Episode 1,304: How I Got into Harvard

Guest: Stephan Kinsella

WOODS: Well, I'm going to blame you for this episode if it turns out badly, and maybe take the credit if it turns out well. But it was Stephan's idea. The other day we were on Facebook Messenger — we have these — we'll go like a week, no conversation, two, three weeks, and then it'll be this incredible flurry of back-and-forth messages on all kinds of things. We were having one of those the other day. And you have a son, who you tell me is in the — I know you have a son, of course, but I didn't know what grade; he's in the 10th grade. And so, in fact, I have a daughter who is in the 10th grade, and so you think about college, and I know we've got people who say you shouldn't go to college. I get that. But for some people, it's the wise thing to do, and you've got to do it on a case-by-case basis. But you're in that mode. You're thinking, once again, just as you were when you were a kid, about college and college applications and the process. And so you thought it would be interesting to talk to me about my own experience, and I insisted this would not be interesting in any way.

KINSELLA: [laughing]

WOODS: And then you persuaded me, more or less, that there may be people who would find this interesting. And so I mean, look, if I've done episodes on my stupid musical taste, then probably we could do an episode on this. So I thought in this episode, I might kind of in a way turn the host's mic over to you, in a way, to let you kind of guide the conversation and ask me things that you think I might be able to help with.

KINSELLA: Yeah, and I'm not a Tom Woods completist, so I wasn't sure if you'd talked about this before. That's why I was sort of asking you. But yeah, I'm in that mode, where, you know, 10th grader, all my friends are thinking about college, and yeah, most people I know, their kids are going to college, and I haven't let my son know that not going to college is an option. Okay, so he's going to go, right?

WOODS: [laughing] Okay.

KINSELLA: But only also for my own interest, you know, I went to a big state school, and so a lot of us, you might not know, we have Ivy League envy. We're kind of mystified by the people that get to go to those kind of schools, right?

WOODS: Yeah.

KINSELLA: And especially now that my kid's getting to this point, we want better things for our kids than to go to LSU or something like that. Not to bash LSU, but —

WOODS: Yeah, and these days, given the PhD glut, almost any school is going to have a really top-flight faculty.

KINSELLA: Well, and I'm sure you're noticing too, the college process now is apparently totally different than when we were younger, or at least us Southerners. When we were young, I mean, it was you were raised near a big state school, you apply there, and you go. It's really simple. And it was pretty cheap, and you did fine. So you didn't have the issue of like, oh, maybe I'll go cross country, or maybe I'll go here, and what's the scholarship process like, and how do I maximize my ACT scores or SAT scores? And by the way, has it ever annoyed you that people say, especially some Yankees, say "SATs," with a plural? Like, "I took my SATs," instead of —

WOODS: Uh oh, yeah, I think I probably say that, but I get why that's annoying. Yeah, I mean, it's not quite as bad as "ATM machine" —

KINSELLA: No.

WOODS: — which makes me want to commit an atrocity.

KINSELLA: Yeah, and it's not as bad as saying, "I'm standing online," instead of "in line," but okay, we can —

WOODS: Yeah, I know, but that's a New York thing, too.

KINSELLA: Yeah, I know. I know.

WOODS: I don't know why they say that, anyway.

KINSELLA: So you know, so you went to Harvard, and the whole process just — I'm always impressed by someone who was able to somehow do that, especially — and so I was just curious: how the hell did you do it? Because, you know, if you have a kid like all my friends' kids, we assume that like Yale and Harvard, these things are sort of out of reach, or that it's really political now, it's extremely competitive. You know, you hear stories about some of the better schools, even if you make a perfect SAT, you're not guaranteed to get it, right?

WOODS: Right, right.

KINSELLA: So, you know, I don't know what it was like or just what the whole experience was like. And by the way, you and I both spoke at Yale in the last year or so, which for me, it was a pleasure, because I can't turn down a chance to speak at a place that wouldn't have allowed me in as an undergrad.

WOODS: [laughing] But they would have been wrong, as it turns out. They would have been wrong.

KINSELLA: [laughing] Yeah.

WOODS: All right, yeah, so let's dive in. Now, first of all, I did notice it's not the same topic, but it's a related topic, that all the way back on Episode 239, I have an episode called "How Tom Navigated Academia."

KINSELLA: Right.

WOODS: And so that was more, once I got in, how did I fit in and stuff like that. It's kind of a different thing. But I'll link to that on this show notes page as a related thing. So how did I do it? Well, the thing is, I'm not entirely sure. So let's just walk through, we'll talk about what I did, and apparently, it turned out to be enough. I will say that I went for a campus interview. You have to do at least one interview. You have to have at least the alumni interview, and if you happen to live within a reasonable distance of Cambridge, you can also do an on-campus interview. That was the way they did it in my day, anyway. So I lived 45 minutes away from campus, so I did both interviews.

KINSELLA: You mean they wouldn't let you do an on-campus interview if you didn't live close?

WOODS: Oh, you could; they just didn't want a disadvantage you, like, well, if you don't do one here, then forget it.

KINSELLA: Ah, I got it. I got it.

