

# VERBOTEN: the interview that could never be



The SHAC7 Trial Was One of the Defining Trials of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

As the *EFIJ* reported, “SHAC Sleeps with One Eye Open,” seven activists were being indicted on charges related to maintaining a website used by the animal rights community to protest vivisection. In an utter violation of free speech, six people were convicted and sentenced to up to six years each. I interviewed them separately. The following is a re-creation.

BY LILAC

*At what point does a community of resistance become “underground”? The arrest and sentencing of Rod Coronado for “friending” Mike Roselle on facebook has provided a difficult point of reference for me in that question. Who can I talk to? What can I talk about?*

*I wanted to conduct a roundtable interview with defendants of the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) case, but the state forbids them to communicate. I suppose it’s suitable, after all — their only charge was communicating, through the internet, with activists. I have, on the other hand, interviewed separately Josh Harper, Darius Fulmer and Andy Stepanian, three of the activists who are now technically free, and turned it into a kind of imaginary roundtable interview. If free speech exists, it is only in our hearts. The following is a creative article about something*

*that did not take place, none of the co-defendants have had any correspondence with each other.*

*Instead, we are perhaps taken to the darkest recess of the mind — the space behind the retinal cone where the windows of the soul, weary from absorbing alien light, seek shelter beneath eyelids. SHAC has slept with one eye open for too long. I close my eyes and voices take hold out of utter darkness.*

I address Josh Harper first. “A lot of people think the SHAC campaign is doing better than ever.” I say, “What do you think?”

“I am not sure if it has grown or gotten stronger.” Josh responds. “I certainly hear very strident rhetoric, but in the US at least I am not seeing people take the kind of actions that made the campaign effective. It’s disappointing. We need to face our failings if we ever want to see progress, and the truth seems to be that the government caused a great blow to the move-

ment here in the US by conducting a campaign of harassment, surveillance, and malicious prosecutions. What we do with that information now is the important thing.”

The prominent features of Andy Stepanian take shape through the shadowy dark. He nods in agreement, “It’s simple,” he says, “HLS still exists. Any rational, empathetic human being feels outrage when they watch Michelle Rokke’s tape or similar footage from the numerous undercover investigations that shows HLS’ vicious cruelty, sloppy science, and a disregard for the health and well being of the consumers who ultimately would be exposed to the end products they were testing. Additionally the animal rights movement is not one that is easily scared off. Yes the prosecution of the SHAC 7 served to scatter some of the flock, but it also served to invigorate others pledging to double their efforts.”

My thoughts turn to the SHAC7 trial. People throughout the world lent their efforts to support the SHAC7 under Freedom of Speech rights. If you didn't agree with all animal rights activists, at least you could see that the SHAC7 hadn't been charged with actions outside of making information available. Clearly, it was a symbolic trial to show activists that state was more into repressing dissent than learning from it. The sentencing of the SHAC7 created shock waves around the world. If you didn't hear about it, you felt it. Somehow, you knew. For a while, Andy's hope touches mine, and I wonder if things aren't as bad as they seem.

Then Darius Fulmer speaks: "Regrettably, I have to disagree. While I am excited to see so many activists fighting on in the face of government intimidation, the campaign against HLS is nowhere near the force it once was. At its height, rarely did a day go by without a significant action, either aboveground or underground, against the lab or their financial supporters.

It is that kind of relentless pressure that is necessary to close them down. We need to bring the campaign back to that level.

"For now it seems we have fallen back into our usual template of scattered and unfocused protests against a wide array of targets with no clear path to success with any of them. Another aspect of the campaign that proved crucial was conducting an honest appraisal of our target, pinpointing their weaknesses, and devel-

oping a realistic plan to succeed. We now have SHAC-North America providing that vision and analysis. I hope that people across the country take advantage

of that blueprint and pour their hearts and souls into a focused campaign again."

Darius's desperate but courageous tone strikes a chord, and I imagine what hell the three activists must have gone through. "The SHAC 7 are almost totally out," I say, "What kind of support would you like to have from the radical community over the next five years?"

A silence gathers like a still pond, until Josh speaks up, sending chills down my spine. "The kind where people honor the sacrifices we made by helping make our shared vision a reality."

I feel like the majestic statement breaks the ice, and Andy rejoins, "I have to second Josh, seeing our shared activist vision become a reality. There is no stronger support than knowing that the fight that you held so dear was not a fight held in vain."

Inspired, Darius boldly shares in the sentiment, "Finish the job. We have

a tremendous opportunity before us. This could be the first time a social justice movement has actually closed down an unscrupulous multinational corporation. The lab has been surviving on a \$100 million loan which comes due in the summer of 2011. The time for action is now, HLS's finances can not be allowed to recuperate before then.

