

**Hi, I'm Chris Hunt, and today I'm talking with Carole Morison. Carole is a long-time poultry farmer, a sustainable agriculture activist, an outspoken critic of the industrial food system, and a former colleague of mine. You might recognize her as the chicken farmer featured in Food, Inc. Carole, welcome to the show and thanks so much for joining us. It's a really incredible honor to have you with us today.**

Thank you I'm glad to be here.

**Q: So for those of us who are unfamiliar with the poultry industry and with your involvement in it, can you give us some background?**

We raised chickens under contract for an international company for 23 years. It was industrial production... I married into it. When I first started, I was under the impression that that's the only way you raise chickens. Throughout the adventure of raising the chickens under contract, it became more and more evident that there were a lot of things wrong with the whole system of industrial production. And that kind of led me to speak out about the industry practices. I reached a point where I kind of looked at myself and said, "How did I get to be this way?" Because I really didn't care about what we were doing here on the farm. I didn't like what we were doing and chickens were like a number. We just counted flock after flock of raising chickens.

So that led me to speak out about things, environmental issues, public health issues, worker issues. I mean, the industry is just rampant with all kinds of issues and it's a system that I finally came to understand is not sustainable.

I think the biggest problem is that there is no care about how the animals are raised, how they go to market, just as long as we mass produce. There is no concern for the farmers, or the workers, or their welfare. They're just another cog in the wheel that's going to move these chickens to market, you know; mass production. And to me, it's driven by greed. The corporations that dominate the industry, their bottom line is the dollar, and nothing else matters. I just saw a lot of things and there were really no scruples or morals within when it pertained to anything. I think that's what bothered me the most, was the lack of care for anything.

Perdue terminated our contract in 2008 because we refused to do the extensive upgrades to our poultry houses that they wanted us to do. First of all, we didn't need to do the upgrades prior to our contract termination. A few weeks prior to that we were awarded the outstanding producer award from the company – so there was really no good business reason to do these demanded upgrades. We were already on top, outperforming all the other farms. And some of these farms had done the upgrades they wanted us to do. It would not have made us better growers. It was just absolutely senseless. I didn't like the way that they wanted

us to totally enclose these houses so that the chickens never saw the light of day or fresh air. And that just kind of did it for us.

We really didn't even feel like fighting with them over it because we had reached a point that it was enough. So the farm sat empty for three years. I had lots of ideas about the chicken houses, the first and foremost one was to have a big bonfire and invite all my friends to come and watch. Sort of purging myself of bad memories.

**Q: A fitting end!**

And once that idea kind of calmed itself down, I had thought about boarding horses that were up for adoption, like a transitional place for them until they found homes. And, of course, then the question was, from my husband: "Well, who is going to take care of all of these horses?"

So that bubble kind of burst. And then they just sat empty. So I would say, between 2010 and 2011, I had the opportunity to see a lot of different ways of farming. And you know, it started giving me ideas. Well, maybe we could do this on the farm, or maybe we could do that on the farm.

We wanted to do meat – chicken, pasture raised. However, the infrastructure here on the Delmarva Peninsula doesn't exist to support independent production; everything is owned by industry. So first of all, there's no local place to buy chicks to raise into chickens, and there're no independent processing facilities. So for us to even process chickens we would have to haul them all the way to Pennsylvania. And that was out of the question. You know, of course that would be such an added cost; to sell the product you would just have to ask an astronomical price that would not be affordable to too many people.

So then we came up with the idea of laying hens. There is not a lot to the processing; we do everything right here on the farm. And you know, transportation – we're working that out now where we're going to piggyback with someone who is hauling another load to where our market is. And that way we can cut down on costs. So we decided to go with the laying hens. We were able to retool one of the chicken houses using some of the equipment that was already in there. And you know, the major thing was taking off the curtains that were on the sides; they were what they call "dark-out curtains," which made everything inside really dark. So we took them off and put clear on so the chickens had fresh sunlight and air all the time, you know, unless it's really cold out. But they still had the sunlight with the clear curtains which I love.

And we cut access doors so that the chickens could roam in and out freely as they want to during the day. We do put them up at night for predator control. We have a lot of foxes here. So yeah; it was fairly simple. You know, first I kind of looked at it as a real daunting task, but it was fairly simple to do. And we're only

using one fifth of the building. We still have a lot more of the building to use, plus a whole nother one, but at least we're starting to utilize what's already here.

**Q: Right. So how man hens do you have at this point?**

At this point we have 550 Rhode Island Red hens. Rhode Island Reds are an old breed. And they are hardy chickens. They adapt to the climate whether it is hot or cold. They are just real hardy chickens. The closer hatcheries couldn't fulfill the order of the 550 that we wanted to start with so we had to go to a hatchery in New Mexico and have them shipped.

