

# UNTOLD STORIES:

## The Personal Insights of a Former ALF Advocate

**This transcript is based on the speech given by Freeman Wicklund at the United Poultry Concern's Direct Action Forum in Machipongo, Virginia on Sunday, June 27, 1999. The weekend-long conference addressed issues of strategy, movement unity, and mobilizing the public in support of animal issues. Wicklund was formerly an ardent Animal Liberation Front (ALF) supporter who founded and ran the publication *No Compromise*, acted as an ALF spokesperson, and travelled the country promoting and defending the ALF. In 1997, after 11 years of activism, he halted his ALF advocacy, and with new insight began promoting Gandhian nonviolence. He shares his thoughts as a former ALF advocate here.**

Usually, I speak on the power of non-violent action, however, as Norm Phelps and Dean Smith will discuss this, and since my thoughts are available in the *Animals' Agenda* article "Direct Action: Progress, Peril or Both" and the publication *Strategic Non-violence for Animal Liberation*, I will depart from my usual presentation.

Instead, I thought that the most vital information I have to bring to this weekend's strategy discussion includes my unique experiences and insights as a former ALF advocate. I hope this information will allow us to understand the challenges we face, and help us find constructive solutions to them.

### My Statements to the Media on the A.L.F.

Before I begin, however, I think it is necessary to address the issue of my statements in the media regarding the Animal Liberation Front or ALF.

I feel it is vital that the public know there are a lot of people committed to non-violence within the animal rights movement. Our association with non-violence helps keep people's minds and hearts open to the message of compassion towards animals, instead of giving them another excuse to ignore or ridicule the painful and often overwhelming topic of animal exploitation.

Unfortunately, humane education, distributing leaflets, negotiating with

animal abuse industries and other non-violent actions that help animals do not make headlines like bombings, arsons, and acts of sabotage do. This skewed reporting portrays the impression that the animal rights movement lacks a strong non-violent contingent to it, and this hurts our cause.

A similarly vital, yet sometimes conflicting interest, is the need for movement unity and solidarity. We have to direct our limited time, energy, and resources towards our opposition--*not each other*.

I will be the first to admit that in my effort to utilize non-violence to the fullest potential for the animals I have made numerous mistakes.

Maintaining movement unity despite our diversity is an extremely difficult and complex issue. Each of our actions as activists affects every other activist, whether intentional or not. In general, ALF actions cause members of the public to be less receptive and trusting and more hostile towards non-violent activists who are trying to educate work with them. In general, non-violent activists who voice disagreement with the ALF's actions hurt the morale of ALF supporters. So what do we do to maintain unity? Do we ban all ALF activity and silence all activists who do not support the ALF? Would this be fair to anyone? Even if we tried to implement such a policy, there is no way to enforce it. What's the right thing to do? What is fair to everyone involved?

These questions are not easy to answer. I have struggled to answer them for many years, and I still struggle with these issues. Sometimes I make mistakes. But through those mistakes I continue to evolve as an activist.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with this controversy, let me start by giving you some of its history. When the Animal Liberation League changed its position from vocal support of the Animal Liberation Front, to adopting the principles of Gandhian Non-violence, we felt it was strategically important to notify the media of our change. On the third Monday of January in 1998—the day set aside to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.—we held a news conference explaining that change. In our news release we said, "The acts of sabotage we used to defend, we now condemn." I believe that statement was a mistake. We no longer condemn the ALF's actions, and our position is changing and evolving to better reconcile our needs to promote non-violence while maintaining movement unity.

Our latest ALF-related media work involves the April 5th raid at the University of Minnesota, where 113 rats, mice, pigeons, and salamanders were removed from the labs and millions of dollars worth of property damage was done. I learned about this raid from an unsolicited call from the *Start Tribune* (Minneapolis' newspaper) asking us for a reaction. We were unprepared to handle the call. During the interview I tried to

