
Avi Schiffmann

JULY 25, 2022

SUMMARY

A Harvard student from Mercer Island, WA, Avi Schiffman discusses his involvement in creating websites under the umbrella of internet activism. In the early days of COVID-19, Avi Schiffman created an acclaimed COVID-19 tracking website. He discusses other projects as well as his personal life.

Kayla Boland: Hi, Abby. Hello. Thank you so much for joining us today at the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. We're really happy to have you. So, to start, please just tell us a little bit about yourself. Where are you from? How did you get started?

Avi Schiffman: Um, yeah. My name is Avi Schiffman, and I'm currently 19 years old, and I live around here in Mercer Island, Washington. Um, I'm currently a student at Harvard. I guess in my spare time. Um, and, uh, I'm mostly here to talk about a lot of these websites I've made in the past. Uh, specifically, like, I have this coronavirus tracking website. Um, that was huge. I've got this Ukrainian refugee site, for example. Um, I like to have a bunch more websites too, I'd say all under the umbrella of internet activism. It's kind of a term I made up, but I feel like it fits because, um, with the internet these days and how easy it is to access, so many people have smartphones all over the world. You can create pretty cool stuff. Um, specifically these humanitarian projects I've worked on. Um, and so, yeah, I guess that's what I'm here to talk about. And I guess what I'm known for. So. Yeah.

Kayla Boland: Awesome. Well, we're so happy that you're here to tell us more about it. Yes. Um, so your first really big impactful project was the nCoV 2019 website, which was an early resource for people to track the spread of COVID-19. Still works. Yeah. And it garnered copious amounts of media attention and ultimately won you a Webby Award. Um, so what drove you into action to create that?

Avi Schiffman: Yeah, sure. The domain for that is terrible because I made that in early January of 2020, which was months before it was even called the pandemic or called COVID or anything. So that was just the unofficial name for the virus. That just means novel coronavirus 2019. And then I did the dot live because the.com was taken. So, um, there was just a website I made back then to track the spread of coronavirus, which was this random virus in China. It was like 51 cases at the time. Just some random epidemic. Uh, you know, I made a very basic website, just a simple dashboard. And it started really getting a lot of users because no one else out there could really find easy access to information about this virus. That was like doubling in cases every single day. And the entire international world was like, freaking out about it. Um, but, you know, I wasn't specifically that worried at the start, just because it was always random stories about viruses around the world. But very rarely do they end up shutting down the whole world for years. So, um, I just, uh, you know, I put the website out there and people started using it. Um, eventually hundreds of millions of people used it, and, uh, it's become one of the most popular websites on the internet of all time. Um, top like 300, which was pretty crazy. And it peak of about two years ago or three and a while ago, by now, um, in like May of 2020, it had over like 36 million users in a single day. So it was a whole lot of people, um, pretty stressful to learn how to maintain a website like that, because you have to think like it's expensive. You have to make sure that it works technically, too. That's a lot of users, a lot of traffic. You have to protect against DDoS attacks and just like hacking and all kinds of things like that. Um, it was used by governments, news outlets, and scientists. It received like thousands and thousands of international press and television coverage and all kinds of things, like it would be like on like the main government channel and like South Africa, they'd just be like showing this website. Um, so it was a very crucial resource during the pandemic. Um, and because of that, it won the Webby

Awards in 2020, which was pretty cool because, uh, Doctor Fauci presented me with that award. Um, and you have to come up with a five-word acceptance speech for that. And I chose you can learn anything online because, um, I learned how to make that website entirely just by watching YouTube videos or just googling things, or I'd hang around in like chat rooms and be like, how do I code this? And like, web developer chat rooms. There are all these industry professionals there who are willing to help you. Um, so I just kind of cobbled that website together. I was 17 at the time. I was still in high school. I think I was about a junior, and, um, yeah, now we're here, and I've made a bunch of websites since then. I feel like that kind of made me realize, like, this is what I'm good at, and this is like what I want to do. Um, I just think it's cool what you can do with the internet these days. Like, everyone's got a smartphone and, um, yeah, it spread fast. Say it went viral.

Kayla Boland: Definitely. And I think, um, what you're saying about you learn anything online really speaks to the information age we're in and just how much you can achieve, um, just by, you know, kind of the world is a stage for learning, essentially, and there are many fewer obstacles.

Avi Schiffman: Yeah. It's never been easier in like, 13 billion years of this universe to learn how to just go online, and you can learn anything. You could learn how, like you're not learning surgery online. But you could be a web. You could learn web development in some rural village, in some faraway country, um, and get a job paying you, like hundreds of thousands of dollars entirely, virtually, for just learning stuff entirely for free on the internet. You can learn, you can earn degrees online these days. Pretty cool.

Kayla Boland: Amazing. Absolutely, amazing. So another big project you had was Who to Vote?

Avi Schiffman: Yeah.

Kayla Boland: What inspired you to create that?

