

Rip Esselstyn:

Welcome to the Plant-Strong Podcast. I'm your host, Rip Esselstyn. We took a little breather last week because we were still recovering and reeling from the overwhelming success of our first ever Plant-Stock Weekend with over 4,000 people tuning in and committing to improving their health and the health of their families. We truly couldn't be more thrilled with how the weekend went, and behalf of my entire family, thank you and I think you'll all agree, even though we couldn't be together in person this year, our global community felt stronger and more connected than ever.

Rip Esselstyn:

Now, I've said it before and I'll keep saying it. Real men eat plants. If you recall, I said that when I was climbing the fire pole with just my arms, with my legs in a L-shape in Forks Over Knives. And with the smashing success of The Game Changers documentary, we've proved that it is possible ... actually, you know what, no ... make that optimal, to build muscle on a plant-based diet. If you still have to see it to believe it, then you'll want to feast your eyes and ears on today's guest. It is none other than Nimai Delgado, professional bodybuilder who, get this, has never eaten meat his entire life. That's right. Nimai was raised vegetarian since birth, and in 2015, while in peak training for bodybuilding competitions, went all in and became 100% Plant-Strong, and guess what? He's been out-muscling his competition ever since. What started as Nimai's personal mission to stay fit and healthy has quickly morphed into a career and a powerful myth-busting fitness and nutrition platform of spreading the benefits and possibilities of a plant-based lifestyle. I hope you enjoy this conversation with a true game changer and hero, Nimai Delgado.

Rip Esselstyn:

With the end of summer drawing near, it's natural to head back into the kitchen and to seek comfort foods that remind us of fall and the hopeful return to schedules and routines. We love hearing all the great feedback from folks who use our Plant-Strong Meal Planner to stay inspired and satisfied while on the Plant-Strong journey. Did you know that you can search by ingredient to find recipes to help you use up what you have on hand? And with the click of a mouse, you can scale any meal to make enough leftovers so you can cook once and enjoy twice. We love providing solutions to make Plant-Strong living easier. Join the Meal Planner today. It's just a buck 90 a week when you sign up for a year. Visit plantstrong.com today and click on, "Meal Planner."

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, here we are, season two of the Plant-Strong Podcast. I am here with Nimai Delgado. And I pronounced that correct?

Nimai Delgado:

Perfectly. Perfectly.

Rip Esselstyn:

Perfectly. The theme for season two is The Heart of a Hero. Obviously, with you, you have more than the heart of a hero. You have the biceps of a hero, you have the abs of a hero, you have the quads of a hero. But it's people that are really changing the game, and no doubt about it, you're changing the game. You've taken a completely different path than the traditional path. The last 18 months have been incredibly impressive for you. You were on the cover of Muscle & Fitness April 2018. Obviously one of

the stars in The Game Changers. You're a social media influencer. You got over 400,000 followers on your IG. Pretty impressive. Are you happy where you are right now?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, happy but never satisfied, like a true athlete, right?

Rip Esselstyn:

Right.

Nimai Delgado:

I think I just have big goals, and ever since I started this ... I didn't have those goals when I first started. This was kind of something I just ended up on this path, and once I was in it, it felt right to me, so I ended up pursuing it. But since I've seen what's possible to accomplish, now my goals are set really high. So I-

Rip Esselstyn:

We'll talk about that.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, of course.

Rip Esselstyn:

Before we do, tell me, how old are you?

Nimai Delgado:

Just turned 30.

Rip Esselstyn:

You're 30 years old. So, I mean, you're still a spring chicken. That's really exciting. When I think about where I was when I was 30, I wasn't even a firefighter yet. I mean, I was doing triathlons. It's exciting. So when people say, "What do you do?" are you a professional bodybuilder? What's your description?

Nimai Delgado:

That's a really good question. Sometimes I don't even know what to say because although I am a professional bodybuilder, I've never competed in bodybuilding for income, if that makes sense. So it's not something that you really pursue for money, because there's not much money in the sport. There's more money making businesses around what you do and maybe sponsorships and everything like that. So I would say I'm a professional body, I'm just a hobby bodybuilder.

Rip Esselstyn:

Were you the first vegan to ever get on the cover of Muscle & Fitness?

Nimai Delgado:

Yes. To my knowledge, and I asked them, and to their knowledge as well, I'm the first vegan to ever be on the cover.

Rip Esselstyn:

And how did that come to pass?

Nimai Delgado:

Funny story. I was actually competing in 2018 for the Arnold Classic and even just to compete at the Arnold, you have to get invited, so it was a really big accomplishment for me to even get invited because that's the top 30 guys in my category. So I got invited and I was training really hard up for that show because I wanted to make a big impact. And just every time I step on stage, it's not just stepping on stage for me. It's almost like stepping on stage for the entire vegan movement. Everybody's looking to me to use me as an example, so that adds a little bit of added pressure for me. But I take that with ... you know what I mean? It motivates me a lot.

Nimai Delgado:

So I was prepping for that show and Muscle & Fitness had reached out to me because we had done a shoot in the past. They reached out to me to do another shoot for them, but it was more for a workout and I was going to be the model. I had done that before, and this time around, I just straight up asked the editor. I was like, "Hey, is there any way I can share my story of what I'm doing? Because I feel like your listeners might be really interested in it. I'm the only vegan in my league competing at the Arnold, blah, blah, blah." And told them my story and they really loved it, and when we went to go do the photo shoot, they basically pulled me aside and they were like, "Hey, we're going to do a cover try." And I was like, "Well, what's that?" And he's like, "Well, we're going to try to get you on the cover, but we're just going to take some shots as if we were doing a cover shoot."

