## Unschooling Dads with Skyler Collins, an Interview

The following is a lightly edited transcript from Pam Laricchia's interview of me on her podcast, "Exploring Unschooling" at the beginning of 2016. The audio was published on the EVC podcast as Episode 064.

PAM: Hi everyone! I'm Pam Laricchia from livingjoyfully.ca and today I'm here with Skyler Collins. Hi Skyler!

SKYLER: Hello.

PAM: It's great to have you on the show. Skyler is an unschooling dad of three children and is the editor of the book *Unschooling Dads: Twenty-two Testimonials on Their Unconventional Approach to Education*. It's not often that we get to hear about unschooling from the dad's perspective and I really love that you took the time and effort to pull this book together. I really enjoyed reading their perspectives. So, we're going to dive into that in a minute.

But first Skyler, why don't you share with us a bit about your background and your family.

SKYLER: Sure. Let's see, I met my wife here in Salt Lake City, interestingly enough I met her at the mall. We were both working there and I was working in the food court and she came up to order and it was love at first sight. I asked her out and we dated. She's actually from Mexico City so she's an immigrant to the United States, in 1999. So that was in 2003. We dated for a while and then probably about eight months later I decided that I would ask her to marry me so I did that and we got married in October of 2004.

PAM: Wow!

SKYLER: And then we had our first child, my son, Skyler Jr. We had him a year and a month later in October 2005. So we moved kind of fast I guess you could say, about everything. And it wasn't four years later we had my daughter, same month, in 2009 and just last year we had another daughter so that was five years later so they're kind of spaced a little bit but I've got the three kids and right now they're ten, six and one.

For the last, well, just after I got married, for the next ten years I've been in software, software support and software quality assurance. I actually left that in June without any prospects. I was just kind of burnt out with it. I knew that if I didn't leave that I was just going to stick there and kind of be unhappy so I took the plunge and gave my two weeks and just sort of been entrepreneurial since then.

I've started my own company selling private label products, primarily through Amazon right now. I started that back in September. My primary income has been me working with a friend who I recently replaced, managing a financial radio network which has been pretty interesting. Now that I've taken over management, it's really brought me out of my comfort zone a little bit and I think I've grown and have continued to grow in that regard so that's been fun. So since June I've been working from home which has been really amazing to be able to see my kids every day, all day long. I know for some people, especially those that are maybe in a schooling mindset, that they rue the day that they have to stay home with their kids, they appreciate when they are at school. But I think, as I've learned more about unschooling, it's giving me that different perspective and it's helped me to see my kids in a new light and see our relationship differently. There certainly are challenges involved, but you know, I've learned to appreciate those. They help everybody grow. That's where we're at right now.

PAM: That's awesome! That reminds me of the ubiquitous back to school commercial, right? The parents celebrating?

One of the things you mentioned in your book's preface, which was very interesting, was that you were the one who brought unschooling to your family. I'm sure you're aware, found out, that's pretty unusual because unschooling groups are by far mostly filled with the moms, right? So, how did you find unschooling and how did you introduce your wife to the idea? What did that process look like?

SKYLER: Well, it was an evolution that probably began with a much broader philosophical approach. At some point, seven, eight, nine years ago I started to align my values with a philosophy known as voluntaryism, which is based on the voluntary principle and that is all human relationships should happen voluntarily or not at all. As I looked out into the political realm, the economic realm and here I am saying let's not force people to do what they don't want to do. Let's try to build relationships in the economic system, the political system on a voluntary basis.

At the same time, at home, I was forcing, at the time it was just my son, I was forcing him to do things. I was being punitive, I was putting him in time-out, I was spanking. In a very real sense I was kind of violating the principles that I was adopting. So a friend of mine, who would also be described as a voluntaryist, he introduced me to a writer, I'm sure you're familiar with Alfie Kohn. He wrote a book called *Unconditional Parenting* and my friend had been listening to a podcast exploration of the book. He told me about it and I was very interested in that so I bought the book and I bought his DVD that's a presentation done at a school in front of parents that's based on the book. I watched that with my wife and we kind of read the book together. That's when it hit me that I don't need to spank, I don't need to put my son in time-out. So not only was I kind of inconsistent

with my other principles, but it's also unnecessary. As well as using rewards based systems to get compliance and modified behavior and that sort of stuff. He talks about both sides, rewards and punishments. You know, I was convinced by that. I said, OK. It was almost overnight when I realized that what I was doing was the wrong thing to do, that we stopped spanking and stopped time-out and we were looking for other tools to put in our parenting toolbox for those situations that arise where you gotta do something.