WOODS: I just I figured I might as well. I thought I made a pretty good impression on people, so I might as well do it twice. So I went in for that interview, but what I remember about it is we had somebody in my high school who was a year before me, who had just everything you could ask for. Scholar athlete, he had every credential you could ask for. And he was rejected from Harvard, and so I brought that up, just to say I had a little apprehension, because I couldn't understand how this guy would not have gotten in. And the woman — I don't know, maybe this was the alumni interview. I could have sworn it was in Cambridge. In fact, I'd bet my life on it, actually, now that I think about it. And the answer that came back was, we basically frankly said that he was a white man, and she said — and I'm not kidding you — we probably already had enough of those, was what I was told.

KINSELLA: Right, right.

WOODS: I mean, just flat out.

KINSELLA: Well, let me back up a second, though. So you came from sort of like a blue-collar family?

WOODS: Yeah, blue-collar family, yep.

KINSELLA: And so you didn't have any legacies, or so you were —

WOODS: No, no, no.

KINSELLA: Did you go to an elite high school or just a regular high school or —

WOODS: No, just a public high school.

KINSELLA: Okay, and so I assume you had good grades.

WOODS: Yeah, I was the valedictorian.

KINSELLA: Okay, so that's one explanation. I guess valedictorian, straight As helps. But like so you knew you wanted to go to college when you were in high school?

WOODS: Yeah, definitely.

KINSELLA: And did you think, I can go anywhere in the country? Was money a concern for you? Was distance a concern? What were you thinking in terms of what kinds of colleges?

WOODS: Yeah, I figured I'd apply and then cross the money bridge when I came to it, because a lot of the places I was applying to were fairly generous with financial aid.

KINSELLA: Right.

WOODS: And I remember my dad saying: look, I'll make this happen one way or the other for you, because I want you to flourish, and you should go to the best place you can go.

KINSELLA: Okay.

WOODS: So that was my thinking. So I applied to a bunch of places. I don't remember all of them, and I don't remember what my safety school was. But I applied for so-called early action to Harvard.

KINSELLA: Right, right.

WOODS: So by December, I already knew I had been accepted. I didn't have to wait till April, like everybody else. I already got the letter in the mail. And when I got the envelope out of the mailbox, it was a slightly thick envelope, so I knew I'd been accepted, because what are they, going to send me a multiple-page letter telling me all the reasons I'm terrible? I assumed that meant I got in, which indeed, I had. But when I look back on it, I did have some — there certainly is a major gap in my application from the point of view of the standard applicant. And that is, I know this is going to come as a major shock to listeners, but I wasn't really an athlete in school. And I think people thought that you have to be so-called well-rounded if you're going to be accepted. And I didn't have that aspect of it. I did have a lot —

KINSELLA: No midget wrestling, Tom?

WOODS: Yeah, right, exactly. No, none of that.

KINSELLA: That's a Michael Malice joke, sorry.

WOODS: Yeah, or an Andy Kaufman joke, and no wrestling women, either. So what I did have was a lot was strong academics, very strong extracurriculars. And then I did unusual things. Yeah, I wasn't on the football team, but I worked really hard on a state senate campaign. Yeah, I know, I feel silly about that now. But he was a good guy, and the incumbent was a bum. And so in other words, I did things that, you know, showed some initiative and that

were unusual for somebody my age to do, and I think that kind of substituted for the athlete thing. They thought: well, you know, this guy's a little bit different. They were willing to do that. I did have the high test scores, I had great — I had recommendations from my teachers that were like just out of this world.

And in fact, one of my teachers — what they like is — this is also, by the way, advice for people who have to write reference letters. If you just have generic, glowing remarks, that's actually not that helpful. What they really want to know is: give us specifics, so we can get a real feel for this person. And I remember my chemistry teacher, I had taken AP chemistry with him, and he recalled a time when he and I and a couple of other students went to UMass for a weekend conference. That's what we geeks we were; we went to a conference with our teacher. And in the middle of the night, I got up, because there was some — there was a math problem — I was preparing for a big — I was on the math team, and I was preparing for some big thing. And there was a problem that it was driving me crazy, and in the middle of the night, I figured out how to solve it. So I got up, and I tried to get over to like a part of the room where there was some light coming through the window, because I didn't want to disturb anybody. And I sat there, and I solved it, and my teacher the next day said, "Did you wake up in the middle of night?" And I explained to him what was going on, and he included that little story in the letter.

KINSELLA: Yeah.

WOODS: And so that made it seem like, all right, this is a guy who doesn't just get good grades and then forgets about it. Like he's really invested in this stuff that he's studying.

KINSELLA: Well, so let me ask you this: was Harvard your goal college? Had it just always been assumed, like this is the best in the country, so if I could get in there, that's obvious? Or was it because of a major, or was Yale or Cambridge and Oxford also like goals of yours? What were you thinking about selecting or trying to get into Harvard?

WOODS: Right, I mean, there certainly is obviously a certain luster to the Harvard name. There's no question about that. But then you combine that with the fact that it was drivable to my house, not that I was going to live at home, but I just liked the idea that I was far enough away that I was doing my own laundry, but not so far away that, in a pinch, I couldn't go home for the weekend. Now, as it turns out, I think I went home for the weekend once in the four years I was there, and I was just burned out. I just needed to rest away for a weekend. But otherwise, of course I didn't want to leave. This is a paradise. Where would I want to go? It was great. So that was the thinking, that it was top notch, and it was within — and I was sort of familiar with it. I mean, I hadn't lived that far away from it. It wasn't particularly because of a major, because I wasn't super, super convinced of what my major would be, but I figured, unless I'm going into engineering — and at that time, the Harvard engineering program was not really very good — there's almost no way I can go wrong.

