



**Episode 1,742: University Life in America: An Eyewitness Report**

**Guest: T.J. Roberts**

**WOODS:** I have read and followed you for a long time, and in the back of my mind, I had this accumulating collection of ordeals you had endured. Now that you're free from that, at least from the undergraduate portion, I thought it might do some good to take stock of what your undergraduate experience was like. Now, is it the case, did I read this right, that Nicholas Sandmann of Covington Catholic High School is actually going to your former university?

**ROBERTS:** That is correct, yes.

**WOODS:** And which university is this?

**ROBERTS:** Transylvania University.

**WOODS:** Okay, are you a lifelong Kentuckian?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, born in Edgewood, Kentucky, raised in Burlington, Kentucky, and I still reside there.

**WOODS:** Okay. Now let me ask how old a guy are you?

**ROBERTS:** I am 22 years old.

**WOODS:** Golly, are you a pup. Holy cow. Okay. And I guess I want to ask, when I have somebody on who's that young, I just have to ask how did you come to be associated with this group of misfits that you associate with, including your host here?

**ROBERTS:** I've been involved in just politics for a long time. I've always had a passion for it. My first real run in was when I was in middle school, I got involved with my county fiscal court, which is essentially just the county government. In terms of just education policy, I've always wanted to be an attorney, so kept getting involved, just ran a little deeper. In seventh grade, I came across the book *Revolution* by Ron Paul and the *Politically Incorrect Guide* by Tom Woods, and I just dove down that rabbit hole. And that was just really all that it came to. I was lucky, like in my public high school, our history teachers were really good at teaching alternatives. Like in AP US History, we had to read stuff by Walter Williams about economic collapses, for example, things along those lines, and it was just born to be that way. And I'm lucky to live in Northern Kentucky, where we have people like Rand Paul and

Thomas Massie representing us, and people at the lower level like Savannah Maddox, for example. Just Kentucky's a breeding ground for liberty.

**WOODS:** Wow. Except the governor, unfortunately.

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, except the governor, which is —

**WOODS:** That's a whole separate question.

**ROBERTS:** [laughing] Yes.

**WOODS:** All right, let's do one thing at a time here. Let's cast your mind back to your undergraduate days. I did some things when I was in college, activist sorts of things, but we never got really in any trouble for any of it. I don't know, maybe because we were so a bit of nothingness in this sea of conformity that I think they thought we were an interesting novelty more than anything else. And also I think campuses were not nearly as bad then as they are now. We're talking almost 30 years ago, early 1990s. I mean, there was political correctness and there was a bias and you only got one kind of campus speaker unless you really, really struggled to get that one dissenting voice. And that much was indeed the same. But the vitriol, the sheer hatred, like the veins popping out of their necks just wasn't nearly as present as it was in your experience. So here you are a freshman. Now, did you actually enter — you entered that university kind of with your worldview more or less intact already?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, I was pretty much a libertarian. I knew I had a lot to learn, but I definitely leaned toward the right and I definitely leaned toward liberty in terms of just my freshman year.

**WOODS:** Okay, so what kinds of things you get involved with and how did they turn out, I guess from the point of view of getting in trouble or watching double standards at work, and so on?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, so my freshman year, I was reached out to by Young Americans for Liberty, and I started a chapter there at Transylvania University. I recruited so many students that they hired me on to be a state chair, so I was in charge of a lot of YAL operations in the state of Kentucky. We decided for the first big event for Transylvania University to host libertarian activist and then-presidential candidate Adam Kokesh. And we figured this would be perfectly fine, because just a semester before this, the university without any trouble posted Hillary Clinton, so we figured we may as well get someone who's running for president, not in 2016 but 2020, who offers an alternative perspective to how politics should work compared to Secretary Clinton.

And we came into some serious trouble over that. I received an email from the Director of Student Engagement about how this is not permitted and they threatened to dissolve my YAL chapter. They asked me about things that I was doing for my professional role at YAL, which, it was disturbing that they even thought that they had the authority to ask me questions like that. But long story short, we wound up hosting Adam Kokesh off campus And that went OFF without a hitch. And in addition, I was involved with Students for Rand Paul, which I can go into a little bit later in the episode.

