

Direct Action For Animal Rights

**A member of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) tells why she broke the
law for animals**

Interviewed by Len Lear

Karen, 38, a health care worker in a large eastern city, is one of the members of the Animal Liberation Front who broke into the Head Injury Clinical Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania in May 1984. In the most widely-publicized break-in of its kind, the A.L.F. stole more than 60 hours of videotapes of experiments and initiated an exhaustive campaign that led ultimately to the Center's closing.

For over 13 years, the Center had used hundreds of unanesthetized baboons to study the effects of head injuries. In the studies, which cost taxpayers nearly \$1 million a year, baboons had their heads plastered to a machine which delivered blows as great as 1,000 times the force of gravity. Then, on Memorial Day, 1984, the A.L.F. team entered the laboratory and took the tapes, which had been made by the experimenters themselves as a part of their record-keeping routine.

The A.L.F. members left the tapes on the doorsteps of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' headquarters in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. PETA hastily edited them down to a 30-minute documentary, entitled "Unnecessary Fuss," which documented violations of the Animal Welfare Act, animal abuse and researchers' callous attitudes toward the baboons. Embarrassed University of Pennsylvania officials pulled political strings and Philadelphia District Attorney Edward Rendell launched an investigation to identify the A.L.F. members involved in the break-in; several PETA members were summoned to testify before a grand jury. Undaunted, PETA aggressively distributed copies of the documentary to other animal rights groups, to members of Congress and to the media.

Publicity about the baboon bashing at the University brought forth protest after protest, culminating with a four-day sit-in at offices of the National Institutes of Health in July 1985. On the fourth day of the sit-in, Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret M. Heckler ordered NIH to suspend its \$1 million-a-year grant to the head injury lab.

Then, late in September after months of investigations and official reports, the University of Pennsylvania announced that "experiments in the lab have been suspended indefinitely." Within weeks, Secretary Heckler announced that funding to the lab would remain under suspension because the researchers had "failed materially to comply with the conditions of their grant with respect to the care use of non-human primates." In a separate action, NIH Director, Dr. James Wyngaarden, spelled out a list of major actions to be taken by the university before he would "consider any request for resumption of funding" for head injury studies involving non-human primates.

In this exclusive interview, Karen (last name withheld) was asked about her background and the reasons for her involvement with the Animal Liberation Front. Our interviewer deliberately took a "devil's advocate" approach in order to discuss the most frequently encountered questions about the A.L.F.

Were you always around animals as a child?

I grew up in a big city on the east coast, and we always had cats. My mom and dad were sensitive to animals. He didn't see the sense in hunting, for example, and I remember one time when she stopped the car to pick up a turtle and move it off the road. They ate meat, though; they never made the connection.

How did your views become more radical?

It started about ten years ago, when I became a vegetarian. I always loved cats, and somehow it occurred to me that I would never eat a cat, so why should I eat other animals? Then I began rescuing a lot of stray animals. I would find homes for them, or at least take them to a shelter that I could trust, one that does a decompression chamber.

Did rescuing stray animals lead you to the A.L.F.?

No. That was something different. For many years I was a waitress, a file clerk and so on, but I was going to school at night for a science degree. In the course of doing research in the library for a couple of papers, I read about things that were being done to animals in laboratories. I was really shocked. I had no idea whatsoever that these atrocities were going on. I could not believe it. Animals are used in the most cruel and horrible ways, and it's not as if it's being kept secret. It's right there in any medical library.

Could you have more specific as to what you learned that particularly disturbed you?

I learned about the experiments on “learned helplessness,” for example, which have been going on since the 1950’s. They would give electric shocks to dogs, and they would naturally try to jump out of the box, but the escape route would be blocked. Eventually the dogs would go crazy. They would throw themselves against the wall and wind up cowering on the floor, accepting the shock and urinating on themselves. The conclusion of the researchers is that if the animal cannot escape, s/he learns to accept the shock. This has been done over and over again — at the University of Pennsylvania, among other places.

