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THE UNLIKELY DISCIPLE

The student who went undercover at Liberty University talks about Christian education, conservative views on homosexuality, and why the “God divide” is overblown

by Bradley Portnoy . CampusProgress.org

By all appearances, Kevin Roose is your typical Brown University senior. He’s an English major, sings in an *a cappella* group and was raised as a Quaker in the kind of family where having two lesbian aunts is no big deal. But, instead of the typical junior year study-abroad trip to Europe or Africa, Roose took a semester off from Brown to enroll in Liberty University, the world’s largest evangelical university.

Founded in the 1970s by controversial pastor Jerry Falwell (also responsible for founding the conservative lobby group Moral Majority), Liberty is known as much for its strict rules (no drinking, no dancing, and no kissing — not even on the cheek) as it is for its agenda-driven academics. Liberty teaches evolution in its biology department (necessary for accreditation), but all students are required to take courses teaching young earth creationism. When spring break rolls around, Liberty students hit the beaches like everyone else — but they’re there to proselytize, not party.

Roose dove head first into what Falwell once described as “Bible boot camp,” living like any other evangelical Christian student. When people on the Liberty campus asked him why he had left Brown to enroll there, he told them he wanted to see what a Christian college was like. This was the truth, but his motives went beyond that. Roose took notes on his experience every night and his new book, “The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner’s Semester at America’s Holiest University,” already on shelves, tells his story of a semester spent at Liberty.

Campus Progress recently spoke with Roose about his time at Liberty, the challenges of returning to Brown after a semester of piety and how his parents reacted to his “semester abroad.” **The book follows you through an entire semester spent at Liberty University and in the end you come away with a surprisingly favorable impression. Going in, were you expecting to receive Liberty so positively or did you find yourself surprised by the outcome?**

I really had no idea what to expect at Liberty, since I grew up and lived my whole life in a secular, liberal bubble. All I had to work with were my preconceived notions of Falwell-style conservative Christianity. So, it was completely surprising to discover that most Liberty students are perfectly normal kids and that a lot of them spend their days watching Judd Apatow movies, gossiping about girls and complaining about the amount of homework they have — the same things my friends at Brown do. I was expecting a col-

lege full of students who spent their free time sewing Hillary Clinton voodoo dolls and penning angry letters to the ACLU. **One of the major issues that you have with Liberty and its students’ views is their intolerance for homosexuality. At Brown you have a number of gay friends and even went so far as to share a room with one of them before leaving for Liberty. Were there ever times that you nearly spoke out against some of the comments that you heard (or even an instance where you did that didn’t make it into the book)?**



With that issue, I was in a pretty tough position since I couldn’t really speak my mind

without revealing myself as an outsider. But, as I got to know the guys on my hall, I did start to pipe up during discussions about homosexuality. I’d say things like, “You know, some people think the Bible doesn’t forbid same-sex relationships at all.” And, of course, my hallmates would mostly roll their eyes and keep talking. But, a few of them actually seemed open to the possibility, so I felt good about that. Baby steps, you know?

Your parents were apprehensive about your project going in — what have their reactions been to the changes Liberty brought about in you?

“Apprehensive” is a bit of an understatement. They flat-out hated the idea of me studying at Jerry Falwell’s college when I first brought it up. They used to work for Ralph Nader, after all. But, I think they came to understand my motives for wanting to do it and they supported me even though they were worried that I’d be changed permanently by the experience. Now, I think they’re just happy it’s over. **Even though you changed the names and identifying details of everyone in the book, you still spent a semester deceiving them about your true mission at Liberty. Were there any concerns going in about the ethics involved in your project?**

Of course. It was unbelievably hard to keep certain parts of my identity shielded from public view and it only got harder as I grew closer to my Liberty friends. But, I decided early on that I wanted to see the real picture of Christian college life and that required being seen as an insider. I did make a few rules for myself going into the project, one of which was that I’d do as little lying as possible. So, I told people I came from Brown and when they asked

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