



From Social Democrat to Libertarian

Jo Ann Skousen

I did not grow up in a politically active family. I don't even know whether my parents voted Republican or Democrat. They subscribed to a daily newspaper, but they seldom watched the news on TV. As a child my politics were simple: "There oughtta be a law" and "government oughtta do." Why couldn't the government simply write a check to build a new library or fix the roads or pay for everyone's medical care?

And yet, by the time I left high school, I was instinctively becoming a libertarian. I worked and saved, learning self-reliance when I was young. I managed my parents' household budget, and provided meals for our family of four with just \$20 a week. And my mother made a deal with me: If I made my own clothes, she would provide the fabric. From this I learned the principle of capitalism, as my designs and labor were worthless without her sewing machine and raw materials.

During my senior year of high school, my parents divorced, my sister left home, and my mother lost her job. I was valedictorian of my graduating class and had a full scholarship to college, but little money for living expenses. That summer my math teacher, for whom I babysat regularly,

J. A. Skousen (✉)
Anthem Libertarian Film Festival, Winter Park, FL, USA
e-mail: joannskousen@gmail.com

asked me to babysit every day even though his wife was home most of the time. The Krantzes could have written me a check and patted themselves on the back for their good deeds instead of hiring me for the summer. But they knew I needed more than money for college; I needed dignity and self-respect. Years later I recognized this as the A&W principle (Accountability and Welfare). We should help others to the extent they need help (welfare), but we should not provide what they can do for themselves (accountability).

MARRIAGE AND A BOOK BUSINESS

I met Mark Skousen when we both worked in the publication office at Brigham Young University. On our first date, he began talking about the magic of the free market, and it all made sense to me. I knew that I was motivated more by money and reward than by duty or community, whether I was babysitting for 50 cents an hour or writing an essay for the A+ I hoped to receive. My social democrat leanings swiftly began to fade.

Mark was finishing his master's degree and I was a freshman when we met. When he accepted a position as an economic analyst for the CIA, I had a decision to make: What to do when the right guy comes along at the wrong time? I said goodbye to my full-ride scholarship and moved with him to Washington DC. Fifteen years and five children later, I completed my degree at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, once again as valedictorian and also winning the award for Outstanding Graduating Senior. I then earned a graduate degree from the University of Florida and began teaching English literature and composition, first at Rollins College in Florida, then at Mercy College and Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York, and finally at Chapman University in southern California.

Meanwhile, during the early years of our marriage, Mark and I wrote financial books together and developed a highly successful book business from our home. Mark did the research and laid the groundwork for each book; I revised it and gave it its flair. When Howard Ruff once praised Mark for his "felicity of expression," I knew whom he was praising. The decade of the 70s was a time of high interest rates, high inflation, and non-traditional investments. Our books helped people navigate those treacherous times. Some of our titles include *High Finance on a Low Budget*, *The Banking and Credit Almanac*, *Mark Skousen's Complete Guide to Privacy*, and *Tax Free: All the Legal Ways To Be Exempt from*

Federal, State and Social Security Taxes. In 1983 we decided to follow our own advice and moved our family to the Bahamas, where we lived almost tax free for two years. We also wrote a popular pamphlet on libertarianism called “Persuasion vs Force,” which is still in print.

After three years at the CIA, Mark realized that the stultifying security of a government job was not for him. He became managing editor of Bob Kephart’s *Inflation Survival Letter*, later renamed *Personal Finance*. Bob hired me to maintain the index for the newsletter and I became immersed in the world of free-market finance. Those were heady times. We were writing books, speaking at investment conferences, and becoming close friends with leaders of the hard-money and libertarian movements, including Doug Casey, Harry Browne, Ron Paul, Jack Pugsley, Hans Sennholz, Howard Ruff, Andrea Rich, Jim and Jackie Blanchard, Karl Hess, Bill Bonner, Ken Gerbino, Bill Bradford, and many others.

I also began writing a financial newsletter called *Jo Ann Skousen’s Money Letter for Women*. I had noticed at investment conferences that women tended to be tentative about speaking up, but in my workshops they were very comfortable asking questions and discussing investment ideas. Several men subscribed as well, sometimes confessing that they wrapped a magazine around my pink newsletter for privacy when they were reading it! I used principles of Austrian economics to guide my investment advice. Eventually we merged my newsletter with Mark’s and I became associate editor of Mark Skousen’s *Forecasts & Strategies*.

THE ERIS SOCIETY

Doug Casey and Bob Kephart sponsored an annual event in Aspen, Colorado, called The Eris Society, named after the goddess of discord. We took turns running the event, selecting the speakers and activities, and handling the organizational details. Topics were often related to hobbies, esoteric interests, pet peeves, and the like. After my talk “Confessions of an English Major,” based on my experiences as a libertarian in illiberal academia, Bill Bradford and Karl Hess asked me to run for president on the Libertarian ticket.

Bill said, “We need to change the image of the libertarian as a single white male sitting in his basement sporting a beard and playing video games. You’re perfect: you’re a woman, you’re married, you’re a mother, you’re religious, you’re smart, and you’re philosophically grounded as a libertarian. You could change the face of the Libertarian Party.” They

called me several times during the 1991 convention, urging me to hop on a plane to Chicago. But the timing wasn't right. I was with my oldest daughter at her orientation for college that week, and I still had four young children at home. Campaigning would require flying around the country for a year. I was flattered by their confidence and tempted by their offer, but in the end, I said no. I have often wondered what kind of influence I might have had if I had campaigned that year. But I love being able to say, "I could have been president of the United States, but I had to take my daughter to school!"