Avi Schiffman: Sure. Um, no one's ever asked about that website, so that's cool. But that was, um, my third internet activist website. Uh, prior to that, I made one called 2020 Protest, which was helping track like Black Lives Matter protests, primarily in the United States. Um, in the summer of 2020, when things were pretty crazy. Um, that website was cool. Not like, not as big as the coronavirus one. It was used by, like, I don't know, around 500,000 people, especially around here in Seattle. Kind of told you like where and when protests were happening and all this stuff. It was pretty cool. And after that, I made a Hutu Vote, which was a website that helped inform people on both sides of the presidential election in 2020. So it had like a nice user interface, and you could see all these things. So, like let's say, I don't know, health care. There would be questions on things like abortion. Um, and you could say like, you know, it'd be like, do you think abortion should be legal and all these specifics, and you could say like, yes. And it would say, okay, this is like, you know, Joe Biden's stance. He's probably going to do all these kinds of things. This is his, um, you know, on his website and his political campaign. He says he's going to do this or not. And it would show you like Donald Trump. So it would kind of like teach you about the issues, um, that were, you know, the current issues and what the political stances are on them and stuff like that. It was pretty cool. It was, I think, I think that website was in a few little like very minimal press, but I think it was in USA Today or something. It was pretty cool. But that was just like another experiment, um, into just like an internet activist stuff. But yeah.

Kayla Boland: I'm a little amazed. I poked around a little bit, and I found it really accessible and user-friendly. And I know that's something you've spoken about in the past, that it's important for you, for you know, many people from all walks of life to be able to navigate the website.

Avi Schiffman: Definitely.

Kayla Boland: So I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about your commitment to accessibility?

Avi Schiffman: Sure. Yeah, I love design. Um, I think these websites, the design of them is very crucial to their success. Like with the coronavirus. One, it was very minimalistic. Um, the colors were very simple, like it was just very easy to use. I made that website because a lot of the other resources on coronavirus stuff at the time were just terrible. Um, and not just in their user interface, but all is just the user experience too, is just atrocious. Um, and so I tried to make the websites designed, um, with the target user in mind. So with like the Ukrainian one, for example, which we'll get to later. Um, I tried to imagine using this website as if I were a refugee who was, you know, currently fleeing like literal gunfire and explosions. And, you know, you're confused. You don't speak the language, all that kind of stuff. And to make sure a website like that. Um, there is nothing to learn. It just works. You know, I don't need an instruction manual to use my fridge. I just know how to use it. It just works. It's pretty simple. Um, I, uh, I'm pretty passionate about just good design like that. Um, let's see what else. Um, yeah. You know, on a lot of these sites, too, there's no advertisements, there's no sponsorships, there's not any of kind of stuff. Um, they're just they they serve their purpose and they work well, um, and, uh, yeah, I like design.

Kayla Boland: Incredible. And design is so key in creating accessible platforms. Um, definitely. So speaking of, uh, kind of back to the voting website, do you plan on developing it further for the next election, or was it more just?

Avi Schiffman: For, um, I mean, I could do something for the next election. There are a lot of ideas I've had for things to do, but, um, these days, you know, I'm focused maybe specifically on, like, this one website I'm going to make. We can talk about that later, but, um, kind of like the next step after the Ukrainian site. I feel like it's going to be like one website to rule them all kind of thing instead of making like a new website every single time there's some kind of humanitarian disaster or some big thing around the world, just having one website that can kind of be general enough to apply to any disaster, I think, uh, would be the future of internet activism. My made-up term.

Kayla Boland: Well, very accurate and I think will become mainstream soon enough.

Avi Schiffman: I sure hope so. I've seen a lot of people, uh, like, do their versions of this kind of stuff, like people have made their own Ukrainian sites and, uh, voting sites, coronavirus trackers, all that kind of stuff. I've seen a lot. It's pretty cool.

Kayla Boland: Excellent. And I'm sure there's a ripple effect from your projects and your goals.

Avi Schiffman: Oh, definitely. I've met many people who have told me that. Like, there are people I met years ago who got into programming because they were inspired by my projects, and now are like, you know, have jobs paying them hundreds of thousands and stuff. It's pretty cool to, like, inspire people to get into the field. Um, it's just cool.

Kayla Boland: Yeah. And speaking of, um, internet activism, would you consider that work akin to philanthropy or something a little different?

Avi Schiffman: Um, yeah. I mean, there's sort of philanthropy, I guess you could say I never really thought about it that way. Um, but yeah, I mean, they're primarily like a public service or not, like, for-profit companies or anything like that. Uh, it's just like, you know, I've got, like, a laptop and fun ideas, and I think it would be cool. And there aren't that many people doing this kind of stuff. So when you do make these kinds of projects, I guess the world pays attention. Um, but I'm just kind of, I mean, it's fun at the end of the day, too. I just like making websites. It's cool when people use the stuff you make as well. Like if I were an artist, I guess you could call the project art. But you know, I'd want people to see, like what I've made. Um, put it in, like, a little gallery. And I guess that's the way I see it with the sites. Like, I like it when people talk about them and use them and stuff. I'm not making the websites to be used by like five people. They're supposed to be used by like 500 million people. Um, yeah.

