

# Chasing FIRE Interview #6 - Marc from Vital Dollar

Today we continue our [Chasing Fire](#) interview series (click the link to see all interviews in this series). I have always enjoyed reading and listening to interviews to learn how people got to where they are, so as to learn from the successes and failures of others. Each individual's story and path is unique, and we can certainly gain insights from those generous enough to share their stories.

My job as the host is to find interesting people that will inspire and motivate you, as well as myself. I plan to share one high-quality interview per month (maybe even less frequently) and the questions may change over time. I anticipate this to be an iterative process and I would love your feedback in the comments (or via email: [dom@genyfinanceguy.com](mailto:dom@genyfinanceguy.com)).

If you'd like to be considered for an interview, drop me a note (see email address above) and we can chat about specifics.

You may have noticed from the first two interviews that I'm trying to pull stories from those that are early in their journey ([Zach our very own FIRE Starter](#)) and others that are much further along ([Max, a higher earning multi-millionaire](#)). The goal is to alternate every other interview in this fashion, as best I can).

Today's guest is Marc from The Vital Dollar. He has a very unique journey where he built his wealth by building websites and then selling them for HUGE gains. He has earned well over seven figures from selling five sites over the last eight years (not counting the income he enjoyed from those sites before selling them). Marc and his wife made a decision in their early 30's to be mortgage-free and four years into a thirty-year mortgage put theirs to bed. They have now been mortgage-free for over eight years. You will see below that Marc's latest project is a personal finance site.

Marc, the floor is yours - take it away!

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**Tell us about yourself: Who are you and what do you do? What is your**

**story? How are you fighting for your Freedom? Where did you start, where in the journey are you, and where do you ultimately want to end up?**

My name is Marc. I live in Pennsylvania with my wife and our two kids (6-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son). I've been self-employed in internet marketing since 2008. Over the years I've had websites and blogs in several different industries like web design, photography, and travel. About a year ago I started a personal finance blog, [Vital Dollar](#).

One of the reasons I love being self-employed and working on my own websites is because there are no income limits and it's possible to do really well. I've always wanted to retire early, but my interest in financial independence has increased a lot in the past year or two. My goal is to retire in 15 years (around the time when our youngest child graduates high school). I doubt I would truly retire, but I would like to have total freedom and flexibility to work as much or as little as I want. As of now, we're on track to make that happen.

**Where in the world are you from?**

I live in southern Pennsylvania. I'm about 1 hour from Baltimore and 2 hours from Philadelphia and Washington, DC. This area has been home for most of my life. I was born in France but only lived there for the first 1.5 years of my life.

**What is your routine like? Are you a morning or a night person? What time do you wake up and go to sleep?**

I typically get up between 5:30 and 6:00 am. I don't really like early mornings, but I don't have trouble getting up and I'm fairly productive in the morning. I'm much less productive late at night. I usually go to bed around 10:30 - 11:00.

Even though I work from home and I'm self-employed, I keep a pretty normal working schedule. I'm in my office by 7:00 am and I'm done at 5:00 pm, or shortly after. Sometimes I'll work a little in the evenings or weekends, but not nearly as much as I did before we had kids.

**How do you earn your living (industry, position, annual income, where you started and how you've climbed the ladder, etc)?**

My income comes from websites and blogs that I own and manage. I've used monetization methods like banner ads, affiliate marketing, sponsored content,

[selling digital products](#), and membership. I've also done some [freelance writing](#) for other blogs at times.

It's really hard to say what my annual income is because it varies so much. The biggest reason that it varies is because I've sold a number of websites over the years. Selling a site obviously creates a spike in my income for that year, but then I lose the ongoing monthly income generated through the site. That creates a lot of peaks and valleys.

I think I made around \$60,000 my first year of self-employment. The last 9 years have all been six figures.

Here is a quick breakdown of the websites I've sold:

- 2010 - I sold a web design blog for \$50,000
- 2013 - I sold a web design blog for \$500,000
- 2016 - I sold a photography blog for \$500,000
- 2017 - My wife and I sold an [Amazon FBA business](#) for \$225,000
- 2018 - I sold a photography blog for \$216,000

I've written an article that tells the story of my photography blogs: [How I Turned a Photography Hobby Into \\$1,138,610](#).

### **Do you have any side hustles? (how much do you make at those?)**

Not really. I think that focusing my time on my core business is the best use of my time, so if I have time to work, that's what I do.

But in a sense, I do have some side hustles. I usually have one main website that generates the bulk of my income, and then I have a couple of other small projects that I work on in my spare time. So instead of having a totally separate side hustle, I'll work on a new-ish website in my spare time and focus on my core website with the majority of my working hours.

Those side project websites might become a bigger priority to me if they start to grow nicely. Right now I have 4 websites that are kind of side projects that don't get much attention, but I do make a few hundred dollars per month (in total) from those sites.