Nimai Delgado:

And I was like, "Okay, cool," but I really tried to keep my expectations really low. I was like, "That's not going to happen. Never going to happen." And yeah, a few months later ... maybe a month later or two months later ... a friend of mine actually sent me a text message of the cover with me on it and I'm like, "What is this? Are you joking me right now? Did you Photoshop this and just sent it to me?" And he's like, "Bro, I just got the email in my inbox and it's you on the cover." I was just like-

Rip Esselstyn:

Did you do a back flip?

Nimai Delgado:

No. I was just sitting in disbelief and I remember looking at it and I was like, "There is no way this just happened." Because I knew what a personal accomplishment it was for me, but a victory for this movement and everything that I've been trying to do, because I knew that there hadn't been one before. So for me to be the first one to open that door for other athletes ... because I'm sure there's going to be plenty in the future, or already have been since. But yeah, it was just a really good moment that I like to just take in.

Rip Esselstyn:

Huge. You keep using the term "vegan." How would you describe your lifestyle?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, lifestyle, I'm vegan. I wear the badge. I'm not afraid to say the word "vegan." I'm not afraid to be labeled as a vegan because it is who I am and I really think that ... There's been a misconception around the word "vegan" for a while now, and it kind of is getting better, I feel, but I think it's about rebranding the word and changing the way people feel whenever they hear the word "vegan." Instead of feeling judged, they should feel excited or feel inspired or feel empowered or however they feel. I think we should just kind of shift that a little bit. So seeing people that are calling themselves vegan and doing things that other people are inspired by, I think that's a really good way of rebranding.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. I think it's important to understand how you got to where you are today. We got to kind of explore where you came from, because you were raised in the Deep South where-

Nimai Delgado:

By you. Right around by you.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Where exactly?

Nimai Delgado:

In South Mississippi.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right. So South Mississippi, which is not, I think, known as a hotbed for vegetarianism or vegans, right?

Nimai Delgado:

Not quite, no.

Rip Esselstyn:

But so, obviously, I guess your parents must have been outliers ...

Nimai Delgado:

Very much so, yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

... and raised you as vegetarian, correct?

Nimai Delgado:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rip Esselstyn:

I mean, so tell me about your family and how you grew up.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. Definitely got to go back. My parents are from Argentina, and they immigrated to the United States in 1988 or something, right before I was born. So they had two kids, my brother and sister, and then my mom was pregnant with me. They came here with absolutely nothing, basically under the pretenses of being religious workers. They are Hindu, and they found their faith and followed their guru who told them about an opportunity in the United States. So they said there was a community in Mississippi that they would have free housing, and they basically made their journey there, and that's where I was raised, in a farm-like community in South Mississippi, but purely of people that believed in Hinduism. We had a temple. We had a cow sanctuary, like a rescue cow sanctuary. We had a garden. Looking back, it was a really beautiful place to grow up, but in a very challenging surrounding environment.

Rip Esselstyn:

So in that Hindu community, was that the way everybody ate? So you didn't feel necessarily like you were standing out from the crowd in Southern Mississippi eating this way.

Nimai Delgado:

No. I mean, I grew up there until I was about seven years old, so I didn't really have too many of those thoughts of feeling different. But once I ventured out and went to public school, that's when I realized that, whoa, I was raised really differently than other kids my age. They let me know right away how different I was. Kindergarten, first grade, second grade, through even all the way up until high school, people knew that I was kind of raised different and it was just apparent because of my name, and also whenever I ate. So like you mentioned, there aren't very many vegetarians in Mississippi, at least at that time, and I knew I was the only one in my school. So every time I would bring my lunch, people would give me crap for being a vegetarian, bringing my lunch and not eating burgers. They would always, like, "Hey, take a bite of this burger. Let me know if you like it." And I was just like, "No, I'm good. I'm good."

Rip Esselstyn:

So that must have shaped your resiliency and your ability to do what you're doing today.

Nimai Delgado:

Looking back, it definitely helped because even on a bigger scale, just being a vegan in a regular community, you feel kind of ostracized, like outcasted, like you are different than everybody else, so I kind of have been going through that my entire life. And ironically, it was very much the same reasons, people not understanding my lifestyle choices, not really understanding how I was eating and why I was eating that way. So I would get asked these questions quite a bit growing up, and for the philosophical or ethical stance of why I was vegetarian, it didn't really resonate with my peers. So I just kind of stopped saying it, and I just went this route of being like, "Yeah, I'm allergic to meat," or, "It's not healthy for ..." I just always kind of had an excuse that didn't end up talking about ethics, because people get very defensive. And that was my way of navigating those conversations for a long, long time.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. So you were a vegetarian up to a certain age, and then you decided to go all in. When did that happen, and what initiated that leap to the next level?

Nimai Delgado:

That was when I was 24 or 25, so about five years ago. I had moved to California after I graduated college and got my degree, accepted a job out here, and just got very much into going to the gym more and really putting effort into going to the gym because I was bored outside of work. There wasn't much else to do out where I lived in California. And I decided ... maybe a day or two before I went vegan ... but I decided to do a bodybuilding show and just commit to stepping on stage and getting out of my comfort zone. That was something like a personal goal of mine. But two days later, I was on Facebook and my mom, of all people, shared this video about the dairy industry and what goes on behind the dairy industry.