KINSELLA: Right. So they don't make you declare a major in the beginning?

WOODS: At the end of the first year, you have to declare your concentration.

KINSELLA: Okay.

WOODS: And that was all I needed, was one year to really sort out that I wanted to go into history, which I would never have guessed in a million years.

KINSELLA: And so did you consider the other kind of premier schools, MIT or Oxford or Cambridge or anything overseas or Yale or anything like that?

WOODS: Never overseas. I'm such a homebody; I always feel like a fish out of water when I'm overseas. I mean, I can stay for a week and do sightseeing and enjoy myself, but after that, I need my bed and my surroundings and people who speak English in the accent I'm accustomed to, things like that. I just need that. So definitely not overseas. MIT I wouldn't have, because I wasn't committed to anything in math and science. I mean, even though MIT actually really has great historians too, but I didn't — you know, what did I know, at that point? Now, I really felt like — you know, as you say, I just wanted to go to the place that I was led to believe was the best place I could go to. Plus, it would be a challenge to see: could I really, with the credentials, I had impressed them enough to let me in, given how rigorous the admission process is?

KINSELLA: And so did you get other acceptances, or was the other one too early for you to even bother with the others?

WOODS: Once I got accepted to Harvard, I withdrew my applications from everywhere else.

KINSELLA: Yeah.

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, I suppose I could have kept them going.

KINSELLA: But what's the point? Yeah.

WOODS: But I thought it was wrong to make them spend effort on that when there's no real need. So yeah, I withdrew everywhere else, and I officially wrote back and said, yep, I'll be there.

KINSELLA: And so your parents freaked out when they found out?

WOODS: Oh, absolutely insane, absolutely insane. And my father, who's since deceased, worked as a forklift operator in a food warehouse, and my mother called him up at work, because he worked nights, and she called and said it's really urgent that he come to the phone, so he races to the phone. And she says, "Do you think we'll be able to get tickets to the Harvard-Yale game?" He said, "You've got to be" — well, he didn't say "kidding me," I'll say that. And then he went around, telling everybody, and it was very exciting. And the whole time I was there, because we were close by, he would come over, and we'd go to like a hockey game, because Harvard actually had a decent hockey team. And we'd go to games together. And there was one time we saw Senator John Kerry. He was a US senator at that time. And I mean, he was just blown away. And my father at that time, he got his GED when he was in his 40s, but he hadn't finished high school. He had taken a course at Harvard in bartending, and he always used to joke about that, and I was kind of a legacy, because, after all, he had gone to Harvard before me [laughing].

KINSELLA: Well, did you have brothers and sisters, or only child, or what?

WOODS: No, it was just me. Yeah, all the love could be showered on the one kid.

KINSELLA: Okay, so you don't know if you would have had a bunch of smart — so I assume your father was pretty smart, too, so you probably got some of your smarts from him.

WOODS: Yeah, he was. I mean, even though he didn't have the formal credentials, he absorbed materials so quickly and mastered it to the point where nobody really wanted to argue with him, partly because he'd never shut up, but also because he was really good at it.

KINSELLA: Now, so I assume — is my impression correct that it's harder to get into like a Harvard for an undergrad than it's — like you went to Columbia for grad school, right, which is another elite school?

WOODS: Yeah.

KINSELLA: But I assume grad school is a little bit different. Once you've got your credentials under your belt, it's probably easier to get into grad school knowing what you want to do, right?

WOODS: I actually did not find that. I had more difficulty getting into grad school. And it was partly because what I wanted to do, it was hard to find quite the right match with the faculty that I wanted.

KINSELLA: Right.

WOODS: Like for instance, Harvard at that time was going through turmoil. They really did not have very many, if any, tenured 20th century professors. And I was going to work in the 20th century, and my dissertation director was Alan Brinkley, the son of the newsman, David Brinkley, and they had passed Alan Brinkley over for tenure. Now, Brinkley is credentialed like you wouldn't believe. There's no reason Brinkley shouldn't have gotten tenure at Harvard. They immediately tenured him at Columbia. *Like, of course, we're going to — what is wrong with these people?* So I ended up working with him, because he was the most versatile 20th century person I could find. But the thing is, when you apply for graduate school, they really want to know about your research interests. I mean, there's probably a very slight ideological filter that's going on there, but it really is mainly a question of: do we have people whose specialty matches up with your expectations? And if we don't, it doesn't matter how smart you are; you're just not a good fit for this department. So that was the issue. Whereas as an undergrad, they don't really have to delve into your particular interests, because you're not really going to be pursuing them here. You need to get a much broader education.

KINSELLA: Yeah, and I think you may also be thinking a little bit from the perspective of the liberal arts kind of academia perspective, like you're going to get a PhD, the person that you study under matters; whereas, like from my perspective, it's more engineering and practical stuff like law —

WOODS: Yeah, true.

KINSELLA: — and people that are going for an MBA or something or an engineering degree, I think they just want to go to a competent quality school. Like there's not a name that's there that really matters by and large.

WOODS: Absolutely. I agree completely.

