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Sherry:

Welcome back to Fork the System — a podcast spotlighting the innovators, researchers, and advocacy leaders reimagining how we feed the world. I'm your host, Sherry Shu, exploring how we can build food systems that are sustainable, ethical, and free from animal suffering.

Our first guest is Cogie, a friend of mine from Western University. They've been active in climate and animal advocacy, but are pivoting into the start-up space by launching Prookie, a vegan protein cookie company. Their journey teaches us about how personal values can evolve into leadership and entrepreneurship, and how working toward change sometimes means stepping into unexpected roles. I hope you enjoy the conversation, and let's dive right in!

Sherry:

Today, I'm here with Cogie Cogan, a passionate leader in the animal welfare space. They're a recent Western University graduate who studied Animal Ethics and Sustainability Leadership, where they took on animal welfare and climate advocacy roles with organizations like the United Nations and ProVeg International. Cogie is also a 2025 Cansbridge Fellow, who will be interning in Thailand this summer for Swees, a plant-based cheese company. They're currently also in the process of launching Prookie, a vegan protein cookie company. So Cogie, it's really great to have you!

Cogie:

Hi, thanks so much for having me, Sherry. It's great to be on the podcast. Sherry and I met at the Cansbridge conference a couple weeks ago, so it's good to reconnect.

Sherry:

Yeah, for sure—shout out to Cansbridge. They run great conferences and it's a great program, highly recommend. But yeah, it's so exciting to be here and just hear a bit more about everything you've done—and where your journey has taken you in terms of your goals of working on animal welfare and climate advocacy.

What inspired you to dedicate your career and your time to helping animals and the planet?

Cogie:

Back in grade 12 was when—so I'm done university, I just graduated, our grad's coming up in two weeks. So, back in grade 12 was when Fridays for the Future got really big, you know, like the climate movement led by Greta Thunberg. So there are all those Fridays for the Future rallies happening across Canada and the world. And that was sort of the first time where I saw

dedicated climate action happening within my city, which is where I lived—up until grade 12, I lived in Winnipeg for a while until I moved away to go to Western.

So at the time, I lobbied my high school to go to the conferences or the rallies happening at the Winnipeg ledge. So we brought a busload of students to go to the protests and advocate for the climate. And from there, it just kind of inspired me even more. Like, at the time, I knew it was a good thing to do and, you know, knew about climate action. But after going to the rally, I realized just kind of the urgency of climate action and that we need more voices and people working in this space and everyone needs to be involved in some capacity.

So, yeah, I got involved that way, realized that there's so many things you can do in climate action to help, whether you're working in art or science or business or whether you're working on fossil fuels versus transportation. And I realized that animal welfare and farming was something that was greatly overlooked in climate spaces. So then I started focusing on agriculture as my primary focus to help the planet. And then from there I realized I'm not just doing this to help the planet, I'm also doing it because I care deeply about animals and I want them to be well. So kind of, tackling two issues there in one.

Sherry:

That's a great journey. What makes you think that—you know, bringing it back to the issue you've identified, animal agriculture—can you tell us a bit more about that problem space? And given that it kind of encompasses both the animal welfare and the planet side of things, why don't more people talk about it?

Cogie:

You know, I think animal agriculture makes up for at least 10-20% of our global emissions, whether it be through direct emissions from factory farming, methane from cows, or even just the transportation costs of food, or even the amount of forest land that—the deforestation that comes from turning land into cropland, which is especially more significant when it comes to animal agriculture.

Because not only—when we look at plants, we're feeding humans those plants, but then when it comes to animal ag, we have to feed those animals something. So then we're having to cut down even more land and grow even more soy for animals to consume in order to grow for us to consume the animals. So animal agriculture specifically is a huge emitter.

And yeah, I think it's tough for people because, you know, food is deeply personal to a lot of people. And then when you start saying, well, we need to change our food choices, or just shift dietary preferences or what people are eating in order to be more sustainable. Cause right now

what we're doing is not sustainable for our planet. You know, the amount of animal consumption is not sustainable in the long run.

I think now it's getting a little bit more recognition, but it needs to get a lot, a lot more. It's one of the big, big problems that we're facing.

Sherry:

Yeah. It's a tough problem. You bring up a lot of good points as to what the barriers are and maybe why people are, I guess, struggling to recognize the magnitude of the problem.

What, from there, got you actually started in student advocacy and youth advocacy initiatives? And is there a specific reason you went towards the advocacy route throughout your time at Western?

Cogie:

Honestly, when I was at Western, my reason for going more towards advocacy at first was because I realized that that's something that I could do to affect change. You know, I wasn't going to build some sort of business that was gonna change how operations were being done. You know, in university, I wasn't going to do—there were a lot of things that would be challenging for me to do. And I just looked at what can I do, at least instead of feeling defeated, I can create more social awareness around the issues that are happening around factory farming, around that link to climate change.

