MOREHEAD, Ky. — It was supposed to be one of the biggest political showdowns in Kentucky this fall: Kim Davis, the clerk of Rowan County, running against David Ermold, the gay man she denied a marriage license to three years ago. That moment, caught on camera, set off a red-hot culture war over the summer of 2015 in this quiet corner of Appalachia.

Since Mr. Ermold announced he was running for county clerk in December, he raised more than $200,000 from around the country and drew supporters far and wide. This was a campaign, he said in an interview before the primary, for a “happy ending” to the whole, loud episode, for “redemption and how our county will be remembered.”

But when the votes were counted on Tuesday night in the Democratic primary, the opportunity to face Ms. Davis, the Republican incumbent, in the November general election fell to someone else all together: Elwood Caudill Jr., chief deputy in the county property valuation office.

“Just like I told you,” said Walter Blevins, the 68-year-old Democratic judge-executive of Rowan County. He was sitting back, between karaoke numbers, at the usual place he sings on Tuesday nights, sipping on his standard tequila with a splash of cranberry juice. “It’s a local race. People know each other.”
Mr. Caudill is a familiar figure, having run for county clerk in 2014 and come within 23 ballots of beating Ms. Davis, then a Democrat, for the party nomination. She went on easily to win the general election, as Democrats nearly always do for local office here. This time, Mr. Caudill won with 1,923 votes, in a field of four. Mr. Ermold, with 873 votes, was the runner-up.

Perhaps Mr. Caudill’s biggest appeal was that he only wants to talk about being county clerk. In a conversation about his ambitions for the office, he highlighted the need for a new fire alarm system so the sprinklers won’t damage any of the deeds in storage.

Everyone in Rowan County is tired of hearing about Rowan County. When the news of Ms. Davis’s defiance got out that summer, international media descended, presidential candidates elbowed into the spotlight and demonstrators from all over crammed into the county government building — “Real radical people,” Mr. Blevins said of some of them, “loudspeakers and bullhorns, all fire and brimstone.” Ms. Davis went to jail for five days and came out a hero of the religious right, changing parties not long after.
To people who lived through them, those long summer months were exhausting, aggravating and humiliating. Morehead, the county seat, is a quiet college town, with a City Council that in 2013 unanimously extended anti-discrimination protections to gay, lesbian and transgender people. But nobody outside the county ever seems to ask about this, or about the Kentucky Folk Art Center, or the lab at Morehead State where they build spacecraft. No, whenever county residents travel, they hear only about the clerk’s office and the marriage licenses. People are not particularly fond of talking about it anymore, and certainly not to reporters who come around asking.

“Maybe it had to happen somewhere in the U.S., but I don’t think any place would have raised their hand and said, ‘Let it be here,’” said Jeff Fannin, a local pastor and the operator of The Good Shepherd’s Printing Services. “The majority of the people I think were just embarrassed by how it escalated.”

Politics used to be pretty predictable. The same families showed up in election after election — Ms. Davis succeeded her mother, who was clerk for 37 years. Caudill is as common a last name around the county as Smith or Jones. Then came “the whole deal that went on,” as some call the events of 2015.
The county clerk's office is essential: running elections, recording deeds, handling titles and issuing licenses for hunting, fishing and, of course, marriages. It is the front line of the government, the arbiter of what is officially recognized as legitimate, and what is not.

Thus Mr. Ermold was maddened to hear his competitors, Mr. Caudill in particular, complain of the inconveniences of the summer of 2015, as he spent most of his life officially marginalized and in many ways left at risk.

“I not only understand but I’ve been dealing with it for the past 44 years,” he said.

Still, it is a county office, one of 120 in Kentucky, and its commission is carrying out the routine details of bureaucracy, not setting a big social agenda. Mr. Ermold acknowledged that he had to combine his campaign message of redemption and social progress with an assurance that he could efficiently manage car tags and fishing licenses. “I kind of didn’t focus on that at first because I just took it for granted that I have the experience to do it,” he said.

Ms. Davis, who was unopposed on Primary Day, has a similarly two-pronged message. In an interview on Tuesday she insisted that she never sought the attention that came that summer, that she in fact hates conflict. She was not sure if she would run again this year but felt called to do so, and she wants to focus her campaign on her experience running the office.

Ms. Davis drew more attention than the town wanted for her stand in 2015 against gay marriage.}

Andrew Spear for The New York Times
Still, since the summer of 2015, she has appeared in statewide Republican campaign ads, met the pope, campaigned against same-sex marriage in Romania, attended a State of the Union address and recently published a book: “Under God’s Authority: The Kim Davis Story.” In the past few months, Ms. Davis has carried in her purse “five smooth stones from the valley of Elah” — the weapons David used to slay Goliath. She saw herself as David and had considered her potential opponent, Mr. Ermold, as Goliath. It is unclear how Mr. Caudill now fits into the analogy.

Mr. Caudill does not think Ms. Davis should have done what she did. He was not objecting to her beliefs, he said, but “you are elected to do a job.” She did not do the job. This prosaic approach is why many of his supporters believe he stands a better chance of beating Ms. Davis in a general election than Mr. Ermold did.

But it is also what left many fired-up local supporters of Mr. Ermold in a dour mood on Tuesday night, with one taking to Facebook to say he couldn't wait to leave a town he called “bigoted.”

Some of the people at Pasquale’s restaurant, where Democrats had gathered to watch the returns on Tuesday night, insisted it was nothing like that. A 2016 law had removed the clerk’s names from marriage license forms, rendering the actual conflict moot. Running for the clerk’s office to make a statement about social change, some suggested — well, that was the whole issue with Kim Davis in the first place.

“Now,” said Traci Stevens, 24, who works at the local Cracker Barrel, “it’s just who’s going to do the job better.”