So this was at the time when my son was in preschool. Alfie Kohn talks a lot about the schooling system and the punishments and rewards that are a part of that, within that book. So that's what got me thinking about how we changed our parenting. We don't want to use punishments and rewards and now I'm going to send him to school every day where he's going to be subjected to punishments and rewards. That's inconsistent, it's going to be undoing everything we're trying to accomplish. So then I'm like, OK, I don't really want to do school. That was probably the primary motivation that got me looking at alternatives to that.

Obviously no school, the only alternative, I realized at the time, was homeschooling. So, I, well, actually it was homeschooling but I'm thinking "I'm not a teacher, I don't want to develop curriculum and sit down and have class and my wife probably isn't interested in that either." It's all kind of me at this point. I haven't really brought her in. So, I was looking at different online based schools like the K-12. I'm thinking we could just have him do this. So I was like, huh, OK. I was still networking with other people and at some point I learned about this thing called a Thomas Jefferson education. Have you ever heard of that?

PAM: I've heard of it, yeah. Don't know much about it.

SKYLER: OK, it's a homeschooling philosophy. It's kind of halfway to unschooling. It focuses on structuring time but not structuring content. It also has a focus on using the classics and literature and other categories to teach kids. So it kind of pushed me halfway. I bought that book and I read through the book. I thought that was very interesting. I like this. The guy, his name is Oliver DeMille who wrote the book. He wasn't even reading until he was 12, because he was homeschooled. There are these milestones that the schooling system expects you to read by a certain age, and I think that's for schooling purposes. Like you gotta read or you're going to be lost in second grade and third grade. But for homeschooling those aren't so important.

Anyway, so at some point I found the word unschooling and I'm like, huh, that's kind of a peculiar thing. So I did some digging and found Sandra Dodd's website, I found your website, I found Joyce Fetteroll's website. I just started reading so much. I found Facebook groups. It was just prior to that that I brought my wife into the conversation when I was looking at online schooling. She was skeptical. She was, "OK." She was kind of acquiescent, but skeptical. She put a lot of trust in me that I was doing my

homework on it. I obviously wouldn't do anything to hurt my kids. We talked a lot about it, what would be involved. What the unschooling philosophy is and how it's lived, at least at the time and my understanding of it. It's certainly broadened in the last few years. She thought it was very interesting.

I look back at my schooling experience and it wasn't a very good one. A lot of people who do like school it's because they like their friends and they like the social aspects. But that was a part of school that I didn't like either. So there wasn't really anything redeeming about my school experience. On the other hand, my wife, she liked schooling because of the social aspect. She also didn't really dislike it as much as me because her entire elementary education was only like five hours a day in the afternoon. They have a morning class and there's an afternoon class. There wasn't the getting up early. She had time to play and to be with her friends and all the homework time. She had a very different experience than I had. She wasn't as anti-school as I was.

She was still open-minded, she decided to give it a try. My son had just started kindergarten and my kids are bilingual so we had him in a kindergarten class that was Spanish/English, kind of a dual immersion thing. He went for a week and then we went on vacation for a week to visit her family in Chicago. We talked and we're like, let's give him the option and if he wants to stay in kindergarten and try it out then we should respect that. So we asked him while we were on vacation what he wanted to do—we wanted him to think about it. So when we got home we asked him if he wanted to go back and he said, "Not really."

So yeah, that's kind of the story there. And just since then, I guess it's been thinking about the future, thinking about when our kids are going to be interested in different things and what we're going to do at that point. It wasn't until a couple of years later that our focus shifted on just living as joyfully as we can, and I know that's been your focus and others' focus. I think that really kind of sealed it. That's what we're doing now.

PAM: I think that kind of seems to be a theme so far for myself and a lot of others that I've talked to, which is we're going to try it out. We're going to see. It's not jumping in wholeheartedly because you don't really know how things are going to flow. So it's great to try it out because then you're always re-evaluating and seeing how things are going.

