

# From Hollywood to **Hog** Heaven

Farm Sanctuary's  
Gene Baur Talks Turkey  
(and Pigs and Cows)

*By Joseph Connelly*

**FARMY**  
farmsanctuary.org

GENE BAUR HAS SPENT MOST OF THE LAST quarter-century building the farmed animal rescue movement, which wasn't on anyone's radar prior to the establishment of Farm Sanctuary in 1986. Baur has just published a book, *Farm Sanctuary: Changing Hearts and Minds About Food Animals*, in which he recounts how finding a live ewe on a pile of animal corpses led directly to a growing awareness of the way animals are being raised in this country—and how the situation can be changed for the better.

Baur and I chatted about his book, some veg history, Farm Sanctuary, and his ex-wife Lorri, with whom he co-founded the 22-year-old non-profit organization. He spoke with candor and sensitivity, his passion and compassion echoing in his words.

**VegNews:** You have just written *Farm Sanctuary: Changing Hearts and Minds About Food Animals*, a biography of sorts, as well as a history of the farmed animal sanctuary movement. Why write the book, and why now?

**Gene Baur:** Farm Sanctuary came along at a time when there was little thought given to factory farming and the plight of farm animals. The book tells the story of how we started learning about and confronting the pervasive abuses of animal commodification and agribusiness excess. After 20 years, it seemed like the right time to write the book and get some of the experiences, good and bad, on paper.

There is now a growing societal concern about the problems of factory farming, and a burgeoning interest in farm animal sanctuaries among animal advocates. I think this book will appeal to both audiences.

**VN:** I just finished the book and I was touched by your compassion, not only toward the animals and your fellow activists, but toward the farmers. You write that some of those who have suffered the most from industrialized farming have been the farmers themselves.

**GB:** Often, people do things because they are told to, or because they believe they must. Farmers have been told and urged to behave in certain ways that are bad for animals, consumers, and themselves. Unfortunately, when a person is in a particular environment and exposed to a limited range of perspectives, they don't have a clue about what else may be possible. At this point, many farmers are living

a painful and fear-ridden existence, conflicted and behaving in ways that are inconsistent with basic humane sentiments.

**VN:** Your story, in a nutshell, runs from liberal, idealistic college grad to co-founding the farmed animal sanctuary movement in your mid-20s while selling veggie hot dogs at Grateful Dead concerts. Then, before turning 30, you are testifying before Congress. How did you make such a smooth and effective transition?

**GB:** I'm always questioning and trying to figure out how to do things better and more effectively. It has been said that the only constant is change, and that rings true for me. I feel very lucky to know and work with so many caring, altruistic people who share my interest—actually, everybody's interest—in living in a kind, healthy world. I continue learning and, hopefully, evolving. I have always been, and remain, very idealistic and optimistic.

**VN:** Obviously this empathy shaped your life's work. Do you see this "empathy gene" as something that one is either born with or without? Can an individual with no inherent compassion for animals, such as the entrenched farmers we were just speaking of, change? In short, is compassion nature or nurture?

**GB:** Compassion, like most other things, is both. I grew up in the Hollywood Hills, around the animals and nature of Griffith Park, and I inherently felt badly when I saw wild animals harmed. One of my earliest memories is of a deer who had been injured, apparently trying to jump over a fence in a neighbor's back yard. I was also viscerally upset to see neighborhood trees cut and other natural areas taken away as the houses grew bigger.

My parents are devout, conservative Catholics and strong proponents of acting responsibly, and some of that rubbed off on me, even if their political views have always been different than mine. I was drawn to folk music—artists such as Pete Seeger and Peter, Paul, & Mary—who sang about fighting injustice and exploitation. Cause-oriented music, as well as the anti-war and civil rights struggles of the '60s, very much affected me.

**VN:** After visiting all types of factory farms and witnessing how miserably farmed animals are treated, what keeps you going? How do you continue moving forward?

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**GB:** I do not dwell on the horrors. I recognize bad things are happening, and I do everything I can to investigate, expose, and stop them. I focus on and take heart from anything positive that happens, whether someone decides not to order veal at a restaurant or goes vegan, or if a positive news story airs in the media, or if legislation advances. I am heartened

mad cow to ultimately bring about a ban on slaughtering all downed cattle, I do not believe the USDA would have adopted this position in the absence of our ongoing No Downers campaign.

I have heard some say that passing laws to prevent cruelty could placate the guilty consciences of omnivores, or conversely,

**“We need to acknowledge and confront cruelty and injustice, but I also believe that by focusing on positive change, we tend to create more of it.”** —Gene Baur, co-founder, Farm Sanctuary

whenever anybody consciously chooses to take responsibility and act with kindness. We need to acknowledge and confront cruelty and injustice, but I also believe that by focusing on positive change, we tend to create more of it. Cruelty is upsetting, and people are appalled to learn about what happens to animals on farms. I believe our current system is intolerable and that change is inevitable.