"We need concerned people across the country and around the world to get involved, take action,



**We need concerned people across the country and around the world to get involved, take action, and make history.**

and make history. Seeing the campaign that they sacrificed so much for end successfully is the best support any political prisoner could hope for. We need everyone to step into the ring and put HLS on the canvas.”

Pondering the power of their words, I wonder how the anti-heirarchal SHACtivists have been impacted by their case. “How do you feel about the publicity surrounding your case? How has it affected your interactions with friends, relatives and people you meet on the street?”

Josh cracks up, exclaiming, “The best part of the publicity, aside from the support we received in prison, is that my mom gets to feel all gangster when she meets other vegans. Once she visited me in prison and she was just beaming as she explained, ‘Last night at a vegan restaurant I ate for free when the waiter found out I was your mom!’ Don’t get me wrong, I recognize how important the publicity is from a political perspective, but from a personal perspective that is what made me happiest.”

*May not be a free lunch, but what the hell,* I think to myself, grinning. Andy is less stoked. “I can’t figure out if I like the publicity or not. Publicity can be a double edged sword, it can serve to benefit a prisoner, an activist or a movement, while also at times also serving to erode security, create a sort of predictability, and bind the activist to have to continue doing or employing whatever tactics garnered such attention in order to feed some sort of publicity monster.”

“It’s ironic that I say this, because I work full-time as a publicist both for authors and for activists, however I feel like that gives me a unique perspective. An example of my bound hands analogy could be found a few weeks ago when I was pitching a TV show to run a story about activists who want to stop the construction of an offshore liquid natural gas terminal, mid way through my pitch they wanted me to come into their studio to

talk about my experiences in prison. As I try to move on with my activism, I find a lot of people want to talk about the stuff I am trying to move past, and as much as I adore the *Earth First! Journal* this interview is no exception.”

The downcast response throws me off for a second, but Darius soon speaks up. “The publicity surrounding our case,” he says, “has brought a lot of attention to the issue

of animal experimentation and exploitation in general. At this point, however, I am much more interested in talking about the present. The trial and my incarceration were yesterday. What are we going to do today to shut down HLS?”

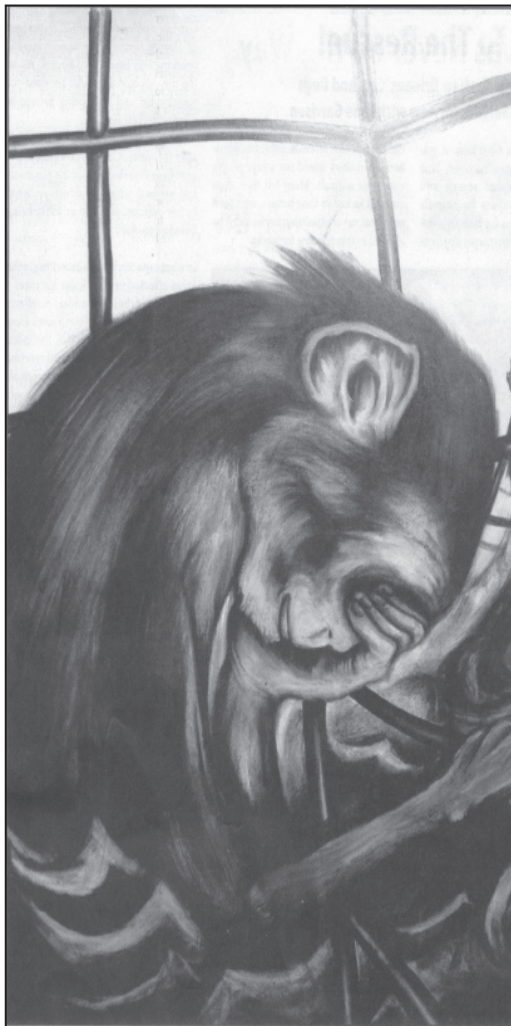
So I change the subject. No more nostalgia, let’s get to the brass tacks. “What kind of roles do you think you’ll try to fill in the future?”

Still beaming, Josh says, “Oh, I’ve got some fight left in me! Prison was traumatic and I am taking it slow on probation, but on the scale between ‘radical’ and ‘otherwise’ I hope people can guess which end they’ll always find me on.”

Again, Andy is a little more reserved, but hopeful. “I hit the ground running when I got out of prison.” he says, “Three friends and I started The Sparrow Project, a grassroots publicity agency for activists and artists committed to relevant social change. In a nutshell we aim to create moments where very typical people can question their current existence as well some of the oppressive institutions they may contribute to on a daily basis. It’s about creating those nexus moments when an otherwise non-activist finds themselves nodding

their head to an activist effort. Now that my probation has finished, I have begun speaking at colleges and similar venues, and resumed my involvement in a documentary film project.”