SKYLER: Yeah, exactly. So in the meantime, my second kid was born, my daughter. She's approaching five years old. She's watching all the different kid shows on Netflix a lot and a lot of them take place in school. So she's getting this idea that school's pretty cool. They're always portrayed in such a positive light, of course. So she said, "Hey, I want to go to school."

At first, personally, I kind of felt like betrayed by that. I was like, "No!" It kind of brought

that knot into my stomach. I can't believe she's saying this. Here I am knowing I can't keep her home if she really wants to do it because that would be wrong of me. But at the same time, I'm just like, have faith in the process. Let her try it and she'll see it for what it is. Just have faith, I guess I took that route a little bit. It pulled me out of that funk that I was in for a couple of days while I was kind of thinking on that. I decided, OK, well, alright, we're going to register you for preschool and the school is just a few streets away.

So we did that and she went to an orientation. The teacher was talking a lot about how you have to raise your hand if you want to talk, you have to raise your hand if you want to go potty, just kind of explaining the rules. That really turned her off. We came home and she said I'm not interested in going there anymore. Alright! I was ecstatic. My faith was proven there. We called in and got my registration fee back. I think I lost the 20 bucks that was non-refundable or whatever but it was totally worth it. She got her fill with one orientation and it was good.

So now as my youngest gets older we'll see. She's going to see her older brother and sister, obviously, not going to school. So we'll see if she ever has the desire or not. But I think part of the turnoff was the orientation, but I think another part of it was at that time she had been first introduced to Minecraft and was first starting to try and play it. So I think a lot of having to do this every day and it's not fun like Minecraft, arguably, having to raise your hand to do this and that, not having that freedom. I think that kind of went together. She was like, "No, no, I think I'd rather do this."

So ever since, you know, she's mastered Minecraft and other games. They're Skyping with their friends all day long, so they get plenty of social interaction and we do playgroups and stuff, here and there. We've got a pretty good community here in Salt Lake that gets together often. We've got some veterans and some newer parents, we've got quite a mix. It's pretty good.

PAM: That's great!

One thing I wanted to ask you about was I noticed that the men whose essays you included in the book came from a wide range of backgrounds. Some were artists, entrepreneurs, college professors. So what did that say to you about the appeal of the unschooling lifestyle?

SKYLER: It said to me that, these are thoughtful, professional, intelligent men, their own values are of course learning and education and intelligence and professionalism, and if they see value in unschooling versus the alternatives, I think what that says is it's something that is a viable alternative. It's not just parents being lazy, not wanting to send their kids to school. It's parents wanting to be involved with their kids. It's intelligent parents wanting to be involved with their kids knowing that's where intelligence comes from, I think, is having that close mentorship.

Having parents who are willing to explore your interests as a kid because the more interested you are, the more you're going to retain it, the more you're going to learn about it.

I mean, my son is fascinated by dinosaurs, and he gets video games, he sees movies, he reads stuff online about them, he sees YouTube videos about them. He can name so many different dinosaurs, more than when I was little. When I was little Jurassic Park first came out and it was a big deal and for him it's Jurassic World and he loves that. He spent the 20 bucks and bought it on Amazon and he can watch it whenever he wants. For me, it was a few library books and I remember having this Jurassic Park magazine. I would copy the pictures out of it and get as much as I could with that but for him it's ten, a hundred times that much stuff that he's able to find and take advantage of it.

Anyways, back to the question, I think that it's not for dummies at all. I think you can be a dummy as long as you know how to get your kid the help he needs or the assistance he needs. I mean if you're somebody who is completely computer illiterate you're going to have a hard time trying to help your kid with something on the computer, but that doesn't mean you can't find somebody who can help him with the computer. Honestly, with kids these days, you just put them in front of the computer, they're going to figure it out for themselves. That's what I did. I taught myself computers. When we first got our family computer, I taught myself everything on it. It was through trial and error, clicking on this and clicking on that and breaking this. My dad had to call support to get it fixed. Eventually, here I am, I made a career out of it. So...

PAM: Me, too!

SKYLER: Exactly! Yeah, so I think with kids we need to just get out of their way and just be there to help them. It is a sophisticated thing if we make it a sophisticated thing. I think that's why it appeals to so many people that are intelligent and professional and what not.

