

## **From viral videos to faith: Austin Groft finds purpose beyond the platform**

STATE COLLEGE — Austin Groft stood near a group of Penn State students with a phone in his hand, looking for the next person willing to answer a question.

At first, those questions were about basketball. He asked people about NBA players, starting lineups and hot takes that could turn into viral clips. Now, he still uses the same camera, quick interviews and social media style, but the questions are different.

Instead of asking students about sports, Groft now asks them about faith, the Bible and what they believe.

For Groft, a 2023 Penn State graduate, content creation started as a way to chase a career in sports media. It led to viral videos, thousands of followers, NBA connections and even interest from the Atlanta Hawks. But after building the platform he once wanted, Groft said he realized it was not enough.

“I have everything that I wanted,” Groft said. “I have all these views. I have all these open doors from a social media standpoint. But this wasn’t fulfilling me.”

Groft, who grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, came to Penn State as a broadcast journalism major with a minor in sports studies and kinesiology. While in college, he got involved with CommRadio, Penn State Sports Night, club basketball and Penn State Athletics video production. He later became sports director for CommRadio and helped start what eventually became 360 Sports.

But before Groft became known for his content, Dylan Chroma knew him as the outgoing freshman who lived across the hall in Curtin Hall.

“He was just an outgoing kid that just wanted to talk to everyone and meet everyone,” Chroma said.

Chroma, a 2023 Penn State graduate, met Groft during their first week at Penn State. The two became close during freshman year and bonded over sports before COVID-19 cut their first year on campus short.

Chroma said Groft was already interested in communications and media, but he did not yet have a clear direction.

“There was no direct path he had yet,” Chruma said. “He didn’t know what he was going to do.”

That started to change during Groft’s senior year, when he connected with Justin Leusner and helped build Basketball TDAY, a sports content project that quickly grew online.

Groft said the group posted every day from October to December. At first, the content was focused on memes, trends, basketball jokes, highlights and anything that had a chance to work with the algorithm.

Then one of the videos took off.

“I was like, whoa, this is crazy,” Groft said. “Being successful on social media is possible.”

By December, Groft said Basketball TDAY had about 50,000 followers across platforms. By May, it had about 150,000.

The growth showed Groft that content creation could become more than just something fun to do. It could be a career. But it also came with pressure.

After graduation, Groft returned to Penn State to keep doing content while also doing ministry. He said he was working long days, sometimes from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., while trying to balance social media, travel, messages and faith conversations with students.

“I burnt out really quickly by March that year,” Groft said.

While his content was growing, Groft’s faith was also becoming a bigger part of his life.

Groft grew up going to church every Sunday, but he said it often felt like he was just “checking off the box.” That changed during college, especially after he was hospitalized with pancreatitis during his senior year.

His doctor told him he could not drink for three months. Groft said that time changed the way he looked at college, faith and what he actually needed to be happy.

“During that time, God showed me that I didn’t need drinking or these things,” Groft said. “I just needed him.”

Groft later attended Kaleo, a nine-week faith program. He also started a College of Communications Bible study with Grant Sheets.

The Bible study only lasted the final few weeks of the semester, but Groft said it showed him how important those conversations could be. He said he was having deep talks with close friends about struggles he never knew they were dealing with.

“I’ve had these deep conversations with people that I consider my best friends, but didn’t even know they were struggling with these things,” Groft said.

Eventually, Groft said he realized he could not keep traveling almost every weekend for basketball content while also trying to grow ministry on campus.

His ministry work had grown through Bible studies with fraternities, athletic teams and student groups. He said he had to make a choice.

“I can’t keep doing ministry if I’m gone every single weekend for content,” Groft said.

Groft decided to leave Basketball TDAY and move into full-time campus ministry.

His last day with Basketball TDAY was July 1.

Chruma said Groft’s growth did not surprise him because once Groft commits to something, he follows through.

“He worked in silence,” Chruma said. “He just figured it out.”

Now, Groft works mainly with fraternities, sororities and athletic teams. He helps students explore faith, read the Bible and start faith conversations within their groups.

He still creates content, but the purpose is different. Groft said his current mission is “making fun Christian content to open up doors for the gospel.”

That shift has also caught the attention of younger Penn State students, including Jack Dobbins, a freshman broadcast journalism major who met Groft through PSU Reach.

PSU Reach is a student content group focused on helping Penn State students build their social media and storytelling skills.

Dobbins had watched Groft's content before meeting him in person. He said Groft immediately offered to help him with his own social media work.

"You immediately understand that he's so passionate about what he does, and he's always willing to help," Dobbins said.

Dobbins said Groft's switch from basketball content to faith-based content happened quickly.

"It was a very immediate content switch," Dobbins said. "It was kind of like a light switch."

Even though the switch was sudden, Dobbins said it did not feel fake. He said Groft makes religious content feel more approachable and less preachy.

"He takes the content that people watch when they're doom scrolling, but turns it into what he wants to put out into the world," Dobbins said.

Owen Daszko, a sophomore broadcast journalism major at Penn State, said Groft's transition worked because it felt true to who he is.

"I think it's just how authentic he is in his content," Daszko said. "That transition could be hard, it could be difficult to make. And he was able to do it with ease."

Groft's content has also led to opportunities outside Penn State.

He said the first Christian video he made was about NBA player Jonathan Isaac and Isaac's faith. Isaac reposted the video, and Groft said it helped start a friendship.

Groft also said he has built a close relationship with Milwaukee Bucks guard AJ Green. Those connections changed the way Groft looked at professional athletes.

"These guys are just normal people," Groft said. "They're just like me and you."

Groft said he does not know exactly what the next few years will look like. He could see himself staying in ministry for five or 10 years, but he is trying to take life one step at a time.

For now, he said content is something he still does because he enjoys it.

"The social media I'm making now is literally just for fun," Groft said.

His advice for other students is simple.

“Just press publish,” Groft said.

Chruma described Groft as “gritty.” Dobbins called him “selfless.” Daszko called him “authentic.”

For Groft, the story is not just about building a platform. It is about what he chose to do after he built one.

“The second you compare is the second you fail,” Groft said. “Everyone has their own voice.”