

Interview: Leslie Zukor from the Freethought Books Project

Contributed by Nontheist Nexus

This month Nexus is interviewing Leslie Zukor, the brain behind the Freethought Books Project, which provides free secular and freethought books to prisoners in the United States. Thanks go out to Leslie for agreeing to be interviewed!

Firstly, can you tell us a little bit about yourself? What do you do when not collecting books for prisoners?

I have many interests. I am an avid Houston Astros fan, and I have been a devotee since grade school. Jeff Bagwell is a favorite of mine, so I collect his baseball cards and game used memorabilia. In addition to loving baseball, I can often be spotted taking pictures of Reed's squirrel population. I love these eccentric critters, and I share that love with others through the medium of digital photography. Since I was nineteen, I have also had a passion for bringing speakers to open up people's minds about various social issues. In my time as President of two disparate political clubs, I have brought speakers such as Daniel Dennett, the Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, Serrin Foster, the President of Feminists for Life of America, and Chris Mooney, the author of *The Republican War on Science*. I also love to collect autographed books, which I obtain at various lectures.

How did you get involved with freethought? Were you raised that way, or did you deconvert?

I was raised in the Reform Jewish tradition, had a Bat Mitzvah, and attended Sunday School until the 10th grade. In our classes, we didn't learn about Bible stories; rather, we talked about current events as they affected Jewish identity. I will forever be thankful that I was not raised in the Orthodox tradition, as I never would have grappled with such important social issues. In my teenage years, I was a staunch conservative, but also in many ways a freethinker. I used to involve myself in Republican causes, but I found myself in constant disagreement with various parts of the GOP platform. Politics was frustrating, because people would turn the cold shoulder if you had an earnest disagreement with any part of their agenda. I yearned to be a part of a political movement where dissent was respected, and where people valued the fact that I didn't entirely mesh with either party's values. I didn't totally become a freethinker until I was 18. Wondering why Bertrand Russell was the bete noir of conservatives, I decided to pick up a copy of *Why I Am Not A Christian* after my senior year in high school. The original purpose of my literary endeavor was to be able to better understand the other side. Even though I didn't agree with Russell's politics, his commentary on religion spoke to things I had deeply believed, even though I never had the words to express them. For some reason, when growing up I always thought the question was "What religion is the correct one?" rather than "Atheism is a viable alternative to the traditional faiths."

So once you knew freethought was for you, what made you decide to become an activist?

Back in the fall of 2003, I went off to Wellesley College in the Boston-area. Even though I had semi-deconverted, I was still active in conservative causes. It was really my experience in the Wellesley Alliance for Life that led to my becoming a freethought activist. While the group was in theory non-discriminatory, it was obvious that you didn't belong socially if you were not a Catholic. Because of my leadership role, I learned of ideas that were quite simply put "shocking." Chief among these is the proscription against birth control. I wondered how the Catholic religion could say "No!" to birth control when it fervently opposed abortion. As a staunch pro-lifer, I didn't understand why people wouldn't want to lower the abortion rate by encouraging safer sex. Naturally puzzled, soon I found out; Roman Catholicism proscribed against birth control. On this issue - and several others, as I would later learn - the word of the Church was final. Simply put, no one was allowed to question the Pope. This was reflected in the many events that club leaders attended; pro-life gatherings felt more like Church services than strategy sessions on how to reduce the number of abortions. If all this sounds bad enough, what was worse was that Massachusetts state pro-life organizations behaved unethically, because they believed that their cause was god's cause. In the words of one group's lobbyist, "We are doing God's work by saving babies!" As he admitted to me privately, the ends justify the means when it comes to pro-life tactics. In short, it was perfectly rational to transgress moral boundaries on behalf of the Lord's justice. In sum, the more I became associated with these people, the more I was convinced that there was a dire need for freethought activism, that is, a voice on campus for people who came to their own conclusions via rational thought, not Papal orthodoxy.

Can you tell us a little bit about what the Freethought Books to Prisoners Drive actually does?

The Freethought Books Project promotes critical inquiry about religion primarily among the prison population, but also among mental hospitals and low-income individuals. Typically, we will receive a letter from a prisoner asking for freethinking literature, and we will fulfill it from our stock of books or on Amazon.com. Our goal is to let people know that there are other perspectives besides the fundamentalism that is all too often presented under the guise of addiction recovery programs. The Freethought Books Project runs because of the generous donations of many in the secular movement. Authors such as Michael Shermer, Paul Kurtz, and freethought organizations such as the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Secular Student Alliance have been instrumental to the success of this project.

How did you come up with the idea?

I now attend Reed College in Portland, Oregon. In my first year at my new college, there was an a box outside the bookstore marked "Books to Prisoners." However, the actual drive was quasi-defunct, and the only books that were ever in the box were tattered rejects, and one or two books if that. "Wouldn't it be nice if we could collect freethought books for prisoners?" I thought to myself one day, as I peered into the empty box. Furthermore, I believed that as human beings, prisoners deserved more than old hand-me-down books. A socially aware citizen, I was only too knowledgeable of the fact that the Bush administration pushes faith-based addiction recovery programs among the prison population. Not everybody was religious, I knew, and it really wasn't fair to the inmates to only get one perspective. After all, there are many individuals for whom religion does not provide meaningful answers about how one should live. It was to help those individuals that the Freethought Books Project was begun.

