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Bernadette Barton

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Bernadette Barton Interview

Interviewer: This is a conversation with Bernadette Barton for the Kentucky Marriage Equality and Religious Liberty Oral History Project. We are in studio A of Breckenridge Hall on Morehead State's campus located in Rowan County, Kentucky. It is 1:16 on February 14th, 2017. My name is Ricky Nelson.

Okay, so thank you so much for doing this.

Response: My pleasure.

I: I love doing these interviews. Okay. So, I'm just gonna start out by asking you where you were born and where you grew up.

R: I was born in Silver Spring, Maryland, but I didn't live there very long. My parents moved around a lot, so I, but I spent the years from when I was 9 to 17 in Massachusetts. Framingham, Massachusetts.

I: Okay. When did you come to Morehead?

R: I started teaching at Morehead in 2000.

I: Wow. Okay. If any, what was your religious upbringing? What were you raised to believe?

R: I was raised, I had two very strong, spiritual upbringings that happened simultaneously. I was raised Catholic from a young age, and all the way til I graduated from high school I went through all the Confirmation, Communion, etc., Confession. And then my father practiced an Eastern spiritual path that involved being initiated by a living teacher and meditating for two and a half hours a day and being a vegetarian and not taking any intoxicating substances. So, those were very different religious, spiritual paths that I experienced.

I: Okay. Did you attend, what church did you attend?

R: I attended Catholic churches in my childhood. And now I do not practice an organized religion, but I'm very interested in metaphysical thought and consider myself a spiritual seeker. And I'm interested in Wicca.

I: That's great. I don't know if I'm allowed to commentate. Okay. And what is your current occupation?

R: I'm a professor of sociology and gender studies here at Morehead State University.

I: Okay. Now we're gonna move on into the marriage equality questions, if that's okay. So, how did you first react to the U.S Supreme Court's decision on marriage equality?

R: Well, I was thrilled. So, I'm in a same-sex relationship and I've been with my partner since 1998. So, we're working on 19 years this year. And we first had a civil union in 2002 in Vermont

when it was possible, and then we got married in 2013, again in Vermont, because we were concerned that if we got married in a different state it wouldn't be recognized. That there would be some confusion between having a civil union in one state and a marriage in another state. So, we went back to Vermont. So, in 2015, when the Supreme Court decision came down, we were just ecstatic. And honestly, I was a little surprised. I'm a researcher who does work on being gay in the Bible belt, so, I didn't really expect it to happen quite so soon but was really happy when it did.

I: What was your reaction to the Rowan County clerk's decision to not issue marriage licenses to either straight or gay couples after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision?

R: Can I add a little bit more to my last question before I go on? Okay. So, in Lexington, where I live with my wife, weirdly, the very next day after the marriage equality decision came down, was the Lexington Pride event. Don't know if you heard anything about that. So, everyone was celebrating. So, downtown was just packed. It was just like we had so much to celebrate. And I remember, I carried, this might be fun for a historian, there are little things called Angel Cards, which are sort of like a silly, fun thing. Each little card has a message on it, like grace, kindness, abundance, positivity, and I walked around all day and I had people pick out a card as a memory of the day and the decision that they could then keep.

I: That's really cool.

R: It was like a little Wiccan thing actually. Like a little, like, you know, it was just fun for me to share those with people. I know it's, like, a silly thing. It was probably more important to me than to anyone else, but I enjoyed having, like, trying to mark the day, because it was such a special day and I wanted to be connecting with other people about that.

I: Yeah. So, then you heard that...

R: Oh, the Kim Davis stuff.

I: Kim Davis wasn't issuing marriage licenses, so, how did you react to that and how did you feel about that?

R: I was surprised and not surprised. At first I kind of, at first I just sort of glossed it over, like ugh. No big deal. It'll go away. And then I was also surprised that I was happening in Morehead because this is where, you know, we are a small town in Kentucky but we're among the more progressive small towns in Kentucky, what with the university being right here. So, I was surprised. And then I was surprised by other people's reactions, that it got so much media attention. So, all that was not anything like we've ever seen before in our sleepy little town, really. Yeah.

I: Okay. How did you hear, how did you first hear about Kim Davis' decision not to issue marriage licenses?

R: Hmm. Probably on a Facebook feed. Probably somebody posted something about it on Facebook, because it happened pretty quickly, right? It happened like, the next day. And she was one of three clerks who refused in the state. Is that right?

I: Yeah.

R: Yes, I heard about it on Facebook.

I: Okay. Did you maybe, were you confused by her decision or did you understand a little bit of where she was coming from because there were a lot of people who told her like, “just because you believe in this doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t do your job”? So, do you agree or disagree with those people who say “yes, she should’ve done her job, but also I understand why she says that she didn’t”?