Nimai Delgado:

That is what prompted me to go vegan, because at the time, I was working as a mechanical engineer in a gas plant and I dealt with all these different operating systems and process constantly, and it was my job to refine them and make them more efficient and make sure they were safe and the risk was low and everything else. But after I saw what was going on behind the dairy industry, it was very similar to what I was doing and I just thought in my head, I was like, "There's probably another engineer that is doing my exact type of work, but to maximize their efficiency for these dairy farms, and it's at the expense of these living creatures that are put in these horrendous conditions and they're just looked at as dollar bills and not living creatures."

Nimai Delgado:

And it really made me sick that I was paying that guy's salary and I was supporting that company, so I just decided to give up dairy altogether. So cheese, whey protein, cottage cheese, yogurt, all the stuff that I was really relying on for my bodybuilding, because those are all the high protein foods. And I just decided, I was like, "I'm going to find a way around it."

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay. Let's talk protein. We know that eating plant based, you're going to get all the protein you need as long as you're consuming enough calories. It's a slam dunk, no problem. But when you're trying to build muscle, I would imagine the requirement's a little bit different. So were you at all worried at first that you would have trouble building enough muscle eating, let's say, a vegan diet?

Nimai Delgado:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, definitely. Definitely. It was kind of like, "Okay, well, this is my new set of conditions and I just have to see if it can work." I had no idea about any of the health benefits. I didn't research the health benefits until much later. It was just kind of trial and error for me. So I cut out all the dairy, all the whey protein, everything else, and then I was like, "Okay, well, I can replace the whey protein with a plant-based protein shake, and then if I stop eating all of these Greek yogurts and stuff, maybe I can replace them with more beans and lentils and whole feeds and maybe even some mock meats." At that time, there was a few brands that were still fully vegan, or were vegan even back then.

Nimai Delgado:

I just kind of made it work. But I was still following this really high number of protein, because this is the information that I was fed, and when I was researching on [bodybuilding.com](#) or these different fitness magazines, even in the gym, everybody was telling me the same thing, like, "Hey, you got to get one to two grams of protein per pound of body weight." So at the time, I was like 150, so I'm shooting for 300 grams of protein. But on a vegan diet, getting 300 grams of protein, it's pretty hard unless you're eating all this maybe processed food or supplementing with protein shakes, so it was really a struggle for me. So I was like, "Maybe I can just eat as much as I can, which is a lot lower than 300 grams, and see if it can work."

Nimai Delgado:

And what I found was it was actually really easy to get between 150 to 200 grams of protein per day. It wasn't that hard for me. And over time, that number has slowly come down for me as well. So as I continue to train, I realize that I can do without so much protein. So now I get like 150 grams.

Rip Esselstyn:

150. Okay, so you're not having to do two grams per pound of weight.

Nimai Delgado:

No, not at all.

Rip Esselstyn:

You're [crosstalk 00:18:00]

Nimai Delgado:

I'm more around .8, .85, somewhere around there.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right, right. Okay. And so are you able to do that eating all whole food plant based, or do you have to supplement with any kind of shakes or stuff like that?

Nimai Delgado:

I do two shakes, but it's purely for my convenience. It's not necessarily because it's my only way of getting protein. I just like waking up and having a smoothie or having a smoothie after my workout. Those are the two times I have protein shakes. But the rest of my food ... So that's probably 50 grams from supplements. The other 100 grams or more all comes from whole foods. You're talking about lentils, legumes, beans, tofu, tempeh, occasionally a veggie burger or things like that, but nowadays I'm pretty much predominantly whole food plant based, and no oil as well.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right, right. You've even gone no oil?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, I've been no oil for a few years now.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right. And I suppose that probably helps you really to be lean and mean consistently.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. Yeah, of course. I mean, most guys struggle to get their fats low whenever they do bodybuilding contests, but for me, sometimes I have to add in fats to my diet because I'm not getting any.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right, right. Do you log everything you're eating into Cronometer or something like that so you know exactly what you're getting?

Nimai Delgado:

Only when I prep for shows. Only when I prep for bodybuilding shows or do a really big photo shoot or something like that, because I'm a numbers guy. I go by data, so I'm very data driven. I know what works for me. If I do this macro ratio and these amount of calories, then my weight will drop by half a pound per week. I'm five weeks out. That'll put me right where I need to be for the photo shoot. I just kind of reverse it all out.

Rip Esselstyn:

So just to go a little deeper into that, if you want to get to your ideal, let's just say, weight, look, feel, and all that, you start five weeks out?

Nimai Delgado:

It depends. It depends where you start, because it could have been a great winter and you may have gone really hard on Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner and all those family functions. So maybe you gained a little bit more body fat than you normally start at, so you have to look at a little bit longer. So maybe I'll do eight weeks or something.

Rip Esselstyn:

So give me an example. How much do you weigh right now?

Nimai Delgado:

Right now about maybe 175. 175 to 180.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, so 175 to 180. And then what do you like to be at when you're doing a photo shoot or competing?

Nimai Delgado:

I'm a lot smaller than what I was when I was competing because my training style and eating regimen has changed a lot. But whenever I was competing, I was stepping on stage at about my weight right now, so about 175 to 180. I was almost 10 pounds heavier just before prepping for a show, but on stage, I was a good five or six pounds heavier than what I am right now. So about 175 to 180.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wow. So it's not a matter of necessarily going down in weight, it's a matter of going up a little bit? Or ...