KINSELLA: They're not getting a PhD, and so by that time, you're wanting to be a teacher. But I'm curious about your Harvard — so you get accepted to Harvard and — you know, because you probably know this. A lot of parents, like where I'm from, especially when you have multiple children, and especially when the parents are well off, right, they have good jobs, so they kind of have the impression that my kid's probably not going to get financial aid, and he's probably not going to be the valedictorian and get a scholarship. So a lot of kids are told, look, you can go to LSU or Texas A&M — you have to go to a state school, get in-state tuition, or this is how much we can afford. And nowadays, of course, if that's all you can afford, then your other option is to take student loans out. I mean, by and large, it's not worth taking $200,000 for the student loans to get a humanities degree.

WOODS: No, no, no. Yeah, so let me tell you how I did it. First of all, Harvard does not have academic scholarships, period. It does not have them. The money they give you is need-based only. And so they basically look at your family's income, and they come up with a package that works for you. And it did involve some loans, but not an oppressive amount. It didn't take long to pay them off.

KINSELLA: Right.

WOODS: So my parents were pleasantly surprised. I mean, they basically thought they were going to be, you know, eating dirt for the next five years or whatever for their lives and never going on vacation again or whatever. But also, it's true, I did work a bit while I was there. Freshman year, I had a couple of jobs. One semester, I worked at a — gosh, I cleaned the bathrooms, because almost all the dorms, almost all of them have in-room bathrooms, in-suite. They're not these hideous hallway bathrooms like you're on the football team or something. It's you have your own bathroom. But what that also means is they've got to make sure you're being sanitary, and you're not becoming your own health hazard. So they have people come in and clean the bathrooms. Well, you're talking to one of them right now. I had to do that [laughing]. And I took that because it paid better than working in the dining hall. Well, I learned pretty quickly why it paid better than working in the dining hall. That wasn't so good.

KINSELLA: Well, so did you do that just have spending money or to make ends meet? Or why did you do that?

WOODS: Yeah, I guess I really did that — yeah, I'm trying to think about exactly what the plan was, because my parents sent me money every week. They sent me money, and that more or less supported me. So I think the job may have been going toward the actual schooling. Honestly, I don't remember the exact arrangement. I do remember that by senior year, I had a job as a desk man in an apartment building, which was great, because all you had to do was sit there all day. If a guest comes —

KINSELLA: So I mean, were you like the poor kid at Harvard, you know what I mean? Like a lot of your friends had rich parents and they didn't need to work?

WOODS: Oh, yeah, some of them did, but honest to goodness, in almost no case did you really know that. I mean, it is not the stereotype; people were not going around saying, "Well on my dad's yacht the other day" — they just didn't. People did not talk like that. They really didn't.

KINSELLA: I'm just saying that there's got to be a strong percentage of the people that you were a school with who just didn't need to work and they didn't have part-time jobs.

WOODS: Yeah, that's true; that's true. And I only had it for the one year, so it couldn't have been central to the financial aid package. But I was mentioning the desk job at the end, only because the reason I wound up getting that job senior year was that I wanted to go to the John Randolph Club meeting out in California, and for me, the registration fee, the airline, the hotel, that would be a lot of money. So I actually got a job, so that I could earn the money for that, so I could go out and hang out with Murray Rothbard and Lew Rockwell. So that was mainly that. So the nice thing was that they just came up with a good package for us that really worked.

But let me tell one other quick little story that people who read my emails may remember this one. There was a time when I was sitting, reading a book — I was reading *1984*, actually. And I came across the word "coercion." Now, I had heard the word coercion, but I'd never seen it before. And it as far as I know, is the only C-I-O-N word in the English language. I mean, Spanish obviously has a ton of words that ended C-I-O-N, but not English. We have T-I-O-N and S-I-O-N. I had never seen a C-I-O-N word. And the reason this alarmed me was that, on my Harvard application in one of the essays, I spelled it with an S. And I looked at it, and I said, "Oh, son of a" — you've got to be kidding. And I thought, well, you know, they're not going to let some idiot who can't spell in. So I went into the guidance department. I will never forget, the chairman of the department, Dr. Deflumere. I'll never forget this. I told him the story. I said, "I know for a fact I have a typo. It won't even look like a typo; it's clearly a spelling mistake on my Harvard application." And he paused, and I'm not joking; he did not say this jokingly. He said, "Well, you applied to other schools, right?"

KINSELLA: [laughing]

WOODS: [laughing] I'm not kidding. Oh, no! Don't tell me that. That's terrible. I got in anyway. In fact, it was at one of the interviews. I said, "Listen, listen, I know you guys have me dead to rights. I know I misspelled coercion. But have mercy on me. There's no other word in English that's spelled that way. I'd never seen it. It's just one of these flukes that, over the course of my life, I'd never encountered the word. I mean, have mercy on me." And they did [laughing].

KINSELLA: So when you show up to Harvard, did you feel like you're at Disneyland and you were like amazed, or did you pretty soon get kind of comfortable and used to the environment? That would intimidate a lot of people stepping onto that for the first time, right? That kind of —

WOODS: Yeah, well, first of all, the thrill of it really never wore off it. I mean, it was an amazing place to be. Even though there were plenty of people who disagreed with me and

stuff, things weren't nearly as intense as they are now. I mean, you know, we had our differences and stuff, but it wasn't like, *You're our mortal enemy and we can even be friends with you because you hold the following seven views*. It was not really like that. And I just met such great people, and, you know, everybody comes to speak there at one time or another, so there were so many great opportunities and stuff. But yeah, it was intimidating, because everybody — not quite everybody, but a lot of people who set foot there think to themselves, *I'm the fluke. I'm the guy who got in by mistake*.