**WOODS:** Okay, so was this a surprise to you? I mean, I know that maybe we kind of expect this sort of thing to happen, but maybe it's different when it actually happens to us. Maybe there is this sense of shock and surprise?

**ROBERTS:** It was definitely a surprise, because whenever I was being recruited to Transylvania University, they made it out to be some institution of truth. They talked about the pride that they had of their long history to where they're so old that their charter is signed by then-Governor Thomas Jefferson. They talked about that with an utmost sense of pride and respect for the history of the classical liberal tradition in which he spoke. So it was just one of those things where like, I came in and I was like, did I just buy into something that is very different from what they advertised, was my perspective. And as my undergraduate career went on, I realized very much so, that I went to a university that did not represent the values they claimed to represent.

**WOODS:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, that is a very, very understandable reaction. So let's talk a little bit about Students for Rand. Gosh, that's so funny that your undergraduate experience was so different from mine. I mean, when I think back to my undergraduate years, the election that happened at that time was Bill Clinton versus George H.W. Bush. I mean, yikes. I mean, at the very least, you could say it's gotten more interesting since then. It's not as boring. But so you were involved in Students for Rand, so what kinds of things did you do and what was the response to that?

**ROBERTS:** Oh, our big thing was just recruiting students on campus to knock doors or make phone calls or go to events in support of Rand Paul's reelection campaign for Senate. We also put up little signs and stickers on our doors. And the response to that was people tearing the signs and stickers down, as usual. For me in particular, these people at one point took a knife and carved the stuff off of my door, leaving permanent damage to my dorm. The university overall was not happy about there was a there was a clear support for Rand Paul's Democratic opponent. And after the election, it really boiled over. And the day after the election, I was wearing a Rand Paul shirt because we, frankly, obliterated our opponent. We beat him by 20 points. And as a result of that, while I was eating dinner, someone walked up to me and spit on me for wearing that shirt.

**WOODS:** Oh, well, I trust something happened to him?

**ROBERTS:** Something but it wasn't really anything worthwhile. The guy had to write a 124-word letter of apology to me, and it was one of the things that, I just know that if I had done that to a Bernie Sanders supporter, for example, they would have buried me under the university.

**WOODS:** I know you have a lot more things to share with us, but let's take a timeout here and say the obvious. We're living in a society where everybody knows and expects university life to be this way. We all know it. We all know these people act this way. We all know how they are. We do our best to adjust our lives accordingly, but we all know that this is how they are. We also know that that's not how we are, that you cannot find an example of us acting that way. Nobody on campus thinks we better not have such-and-such speaker because the right-wing students will shout that speaker down. No one has ever in the history of mankind worried about that. That does not happen. We don't burn cities down. We don't riot. We don't threaten people. We do literally none of this. It is entirely the other way.

And yet, if you were to base your worldview or your understanding of what's happening in the world on what you see on the evening news, you would think that there's some kind of fascist takeover underway by right wingers, and that we have all these left wingers who are just innocently trying to pursue the common good, but they're put upon by these terrible people. And yet, at some level, every single one of us knows that's false and we have to pretend that it isn't. It's absolutely bizarre. I don't know how you did it.

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, I mean, one of the things was that I did my best to be as real as I could and not pretend in this time, because Transylvania is a very small community and unless you are in complete lockstep, you will be ostracized there. So I just didn't bother with what the campus community thought of me. I took the friends that I could get, and I ultimately just branched out beyond the university for my social circles. I mean, that was the way that I survived throughout that entire time, was just realizing these people are going to hate me no matter what I do. They're going to claim that I'm some evil human being who wants to kill them, who wants to kill Grandma, which is a relevant thing now in this whole coronavirus thing. But we're also at this point to where we look at all, and it's just bizarre to me that, my big thing was I just wanted a government that leaves me alone and that was something that was evil to them, that they reviled me for, for supporting an antiwar, anti-drug war, pro-liberty, pro-small-government conservative like Rand Paul. But then these guys are saying, *We need to rule your entire life*, and they're not the evil ones.