Would you accept the notion that some of the animal research may be valid?

For example, the people at the UPenn head injury lab claim their research will benefit children who have suffered traumatic head injuries and brain damage. I certainly can sympathize with the parents of such children, but that still does not make this research valid. The researchers would like you to believe that if enough animals are killed, little Johnny’s head will be repaired. But this is ludicrous. Considering the hundreds of millions of animals killed in research labs, we should all have eternal life by now.

Very, very little has been gained from this killing that is of benefit to humans. In fact we might be farther in treating head injury victims if no animal research had been done. We’ve been deprived by the fact that more has not been done with human clinical studies, human autopsy studies, epidemiological studies, solid tissue cultures, computers, positive emissions tomography, and so on. Dr. Gennarelli, who was in charge of UPenn’s head injury lab, even admitted that these things are not being used enough because the money is being drained off by animal research. In fact, nuclear magnetic resonance is a way to study human brain damage without using animals, but it’s very expensive and the money is tied up in animal projects.

Are you saying that human head injury victims have not benefited at all from the kind of research that was done at UPenn?

Absolutely. I have read every single head injury study that has been done, and not one has discussed how the human victims or the animals victims were treated after the research. The human victims and their families have been exploited and given false hope. They have been used as a shield to keep the cruelty and the money coming.

How did you come to join the A.L.F.?

After learning about the horrors of useless animal research, I began writing letters to Congress, handed out literature at tables in shopping centers and engaged in picket demonstrations. I still do those things, but I realized that other forms of action were also necessary because the killing and the torture kept right on happening.

How did you and the other A.L.F. members find out about the research at UPenn?

Very simple. Dr. Gennarelli has published all of his findings and his methods in a medical journal dealing with brain trauma. We simply read his own published reports. The details of this and other animal research can be easily found in any medical library in the country.

Did you know in advance about the videotapes, which were the key in shutting down the lab?

Yes. Gennarelli mentioned the tapes in his published studies. We were very happy when we found them, but they were far worse than we had expected. The callousness and brutality were absolutely unbelievable. The researchers made fun of the animals while they were dying, and they’d beat up one animal in front of another.

You could clearly hear them say that one baboon was “off anesthesia” right before they started bashing in his/her head. You could see the animal trying to crawl off the table. One researcher said, “It looks like this one has a dislocated shoulder,” and then he deliberately picked up the baboon by the arm, causing the animal excruciating pain, laughing all the while he was doing it. They were like Nazis. They didn’t even do a proper neurological exam, and they left the animals unattended and tied to the operating table after the injuries.

How would you respond to those who say your efforts are merely condemning more animals to death since the research you disrupt is likely to be done all over again?

We are abolitionists, and if we are successful in closing down a lab, as we did at UPenn, then obviously no more animals are going to be killed there. We also had the funding cut off from the City of Hope in Los Angeles after our break-in. they were doing cancer research, but the conditions in the animal lab were horrible. Dogs were dying unattended, and one suffocated in his own fecal matter.

Don't you worry about being caught and going to jail?

I do not live in fear. I have been in on three break-ins, so I could go to jail and I'm prepared to deal with it if it happens. We are not martyrs, though, and we'd much rather stay out here, where we can do more for the animals. [Karen has no children and no husband, although she does have a boyfriend who is "supportive" of her A.L.F. activities. -Eds.]

In many of your raids, you have liberated research animals. What has happened to those animals?

We make sure they are well cared for. We feel that by liberating animals, you are also liberating people. We are on this earth to protect animals, not to exploit them. We do not have the right to use them as if they are inanimate objects. They have a right to their own lives, which should not include slavery and torture.

Don't you feel you have committed an immoral act when you have destroyed property that belonged to others?

Not when that property was used to inflict pain, suffering and death on living creatures. we have been referred to by certain critics as terrorists, but the real terrorists are those who put animals in boiling water and bash in the brains of fully conscious creatures and harm human beings by misdirecting research. If all of that is not terrorism, then what is?

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