PAM: Yeah, I think as long as, the whole point is putting some value on learning, so as long as you value learning you can be learning alongside your kids. It's not that only the kids are learning, right? I'm still learning tons of new things and things are being brought into my world by my kids all the time. So, yeah, as long as you've got that keenness and that excitement about learning itself, and it's basic to anyone whether you're an artist, an entrepreneur whatever it is. As long as you're excited about learning, this is a great way to approach living it, right?

SKYLER: Yeah, exactly. I think if you're somebody who isn't interested in learning, there's probably deeper issues there, with say depression or something else going on. I think most mentally healthy people are interested in learning. People get lost on computers and on the internet all the time, it's almost a problem for people how much they can get lost on

these things and that is different types of learning going on.

PAM: You know what? That just occurred to me, one thing that can really help is expanding your definition of learning. I think so many people have got such a narrow focus on what learning is. To them it just looks like school, right? So that's why one of the biggest things at first, is expanding and seeing the learning in the things that you're doing on the computer and all that kind of stuff. That's cool.

I loved that you organized the 22 essays around the contributors' unschooling experience. How you laid it out with prospective unschooling dads, to junior dads, to senior dads. Was this something that you planned from the start or did that arrangement come about after you gathered the essays and you saw a thread through them?

SKYLER: The arrangement did change a little bit, but it is what I planned from the start. The reason is because I already had people in mind who I wanted to approach. Some were veterans and others were future dads that were already committed to unschooling. So when I originally started approaching people, I was casting a pretty wide net to try to get interest. There were people that I wanted for sure that I got, the rest was just whoever was willing. I went to different unschooling dad groups on Facebook and what not to look for them. There were some dads that I wanted that could either not get a hold of them or they were just too busy and they apologized for that. They wanted to contribute but they just didn't really have the time. There were some who had committed but then had to bow out so it would have been longer than that.

It was originally going to be four sections. There was going to be future and then new unschooling dads and then seasoned and then veterans. So as the essays came in one of those sections, it was the seasoned, was kind of thin so some of them I merged with the veteran and others I merged with the new, now had the three sections: the future, the junior, the senior. So, from the beginning that is what I wanted to do.

The reason I wanted to do that was I think each of them has different perspectives and I think people reading it will relate better with one or the other, somebody who has got young kids who are not even school-aged yet, I think they'll appreciate the veterans talking about it a little more than the people who are like themselves, it's like, they're where I'm at, what do they know? So, there were just some people that I knew would write really good essays that not actually had kids yet so I definitely wanted to include them because they were intelligent and they were thoughtful about it, it was something they had put a lot of thought into and I thought that would be valuable for its own reasons. So yeah, that's how it turned out.

PAM: That's cool. That was really fun. I wasn't expecting that at first, the prospective dad

section, I hadn't thought about that before. It was really interesting to read their perspectives, that was fun.

Another thing I was wondering, it is really interesting when you catch a glimpse of the diverse paths people take to get to unschooling, right? We've heard yours and most people listening, I think, know mine now at least. Some find it as they actively move away from school experiences that aren't working, which is you and me, while others find it as a move towards the philosophical principles that unschooling embraces.

What's your impression of the interplay of the anti-schooling vs the prounschooling throughout the book?

SKYLER: Well, it's really kind of difficult to talk, and I think it's just because of the schooling context we all find ourselves in, it's difficult to talk and to think about unschooling without also looking at the reasons why you don't want to school, because they are so diametrically opposed. I mean they are complete opposites. If you're pro-unschooling I think you are necessarily anti-schooling. For a lot of people, they are pro-schooling and they were raised in schooling they can see that and in some ways they can feel attacked by that.

As people have come towards unschooling and away from schooling, I guess that the antipart of that is an important part for people and the reason they're anti-schooling and how it's conflicted with other values that they hold or have developed along the way. Whether they originally held them and were just being inconsistent or it's something that sort of developed over time. It's just one of those things where it's hard not to at least say something against schooling when you're talking about unschooling. So, the essays throughout, you'll definitely get that but I think it's pretty well balanced, though. I definitely didn't want anything that was just a big diatribe against schooling. I wanted people to understand where these dads come from but also how they're looking forward. **There is** that anti-schooling, but half of their motivation is the pro-unschooling. We see unschooling as the better alternative, based on our values and what we want our kids to become, what they deserve to become. I think it turned out OK. I know other reviewers have commented on this that there's a little bit of a libertarian bent and that's because some of the dads and the circles that I run in, you know some of the people that I knew were of that political persuasion, you do get that in anti-schooling. That's because so much schooling is government bent. Parts of that are contrary to the values they hold so you do get a little bit of that.

