

LIBERTY ON THE ROCKS: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMANDA TERESI

Eva Kosinski

For those of you who've been in a cave for the past few years, Liberty on the Rocks is a group that uses meetup and other social networks to identify places to meet and chat about politics and freedom with other folks who believe that liberty is the essence of our national character, and needs to be preserved.

When I first started hearing about Liberty on the Rocks, it was before the Campaign for Liberty, but after the Ron Paul supporters started their many, many meetup groups. I was never sure if LOTR was part of the RP movement or not. At the time, I was the Chair of the Libertarian Party in Boulder County, and we'd been approached several times by local Republicans, some LOTR attendees, some of them looking for Libertarians to change parties to support Ron Paul, some requesting that we pull our LP candidates from a local election to let the Republican win, and some asking us to change registrations so that we could rid the area of the evil socialist Democrats, so I was not, in any way, kindly disposed towards a group that was formed by someone who used to be a Republican. What I saw in my mind's eye was a Republican party willing to use just about any clever machination to get Libertarian registration increases in Colorado down and get Libertarian candidates who were gaining ground, out of the way. Plus, why if this were not a Republican outfit, were there few Democrats who were at all interested in attending? There was a group called "Drinking Liberally" which I assumed was where the Democrats went.

But, folks that I trusted who had attended some Liberty on the Rocks events in Denver, kept telling me I was being a bit paranoid (to which I replied "that doesn't mean they're not out to get us," quoting the old sixties lapel button). Finally, I said, "OK let's find out if I am or not. I don't want to be the one accused of holding an unrealistic bias, and since reality always wins, let's check out reality." I sent Amanda Teresi an email, telling her I was one of the folks severely unconvinced of what she was doing, and asking her if she would be willing to take some time and chat. She responded right away and we met for lunch. I definitely arrived with a bit of a chip on my shoulder, ready to argue, and folks who know me know I don't much beat around the bush. Little did I suspect it was going to be a very interesting lunch.

- Eva Kosinski

Are folks more interested in Liberty than they used to be? Is that a part of the reason LOTR took off the way it did?"

Liberty on the Rocks is not an outgrowth of any party. It was able to come about because more people are interested in liberty today, in my opinion, than they have been in a very long time. That alone has spurred the creation of many liberty-based groups which have recently come into being.

What about you? What is there that motivated you, personally, to have an interest in the Liberty movement?

In my teens I started to become interested in people and the way they behaved. It didn't take long for me to see the nature of being human. People have a rational self-interest, plain and simple. But what I came to realize is that this isn't a bad thing. It only becomes a bad thing if in our conquest to do what is best for ourselves we take away the rights of another. This does happen from time to time and that is why I believe we need some government to protect our individual rights. But I also must point out that if someone does something that violates the rights of another, they are not truly acting in their rational self-interest. I am very interested in Ayn Rand's opinion on this matter. What I had come to find in addition to the fact that people are self-interested, was that in order for them to get what they wanted, they first had to please others. Most do this by opening businesses, inventing new products and services and making the people of the world better off (so they can make a profit and have what they want in life).

So the bottom line is that we must let people pursue their rational self-interest, as it is the only way for us all to fully prosper. I have begun to see the government's main purpose as doing all they can to stifle creativity, innovation and hard work. They do this in many ways, but the worst thing they do is to punish success. It doesn't get any worse than that.

Is LOTR an outgrowth of the Republican Party? Is it related to the Tea Party folks or the Campaign for Liberty? Does it get money from any of these?

Neither myself, nor Liberty on the Rocks, endorses a particular party. I personally don't believe in parties and am the ultimate advocate of principle over party. That means I don't care which party people are affiliated with, as long as they demand (on a consistent basis) less government from whoever is in office. I personally think of myself as a free market capitalist, rather than the member of a particular party. LOTR is its own group and is not related to the Tea Party folks or Campaign for Liberty, and receives no monetary support from either. While we do not endorse parties or candidates, LOTR does support any group or organization that promotes the true principles of liberty by encouraging its members to utilize their research and get involved with their cause.