Kayla Boland: And there's a lot more to take into account when you're trying to gauge what, you know, one group of people might, you know, need to access the website and navigate it well. Yeah. As opposed to when it's targeted to a, you know, a smaller group, it's a little bit easier to pinpoint that. So you kind of have to have that wide-angle view of, you know, what is going to help people the most. Right. So that's wonderful. Um. So, um. Considering people who are not proficient in the world of websites. Sure. And things like that. Um, what is your kind of thought process when you're creating these websites when you have those people?

Avi Schiffman: Um, yeah. I mean, I think I'm a pretty terrible coder. Coding is not, even though it seems like it. It's not really like my passion. I failed three computer science courses, so, um, I'm not like an expert programmer. I'm not an industry professional. I'm not trying to be one. Anyways. Um, but, uh, with a lot of these projects, I come up with the idea and then I realize, okay, I need to learn this to make that. And so you just kind of learn it, uh, or like, ask people how to do it, or work with other people. Um, and I mean, these like I was saying, you can learn anything online these days, like if I, you know, work on the site and I'm like, okay, I want to make the text red, just type it into Google. And people have been making websites for over 30 years. Like any question I can think about has been answered, um, and asked like so many times, there's just a giant database of this, and it's only growing. So, um, honestly, coding is mostly learning how to Google. I'd say kind of a lot of things like that. But, you know, the websites are certainly not perfect, um, at all. Like, they could be way more efficient. They could be a thousand times more complicated in the back end of it. Um, the coronavirus one. I'm telling you, that thing was held up by, like, Band-Aids and matchsticks. That was very, very sketchy for quite a while. I've, I've, like, recoded that entire site like four times by now. Um, that's a miracle. It's lasting. Still, I'd say that, but, um, but, yeah, like, you know, I didn't think about making it the most efficient, perfect thing. I just kind of put it out there. And at the end of the day, they ended up becoming one of the first ones and, uh, becoming popular because I didn't spend months tweaking it, making sure it was perfect. I mean, like, the domain for the site sucks. Okay? You can't even say it like ncov2019. No one even knows what you're saying. Um, but it doesn't matter in the end if you make something useful. Uh, yeah, exactly.

Kayla Boland: It's become such a Prevalent tool across the whole world. And, you know, websites, you know, there's always going to be more you can do to optimize them and make them more efficient and things like that. But there and that way, they're kind of living documents.

Avi Schiffman: Sure. I mean, they're not also it's not like the same. I mean, it's the same with everything, not just websites. Like, that's, I don't know, fashion design or anything, making movies or something like, eventually you kind of have to be like, okay, it's good enough. Um, I can't spend 100 years working on a movie.

Kayla Boland: If you expect perfection, you'll never get it.

Avi Schiffman: There's one, uh, quote I like that's called, like, um, perfectionism is procrastination. And heels, I think, is a fun quote. Uh, but it's true if you think about it.

Kayla Boland: Absolutely. I see that. So it's applicable in so many ways. Um, so, you know, you've mentioned that you looked up a lot of things on the internet. Do you have did you have any mentor in particular?

Avi Schiffman: Um, not particularly like one person, just kind of. There are plenty of people who were just good friends you can just ask questions to, and they'd be willing to help us. But many friends over the years, just like in that space, and there are plenty of people who are willing to help. Um, I've kind of it's been cool that I can, like, lead people in the right direction as, like people once helped me, and it's been kind of cool. I get like a lot of DMs from people on Twitter and Instagram, all that kind of stuff that are trying to get into coding. Um, just looking for like, good resources and stuff. And it's cool to give them the same resources that I use. There are plenty of good YouTube channels and websites and all that kind of stuff out there.

Kayla Boland: Absolutely. So your most recently, you and your coursemate?

Avi Schiffman: Oh well. Yeah. Sorta. Marco. Marco.

Kayla Boland: Burstein. Is that right? Mhm. Um, recently, you and Marco Burstein created Ukraine. Take Shelter. Com as a tool for refugees looking for shelter during the war. So, tell us about the process you went through.

