

Heather Mills

The businesswoman, athlete and media personality speaks about her 25 years of being plant based

Heather Mills has been in the public eye for over two decades and at the forefront of the animal rights movement for most of that time too. With a wealth of experience under her belt in all things plant based, we're delighted that Heather will be writing a monthly column for PlantBased and sharing her extensive knowledge with you all. For this first issue, however, we sat down to speak with Heather to discuss her hugely influential role in the vegan movement, the challenges ahead and the benefits of eating plant based.

So first of all, how did Heather come to start eating 100 per cent plant based at a time when far less was known about the benefits? Well, surprisingly, it was rubbing shoulders with death which prompted the radical change in diet. After her well-documented accident, where a collision with a police motorcycle resulted in the amputation of her left leg below the knee, a move to a hospital in Florida — where plants alone were on the menu — turned her fortunes around.

Suddenly the infection improved and rapid advancements were made in her healing process. Heather describes the dietary change as the “springboard” to her recovery.

Having a platform from which to talk about the benefits of plant based eating allowed Heather to start getting the message out, but it certainly wasn't so well-received in the early days. Heather speaks about an interview with Lorraine Kelly on GMTV in 1993 where the host wasn't convinced by the health claims.

“There was a really great video with me sitting on the sofa, still without a prosthetic leg attached, talking about the benefits and how it had healed my leg, and Lorraine Kelly looked at me like I'm a bit nuts. I remember afterwards Dr. Hilary Jones was brought on to be controversial and argue the case with me,” Heather explained. “I met him many years later and he said to me ‘how crazy is it that you were talking about plant based all those years ago, and everyone thought you were crazy and now it's been proven true.’ It's nice to see how



everyone is moving forward.”

We move on to speaking about the difference between labels such as ‘plant based’ and ‘vegan’ and the way in which plant based seems to be the up and coming buzz word of the moment. “I think plant based makes it more accessible for people who are looking purely at getting healthier and may consider certain aspects of other areas. Veganism is a completely different lifestyle change, so that

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freaks people out who are new to it, people who might not be able to give up their kebab at 4am after 20 pints in Newcastle.

“It’s not about one being righteous because I know a lot of pain in the arse vegans who are actually so extreme that they are stopping people from moving to more plant based foods, which could eventually help them to transition over. Not everybody can just move to kale and cauliflower overnight.”

We discuss the plant based movement which is currently thriving, with people embracing plant based foods for a variety of reasons, including health, ethics and the environment. There is still much work to do though. “Some people don’t care about animals, they care about health or the environment and it’s not often you get people that care about all three,” Heather explains. “You’ve got to think about problem-solving for every single type of individual that you come across.”

Heather is keen to make plant based eating far more accessible though. One of the main ways of doing this is by showing people that eating plant based doesn’t have to mean missing out on the things that they



loved eating before. In 2009, Mills bought The Redwood Wholefood Company, re-branding it as VBites “to stay on the top of Google”. The brand produce a wide range of meatless meat alternatives, made from a mixture of pea protein and soy protein, and provide recognisable ingredients to help with those transitioning to a plant based diet.

She also opened VBites cafes up, in a few towns around the country, including the flagship Brighton branch; a non-profit community café designed to serve the community, whilst challenging the misnomers surrounding plant based food as boring and expensive. Her plans go bigger than a few eateries in the UK, though.

“I want to get on with the bigger picture, which is manufacturing for the masses to get my products in every café and every restaurant so that it becomes the norm that there are plant based options on every menu in the world. It’s no good just doing the plant salad stuff either. You have to think about the broader spectrum, not just that every plant based eater is a rabbit.”

In fact, Heather is a keen cook when she has time to get in the kitchen, and loves changing stereotypes around plant based food through great-tasting meals. She says she often gets all the family together to replicate the roast dinners she used to eat as a child thanks to her Geordie “meat and two veg” upbringing, and will cook classics such as mac ‘n’ cheese with her own plant based twist, much to the surprise and delight of guests.

“I do great cakes too, I’m a real baker. It’s nice to show that you can have anything you want if you educate yourself on the alternate. So you’re not giving anything up. It’s so much easier now than 25 years ago.

“I can go to an Indian restaurant and get them to do me a real veggie korma, with coconut milk, or tarka dhal and rice. If I go to the Thai restaurant, I get a tofu black bean curd cashew nut dish. Every time I order with a group of friends, they always end up eating my food instead of theirs.”

This is the way to convince people that eating plant based is achievable, by showing how tasty it can be. Mills is currently on a TV show in the US where she teaches top chefs to replicate their menus, but with plant based ingredients. “I’ll take them to the supermarket, I’ll get them to get their normal basket and then I’ll have a basket next to it and I’ll fill it with exactly the same products they could use to replicate their menus, because it’s a matter of education. Most Michelin star chefs know very little about health, nutrition and real plant based foods and meatless meats.”

Nutritional foods are of the utmost importance to Mills, though, who in 2010 was spotted skiing by the former Olympic coach to the Austrian team. She began training and has since gone on to win various Gold medals and to break five world records making her the fastest disabled female skier in the world.



“I train a lot and I need a lot of protein. People see that I have muscles and they ask how I get them without eating meat. That’s just a lack of education, ignorance and naivety. It’s like if you asked me about Botticelli’s paintings — I wouldn’t have a clue until I read up on it. We just happen to know about it because we’re involved in it. So I want to help other people understand that more, without being judgemental or confrontational or critical.”

Mills believes it’s important for parents to educate themselves so that they can be informed as to the best things to feed their children. “With parents, if you want to feed yourself junk food, that’s your choice, but, it’s

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unfair if you don’t educate yourself to know what’s best for your child. That’s doing it in a way that doesn’t make the parents feel as though they are bad parents.”

There is one major way that Mills believes can turn the world plant based though. “We need to make it the hippest, coolest, most fabulous thing to be plant based, that’s how things will change on the bigger scale. It cannot be in the hippy movement, that it was in the sixties, that’s just not going to work. In the superficial world we live in, it has to be cool, hip and happening to eat plant based.”

We look forward to hearing more from Heather in her upcoming monthly column.