KINSELLA: So you concentrated in history, though, is that right?

WOODS: Yeah.

KINSELLA: So these friends, did you make a lot of friends that you still have?

WOODS: I did. Yes, I did. That's right.

KINSELLA: And do you go to the reunions and all that?

WOODS: I do. I do. I have my — next year, 2019, I have my 25-year reunion.

KINSELLA: Okay, and so when you go now, because you're getting to be kind of a minor celebrity outside libertarianism — I mean, you're a major celebrity in our circles, but you know, are you starting to get people even recognize you and go, "Oh, I know about your podcasts?" and all this kind of stuff, and your book?

WOODS: Not really.

KINSELLA: Maybe next time.

WOODS: I think most of them are in a whole different world, but I did see — I didn't say hi to him this time, but the guy who, when Rand Paul was running for Senate originally in 2010, he ran in the primary against the Kentucky Secretary of State, Trey Grayson. He was in my graduating class, class of '94. And I did see him at the last reunion. But I had been such a, you know, Rand partisan, [laughing] I didn't go out of my way to say hello. We were not unfriendly in the past, but I thought, eh, I don't want to —

KINSELLA: Okay, so obviously, you don't regret having gone to Harvard, right, and that choice?

WOODS: No, no, no, it was great. It was so great.

KINSELLA: Or going to college, right? Because I know we talk about some colleges not —

WOODS: Right, it's not for — but in my case, given that I'm pushing ideas that I think are 100% correct, but they're highly unorthodox, the academic credentials have helped me to fight back against people who say I must just be some crank. All right, well, I'm a crank with these degrees and such and such book, and whatever — which, by the way, that does not make you not a crank. But for the types of people using that language against me, that's the currency they trade in, and so the fact that I have it gives them a little pause.

KINSELLA: So my impression, and I want to see if you kind of agree, is that by and large in today — and by the way, I'm thinking from a practical like law school or engineering kind of perspective, mostly, because that's my field. But my impression is that most universities in the US are very good now, because you can recruit the best teachers, because everyone wants to be a professor, because it is a cush job. And the teaching materials are great, and the facilities are great, so in substance, the difference between these school is probably small. A decent-sized state school or an elite school, they all have great programs, great learning. They may differ a little bit for like if you want to get a PhD in a specialty like you did. But also nowadays, they might be changing in the sense that the Yales and the Harvards are becoming so politically correct, that it's actually in a way worse for the liberal arts and humanities types in some of these so-called better schools that are kind of resting upon their reputations or laurels. I mean, what do you think about the relative merits of trying to go to one of these elite schools now as opposed to 20, 30 years ago?

WOODS: Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, first of all, if you are planning to go to graduate school, I do think it's the case that the graduate school you go to tends to be what whoever is going to employ you looks at more closely. Where did you get the more specialized training? So I think it's not bad to go to a decent school for undergrad and then really, really set your sights on the best graduate school you can get into. So if you can save yourself the Ivy League tuition — now, as I say, I can't speak for the other Ivies,, but I know that Harvard had need-based assistance, so you should be okay even there. But I don't think it's an absolute necessity for your success for you to do it.

Now, in terms of your question about PC, is it worse at the higher-tier schools, because after all, they can just rest on their reputations, even if they're terrorizing the kids with the craziness? The thing is, when I hear the horror stories about PC, they're almost always at Podunk schools. So that's going on I think at all levels. The thing about the Ivies is that, despite the PC, there's still — I mean, I know this might sound naive, but there's still a point at which they say to themselves: what matters here still is excellence. And now, yes, it's true that Murray Rothbard was not going to get a job at Harvard no matter what, so it's not perfect, but there is still this sense that we want people who are going to do the best work, period, and they feel like their brand is invested in that. We have to have the top people doing the best work. Whereas Podunk U., because it's kind of considered to be interchangeable with other schools, well, you know, they're just going to have the typical faculty doing the typical stuff. But whereas at Harvard and the Ivies, they really feel like we have to be at the cutting edge of everything to justify what we charge. So I mean, that's my thinking, that you're still going to find decent people doing decent work. I mean, how else did I get a PhD at Columbia?

KINSELLA: Right.

WOODS: I mean, I couldn't have written on a less fashionable topic from a less fashionable point of view. And not only did I get it approved by the department, I got it published by Columbia University Press as a book. Now, that's not because they love me or my point of view; it's because I did good work.

KINSELLA: Well, what is this thing where you will typically see a scholar or a professor, someone like yourself with advanced PhDs in the humanities or liberal arts, and their resume is scattered? Like they'll have one college for undergrad, another for grad school. Like rarely do you see someone go Harvard, Harvard, Harvard. Do they do that on purpose, like they're

trying to have some — in other words, are you disadvantaged if you just went to Harvard straight out or just one school for all of your degrees instead of mixing —

WOODS: No, no, I don't think it even matters. One of my good friends from school went to Harvard for everything, got his PhD in history at Harvard. He teaches at BU now. I don't think it really makes a difference.