Avi Schiffman: Sure. Yeah. Marco. Marco was a friend of mine. Or is a friend of mine from school who helped me with the earlier parts of the project. He was there for about like a month, but he got swamped with schoolwork. So it's been mostly me for the past few months. Um, but, uh, Ukraine Takes Shelter is, uh, my favorite website I've made recently because it's had, like, the other websites. They're cool and all, but I feel like you just kind of are static in some ways. You just kind of look at them, um, they provide you with information. That's great. But Ukraine Takes Shelter is a website where anyone can sign up. Um, and, uh, it's kind of like a Airbnb for refugees type of thing where you can sign up and say, you can host refugees and give all these descriptions and all this kind of stuff, um, go through all these like, security tests we have and all that kind of stuff. Um, and then as a refugee, you can go on this website and type in where you are and where you're headed, and you can see thousands and thousands of people. There are hundreds of thousands of listings. It's like 4 or 5 times the size of Airbnb's refugee initiative. Um, and you can just see, like type in Budapest, for example. It's close by. A lot of refugees were going there in the early stages of the war. And, um, you know, there are thousands of listings you can go through. It's pretty cool. And it's so far, the website has helped house over 25,000 families. Um, and every family is an average size of about, like, five. And they usually have like a pet or two. So it's a whole lot of people. It's pretty cool. Um, and, uh, yeah, I'm trying to think, um, yeah, it's been cool. I've worked with the Ukrainian government and the United States government. Um, that website's also gotten a ton of international press as well. Uh, and it's just been used by, like, a lot of people to millions and millions of people as well. It's pretty cool to see the success of that site, just because that's way more like actionable type of project that I like. You know, the coronavirus one's cool, right? But you just see the data. Um, but this one, it's so much more, and it's been really cool to see like the real impact it's had on the war. You know, like there are millions and millions of refugees. Like one of the reasons why I started this site, I realized this was the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, but the services in place there were just not going to scale up to house that many refugees. I mean, there are a lot of NGOs and stuff on the ground there. They're doing amazing work, but they're overwhelmed when there's like 50,000 refugees, okay? And there are 10 million of them. It's it's insane. Um, so, uh, Ukraine takes you know, a lot of people were kind of posting on, like, Facebook groups and being like, hey, you know, I can help post refugees, but there's and people who would just, like, post like, I need help. I'm like a mom. Whatever. Um, but the efforts there were so decentralized and so, um, complicated and all these different languages, it's just that there was not like a standard platform to go to or some easy thing to share. Uh, and in one city, there could be like 50 different Facebook groups. I mean, it's ridiculous. So, um, that's why I started Ukraine Take Shelter. I think that that launched, like, a few days after the war. Um, and yeah, it's been pretty cool.

Kayla Boland: That's also incredible. And I've seen the impact of it. Just, you know, I heard about it as well.

Avi Schiffman: And.

Kayla Boland: Got on the website myself, and it's just a wonderful resource. And um, from what I understand, you made it quickly.

Um, so it was a very quick response. Yes. Um, and because it's, you know, it's a crisis, it's an urgent situation, and you need to respond quickly. Right. I think it's great that you're collaborating with the government. And, um, you know, one organization can't do it alone type thing, right? So I think it's great to see that.

Avi Schiffman: Yeah. It's been cool to, to like, I was in Europe recently meeting with some people from like the European Digital Commission and stuff like that. And uh, I met with like the president of Poland, like all these crazy people to, like, work on these projects. Um, and there's something else I was going to say I forgot, but, yeah, I don't know. Ukraine Takes Shelter is awesome.

Kayla Boland: Have you, um, spoken with any refugees directly?

Avi Schiffman: Oh, yeah. Plenty. There are insane stories I've gotten. It's pretty cool because the sites, like, um, you know, I made it to house refugees. I didn't realize that it would. And also saving their lives. The most notable story I remember of refugees using Ukraine, Take Shelter, was originally covered by the BBC. I had no idea it was even happening. They just some friend sent me this article and it was, you know, there was a line in there. Oh, by the way. Like, you know, this family used Ukraine to take shelter. So I got in contact with the host family and the refugee family afterwards. But, um, the story was incredible. Like there was this family that was in Kharkiv, which is the second largest city in Ukraine, and it was currently being besieged by Russian troops. And this family was hiding in their basement, cellar type of thing, like it was like a dirt floor. They were not like living there. They were hiding, um, and they were able to use Ukraine Tech Shelter to find a host in France that was able to help them come to France. Um, and it was this, like, beautiful, like holiday home in the French countryside, on the beach. Like, it's pretty crazy. They sent, like, these photos, this family, they're like, you know, literally like tattered clothing, like in this basement. The lighting is like the rubble and rebar everywhere. And explosions. And then they're like in, like, the cinematic looking frame of. This beautiful French house. It was cool. But the reason why the story was pretty memorable to me was, um, three days after the family arrived in France, uh, their house in Ukraine was destroyed by Russian bombs. So it was pretty cool to see that this family, um, was not only like the Ukraine took shelter, was not only able to help house refugees, but also save their lives. So, um, it was pretty cool. Uh, there are many stories like that. Um, it's pretty cool when they're covered by, like, real news stations, and I don't even, like, I'm not the one that reaches out to these refugees or anything. Uh, it'll be like AP news or some CBS or type of thing, and it's cool. At one time, I was on CBS, um, it was just some live thing, and I was just talking there and then, like, they had like a side panel right there of, like, a refugee family currently in some host house that, like, used Ukraine, take shelter. So I was like, that's pretty cool. Um, but like, there was this one story I remember from AP news that was cool of like this guy in Sweden who, um, you know, wanted to host refugees and he contacted, like, all, like three refugee agencies around him. None of them got back to him for weeks. He then found out about Ukraine, Take Shelter. Um, posted his advertisement there. And within 24 hours, like, literally the next morning, um, there was a family at his doorstep, um, that he took in. And it was pretty cool to see, like, how fast it's able to work. So Ukraine Take Shelter is really like, um, it works well. Like too well, sometimes it's a bit overwhelming because again, like, I'm only 19, just kind of running this crazy website. Um, but it's cool and it gives me ideas for like what to do next. I've got big plans.

