

TERRORISTS OR FREEDOM FIGHTERS?

KATRINA FOX TALKS TO WOMEN WHO RISK THEIR LIVES AND LIBERTY TO SAVE ANIMALS

Melanie Arnold is a 38-year-old manager of a small home for adults with learning difficulties and autism in the UK. It's one of a string of jobs she's had over the years as a carer and she's currently two years into a naturopathy course with the aim of healing people with natural medicine. She is a spiritual person with a respect for all life – human and animal. But the mainstream media brands her a violent 'terrorist'.

Why? Because she's carried out direct actions in the name of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) – from rescuing dogs from vivisection labs to using incendiary devices to set fire to some meat lorries and a slaughterhouse. The latter act took place in 1996 and Arnold spent three and a half years in prison for arson.

Government and big businesses throw the 'terrorism' label at Arnold and others like her, while images of the balaclaved 'extremist' continue to fill the pages of newspapers and magazines across the world. But an award-winning documentary by US lawyer Shannon Keith, *Behind the Mask*, portrays ALF activists as compassionate freedom fighters and acts of terror to be carried out by none other than those working in 'animal industries'.

Take Britches for example. Britches was a baby monkey who was removed from his mother at birth and his eyelids sewn shut in 1985. Bandages were wrapped around his eyes and a sonar device attached to his head that emitted a high-pitched screech every few minutes as part of a 'study' into maternal and sensory deprivation. Thanks to the ALF, Britches was liberated, the device removed, his eyelids opened and he lives happily with a surrogate mother in a primate sanctuary.

BREAKING THE LAW

"I was responding to something in need; the illegality of it did not concern me," Arnold responds when asked what prompted her to go from legal, overground protesting to illegal, underground acts. "Years of informing myself and dwelling on the horrific injuries and deaths of countless animals in our institutions, and of my inability to help in an immediate and direct way was suddenly reversed. The law doesn't just allow this abuse to take place, it creates the need, it finances it. Why on earth would I care if I broke such laws?"

Using the law to change laws isn't a viable option, Arnold continues. "It wasn't so long ago that it was legal to experiment on Jews in Nazi Germany, or on psychiatric patients in the UK. Legal to have black men in chains... Laws are transient and are altered when enough people demand they should be so, but not through letter-writing and voting, but through continuous hard-hitting action."

And this action is carried out predominantly by women in various ALF 'cells'. "From my earliest involvement it was primarily the women who organised and were the driving force behind a lot of actions in spite of men being involved," Arnold says. "There were and are a few very organised and focused key men and I intend in no way to minimise that, but it is my experience that cells were mostly women; and with a few very famously publicised raids being performed entirely by women."

TERRORISM?

But what of those who believe – and this includes some animal welfare and rights organisations – that burning buildings and vehicles and smashing up labs is going too far, especially in light of 9/11 and the 'war on terror'? "Fundamentalists blowing up an occupied building is an act of terrorism," Arnold says. "The US/UK invading, occupying and slaughtering civilians is an

act of terrorism. Vivisection blinding kittens and electrocuting monkeys are acts of terrorism. The ALF largely take rabbits, rats and dogs from facilities that are designed to study their torture. They take chickens and turkeys and sheep before they are boxed off to be decapitated. The ALF do not commit acts of terrorism – they prevent acts of terrorism. Does not a monkey feel terror in its stereotaxic chair while its brain is being interfered with? Do not beagle puppies having their faces punched not feel some degree of fear? Do pigs being blowtorched alive in burns experiments not feel terrorised?"

The ALF have never used the kind of indiscriminate bombs utilised by other organisations, Arnold adds. "In fact the ALF have never used bombs. Bombs are intended to kill and maim and that is not our intention. Furthermore to harm or kill is contrary to the principles of the ALF and is understood by those who adopt the name. The ALF use incendiary devices in a controlled manner to destroy inanimate objects (buildings, cars, equipment) that would otherwise be used to inflict harm or death onto a living animal."