WRITING MOVIE REVIEWS FOR *LIBERTY* MAGAZINE

Bill Bradford was founder and publisher of *Liberty* magazine, then available in many bookstores. He called one afternoon to talk enthusiastically about a review I had written about a civil war movie, *Gods and Generals*. He was interested in publishing it, but recommended that I remove the opening paragraph directed to my family. I was confused: I hadn't written a review of the film. Finally, we figured out the source—Mark was expecting to meet the producers of the film and had asked me to watch it and tell him what I thought. I sent my observations in an email to the family—and Mark forwarded my message to Bill. "If that's the way you write when you're just sending an email to the family," Bill told me, "I want you to be *Liberty's* movie reviewer!" That was the beginning of many longwinded late-night phone conversations with Bill Bradford. Curious, engaged, skeptical, and conversant in any topic, Bill had the right personality for a newsman. And the headlines he could write! I have written hundreds of movie reviews and reflections for *Liberty* in the ensuing twenty years, eventually becoming *Liberty's* entertainment editor under Bill's successor, Stephen Cox, a mentor and great friend.

MOVING TO NEW YORK

In August 2001 the Board of the Foundation for Economic Education invited Mark to become its new president. With just three weeks notice we packed up our house and moved to "the shanty" in Irvington, New York, a small three-bedroom cottage behind the nineteenth-century mansion that had housed FEE headquarters since 1946, when Leonard E. Read started the think tank. We immediately began planning spring break seminars to supplement the traditional summer seminars and organizing the

fall Board meeting and annual gala with Paul Gigot of the Wall Street Journal as our keynote speaker.

Then terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, and everything changed. Would anyone ever feel safe attending seminars in New York again? Was Paul Gigot even alive? (He was—and he gave an inspiring talk.) Students did return to New York, and we enjoyed a happy and exhausting summer of teaching weeklong economics courses to students and faculty. I was responsible for organizing the student seminars. With the able guidance of FEE veterans Greg Rehmke and Beth Hoffman, I designed the curriculum, selected the faculty, and even cooked all the meals. Using that experience as a template, I recently designed and organized a similar weeklong Economics of Life Summer Academy for rising first and second year college students on the Chapman University campus for the Ronald N. Simon Foundation.

That spring we decided to take FEE on the road to Las Vegas, where we teamed up with the Money Show to produce our first (and last) FEE National Convention, dubbed “FEE Fest” by one of our staffers. It was a huge success, with 850 attendees and 100 speakers gleaned from think tanks, authors, and investment organizations around the world. Then in 2007, having returned to the world of private enterprise, we resurrected FEE Fest as FreedomFest, “the world’s largest gathering of free minds,” regularly attracting nearly 2,500 attendees, 250 speakers, and 150 exhibitors in the “tradeshow for liberty.”

STARTING THE ANTHEM LIBERTARIAN FILM FESTIVAL

As entertainment editor for *Liberty*, I was disheartened by the anti-business, anti-liberty themes of most movies. So in 2011 I created the Anthem Libertarian Film Festival as a venue for libertarian filmmakers. I borrowed a hope and a promise from *Field of Dreams*—“if I build it, they will come.” And they have. We started in a banquet room on the 26th floor of Bally’s Hotel with a dozen mediocre films and a handful of outstanding ones. As filmmakers and think tanks caught the vision of what we were providing, they began to produce more films with libertarian themes. And because we were part of FreedomFest, we have access to top-quality speakers for our panels and top-quality viewers for our films.

Anthem celebrated its tenth anniversary at the impressive Elks Theatre in Rapid City, South Dakota, with nearly forty outstanding films and an audience that numbered in the hundreds at times. One filmmaker wrote,

“Jo Ann and her team supported our film when most other festivals were afraid to screen it for fear of offending left-leaning festival goers. Being in the company of such truly first-rate and thoughtful filmmakers was a thrill. Anthem may be the smartest, most interesting film fest out there.”

A LEGACY OF TEACHING

As I face the beginning of my seventieth year, there are many projects I want to complete. “Persuasion vs Force” is desperately in need of an update. So is *High Finance on a Low Budget*. In 2016 I wrote *Matriarchs of the Messiah: Valiant Women in the Lineage of Jesus Christ*, giving voice to the women who have often been overshadowed by the prophets of the Old Testament. Its running theme is choice and accountability.

The lasting legacy of a published book is always enticing, but my real joy comes from teaching college students to read analytically, think critically, and write clearly. I guide them to discover the dignity of the individual, the responsibility of choice, and the creativity of the market place—even when I’m teaching poetry.

During our time at FEE I began teaching at Mercy College, just down the aqueduct from the mansion. This led to my favorite experience of all, teaching college courses to the incarcerated men at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. I’m a featured teacher in the HBO documentary *Zero Percent* about the program (www.zeropercentfilm.com). The program was so successful that for the first dozen years the recidivism rate among graduates who were released into the community was zero—not a single man went back to prison for a new crime. Even now, twenty years later, the recidivism rate hovers around two percent. What set this program apart for all those years was that it was privately funded, and as a result the men approached it not as an entitlement but as a gift. One of the requirements for being admitted to the college program was having a job within the prison and paying a portion of their tuition from their earnings. Mark’s A&W principle came into practice, providing for them only what they could not provide for themselves. The men knew that private donors believed in them enough to invest in them, and they rose to the expectations.

Looking back on my first brushes with market motives, I realize that profit incentive is not limited to the dollar. For me, the reward of a mind changed, a life saved, and a job well done is just as satisfying as a paycheck. Working with these students was selfish indeed.