PAM: I enjoyed reading everybody's different perspectives because that's the point that we come at things. It's so interesting the different backgrounds from which we come to unschooling. So, that slant in some of the essays certainly didn't bother me. I found it interesting.

SKYLER: Well, yeah, that's good. You could always try to get rid of some of that stuff but I

thought it was OK, but I may not have noticed because I was so absorbed in that worldview. So when I did start hearing from reviewers that that's the impression they picked up I just said OK, well, I guess it is what it is.

PAM: But that's the root of their story, I mean that's the story for them.

SKYLER: I mean, liberty is something they value so they want their kids to have that as well, which they're not getting in school.

PAM: Yeah, that's another thing to consider. So, last week, I spoke with Sandra Dodd. I did one of the ten questions interviews with her, and we talked about something you mentioned a little bit earlier, the paradigm shift to joy, that was part of your journey to unschooling. She wrote about it in her short essay, "Rejecting a Prepackaged Life". That shift to joy was so fundamental for me that 12 years ago I named my website after it, living joyfully. And you touched on it in your essay in the book, as well, so I wanted to read a short quote from it if that's OK?

SKYLER: Sure.

PAM: "My wife's reluctance has faded quite a bit now that she's witnessing our children's joy. For me, that's the primary focus of unschooling: helping our children live as joyfully as possible. Everything else will naturally follow from that. As long as our children are happy, they will have confidence in themselves that they can achieve anything they want to in life. I truly believe that and unschooling is the better vehicle towards living joyfully than any school-based alternative."

Can you talk a bit about how joy became your primary focus in unschooling?

SKYLER: Well, yeah, I did think as my kids were getting older and you see other kids their age, how they start to learn different things cause the school system expects you've got to learn to read at a certain point, you gotta learn to write cursive writing, I think that still goes on. You've got to learn multiplication, division, and algebra and it's a step by step by step.

So as my kids are getting older, I'm thinking, "What should be our focus here?" Do I want to try to strew things in front of them that will lead them into what their school peers are doing? Or should I focus more on helping them in whatever it is they're doing, having the best time and will that payoff? Will they pick up the skills necessary to then later on, if something is a requisite to what they want to explore, will they know where to go, will they know how to at least get me to help them with where they want to go, without reaching frustration? I want them to know that I'm a partner here and I'm here for them for whatever they need. I think that if the home life and if we want to have joy and we want to be happy and when everybody is happy then I think everybody is growing and learning a

lot better because what they're doing is joyful, they're enjoying, it so it's meaningful for them. If they're not enjoying it then it's not meaningful, it's less likely to be retained or be useful at any point.

From time to time I think about those things and wonder, but then I realize as a 16-year-old I learned to operate a motor vehicle and that was a lot more complex thing than multiplication. So, if at 16 I can learn to do that or later on, the things that I've done in software, if I can learn those things there's no reason why a 16-year-old can't learn multiplication and division. I think they'd pick it up in a matter of minutes. Or to read, 12-year-olds that learn to read later in short order and they're reading Harry Potter, they're not going through Dr. Seuss for months, you know? Once that mind is developed to the point where it can grasp concepts easier.

I think about when I was younger and I was able to learn, and that doubt and that fear kind of goes away, then we can return to joy. Just finding what excites my kids and what excites me too, and my wife. We, of course, try to find our own joy as well.

PAM: I really found that as well, too, because every time I would start wondering it always came back to the fact that when they're doing something that they enjoy, when they're seeking out joy in whatever, that's where the best learning is, where the engagement is. And that's where they build more joy. As you said, you notice as they get older that whatever they put their mind to, they can pick it up. I often marvelled, certainly through a lot of the teenage years and stuff, just how dedicated they were to pursuing the things that they found interesting and enjoyable. I like the word joy versus happy because sometimes pursuing something that you really want has some frustrating moments in it, right? But man, they never gave up when they really wanted something—I would have given up so much easier at that age. So, I thought that was a really beautiful way to look at the joy that they were pursuing because it just came down to the best learning.

