



Episode 601: Just Do It: Finding Your Place in the Liberty Movement

Guest: A.J. Van Slyke

WOODS: This is crazy. This is funny to have you talking to me. I'm thinking of actually having my mother on the show for a bonus episode some months down the road actually, but you know, you have an interesting story, and the whole show is an interesting story if you ask me. But you are not just somebody I hired just at random because you know how to do this stuff. You've been around a while, and I want to talk about that, how you got into this whole thing. It was long, long before there was a *Tom Woods Show*. What was the factor that drove you into this? Were you political but just now you think you were wrong in those days, or were you just not political at all? What was it that happened?

VAN SLYKE: I grew up in a political family, conservative, traditional, you know, Republicans, and I was always fascinated with markets and politics and history and the combination of all those things. But I was never a libertarian until maybe my early 20s when I started becoming more libertarian. I had a friend that always told me I was a libertarian, but I didn't believe him (laughing). And at some point in time when I was playing baseball — I played in the minor leagues for a while — I ran across Ron Paul. A friend told me that Ron Paul was running for the nomination, and he said this guy's great, you've got to check him out. And I was skeptical, but I did anyway. And you know, as many people listening to this show obviously had the same experience, I just dove right in and watched all his videos. And from Ron Paul I found Peter, Peter Schiff. And I read Peter's book the last year I was playing baseball in 2008, *Crash Proof*, and that book really got me started, because it was a combination of an introduction to Austrian thinking and finance and markets, which was my passion — still is my passion. So after reading that book, another friend gave me some Ayn Rand nonfiction, and then he finally gave me *What Has Government Done to Our Money?*, and that was the nail in the coffin for me. And I found Rothbard that way and then just read as much Rothbard as I possibly could from there. So that's how I became an Ancap.

WOODS: All right, now what interests me is that you actually jumped in and got involved in Peter's U.S. Senate campaign back in, I guess it must have been 2010. It's hard to believe it was six years ago.

VAN SLYKE: Yeah, it doesn't seem that long ago. But yes, when Peter announced his campaign, I had just gotten a job in finance. I took my Series 7 during the crash, which was not an exciting prospect to go into the business at that time. And I was working in

finance, and I was doing all these things I didn't really enjoy. I was trying to sell products to people that I didn't believe in, and it was kind of a disheartening experience, so I thought, well, if I wanted to work for anybody, I'd want to work for Peter. So when he announced his campaign, I just packed up all my stuff. I told my boss I was taking my vacation time, and I drove to Connecticut. And my plan was to just kind of ambush him at an event. I was just going to find him at an event and just try to talk to him and see if I could, you know, somehow get on the campaign. And so I showed up at this event, and he never showed. The event was cancelled.

WOODS: Oh no (laughing)!

VAN SLYKE: So I was a little disheartened, and I was like, okay, now what am I going to do? I guess I could wait until the next event and just sit here, or — then I just drove to the other side of the state and went to the campaign headquarters. And, you know, I remember I was driving on the highway; I wanted to look good; I wore a tie, and I went and shaved in one of those roadside rest areas (laughing), and I walked into the campaign headquarters, and I was all looking nice, and I said, you know, I want to volunteer; give me something to do. And they said, great, come on in. Here's a call sheet; start calling voters and tell them about Peter Schiff. And you know, I wasn't real excited about doing that, but I said, sure, whatever you need, and I just went at it as diligently as I could. And by the end of the second day, they offered me a paying job. I think they waited till the next day just to see if I'd show up again —

WOODS: Yeah, sure, right.

VAN SLYKE: (laughing)

WOODS: Especially after having to make phone calls, which I think I did years ago for another candidate, and I hated every minute of that. There's nothing about that that's enjoyable.

VAN SLYKE: Yeah, it's not fun.

WOODS: No, because no one wants to be talking to you.

