DANIEL ZALKUS

Pushing the Animal-Rights Envelope

CLASS OF '00 | **When she was 12 years old, Dara Lovitz C'00 joined a group at Philadelphia's International Airport that was protesting the inhumane transport of animals.** A brochure had caught her attention; its photos showed farm animals packed tightly into factory crates.

"I became a vegetarian right then," she recalls now, two decades later.

The exposure was significant in another way, too—sending her on a quest to right such wrongs. Whether it's through teaching animal law at Drexel University and Temple University (where she received her law degree in 2003), serving as counsel for various animal-advocacy organizations, or writing extensively on the subject, Lovitz isn't shy about getting the word out. Her first book, *Muzzling A Movement* (Lantern Books), was released earlier this year.

Animal law—or, put differently, the idea of animal rights—concerns "any kind of animal exploitation," Lovitz says. "It can range from elephants in the zoo to factory farming, anything that humans do for economic benefit." Even pet ownership is a bone of contention: Lovitz calls it "kind of strange and kind of selfish," but quickly adds: "I tend not to go there, or to talk about areas like guide dogs. There are so many more violent aspects than these to the way we think about animals as property."

And while Lovitz has continued to participate in protests against circuses and horse-drawn carriage companies, she's starting to make a specialty in challenging animal-enterprise terrorism laws, which are now on the books in 33 states. (The federal Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act of 2006 subjects those who cross state or national boundaries, or use the mail, to physically disrupt, threaten, or cause bodi-

the news. Although Uganda has been aggressive in combating HIV, she worried that Victo might have contracted the virus. Victo could die in childbirth, or she might develop a fistula. And Converse knew there was a very good chance that this would be the end of Victo's education.

Victo had kept her pregnancy secret for as long as possible—by running, among other things. Just two months before, she won her school races and her district races. Converse explains. "She was sent to nationals and she didn't have any money to go. She was running barefoot and pregnant. But nobody knew. And when they found out, she was kicked out of school."

Converse managed to get through on Victo's father's cellphone. She told Victo: "I hear that you are pregnant. I want you to go to a hospital and be safe. And we will find a secondary school and a place to live. And I love you." Victo cried, and they ended the call with "I do not forget you."

When Converse returned the following February to teach, she helped Victo arrange for her delivery and paid the doctor's fee. (The HIV test came back negative.) Converse also helped her young friend get out of the abusive situation in which she was living, then took her to visit relatives the girl hadn't seen in years.

To get to Victo's grandparents, they rode on a "little motobike," Converse recalls: "Me at that time 68 hanging on for dear life and she seven months pregnant sitting side-saddle on the back. I thought 'There's something hideously irresponsible about this.'"

Then they took a jitney for two hours to Mbale, the closest large town, to visit Victo's Auntie Irene. Although Irene was a full-time maternity nurse with children of her own, she welcomed her pregnant niece.

"When I take the baby," Irene told Converse, "I will need help with food and a nurse to watch the baby while I work."

Much to Victo's joy, she was going to live with her Auntie Irene, where she would be able to attend school. Mary offered to help Victo with the move.

In late April 2010, Auntie Irene took Victo to her hospital, where she delivered a healthy baby boy. When Converse reached her on the phone, Victo told her the baby was named Graham, for Converse's son.

Converse has arranged a sponsor to fund schooling for Mary's daughter and another for Victo's son. She has also organized help for Victo's cousin, Lydia, who is HIV-positive and orphaned. Peter Steffian Ar'59 is sponsoring Lydia's education, and Auntie Irene has invited Lydia to live with her while she is studying. Given that Irene now has nine children living in her two-room house—her own children plus Lydia, Victo, and baby Graham—Converse is starting to raise funds to build a larger house.

Meanwhile, Victo is running for her school—still barefoot—and nursing her baby between classes. Converse believes Victo can run in the Olympics some day, or run the country.

"Victo is for *victory*," Converse says. "Not for *victim*."

—Emily Rosenbaum C'95 GEd'96

ly harm to places and people associated with animal enterprises—such as academic institutions, commercial agricultural facilities, zoos, or aquariums—to fines and/or imprisonment.) Those "Green Scare" statutes—which animal-rights activists compare to the "Red Scare" tactics of the 1950s—represent a First Amendment issue that, in Lovitz's view, has yet to be explored in standard textbooks and courses on animal law.

Aside from her outrage at the idea of placing such activists in the same category as "those who fly planes into buildings," Lovitz' interest stems from a firm belief that, as the title of her book suggests, freedom of speech is being compromised.

"If activists fear prosecution, they may be unlikely to speak out on behalf of animals," she says. "And the result could have a chilling effect on an otherwise powerful political movement." In her book, Lovitz argues that animal-rights activists, unlike terrorists, "do not condone attacks on innocents," adding: "All individuals targeted for protest, property damage, or other economic damage are directly or indirectly involved in the abuse of nonhuman animals." Deliberate attacks "on the wallet," she adds, are not comparable to those that threaten the safety of civilians who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Further, she argues, the more dramatic types of violations that make the news—such as releasing minks from facilities—are already covered by existing criminal laws. "By singling out animal activists, the AETA violates their constitutional right to equal protection," Lovitz writes.

The book blends the passionate enthusiasm of a committed activist with an attorney's detail-laden sense of justice—as does its author. At times, Lovitz can skew a little *Mother Jones*-y. A position paper on AETA that she wrote for one of the most liberal of congressmen, Ohio Democrat Dennis Kucinich, refers to breeding as "forced copulation"; and she admits to making her resolutely carnivorous lawyer husband, Josh Van Naarden, sit through a barrage of explicit videos on animal agriculture.

Yet in person, the 32-year-old cat-owner comes across as reasonable (she doesn't mind if her mate eats meat, she says, as long as it's not in their home), vivacious, and affable.

Writing is a relatively new avocation for Lovitz, but so is lawyering. At Penn, she majored in French and Italian and was all set to pursue her "dream job" of teaching at the college level after graduation. That is, until her Penn professor told her she'd have to adjust to a peripatetic life, at least for a few years. "I am so attached to Philadelphia," says Lovitz, who grew up in Narberth and now lives in Center City. "I knew right away that wasn't the lifestyle for me."

Lovitz opted for what had always been her "fallback plan": law school. After graduating from Temple, she quickly landed a job working in personal injury at a private firm. At the same time, she put the word out to animal-rights groups that she was interested in offering them pro bono help. She soon found herself serving as one of two special civil prosecutors for the Lancaster County district attorney's office on a suit against egg farmers whose inhumane treatment of hens had been secretly videotaped.

As Lovitz relays in her book, the magisterial district judge ultimately commended them for proving that the hens were being kept in conditions that did not meet the standards for normal agricultural operations in the state. Nevertheless, Lovitz writes, the judge acquitted the defendants because she could find no precedent and did not want to create "new law."

The decision opened Lovitz' eyes to just how little protection the law offers to animals, she says, and brought her activism to a new level. Not only did she work hard to integrate her beliefs into her professional life, she even upped her personal commitment by becoming a vegan. "Seeing the suffering that goes on in the egg industry really got to me," she remembers. "I'd much rather be a beef cow than an egg-laying hen in terms of what they endure."

For the most part, her dietary sacrifices are no big deal, Lovitz says. "I do have a sweet tooth," she offers. "But it's amazing how great some vegan desserts are." Meat? Well, now, sometimes that's a different story.

"I have an almost Pavlovian response to my mother's brisket," she laughs.

–JoAnn Greco