KINSELLA: Okay.

WOODS: It'd be nice to have different experiences.

KINSELLA: Yeah.

WOODS: And I'm glad I went to Columbia, because I had a chance to get to know New York, and I really like New York, despite all the obvious problems. I want to tell a little story, if I may, about when I was on the other side of things. I volunteered to be an alumni interviewer myself, so I would interview people in my area who were applying, and then I would write up a report and send that into the admissions committee. And this is when I lived on Long Island, and I had an academic office and everything. And so, you know, I had some really bright students come in, and it was very interesting for me to be on the other side of the aisle. I'm the one they're scared of now. I'm not the one who is scared; I'm the scary one. And of course, the idea of me being scary is a little silly, but you could tell they were a little nervous and everything. I tried to put them at ease.

But there was one particular incident, where I interviewed a young man whose strength was obviously athletics. And there is a degree to which Harvard will look at athletics, because they do want at least some heft to their athletic programs, so there are some advantages to be had. So, okay, so we talked, and he couldn't have been less intellectually curious about anything. I got one-word answers to almost everything. He was the most unimpressive applicant I had ever seen. Then around the same time, a young lady came into the office, and she was by far the most qualified high school student I've ever seen before or since, by far. And her academics, off the charts, but then also sports off the charts, extracurriculars off the charts. The things she did, it was like she was a Rothbard. It was like she was four people. I could not understand how she could have a record like this. And I thought to myself: this is clearly the most qualified student I've ever seen. So I wrote up the best report I could possibly write, and I submitted that. The athlete got admitted, and she got put on the waitlist. And so I resigned. I said ,I'm not — forget it. I'm not — Now, I know obviously there could be many factors I'm not aware of, but in this case, BS. In this case, I cannot imagine what possessed them to — So she — and I actually, I wrote to her family and said: what happened to you is an absolute outrage. Now, I've had students get rejected or something that I thought should get in. Okay, you never know. But this was so outrageous, I wrote to them and said, in protest, I have refused to do any more alumni interviews over this injustice. Now, I'm sure she's prospering. She went to Cornell, and she probably did fine. But I don't even know what the point of that story is, other than to say, you can't even totally sometimes get what's going on at these elite schools in their admission decisions. It does not mean you're no good if you got put on the waitlist or something.

KINSELLA: Well, I think I heard an interview recently, it was about that lawsuit — I think it's against Harvard, right, by the Asians?

WOODS: Yes, right.

KINSELLA: And from the facts that are coming out — and it might not have been about Harvard, the stats I heard, but I thought that there's something like if you're an athlete, your odds of getting in are like ten times higher than even a top-notch academic person, just because it helps their minority recruiting too, because, you know, by and large, these are underprivileged or minorities you know. So there's just a disparity, and I think part of the negotiating they're trying to do is trying to lower this Asian cap, basically, and not hurt the minorities too badly, but tone down legacy and athletic preferences that are given now, so they're trying to adjust all — you know, someone's going to hurt, right? You're going to take away from one and give to the other. But I don't know what if you have any thoughts about the way that is now or the way it used to be, in terms of, like you said something, if we have enough white males already or something like that. Like is it even harder now if you're not a minority, do you think, to get into these kind of places?

WOODS: Yeah. I don't know how much things have changed on that particular front. I mean, the statistics were pretty — I mean, these schools keep these things under lock and key for the most part, but occasionally, statistics drip out. Like in the late '80s or early '90s over at Dartmouth, it came out that minority students who had been admitted under an express Affirmative Action program dropped out at a two-to-one level over students who had just been accepted on the regular basis. And so obviously, that's not good for them, and it's not good for the people who didn't get to go and all that. So that's definitely there.

On the faculty level, I remember my own — Alan Brinkley, who was a left-liberal in the Hillary Clinton tradition all the way, and I remember talking to him about going on the job market and applying for jobs. And we were speaking frankly about Affirmative Action and white men getting jobs in academia. And he said, "Well, look, I'll just be frank with you. Generally, when I sit on faculty search committees, we almost never see minority candidates applying to be professors at Columbia, and when we do, they've generally been very unimpressive." So he said, "I think this is an exaggeration. I don't think you have as much to worry about as you think." There just aren't that many who go into academia or who have terminal degrees, period. So there's that aspect. But on the student level, I just don't know what it's like. But on the other hand on that — so the thing is, on the boxes where you check off your race, I think there's usually a box where you don't want to indicate your race, but everybody knows that means you're white, right? You'd be an idiot. If you're black, why would you not take advantage of everything you have coming to you? You just put an X in the black box. Why not? But you're not going to say, "I'm not going to tell you."

KINSELLA: Right, well, so you're a little younger me. When I took the ACT, SAT, I just took it one time and that was it. I figured I took it and whatever I got, I got.

WOODS: Yeah.

KINSELLA: And I didn't even know there was such a thing as prep courses and all that, because it didn't really matter for what I was going for.

WOODS: Me either.

KINSELLA: But so back when you were applying, were you taking it many times and trying to maximize your SAT score and all that kind of stuff, or did you just do well enough, and that got you in?

