

## Twyla Francois – ‘Our Window to Canadian Slaughterhouses’

**For many of us, the thought of a slaughterhouse is reason enough to go vegetarian. For some, a visit to such a place would be considered our worst nightmare. Yet for Twyla Francois, a vegetarian since the age of 13, visiting slaughterhouses is something she does on a regular basis. Twyla has been kind enough to allow Niagara Action for Animals to interview her about the invaluable work she has been doing on behalf of farm animals.**

*How long have you been investigating slaughterhouses and what made you get into this line of work?*

I started having a very normal sort of life. I worked in the President's Office at the University of Manitoba working my way up and moving between the various Vice-Presidential offices. It was during my time working for the Vice-President of Research that I started learning about what this institution that I valued so highly was actually doing to animals in the name of research. Much of the research was purely knowledge-based, meaning it never translated into actual improvements for humans. The guilt gnawed at me and culminated in an emergency surgery, a second surgery and 6 months of chemotherapy. While bed-ridden, I had time to think about my life and whether I'd actually done anything worthwhile during it. Rather than returning to the university, I started a non-profit animal advocacy organization called AnimalWatch Manitoba. What was incredible was that immediately after the group was founded, we started receiving photos and emails from concerned Manitobans that showed horrible, inexplicable things happening to farm animals. I started discreetly visiting one of the facilities – a pig collecting station - every day for over a year. The things I found were unbearable – sows with broken hips and legs left in barren pens with no food, water or medical attention overnight. These pigs were then literally dragged across the street to be slaughtered before the Canadian Food Inspection Agency inspector arrived. Dying pigs were being tied up outside, in all elements and left to slowly die. As I started taking my information public, members of the general public began visiting the facility too! After 3 years of investigating, the facility closed. The plant cited market conditions but we're certain it was all the unwanted attention and bad press they were receiving.

*Who hires you to do the investigations?*

I'm lucky enough to be hired full time by one organization – Canadians for the Ethical Treatment of Food Animals. Before this I worked for Animals Angels for a number of years. I also do volunteer investigations for a number of groups and am Central Region Director with the Canadian Horse Defence Coalition.

*Can you describe some of what you see when you arrive on site and what you actually do there?*

It varies from location to location and we never know what kind of reaction we'll receive. Livestock auctions are public so we're relatively free to walk around. Slaughterhouses are more restricted but you wouldn't believe the things you can see just from the parking lot. What I do isn't extraordinary – I just seek these places out as anyone can and record what I see when I get there.

What's been the biggest shock has been the routineness of the abuse and cruelty. It's incredibly rare that I visit somewhere and don't see horrible violations and abuse. It's inherent in the industrialization of raising and killing these animals. Workers simply can't process as many animals as they must and be concerned with them. It breeds mindlessness, contempt and hostility toward animals and those attempting to protect them.

The other major shock has been the complete lack of protection for these animals. Like everyone, I believed there was a government body ensuring the welfare of these animals but it's not the case. Government inspectors in slaughterhouses rarely observe the live animals as they are heckled and harassed if they leave the lab. They have no idea what's happening on the kill floor. Those that do often partake in the abuse – as we exposed on the CBC National documentary “No Country for Horses” where the CFIA vet continually yelled at the man with

the captive bolt gun to “Speed it up! What's the hold up!”. Each time, the operator would become nervous and botch the shot. This meant the horse wasn't rendered unconscious, yet it was pushed through the butchering line. Workers and the vet could even be heard woo-hooing over one horse who'd gone through the hock cutting machine, still kicking.

Even when these violations are completely documented, the federal government does nothing. In the five years I've been collecting evidence, CFIA has never once prosecuted the offenders in any way.

It's become clear that we as regular citizens are the only protection farm animals have.

***How are you treated by the workers or managers of the slaughterhouse?***

It varies. If the facility is good and they have nothing to hide they are open and transparent, providing tours and information. We always double check though with our cameras to ensure they are telling the truth. If they aren't so good, they often still meet with us but their comments seem misleading and deceptive. Recently, reactions have become more aggressive. At the horse slaughterhouse mentioned before we were chased on a gravel road for over 30 km at speeds in excess of 130 km/hour. They even tried to run us off the road. We've had guns pulled on us in the US. Some of these men are violent and have criminal records so we must be careful. I always think though that if they are like this with us – fellow humans – how are they to the weak and helpless animals they are killing?