Kayla Boland: Oh, I bet. Um, so, in terms of the Ukraine website, how did the Chabad organization get involved in that?

Avi Schiffman: Oh, yeah, that was cool. Um, I worked with Chabad pretty early on in that they just have massive outreach all over Europe. They've got, you know, Hobart at almost every, like, even small city in Europe. It's pretty crazy. Um, and they like the idea of the site. And so they're helping a lot of refugees come, like they're sending these buses to Ukraine or, like, helping them come out of the country, um, go to neighboring places like Moldova, Poland, Germany, etc., all around there. Um, and they help with, like, a lot of guerrilla marketing, I'd say, of the Ukraine take shelter. Um, you know, they give like bus drivers, like QR codes. And I made these, like, little illustrations of, like, you know, how to use the site, um, and all these different languages that you can, like, scan it. Um, and also, Ukraine Take Shelter has been translated into over a dozen languages. It's pretty cool. Um, but anyways, uh, yeah, it just like they give, like taxi drivers, they put, like, on the windows of buses and stuff. And it was just, uh, the Chabad helped, like, get the word out there a lot in Europe. And they were using the site, to like they'd have volunteers that are like, literally using the site. So, um, it was pretty cool to see a lot of that. It just, uh, Yeah.

Kayla Boland: Yeah, incredible to kind of, again, galvanize and teamwork to get the word out there to as many people as possible, and kind of on the same note, how would you say your Jewish values have influenced this path that you're on with internet activism?

Avi Schiffman: Um. Um. Well, I, uh, certainly like I've been born into the whole Jewish world of, you know, all the ideals of, like, helping other people and maybe not expecting a lot of things. And, uh, in return, I mean, and also, um, I think the whole, like, love of learning just for, like, the sake of learning. There are a lot of things I'm interested in that I've just kind of like learned just because it's interesting. I'm not trying to get anything out of it necessarily. Um, a lot of things like that have helped me over the years. Just kind of learn how to make these kinds of websites and also then, um, you know, be running them in the first place. Uh, it's been cool to just like there's just a whole lot of, like, Jewish, like reporters and like media people, all kinds of stuff that I've

known over the years that have been really cool. Like, I'm good friends with this woman from The Times of Israel, which was pretty cool. That is one of the first people I've gone to, like when I've made some of these websites. Um, and I mean, they like me over there. My article with them, for like the COVID site, is their most popular article of all time or something. So the reporter got a raise or something like that after doing the interview. So they appreciated it. Like I remember, I just called them back. I was like, look, I made this Ukrainian site, um, and like, you might find it interesting, and within like a few hours. It's like an international press. So it's pretty cool that I just know all those people. Um, but, you know, that helps, just like the Jewish part of it. I mean, because, like, a lot of these reporters are all Jewish, and you just kind of, you know, stick together in some ways. So, um, helps like that. Yeah.

Kayla Boland: Thank you for sharing that. I appreciate that. Um, so with all these websites you've made and just all the other work you're doing, um, how would you say your skills have become more refined?

Avi Schiffman: Um, I think I was at the start a lot more focused on like the coding part, which I still am, but I have like other friends that, you know, are good at that kind of stuff. Um, I think I've learned a lot more about, like, leading a team and like, uh, just coming up with an idea and just like, leading a team to make that idea a reality is certainly what I've gotten a lot better at. Um, just coming up with the ideas in the first place. And, um, the design, I've learned just a whole lot about design. Like what? You know, good websites look like, um, I've learned, uh, I mean, overall, just like how to deal with running such large websites, it's definitely like an acquired skill. Like, you can't learn that by watching YouTube videos. Um, you know, contradictory to what I said earlier, but, uh, just the stress of running such large websites, especially like the coronavirus one. I mean, that was like, can you imagine 36 million people? That's like the entire state of California. Um, it's a whole lot of people. So, uh, the technical side of it is very stressful. You have to learn, you know, you have to make sure the website servers don't go down, right? Um, you have to just deal with the. It's just a lot of pressure. You have like, uh, pretty much every single news outlet, like, in the entire world, covered the COVID site. And they're all looking for stories, right? And, um, that that's just a whole lot of a whole lot of pressure. Um, you have to learn how to deal with that. So I've certainly gotten better at that over the years. Now, I'm certainly, um, I don't know, I kind of like it's kind of like what I'm good at in some ways. So it's not that I'm not, like, nervous when like we're running these kinds of websites. Like, I understand how it all works. I understand the media pretty well by now. I understand, just like, you know, just how to make, uh, how to make them useful, how to get the word out there pretty fast, all that kind of stuff. Um, and it's cool because, uh, like, with the like. Now, when I make these new websites, I have this big online platform as kind of like an internet activist, so I don't have to, like, scream into the void when I release these projects. I already know people, like, for example, the Ukraine site, I knew like when I was starting to make the website, um, I had full faith that it would, you know, get out there fast, and it would be working. Um, because I just, I just called up reporters that were finished the website. I'm like, okay, call them up. Like, look, this is a cool project, and they're all writing about it, then. And then everyone starts using it, and then, um, you know, it's it becomes so popular and it's awesome. It's cool.