**Q: What were the challenges of making this transition from industrial production to sustainable?**

I think the biggest challenge was mindset. You know we were kind of still in that contract farmer industrial production mode. Raising the chickens the way that we're doing it now is totally different. I had no clue about it, of how to even begin. And, you know, of course, my husband, he grew up on a farm. So way back when, they had a few hens that scratched around in the backyard. So he was a little bit more familiar with it, but it was just kind of resetting our minds as to the way things should be done.

For instance, my husband had gone to the store and bought some heads of lettuce and he said, "I'm going to take them over and let the chickens have them." And I'm like, "Well, are you sure that we can do that?" I was still back in the day when you couldn't feed anything else but what the company told you to feed. So it was a big change in the mindset that these chickens are meant to eat all kinds of things and to run around and just behave like chickens.

**Q: Yeah!**

No, seriously; the difference is unbelievable.

**Q: Can you talk a little bit about that?**

With the industrial chickens, I mean, I grew to hate going in the chicken houses. It was dirty, it was dusty, the chickens just grew so fast in the seven weeks that they were here on the farm, and they weren't active. Of course it was dark inside the houses and that cut down on their activity as well. And I mean, to me, they really just weren't chickens. They didn't jump, they didn't run, they didn't try to fly. Most of the time when you would walk in it would scare them to death and they would all just go off in a flutter. They could walk maybe ten steps at the most before they had to plop down because they were so heavy.

So that part there is just totally different. The chickens we have now, they remind me of little kids. They really do. They are just running and jumping and flying and just having a good time.

**Q: Keeping you on your toes!**

Well, yeah, but they don't try to get away or anything. They stay where they are in the pasture and it's just normal for them to forage and you know, run around and play and do things. When they get tired, we've put perches inside the chicken house and they go up on the perches, they'll take their little nap and then they'll run back outside again. You know, it's totally different. And it amazes me. I will say that they are the most farmer-friendly chickens I've ever seen; they are so easy to take care of.

I sound like a kid at Christmas with a new toy. It's just such a big change. But I really like it. We don't feed any antibiotics, no arsenic, no animal by-products; it is straight grain and pasture. What they get when pasture is not available, like this time of the year, it's not real plentiful, of course, it's not growing, we put hay out for them and they like the hay. And of course, we give them little treats like the heads of lettuce – they go crazy over that. So it's kind of leading us to try some experimenting this spring, as to what we're going to plant in the pastures for them to eat. And lettuce is definitely on the list. They'll have free access, they love it for some reason. And we're going to mess around with different types of forage to see what is high in boosting the Omega-3s, you know and all types of things to make the product better.

**Q: Cool.**

Yeah; it's a whole new adventure!

**Q: It's neat that you get to do all that experimentation with raising the hens; certainly note really possible with the industrial model...**

Oh my Lord, no! If we had ever tried to do something like this when we were raising under contract, our contract would have been terminated; we had to feed exactly what the company brought here for us to feed and nothing else. So it's just much healthier for the animals, it's much healthier for the farmer, and I honestly believe that we're producing a much healthier product.

**Q: I'm wondering first of all if you had support from the outside in making this transition, whether it be from organizations or universities or from the government, and second of all, what sort of policies could be implemented to encourage this sort of transition to occur?**

We didn't have support from anyone. The only thing that I adhered to when we were planning it was the Animal Welfare Approved standards for raising

chickens. Because I was looking down the road to have the farm certified. Outside of that, there was no outside help. Our local cooperative extension has no knowledge on chickens except industrial chickens. There is really not a lot going on out there to support farmers that want to do this.

You know, we're in an area where it is highly concentrated in industrial chicken production. However, we have a lot of farms that are standing empty for one reason or another; you know, contract termination, whatever. And these farms could be put back into production doing it a different way; they don't necessarily have to be industrial. And we have no help out there to assist farmers with this transition.

Just recently I've been kind of researching and talking to people about what is out there for marketing local products. And I'm finding that some of the states – the departments of agriculture – are running some programs to help with marketing of local foods. However, it's not a lot. Most farmers have to go out there and do all of it on their own. And financially, there is no support. It's just something that you have to do and you do it on your own. So there're a lot of changes that could be made. My biggest thing is the farm subsidies – that they need to be redirected as to where the money goes. We're paying grain farmers to raise corn under the cost of what it actually costs to produce, so that industrial agriculture can buy cheap grains. And that's absolutely ridiculous. Let's direct some of that money towards smaller-scale farms, people who want to start up in different types of agriculture and utilize that money that way.