WOODS: Yeah, that was basically it. And then in my day, you also had to take what were called the achievement tests. I don't know if you did that. But in Massachusetts, you had to take — and they were in different subject matter. So the SAT had math and verbal, but the achievement tests were like chemistry, Spanish, all these sort of academic topics. And they were also graded on an 800 scale. And I did really well on those. And so I never either retook anything or did any training course. But also, it was because the particular things that the SAT tested happened to be where I was already pretty strong. There was no reason for me to take an SAT math prep course when I was the captain of the math team? The SAT math was a joke.

KINSELLA: Yeah.

WOODS: So there was no reason to worry about that. But with my own kids, I may actually encourage them to do that, because they don't have the same facility with math. And math is something — the SAT math is not that bad; it's more a question of have they forgotten it by then, and if you just refresh your memory on it, you could easily probably see at least a 50- to 100-point boost.

KINSELLA: Yeah, but it's become like an industry now, where you almost have to do this, because if you don't, you're at a competitive disadvantage. All the parents who are say everyone's using tutors and taking sample tests, and getting feedback and taking it multiple times and trying to optimize and it's a whole different thing now.

WOODS: Yeah, it is a different ballgame, but on the other hand, even a kid who just goes to the local library and checks out a book on SAT prep is way ahead of the game. I mean, all you need is that, is just a library card. You don't even need the fancy classes, and you'll still have an advantage. In fact, I remember being on a panel it when I was first a professor, and there were people talking about exactly what you said, and saying that this gives white folks a special advantage. And my answer was: almost nobody takes those prep courses. When you compare it to the student population, it's basically zero. But secondly, is there anything stopping you from getting a library card, going to the library and checking out a book on SAT prep? No one had an answer to that, because that is the obvious answer.

KINSELLA: Well, on that achievement test, in Louisiana, we did have it, but it was like things like how to boil crawfish and how skeet shoot, how to lay traps for deer, things like that.

WOODS: Yeah, see, it's a good thing I didn't have to do that. That would have bene a big old zero.

KINSELLA: Yes.

WOODS: How do you do those things? Answer: you get your friends to do it.

KINSELLA: [laughing]

WOODS: How do you change a tire? I couldn't even have done that.

KINSELLA: You know you mentioned the — I always think that's a great — kids should have a summer job at an auto mechanic shop and also as a short-order cook. Learn a little cooking; learn how to fix an automobile. That's probably two really good skills to have in life.

WOODS: And not only are they good skills, but it's also good to learn to appreciate the people who do them.

KINSELLA: Yeah, of course.

WOODS: Because I mean, somebody who can fix something saves your life in so many cases, and I don't want to forget that or have my kids forget it. And then when it comes to cooking, there have been times — I mean, I'll confess I have a secret pleasure. I do go to Waffle House now and again, and there have been times when you go into Waffle House and there's nobody there, and other times that it is hopping so much that that woman who's at the register and who's also waiting tables is losing her mind.

KINSELLA: Yeah.

WOODS: And I remember there was a night where I felt so sorry for her, I went up to the register as we were leaving, and after I paid my bill, I just like threw some money at her [laughing]. I just said, "Here. Take this. This is awful, what you've endured."

KINSELLA: [inaudible] for the cashier.

WOODS: Yeah, but I mean, the fact that, I mean, I get to work in this climate-controlled splendor, talking to interesting people all day, and you know, man, she's got to really work hard, hard, hard to make her income, and I think it's good to appreciate that and to be in that position sometimes.

KINSELLA: Well, I asked you about the jobs and whether it was for spending money, because I kind of had a feeling it was spending money, and it was, that you were spending it to go to an academic conference and —

WOODS: [laughing] I know, isn't that dorky?

KINSELLA: Well, when I had part-time jobs in college, I was trying to save up money to buy big speakers for my car, so I could win like a Crank It Up contest down the street.

WOODS: Oh, that's funny, that's funny.

KINSELLA: You know, buy some Rush CDs . It wasn't quite as a lofty as goals.

WOODS: Well, I tell you another dorky thing. I went to Liberty Fund, which publishes a lot of great liberty books in inexpensive additions. They also put on scholarly colloquia, and you go there for a weekend, and in the old days, they paid you — they pay a little more now, but they paid you $700, and you would sit around with about 15 scholars, and you would all discuss some reading that you had all done. And then there would be outings and fancy

dinners and a fancy hotel, and it was just an amazing experience. And as a grad student, the idea that I'd be gone a couple of days and earn 700 bucks was just, you've got to be kidding; of course, I'll do that.

So one of the times I did that, I got the 700 bucks, and when I got back, I saw that Union Theological Seminary down the street from Columbia was having intensive — they were offering a course in German for reading knowledge. So to this day, I have no idea how to hold a conversation in German. It's just how to attack a German sentence and understand it. And I thought, that might be useful. Might be good to have reading knowledge of German. And it cost $700, so I took the money from the thing, and I spent it on — and everybody else there was a Lutheran theologian. That's why they wanted to read German. And then there was just me, this American historian who just thought it'd be neat to learn [laughing].

KINSELLA: So you didn't have a lot of girlfriends in college, that's what you're saying [laughing].