SKYLER: Well, and another aspect of that is **if we look at life as moments and** memories, do we want our kid's memories to be mostly joyful memories or full of strife? The joyful memories, they're more meaningful and they retain the important parts of those better than the strife filled moments. I mean, the strife filled moments can certainly be learning experiences, no doubt, but strife and trauma they don't make for a very helpful outlook on life in the future.

PAM: And plus because our focus is lifelong, right? We're not just looking at the schooling years and trying to squish everything in there. That's really interesting.

Another thing I loved in the book was the epilogue. I had a great time reading that. How being asked to write an essay for the book felt like homework to your

friend Phil. You were saying you were asking some people to share stories, so can you share the story of that and how it relates to unschooling?

SKYLER: (laughs) Yeah, so when I first started, he's a good friend of mine and we did our own podcast together for a little while and I wanted him to write something for me. I asked him and he was like, "Oh, yeah, sure." He was excited about it. But then as I was collecting essays and things were coming down to the wire, he hadn't turned anything in.

So we were chatting one day and that pretty much, with my words taken out, that was our chat transcript. That's what he was saying to me about, you know, wouldn't this be a funny epilogue or something. I took it and I formatted it as a short essay and he really liked that. He got a big laugh out of that, gave me permission to use it.

That's what he was saying, that as the deadline was approaching it kind of mentally pulled him back into his younger self when he was filled with that stress in school because of homework to do. It really kind of locked him up and it was really hard. It was hard for him to fight through that, to get it done because of that whatever the reason whether it's his personality type or because of the trauma at school or some trauma outside of school for whatever reason that created those feelings in him and he doesn't want that to happen to his kids. He doesn't want them to approach their obligations and commitments that way, so he doesn't want to ruin that with school. So that's been some of his motivation for unschooling, kind of a different motivation than what you typically hear about.

PAM: Yeah, it was really fun to read because it does, it puts you right back there to deadlines and tests and homework and all that kind of stuff, so you could really feel for him although I'm sorry you didn't get a longer essay out of him. (laughs)

SKYLER: (laughs) It was good. I was glad to have gotten something. It was humorous and I thought it would be a good finish.

PAM: Yeah, that was great! There was one more question I wanted to ask you.

Was there anything that surprised you or what it was that surprised you most out of the essays that you did receive?

SKYLER: That's a good question. I don't know that it's out of the essays but what surprised me was how many people I found out were willing to write something but unfortunately life got in the way for many and they had to cancel because they just weren't able to dedicate time. They were willing to put a lot of effort into it. They didn't want to just skimp on it. But they were so busy with the rest of their lives that they weren't able to do that, so rather than giving me something that was half of what they could do, they just politely bowed out and I appreciated that.

I was kind of surprised with how many were interested in it. I knew that moms numbered ten to one to dads in these unschooling groups, but there are still a lot of dads that are passionate about it. So I was glad for that. It was a good time. There are people in my life that kind of motivated me to put this together so I would have a resource that I could give them. Or my wife's friends that they could give to their husbands. That was really the primary motivation, just having something that we could pass to people that would find value in it.

PAM: That's really cool! Really cool that you got a lot of responses. That's nice to know.

SKYLER: It is. It would have been nice to be a little bit bigger and I could have some of those passionate entries in there, but unfortunately, it is what it is. Most dads are busy and when they're not working they want to spend time with their kids, not writing essays for me.

PAM: Yeah, well you could always go with a volume two, eventually (laughs)

SKYLER: Or Unschooling Moms and make it ten volumes! (laughs)

PAM: (laughs) Good one! Thank you so much for speaking with me today Skyler. I really enjoyed diving into the dads' perspectives with you. It was really fun!

SKYLER: It was fun! Thanks for having me.

PAM: No problem! Before we go, where is the best place for people to get in touch with you online?

SKYLER: Well, skylerjcollins.com is probably my main website and links to all my auxiliary stuff. Most of my writing either on parenting or unschooling or philosophy is at everything-voluntary.com. Most of that is probably philosophy and economics. There is some parenting and unschooling and this book is published through that. I think everything-voluntary.com is probably the place to go.

PAM: And they'll be able to find links to your books at both those places?

SKYLER: Yeah, both those places. Just hit publications at the top and they both show all my stuff.

PAM: Excellent! Thanks so much Skyler!

SKYLER: Thank you!