**VN:** In *Farm Sanctuary* you detail the 15-year effort to get the Downed Animal Protection Act passed, coming close on several occasions only to be thwarted each time, before the discovery of a mad cow in 2003 finally led to a permanent USDA ban on downed animals entering the human food chain. Later, though, you admit, “downed cows were still being slaughtered and used for human food.” The late Gretchen Wyler said, “It is more important to change minds than to change laws.” On a personal level, how do you reconcile advances in legislation with the knowledge that enforcement is nearly impossible and always problematic?

**GB:** Legislative efforts are part of a much larger societal and cultural movement. Enacting laws helps engage animal advocates in the process, which increases our influence over time. Legislative efforts also tend to create opportunities to discuss issues and educate others. They draw attention to the plight of farm animals, and if successful, they can help alleviate some suffering.

Advocating our No Downer position in Washington—despite ongoing setbacks amid some incremental successes, including banning meat from downed cows in the school lunch program—allowed our position to eventually be understood and accepted by the USDA. While it took the discovery of

that passing laws to prevent cruelty can help raise awareness and potentially lead people toward a vegan lifestyle. Nobody knows which position better reflects empirical realities, and there may be different times when one or the other may be more fitting, but on the whole, I tend toward the latter.

While animal activists may feel acute pain and anxiety over the unnecessary suffering and senseless slaughter of innocent animals, most citizens give little thought to the topic. Consumers already assume, incorrectly, that humane laws protect farm animals, so they are already largely placated and in denial. But, consumers oppose factory farming practices when they learn of them. We are positioned to outlaw certain practices—many that consumers would assume were illegal if they knew about them.

I agree it’s absolutely critical to touch people’s hearts. Drawing attention to the violence of animal exploitation and slaughter, including through legislative efforts, is part of that. As people think about and better understand the impacts of their food choices, I believe most, when given the information and opportunity, will tend to choose kindness over cruelty. And, I believe kindness, just like cruelty, can become contagious and spread.

**VN:** Let’s hope. You just mentioned how consumers already assume that animals have basic protection. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the federal Humane Slaughter Act, which I’m certain few Americans realize covers only mammals and not birds, who account for more than 95 percent of the food animals killed in this country. What efforts, if any, are being made to expand the HSA to cover all food animals?



**Gene Baur and one of his rescued charges relax on the farm.**

**GB:** There have been several attempts made over the years to explicitly include birds in the federal "Humane" Slaughter Act, but so far, none have succeeded. Congress is not currently considering such legislation, though a lawsuit has been filed by the Humane Society of the United States, which argues that birds should be covered under the existing law.

**VN:** One of Farm Sanctuary's most significant achievements occurred when a stockyard in Pennsylvania was convicted of denying proper veterinary care to an animal. I believe this was nearly 15 years ago. What has this victory meant, both for downed animals at individual stockyards, as well as for the larger, public awareness level for the treatment of animals throughout the industry?

**GB:** We started documenting conditions at Lancaster Stockyards in 1986, and despite intolerable animal abuse, including discarding living animals on the dead pile, we were unable to legally prosecute the stockyard for cruelty. In 1993, after we incorporated a law enforcement organization, we succeeded in convicting Lancaster Stockyards of cruelty to animals for neglecting a downed cow. This was the first such conviction in the US. It marked a major shift and was a culmination of a multi-pronged, seven-year effort, which

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included documenting conditions, raising awareness, and utilizing legal systems to the extent possible.

**VN:** This was the first such conviction in the country?

**GB:** Yes, that's right. Prior to this conviction, Lancaster Stockyards had been seen as a pillar of the community, but that changed. The law is a very conservative institution that upholds and enforces societal values. Convicting Lancaster Stockyards sent a fundamental message that its behavior was outside the bounds of acceptable conduct in our society. With this, Lancaster stockyards had become the miscreant, and Farm Sanctuary—which had previously been unfairly denigrated as a flaky, vegan, hippie organization—earned a degree of respect in the community. Today, Lancaster Stockyards is shut down and its pens and other structures

## Required Reading

### Farm Sanctuary

Changing Hearts and Minds  
About Food Animals

By Gene Baur

Touchstone/Simon & Schuster • 2008  
288 pages • \$25.00

With a subject that hardly qualifies as a bedtime story, Farm Sanctuary co-founder Gene Baur succeeds in crafting a No Downer chronology of his life in the farmed animal rescue movement without it being a depressing read. This feat alone makes the book a worthwhile addition to your library, though it offers much more. One gains an understanding of the history and pre-history of how the movement began, watches it grow into a formidable political entity, and learns the biographies of a dozen or so of the Sanctuary's "ambassadors" along the way. Much like a visit to the Farm, anyone who has been will understand that this genuinely Peaceable Kingdom is truly uplifting. Those who haven't, well, once you read this book you'll be planning a trip to Watkins Glen or Orland.