R: Well, I understand why she said that she didn’t but I don’t think it’s a really good reason, because it’s not like she was being tortured for not doing her job. She could just resign from her job. It seems like there was, like, a false dichotomy that was put there.

I: Now let’s talk about the protests that happened at the courthouse. Do you know, were you directly involved with any of the protests?

R: I was.

I: Okay, will you talk about that for a little bit? Like, your experience and what you did and what you saw and how you felt? Just the whole environment.

R: Sure. Let me preface my comment with, I wrote a book called Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays and in it, I researched and spoke with hundreds of gay men and lesbians from the Bible Belt. Interviewed 59, formally, and collected their stories of family rejection and religious oppression. So, to do that, I really had to insert myself into the mindframe of conservative Christians, which was foreign for me as you might know, because Catholicism and Indian spiritual paths are not like conservative Christians, so it took me a while to sort of figure that out. So, I had recently published that book, and that book was kind of explored and explained a lot of what was happening in terms of, like, the clash between gay people and conservative Christians and their ideology. So, when I went to the protest, I was, you know, going partially as a researcher as well as an individual.

So, when I got there I knew a lot of people. Like, I just know a lot of people in the gay community so, I know a lot of the protestors. I didn’t know the counter-protestors. So, I thought that there was just a really wonderful energy that they had and that they were very engaged and energetic. There was a lot of people coming together to create change, and that was really positive. And they were very civil, also, with the counter-protestors, so that was an interesting dynamic.

I: After your experience with the marriage equality protest and movement, did you become involved in any groups that support that and promote it?

R: I'm involved in probably all the groups at least a little bit. So, Rowan County Rights Coalition emerged out of that and then they splintered, and then there was also Morehead Pride that came out of that. And the group on campus, Alliance, which is now Spectrum, was also involved. So, of those groups, I'm affiliated with all of those groups.

I: Okay. We're going back to Kim Davis. Lots of Kim Davis questions.

R: Sure.

I: So, do you think that she best represented the cause of religious liberty? Do you think that she did that well?

R: No. No.

I: Could you explain a little bit more?

R: Yes. Well, religious freedom is the freedom, in my mind, is the freedom to explore one's own spiritual ideas and beliefs, unencumbered by other people's perspectives. That's a separate thing from what is expected of you in the workplace. So, I teach a course on religion and sexuality and we have a rule in the class. One of the only rules is that we, nobody gets to control what anyone else believes. Everyone gets to believe what they want. And if people believe things that are negative about other people, they just don't talk about that. Like, that's like, we don't talk about that. So, you don't get to push your belief on somebody else. You can even think that everybody else is wrong, if you want, because nobody gets to control your beliefs. But you don't get to tell other people that they're wrong because that's infringing on their beliefs. So, we, like, seek a personal alignment and center and we support lots of different faith expressions. And that, to me, is religious freedom, because it doesn't restrict the rights of anybody else to believe whatever they believe. So, her actions was about, to me, was about her imposing her beliefs on other people by refusing to do her work, to do her job.

I: So, then, what did you think whenever...actually, let me backtrack and ask what do you think should have been done to handle the situation? Because Kim Davis was refusing marriage licenses and so then there were the protests and the media just invading her workplace, basically. So, do you think there was anything that could've been done differently that perhaps would have been maybe more civil, in a way?

R: It was pretty civil. I'm not sure what could've been done differently because it wasn't within the power of the state to fire her from her job because she was elected by the people. So, I think it all played out, probably, the best way it could. I would've liked to have seen her go have a change of heart and not adhere to a religious structure that discriminates against a group of people. And I did not like the fact that she changed her political orientation from Democrat to Republican. That seemed to me just very hypocritical. And I felt like she was bought out by some big Republican religious groups and manipulated.

I: How did you react when you heard that she had been arrested for refusing to give out marriage licenses?

R: I thought that was unfortunate. I wasn't happy. I didn't feel celebratory. I thought, in fact, that she would become a martyr for conservative Christians and that that would be bad for gay people. So, I wished it hadn't happened that way.

I: Wow. So, that's a different, I've never got that answer before. Wow. So, what were your thoughts upon her release then? Just five days after she was arrested.

R: I was glad that she was out because I didn't think it was doing anybody any good having her be in jail. And so, in fact I wish they had come to the solution of having her clerk sign the forms earlier and skipped the whole jail thing.

I: Yeah. Well, how did you react when, did you watch her release? Whenever they had, they played "Eye of the Tiger," she got up on stage...