Why do you think it is important?

Education and civic literacy are of preeminent importance among the prison population. All too often, inmates are only presented with the Christian side of current issues in the "culture wars" of the 21st century. This is unfortunate, as not everyone shares the same beliefs and not everyone will be inspired by the same literature. As a result of the one-sided environment faced by many prisoners today, providing alternative views is a must. Furthermore, it is surprising how much people underestimate the transformational nature of inspiring titles. Since I have been invigorated by freethought literature, it is likely that the same books I have read will have a similar affect on at least some inmates. And such is my goal with the Freethought Books Project.

How did you get started? I wouldn't know where to begin...

First of all, I needed to find out if there was support for getting freethinking literature in to prisoners and prison libraries. Thus, I wrote to prison-donating organizations across the country, mainly to see if they would be receptive to freethinking literature. I got many affirmative answers, so I knew there was support for our project. Then, I solicited donations from Reed Secular Alliance club members, as well as local freethinking organizations and people on the Internet Infidels Discussion Board (IIDB). It was through a private message from author David Mills that this project really took off. Mills, the author of *Atheist Universe*, told me to ask some authors he knew to donate books, and all those whom I contacted contributed multiple copies of their works. At that point, I took Mills's advice a step further. I thought that if these authors were so generous, then why not ask others in the freethought movement to donate books. Thus, I wrote to several authors and had a 90% success rate in the first year of my project. Among the highlights of our collection are Dan Barker's *Losing Faith in Faith*, Michael Shermer's *How We Believe*, and Prometheus-donated *The Reason Driven Life*. After we had given to a number of prison-donating organizations and there was an awareness of our project, soon enough did we get requests from prisoners themselves looking for freethought literature.

Did you have any experience working for charities, or was it a case of sink or swim?

Honestly, I jumped into the deep end on this one! Although I have volunteered my time to several causes, I had never assumed a leadership role on a service project. Thus, developing the Freethought Books Project was a matter of trial and error. To begin with, I had no idea about where to solicit donations. Until David Mills contacted me, I had never even thought to write to freethinking authors. The one thing I should stress is although I had never done this before, I was devoted to the trial portion of trial and error. I made my project known through posting on several message boards, I solicited contributions from club members, and I asked freethinking organizations in the Portland-area. In short, I wasn't afraid to fail, even when I received skeptical responses on message boards.

What reactions have you gotten? Has any of it been negative?

The overwhelming majority of prisoner letters have been positive. Here is a sampling of the gratitude we receive on a semi-weekly basis:

"This sounds too good to be true....Material such as this is hard to find in prison, where everyone is a supposed Holy Roller." -Raymond

"Thank you so much for the books & magazines. Several of my like-minded friends & I are really enjoying them." -Adam

"There are no appropriate words to approximate the appreciation you so aptly deserve. The constant inculcation of the Christian myth is a vexation that cannot easily be overcome." -Brian

"Dear Leslie,

I can't tell you how thrilled I was to receive your kind package containing a number of freethought books. It is also important for you to know how extremely valuable your service is to people in my situation, for currently you represent the only source of distribution for such material. And for that you deserve much praise. You most certainly have found a gaping niche and are filling it admirably.

As a point of amusement you will no doubt be interested to learn that when I was called to the mail-room to take delivery of the above, the officer, upon examining some of the titles, immediately sought the chaplain's opinion. And, although the look of disdain on his face spoke volumes, he nevertheless was obligated to allow me possession of the entire parcel. He now ignores me in the hallways!

I sincerely hope that you will continue to provide assistance to folks such as myself for many years to come, for I am keenly aware of its significance. Therefore, here's wishing you much further success. And again, thank you for your kindness, generosity, and prompt attention to my letter.

Be well!

Ben."

We have only gotten one negative letter. This prisoner made a donation to the Secular Student Alliance, so the group's Executive Director, August Brunsman, suggested that I send some books his way. He responded that he did not need to be a "parasite" on the freethought movement, and that he didn't want any more secular books. Luckily, letters like his have been an aberration.

If the people reading this would like to help you (maybe by donating books to your organisation) how would they go about doing that?

<http://www.freethoughtbooks.org> has all the information you would need to donate to this worthy freethought cause.

Would you recommend other freethinkers get involved in some sort of activism? What has it done for you, and what has been the best thing about it?

I would definitely recommend that other freethinkers get involved with activism. It is one thing to hold firmly to your convictions; it is quite another to take a stand for ideas in which you believe. I would especially recommend service work. Not only does it promote a positive image of freethinkers, it allows one to be creative in terms of seeing a problem and expending resources to remedy it. It is the greatest feeling in the world to have an idea and then to see it in action, and to be helping individuals at the same time.

Finally [the stock question, thanks due to Pavlov's Dog], why do you want to make baby Jesus cry?

Never has the goal been to make Baby Jesus cry. If prisoners want to read Christian literature, then I have no problems with that, so long as the taxpayers aren't in any way subsidizing a particular religion. However, from the testimonies of individual prisoners, I know that the secular perspective is all too often ignored. That's what the Freethought Books Project seeks to remedy.