

Health Transformation Grows into a Personal Mission

WORKING TO CONNECT AND SUPPORT PLANT-BASED COMMUNITIES IN NEW YORK CITY

by Lianna Levine Reisner

After discovering an ovarian cyst at the age of 27, I was diagnosed with endometriosis during surgery in 2012. The surgeon had found endometrial implants on my intestines, and, except during pregnancies, I was advised to spend the rest of my fertile life on the pill to regulate my hormones and minimize further damage.

Fast forward to 2016: As a young mother, overweight from my second pregnancy, wondering when my teenage acne would ever subside, and struggling to bounce back from common colds, I knew something had to change. Even though I was living with endometriosis, I didn't think of myself as unhealthy, only challenged by life's usual stressors. I also had an earnest desire to learn how to feed my children to support their health. For all these reasons, I started to research food and health, looking for local experts in my hometown of New York City, scouring the internet, and reading whatever books I could find.

My first few steps happened to be transformational. I cut out dairy and gluten from my diet for two weeks, and my next menstrual period that followed was surprisingly mild—a huge change for someone who had endured heavy, painful periods for years. My periods immediately became more manageable, shorter, and less eventful than they had ever been. I went on to do a fancy elimination diet which, in retrospect, was highly plant-based and less-processed. Within three months I had easily shed all my excess weight and felt a full-body reset of so many of the little things that I thought I would have to live with forever. Yet I didn't understand why these changes had happened, nor what I should eat in the long term.

It took 18 months of exploring “nutrition” in popular literature before I found clarity. An online bookstore algorithm suggested T. Colin Campbell's book, *Whole: Rethinking the Science of Nutrition*. Within Dr. Campbell's narrative was not only tremendous science and simplicity but also a rationale for why

I had been stumbling through a littered marketplace of nutritional theories and protocols. I was amazed, humbled, and inspired. Within weeks, I had made some further adjustments to my diet, felt my allergies clear up, and came off the low dose of thyroid medication that a functional medicine practitioner was sure I needed.

Like so many others whose stories have graced these pages, I developed a new consciousness and worldview that deeply influenced my next steps. I took the plant-based nutrition certificate course from eCornell and the Center for Nutrition Studies. I watched Nelson Campbell's film *Plant Pure Nation* and became a leader of a local “pod” in Manhattan, building community among people who had found this lifestyle and were at various stages of change. It was through this work that I became familiar with, and then a member of, the National Health Association.

Even through all my excitement, it was not lost on me that my own family members, friends, colleagues, and pretty much everyone I knew in my neighborhood and synagogue community had never come across whole-food, plant-based nutrition. Because so few people around us had heard about it, my husband, ever the skeptic, wondered about the veracity of the claims about this lifestyle—even while happily embracing our new way of eating.

As I got to know people and groups in the New York metropolitan area who were similarly woke to plant-based nutrition, I was surprised to find that there wasn't yet a community-based initiative in our area to educate the masses. There were small and somewhat new projects, including those run by other pod leaders, two new plant-based programs at local hospitals, a few doctors in private practice, and one university with an interdisciplinary committee on plant-based nutrition. While these efforts may be leaps and bounds beyond what you would find in a small town, it astounded me that something

so transformational was effectively missing in New York, a place where you could imagine finding anything under the sun. Nor were these disparate entrepreneurial people and projects connected strongly to each other.

This became my personal mission: to build a network of change agents working in concert across the metro area, expanding awareness of plant-based nutrition within our respective communities, bringing legitimacy to our message through our unity and our commitment to the science, and hastening healing in neighborhoods, not just exam rooms. I teamed up with the other pod leaders to cofound Plant Powered Metro New York, a health empowerment nonprofit organization that I now lead, demonstrating the power of connection in our movement. We offer a path and a voice for our growing force of volunteer leaders. We curate, adapt, and create educational programs that spark change in people from many walks of life. We build bridges across institutions and sectors to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to learn about plant-based nutrition.

In full honesty, building this metro-wide educational enterprise from scratch is not easy. My children eat incredibly well, but they do wonder why mommy has to be so busy. I have a deep passion for bringing people together, sharing life-giving information, and bringing hope and positivity to so many people who are struggling or worried or fearful. The only way to be successful is to meaningfully join forces with others. I am grateful each day for the knowledge and wisdom I have gained, and for the friends and companions who are taking a leap of faith with me to act and innovate for health and healing. 🌱



LIANNA LEVINE REISNER

is the President and Network Director of Plant Powered Metro New York, plantpoweredmetro.org.

Previously, she worked as an independent coach and consultant serving the UJA-Federation of New York, providing organizational change support to Jewish nonprofit organizations in the New York metro area. Lianna has a master's degree from Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management in Positive Organization Development and Change, and she is a classically-trained vocalist. She lives with her husband and three children in Manhattan.