Kayla Boland: Absolutely. And I'm just going to pause again really fast. There we go. So I asked this, knowing it may be impossible to answer, but is this what you see yourself doing for the rest of your life? Um, do you have interests in any other fields?

Avi Schiffman: Um, yeah. I'll try and keep it a bit short because there are so many things I'm interested in. I could talk for hours and hours, but, um. Uh, I mean, in some ways, yes. This is just kind of what I've been doing these days, but, um, I mean, I don't see, like, the rest of my life as, like, a career, like, blocked out or anything. Like, I'm not trying to, like, level up, get, like, a raise or anything. Like, I'm just working on my own projects. Um, and I'll probably be doing that forever. Um, you know, right now I'm working on these nonprofit-type websites, but I'll probably get around to doing like tech startup stuff eventually. I'm pretty deep in that world. Um, I know a lot of, like, venture capitalist stuff and like, the whole Silicon Valley world. I'm pretty deep into that because I have a lot of friends around there, that's just kind of like where I've hung out a lot. Um, I've. I help run and I stay at a lot of, like, hacker houses, which are primarily for people that are like, I mean, the ones I'm in are like early 20s, mid 20s, people that have like dropped out of college, um, that are currently just like working on their own startups, their own projects. And it's just like, well, they're not going to live with their parents' house. Why don't we just have like a whole house together? So, um, I've been doing a whole lot of those all over the world. Um, we, uh, we've had some in Denver, Colorado, New York City, uh, Barcelona, Amsterdam, um, all over. It's been pretty fun. And they're all paid for by venture capitalists, too, so it's great. Um, and that's kind of like where I've been staying and, like, where I'm probably going to be moving soon. I'm going to Lisbon, probably after the summer. Um, just there's a big tech scene over there, surprisingly. Um, that's very surprising, apparently, to most people. But, yeah, Lisbon is amazing. Um, they have really good laws for a lot of, like, startup stuff and, like, crypto-related things and all that kind of stuff. So, um, it's a big community there, and I have a lot of friends there. So, um, you know, if I'm not in school right now, like, why not move there? Mercer Island is going to be pretty boring after the summer ends. So, uh, no offense, but, um, yeah, uh, there are many fields I'm interested in. A lot of things. Just like, I mean, pretty much every like cutting-edge field in primarily tech. I'm interested in, like, artificial intelligence stuff is cool. Um, I'm pretty involved with like a whole lot of groups doing things, um, with like, AGI-related stuff is pretty something I'm like, very interested in. That's like the whole, like a true artificial

intelligence because, like when people say I, I mean, they just, it doesn't exist quite yet. We have artificial narrow intelligence stuff, like you have computers that are good at playing chess, but they can't necessarily, you know, make music or something. So an AGI would be something that is like truly conscious and can kind of learn how to do everything. So I'm pretty interested in that. Um, I'm very interested in brain-computer interface stuff as well. I did like a quick internship, um, at Harvard's Massachusetts General Hospital, uh, working on researching the user experience for brain computer interface chips. That was pretty cool. Um, like, how do you like design? Like, when you press a button with your mind, like, how do you design the feedback for that? It's pretty interesting stuff. So it's all new. Um. What else? Um. There are so many things I like. Pick some. Um, I mean, I'm pretty interested in, like, nuclear stuff as well as, like, energy. I feel, um, that it should be used a whole lot more. It's very annoying to me that it's not, um, any other fields, just like tech stuff. And, I mean, I'm pretty involved in, like, every tech-related thing. So there's a whole lot of, like, let's say, crypto things out there. Um, I'm pretty involved in, like, the developer side of those kinds of things. Um, I know like, all the people there that's just like my friends, pretty much, um, or the people that, like, invented things like NFTs, um, things like that. Uh, which is pretty cool. Um, but yeah, I mean, I have like, a trillion ideas. It's just that amount of, like, actually executing on them is pretty hard. Um, and, like, dealing with the whole startup is a whole lot, um, which I realized, you know, I have a lot of friends. They're all raising millions of dollars and working on their own companies and everything, and that's great. But, you know, I'm not in such a rush to do such a thing like that right now. I feel like I've made enough big projects by now, like I'm still working on stuff, but I'm a little, like, unmotivated for that. I'm more so, you know, that's like why I'm here in Mercer Island. Like having fun in the lake with friends instead of, you know, grinding in some apartment in New York, like making website after website, like there's only so many websites you can make. Um, I find that there are many other things that make you way happier. Um, you know, people, just people are in such a rush all the time to get more, more money, more skills, more school stuff, more this, more that, and, like, perfectly fine. But I'm pretty content with the way things are, uh, like on paper success stuff. Um, for only being 19 for now. So I'll get around to going back to school and stuff eventually, but for now, um, it's a nice sunny day, so.