R: I did.

I: What was your reaction to that? Because I know a lot of people thought it was just for show. Just a publicity thing.

R: Yeah. I think that that was staged by conservative religious groups. And wasn't Mike Huckabee, I believe Mike Huckabee was there, a presidential nominee at the time. So, I thought that was really about his campaign. I didn't really fault her though. I didn't feel like she had much to do with that. I feel like she just walked into it. Like, I don't feel like she created all that media hubbub. Kind of like she was a pawn.

I: Could you talk about that a little bit more? Because that's an interesting perspective to have on it. Because I get the sense that you don't, like, you don't feel any hate or anything towards Kim Davis.

R: No, no animosity at all.

I: So, could you talk about how you feel, like, she was just trying to do what she thought was right and then was invaded and used by the media basically.

R: Not even the media but actual like, Republican, conservative, religious think tanks that funnel money to certain kinds of ways that will promote a radical right agenda. I think she was a tool of the radical right.

I: This is always a fun question. What are your thoughts on the reactions of the local elected officials?

R: Well, I don't live in Morehead. I live in Lexington. So, I didn't have a front row seat to that in the same way. They were, I'm not sure what their reactions was, actually, because I wasn't really paying as much attention to that. Can you refresh how they reacted for me? And I am feeling so parched. I wonder if we have any water anywhere.

I: I can fix trays and –

R: That would be great. I'm feeling like my throat's kinda dry.

I: We can pause for a moment. I'll fetch trays.

Well, while we wait on trays, do you mind if –

R: No, no, keep going. So, the elected officials, were they supportive of Kim Davis, largely? Because I'm thinking that's what it was.

I: Yeah. They were really supportive of her.

R: Although not President Andrews.

I: Yeah. He, I don't really remember his take on it. We interviewed him on, I do a show here on MSU TV called What's Up and we interviewed him about it.

R: Did he stay neutral? Maybe he just tried to stay, like, not say anything.

I: I'm pretty sure he stayed neutral on it. But all the other elected officials seemed to –

R: Support Davis.

I: Yeah.

R: That's disappointing. It shows not, it shows just the lack of support the gay community has, which completely, you know, is in alignment with my findings and my book. So, I was not surprised. I am not surprised.

I: Now, before we move on, since you live in Lexington, you talked about the celebration that you guys had when you found out that marriage equality was going to be legal. Can you go into a little bit more detail about that? Because I find that really interesting, that Lexington as a whole celebrated it.

R: Well, Lexington had a Pride festival scheduled for that day anyway, so it had already been in the works. So, these were mostly gay people, but some allies coming out to the pride festival. What also happened right after the decision was this beautiful, beautiful interfaith ceremony that was organized by local clergy. In particular, a Marsha Charles Moore was one of the folks involved. And at this, ten or twelve religious leaders of all different denominations, including Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, Orthodox something, the Spiritual Center Ahava, a Jewish Rabbi, all came together and there was a service followed by benediction. So, anyone who wanted to could walk up and be blessed by everybody. So, it was like, you know how you speed date? You go from person to person, like speed blessed. We went from person to person. So, Ann and I, my wife, walked up, and we went from person to person, each religious leader, and got a special blessing. It was just the most moving thing. I mean, I was tearful but people

were crying and crying. To have just sort of this acceptance was such a beautiful experience and to have it in a religious context was particularly moving when gay people experience so much rejection religiously in the Bible belt.

I: Okay. Going off that positivity, actually I better backtrack. Gotta keep track of my questions here. No, you know what, I'll backtrack later, because this is good. So, let's move on to talking about were you here when Westboro visited?

R: Yes. Yes.

I: What were your thoughts about that? How did you first hear that Westboro had intentions of coming to campus?

R: I'm trying to remember how I first heard. I don't know if it was, it might have been from, the president sent out a email announcement. I don't know if I heard about it before then or not. But, again, that semester I was teaching a course on religion and sexuality. So, once we learned that Westboro Baptist Church was going to come, I spent quite a bit of time in the classroom talking about it. We watch a documentary on the Westboro Baptist Church because I wanted the students to know who these people were, who they were, what their theology was, what their, how they operated. So, we spent a lot of time discussing it. Then, I made a mistake and I thought they were gonna be there on a day they weren't there, so I ended up coming to campus and mixed that up. Then the next week I came and it turned out that they were not at the free speech area but at, like, some little corner of the campus.

