



THE SEARCH FOR GOD

A BROWN STUDENT SHARES HIS SEMESTER AT LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

BY DAN SCHWARTZ

ROOM INSPECTION THREE times a week. Hand holding is the furthest you can go with girls, and hugging can't last longer than three seconds. No alcohol, tobacco or 'R' rated movies. Men's hair must be cut short. Maintain a modest dress code; no shorts. These are just some of the regulations within the 46-page code-of-conduct book, *Liberty Way*, given to new students at Liberty University in Lynchburg Virginia.

While most undergrads study abroad in places like France and Ecuador, Brown University student Kevin Roose decided he'd rather investigate how his conservative Christian counterparts live by spending a sophomore spring semester among them. Except nobody at Liberty, the university run by the late evangelist Jerry Falwell, knew that Roose was also doing research for a book, *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University*, which has just been released and is now producing waves on the national talk show circuit.

The book is remarkable for not only shedding light into one of America's most rightwing conservative schools – or as Roose puts it, Bible Boot Camp – but also because the story is so personal, as he details his struggles to adapt within the conservative environment and understand his fellow students. Roose is an outsider among outsiders, but he also gets a taste of the shared spiritual energy.

Yet there are also some flat-out strange practices at Liberty, like a group that Roose attends – called "Every Man's Battle" – which is designed to curb masturbation. Or his dealings with his on-campus spiritual mentor, Pastor Seth, who wants Roose to text message him when he feels he's "about to fail" so he can call him back with "distraction strategies." Then there's the History of Life class that asks interesting test questions, like: "True or False: Noah's Ark was large enough to carry various kinds of dinosaurs?" (In case you're curious, the

answer is "true," based on the theory that the dinosaurs could have been adolescents, thus taking up less space).

We had the pleasure of catching up with Roose to discuss his experience and attend the launch of his new book. That day, he'd already been on two radio shows and just found out that his book's chapter on an evangelical spring break trip to Daytona Beach won a Brown non-fiction award.

Are you trying to use the book at all for college credit?

I wish (laughing). I think one double dip is all they're going to let me do.

You've been interviewed twice on radio today. Tell me what that was like.

In the morning, it was a Christian radio show out of Maryland. I never get the synopsis beforehand. I was waiting at the commercial break and I heard, "And Bob was just transformed by the holy spirit," and I thought, okay, I get it. I have gotten

a couple Christian radio hosts introducing me with, "We're here with Kevin Roose, enemy of the religious right." But generally, everybody has been friendly.

Your portrayal of Liberty University is fair, and not vindictive.

I didn't think that would help. We have a religious divide in America – the God divide – and it's a serious thing. I wanted to examine it seriously, but it's also a funny book at the same time. Let's face it: I'm the least likely Liberty student in the world because I had the ultimate secular liberal upbringing.

Growing up in Oberlin, Ohio must have been the polar opposite.

If Brown is liberal, than Oberlin is Sodom and Gomorrah-lite.

Brown offers a very diverse course load, and it's interesting that to gain a different perspective you have to go to a school like Liberty.

I think that's true, but I wouldn't say that



Roose outside Brown (left) and his dorm at Liberty University

Brown is the Liberty of the left. There is a conscious effort in both places to create a political campus. Both sides fall prey to the same echo chamber effect – when you're there everyone tends to agree with you. There is definitely a majority opinion that can make extremists out of moderates.

Protesting is forbidden at Liberty?

Paradoxically, naming a school Liberty doesn't make it a place of liberties. They do have a rule against protesting. If you don't agree with a rule, how are you supposed to show it? There is a tautology there. I had to really struggle and adjust. I bought a self-help book called *30 Ways To Tame Your Tongue*, where you replace your curse words with things like "glory" and "mercy me." The students looked at me like, "What planet are you from? What kind of homeschooling education did you get?"

As an English major, have any fiction or non-fiction writers influenced you?

The biggest influence is my old boss A.J. Jacobs, who wrote *The Year of Living Biblically*. And the sort of genesis for this book, if you will, came as a result of my work with A.J. We were down at Jerry Falwell's mega-church doing work on his book, and that's when I bumped into the Liberty students and got the idea of exploring their world.

What intrigued you the most about them that made you want to go to Liberty?

Just from outward appearance, the students looked like people I would be able to talk to. We're all college students. We're all

Americans. We all speak English. But there was so much that separated us, an immense culture gap. It was really hard to communicate, honestly.

Was going to Liberty sort of like being in a club?

It is a group that defines its own set of boundaries. You're either in or you're out. If you're in, they treat you a certain way, and if you're out, they treat you another way. That's not exclusive to Liberty. I knew that as an outsider I wasn't going to get the complete picture of life there. So I decided to go undercover and get on the inside.

On the spring break missionary trip, you are a group of outsiders among the rowdy partiers, and then you yourself are a secret outsider within your own camp. What was that like?