That's why I started a club in first year focused on environmental business leaders. And then later in my fifth year—you know, it's interesting because it follows my journey of being really passionate about the environment to then being much more specific. And then in my fifth year, I founded a club that focuses on animal protection, a little more closely aligned with the work I'm doing now.

Sherry:

Yeah, makes sense. What changed your mind then? Cause, you said that before you didn't feel like you could start a business that changes operations. But now, you're starting Prookie and working on creating a company. So, what inspired that shift, and then tell us about that journey.

Cogie:

Sure. Yeah, I'm currently starting a vegan protein cookie business called Prookie, which I've been working hard at for the last few months. I'm super excited to be launching it in the fall. I think just realizing that there are so many ways to tackle a problem and you need to be able to tackle it—like different people and the roles they play are all equally important. And after doing my degree and working several internships, I've helped a lot of startups in the past not specific to this

issue or not on the protein industry or the plant-based industry, but I realized, okay, now I have a whole bunch of other skills that I can now utilize to make some sort of change. And the other thing I realize is if I'm able to start a business and hopefully, you know, get some capital through it, that hopefully can then affect more change, because it's definitely a struggle having to figure out where you're getting funding for projects that you want to do. But if I have my own stream through a business, potentially I think in the long run, that could be really useful for meeting my goals and helping the environment and animals more.

Sherry:

Can you elaborate on that? So funding—what would you want to put that funding towards? And do you see yourself integrating your advocacy background and experiences with the more business side of things?

Cogie:

Sure. Yeah. There's a whole bunch of stuff. I mean, the things, the number of issues and places you could help is endless. But I would love to continue to fund some of the student clubs I helped found at Western—putting some allocated money towards those student clubs and the new students who are running those programs for future students. I'd love to see those become something more sustainable and then give back to those. And then, also just thinking bigger, I've had experiences of going to animal sanctuaries around the city and hearing the stories of the survivors who have been brought there. And to me it's inspiring because—and it's also super important because, when you get people on a personal level connected to animals, then that evokes more empathy. And then people feel like they're able more to make a change for animals and that they care more. You know, if someone's very disconnected from nature, they're not maybe going to want to help the environment, but if they're out in nature and they have those experiences and the same goes for interacting with animals, then they might want to make some sort of change. So yeah, helping those animal sanctuaries, they're always in need of funding. So that's something I would love to do down the road.

Sherry:

That's a great initiative. Do you think it's—just kind of building awareness of experiences for people with animals, like emotional experiences—is that enough to kind of expand people's moral circle, or expand people's conception that animals deserve similar moral status to people? Cause I know some people, like, they love animals and they love their dogs and cats in theory, but then they still eat meat. So, do you find this giving people that moral perspective a difficult process?

Cogie:

Sure, I mean, I think it depends on the person, but I know in order for a movement to gain traction, you don't need everyone on board. You just need a certain percentage of people on

board. So going to one of the sanctuaries here in Winnipeg, the founder of the sanctuary told me that, people who came to the sanctuary afterwards maybe reduced their meat consumption or even went vegan after meeting the residents of the sanctuary, which to me is inspiring. And I think you kind of need two, you need the push and you need the pull and going to a sanctuary like that to me is the push. It kind of pushes you to think about, you know, animals are sentient and they're deserving of love and care. And they're no different than my dog or cat that I have at home. That's the push, but then often then people come up with this—maybe they think of a barrier where it's too hard, they say to themselves, it's too hard to make this change or eat less meat or choose the alternative that doesn't have dairy in it. So then the pull to me is then—and this is why I'm starting a company like Prookie—is you make it so that's no longer something people can say because you have so many options that don't have animals in the supply chain. Then people say, well, I can just go ahead and do this and I can make the change. And they—it's a convenience factor. There's no inconvenience anymore for them.

Sherry:

Hm, makes sense. Are you seeing, I guess, through things like market research or as you're launching Prookie that there is continuously increasing demand for these types of vegan and non-meat products? Like I know people have been talking about the trend in recent years, but do you see that trend continuing into the next couple decades?

Cogie:

Yeah, I mean, statistically more and more Canadians, like the number of Canadians, you know, going pescatarian, vegan, vegetarian, or even reducing their meat consumption is increasing quite a bit. It's increasing every year. I mean, you look at other parts of the world and there are places where people are entirely vegan and vegetarian. So I think there's a shift in social consciousness around animal welfare and how our diets impact that. I think one of the big things is there's definitely been a push, or maybe it's a trend, for people to want to consume more protein—and veganism is more of like a moral stance, but plant-based eating per se—and they think, oh, but it doesn't have a lot of proteins. So I think, yeah, I'm just trying to make sure that there's vegan options that are high in protein and people don't think twice about it.