I: Yes, they were put in front of Laughlin, is where they were. And I spoke to Chief Harrison about that and he said that him and the other police officers made the decision to have them there because they didn't want to distract the students who were going to and from class. They didn't want anyone to feel endangered, basically, pretty much, because everybody knows Westboro's reputation. And it, he said it was just a safety precaution because he didn't know how many people were gonna be there. They initially thought it was going to be a much larger group, which is how come they didn't want them in the free speech area, because if they were going to have that many people with that kind of reputation out there they didn't want, they were just thinking, they wanted the students to be safer and they wanted to students to go about their day and worry about their classes. So, that's why he said he moved them to in front of Laughlin. And then it ended up being four or five of them.

R: Which is actually always the way they do it. It's usually only four or five. So, they didn't, we needed probably a little bit more information about them. That was interesting. So, I had to find them and there was a small crowd of students, faculty, staff that were there, and media folks. And then somebody, I guess the main preacher at Kim Davis' church was there. I forget his name. like Randy something? And he was, like, all about making a statement about how he didn't support them. That really got on my last nerve (laughs) because it was like, I just read a book. I reviewed a book, a scholarly book on the Westboro Baptist Church recently. And one of the author's findings was that everyone will distance themselves from the Westboro Baptist Church because their theology is so intense, so extreme. But, by comparison, everyone else also looks more moderate. So, in some ways, the Westboro Baptist Church, you know, legitimizes

anti-gay sentiments expressed by more moderate congregations because everyone distanced themselves from the WBC. Do you follow that?

I: Yeah.

R: So, I felt like that was happening. He was trying to position himself as not as extreme, even while he's homophobic. And adheres to a religious ideology that's homophobic. Spiritually-based homophobia, which is, perhaps, the most poisonous and perverse kind. To claim that you're ordained by God to discriminate against this group of people.

I: Now, the students, in response, there weren't very many students down there.

R: No, they didn't know where it was.

I: Yeah.

R: And a lot of them were frustrated that they missed it.

I: Yeah, yeah, a lot of them were frustrated at that. I know that the students that were down there were very civil. They weren't trying to antagonize Westboro. But they also, that day, organized a much more loving event on campus -

R: Right, that was wonderful.

I: - where they just took donations and handed out buttons and gave out shirts for much more love. So, could you talk about your reaction to, maybe being a professor here and knowing so many students here, how that made you feel, that the students decided to take it upon themselves to organize an event about love as a way to kinda protest Westboro being here?

R: I thought it was a beautiful choice and it was well organized. And, I think, I'm not sure it was student-driven. I think it might have been organized by Jasmine Whitlow, who was the multicultural director at the time and also in charge of Alliance. Certainly, the students participated, but I think it was her idea. But not 100% sure. But, so anyway, I went to the Westboro Baptist Church thing and then walked, with the media, with a reporter. And sort of talked with her all the way back and walked her to the Much More event and got a t shirt and a button, gave money, supported the students. And that was a really positive experience.

I will talk a little bit more about the students, though. They didn't know where to find Westboro Baptist Church and they were confused. And meanwhile, they had gotten a message or two or three from the president like, warning them about it and advising them to stay away and not engage. So, people's emotions were kind of ramped up. Well, later, a couple of weeks later, a month later? I can't remember exactly. Another one of those, like, preacher folks came to campus with a couple of people. You know how they sort of regularly come here. And the response from the students was just outrageous. It was, like, a huge group of students, like 50 to a hundred, surrounding these three people, kind of yelling at them. And I felt like that reaction was delayed. Like, they had wanted to do something like that with the Westboro Baptist Church but hadn't had the opportunity. And so that was sort of releasing that, cathartically, later.

I: I remember that.

R: You do remember that?

I: Yeah, yeah, I remember exactly...

R: When the other group came?

I: Yeah, I remember when the other group came because I walked past it.

R: And it was this big, huge...

I: Yeah, I was so shocked at how many people were there, because they had never been –

R: Usually, the students, maybe ten or twenty hang out...

I: This was such a big group of people. I was like, uh oh. Okay. I was shocked. I try never to get involved with, because that's what they want, I feel like. They want that reaction from us.

R: Right.

I: They want to get us fired up. So, that was crazy. Trace is somewhere, with water. I hope. He just texted me, so.

R: Oh, good.

I: He looked at his phone finally. Sorry Trace. He's the one that edits these together. So, okay. Let's go back to, because you were talking about the media and walking around with a reporter the day that Westboro was here. In your eyes and in your opinion, do you think the media attention to Kim Davis, to this entire event, was appropriate?