Kayla Boland: Exactly. And I think it's important to strike that balance and cultivate it early on, because I think with a lot of people, they fall into the rat race mentality and just constantly needing to achieve more or do more and more and really, like you don't need to prove yourself every single day, you know, on such a massive scale.

Avi Schiffman: I mean, you're going to blink and you're going to be 40.

Kayla Boland: Exactly. So it's important to make time to enjoy life, going to the lake with your friends, and things like that. So that's great to hear that. You're right.

Avi Schiffman: There'll be time. There'll be time eventually to become a trillionaire. But that's for.

Kayla Boland: Later.

Avi Schiffman: I'll get around to it.

Kayla Boland: Exactly. So what is going on in your life apart from, you know, your website, things, your education, and work items?

Avi Schiffman: I mean, those are like the primary things, I suppose. Uh, you know, I'm doing website stuff like giving talks and things around, like I was just in Aspen, Colorado, uh, talking at Aspen Ideas, which is pretty cool. Um, you know, working on stuff, uh, I mean, I mean, at the end of the day, I'm just like a teenager, right? So, like, I don't know, I just literally had, like, an orthodontist appointment this morning, like, just with, like, Invisalign stuff. Um. Uh, yeah. Just like random things. I mean, like, I like movies a lot. Um, I like, I mean, I like everything. There's nothing that's not interesting to me. Um, I like Dune, for example. Uh, a big sci-fi fan. Um, Dune. Great. Uh, my friends love it when I talk about it for hours and hours. Um. What else? Uh, you know, I mean, the most, like, content or, like, the most thing I want to do these days is just like, I don't know, like, hang out with friends or, like, read a book or something, like, around, like, the islands and stuff like that. It's just like nice, like chilling around here. Um, like I do stuff like, to be honest, I feel like people maybe think I'm way more productive than I am. Um, maybe it looks like that. But, uh, the great thing about making websites is they kind of run themselves, so I don't have to do that much maintenance on them, especially because I've gotten a bit better at it over the years. I'm certainly not an industry professional or anything like that, but after especially the COVID site, I kind of learned how to make websites secure and safe, and just like, you know, make sure that they're confronting themselves. The coronavirus website is updating as we speak, or while I'm sleeping, which is pretty nice. Um, but I'm on to I'm on to new things right now. I'm starting a nonprofit called Internet Activism, um, with like, a whole law firm called Skadden, Arps, and everything. It's pretty cool. Uh, it's kind of an umbrella organization for all these internet activist projects I've been in the past to cover them legally, but also for the future, because I've got big plans, which I'll tell you about in a second. Um, but I, I've worked on all these projects, especially Ukraine, Take Shelter. And I have all these, like,

every single NGO you could think about, like, Save the Children. I don't know every single one of them. They're all, like, wanting to work with me on this, um, and governments and all this kind of stuff. But a 19-year-old with a website, right? That's not very professional. But what if it's a nonprofit organization with like, employees and everything, and the, you know, they're not websites. They're like platforms, and everything is being run by an organization, and it's a legal entity to partner with and all that kind of stuff. That's the future. Um, and I've got big plans because, uh, okay. So like the Ukrainian site, for example. It's great. It proved the model that everyone, like everyone, wants to help. There's always some disaster happening around the world, right? There's always going to be another natural disaster or war pandemic. Right now, there are a bunch of other refugee crises happening. Um, everyone wants to help. But really, the only thing you can do is donate money or, like, call your congressman or something like that. They don't even really listen to you. Um, so imagine you're like an immigration lawyer and you want to, like, contribute your skills pro bono, or you're like, I don't know, you're you work in the mental health field and you want to, you know, contribute your skills to helping people with trauma. But like, where would you do that? There's not a platform for any of that. Um, so I think making, like a Ukraine tech shelter, that's way more general, uh, where it's not specific to just Ukrainians or like a war like that. It's just like if you want, you know, there's always going to be something happening. And if you want to help in a situation like that, it's a place for you to kind of advertise. Like, yeah, look, I can take in refugees. Um, I can tutor them in math, I can tutor them in English or Japanese, or whatever. So, um, I think that'd be cool. And, um, you know, imagine, like, if Ukraine takes shelter before the war breaks out, it could have already had hundreds of thousands of people signed up, ready to go, um, and could have saved way more lives and been way more amazing from the start. Instead of having to grow such a platform after the disaster. Uh, so I just think it'd be cool for like, a just it's like a more general Ukraine take shelter. That's not specific to just housing and not specific to just Ukrainians, just kind of everything. I think that would be like, honestly, one of the coolest things anyone has ever done with the internet if it worked on such a big scale. But, um, I mean, at this point I'm. It sounds cocky, but, I mean, I'm pretty sure I'm pretty confident. Like, I could get it to be used by millions and millions of people. Um, I'm kind of going to take everything I learned from all these past projects and combine it into one, like an ultimate project. I think it'll be cool. It'll be way more professional. Um, it'll be just it'll be I talked about this product for so many people, and nobody seems to be as excited about it as I am, but I think it'll be amazing. Imagine if you have, like, there's always some random thing, like there is this volcano that erupted on this island. It was a while ago, I don't remember, it was like Tonga or something. This was like somewhat recently, but this volcano erupts and there are millions of, or like hundreds of thousands of people there that are now without jobs, without housing, all this kind of stuff. They're fleeing on boats to places. And imagine if, um, you know, everywhere around the world that they go, they end up, maybe they, you know, go on a boat, refugee boat, and they end up in like, let's say South Africa or something. Um, there are millions of people in South Africa who are ready to help house them, tutor them, feed them, you, you know, drive them to transportation, all these kinds of things, uh, all for free. Just because people want to help. Um, that would be so cool. People want to help. There's just not a place for them to do that on. And and most websites out there honestly suck with design. Governments are so slow to help with things like the whole, uh, refugee agency thing and the whole Sweden AP news story, um, all that kind of stuff. So, uh, yeah, I think, I think it will be awesome. That's kind of the next plan. Um, honestly, a bit lazy these days. I've just been kind of burnt out, but, um, that's the next project. Just like internet activism, really, but on the biggest scale possible and more permanent.