***Do you have any contact with the animals, and if so, could you please describe their reaction to you?***

We do – this is a major component of our work actually. Our goal is to interfere when we see cruelty and advocate for the animal. Often this means having them humanely euthanized, which is a difficult decision but often the only one we have. If the animal is small enough and conditions favourable, we'll remove them. Rescues are the best part of my job – taking an injured animal back to our hotel room at night and seeing them through that first night – it's difficult to describe the feeling. What's incredible is how quickly these animals bond with us, even if they've never known kindness before. One crippled duck we rescued that was on his back and had been for days took his first tentative steps just hours after his rescue – right into my lap. It's those moments that make it all worthwhile. At auctions, we sit in the sales ring and try to make eye contact with the animal being prodded and hit. In the ring, they scan the audience for a kind face. They lock on ours and for those precious seconds you can see the relief on their faces. It's heartbreaking.

***Most Canadians have been raised to eat meat and are told from a young age that this is what farm animals are for - that they do not feel pain or suffer. Can you address this?***

This question has always bothered me but I hear it all the time. Nervous systems aren't somehow bred out of animals we use for food. In fact, in some cases – for example, poultry – their nervous systems are even more sensitive than our own. Many farm animals don't show their pain because they are prey species. In nature, if they would cry out it would indicate to a predator that they are wounded and would put them at risk of being attacked. We as humans take this as an indicator that they aren't suffering. Even the most beaten down, dying farm animal I see is quiet as they die. Whether we agree or not that these animals should be eaten, they should at least be afforded a decent life, which the vast majority are not receiving in Canada.

***It takes a special kind of person to do this type of work, to see the cruelty first hand... How do you cope?***

It was difficult at first because I'd not yet developed a support network. Now I talk, paint, draw or sculpt it out. To me, it's all about exposing the brutality and letting the viewer decide if they want to support the cruelty by continuing to purchase meats made from these animals. I strongly believe that if given the information, Canadians will make the right decision, so my coping strategies deal directly with this – talking to people, making short videos, painting and writing that helps shine a light in these darkest of places.

*Part of our mandate at Niagara Action for Animals is to empower people to help animals. Could you please let us know what we can do to help?*

Stopping one's consumption of these animals is the single most important decision you can make in your life. You can go to bed each night knowing no one died for you to live that day. And you create a ripple effect around yourself. You expose the issues to people that otherwise wouldn't be aware of the abuses. No one wants to be preached at but just in observing your choices others learn and it normalizes vegetarianism/veganism for them. There are so many reasons to become vegetarian/vegan – for your own health (we veggies live longer!), for the health of the environment (no massive pig operations means cleaner and safer drinking water), for the welfare of the animals, and for the global food crisis (people are starving because the vast majority of grains are used to fatten up livestock – an enormous feed and energy waster).

Also, seek out the places where these animals are and if you see abuse, interfere on the animals behalf. Give them water, call the authorities and document everything. Canadians still believe it's Old MacDonald's Farm out there – we need to educate them that this is no longer so. Check the CETFA website often: [www.cetfa.com](http://www.cetfa.com). We'll soon have a Volunteer Inspector Program with a checklist and list of auctions available. Take a day to attend one and have direct contact with a farm animal. It will change and motivate you!

'Free Me' by Twyla Francois



Please visit [www.towardsfreedom.com/TributebyTwylaFrancois.html](http://www.towardsfreedom.com/TributebyTwylaFrancois.html) to view Twyla's tribute to the animals. Click on 'Twyla meet' to see more of her artwork. You can also view her reports on the Canadians for the Ethical Treatment of Food Animals website [www.cetfa.com](http://www.cetfa.com).

**On behalf of Niagara Action for Animals and all the animals whose lives you have touched, thank you Twyla. You are an inspiration to us all and remind us that we too have the power to evoke change.**