came upon this lifestyle at about the same time I did. I can also tell you that everybody in our family now does it. I have two brothers, one is 11 months younger and the other is four and a half years younger. My sister, Jane, is two and a half years younger and we're all doing it now. I don't know if anyone did it quite as intensely as I did, but they're all there now.

Mark: Is that the competitive side of you?

Rip: To me it wasn't competitive. It was just a matter of finding it much easier to do things when you just kind of jump in "full kale" as opposed to flip-flopping and doing it half-assed. I was convinced that this was the best way to go so I wanted to give myself every possible edge.

Mark: You do seem to relish what you do. You also seem like a very, very close family.

Rip: It is a definitely a family affair.

Mark: Your dad strikes me as a very decent, principled sort of guy. He's not judgmental, and for all his fame and stature, doesn't appear egotistical in any way.

Rip: (Laughs) No, my dad's got an ego. No doubt about it. But it is very well-tempered. He doesn't wear it on his sleeve. He's competitive and he certainly had to be. Look what he did against all odds working at the Cleveland Clinic back when people were calling him "Doctor Sprouts" and a lot of other things. He just knew in his heart he was right. He has never done what the status quo has

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done just to do it, and if he feels like he has stumbled upon something that is the right thing, and it's the truth, he will hang onto that because, as you accurately said, he is very principled.

Mark: What do you think the impact has been of Whole Foods Market on the current state of progressive thinking about health?

Rip: I think it's been incredibly brave and bold what Whole Foods Markets is doing with their healthy initiative. They launched it in 2010 and made it their seventh core value. Nobody really understands the Whole Foods culture unless you are actually a team member and you are ensconced in it. I have had the good fortune of being involved in it now for almost three years and I can tell you that if something becomes a core value of the company, team members take it very seriously — they latch onto it. I believe that Whole Foods Market will single handedly have more impact than any other company in basically changing the health paradigm in America. And keep in mind that it's been around thirty years and is now a nine billion dollar company.

Mark: How influential is John Mackey in all of this?

Rip: John Mackey basically throws the idea out there. He opens up the window or the door and then he lets everybody else break it down. People see it and they get it. Whole Foods Market is on a tear right now. I think you're finding Americans are having a newfound awareness and relationship with food that they never had in the past and they see Whole Foods really as a sanctuary.

Mark: Do you practice what you preach when it comes to living on a plant-based diet?

Rip: Oh gosh, yes. I'm 100 percent plant strong. Now when I'm out on the road, it is sometimes hard to avoid oils, white flour or white pasta, but I never eat cheese or animal products or anything like that.

Mark: You hear all the time that when you're an athlete you can't live on a plant-based diet. Any truth to this?

Attendees enjoying the Farms 2 Forks event.



Rip: I say, "Baloney!" I've been doing it for over 25 years.

Mark: You are obviously maintaining whatever physique you had before. How do you do that?

Rip: You get everything you want and then some by eating plant-based. I tell people that if you want to have an athletic advantage, then you will definitely want to go plant-based for optimum recovery, performance, and minimal inflammation. You will always feel light, unencumbered and sleep better. It's just the gold standard and I think that you're going to see athletes coming around to it.

Mark: Do you have athletes that you mentor?

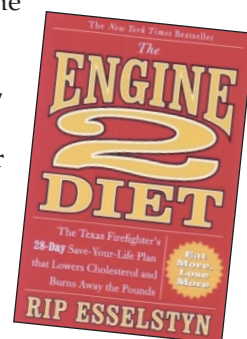
Rip: Most recently I've been working with Lance Armstrong. He came out in the *Huffington Post* a couple of months ago and said that he has been following Engine 2 and that he has never felt as much clarity, as much energy, and he doesn't have to nap any more during the day. Lance epitomizes someone who's now gone from plant weak to plant strong.

Mark: How much success has your book, *The Engine 2 Diet*, enjoyed?

Rip: Great success. We have sold over 200,000 copies.