**WOODS:** Let's go on to your sophomore year. What happens to your Young Americans for Liberty chapter that year?

**ROBERTS:** Oh, yeah, I received an email without really any notice from the same person who threatened to dissolve my chapter my freshman year, indicating that they had officially dissolved it because of inactivity. Which of course, how can you do anything with that chapter if you are regulated to the point that you can't do anything? We actually had multiple events throughout that year; we just did it off campus to avoid running into that bureaucracy. I'm off campus, so there's nothing they can do to me about admitting to that anymore. But if they had heard that I was doing this stuff off campus, I don't want to know what they would have done in response to it. But ultimately, we had given people the opportunity and they just said, we no longer recognize this as a legitimate chapter on our campus anymore. So they bent the knee to the left wingers who wanted to eradicate any chance for me to be involved politically on campus, which, I guess that's fine. But the fact of the matter is that that was just depriving other students of opportunities that they also very much deserved. So that's the big thing with my sophomore year.

**WOODS:** But did they have any conceivable grounds for doing it? I mean, what was the pretext?

**ROBERTS:** The pretext of it was that was that Transylvania University, they say that they will eliminate a student organization if it hasn't been doing anything on campus after a certain period of time, which in theory could be a good idea, but then it gets into the question of, are you really enforcing this consistently among all the groups, too? Are you guys allowing groups to do anything in general either? Because that's the whole thing, is like, well, if you don't do anything for three months, we're not going to allow you to do this, but we're going to close down your group because you haven't done anything for three months, because we've rejected everything that you've proposed doing.

**WOODS:** Right, right, right. And you did do some things during that year.

**ROBERTS:** Absolutely. Yeah, like we hosted Adam Kokesh in Lexington again. We sent student door-knockers out for Savannah Maddox through Operation Win at the Door. We got involved with the local Americans for Prosperity chapter for things like repealing the prevailing wage, right to work, pension reform, things along that – generally like boring things, but for the economics students, they love that stuff.

**WOODS:** All right, let's go to junior year. Junior year looks fun because you did something on Constitution Day, which seems harmless enough.

**ROBERTS:** It's definitely not harmless at Transylvania University. So I partnered up with the Young Americans for Freedom and Students for Free Expression chapters there because they did not get shut down. And we handed out pocket Constitutions, at which point someone did not really appreciate the values of the Constitution. They burned part of it, they wrote "F\*\*\* off Nazi punk," and they slid it under the dorm of one of the freshmen that was handing out Constitutions with me. That student, again, got a slap on the wrist and just a little bit of community service. And now the students who did that, who burned the Constitution, so committed arson, and then put that in as a threat of intimidation against the fellow student, now serves as a senator on the Student Government Association.

**WOODS:** And is doing what kind of stuff? I mean, I assume, not exactly making everybody feel welcome.

**ROBERTS:** Oh, no, whenever we made some motions to expand free speech rights on campus, he voted against it. He championed the push against free speech. Of course, this student is a leader of a student organization as well. He went on to start a Democratic Socialists of America chapter. He wants free speech rights for himself, but not for people like us, Tom.

**WOODS:** Well, how about that? It's almost like there's some kind of double standard going on here. All right, but that's not all from your junior year. I'm going to need some more details on your civil liberties graveyard from October that year.

**ROBERTS:** Absolutely. So it was getting close to Halloween, and one of the things that a lot of the conservative libertarian groups do is they do a civil liberties graveyard, where we make headstones that point out various civil liberties that we've lost, whether it be the right to privacy, which is dated from 1791 until 2001 with the Patriot Act, or the right to honest money, which is from 1787 until 1913 with the Federal Reserve Act, or the right not to be sent off into endless wars, things along those lines. Just basic things that you think that decent human beings to get behind, of maybe we should have the right to privacy, maybe we should have honest money, maybe we should end the war so that way we're not killing millions of people overseas. But the left had a bit over it. It led to people crying in the middle of campus and screaming to the point that it was disrupting classes inside. And the president unilaterally imposed these speech restrictions that made it to where really you couldn't do anything. One of the restrictions that they imposed was a rule against any activism that inhibits the enjoyment of another student, whatever that means.