Nimai Delgado:

Well, at that time before, I was probably 185, 190, walking around. But then when I prepped down, I would lose about 10 pounds and be ready for stage.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right. Well it's-

Nimai Delgado:

So it's definitely you lose weight. If you're prepping for a show that's two months away and you're 180 pounds, by the time you step on stage, you may be 165, 170, 175, so 10 pounds less.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right. If I'm a traditional bodybuilder, what am I relying on to get to where I want to be that you aren't even thinking about because you're doing the vegan thing?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. Protein, number one. Most guys really up their protein whenever they put themselves in a calorie deficit and start to train for shows. So most guys will go two grams per pound of body weight starting their prep. So that means I'm a light bodybuilder compared to some of these other guys. Some of these other guys step on stage at 230 or 200 pounds, so that's a big difference when you're talking about pure muscle. And those guys get like 40 to 50% of their calories from meat, so that means they got to eat and eat and eat to get that much. So you're talking egg whites for breakfast, maybe throw some whole eggs in there, too, then a whey protein shake after that, then maybe eight ounces of chicken breast, then another eight ounces of chicken breast, then another eight ounces of sirloin, and then another eight ounces of salmon or something like that before they go to bed. So that's four or five different animals right there. Again-

Rip Esselstyn:

Right. Different animals that they're not-

Nimai Delgado:

Not even the amount of protein, but just different animals that are supporting this one being. So as a vegan, you don't have that type of ... You don't need those same type of resources, so you can just go straight to where the animals get their calories and protein and amino acids and everything and get it directly from the plants, cut out the middlemen, cut out the suffering, cut out the death, and then increase your recovery time, increase your performance, increase your cardiovascular health. There's just too many reasons to count as to why at least being open minded to the idea of a plant-based diet could be beneficial.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well said. I've noticed that you do a really nice job on social media, especially with all the comments and all the naysayers and all that. What do you say to people that maybe say, "There's no way that Nimai can be that big and not be doing steroids," or something like that.

Nimai Delgado:

Again, it's hard for people to grasp that there are people that work really hard and are really disciplined. But then making that circle even smaller, there's even fewer examples of vegans that are doing that. So obviously, now people are aware because The Game Changers just came out and their mind has been blown and they're seeing these guys that have been doing it for a while. But previously, there weren't just many examples. So you see a guy that's muscular and you think, "Wow, that's impressive." But then, to a normal person, seeing a guy that's muscular and, "Wait a minute. He's vegan. He doesn't eat all those foods I just listed? There's no way he could do this. It must be steroids or something like that." But the reality is that social media has greatly lowered the bar for what people consider to be possible and what people consider to be impossible. So nowadays, there's people that edit their photos. There's just so much other stuff that's going on on social media that makes you believe that everybody's on drugs because it just doesn't seem realistic.

Nimai Delgado:

But I've been lifting for 10 years or maybe more. I always eat healthy. I train really hard in the gym. I analyze every single thing that I do when it comes to how I lift, how I'm spending my time in the gym. I mean, I'm a numbers guy so if people don't believe me, I stop trying to convince them, essentially. If they don't believe me, I take it as a really ... It's a compliment. They think that something I'm doing is impossible. But in reality, what they're just saying is that it's impossible for them because they don't believe they could do it. They already limited themselves to ever being able to accomplish that. So my response is, you guys are capable of so much more than you give yourself credit. So you don't have to resort to those drugs. You don't have to resort to doing things that are bad for your health in order to reach a certain level. That's what's beautiful about talking about being plant based, is that you don't have to sacrifice your health in order to look good, because most of these guys on stage, they look really good but their health is really bad.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. You lift up the hood and it's probably pretty problematic.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. You know.

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh yeah.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. You know.

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. No, there's more people that look like Ferraris on the outside but you peak under the hood and it's a mess. How well do you know Mischa?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, pretty well.

Rip Esselstyn:

Did you meet him during The Game Changers, or you knew him before that?

Nimai Delgado:

Funny story. I was actually scrolling through old photos, and before I ever moved to the LA area, I used to come down to Gold's Gym from Bakersfield just as a weekend treat for me just to spark my motivation. I just love going to Gold's Gym because it's every bodybuilder's dream. And in 2016, I went down there just on a weekend trip and I had got some workout videos, and who do I see in the back? Mischa.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wow.

Nimai Delgado:

And who else is with him? The Game Changers crew, and they were filming Mischa and I had no idea that that was Mischa or who he was or what they were filming for. And then about a year later, after I filmed ... or maybe, yeah, a year and a half later after I filmed for The Game Changers and we go to this event is the first time I meet him. He's just a good buddy of mine now and he's a great guy. I love Mischa to death.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. I mean, that was, to me and a lot of people ... You may not have seen this, but at the one-day world premier on September 16th, they had some bonus footage after the film.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, I did see that. Yeah, I did see that.

Rip Esselstyn:

And it was 20 minutes and there was a lot of James Cameron in there, and then they followed it up with some different ... kind of zeroing in on some of the different athletes in the movie. But they did Mischa, and they showed him being tested for drugs and taking a lie detector test. And so there's different categories, right? I mean, is there a clean category and then anything goes?