WOODS: [laughing] That is what I am telling you. Well I will say what was interesting about that kind of experience — in grad school, I really didn't, but as an undergrad, what was interesting was that a lot of us in school had had the same experience. You know, we were the new kid who got made fun of. By the time I got to high school, I'd kind of gotten around that, but still, you know, maybe the popular kids thought you were okay, but you know, you're not coming over or whatever. But even that, by the end, I was kind of fixing that up. But still, we'd all kind of been that kid, and now we could all start fresh. Not only could we start fresh, we could start fresh with other kids who had been that kid, and so all of a sudden everything was all right. You know, everything was okay. All your insecurities and stuff, you're okay, because no matter who you are, there's somebody nerdier here. No matter who you are, there's always somebody nerdier. And even if you're the nerdiest one, well, wait till next year. There'll be another nerdier one than you. And so I did have a girlfriend for a couple of years there that I just feel like, if we'd been back in high school, would have been completely out of my league. It would have been impossible. But because we were all on an even level, anything's possible. Dreams can come true under these circumstances.

KINSELLA: Yeah, and I had one thing like that. I went to a Catholic High School in Baton Rouge, and one thing they did that I was always impressed by, they'd give letterman jackets out to the guys who were on honor roll too, so it's not just the jocks. So it's like a little way of sort of trying to say that being smart is cool. You know, it doesn't always help, but to be in an environment where everyone is like, pushing education and smarts, it's got to be liberating and refreshing if you've sort of kind of had to suffer the shame of it almost under certain environments.

WOODS: Right, right. Right, that we didn't have to pretend that we weren't interested in the stuff we were studying and pretend that we'd rather do extra — you could say: hey, I really like this. This is great. And look, I had lunch with my professor, and blah, blah, blah. You know that was fine.

KINSELLA: Yeah. Well, I think you satisfied my curiosity [laughing].

WOODS: Oh, good. I'm glad. I'm glad. Well, actually, I hope other people listening enjoyed hearing us talk about this, because it was actually fun to reminisce about it a little bit, especially ahead of the 25-year reunion coming up. My kids did come with me to the 20-year

reunion, and we walked around campus, and when they saw just the majesty of some of the buildings, I remember one of them saying, "I want to live there." [laughing] Yeah, I did, too when I was here. They didn't let me. I had to live over here. But yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right. It was Lowell House, for anybody who's ever been on the campus. They looked at that, and they said, "Yep, that's where I want to live." So they have a really neat experience for the older kids, where they get like what a day in the life of a student here is like, and I think my Regina would enjoy that.

KINSELLA: That's got to be cool. And I remember when you got invited to the Yale thing, you and I were talking about it, because we did it the same year, and you were like: yeah, it's special for me to go to Yale, because that's sort of, I guess, the rival for Harvard, right, so you checked that one off your list, too.

WOODS: Yeah, and boy, we could be — it was funny when I'd go to a Harvard athletic contest. I mean, whatever the game — I mean, hockey we had a fighting chance, but a lot of the time, it was pretty pitiful. And so the best we could do was try to humiliate the other team. That was all we had. So the chants that we would chant — we would chant, "Safety school," to the other team, which is really not nice [laughing]. Or if we would play against Brown University, the chant was always, "What's the color of" — you know, and the answer was "brown" [laughing]. So that was not — you know, we were nerds, but we could really cut you to the quick.

KINSELLA: How's the Harvard campus compared to Yale? Because I've never seen Harvard, but at Yale, I mean, the buildings are pretty, but the campus to me is not that great. It's just a bunch of city block, sort of, you know what I mean?

WOODS: Yeah, that's what I remember. The thing is that I've really only seen Yale at night, and so I can't really say. But I will say that when I've gone to Princeton, Princeton just blows Harvard out of the water, and I think Harvard blows Columbia out of the water.

KINSELLA: Got it.

WOODS: Now, you know, it's a beautiful campus. It's not super big, because the undergraduate population is about 6,400. It's not gigantic. But the graduate school nearby, the business school actually has, I think, even a nicer campus than the undergrad. But it is so picturesque. I mean, every time I would walk through to go from where I live to the library, it was just an absolute pleasure. I just soaked it in. It was a beautiful oasis.

KINSELLA: And I think Harvard has the biggest like endowment in the world or something for a university, right? It's like $30 or 40 million —

WOODS: It does. Yeah, they suffered a bit during the financial crisis, yeah, but that's why I once did an episode with a guy named Ron Unz, who was doing what he called his Free Harvard, Fair Harvard campaign. So Fair Harvard had to do with admissions, and Free Harvard was: look, your endowment generates so much income, you don't even need the tuition money. You don't need it. Unless you're just trying to prove a point about how much money you can bring in, you could actually let people go for free, and you wouldn't even feel it. So why not do it? If you're really talking about equity, why not do it? That was interesting.

KINSELLA: What do they spend the money on?

WOODS: I don't know. I never bothered to look. I don't know.

KINSELLA: Huh.

WOODS: Yeah.

KINSELLA: All right.

WOODS: Okay, well, I'll link to these couple of episodes that I mentioned, that one and my "what I did once I got there" episode, at TomWoods.com/1304. Well, thanks for being my sort of guest, and I think it turned out really well. Thanks for suggesting it. Well, actually, you didn't really suggest it. You were demanding that I answer these questions. I didn't think I had anything to say that. Then I said, "Let's make an episode out of it," and it turns out, as usual, I can talk forever.

KINSELLA: [laughing] I enjoyed it a lot.