Darius, who looked thoughtful while the other two spoke, answers slowly and provocatively: “Activists and even entire organizations too frequently choose one tactic or method of activism and stick with it, trying to apply it to every campaign. This reduces our ability to effectively create change. The SHAC campaign has been so successful precisely because it didn’t do this. Rather than using the same game plan as always, it looked at this particular target and developed the most effective means for this specific situation. As far as I am concerned, it does not matter if a tactic is radical, moderate, conservative, militant, etc. The only question I have is this: is it going to get the job done?”





“The SHAC movement was so successful because it moved away from the typical protest mold of yelling at a building and placed focus on the money that fed that abusive business. It directly challenged the capital that kept HLS alive.” — Andy Stepanian



My mental space is almost full, and I try to resolve the questions in my head with a final *pregunta*:

“What do you think of the animal rights movement today? Has it changed? Do you have any ideas or thoughts about the future?”

“When I was a kid we all wanted to be Rod Coronado.” Josh proclaims, “Now everyone wants to be a blogger. The animal rights movement has an incredible amount of potential, sadly much of it gets wasted on tough words, angry t-shirts, and macho posturing on Facebook. All of that stuff is corny. I want to see people doing the hard work that needs to be done, not just posting pictures of guns and bullshit like that on the internet.

“As far as the future goes, I love militancy, but I hate the silly culture that attaches itself to the term. I want to see a mass movement that includes, but is not limited to, kids in Earth Crisis hoodies or dreadlocked crusties. Angry grannies, subversive yuppies with access to boardrooms, straight laced middle aged soccer moms—there is not reason any of those people couldn’t get involved. We need millions of people to do the work that needs to get done, let’s stop limiting ourselves within the confines of one subculture or another.”

Andy chimes in, “I think that it is unfortunate that our animal rights movement is often single issued and myopic. I would be excited to see our movement adopt a solid critique of capitalism. Capitalism is a predicate to myriad forms of oppression, often rewarding the oppressor with widened profit margins, this is true for animal oppression, environmental degradation, gender oppression, racism, sexism and homophobia.

“The SHAC movement was so successful because it moved away from the typical protest mold of yelling at a building and placed focus on the money that fed that abusive business. It directly challenged the capital that kept HLS alive. Our movements could gain a whole lot by taking a serious look at capitalism and adopting an anti-capitalist stance.

“Additionally I think we should challenge this single-issue predisposition we have as a movement. I agree wholeheartedly that it is best not to spread yourself ineffectively thin on various issues when you can be really effective on one issue, however we should still recognize, respect, and show solidarity with, the struggles of womyn, struggles in communities of color, queer community, movements in

the global south, etc, etc.”

Darius seems to agree, but maintains a contemplative distance. “When I was first involved in this movement I had plenty of passion, but little focus or strategy. I was infuriated by animal exploitation and wanted to express that rage. This might have made me feel better, but often failed to create palpable change for abused animals. I was unfocused in my approach, wanting to speak out against every incidence of animal abuse rather than focusing on a single, winnable campaign.

“The organizations I have come to most respect are those which, like SHAC, think strategically about what they want to achieve and how to make that happen. Your actions need not be on a grand scale to be effective. You don’t have to close down a multinational corporation to make a change. Start with small, workable goals and meet them. Once you have your strategy, be flexible and creative in your approach, but tenacious in your determination and never back down.”

Yes. No Compromise. My mind begins to clear. “Anything else you want to communicate to the *EF!*’s readership?”

“I would just like to thank everyone for their activism.” Josh insists, “In a world where so few people lift a finger to help others, y’all give me hope! We might be in the last generation of people who have a chance to make meaningful change, and I can not wait to be off of probation and back in the trenches with all of you.”

Andy responds in kind, “Likewise, I too would like to thank everyone who is out there fighting for the rights of animals, people, and the earth we share as home. Seeing others’ hard work is a shot in the arm for me to keep trudging on as an activist, I owe that to each of you. Never, never doubt the effectiveness of even the smallest actions. Stay inspired because inspiration is contagious, I see it regularly when someone contacts me and says my actions or words inspired them to become active, little do those folks know that it’s their words at that very moment that give me the hope to keep doing what I do. I am so thankful for that, and hence I love each of you beyond words.

Darius sums it up: “Every one of us has the power to change the world. The first step is to believe that we can and will bring about animal liberation. But wanting it and believing in it is not enough. There is a lot of hard work that needs to be done. Don’t wait for someone else to make it happen. Take the responsibility on yourself and make it happen. The stakes could not be higher, and the animals and Earth have nobody but you.”

Thank you to the SHAC7, whose words and sacrifices have made a million dreams possible.