There's a whole lot of programs out there that could use some tweaking to be geared more for the smaller scale independent farmer.

**Q: Do you get the sense that there are a lot of other industrial producers who would like to make a similar transition?**

Definitely. We're not officially open for farm tours; that's something that we're planning down the road. However, we've already had farmers come to visit individually and take a look at what we're doing. Yes, there're definitely farmers out there who would like to get out of the system they're in. And right now they're stuck simply because, like I mentioned earlier, there's no infrastructure to help the independent farmer or that the independent farmer can use. There're no government programs, you know, that the farmer can go through to get up and running, and there're just a whole lot of roadblocks there.

**Q: One of the things that came out of Food Inc., too, was the fact that it's often very difficult financially, because so much money is invested in the infrastructure of poultry barns, for instance, and in all the upgrades that are required. Which makes it tough for someone to make that sort of rapid transition without any capital from the outside.**

I mean, we have two buildings here that are worth over a half a million dollars. And they are single-purpose buildings for raising industrial chickens so it's kind of hard to find things you know, that you can utilize what's on your farm. We were looking at three choices, and that was tearing the buildings down and scrapping the metal and get whatever we can for the metal. The other thing was, of course, raising pasture-raised, like we're doing now, and I can't even remember what the third choice was. It wasn't much of a choice—oh, to sell. You know, and in the real estate market that we're in right now, we would have sold at a huge loss.

So it only made sense to try to figure out a way to utilize what we had. And loans are tight right now; it's hard to get a loan, especially for a farm or a small business starting up. So you've got to try to figure out ways to do it at the least cost.

**Q: Yeah; I think that's what's exciting about a lot of sustainable agriculture initiatives; much of the innovation is being made at very low capital cost, requiring very small expenditures. And the ingenuity that farmers like you have; making use of an industrial structure and putting it to use as part of a sustainable model; to me, that's really exciting.**

You know, farmers have to do what farmers have to do to exist and I think when I had the opportunity to see all the different ways that people were farming, I saw farmers doing what they do best, and that's farm. And making do with what you have—that's the typical thing on a farm. You make do with what you have and try to figure a way to use it without a lot of capital costs.

And it's kind of the way the sustainable or transitional food movement is right now; farmers are just coming up with all kinds of innovative ideas. I get these wisecracks every once in a while about how I'm going back in time to my grandparents' time. And I don't see it that way at all. In a sense, it might be, but there are a lot of new innovations that people are using and it's a lot more progressive than what it was back in my grandparents' time.

**A: I want to hop back to something you mentioned earlier. You said that you were certified by Animal Welfare Approved? In fact you're the first farm in the Delmarva Peninsula to be Animal Welfare Approved certified. So what prompted that decision and what exactly does that mean?**

Well, what prompted my decision was that I hated the way that we were raising the industrial chickens. However, there's some entity out there, I believe it's the National Chicken Council, who has guidelines on animal welfare for raising chickens. And as far as I was concerned when I was raising industrial chickens, there was no animal welfare. That was one of the things that kind of did it for me towards the end that I wanted out of it, was the way the animals were being raised.

And there're other certification programs out there, too. I looked at Animal Welfare Approved because they have the strictest standards in the country for raising farm animals. It's a voluntary program; nobody is telling me I have to do it. I have the choice; I can participate or not participate. There is not a big fee to come and inspect the farm; actually it's free. So any farmer who wants to participate, all they have to do is read the standards and if they think that they come into compliance with them, they just call and ask for an audit and someone will come to the farm and then they will help you if you are not up to standard to achieve certification.

So I just kind of like the whole program and the way that they were willing to work with people. It wasn't like it was animal activism. It was animal welfare and they want to help farmers, to do the best job they can do. And, in my mind, animals sustain us. There're people that don't eat meat, but there's a lot of people that do. And they sustain us, so why wouldn't you take care of them? You don't get animals on the farm to abuse them. And I didn't like the idea of constantly having to kill chickens because they weren't uniform in size. And that's what we had to do in the industry.

It was just a lot of those things that really turned me off. And I just made up my mind that instead of making claims to having the highest animal welfare standards, that we were going to be certified by a third party that came in and said, "Yes, you have the highest standards in the country." So that's kind of what made up my mind to do that.

**Q: We're actually big fans and a partner of Animal Welfare Approved here at GRACE, and you can find Animal Welfare Approved farms, including yours, in our Eat Well Guide**

Oh, I didn't know that!

**Q: Yeah, Yeah.**

Well now you just taught me something!