The Amazon FBA business was a side hustle that my wife and I wanted to work

together on, but it wound up taking a lot more time than we planned, and we didn't really enjoy it, so we sold the business. Even though it was a part-time thing, it did pretty well. The only full year we ran the business it made over \$100,000 in profit.

### **What percentage of your after-tax income do you save?**

This question is also hard to answer because my income fluctuates so much. Even though my income is up and down, we try to live on a steady budget. When my income is good we don't go out and spend extra money.

Our expenses are around \$60,000 per year, and then we save whatever we can. When we've had lump sums from website sales we've saved the majority of it (although taxes account for a big chunk too)

### **When it comes to building wealth, do you spend more time figuring out how to cut expenses or increase income? Why?**

I think both are important, but increasing income has the bigger potential. There are a lot of ways to save money, and I'm always interested in finding new ways, but you can only cut so much. At some point you either run out of ways to cut money, or the amount of money that you're saving with those new methods is very small.

I've always been pretty good with managing money and spending less than I make, but my financial situation drastically improved once I started my own business and my income increased.

The key, of course, is to continue to manage your money wisely after you increase your income. If you just spend all of that extra income, you won't be in a better position.

### **What is your definition of Financial Freedom? Do you differentiate Financial Independence from Financial Freedom? If so, can you explain? And what is your FREEDOM number(\$)?**

I don't really differentiate financial freedom and financial independence. To me, financial freedom means not worrying about money and being free to do things like travel.

Of course, financial independence is often defined as having 25x your annual living expenses, but for me personally, that's not enough to give me a true feeling of

freedom. For me, 50x my annual expenses is a more accurate number, which would be \$3,000,000 based on our family's current expenses.

Regardless of what any formula or calculation says, I wouldn't feel like I've reached financial independence until I truly feel freedom over money. I'm not sure if that would happen for me at \$3,000,000, but I think it probably would.

### **What is the best financial decision you have ever made?**

My best financial decision was to start my own business. For the first 1.5 years it was just a side hustle, but then it turned into a full-time income. I'm sure we're in a better position today than we would have been if I hadn't started my own business, plus it has allowed me to work from home and do something that I enjoy.

### **RECREATION - What do you do for fun?**

#### **How many hours a week do you watch TV? Favorite show(s)?**

I probably watch about 10 hours of TV or movies per week. Almost 100% of that is in the evenings with my wife after our kids are in bed. We like to watch movies or shows on Netflix together as a way to wind down at the end of the day.

My all-time favorite show is Seinfeld, but it's been a long time since I've watched that. Some of the favorites shows that we've binge watched on Netflix are Breaking Bad, Psych, Burn Notice, and we just finished Dexter.

#### **What is your beverage of choice?**

Sweet tea. I don't drink that much of it because of the sugar, but if that weren't an issue I would drink it all the time. If we're talking about alcoholic beverages I would go with rum and Coke or Long Island Iced Tea.

#### **What movie - if any - have you seen more than once?**

I usually watch *My Cousin Vinny* about once a year.

#### **Do you like to travel? Describe your last vacation. Describe your dream vacation.**

I love to travel, but the past few years we haven't done all that much travel because

it's pretty challenging with young kids. Our kids are getting to the ages where they can handle it a little better, so hopefully we'll be doing more. Although, now my daughter is in kindergarten, so we'll have to travel around school schedules. We're starting to plan a trip to Disney World for next year.

The last vacation was about two months ago when my wife and I went away for 5 days for my birthday. We went to a place in the mountains in Pennsylvania. We hiked during the day and relaxed at night. There are a ton of waterfalls in the area and I love landscape photography, so that's a perfect vacation for me. It was great, except for when I accidentally took my phone into the hot tub.

About 7 years ago my wife and I planned a vacation which included my dream destination, which has always been Egypt. We booked a Mediterranean cruise that gave us 2 days in Egypt, plus time in Barcelona, Rome, Athens, Ephesus, and Malta. But we were on the ship when the worst of the riots broke out in Cairo, so our ship was re-routed to Istanbul. It was still a great trip, but Egypt definitely remains high on my list.

As I've gotten more interested in photography the past few years, I've also set a goal to visit all 59 national parks in the U.S.

**MORE - Tell us your secrets!**

**What about you do most people not know?**

People that know me personally (my "real life" friends) don't really know much about what I do for work. I've never showed friends or family, aside from my wife, any of my websites. I'm not exactly sure why, but I'm really private and I don't like the idea of people who know me reading my sites/blogs. One of my wife's friends is a photographer and she knew about one of my photography blogs, which I didn't enjoy.

Sometimes I write about personal stuff on my blog, like [paying off our mortgage](#). I don't really like the idea of people I know reading that stuff. Even the numbers that I mentioned in this interview, like the amount that I've sold websites for, none of my family and friends know that (aside from my wife). Some people know that I've sold sites but I don't mention the dollar amounts and no one has ever asked. I probably wouldn't tell them even if they did ask.