**WOODS:** All right, I want to talk more about double standards here because they're just everywhere. So you had a situation on May Day where the democratic socialists did

something, and then the very next day you guys did that exact thing, but the way the university reacted was slightly different, let's say, in your case.

**ROBERTS:** Just slightly, yeah. So on May 1st, they went out tabling trying to recruit members for their communist revolution. The president of the university that wrote those restrictions that I was referencing beforehand, he even dropped by. He commended them for doing what they're doing and just allowed them to keep going. One of the other students got these people on record admitting that they know they're outside of the so-called free speech zone, that they know they did this without permission, without doing any paperwork. They just grabbed a table from the university, put it up, put their stuff up, and went on without any interference from the university at all.

So we decided to do our own free speech event, because beforehand, we did a little poll of the students, just an anonymous poll, people could pick it up and answer it. And more than 85% of the students who picked up the questionnaire agreed that Transylvania University needs to get rid of their free speech restrictions and have more respect for free speech. So we decided to get signups to increase our activism for the expansion of free speech. Within two minutes of setting up this table, Tom, the Vice President for Student Life and the Dean of Students came up to the table and told them they had to leave. They even threw one of my friends off campus for holding up a sign that says, "Do you like free speech?"

**WOODS:** Did they try to account for the difference in treatment, or they're the administration so they don't have to?

**ROBERTS:** Right, and that's the entire thing. Like whenever we brought that stuff up, they even made this reference to the fact that if we don't leave right now, that they're going to make the restrictions even harder on us, that they're going to make rules that are even more burdensome for student groups, things along those lines. They didn't try to justify it; they just said that we need to go right now.

**WOODS:** There's an organization that obviously you are now quite familiar with, with the really neat acronym FIRE because it's the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. And they often we'll highlight some of the worst, most egregious examples of the kinds of things you're describing here, and sometimes they can lend assistance and try and get some of these terrible policies overturned. Apparently they intervened in the case of your university.

**ROBERTS:** Yes, they publicly shamed the university. They breathed down the neck of the university throughout summer and through my last semester as a Transy. And unfortunately, it just didn't come to anything. But yeah, they went after it. And you would think that — these guys are lawyers who have argued before appellate courts, who have argued before the Supreme Court of the United States. Their arguments legally are clear-cut of: you are doing this, this other university did this exact same thing, and this court, which is in your jurisdiction, ruled this was illegal, so change it.

The response instead was for even more left-wing whining over the fact that, oh, people I disagree with have the right to speak their minds as well, which led to a religion professor and a political science professor making memes about me and my friends, essentially calling us snowflakes and crybabies because we want basic First Amendment protections. And it also led to this one professor calling me a white supremacist to one of my friends on campus, who I will keep anonymous.

**WOODS:** Okay, and we all know that that doesn't mean anything, basically. We all know that that legitimately means nothing.

**ROBERTS:** Oh, the thing that's funny about it is it has no meaning. It's one of the things that "white supremacist," especially on campuses like Transylvania University, is *anything I don't like*.

**WOODS:** Yeah, it couldn't possibly mean anything else. I literally don't know of anybody who favors that position. And I don't even know, what do they mean by that? When we used that term in the old days, it meant people who favored a legal regime privileging white people over members of other races, because that's exactly the regime you had in some places. And so you had a situation of one race holding supremacy over another race. I don't know anybody who advocates that, not a single soul advocates that at this point.