It's a testament to the careful planning and detailed reconnaissance work of the ALF that no one has been killed in any of its thousands of actions over the past 20-plus years and similar actions have been employed in both the women's and black liberation movements. Nevertheless, the ALF is cited to be the number one domestic terrorist threat in the US by the FBI. How does it make Arnold feel to be labelled as such? "Nelson Mandela sat in a cell for 27 years for his involvement in the anti-apartheid movement," she says. "He was called a terrorist by a repressive regime. Times and opinions changed whilst he was incarcerated and he went from being a criminal to a leader of his nation, a beacon for peace. People who fight for the freedom of others have always been called terrorists."

BEHIND THE CAMERA

But it's not just direct action activists such as Arnold that the government and corporations find a threat. Even the lawyers who take on activists' cases can suddenly find themselves on the radar of security agencies – as Shannon Keith found out during the making of her film, *Behind the Mask* when she learned she was under investigation by the FBI who felt she was part of a 'conspiracy' with the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign to threaten and harass Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), a large vivisection company (see sidebar).

"The documents revealed that the government began investigating me in 2001, after I spoke in Little Rock, Arkansas, as part of a national protest against [bank] Stephens Inc," Keith, 34, explains. "Stephens Inc had lent HLS a tremendous amount of money to help prevent their bankruptcy. Interestingly, my 'speech' was about what the protestors could do legally. Based upon my speech there about legal issues, the FBI decided to spend taxpayers' money in launching an insane campaign against me. They proceeded to follow me, surround my house, search and steal my trash, follow my mother and implement pen registers [tap and trace devices] on my phone. Not only that, but they violated the sacred attorney/client privilege by listening to and transcribing conversations between my client [SHAC campaigner] Kevin Kionaas, and myself."

As a solo private law practitioner who "could never work for a large firm because I will never compromise my beliefs and take a case I do not believe in", Keith doesn't have to worry about being fired from her job with some big law firm, but she acknowledges that by simply defending animal rights activists and even making a sympathetic film about them could put her career in jeopardy. Yet it's not something she loses sleep over.