It was horrible! The trip was a week long and it was the hardest week of my life. This probably was the least likely place to convert people to Christianity, because you're going to places like Señor Frogs and everybody is drunk. We evangelized outside a nightclub, and a *Girls Gone Wild* style film crew was next to us. The girls would lift off their shirts and then come to us and we'd tell them about Jesus. It was a sin and repentance assembly line.

How did you answer your fellow students when they asked you about your relationship to Jesus?

The easiest answer was to say, "I'm a Christian," because I am a Christian techni-

cally. I grew up as a Quaker, though I wasn't observant and my family never went to church or Quaker meetings. They assumed I was an evangelical Christian when I said, "I'm a Christian."

Jerry Falwell's son said you didn't understand conservative Christianity, and that you had misconceptions coming in.

I think that's a little dishonest on his part, because I did sit down with him and explain the concept of the book. And he was very receptive to it. My goal was not to bash Liberty.

What was the reaction from your Liberty friends when you told them about the book?

Everyone's first reaction was to go back through their mental inventory, and say, "Oh, so that's why you were taking notes in church that one time." People are excited that I didn't go in with an agenda. I was transformed by my semester there, and people were thankful for that.

Was it like being an anthropologist going into the field?

No, because as an anthropologist you are supposed to stay neutral and detached from your subject, and I was not. I went in with my biases and presuppositions, but I was open to changing them. I found myself struggling at times to remember that I was there as an outsider. This school is built to convert skeptics into believers.

As a writer you need detachment for objectivity. Was that easier to do at Lib-

erty, as opposed to a more familiar subject, like Brown?

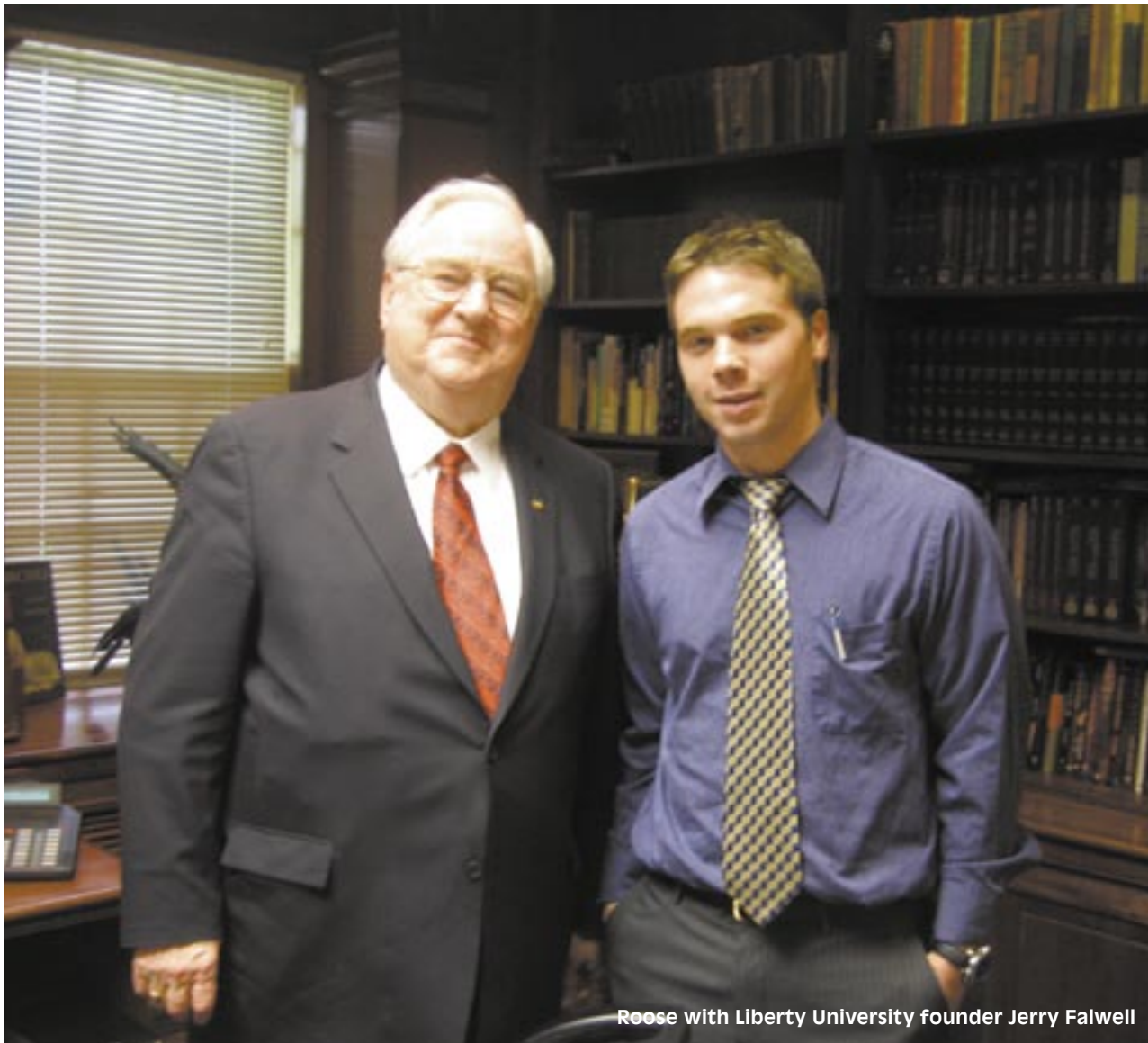
It was easier to observe, because it was all new to me. One of the first differences I noticed was when I went to the bathroom during orientation week and on the stall wall was religious graffiti. Someone wrote, "If God is omnipresent, why was Jesus necessary?" Someone had scrawled underneath it, "Because of sin." At Brown you'd find haikus or messages trolling for sex.

