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The Only Way I Was Going to 'Veganize' My Life Was to Immerse Myself

By Amanda Osorio
UCF Forum columnist

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This summer I made the decision to do something that many Latins often hesitate to attempt: become a vegan.

Being Latina and a vegan is difficult since most of our traditional meals consist of meat: *arroz con pollo*, *tripeatas*, *mofongo*, *alcapurria*, *pinchos*, the list goes on. I think it's especially difficult for students to make this change when they're living away from home the first time.

But my goal to try this new lifestyle was simply to try to be healthier, both through my diet and exercise. And from this journey I must say I have felt more energetic, especially in my morning classes, satisfied and not too full after eating. I also have become more enlightened by thoroughly searching labels.

I remember back home during family dinners there would be separate dishes for my vegan brother and sister-in-law, and questions posed to them about why they didn't eat anything that came from animals. But still I thought, "Why not give this vegan lifestyle a shot?"

The only way I was going to "veganize" my life was to immerse myself so there wouldn't be any temptations. My brother and sister-in-law live with my family, so I was able to thoroughly observe what their clean, plant-based diet was all about. They briefed me on their ways.

Weeks before my transition, I slowly gave up eating meat as recommended by my brother and sister-in-law so the shock on my body wouldn't be so intense. I was ready for the challenge...

Since I started my plant-based diet Aug. 1, the change has been a wake-up call and an ordeal on my taste buds and wallet.

Other observations about my new direction:

- My goal is to see how far my mind and body will go to feel healthier in this new diet. Healthy living is very important to me and now that I moved to Orlando for school, I

didn't want to be associated with that expression of "Freshman 15" – the term commonly used to refer to the extra 15 pounds put on during a student's first year at college – or in my case as a junior, the Transfer 15.

- Labels are everything. A vegan diet is all about one simple factor: nothing from animals. Of course meat and dairy are the obvious choice, but just because a package states "Organic" doesn't mean its vegan. "Non-GMO" and the green sticker that states "Certified Vegan" are the only ways to be safe. Checking the ingredients for me is like doing a chemistry problem: "What am I looking for?" Natural ingredients and a shorter list, as well as how to pronounce them, help to clarify what should go in your house and, more importantly, your stomach.
- Cookbooks are your best friend. I am a fan of cookbooks because I am not that creative in the kitchen, but to be a vegan your creativity is a must. Vegans do not only eat salads! I was grateful to observe and sometimes help my mom and sister-in-law prepare delicious meals. When becoming a vegan, one should check out bookstores to see what cookbooks look appetizing.
- Eating a lot is a must. Many people think that being a vegan is only about eating salads and grains all day. I have witnessed my brother and sister-in-law carry a lunch bag filled with food: leftover dinners for lunch, sliced fruit and veggies with hummus and dressing, and a lot of water to stay hydrated. Their breakfast smoothie fills them up for most of the day. I even started making my own.

Now this is not all that easy, and I did slip up on days. They always say to eat something if you're drinking (hey, it was summer break and I am 23), so I did have one or two beef and chicken *empanadas*.

And now that I am living back in Orlando with my new vegan foundation and with roommates who aren't, it is going to be an interesting transition toward maintaining this lifestyle.

With so many non-vegan options on campus, I'll need to search and explore what my community has to offer.

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