

# Some 'fu for thought

Centennial vegan reflects on her lifestyle and fleeting fame from rejected tofu license plate

## At a glance

'ILVTOFU' nixed by DMV  
She explains vegan choices

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When Kelley Coffman-Lee proclaims her love for tofu, she isn't just telling tofu what tofu wants to hear.

"It can be used for anything," she said of the versatile food product. "You can freeze it and it has a different texture. We have a lot of tofu in the fridge right now."

The soft bean curd made with coagulated soy milk is something of a wonder food among vegetarians. What was once an esoteric component of Chinese cuisine has evolved into a vegan staple — a substitute for meat and eggs. Its requisite soy is also a chief ingredient in nondairy cheeses, mayonnaise and other vegan alternatives.

"That's the thing," Coffman-Lee said. "People don't have to give up anything to live a compassionate and responsible lifestyle."

Tofu had become such a fixture of the Coffman-Lee household that the 38-year-old Centennial mother of three decided earlier this year to pledge her affection for bean curd with a personalized license plate on her Suzuki



Centennial vegan Kelley Coffman-Lee received worldwide attention last month when she unsuccessfully applied for the personalized license plate, "ILVTOFU," for her Suzuki minivan. Photo by Peter Jones

minivan.

As has since become known from New York to Hong Kong, the Colorado Division of Motor Vehicles famously rejected Coffman-Lee's request for a plate reading "ILVTOFU." Officials said the letter combination could easily be read as a love for sex — and if the message were interpreted literally — sex with whatever driver happened to be behind the homemaker's vehicle.

"I wouldn't put that on my

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family car," she said with exasperation. "Our society — they're not really thinkers. There are dirty-minded people every place. I knew people might construe it in that manner, but tofu's a word!"

Since Coffman-Lee's run-in with DMV made the international news last month, she has experienced the sort of fleeting fame once predicted by pop artist Andy Warhol, who suggested that in the ever-evolving media climate everyone would be a celebrity for 15 minutes.

In the span of several weeks, the Centennial vegan has turned up as a quirky news item on every outlet from MSNBC to Salon.com. The local homemaker was even an answer on NPR's news quiz show, "Wait, Wait ... Don't Tell Me!"

As a result of Coffman-Lee's unintended tofu-mania, manufacturer Nasoya gave the homemaker a hefty supply of free tofu and the American Civil Liberties Union offered to take her case to court pro bono.

"It's just been wild. It's been stressful," she said. "It's weird seeing my name every place and hearing my voice on the radio. I had no idea it was going to explode like this. If I had known that, I never would have done it. I'm the 'eff-you' lady now."

Coffman-Lee was particularly bemused by the coverage her case received in a Taiwanese newspaper.

"It was all written in Taiwanese," she said. "But it had my name in English and then it said 'tofu' and 'sex' in English. And I'm like, 'Wait a minute. I don't know what that says!'"

The Centennial resident says she had hoped for more quality than quantity in the coverage her family's love affair with tofu received on the world stage. She says most of the interviewers have been more interested in titillation and free-speech queries than her core issues of veganism and animal rights.

"I thought maybe they would ask me questions about why I'm a vegan," she said. "They didn't care about the actual message. My First Amendment rights never occurred to me. The state has letter combinations that are not allowed and that happened to



**Centennial's Kelley Coffman-Lee uses an assortment of vegan meats, cheeses and other non-animal products when she prepares meals for her family of five. Photo by Peter Jones**

be one of them. I respect the decision. I'm done with it."

Coffman-Lee has turned down the ACLU's offer of legal representation.

"It seems like a waste of everyone's time," she said. "That's where the message would completely be lost."

### The lost message

Coffman-Lee wears her veganism on her sleeve.

Her T-shirt bears a running rabbit, an international symbol of anti-cruelty. The back of her Suzuki, the intended recipient of the ill-fated "ILVTOFU" plate, is covered with bumper stickers advocating veganism, animal rights and more controversially to some, her adamant anti-abortion views.

"I don't understand why so many animal-rights activists and liberals are pro-choice when it's kind of our philosophy to protect the weak and helpless," she explained.

As committed vegans and all-purpose "pro-lifers," Coffman-Lee's family has sworn off all animal products in their food, clothing and other household items.

A sign once hung on the front door reading, "Please don't wear leather, fur or other animal products in the house." The sign has since been removed because Coffman-Lee says she has learned to choose her battles.

"I took it down because it seems rude to most people.

There's a point where you have to be really extreme and there's a point where you have to let things go," she said.

For Coffman-Lee, health is an important issue, but she says her family's lifestyle and consumer choices ultimately boil down to protecting animals.

"Everything we buy, from food to shampoo, we have to read the labels," she said. "I think that's the weirdest thing to put stuff in your mouth without knowing what it is."

The wife and mother began her first flirtation with vegetarianism, as an exercise in non-conformity while she was still in high school.

"I was in Iowa," she said. "What's more different than being a vegetarian in the Midwest?"

She returned to vegetarianism as adult and kept a no-meat diet for nine years before completely removing all animal products from her household. That happened only after she had finished weaning her youngest child — an unnecessary precaution, she says in retrospect.

Early on, the new vegan fell off the wagon briefly at the temptation of a Krispy Kreme doughnut, but says she has not consumed any kind of animal product since.

Coffman-Lee's husband, Kristin, and her three children have also become committed vegans. When 10-year-old Gabe is asked if he is ever tempted to sway from his family's vegan regimen, the home-schooled fifth-grader does not miss a beat.

"A piece of meat used to be a living, feeling animal," he said with the calm self-assurance of an activist three times his age.

The family has experienced its share of detractors. According to Coffman-Lee, some people have been downright hostile to the way she and Kristin, have chosen to raise their children. She remembers an extremely overweight man counseling her husband on the "unhealthy" dangers of a vegan diet.

"That blew my mind," Coffman-Lee said. "You know what we're eating? We're eating fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes. We're eating all the crap that our mothers always told us to eat. My kids eat brussels sprouts and broccoli."

A vegan lifestyle has its challenges, though. Eating out invariably leads to either the fast-casual options of Noodles & Company and Chipotle or driving to central Denver's vegan-friendly City O' City and Watercourse Foods.

Even a few of the vegan foods that Coffman-Lee, herself, has prepared are a bit of an acquired taste, she admits.

"Some of the vegan food — you're eating it and you're wondering, is it spoiled or is it supposed to taste like this?" she said. "There's vegan fish. Yuck! I tried some in a can and it was horridness."

Still, the nonconventional cook stands by a long list of recipes in her broad animal-free repertoire — from tofu-scrambler burritos to soy-cheese pizzas with veggie pepperoni.

Clearly, Coffman-Lee does love tofu, just as she was prepared to proclaim on her would-be license plate. But she says she will stick with bumper stickers and conversation as the means to convey her message, at least for the time being.

"I'm done with license plates. I'm not going to try that again," she said, before hesitating.

"Maybe IHATMEAT. Can you have eight letters?"