What do you think is a major appeal of Liberty?

I honestly expected the students to sort of hate their roles; to resent that they're being made to live as if they're in prison with the restrictive social rules. I found that people took refuge in that. We think of college as this freewheeling thing, and at Brown you can basically do anything you want. No rules. No guidance. And that's good, but it's also comforting to have that structure in your life. Liberty does a great job of providing that, although I don't like some of the things that come along with their particular brand of religion.

How does religion play a role in your life now? Do you pray regularly?

I do. When I went to Liberty I wasn't an atheist, but I wasn't a believer either. I was God ambivalent. It wasn't part of my life. Now I think about it all the time because I have this whole group on Christian friends now, and they text message me and say, "Hey, we're praying for you down here."



Roose with Liberty University founder Jerry Falwell

Do you have any book plans for the future?

(Laughing) I'm still looking for a summer internship. Somebody said I should go to Yeshiva University and do the Jewish version. I don't think any religious committees are going to get within 100 miles of my application. My parents said, "Graduate, and then do more crazy book projects. But first graduate."

Now that the book is out, how has the response been?

Things are going really well. I've gotten emails from atheists who say this helped them understand Christians and where they are coming from, even if they disagree with them. And I've heard from pastors who say this is helping them figure out how the church can change, and how to approach the secular world in a more appealing way to them. People are sick of the culture wars, and I think we're ready for something new. I hope my book can be a contribution to that new tone.

What are the biggest similarities and differences between Liberty and Brown students?

The social activism is the biggest similarity. Both schools teach their students to care passionately about issues and act on them. The biggest differences are the obvious ones: Your average Brown student is left of center, and your average Liberty student is right of Mike Huckabee.

Do you feel the book will have a transfor-

mative effect on Liberty students?

I've gotten a lot of emails from Liberty students who've read the book. There are a lot of people who feel like outcasts at Liberty, and I've heard them say, "I doubt," and, "I'm skeptical." It's good for me to know that other people are feeling that way too. **What was the stronger emotion: fear of being found out or guilt of not being able to tell?**

The guilt. The fear I got over. Once you're there, you assimilate. All I had to do was keep up the signifiers like going to church on time, pray before I ate and do the basic things. The guilt was horrible. I grew to like the students, and they were some of my best friends. To keep up the false pretense while trying to be as honest as possible was hard. **Would these students have difficulty transferring here for a semester?**

I think it would be fascinating. My dream is to get an exchange program between the two schools. That would be either a great idea, or a horrible reality show.

Who knew beforehand that you were writing a book?

My parents, the publisher and my good friends at Brown were aware. My Mom wanted desperately to tell her book club, but I forbid her. My friends at Brown joked with me saying, "A semester with no sex? And this will be different how?"

How long did it take to write?

Too long. I wrote some of it while I was there because I wanted it to be a vivid

experience, so I took a lot of notes and wrote while I was there. It took me almost two years to write the whole thing. I wouldn't recommend doing it as a full time college student.

Have you become a celebrity on campus? Nawwww. My friends have no sympathy for me when I complain about having to write a 15-page paper. They're like, "What? If you wrote a 320 page book... come on!" And my professors think the same thing.

Any serious confrontations?

I went back to Liberty a couple of weeks ago to do a book signing at the Barnes and Noble next to campus. Everyone was friendly, and even the one woman who followed me to the bathroom to tell me I was going to hell had a smile on her face. And she bought a book and had me sign it. No one has gotten in my face. I did have someone email me after I was on C-SPAN and said that I used the word "like" too much during my appearance.

Were your parents concerned?

They certainly never expected their youngest son to come to them and say, "Hey, I want to study at Jerry Falwell's school." They were nervous, but supportive. They televise the church services [Thomas Road Baptist Church] every Sunday, and I was in the church choir. My Mom would watch me every Sunday and see me sing. She would call afterwards and say, "Oh, it didn't look like you knew the words to that one."

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