VAN SLYKE: No, and you don't have a product to sell. You're trying to sell a person that they don't even really know and it's not really a pressing issue to them. That's why politics is so hard, because it's not like a business where you have a goal. There's just this very nebulous world that you're operating in that doesn't really have set goals. But anyway, they offered me a paying job. And I started off as Peter's driver. That's what they gave me, because as you can imagine, Peter is difficult to handle for some people. He's very intense, and he's very opinionated, and some people, you know, don't take to that very well. So they knew I liked Peter and that I liked his ideas, so they said, oh, well why don't you drive Peter to all of his events. And I said, great. I was really shocked. You know, you get in the car with him for the first time, and like I couldn't really believe what I was doing.

WOODS: (laughing)

VAN SLYKE: (laughing) So I drove him around that whole year, 2010. I was his personal driver, and I probably took him to about 200 or so events where he would give stump speeches and shake hands and all that good politics stuff. And in all that year, in 200 events, I don't think I ever saw him — I know I didn't ever see him bring a note to the podium. Not one time.

WOODS: Yeah, that's just not his style.

VAN SLYKE: Just not his style. He's amazing like that, how he can talk off the cuff. And you know, the campaign was entertaining. Peter was so much fun to work for. I remember one specific time, a Democrat drove to our campaign headquarters and walked in, and Peter was there, and he told Peter that he was thinking about voting for him. He liked some of his ideas, and he wanted to talk to him further. And in the course of the discussion, they had a conflict of ideas, and Peter just would not let up on this guy. He just kept telling him why he was wrong and how he needed to change his opinion, and the guy was like, fine, I'm not voting for you, and walked out. Well, Peter wasn't done. Peter chased him outside —

WOODS: (laughing)

VAN SLYKE: — into the parking lot and was arguing with him as the guy was driving away.

WOODS: (laughing) That's awesome.

VAN SLYKE: Which is, needless to say, why Peter is not the greatest politician on Earth, because he can't lie to people. He's just so strong in his beliefs and convictions, he can't even shave off the edges at all. But that's what I loved about him, and that's what I love about Ron Paul too, obviously.

WOODS: That must have been a tough campaign. He was up against two very well known opponents.

VAN SLYKE: Yes, and we did surprisingly well, much better than I ever imagined we could do. I think we got almost a quarter of the Republican primary vote, which in a three-way race is very respectable.

WOODS: Yeah, especially with a guy with very little name recognition around —

VAN SLYKE: Yes, and I think even by voting day we were still just barely over 50% name recognition in the state.

WOODS: Wow.

VAN SLYKE: Which is, you know, somewhat of an accomplishment coming from next to zero, but with Linda McMahon in the race and 100% and the amount of money she had behind her, it was very difficult.

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, of course what we dreamed of was having Peter win the nomination and then be in any sort of debate for the general election.

VAN SLYKE: Yes, yes.

WOODS: I don't care if he wins or loses the election; I want to watch that debate.

VAN SLYKE: Yes. And that's what I told him. When I came to work for him, I said, you know, Peter, I know this is a long shot or whatever. I just want to see you stick it to them more, on TV or in the debates or wherever you can get a voice. Imagine Peter Schiff on the floor of the Senate (laughing).

WOODS: I know. I mean, that alone, can you imagine how awesome that would have been, day in, day out? Because not only would he have been telling the truth, but he would have been telling it in his devastating, hilarious style —

VAN SLYKE: Yes.

WOODS: — complete with the classic Peter Schiff analogies that would then be repeated by the whole country the next day.

VAN SLYKE: Yeah, it would have been — it was my dream. I really wanted to see that happen. And maybe, you know, in the future. Who knows? I don't know if his political career is over at this point, but that's what I wanted to see.

WOODS: Now, do you at this point have any connection with Peter professionally?