Mark: Is it out in soft cover now?

Rip: Not yet. It's been moving so well that it is still in hardback.



Mark: Do you have another book in the works?

Rip: I have one coming out in nine months. We've turned in everything but we don't have a title for it yet. It's basically 35 chapters. Each one is focused on how to win an argument with the media on challenging topics for those who want to pursue a plant-based diet, like where we get our "complete" proteins, our calcium, iron, etc. I also deal with the claims that athletes can't eat this way, that the food doesn't taste good, that it's too expensive, and that people will make fun of you for doing it.

Mark: When your mom and dad were in Youngstown a few months ago, your mom explained the difference between her and your dad being “plant-based” and you being “plant strong.” Can you tell me the difference between the two?

Rip: They’re very, very close. I would say the difference is that on my father’s program, especially for his patients who are trying to halt and reverse heart disease, he really wants them to stay away from nuts, avocados, olives and even tofu. On Engine 2, we’re not quite as strict and we allow some nuts, seeds, avocados and soy products. I would say that is the biggest difference.

Mark: Let me ask you about the vegan phenomenon which seems to have become a fashion in the healthy living world. It seems like vegan restaurants are popping up everywhere. Is this a good trend even if eating vegan does not necessarily equate to eating healthy?

Rip: I think it’s all positive and I think that more and more people are coming around to this not only for health reasons, but also for environmental and compassionate reasons — whatever resonates with them.

Mark: We’re here in St. Charles and your event is sold out. You told me that at your last event you were sold out and even had people waiting outside. Obviously things are looking up. Do you think there’s a growing awareness and openness to what you’re talking about?

Rip: I think people realize the current system is not working. People realize we’re dieting more than we ever have and we’re still fat and we’re still sick and we spend more on health care than any other country on the planet. So the system’s broken. It’s not working.

Mark: In looking around at the people attending, you are attracting a younger crowd than I’ve seen at events of this type where you tend to attract the same people who come over and over — the true believers who come just to get their batteries recharged.

Rip: Most of the people are here to learn about this for the first time.

Mark: And they are not coming in on their last leg either.

Rip: No, they are not. And I think a lot of these people who are here were exposed to it in the last six months or eight months through the documentary, *Forks Over Knives*.

Mark: Why do you think so many people shop at Whole Foods Markets? Is it because people are finally making that vital connection that what they eat and how they live makes a big impact on their health?

Rip: I’d say that’s one of the major reasons people shop at Whole Foods. Unfortunately, most people don’t know that a lot of stuff they are buying at Whole Foods isn’t necessarily healthy for them. One of the things we teach people



Rip and Jeff Novick

at our events is how to shop for healthy foods and that’s why we bring in a guy like Jeff Novick. No one does that better than Jeff. I’m basically following his principles for a special food line I am launching at Whole Foods.

Mark: So, there’s going to be an Engine 2 food line at Whole Foods?

Rip: Yes, and I am very excited about it. I retired from firefighting a little over two years ago and John Mackey asked me to partner with him. So I’ve got two things I’m going to do. One is going around talking to members and customers all over the U.S., Canada and the UK about eating more plant strong. And the other thing is that John Mackey has licensed for me my name, likeness and the name Engine 2 to launch what will become, we believe, the healthiest food line on the planet. Our hope is that over the next five years we will have close to 500 different products.

Mark: I think it was Confucius who said, “Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life.” Is that where you are right now?

Rip: I would say that I am right in the thick of that right now. It’s been beautiful. I mean I started all this not expecting any of it and it’s amazing how the dots have connected. From saving JR and the publicity that came out of that, then people soliciting me to write the book, then John Mackey contacting me to join forces with Whole Foods Market, then starting through all these immersion events, now doing the Farm 2 Fork retreats, and soon the food line.

Mark: And you get to do it all with your folks.

Rip: Yes — working with my parents. It’s been dreamy.

Mark: Rip, it’s been a privilege.

Rip: Appreciate it, man.