**Q: It works out well; it provides a little bit of marketing for you without you having to actually do anything.**

Exactly. And believe me, every little bit helps. With different organizations doing stuff like that, and GRACE doing it, I mean, I think it's great. Us farmers can use all the help we can get!

**Q: Small farmers especially.**

Oh yeah, yeah, the system is not designed for the small farmer, and you know, I've been talking to local farmers around here. There're a few who are doing

pasture-raised beef, and pork, and some are doing eggs, not many. And they talk about how hard it is for them to be able to market their product; that the laws are designed so that it's really hard for them to do processing or selling over state lines. There're all kinds of things that are roadblocks and all kinds of permits and fees that they have to pay. So it's really holding them back. And what I'm finding is that while there're a couple of farms here, locally, who do their processing on farm, they had their farm's store on the farm, and that way they are able to sell their products because they can't afford all the licensing and the fees. It's a big problem.

So the marketing, anybody who helps out with that, I think that is great. And I'd like to see a network built up here on the peninsula. Especially where farmers could get together and go through one distributor to carry all their products. We have a couple of hours drive to get over to the mainland in Maryland, what we call across the bay. And it's hard for individual farmers to keep running back and forth to deliver product. And costly. So if they can build up a network here where they can all ship product at the same time that would be a huge help.

**Q: You were featured in Food, Inc. And I've always really loved that, because I've always felt that you are one of the most compelling characters in that film. And whenever I watched it with people, I always pointed out "Hey, there's Carole, I used to work with her. I know her. She's fantastic." So I'm always really proud to say that.**

**But how did the experience of being featured in Food, Inc. affect you and your work?**

I think it made me seek out answers instead of always pointing out the problems. For a long time, even before Food, Inc., I worked on problems within the poultry industry, whether they were environmental, worker related, public health, whatever. However, after Food, Inc. and being in touch with so many different people around the country, it was kind of like, well, yeah, there're problems there, they are not going away, but let's see if we can't find some solutions that will give both farmers and consumers choices, instead of being stuck in one system of producing food.

I think that was probably the biggest change. And secondly, I would say working with kids. It's amazing, the idea that a lot of the schools have programs where they're showing Food, Inc. I get letters from kids – from middle schools a lot – where they see the movie and then they have to contact, write a letter to someone who was in the film. And some of the ideas that they come up with and their comments, I mean, they just really inspire me to keep doing everything I'm doing because they actually get it. A lot of people don't pay attention to kids, but these kids get it. And they're finding out that the food they've been eating isn't that great and they'd rather have something else.

So that right there, it's a big inspiration to me. I love working with the kids. I think I'm going back to my childhood. I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up, you know. It's really fun. And I think they will be the change in the future that's needed. They are going to be our future, so working with them now and helping them to understand kind of helps them develop a good adult view as they grow older.

**Q: What can people do, what can consumers do, to support sustainable chicken production and sustainable egg production in the US?**

I think the biggest thing that people can do is to support their local farmer – your small farmer who is producing locally. No matter what the product is, and when you are in the grocery store, if they are not carrying a product, talk to the manager in the grocery store and ask, “Why not?” Or say you'd like to see that product on the shelf.

Consumer demand is what's going to be the ultimate drive in changing it. And without the support from the community and the consumers, it's not going to happen. That's just point blank the way I see it. But I do see now, more and more... if you had asked me a year ago if I thought that the buy local and sustainable food movement and the amount of farmers getting involved would succeed, I would have told you no. So I can honestly say that in the past year I have seen so much that I just look at it positively now; I think it's a positive thing, that it will happen. It's a big change from just a year ago for me.

And the biggest thing that I'm hearing from potential buyers is that the supply can't meet the demand. They need more farmers; they need more people producing food to be able to carry the local foods. So we need to find farmers. And I think there're more and more people who are doing it, getting into it on a smaller basis. You can produce a lot on five acres, believe it or not. It doesn't take hundreds or thousands of acres to be able to do it. So I just think that we're going to see it moving forward, I believe, rapidly.

**A: That's very exciting, to be sure. Carole, thanks very much for joining us today. I want to also, before I forget, plug your blog, which is fantastic. And everyone listening should check it out, the blog is [Oldfarmerlady.Wordpress.com](http://Oldfarmerlady.Wordpress.com). It's pretty great stuff. There's a great introductory part that documents your transition to a sustainable egg operation, which is pretty interesting to read. And the commentary is just great, in general. So definitely be sure to check out the blog. Carole, thanks so much for joining us, it was a pleasure to have you here, and a very interesting conversation today. I'm glad you could join us.**

Thank you. I enjoyed it.