VAN SLYKE: Yes, I do still. So after the campaign was over, some people that worked on the campaign with me more closely and had influence over Peter told them that he should give me a job at his brokerage firm, Euro Pacific Capital. I was already in the industry before, and I had been a good employee on the campaign, so it was kind of a natural transition, and Peter was kind enough to do that. So I started off working for him at the only job they had, which was just booking trades at this trading desk in Connecticut, and he very shortly after started *The Peter Schiff Show*, which I'm sure some of the audience remembers, were listeners of. And because I'd been on the political side before that and I had helped Peter with a lot of the radio events that he had been doing while campaigning — he used to do these things called town halls where people could call in and listen, and before that he used to do the *Wall Street Unspun* show.

WOODS: Yeah, I listened all the way back then. I listened to all the — well, as many episodes of *Wall Street Unspun* as I could.

VAN SLYKE: Yeah, so it was great. And so I just naturally kind of started to help out with *The Peter Schiff Show*. They didn't pay me or anything; I just loved the show, and I loved Peter's voice, so I did whatever I could to contribute research or articles or any type of information that I could share to help the show out, I did. So in the course of those events, Peter, because of his busy schedule, needed many guest hosts. And I had been reading your books, your history books, *33 Questions* and other books by you, and I'd watched all of your videos and speeches and everything like that. So I said, you know, we've got to get Tom Woods as a guest host. And he said okay — well, actually I think they said, who's Tom Woods, and I said, well — (laughing).

WOODS: Nice.

VAN SLYKE: He's this tremendous Austrian author, he's a libertarian, and he's a great radio host. He's really good on the radio. And they said, okay, let's get him. So they got you to guest host *The Peter Schiff Show* often. I think you were the most common guest host by the end of it.

WOODS: Yeah.

VAN SLYKE: Which I loved when you guest hosted.

WOODS: It was a great experience. And also they did a little poll on the Ron Paul forums, who would you want to have as a guest host, and apparently people had said that I would do a good job —

VAN SLYKE: Yes.

WOODS: — and so when it was proposed to me, I thought, why would I say no; it sounds like something fun. And I did it at first from a local radio station, you know, with a big microphone and everything just like a regular radio host, and then Peter paid to outfit my office so that I could just do it right there and they wouldn't have to pay every single time, pay the radio station. But yeah, that was a great time, and I still to this day have people, you know, years after Peter discontinued the program, I still have people writing and saying I first heard you on *The Peter Schiff Show*. So that was a benefit to me in many ways.

VAN SLYKE: Yeah. And so at some point — I don't know who suggested this; it wasn't my idea, but someone — or maybe it was yours — suggested that you get your own spinoff show. And I was real excited about that, and when it came to fruition they asked me, they said, would you like to produce it. And I said, of course I would. I jumped at that. And that's how we got together.

WOODS: Yeah, that's right. Now, the whole thing about my starting a show, people have been asking me that for a long time, and people on the Genesis network that I think does Alex Jones, I had a lot of different places asking if I would do it. And I liked the idea, but there was always something going on. I was writing a book or there was always some big project. But I wish I had done it sooner. That's my only regret, that if

only I had started it sooner, because it's been so good for me in so many ways. I mean, here we are now at Episode 601 —

VAN SLYKE: Which I can't believe.

WOODS: I can't either. And it's really done great. But you know, when we first started this thing — I actually cannot — I cannot listen to the early episodes.

VAN SLYKE: (laughing) I've never gone back and listened either.

WOODS: Nope, I refuse to do it. Back when we were on this other platform and the audio was not good, and for some reason I thought the show needed to be live, which is ridiculous. Why would I need a live show?

VAN SLYKE: Yeah, it was just because we were used to doing *The Peter Schiff Show* live.

WOODS: Right. Yeah, it's a podcast. You don't have to do it live. It makes no sense. And I remember the first episode was with Michael Boldin —

VAN SLYKE: Yes.

WOODS: — and we hadn't quite perfected the system whereby the guest calls in, so if you've ever listened to the very first episode, you wondering why I'm yammering on and on and on about the nature of the show, it's because I'm waiting for Boldin to call in. Well, I didn't realize that this phone number that keeps coming in is Boldin. It wasn't a number that I recognized. So eventually I just thought maybe there's some chance that it's him. But I was so glad when we got off that model.