I had mentioned before that I was once a "Hypocritical Republican". What I meant by that was that I claimed to love liberty, but I didn't really study the issues and instead just listened to what the pundits and politicians on my side were saying. What that meant was that I couldn't properly defend free markets to those who asked, and I supported things that were antithetical to liberty because I didn't fully understand the consequences.

One example of this is gay marriage. I now believe the correct answer for that issue, instead of banning it, is to take government out of matters relating to marriage completely. Marriage is a contract between two individuals, and there is no reason for the state to tell people who they can and cannot make contracts with.

How does one go about getting from the idea to the reality? Clearly you found ways to get people together to talk? How did that happen?

After a few friends and I decided to start this social network, we hunted for a good location (which took a few weeks) and then chose a day to meet. We invited all of our friends to our first meeting in June - anyone we could think of. We also invited Jon Caldara of the Independence Institute and two activists who were having their home/business taken from them through eminent domain. We ended up with fourteen people at our first meet-up. After a few weeks of meeting at the same place, we found an even better spot and are still there to this day. To increase the size of members we advertised on facebook and by word of mouth. Those who were showing up to meet-ups were well-connected individuals who were happy and anxious to spread the word to others. We also had a few bloggers in the area mention in their blog posts that we were meeting. By the end of the year we had over sixty individuals showing up every other week to meet and network with other lovers of liberty.

What made you think of creating Liberty on the Rocks, the Non-Profit?

I created LOTR because I wanted to connect individuals who believed in the concepts of liberty, no matter what their political affiliation. There are a few reasons for this. One is so they are able to see that they aren't alone in their viewpoint of limited government. The second is to motivate and encourage them to become more aware and involved. Mostly, I want to connect people so they are more likely to learn the truth about matters of liberty, both from each other and from local and national groups studying issues of public policy. Unfortunately, due to a lack of education in free market economics, thanks to the public school system and the mainstream media, there are a good number of individuals who don't realize just how the economy works, or what capitalism really means.

If LOTR becomes really successful, what would you see as the hoped-for outcome of these gatherings?

My hopeful outcome is that more and more people reject what politicians on all sides are doing to this country. I want people to get more involved and to pay attention to what politicians are doing all year long, as opposed to just right before an election. I would also like more people to study free market economics and to pay attention to research that is coming out of free market think tanks and organizations such as Reason and Americans for Tax Reform. I think this will happen when we bring more people together to discuss these issues. My ultimate goal would be to get to the point where such a vast majority of individuals demand freedom, liberty and less government, that no politician would stand to be elected unless they promised (and proved) to cut the size and scope of government tremendously until it was at levels dictated by the Constitution.

There are a few things I'd like to see Liberty on the Rocks accomplish. One is the creation of friendly, so-

cial environments that will allow for networking and idea sharing to take place on a monthly basis across the country.

A second is to promote education on the principles of liberty. This will be done in a number of ways, but mainly through the promotion of research completed by free market think tanks and national liberty-oriented organizations. Each chapter leader (or chapter volunteer) will be encouraged to operate a blog site that posts educational information. This will be in the form of written blog posts or the promotion of educational events in the area.

Chapters will be encouraged to write about the research that comes out of their local free market think tank as well as other national organizations which Liberty on the Rocks supports. There are already plenty of institutions conducting research and providing opportunities for activism. Instead of emulating these institutions, Liberty on the Rocks seeks to market their research through our social networks. The ultimate goal is to get more information out to the people so they are better equipped to defend free market capitalism and the principles of liberty.

You're awfully young to have suddenly become the nexus for such a large undertaking. It takes a lot of logistical skills to manage such a large organization. Have you always been organized?

I don't know that I would consider myself organized, at least not as organized as I should be. However, I do have a passion for freedom, and I think that helps to qualify me.