Nimai Delgado:

It's more like a tested federation versus a non-tested federation. So if you compete in the tested federation, you have to go through that protocol every single time you compete to make sure that people aren't using drugs. In the federation that I compete in, it's not the case. And the reasoning for that in my mind was when I first started off, I was doing natural shows and I won and I did great. But I saw the response that people were telling me as like, "Yeah, you look great for a natural guy, but you could never compete against these guys in this organization."

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh wow.

Nimai Delgado:

And I was like, "I think I can. I really think I can." And the very first show that I did in the non-

Rip Esselstyn:

So that caused you to up your game, didn't it?

Nimai Delgado:

It did. Well, the other thing is that there's a lot more publicity in the league that I compete in because Arnold was in it. It's the Mr. Olympia contest. There's a lot of good publicity around it. And I was like, "Man, if I'm going to reach the most people, I should probably compete in the league that gets the most publicity." So I did my first show and I won the whole thing. I won the overall, and I was like, "All right. Now I can do it."

Rip Esselstyn:

So this is ... Again, let me just repeat. You won the whole thing, and this is a league where anything goes.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

Even guys that are doing 'roids.

Nimai Delgado:

Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay. Wow.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. And that's one of the proudest moments that I've had in bodybuilding was stepping on stage, winning that overall, knowing that there was 80 guys behind me that they could or could not be doing exogenous hormones, and they're also eating meat. I was the only vegan, probably one of the few natural guys up there, and I had won. That proved everything that needed to be proven to me, that it's possible. And after I won that first one, I was like, "Now there's no question in my mind that I could get to the next level," which would be the professional level. And four shows later, I ended up getting my professional status.

Rip Esselstyn:

That's pretty exciting stuff right there. The single most important pet health decision we can make each day is what to feed our furry friends. While science backs that a plant-based diet is better for the planet and has significant health advantages, what you feed your pet should be a decision you take seriously and give considerable consideration. I also encourage you to think beyond the bowl into the impact that your pet food has on the world around us. For these reasons, it's easy for our family to feed our dog

Jade Wild Earth. It checks every one of the boxes and is in complete alignment with our family values. Try it today. Visit the episode page at plantstrongpodcast.com to claim up to 50% off your order.

Rip Esselstyn:

One of the scenes in The Game Changers that I love is when you're talking about how all these guys backstage, they're ... I don't know where their minds are, but you, you're eating a banana, you're doing what you want, and they're kind of marveling at you going, "Oh my God. How is this guy able to do it?" I mean, that must ... How much of bodybuilding and competition is the mental game, and do you think by doing what you're doing, it's given you an actual mental edge on these guys? I mean, do they know what you're doing and that you are vegan?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, for sure they know. A lot of the chatter behind stage is pretty mutually respectful. Just to be a professional athlete and get to a certain point, there's a certain level of respect that everybody gives because no matter what, if you like the guy or not, you know he's a hard worker, he's dedicated, he's really driven, so you can respect that. The difference is whenever you see somebody doing it different. So most of the guys backstage, they really are curious of how I'm doing it, or what I'm eating. Because again, they follow me online or they hear about me or they see, "Oh, it's this vegan guy. What is he doing?" And they see the food that I'm eating up until my show and it's totally different than what they're eating, and my prep time is significantly less, too. Some guys train 12 to 16 weeks out before a show, some guys shorter, but normally my prep time is six weeks ...

Rip Esselstyn:

Wow.

Nimai Delgado:

... which is really fast. And they're just curious. It's a good thing because-

Rip Esselstyn:

So how many ... Yeah, go ahead.

Nimai Delgado:

No, I was just going to say, it just opens their mind. It just opens their mind. And most of the time, these guys ask me questions and I answer it like always and there's a shift there, which is good.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Do you know of any of these guys that have been curious and asked you questions that have actually come over to the ...

Nimai Delgado:

The green side?

Rip Esselstyn:

... the Plant-Strong side?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Definitely, a ton.

Rip Esselstyn:

Really?

Nimai Delgado:

A ton. Oh yeah. Some guys that are big, too. I can think of one guy in particular. He's 6'5", 230, and he didn't think it was possible. He's a bodybuilder competitor and he went vegan. And what's even crazier ... this is the part that I love ... is that I always lead with health and performance and kind of leading with the ego because the ego speaks to everybody, and everybody wants to look good. Everybody wants to be sexy. Everybody wants to be confident. They want to feel good. And talking about this lifestyle from that angle really makes people's ears perk up. If you come at it with another angle and you're like, "Hey, what you're doing is terrible for the environment, it's terrible for animal welfare, you're killing yourself," people are going to be like, "I don't even want to hear this stuff. Get away from me," right?

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah.

Nimai Delgado:

But what's crazy is that that mindset shifts just from talking about it from a health perspective, so these guys that are going vegan and try it for three, four months, all of the sudden I see them posting on social media some stuff about animal rights and being eco friendly and there's a shift there. I'm like, "Wow, he wasn't talking about those things," or, "He didn't even care about those things when he first started, but now he can see that since he doesn't need those, maybe it is kind of wrong, or maybe there is some changes that can be made."

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Well, maybe it was Mischa that said it in the film, but sometimes especially I think men, they need somebody to show them what's possible and to lead, and then they're able to kind of embrace something that they think is impossible. So, I mean, kudos to you and Mischa, back in the day, Bill Pearl, who was-

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, Bill Pearl, of course. Yeah. And even Arnold recognizes Bill Pearl as a good friend and he considered him one of the best bodybuilders in the world. And even Arnold knew back then that he was purely vegetarian.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. I think there was some stuff in the extra 20-minute footage ...