## **What was your biggest surprise, financially or otherwise?**

My biggest surprise was probably when my wife and I went in for the first ultrasound during her first pregnancy and there was no heartbeat. We weren't expecting to be told that she had a miscarriage.

It was a difficult experience for both of us, especially for my wife. There was some positive that came out of it, though. I really hadn't wanted to be a father and I was not at all excited about it. When the miscarriage happened I felt terrible and realized what I had lost. It motivated me to be a better father and helped to change my attitude.

## **Who and/or what has influenced you most in life, positively or negatively?**

Aside from my parents, the person in my life who had the biggest influence was my high school basketball coach. He was really tough and demanded a lot of us. He was probably the only person in my life that ever truly pushed me to be better. I was never a great basketball player, but I learned a lot of valuable lessons about hard work, discipline, accountability, handling criticism, teamwork, winning and losing, and how to go after something that you want.

## **What does "living life by design" look like to you, in terms of a typical day, week, month, year...? What, if anything, is holding you back from living life by design?**

My daily life right now is fairly close to what I would design, except I would be making more money and working slightly fewer hours. I enjoy what I do, and if I had financial freedom right now I think I would continue to work on my own websites and blogs, but I would cut back a little. I wouldn't start as early in the morning and I'd take more days off.

I'd also like to travel more. One of the nice things about what I do is that I can work from anywhere. My wife and I took advantage of that more before we had kids, but hopefully that will change at some point.

The biggest thing that's holding me back is that I haven't reached my financial goals yet.

## **PARTING ADVICE & WHERE WE CAN FIND YOU**

## **What advice would you give to a reader who is 25-35? How about 45-55?**

I think my advice would be the same, regardless of the age group. The advice would be to find something that you enjoy doing, whether that's working in a typical job or starting your own business. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do, but once I did, my work has been a lot more fun, and my financial situation has drastically improved.

I didn't jump into a business full-time right away. I started with a side hustle and the hope of doing it full-time, and it worked out. Even if it never turns into something more than a side hustle, being able to make money while you work on something that you enjoy is pretty awesome. Regardless of your interests, there are probably some ways to make money doing what you enjoy.

The other part of my advice is to manage your money well, and save and invest as much as you can. You're never too young to start saving, and the younger years are the best time to save because your money has more time to grow. For those in the 45-55 range, saving and investing is important too.

## **What is your favorite online financial resource, paid or free (i.e., Personal Capital, YNAB, Robinhood, etc.)? How about offline resources?**

I really like Personal Capital. I love being able to login and see all of my accounts in one place. The net worth tracking is really powerful and has helped me to get a bigger picture view of my finances. Tracking net worth has also helped me to make better financial decisions, because I think about how my decisions will impact my net worth. After using Personal Capital for a while, I actually wrote an article [9 Convincing Reasons Why You Should Be Tracking Your Net Worth](#).

As far as offline resources, I like using simple spreadsheets.

## **What are the top five personal finance blogs (or podcasts) you read regularly? Why those in particular?**

I read/scan a lot of different blogs. I try to stay on top of things and I also like to get to know other bloggers, so I follow a ton of blogs. A few of my favorites are [Wallet Hacks](#) and [Budgets Are Sexy](#). Wallet Hacks has a lot of great content and I like following Jim because he's a very successful entrepreneur. At Budgets Are Sexy, J. Money takes a much more personal approach to blogging and I like that his site is

one-of-a-kind.

I also like following other bloggers that I'm getting to know and connecting with personally. There are several, but a few examples are Scott from [Making Momentum](#), Todd from [Invested Wallet](#), and Andrea from [Saving Joyfully](#).

I also listen to a lot of different podcasts. There are a lot of good ones, but two that I've come across recently that I enjoy are [Inspire Your Success](#) and [House of FI](#).

**Where can we find you online? If you're a blogger, this is the perfect place to plug to your blog and tell us why it's great ????**

You can find me at [VitalDollar.com](#). I publish articles on [ways to save money](#) and [ways to make money](#). I write about some of the things that I've learned in my 10 years of running an online business, and I'll probably be publishing more content about how to grow successful blogs.

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## Gen Y Finance Guy

**Hey, I'm Dom** - the man behind the cartoon. You'll notice that I sign off as "Gen Y Finance Guy" on all my posts, due to the fact that I write this blog anonymously (at least for now). I like to think of myself as the *Chief Freedom Officer* here of my little corner of the internet. In the real world, I'm a 30-something former C-Suite executive turned entrepreneur turned capital allocator. I am trying to humanize finance by sharing my own journey to Financial Freedom. I believe in total *honesty* and *transparency*. That is why before I ever started blogging, I decided that I would share all of my own [financial stats](#). I do this not to brag, but instead to inspire, motivate, and also to hold myself accountable. My goal is to be a beacon of hope, motivation, and inspiration for *you*, the reader, by living life by example and sharing it **all** here on the blog. My sincere hope is that you will be able to learn from me - both from my successes and my failures! [Read More](#)