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Surgeon Walks a Thin Line on Animal Rights

Dr. Jerry Vlasak stays carefully in the world of medicine while serving as a spokesman for extremists who threaten laboratory researchers.

By Joe Mozingo
Times Staff Writer

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His views are so incendiary that he is banned from ever visiting Britain. He has been arrested on a Canadian ice floe, at a traveling circus, at a Rodeo Drive furrier. In La Cañada Flintridge, he once fended off a furious PTA mom while disrupting an elementary school fundraiser featuring circus animals.

Dr. Jerry Vlasak, a trauma surgeon who lives in Woodland Hills, takes his belief that animal life is as valuable as human to the extreme — openly arguing that killing scientists to stop animal research would be "morally justifiable." He has become the public face for underground groups such as the Animal Liberation Front, which the FBI deems a significant domestic terror threat.

FOR THE RECORD:

Animal Liberation Front: A story in Tuesday's California section incorrectly reported that Dr. Jerry Vlasak, an animal rights activist and trauma surgeon, performs surgeries at Riverside Community Hospital. Though he is an active member of the medical staff — meaning that he has rights to practice if patients choose him -- he has not performed trauma surgery there since January.

Last month, those groups scored a victory when a UCLA professor conducting research on macaque monkeys sent Vlasak and others an e-mail with the subject line "You win." After several years of harassment and threats to his family, neurobiology professor Dario Ringach announced he would stop his primate research.

"I think Dario Ringach is a poster boy for the concept that the use of force or the threat of force is an effective means to stop people who abuse animals," Vlasak said in an interview last week.

Vlasak, 48, sits on a precarious perch within the animal rights movement. Through his Animal Liberation Press Office, he is the spokesman for shadowy groups that sabotage labs, vandalize homes, firebomb properties and make death threats via late-night phone calls. But he works in the wide open, operating a website, issuing press releases, talking to journalists.

The press office is in a business suite in Canoga Park. And despite Vlasak's advocacy of violence in one realm of his life, he works saving lives in another, performing surgery at Riverside Community Hospital.

He said he does not know anyone in the underground. He receives their anonymous "communiques" via e-mail or regular mail, posts them on his website and writes press releases to get the message out, he says.

The Animal Liberation Front is so deep underground that even its own members probably don't know who their fellow conspirators are, authorities say. And because there are no known leadership or membership rosters, anyone can strike under the group's name — or claim to have done so. The communiques are often signed just "ALF."

A typical one, posted on Vlasak's website July 27: "A bomb hoax was called into Phenomenal headquarters in Torrance California on July 13. The call was a hoax, but unless they cut their ties to ... Huntington Life Sciences, the next time the result could be different. ALF."

Huntington Life Sciences is an animal research lab.

In addition to his media work, Vlasak and his wife, former child actress Pamelyn Ferdin, formed the Animal Defense League of Los Angeles to bring a more confrontational, in-your-face element to the animal rights scene. They routinely demonstrate in front of city officials' homes to protest the euthanasia of 25,000 animals a year in Los Angeles pounds.

Their tactics both infuriate and frighten. The boundary between them and the criminal underground is murky; often, those on both sides target the same people.

In December the city attorney filed 14 criminal counts against the Animal Defense League and members, including Vlasak and Ferdin, for 62 specific acts of harassment and intimidation allegedly committed since January 2004.

In May, Vlasak was convicted of "targeted protesting" — in violation of a Los Angeles municipal ordinance — for protesting in front of a Department of Animal Services employee's home and sentenced to 30 days' electronic monitoring. Ferdin was convicted of trespassing and sentenced to 90 days in jail. She said she was released because of overcrowding after a day in the reception area.

Vlasak said the city is violating the group's free speech rights. He said authorities lash out against demonstrators because "they don't know who else to look for."

"There is a real firewall between the above-ground people and the underground," he said. "I am so high profile, I have to stay squeaky clean."

The FBI would not comment on Vlasak specifically. But a spokesman said agents are not going after people solely for their ties to the Animal Liberation Front or other domestic extremist groups.

"We're not going to go out and arrest everyone with ties to this group," said Paul Bresson, an FBI spokesman in Washington. "It's different with international terror groups like Al Qaeda, where just providing material support is breaking the law."

Experts say the animal rights campaign is more akin to the antiabortion movement than to foreign terrorist groups. Both homegrown movements harbor a wide continuum of ideology and strategy, including moderates seeking change through legal and political channels, combative picketers and an underground willing to use force.