Nimai Delgado:

That's right, that's right.

Rip Esselstyn:

... with Arnold and Bill Pearl and stuff like that. So what's some of the craziest bro science stuff that you've heard in the gym that guys are doing these days?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. The gym rhetoric, it's always fun to listen to because normally ... I mean, there is a bit of ... I understand why this happens, because normally there's a really big guy in the gym. Who knows how he got there or how long he's been working out or what he did to get to that point, but normally it's just from personal experience. These younger guys will walk up to the bigger guy and be like, "Hey, what do you do? How do you train? What do you eat?" And this big guy will give his personal experience, which may or may not be healthy. And again, I call it gym bro science or gym rhetoric, the bro bible, you know what I mean, the bro gospel, essentially. This same message keeps getting passed down generation after generation and guys tend to just take it as how it is.

Nimai Delgado:

Protein's one of the biggest one. Even nowadays still, trainers will tell their clients that you cannot be a vegan bodybuilder and there is no way that you can get enough protein, and you will definitely develop some type of deficiencies. I know this because people send me messages of screenshots from their trainer after they want to go vegan or watch *The Game Changers* and they're like, "Hey, I talked to my trainer about it but he told me it's impossible and he's certified." And yeah, I mean, maybe certified in training, not in nutrition, but they believe him, and that's where I get a little bit upset because people are talking about a subject that they don't necessarily know about in enough depth to speak on it and make that call. But here there are many other people who do know about it in depth and can clearly break it down how it is possible and show you that it's possible. Yeah, that's where I get a little bit aggravated with bro science.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, totally. And I think that so many of these guys in particular ... maybe women as well ... it seems like they'd be willing to do anything that can get them big and strong. If somebody said, "Hey, you want to drink two liters of horse piss every day," they'd probably be thinking about it. Kind of ridiculous.

Nimai Delgado:

But on the same note, they won't look at their diet. They're willing to do all this, but cut out meat and dairy? That's extreme, right?

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Yeah. It's a little bit ass backwards. You were a mechanical engineer. You hated it, right? It felt like a slow death?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. Yeah. It was voluntary jail. I would go to the same cell every day, lock the door behind me, and then think of why I couldn't be outside living my life. It was miserable. It was soul suicide.

Rip Esselstyn:

So if I'm not mistaken, your outlet was going to the gym, bodybuilding, right? It's where you felt free and like it allowed you to soar. And so at what point were you like, "All right. I can't do this any longer and I am going to take this leap of faith"?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, it was tough. It's tough when you try to leave and they keep throwing money at you. I mean, I'm almost ashamed to say it now, but working in the oil and gas industry, it was one of the highest paying industries and that's one of the reasons why I went into it, even though I considered myself an environmentalist and cared about the planet and everything. But growing up poor and when money's always an issue, stability is something that's very highly sought after, and that's what I wanted. I wanted something stable, something that would give me a good paycheck every month and utilize my engineering skills, and that's why I went into it. But I never went into it from the place of, "This is what I want to do. I feel enjoyment and fulfillment from walking into work and doing these projects." I never felt that once, and that should have been a really clear sign for me.

Nimai Delgado:

But I had the blinders on because I was getting paid very handsomely, and that kept me there for a while because I kept thinking, "What else could I do? What else could I possibly do?" And I never looked at the gym as being something that could be capitalized financially or even especially being a vegan, nobody was really caring about what I had to say and I was like, "I don't really know." And then as I got more into attending VegFest and giving speeches and things like that, that's when I really noticed that people were listening and people were really evaluating what I had to say and walking up to me and telling me their personal stories about how I may have helped them or inspired their journey to go plant based and they feel healthier.

Nimai Delgado:

But yeah, one guy in particular really just was the straw that broke my back, essentially. He made me look at myself and question what I was doing and whether or not I was spending my time purposefully or not. He basically told me that I helped save his mom's life in a very short story, and it really touched me. I went back home that weekend and I thought, "What am I doing? I'm spending 10 hours a day in a place that I really hate, and then on the weekends, I'm living my life to my fullest and getting so much fulfillment in meeting these people and seeing the difference that I'm making. Why don't I just take a shot? What's going to happen? I don't like my job anyway. There's always going to be another shitty engineering position that will hire me if this doesn't pan out, but why not take a shot at really pursuing what makes me happy and really let that drive my direction?"

Rip Esselstyn:

Bravo. Bravo. Yeah, yeah, it's amazing how many people are stuck in jobs that they can't stand, right? And they're not fulfilling their passion and their destiny.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. Or they think they're stuck, and that's where I was. I thought I was stuck because I didn't think that there was any way out. But I think if you let your heart lead you and you give your energy 100% to what drives you and what brings you happiness, then you're going to get really good at it. You know?

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah.

Nimai Delgado:

And if you're good at something, people will pay you to do it. Whatever it is, you can make it into some type of sustainable business. And again, money isn't the definition of success. In my version, it's what brings you happiness and joy. If you're super happy and joyous all day and doing what you love, then I would consider that a really big success, not just financially. So you may be even okay with making less money, which I had to make that choice, like, "Can I be okay with making less money and be this much happier?" And I was like, "It's worth it for me."