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are being dismantled. I'm hoping the property becomes a plant-based farmers' market or a community garden.

**VN:** In many ways your book is as much a biography as it is the history of the farmed animal rescue movement. You talk about your parents, your childhood in Hollywood, family values, and your family's hotel business. Is there a favorite story from the book that you are most proud of, or a story you'd like to share with the VegNews reader?

**GB:** An important take-home message from the book is that most people share the same basic values and interests, and prefer kindness to violence. Yet somehow, we have come to accept cruelty as normal, even

bad things, there is an amazing capacity for rationalizing and limiting one's perspective in order to maintain faulty assumptions. A major part of our work is challenging such assumptions and reawakening people's hearts.

**VN:** I'd be remiss if I didn't ask about Lorri, your ex-wife and the co-founder of Farm Sanctuary. Both of you are heroes to many in the animal rescue movement and both deserve to be honored and recognized. How do you treat Lorri's contribution to Farm Sanctuary and the farmed animal rescue movement in your book?

**GB:** In the early days, Lorri and I did much of the work together, visiting farms and stockyards to document conditions and

“As people think about and better understand the impacts of their food choices, I believe most, when given the information and opportunity, will tend to chose kindness over cruelty. And, I believe kindness, just like cruelty, can become contagious and spread...”

defending things that are harmful to others and ourselves.

We were working on an initiative campaign to outlaw gestation crates in Florida, so I met with the manager of the swine unit at the University of Florida. As I walked into his office, he was immediately defensive, saying, "So, you want to put my people out of business, huh?" I responded saying that our goal was simply to prevent cruelty and suffering. When I described how farmers have lost touch with animals and nature and how farm work had become factory work, he seemed to remember childhood experiences growing up around pigs.

Toward the end of our meeting his combative stance softened. He opened up and said, "You know what's missing today on the farm? Pigmanship!" I took this to mean an understanding of animals, which is not only absent but also actively discouraged on today's factory farms. Then he said, "You know what everybody should see? A sow build a nest." For that moment, he remembered something about animals' natures and relished a long forgotten memory of seeing pigs being pigs, mothers building nests and watching over their young.

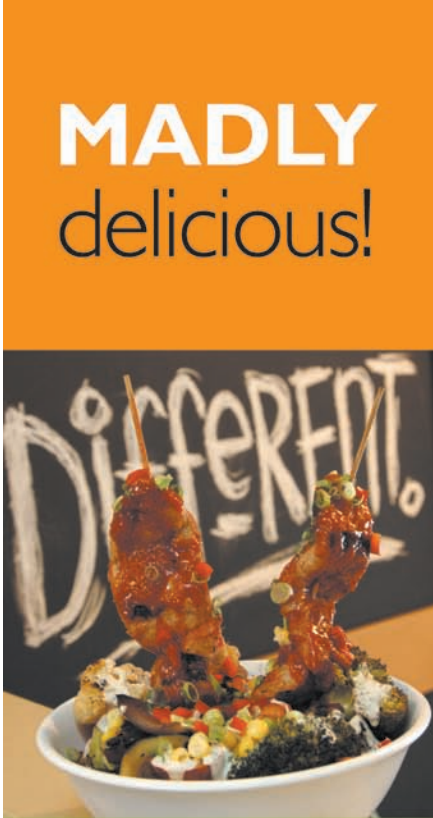
When people are acculturated to accept

caring for rescued animals who came to Farm Sanctuary, which I discuss in the book. While we came to approach some things differently, I appreciate her contributions and efforts to help animals. It's also important to recognize that many people worked very hard to make Farm Sanctuary and the movement what it is today. Some are included in the book, but there are many more who aren't, who also deserve recognition.

**VN:** Let's switch gears for my last question. Farm Sanctuary has become quite known of late for its annual fundraising gala. In 2006 you had Moby perform in New York, then last year, Jon Anderson, along with the kids from The School of Rock, in Los Angeles. You have another party coming up. What can we expect this year?

**GB:** At our gala in New York City this May, guests are guaranteed a unique new spin. We're very excited and busy working on a special surprise at the moment. And that's all I'm going to say for now. You'll have to be there! **VN**

Before starting VegNews, Joseph Connelly was a volunteer pig pooper-scooper at Farm Sanctuary in Watkins Glen, NY.



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