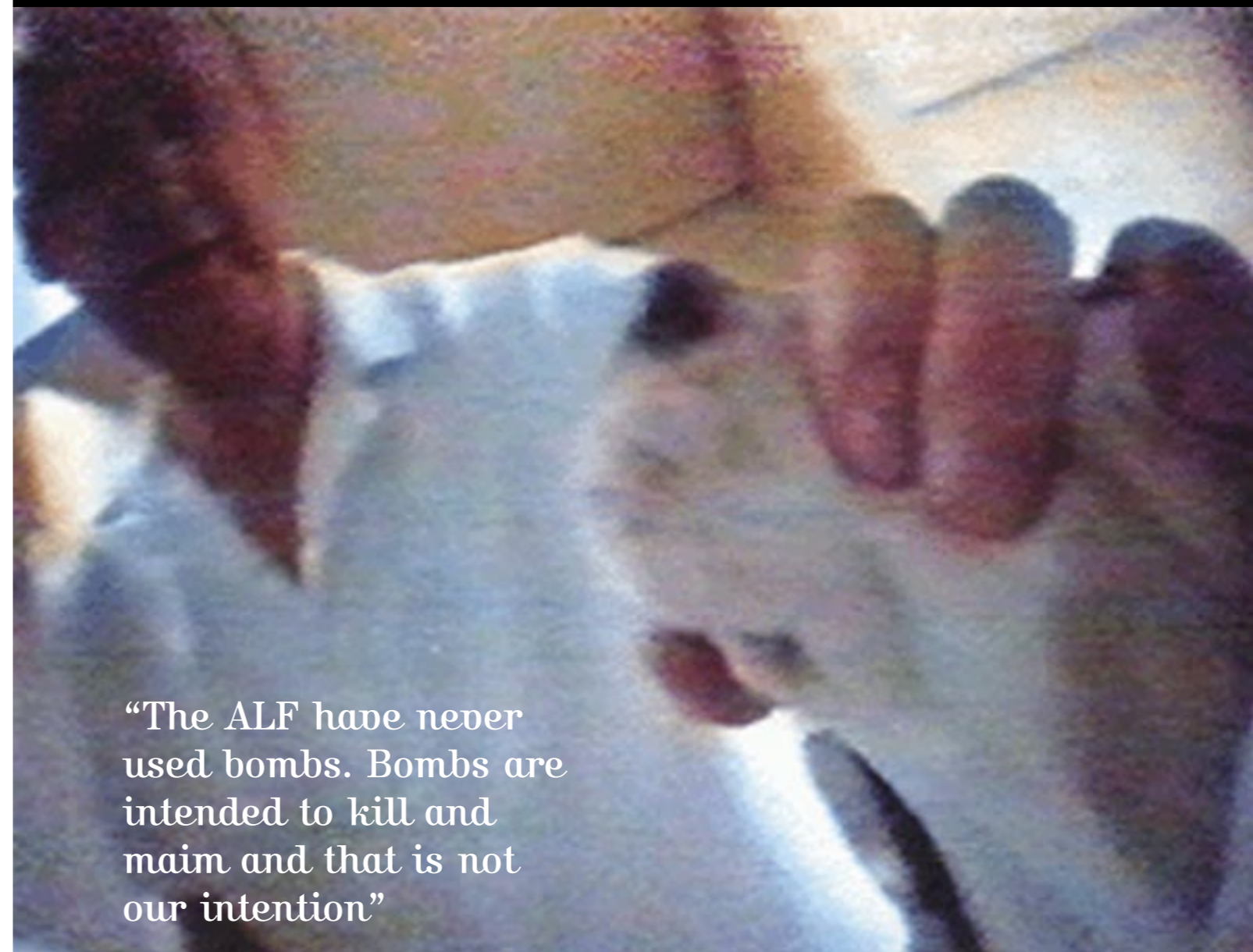
Melanie Arnold



Shannon Keith



Sandra Mohr



"The ALF have never used bombs. Bombs are intended to kill and maim and that is not our intention"



Caption



Photo credits Sarah Kite

ACTIVISTS VS BIG BUSINESS: THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST HLS

Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS) is the second largest contract research organisation in the world. Workers there kill 500 animals, including rabbits, cats, hamsters, dogs, guinea-pigs, birds and monkeys, a day in tests for products such as weedkiller, food colourings and drugs. HLS has been exposed not once, but at least five times for animal cruelty and rule-breaking.

Investigations began as early as 1981 when Sarah Kite went undercover at HLS for the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) where she revealed rats, mice and beagles were poisoned and died in their cages, bleeding and in agony. In 1997, Zoe Broughton worked undercover inside HLS as part of a Channel Four series, *Countryside Undercover* in the UK. Her investigation showed workers punching beagle puppies in the face and home office inspectors failing to do their job. Meanwhile in the US, PETA member Michelle Rokke's undercover video showed a catalogue of abuses at HLS including a monkey being cut open during an 'autopsy' while still alive.

The Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign was set up in 1999 with the sole aim of closing down HLS. SHAC groups in several countries used a range of tactics against HLS, from national demonstrations in busy city centres, protests outside the offices of any company that did business with HLS – from couriers to suppliers of equipment such as head clamps used to keep an animal in place – to leafletting the neighbours of HLS shareholders to let them know who they were living next door to.

So successful was the relentless campaign that HLS's share price plummeted, all the major banks in the UK as well as a slew of other financial institutions distanced themselves from the company, it was forced off the main trading platforms of the London and New York Stock Exchanges and the directors have had to put their own money into the firm.

In 2006, the battle between activists and big business in the US was stepped up when seven people (later dropped to six) were charged under the newly introduced and controversial Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) which aims to punish anyone who "physically disrupts" an "animal enterprise". The AETA was lambasted by over 200 animal protection agencies, as well as the National Lawyers' Guild, and the American Civil Liberties Union expressed "concern" over the Act.

The seven defendants (known as the SHAC 7) – Kevin Kijonaas, Lauren Gazzola, Jacob Conroy, Joshua Harper, Andrew Stepanian and Darius Fullmer – were charged with conspiracy to violate the Act. However, they were not actually accused of having personally engaged in terrorist or threatening acts. All the SHAC 7 did was operate an anti-HLS website. The government's case centred around the idea that above-ground organisers of a campaign are responsible for any and all acts that anyone engages in while furthering the goals of the organisers. The defendants were convicted, sentenced and are currently serving between one and six years in prison. This outcome has delivered a resounding blow to the concept of free speech and sent a chill through activists everywhere, no matter what their cause.