R: Well, I mean is it up to me to say what's appropriate? I think that the media fixated on her, that she was like a trend, a flash. She physically embodied and religiously embodied a stereotype that I think drew a lot of media attention. What was it? She's an Apostolic. She practices an Apostolic religion that's, I believe, charismatic, right? And she's, they don't cut their hair and they always wear skirts. Okay, so, I think all of that was sort of easy for the media to fixate on as sort of freakish, you know? And that's not fair to her. She gets to pick what she looks like, and I didn't appreciate any of the snarky memes floating around, making fun of the way she looked, at all. But I think that visual, that exotic visual look, was very arresting to media folks from New York and California. Just is not in their normal, day to day life. So, that drew their attention. And then the ideology, the religious ideology was also extreme, in that, you know, she was basically choosing to discriminate against a group of people in the name of religion. So, I think that whole package together was really attractive to the media. I think the media, it's easy for the media also to put down Kentucky as a place of backward hillbillies.

I: What are your opinions on the outcomes of the marriage equality movement? Do you think it was, there was a victory, a failure, you think that the marriage equality movement succeeded in doing what they wanted to do?

R: Yes. I feel like the marriage equality decision was a huge victory. And I'm excited that it's in place. I'm a little apprehensive that it will somehow get rolled back under the current administration.

I: I know that you say you live in Lexington, but when you're here, when you're teaching, since the Kim Davis things have happened...there he is!

R: Thanks so much. Sorry I didn't bring my own water. I didn't realize this was such an involved thing.

I: Thank you, sir. You have class at 2? Okay. Well, I've only got a few more questions. Nope. Okay. Where do you have class at? Okay. I'll text you. Thanks Trace. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I do only have a few more questions.

R: Sure.

I: This is going great. What was I say? You live in Lexington, but from the few times, like when you're here teaching and when you were teaching here after these events, do you think that the community was changed because of the events? Do you feel that Rowan County either was, got closer together or even further apart because of the events that happened?

R: I think the town is not used to this kind of attention. You're probably better off asking people who live in Morehead about their day to day experiences. For me, it solidified my relationships with people. But I mostly interact with progressives on campus and not so much with the people in the town. However, I would say, considering the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, that people are more polarized now, and I think they were probably more polarized then. I guess I would hypothesize it had a polarizing effect. That was evidenced in the 2016 election outcome. Because I think that progressives and conservatives feel even further apart in the way they perceive things. And they're having not an easy time finding common ground.

I: Okay. Do you believe that the debate over religious liberty or marriage equality is over?

R: No. (laughs) Definitely not. There's all these bills that are getting filed in the name of religious liberty that's all about protecting people who want to discriminate against, you know, minority group members. And that's just, well that's continuing, it's not just getting started. But it is continuing and amping up. I'm hoping that people resist, these laws won't get enacted, that a new administration will come in and things will change. That people will realize that discriminating in the name of God is not a good idea. But I definitely do not have my pulse on the political ideas, because I thought that Donald Trump would lose every state, that surely no women would vote for him. And no people of color would vote for him. And no gay people would vote for him. Only angry white men would vote for him. And I was clearly really wrong. So, I am, and marriage equality, I actually feel a little bit more confident about marriage equality

as staying, because I think it's gonna be kind of hard to undo that. But, it can be eroded with these religious bills.

I: Okay. Now, you said you wrote a book.

R: I did.

I: So, what ongoing work, if any, are you going to continue to do?

R: Oh, good. Weirdly, I have a, here's my book. Here's my book cover. It was published in 2012 through New York University Press. I'm actually just starting a new project on this, as I said earlier, with a colleague from the University of Cincinnati. We're gonna be looking at mobilization around marriage equality from a social movements perspective, here in Rowan County. And we'll start interviewing folks, kinda like what you're doing but, in fact, if you've already done these interviews we might mostly use your secondary data to explore these things. We're gonna be looking at how activists handle defeat and victory.

I: How has the experience, the protests and the marriage equality movement, how has it changed you, if it has at all?

R: Well, the marriage equality decision has improved my life. I was already in a long-term relationship, in which I considered myself married. So, I didn't actually think I'd feel that different being legally married, but in fact, I do feel a little bit different being legally married and part of it is, it feels good to talk about my wife and use the language of "my wife." I think that the institutional legitimation, it's not like I feel more solid in my marriage, but I think that other people perceive it as more of a real thing, and that is a positive experience for me.

I: Okay. And last but not least, are there any other comments or thoughts that you would like to add to the interview? Just about anything involving marriage equality, religious liberty, anything at all.

R: I hope, if anybody looks at this, years down the road, that we've come into a place where we are a more loving, accepting society. I hope that this is the last gasp of oppression we're seeing, in this 2016 election outcome, and that things are much better and that these bigoted religious ideas have disappeared.

I: Okay. Well that's all the questions.

R: Okay.