Rip Esselstyn:

Very wise man at just 31 years old. That's impressive. When you're in these competitions, what kind of high is it? Is it pretty cool?

Nimai Delgado:

Nobody's ever asked me this question, but I think the high comes whenever you reflect back. It's not necessarily when you're on stage. When you're on stage, you're still focused and I'm still thinking all my cues, like, "Okay, back pose. Feet out. Flare my lats. Rotate my shoulders back. Squeeze my rhomboid." I'm thinking all those cues, so I'm very much focused. I'm not really allowing myself to be present and bask in the glory, you know what I mean, of being on stage. It's more like, "Execute, execute, execute." But then when I get off stage, regardless of the placing, I look back and I'm like, "Wow, I did it." And then I'll think about the journey it took to get there, so prepping every single day, going to the gym every day, working out with my friends, seeing the slow progress of my hard work. That's where the high really comes. It's like, "Wow, I just feel accomplished and inspired," because as soon as I'm done I'm like, "All right, let's do another one."

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Do you get nervous at all before competitions?

Nimai Delgado:

Nah. No, I thought I would, but even my first one, I was never nervous. It's fun. You can't really see anybody. That's the other thing that people don't realize.

Rip Esselstyn:

Because of the-

Nimai Delgado:

The lights are so blinding. You can see the first two or three rows of people, but beyond that, you don't really see anybody.

Rip Esselstyn:

Tell me what you've had to eat today.

Nimai Delgado:

Today. Today's been a different day for me. I fasted up until I worked out, and then I came back home and had a-

Rip Esselstyn:

What'd you do for your workout? What'd you work on? What body part?

Nimai Delgado:

I worked out twice today, so I had a session in the morning with a friend and we did just biceps because we were filming for his YouTube channel and just people always want to work out biceps with me. And then I went to the gym and did legs with my buddy. Then I came back and the first thing I did was have a big smoothie. That consisted of almond milk, a banana, some frozen blueberries, one scoop of protein powder, a little bit of maca powder, and a little bit of creatine. So that was what I had for the first thing, and then I ate a little while before you got here and I had some jasmine rice with some lentil dahl, dahl lentils. And that's it.

Rip Esselstyn:

Gotcha. What do you consider your strongest body part?

Nimai Delgado:

My brain.

Rip Esselstyn:

That's awesome. Okay. How about outside of your head?

Nimai Delgado:

Okay, outside of my head, yeah. My two biceps, for sure.

Rip Esselstyn:

Your two biceps?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

All right. And I-

Nimai Delgado:

I call them my moneymakers now.

Rip Esselstyn:

And you've named them, right?

Nimai Delgado:

Yes.

Rip Esselstyn:

You've named them ... is the right one grapefruit, or the left one?

Nimai Delgado:

No, the left one.

Rip Esselstyn:

The left one's grapefruit.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, the right one's chickpea. Because there's a split down the middle and it kind of resembles a pea, like a chickpea, so yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

That's awesome. And what would you say is the most challenging body part that you're working on?

Nimai Delgado:

Calves. Calves for me. I just don't have the genetic gifts that other people do when it comes to calves, and I've been working on them. And people tell me ... Oh man, people are vicious online. They're like, "What about your calves?" I'm like, "Bro, listen, I'm hitting them. They're just not growing."

Rip Esselstyn:

Isn't that funny? Calves do seem to be an extraordinarily genetically either gifted or not gifted body part.

Nimai Delgado:

You know what you never see? Calf transformation pictures. Because you either have them or you don't. You never see somebody like, "Oh, two years ago, this is what my calves looked like. Now they're like this," and they're huge. It just doesn't happen.

Rip Esselstyn:

I'll give you half my right calf. I'll have to show you my right calf. I got a good right calf. To soy or not to soy?

Nimai Delgado:

To soy.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, to soy. And when you do soy, are you doing whole soy, like edamame, tofu, tempeh?

Nimai Delgado:

I do those three versions of soy. I don't do soy powders, just because I prefer pea protein powder. But I do edamame, organic soy, and organic tempeh. Those are pretty much ... I mean, occasionally when I do mock meats, alternative meats, most of the time they have some soy in there and I'll eat it there, too. But apart from that ... yeah, that's about it.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Me too. I'm not afraid of soy. We know the-

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. Well-

Rip Esselstyn:

Go ahead.

Nimai Delgado:

I've been eating it my whole life as a vegetarian. I had the ... It's called TVP, which is texturized vegetable protein. I was eating that since I was a kid because my parents would buy it in bulk from the Indian stores and they would come home and soak it and they'd make these little granules and then they would flavor it and it was awesome. So I've been eating it my whole life and people are always ... Yeah, it's going to be a hard one to convince people it's okay to eat soy. But-

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. I think The Game Changers does a pretty good job of explaining how the phytoestrogens in soy actually can block those estrogen receptors that we have and regulate the amount of estrogen. It's a good thing.

Nimai Delgado:

And it's funny because guys are so afraid of soy, especially the fitness guys, and then they're still drinking cow's milk or they're drinking beer and they don't realize all the phytoestrogens that's in beer and all these other things. But soy just gets the bad rep, but you and I understand life.

Rip Esselstyn:

I know. The lactating dairy cow, it's estrogen levels go up 30-fold. Not 30%. 30-fold. It's crazy. It's like, come on, let's get a clue.

