

Mihika Chechi

When I first came to America at six years old, I brought with me the culture and cuisine I had always known. Saag paneer, rajma chawal, and aloo parathas were among the infinite variety of delicious, nutritious, plant-based options that were regular staples in my diet. Yet, growing up in a community where I was among a handful of vegetarian students in the entire school, I quickly learned that the world did not cater to my tastes. Meal options for vegetarian or vegan students were always sparse at school lunches, and even among elementary schoolers, there was a distinct stigma around abstinence from meat that made it difficult for us to advocate for better options. One day, after a classmate's birthday party where I'd found nothing that I could eat, I asked my parents, for the first time, why our family didn't eat meat. It was here that I received my first-ever exposure to the factory farming industry and the massive, egregious abuses that occur within it. I learned of the 70 billion animals raised in tortuous conditions and slaughtered for food every single year, and the horrendous ripple effects this produces in the form of environmental carbon emissions. Though I have been a vegetarian for my entire life, I consider this day at six years old to be when I consciously became one. Since then, advocating for animal welfare on a broader level and bringing attention to concerns relating to the factory farming industry and the merits of vegetarianism and veganism has become a source of personal inspiration for me. I've always felt an intrinsic connection with animals, and I convinced my parents when I was eight to allow our family to start taking in rescued pets. We have since fostered over thirty-five rescued dogs and kittens of various backgrounds and personal needs, from mothers and their babies to elderly animals in need of gentler care. I became a seasoned volunteer at weekend adoption fairs and have spent dozens of hours helping set up various, comfortable boarding spaces for dogs without foster families. I also co-founded the Animals FURever club in my middle school, where weekly meetings consisted of infographic slides on various animal welfare-related issues, from the exotic wildlife trade to the large-scale abandonment of pets, and resources for students interested in providing support. We also coordinated several fundraisers and interactive events that were popular among students, including a visit from a local dog rescue organization that brought over some of their dogs for a meet-and-greet and walkthrough of the process of fostering pets. Events such as these were widely successful in helping local organizations find more long-term fosters, volunteers, and even adopters. In high school, my love for animals and their ethical treatment translated to undertaking larger-scale projects directly concerning the climate and the factory farming industry. In eighth grade, I reached one of the final levels of a grade-wide speech competition with my speech on the atrocities of factory farming and how people could make a positive difference even by simply incorporating Meatless Mondays or trying local vegan restaurants. This became the catalyst for my career as a debater in high school, where I used both philosophical and practical arguments to discuss a host of issues, from West African urbanization to space exploration, that often boiled down to the best policy decisions to be made in order to protect the climate. As the Vice Captain of my school's Debate team and the Founder and Captain of the Ethics Bowl team, I also helped coordinate numerous school-wide debate events which brought light to various relevant issues. I personally defended the merits of veganism in a debate event with over 250 audience members from schools across the district. I also co-founded a Change.org petition demanding that the U.S. government officially declare a national climate emergency in order to provide much-needed federal backing to climate awareness movements, which has since received over 9,800 signatures from around the world. Additionally, I am a research intern for The Scholars' Circle, a radio show hosted by international relations professors that discuss critical issues with global academics in various fields. I proposed an episode centered around factory farming and the ethical, practical, and political

consequences of the meat industry as a whole. My proposal was approved and the episode, featuring a panel of international scholars, was broadcasted on over 10 national radio stations. Now, with my time in high school drawing to a close, I am ready for the next chapter in defending animal rights. In college, I seek to double major in philosophy and International Relations so that I may use my interests in ethics and policymaking to better serve this cause. Having visited my own ancestral rural village in India, I had the unique experience of witnessing how traditional barn animals such as lambs and pigs were treated as pets, just the same as dogs and cats. Now, through philosophy, I hope to explore fundamental concepts such as the intrinsic value of all living beings and why societal perceptions differ regarding pets, exotic animals, and farm animals. Through International Relations, I hope to better understand the world of policymaking and gain real-world experience working with companies dedicated to inspiring policy changes that protect animals, such as Mercy for Animals. I also hope to work within the United Nations to work on bringing affordable, sustainable vegetarian and vegan options to rural and underserved areas around the world. On a broader scale, I hope to become involved in policymaking that protects pets and exotic animals from abuse as well, specifically with the long-term goals of mandating all United States animal shelters to be no-kill and creating more government-run wildlife sanctuaries around the world. In all, I have the desire and the ability to effect real change in matters concerning animal welfare and each of my experiences thus far has fueled my passion for a cause for which I absolutely intend to continue fighting for the rest of my life.