Despite these convictions, the campaign against HLS continues.

Visit www.shac.net and www.shac7.com for more information and find out what you can do to help.

“No matter how much money an animal protection organisation raises, it seems it is never more than the meat industry or pharmaceutical industry has... ”

“I believe in fighting for what I believe in, and if that fight puts my career in jeopardy, so be it,” she asserts. “We cannot live our lives afraid of what will happen if we stand up for what we believe in, and the fact that people live and react that way is embarrassing. I would rather lose my licence fighting for animal liberation than live the rest of my life not making the changes I wanted to make because I was scared.”

So dedicated is she to defending those who take action to save animals from torture and death that she recently set up The Activist Legal Fund – a non-profit organisation that comprises a network of lawyers in the US. Donations made to the fund mean that animal rights activists across the country can be guaranteed representation from a private attorney who cares about their case and has experience with the issues. “I have found that in the short time since the Fund started, there has been no shortage of those who wish to be involved,” Keith says. “It is promising and hopeful. With this resource, it won't be long before the big-time firms and corporations are fearful of us, and the organisation and success of the Fund with powerful attorneys will deter the government from continuing to frivolously prosecute activists.”

MEDIA BIAS

In addition to being engaged in battle with government and big business, animal rights activists and advocates also face the bias of mainstream media which regularly misrepresents their actions and tarnishes them with 'extremist' or 'terrorist' labels. Sandra Mohr is the 41-year-old editor of *Behind the Mask*. Mohr has been involved in animal rights campaigning, working behind the camera for 10 years, exposing the atrocities of a huge range of animal abuse industries from fur farms and vivisection labs to the meat and dairy industries and more. She admits it's not easy to get this kind of footage out

into the public arena.

“No matter how much money an animal protection organisation raises, it seems it is never more than the meat industry or pharmaceutical industry has,” she laments. “That's why television in the US is swimming in commercials that tell you to eat more meat and take more drugs. Given this fact, it is extremely difficult to get a television station to run an ad or programme that is in conflict with the pro-meat, pro-drugs commercials – at any price.”

Mohr's partner is renowned US TV news journalist Jane Velez-Mitchell who reports regularly for CNN, MSNBC, Court TV, Fox News, E! and other national cable TV shows. While not affiliated with the ALF, Velez-Mitchell understands the desperation they feel as they reach out unsuccessfully to the media for a voice and is one of the few mainstream journalists willing to risk saying this in public in *Behind the Mask*.

Mohr admits she knew little about the ALF before editing the film, but immediately became sympathetic to their actions, comparing them to doing the same job as the 'Underground Railroad' did for slavery – breaking the law for a higher purpose. She was also “more horrified” than she expected to be by the footage from inside labs. “Mice taped down on pieces of cardboard, guinea pigs stuffed into cylinders so that they cannot even move a limb and then gassed for 24 hours, and men in white coats cursing at, shaking, and punching beagle puppies when they screamed too much during the experiments.”

So why aren't these atrocities front-page news? “The reason mainstream media will not show the ALF as compassionate is because they are afraid of confronting the evil they are a part of when they consume or advertise products that exploit animals,” Mohr argues. “Also, they will lose advertisers that spend millions and millions of dollars each year to advertise on their

channel. For them, it is easier to just take the money and ignore the truth about these modern-day freedom fighters.”

Fortunately the Internet is changing the way people receive information, with sites such as YouTube offering the opportunity for people to watch extracts from *Behind the Mask* and see for themselves the human face and the compassion behind organisations such as the ALF.

“The animals need us now, and cannot wait for legislation to change. If your child, husband, wife, partner, sister, brother, mother or father were imprisoned, beaten and tortured, would you wait for the courts to change their mind about its legality or would you do everything in your power to make sure [your loved ones] got out of that horrible situation? I know that I would do everything in my power to help get that person out of there, just like I would with an animal.”

Behind the Mask is available from Animal Liberation NSW at www.animal-lib.org.au or Uncaged Films at www.uncagedfilms.com

The Activist Legal Fund is at www.activistlegalfund.org.

Visit www.peta.org for more on how to save animals.