Nationwide, the FBI says animal rights and related environmental extremist groups such as the Earth Liberation Front have escalated the number and severity of criminal incidents in recent years, although they have not succeeded in carrying out their threats of direct violence against people.

"From January 1990 to June 2004, animal and environmental rights extremists have claimed credit for more than 1,200 criminal incidents, resulting in millions of dollars in damage and property loss," John E. Lewis, the deputy assistant director of the FBI's Counterterrorism Division told a Senate committee last year.

Because they work as small, independent cells, they are difficult to break up.

Websites like Vlasak's help keep such a scattered movement focused by pointing out targets and then publicizing "direct actions" taken against them.

He said he does not fear acting on false information — even after activists targeting another UCLA researcher mistakenly left a crude explosive device at an elderly neighbor's home. The Molotov cocktail did not ignite.

Michael Budkie, the executive director of Stop Animal Exploitation Now, provides much of the research that activists use to decide whom to target. Based near Cincinnati, Budkie ferrets out public records from universities around the nation, pores through articles at the National Institutes of Health website, reads medical journals, locates animal necropsy reports and unearths research proposals.

Budkie and other activists plan to hold a press conference at UCLA today to release what they say are internal UCLA research documents "detailing primate healthcare records and experimental procedures," including those of Ringach.

He said he found articles by Ringach in scientific journals that described placing electrodes into the brains of macaque monkeys and measuring the neural response when the eye is stimulated with light.

Budkie said that, based on documents obtained by the activists, 30 monkeys are killed each year during the research.

Ringach has refused to talk about the subject after his family was repeatedly threatened. But William McBride, chairman of UCLA's animal research committee, said in a statement that "recent descriptions of some of the work being conducted here are ridiculously misleading."

Researchers at the Anti-Defamation League, which monitors hate groups, suspect Vlasak is tied to the underground that targeted Ringach.

"Spokespeople don't come out of nowhere," said Oren Segal, an eco-terrorism specialist for the ADL. "They have to prove their bona fides somehow. One of the reasons the Animal Liberation Press Office is so respected in the movement is that he is connected."

He said Vlasak brings a sense of social legitimacy to the movement. "Normally you think of these groups as tree-huggers, anarchists, people with piercings," said Segal. "Vlasak brings this notion: 'We're serious people. We have real jobs, we're affluent and we believe this.'"

In person, Vlasak is easygoing and has a sense of humor — not the stereotypical self-righteous fanatic. He admits running astray of his own absolutist theories on animal liberation.

For a meeting with a Times reporter, he picked a California Pizza Kitchen in Santa Monica — a place that serves all types of meat products, although he ordered a chicken-less Oriental salad and a hummus plate.

"Within a society, we do the best we can," he said. "I drive a car; I know I kill bugs. Some in the movement are the vegan police. They would

not eat here."

As a medical resident before he became an activist, Vlasak said he worked doing research on dogs' arteries in a lab at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. The experiments ultimately killed the dogs. He said he was not affected by it at the time.

Ferdin — who among many roles in the 1960s and '70s was the voice of Lucy on several "Peanuts" cartoon television specials — decided several years later that killing animals was wrong; and, after much reading, Vlasak came around to her view. Since then, they have led or joined all sorts of causes — against whaling, seal hunting, animal research, wolf hunting.

He and Ferdin chuckle at some of their follies in the field. "Pam was once chased down and beaten up by a popcorn lady at a circus," he said.

Yet his rhetoric is serious to the extreme.

"I don't think you'd have to kill too many," he told the Observer in England in 2004, speaking of researchers who experiment on animals. "I think for five lives, 10 lives, 15 human lives, we could save a million, 2 million, 10 million nonhuman lives."

He depicts his struggle as a war of liberation, no less significant than abolitionism in the 1800s or women's suffrage at the turn of the 20th century.

"No strictly peaceful movement has succeeded in liberation," Vlasak said. "John Brown dragged slave owners out of their beds and shot them in the street.

"I think the animal rights movement has been restrained in its use of force, mostly because people in the struggle are often people of privilege who aren't willing to risk losing that privilege."

Asked where he would draw the line on animals worth protecting with force — jellyfish, sponges, flies? — he parried that he has more pressing concerns.

"You don't have to believe in the rights of an oyster to see what they're doing at UCLA is wrong," he said.

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