Kayla Boland: Exactly. And we're very excited to see what's next. Um, you know, as you're you've made history already, and I mean, especially, um, you know, with our organization, we, you know, say preserve the stories of Jewish people in Washington state. And so, you know, it's just amazing to have your story so far. You know, we hope that we'll get to learn more about you as your career unfolds. And, you know, keep in touch and all of that. Um, so we just really appreciate you coming by. And, you know, before we kind of wrap up, is there anything more that you'd like to share?

Avi Schiffman: Um, um, I mean, I think it's a cool organization, this Washington State thing. My mom and dad have heard a lot about it, so it's pretty cool. Um, I'm just I'm happy that more people can learn about this kind of stuff, and I hope that it inspires more people to get into the field and to work on this stuff and the concept of internet activism, because this is a recent thing. After all, the internet, um, was not that accessible. I mean, the internet's pretty new still, even though I'm pretty young. I was born in 2002, and everything but the internet was still like a vastly different place when I was born um, versus now. And also, the access to it. Um, we have smartphones everywhere, like, pretty much every person has a smartphone. Um, even in, even in like, super underdeveloped countries, like pretty much everyone just like, has like a terrible android. But on that terrible android, you can still go on the internet and access anything. Um, and I love making websites because there's nothing to download, there's nothing to load. It just instantly works. Um, and you can have it on any device, and it's just incredible. The internet is amazing, and I think it's an underutilized tool for humanitarian stuff. So that's kind of my goal, to like, realize that to this extent, I think would be amazing.

Kayla Boland: Yes, I completely agree. I'm again looking forward to seeing what's next.

Avi Schiffman: Wouldn't it be awesome like the Prime has been talked about?

Kayla Boland: Yes. Oh, yeah. That's exciting. And I mean, I can see so many applications for it. I mean, the climate crisis we're in. Sure. For one, I can only imagine, you know, so many directions it could take with, you know, you know, the climate, climate change is already tangibly affecting.

Avi Schiffman: In a way, it will be like a loud like every single NGO or government agency to work together without having to do anything. They're just kind of like, it'll just be amazing.

Kayla Boland: Exactly. Making it work. Making the website work for you, making it work for everyone rather than, you know, just endlessly plugging away on this, like, ancient website. That's complicated. Exactly.

Avi Schiffman: So, so not so decentralized. So you won't have to use 50,000 different websites. It'll just be one greatly designed website. It'll be cool.

Kayla Boland: Awesome. Well, do you have any words of advice for anyone seeking to enter this field?

Avi Schiffman: Um, just kind of a culmination of everything I was saying earlier. It's pretty easy, relatively easy to learn these kinds of things online. If you are motivated, at least, um you can find any questions or answers. There's like, people have been making websites for over 30 years. Um, web development is also pretty easy compared to most coding-related things. If you look at it like HTML, for example, English is pretty much. Um, if you look, it looks very English. She, um, the coding is hard when you're doing, like, artificial intelligence stuff or coding, you know, stuff from scratch, all these complicated data algorithms and all this kind of stuff. But honestly, like if you're just making websites like this, it doesn't matter. Um, it's pretty much like adult Legos. You just kind of like plug-and-play things together here. It's not that complicated, in my opinion. Um, I just think if most people took a look at it, they realized they could probably do it. Um, you know, in my opinion, if you're doing, like, AP calculus and all this crazy stuff, then I think you can learn how to code very slightly different English. It's very simple, I promise. Um, and there are amazing resources online. There's a great YouTube channel called Free Code Academy that has these videos that are like 14 hours long, um, with like, no ads that are exactly what you need to learn, like, everything about certain things. So, um, it's a good resource. I used, um, but. Yeah.

Kayla Boland: Well, great. Again, thank you so much, Avi. It was great to speak with you, and thanks for sharing a bit about your work, for sure.

Avi Schiffman: I hope we speak again for an even bigger project.

Kayla Boland: Yes, I hope so.