VAN SLYKE: I remember the night before that first episode, I was up all night having a panic attack, because we had tried it the day before and it failed completely, and I was like, there's just no way this is going to work (laughing).

WOODS: (laughing) Oh, just crazy. But now we've got a good, solid audience. I am shocked at how many people I run across who say they listen to it every single day. I mean, that's great. I'm glad they made it part of their routine. It's wonderful. And you have been — I mean, you've been an indispensable ingredient in all of this. You're unbelievably efficient. You do everything I ask for. You do things I don't even think to ask for, you do them. And so when I'm telling people, listen, help out the show in any way you can, it's in part because I want you to be supported because of all the — if there were no A.J. Van Slyke, there would be no *Tom Woods Show*, period. It just would not happen.

VAN SLYKE: Thank you very much, Tom.

WOODS: And so you have done so much for me. And sometimes there are times when I say, look, it's just been one problem after another and the show's not going to be

ready till 9:30 at night; do you think you could get it ready for me? You're always there, and I think to myself, I can't keep abusing this poor soul. And I really do want to get to that point where we've got 8 million shows in the queue and it's ready to go, and something keeps coming up in my life, but we are little by little getting to that point.

VAN SLYKE: I get a very large amount of pride out of doing this show. I always have. It's a dream come true for me. I never thought that I would work for two of my heroes, Peter and you.

WOODS: Oh, that's very good of you to say. Do you have any particular moments that you think are better rather than some of our worse moments?

VAN SLYKE: Well, I mean, yeah. Some of the shows we've done have even amazed me. The recent episode with Commander Brown in Detroit was just amazing.

WOODS: Yeah.

VAN SLYKE: I could go through many of my favorite episodes. The people I've gotten to interact with and learn about, the guests we've had, it's all been an amazing experience for me, more than I could have ever imagined would have happened when we started this.

WOODS: Now, I get emails all the time for people saying, I'm a young guy and I want to get into the liberty movement, and what should I do. And I never really know what to tell people, because frankly it's not that easy to make a living doing this. To be in effect a professional libertarian is almost not doable. And the thing is it's not anything I set out to do. I was going to be an academic for my whole life, which I was for a little while, and it was only later when I realized that I could actually do this and it would be better for me, from both my mental health standpoint and in other ways, to actually be completely on my own. I have no employer. I employ myself, and I just try things, and some of them work, and some of them don't, and one thing that really, really worked big time is *The Tom Woods Show*. But what would you say to somebody who asked you that, because I tell you, I get that email constantly?

VAN SLYKE: Yes, you do, and I read those emails, and I can imagine myself back in seven, eight years ago when I was that person who just desperately wanted to do something and didn't know what it was, and just standing on a street corner and yelling didn't seem like a very viable option. So I just decided that I was going to show up. I was just going to show up and I was going to do whatever they asked, whatever that was, and I just was going to keep doing that until somebody noticed me. And I just got lucky that Peter was a natural fit for me, because I had the skills to work in his industry, and I showed him my dedication to his efforts. On those campaigns, you know, you get paid, but it's not like a regular job. You don't go in at 9 and leave at 5. Sometimes you go in at 8 and stay till midnight, because it's not like a business. And when you show people that you're willing to go those extra miles, whatever they are, I think it's just a natural thing to want to include you in their operation, their

endeavors, their enterprises. And that's how I got in with Peter, and that's how I got in with you. I was just there. I was there, and I cared, and I showed how much I cared, and they decided that, you know, if you're going to have somebody do it you might as well have the kid who wants it more than anybody. So if you just show people that, if you show up, if you volunteer, if you sweep floors or whatever they ask, you're always going to have a place. People are not going to turn you away.