Nimai Delgado:

And you think about the hormones it takes to grow a baby cow versus the amount of hormones it takes to grow a baby human. There's a couple hundred pound difference there of muscle mass, so obviously you know which one's going to have dietary hormone. But, I mean, people are just quick to believe what they've been told.

Rip Esselstyn:

Do you have a hero or somebody that you look up to?

Nimai Delgado:

My mom and dad, for sure. Hands down, they're my superheroes. They're my rocks. They're the whole reason I'm here and the whole reason I am the way I am, is because of them. I owe my life to them. But they're two of the hardest working people that I've ever met in my life and two of the most selfless people that I've ever met in my life, and that's something that I always try to remember, to be a servant, be of service to people, because not everybody has that. So the more you give ... It's better than receiving. It's much better because people need it. People need that, and especially when it comes to this type of information, because it really can save your life.

Nimai Delgado:

I feel like everybody that promotes a plant-based diet is a light worker in a sense because they are providing a really good service to people. Their method differs from person to person, but for me, it's just how can I help people live longer, healthier, and happier lives, and I really believe that it's through looking at what we're eating and thinking about how we move and how we spend our day, not just in the gym, but outside of the gym and how we're getting rest and how fulfilled are you. Do you feel like you're in alignment with your purpose, or are you maybe misaligned and doing something that you don't like? Because that has an effect on your health, too. So just kind of this full, holistic approach to being healthy.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Beautiful. Beautiful. Speaking of being ... I think you said light workers? Is that right?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. What does your name mean?

Nimai Delgado:

Well, one of the translations to my name means "inner light," or, "the light from within."

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Where are your parents living today?

Nimai Delgado:

They are still in the South. They're still in the South. They bounce back and forth between Louisiana and Mississippi. They have two properties, and they're trying to go back to our roots where I grew up and go back to the farm and just spend the rest of their days there.

Rip Esselstyn:

Are they now vegan as well?

Nimai Delgado:

I can't say for sure because I'm not down there, but since the last time I visited, they both told me that they were going to go fully vegan. My mom has always been trying, she just needs assistance. Like sometimes she forgets that butter isn't vegan and I'm like, "No, Mama. You can't do that. No butter for me. No butter for you, either." And the last time I was down there, my dad actually shared some news with me that he was on the verge of becoming type 2 diabetic because of his blood panels were just way off. And I was like, "What are you eating?" And turns out, he was eating at the temple every day and the food at the temple loves to have saturated fats from ghee, which is like almost pure saturated fat. So I just told him, "Be careful of how many fats you're eating. Just shift your diet," and his levels went dramatically down. He does a little test every day after he eats, and he sends me his levels, so it's like ... just getting healthier.

Rip Esselstyn:

They must be so incredibly proud of what you're doing and where you've landed and all the light that you're spreading.

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah. They tell me all the time. I don't know if they know everything that I'm doing, because I just talk to them and I don't try to overwhelm them, because I feel overwhelmed sometimes with, like, I'm doing this and this and this and this. But things like The Game Changers-

Rip Esselstyn:

Have the seen the movie?

Nimai Delgado:

Yeah, yeah, oh yeah. I let them see it before it ever came out because James had sent me a copy, so I was like, "You got to watch it," and we all sat down together and watched it. But yeah, they're really proud. Even my niece, she sent me a video. My aunt recorded my niece watching me for the first time in Game Changers and she was like, "Whoa, that's Uncle Nimai," and then she was like, "Look how strong he is." And she's telling my aunt, she's like, "Did you know that he only eats plants?" And then she's also telling my aunt, she's like, "And that he's traveling the world telling people to eat plants to become healthier?" And I'm just like ... It melted my heart because I remember being a kid at that age and not really having somebody to look up to and be like, "Hey, that guy's eating like me," or, "Look where he is," some type of role model. So it really makes me happy that kids are seeing it, too.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, fantastic stuff. Well, I'm going to wrap it up there, but I appreciate you letting me come by your place ...

Nimai Delgado:

Of course.

Rip Esselstyn:

... here in Marina, right? Marina, outside of LA. Just want you to know how great it is to have met you since Sundance in 2018 and how much joy it gives me to know that we have young people like you that are spreading this message and reaching a lot of people that wouldn't otherwise be receptive to this

message. So thank you, Nimai, for having the heart of a hero, going against the grain, and doing all this fantastic work.

Nimai Delgado:

Thank you so much, Rip. Peace, Engine 2, keep it Plant-Strong.

Rip Esselstyn:

Always.

Nimai Delgado:

Thanks, Nimai, for everything you're doing to inspire people to live, move, and eat with purpose and compassion. You have the biceps of a bodybuilder and the huge heart of a hero. Most importantly, you are the bearer of truth in a sport that is full of misinformation. Keep spreading the light, my Plant-Strong brother. To learn more about Nimai's fitness and nutrition coaching, visit veganfitness.com or our show notes at plantstrongpodcast.com.

Nimai Delgado:

Thank you for listening and subscribing to our show. I want you to know that we read each and every one of your reviews and we appreciate each and every one. If you want to learn more about this season or today's guests and sponsors, please visit plantstrongpodcast.com. The Plant-Strong Podcast team includes Laurie Kortowich, Ami Mackey, Patrick Gavin, Wade Clark, and Carrie Barrett. I want to thank my parents, Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn, Jr. and Ann Crile Esselstyn, for creating a legacy that will be carried on for generations and being willing to go against the current and trudge upstream to the causation. We are all better for it.