Sherry:

That's awesome. Do you think then, with Prookie, you're targeting a specific demographic? Is it like outdoorsy, sporty people that really want protein? Is it like emerging vegan, vegetarian people? Or is it like—who are you kind of picturing in mind as the main customer?

Cogie:

I don't want this to be a product that's only for vegans. Part of the purpose is to have more people choosing to be plant-based. So if you already have people who are vegans, that's not really making that huge of an impact. But yeah, I think I'm mostly targeting people who are trying to

hit their macros and are looking for a healthy option that's high in protein, tastes good, and is made with simple ingredients that you can read and you understand what they are and doesn't have a lot of sugar, and yeah, folks like that, gym goers. I think vegans will naturally find the product just by marketing it as vegan, but that's not the main demographic who I'm going to be targeting.

Sherry:

What are your biggest wins through the process of launching? What have been kind of the recent updates on where the product is going so far?

Cogie:

Yeah, honestly, I'm right at the beginning of launching Prookie, so right now, I filed for a trademark, I'm registering as a business, and I've applied to a few programs to get some funding, and one of the most exciting things was actually making a product that I thought tasted really good and having other people confirm that. Yeah, I'm really excited to see where it goes come the fall, because I'm definitely going to hit the ground running in terms of branding and the marketing and content creation, and yeah, right now, it's just some of the legwork behind the scenes sort of stuff, no one really sees what's happening, but there's a lot of work being done, and every step just feels like a step in the right direction.

Sherry:

Sounds really exciting! If you ever come to Western or launch in London, I'll definitely get one! I'll tell my friends about it cause that sounds really awesome.

Cogie:

Aw, thanks! Yeah.

Sherry:

And yeah, what has been big wins throughout your journey also outside of Prookie? Throughout your decision to kind of work on animal advocacy, work on climate. Have you had any other big wins or really proud moments?

Cogie:

I've had a few moments that have just, yeah, have been really wonderful, and often it feels like you're fighting an uphill battle, so it's nice when you get those wins and it reminds you that you can get something done and your advocacy is making a difference. Definitely getting the animal welfare club up and running, that was a big win, that's going to have a lasting impact on the students who are a part of the club. Back in my second year, or I think it was my third year university, I led a campaign to eliminate single-use plastic water bottles from campus, and there were people who helped with that campaign. Yeah, that was a huge win to see that get pushed

through, and now I look on campus and there's no plastic water bottles, so those sort of efforts have paid off. But yeah, I'm excited to see some of the other work that I get to do with Prookie, and my goal with Prookie, I want to be able to do compostable packaging or recyclable packaging. To me, if I'm able to do that with this product, that's an additional win. So hopefully we'll see what's possible, but I definitely want to raise the bar in terms of what's expected for the food industry and the standards that companies are expected to meet in terms of ethical practices, sustainable practices.

Sherry:

That's great. I know it's definitely logistically challenging cause there's all those other factors that go into it, but setting a standard for other companies to follow is really admirable. So that's a really great goal.

Yeah, just wrapping up here, for other people that are interested in this space, kind of, as a career, or wanting to just get more involved in climate advocacy, animal advocacy, alternative proteins, and the vegan food space—I know those are very broad categories—but, given that it's something that's not talked a lot about, what initial resources would you recommend to those young people or those people that want to learn more about this space?

Cogie:

There's some great resources, if you're a Canadian student, the Good Food Institute—well this is, yeah, if you're a student anywhere—the Good Food Institute has some great resources on alt-protein specifically. Through that, the University of Waterloo—I believe, Alt-Protein Society is what they're called?—they create a resource that encompasses jobs in alt-protein, but then the resource goes beyond that and starts talking about various ways you can help animals, regardless of what your background is, you know, whether you be an artist, in business. Yeah, so that resource I think is incredible. And there's ample resources out there I think to get started, but start local, start at your university, start at your school, and just take the first step.

Sherry:

Great! Yeah, super inspiring. Hopefully more people are inspired to work on this problem. Any final words, I guess, to the podcast or to anyone watching before we wrap it up?

Cogie:

Yeah, you can give us a follow on Instagram @prookie_proteincookie. We're gonna be starting to make some more posts about launch dates and some of the work we're up to, so definitely give us a follow, and yeah, that's it!

Sherry:

That's it for this episode of Fork the System. If you have a guest or topic you'd like to hear about, share your ideas using the feedback form linked below. Until next time!

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