WOODS: And it doesn't hurt to pick up some skill that might be of use to, let's say it's a think-tank you want to part of or some organization. Pick up some skill that even if you're not their main person who does that, you can be a good, reliable back-up person who can do video editing or audio or some of the things that nobody else in the organization is going to know how to do, and it'd be great to have somebody in house who can help. I mean, just — and especially in this day and age. I mean, now I can do basic audio work for somebody if they needed basic noise removal or if they needed a podcast recorded. I can now do that, and that's just because I just learned it. It didn't take me that long. And I can do video editing. And I'm some guy. I'm not a specialist in either of these things, but in this day and age when you have this software, these programs that are so easy for a beginner to use, you can pick up five or six skills in almost no time at all.

VAN SLYKE: Yeah.

WOODS: And people like the guy who can do five or six things. There's no organization that doesn't like that guy.

VAN SLYKE: That's right. And when we started this, there were a ton of things that I do now that I had no idea how to do (laughing), and you just — with the Internet today, if you think that there's some place you want to work or some thing you want to do, you just Google that skill, and you can find it. You can figure out how to learn it. All the things that we do with your website and audio editing and tagging and all these little things, I had no idea what those things were when we started. And I was the producer of the show (laughing). But you know, you just learn, and there's so much knowledge out there today that there's really no excuse for not being able to do what you really want to do.

WOODS: Yeah, and any skill, especially a tech skill, that you might want to learn, at the very least you can find a Udemy course — [Udemy.com](https://www.udemy.com). You can find a course there that, okay, maybe — and by the way, they have big sales on those courses. Sometimes they are rock bottom cheap. But even if you pay \$100 or \$200, it saves you 1,000 hours of figuring it out on your own, and it's a skill that you can sell for way, way more than that. So yeah, there are opportunities galore. There are ways to support yourself. There are ways to — I mean, Ben Settle is my email mentor, and Ben Settle says, using the Internet to earn money is about as hard as falling off a log. Now, maybe he's overstating that, but I have found if you are entrepreneurial and you are alert to opportunities, that is absolutely the case, and that's partly why I've been putting so much emphasis on that on the show, because I feel like I've found — I've stumbled into so many things that have helped me support the family that I want more people to

know about it. And chances are we're not going to be stepping on each other's toes, so I'm just going to be able to give you information that will help you. So anyway, in fact, one of the things I've been giving away is bonuses, like if people buy like a really, really high ticket item through an affiliate link of mine, is I'm putting together a webinar where I go through every single thing that I've been able to do online that helps put food on our table. And as I've said on the show a lot of times, we've unfortunately had some health problems in the family, so we have big bills we have to pay, so I've got to be creative to figure out how to make it all work. And I enjoy sharing that with people. So I'm glad that, yeah, you were thrown into a position where you had to learn about tagging — I still don't really know what tagging is, so I'm glad you do (laughing).

VAN SLYKE: (laughing)

WOODS: I'm glad you never get sick, because I don't know what I would do. The show's over, everyone. I have no idea what to do.

VAN SLYKE: I don't think I've taken a day off from you since we started this.

WOODS: Yeah, and I mean, at some point we have to talk that through, and I know you've made instructional videos for me, but I think what we need to do is we need to get on Skype, do screen sharing, and you walk me through what you do with the episodes, and I'll watch you do it on the screen, and I'll do a screen capture to save it, and then that way I'll feel like if you absolutely have to stop working, if that is somehow in the cards, then the show will go on (laughing).

VAN SLYKE: Yes, well, division of labor is a beautiful thing, but it's nice to know what's going on.

WOODS: Yeah, that's right. That's right. Well, listen, I'm glad we were able to have a little chat and people were able to get to know who's on the other side of the show, who's the one who's booking the guests, who's doing all the correspondence, who's getting the show up there every day and getting those links up and doing all this stuff for me. It's the heroic A.J. Van Slyke, whom I could not do without, so thanks so much.

VAN SLYKE: Thank you, Tom.