

Activist to Administrator:

Élise Desaulniers Leads Canada's Oldest SPCA

Interview by Brigitte Gemme | Written by Carole Audet



Élise Desaulniers is the Executive Director of the Montreal SPCA, the first organization in Canada established with an animal-welfare mandate. Vegan for 12 years and with experience as an animal activist, she is in a unique position to ensure the largest SPCA in Quebec serves the needs of animals as more than a shelter.

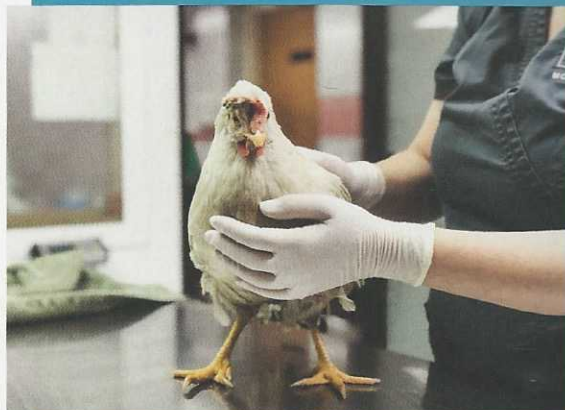
With a background in advertising and revenue management, Élise is surprised she was able to combine her volunteer work as an activist with what she does to earn a living. She left her full-time position upon the publication of her first book and earned her living via speaking engagements and small contracts. At the same time, she was volunteering with many organizations, including the Montreal Vegan Festival and the Montreal SPCA.

She threw her hat in the ring when the SPCA was looking for a new executive director, thinking only of helping out until a permanent replacement could be found. "My colleagues seemed satisfied with my work so far. I decided to go for it and see how someone like me, joining the oldest animal protection organization in Canada and the largest in Quebec, could help the animal cause," she reveals.

Since joining the SPCA, Élise has felt embraced and inspired by the community striving to help animals in need, especially when compared to working in isolation while writing a book. "The best thing is working as a team, interacting every day with brilliant, motivated people who also want more justice for animals," she reflects.

But there's no doubt that the challenge that lies ahead for anyone whose mission is to advocate for animals is a tough one. Élise understands the difficulty of putting a plan—brilliant as it may be—into action, particularly when dealing with staff shortages due to layoffs prompted by COVID-19. But they demonstrated their resiliency by implementing non-emergency drop-offs that resulted in reducing or preventing the abandonment of unwanted animals. This was followed up with a plan to ensure these animals found their forever homes as quickly as possible.

Being the executive director means that Élise is the point of contact for the media and decision-makers, which makes her realize the monumental tasks of animal advocacy. She points to the federal election in 2021 and the fact that issues affecting animals—from live animal transport to the reliance on animal protein which impacts



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Despite the struggles, they’ve achieved significant victories in Montreal, including prohibiting pet stores from selling cats, dogs, and rabbits that don’t come from shelters, horse-drawn carriages are a thing of the past in Old Montreal, and animals are now recognized as sentient beings in the Quebec Civil Code. “Winning those battles the SPCA had been fighting for years gives me hope,” says Élise.

She’s proud of being part of the growing global movement that is embracing veganism, and the impact she is personally making with her books and science-based conversations.

In 2019, Élise and 21-Day Vegan Challenge co-organizer Patricia Martin joined forces to create a cookbook featuring recipes from around the world. They veganized recipes from friends from many different cultures, and together with photographer Marie Des Neiges Magnan cooked, baked, styled, photographed and enjoyed the 125 dishes that appear in the cookbook.

“Each day of shooting was a blast and we were able to develop an intimate relationship with each dish. Several recipes from the book are still in my repertoire,” shares Élise.

She continues, “I also aimed to give this cookbook a political bent, as it features vegans who look different from what often gets pictured. They tell their own stories, like Xavier who is Abenaki, or Marie whose parents came from Vietnam. I wanted to show that veganism unites rather than divides.”

Tables véganes: Menus d’ici et d’ailleurs went on to win a Taste Canada gold medal.

Since launching the 21-Day Vegan Challenge in 2014, more than 40,000 people have taken part, and Elise has been repeatedly told by participants that they made the switch permanently as a result of that challenge.

She credits the hands-on guided approach for the success of this program. She explains, “When we undertake a change, we often need to be taken by the hand.

As seasoned vegans, we can underestimate the little things that make the transition to veganism a struggle. An unexpected lunch with a colleague, a missing ingredient for a recipe, the youngest child refusing to eat tofu. Despite initial good intentions, some participants might give up at the slightest pitfall. As advocates, we need to normalize those difficulties so they can be overcome.” ●