Having received an English degree and Political Science minor from the University of Iowa, along with a teaching license from the University of Colorado in Denver, it didn't take long for me to realize why people thought the way they did. The educational system is clearly a driving force behind society's inaccurate perception of reality. When I escaped the world of public education, I went straight into the arms of a free market think tank and surrounded myself with individuals educated in the school of Austrian Economics, and it has made all the difference for me. I'd like to work towards encouraging others to do the same.

Although I may be considered young, I believe I am a perfect fit for reaching those who need to be reached the most - others in my age range. I am also far from completing this project on my own as Liberty on the Rocks is a nationwide organization, presently run by volunteers in seventeen cities and ten states. I also have a fantastic Advisory Board whom I work with on various projects. I consider myself lucky to be working with such talented and enthusiastic people - all of whom make it all possible.

How has the internet changed the way the conversations about Liberty are taking place? Was having a website important? Do you have to answer constant emails? What did the 'net let you do that really helped get the word about LOTR out there?"

The Internet has also allowed for a national network such as this to become reality. On a limited budget, free advertising takes the cake! If it wasn't for facebook, Youtube and Meetup, I don't know if Liberty on the Rocks would have grown as fast as it has. We produced a short Youtube video in March of 2009 that received over 50,000 views in the first two weeks! That drove a good amount of traffic to our main site, and encouraged many to sign-up online to start chapters. Facebook has allowed for chapter leaders to promote meet-ups to a large number of people without much legwork. The Internet has definitely allowed for groups nationwide to promote themselves and send information to a mass audience. It has also allowed conversations surrounding liberty to take place on a massive scale. This is something I found to be fantastic, but I began to think that it would be beneficial for people to get together in person, in addition to discussing matters over cyberspace. That is where Liberty on the Rocks comes in.

Are there rules of the road for LOTR groups? Do folks get fired up about their opinions and argue? Do they come to lobby one another on issues? Do candidates use them to tell folks about their campaigns? Are there "no-no's" for attendees?

The only real rules for chapter leaders are not to endorse specific candidates, legislation or political parties. For guests, the only real rule is to be polite to one another. Because we are a "big tent" group there is no doubt there will be disagreements between those who show up. It's not bad for us to disagree, but it's important that we are able to listen and learn from each other. As individuals we don't have all the

answers, so we must find out all we can, and then rationally determine what is right. I do ask guests to stay open-minded in addition to being polite. The point of these networks is to learn from each other!

How does a person find about LOTRs in their area?

Anyone looking to attend a meet-up or start their own can go to www.LibertyOnTheRocks.org. There is a 'Locations' tab where people can look to find if there is a social network near them. Each location listed also has a link to their facebook page and/or blog site which people can sign up with to get invites. I also post all meet-ups on this site as well.

You mentioned that LOTR will be raising funds by marketing their research to social networks. Do you have research staff? Are you looking for volunteers to help with that effort (writers, researchers, etc) or are you passing on info that you get from other organizations?

I'd like to encourage people to contact their local LOTR chapter head to find out if they need volunteers. Most of them do and it could be for a variety of reasons. Volunteers are also needed for the national organization to help with educational efforts. I'd like to focus on providing more educational materials through the networks and the main site - even in the form of blogs. To ensure the information in the blogs is pro-liberty, LOTR has a list of affiliate organizations such as Reason or the Mises Institute, which we ask writers to link to. The purpose of these blogs will often be to lead readers to an article or research paper written by an affiliate organization.

What are your expectations for the liberty movement? Do you see Liberty on the Rocks playing a part?

I have high expectations for the liberty movement, although I think we have a long way ahead of us. I believe Ron Paul showcased the interest that is out there, and I am so glad that he brought such important points into the general conversation. However, there is still much opposition to liberty and freedom in America. Until more people are aware and engaged in the fight for individual rights, the tyrannical majority will continue us down the same path.

Because liberty is such an important issue to those who desire it, I very much believe it can prevail. I think Liberty on the Rocks will play the part of connecting individuals nationally via social situations, and will also help when it comes to encouraging education on the principles of liberty. I believe that the friendships that come out of these social clubs, as well as the educational aspects that are touted will be part of the glue that holds this liberty movement together. That, at least, is what I am going for.