**ROBERTS:** Right.

**WOODS:** But it's an ugly term because it represents ugly behavior. So therefore, they resurrect it as a way of, they figure, okay, at this point, everybody knows *racist* doesn't mean anything anymore. We can't use that anymore. We ruined that one. So let's try to come up with the most toxic term we can that everybody remembers from their middle school textbook, and we'll start throwing that at people. I mean, my feeling is that's probably what happened, that they had done everything they could with *racists*, so they had to come up with something that — I mean, nobody wants to be called a white supremacist, right? That's horrible, right? Nobody wants that. So you just throw it at people, and then they'll spend all their time insisting that they're not this thing. And meanwhile, the more they do it, the more suspicious they seem. I mean, I have to admit they have a pretty good racket going.

**ROBERTS:** Oh, yeah. I mean, it was a great move on that professor's end to call me a white supremacist, because it led to other students and other alumni and members of the Transylvania community, whatever that means, to go onto my social media, harass me, message my mother, things along those lines. And the harassment eventually just got to the point that I just looked at my academic resume, realized that I had the credits to graduate. I spent one more semester at Transy, and I graduated early just to get out with my mental health somewhat intact.

**WOODS:** Geez, they owe your refund, those people, really.

**ROBERTS:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** And again, it's so funny for them to try to use the word *snowflake* against you and our people, when if they had to endure for one day the kind of indignities to which we are routinely subjected every day, they wouldn't last ten minutes.

**ROBERTS:** Oh, absolutely not. If *communist* meant in the minds of the people, if it had the same vitriol that the term *white supremacist* had, these people would not survive what we deal with.

**WOODS:** So you wound up leaving early. Now you're in law school. What are you hoping to do someday with that? I mean, not that your career has to have anything to do with any of this

stuff, but I don't know, something just tells me that you're the kind of person where it just might.

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, it probably will, because the whole thing is that I've seen throughout this how much a good attorney can help out an individual in a position like mine, and I feel like I owe it forward to people that will be in a similar situation once I've completed my legal education to help these guys. So I'm looking to go into legal practice, particularly with civil liberties litigation, privacy, some election law, maybe a little bit of tax law as well, just a multidisciplinary approach. In particular, just protecting the rights of people, especially people who have been put in a position that they never asked to be put in; they just wanted to speak their minds, and they wind up in the worst kind of places.

**WOODS:** Are you plugged into the Federalist Society at all yet?

**ROBERTS:** I am, actually. I'm the Program Director of the Federalist Society at —

**WOODS:** Of course you are. Why did I even ask? Of course you're the Program Director. Why wouldn't you be [laughing]? Well, that's good. Now, I assume in law school, people are too busy for the usual nonsense and generally people aren't living on campus and stuff, so you don't have the same kind of crazy culture?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, you can see that there's a clear bias within law school, but ultimately it's livable. And for most of the people, it's one of these things like once you're in law school, there's a degree of intelligence that you need to have, so even the further-to-the-left people, they're not absolutely insane. They're not absolutely devoid of reason. They're capable of intelligent conversation.

**WOODS:** Okay, and you're more than capable of handling yourself in these situations, so I'm sure it's going to be a less eventful several years than you had before.

**ROBERTS:** I sure hope so.

**WOODS:** And I hope it does go really well for you. So in the meantime, obviously, you should be devoting — I sound like your father now — you should be devoting your time to your studies, son — but I don't know. And I know you're on social media, so do you have a website or anything that I should direct people to if they want to know more about you?

**ROBERTS:** Yeah, I mean, my Facebook is TJ Roberts, it's just my name. My Twitter is @RealTJRoberts, it's mostly just retweeting you and Dave Smith, but it's there. I do some writing for the Advocates for Self-Government, and I do have a few articles published on the Mises Institute, so those are the main places to really keep track of it. So that's more or less where I would go.

**WOODS:** Okay, so I'll collect all this stuff and put it on the show notes page, which will be [TomWoods.com/1742](http://TomWoods.com/1742), and that's where you can find the TJ Roberts smorgasbord, let's say, will be located there. Well, thanks for sharing some of these old war stories with us. I certainly appreciate it.

**ROBERTS:** Absolutely. I was happy to be on here.