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Rowan County Marriage Equality & Religious
Liberty Project

Fall 2015

Carmen Wampler-Collins

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Carmen Wampler-Collins

Interviewer: This is a conversation with Carmen Wampler-Collins for the Kentucky Marriage Equality and Religious Liberty Oral History Project. We are in the studio room of Breckenridge Hall on Morehead State's campus located in Rowan County, Kentucky. It is 2 o'clock on June 14, 2016. My name is Dakota Barr.

First of all, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to agree to meet with me.

Response: Sure. Happy to be here.

I: I'd like to start with some biographical information such as where you were born and where you grew up.

R: Well, I was actually born in Plymouth, Indiana, but I only lived there a short time. My parents are both from Morehead and so by the time I was one we had moved back and I grew up in Morehead.

I: If you could just briefly touch on your childhood.

R: Sure. Like I said, I grew up primarily in Morehead. We left Morehead and Rowan County and lived in Elliot County for about three or four years from the time I was 6 to 10. I did like first through fourth grade in Elliot County. You know, I come from a relatively big family on both sides. My dad is one of nine, my mom is one of six kids so I had a big extended family, cousins, aunts, and uncles, you know, and that was our basic social group growing up. My summers were spent with my cousins at each other's houses, you know, that kinda thing.

I: So, would you consider Morehead to be your home?

R: Yeah, it's my hometown for sure.

I: What about your religious upbringing or ideological background?

R: Interestingly, my parents were sorta the black sheeps in their family. They both came from traditional Baptist background. Both of my parents' mothers went to church regularly and were pretty devout Christians. When I was a kid, we actually didn't go to church and my parents were very liberal. They, my dad would've said he was a humanist, I think, and we were taught about the Bible and stories from the Bible but always in the guise of this is what some people believe. So, it was more, you know, it wasn't presented as truth. You know, we were allowed to go to church with our grandparents but my parents didn't really believe in God and Jesus, so they sorta left it to us to determine what we believed in and what our faith would be. They were pretty liberal for the area, definitely very, very liberal for coming from their families and their upbringing. I'm not sure what caused that or (laughs) why that happened but that's the way it was. I actually remember feeling one of the things that made me different as a kid was that we didn't go to church. You know, I really really wish we had when I was young, because that's, outside of family, that's where social groups in this area sorta of had their base, was in church activities or Sunday school and we didn't do any of that. (laughs) So, but I was always very

spiritual as a kid. I liked going to church but I never took any of it as gospel, so to speak. My cousins would tell me “if you say the word, this and this word, if you say you don’t believe in God you’re going to hell,” so I would say it like, to prove that the ground wasn’t gonna crack open. You know, it was a very, a sorta literal thing. Yeah, we were different in that way, but like I said, I liked going to church and you know, I never was a hardcore believer but had, I guess I went through different periods of faith, what I believed in. Sometimes that was a more traditional belief like my grandmother and you know, it sorta expanded to be a little more open as I got older.

The interesting thing was, my dad, when I was older, he had some, he had a fall, and he had some physical problems that caused him to go back to the church and he ended up becoming a lay minister in one of the conservative Baptist churches in town. And while his beliefs were much more liberal, he felt like he was needed in that community that was lower-income and that had a pretty strong, you know, radical conservative belief. It was interesting to sorta see him go through that process over time.

I: Are you currently a member of a church?

R: No.

I: What do you do for a living?

R: I am a grant writer and fundraising consultant. I do consulting work for nonprofits.

I: I’d like to ask you how you first became involved in the marriage equality movement.

R: Sure. That’s a, I have to think about that a little bit. I think, you know, for years, Shannon and I had been involved in different parts of the movement. Before it became specifically about marriage equality, we lived in, she’s from Northampton, Massachusetts. We lived there when some of the first fairness ordinances were being passed and laws of that sort, nondiscrimination laws were being passed and worked in that area on those sorts of efforts. And even in the progressive area where we were, (pause) it was heartbreaking at that time when we went through, you know, Northampton was a very very progressive town. The mayor was a lesbian. And the first fairness ordinance there was defeated. I mean it was heartbreaking (laughs) you know, heart-crushing. And then we were involved a little bit in, we moved to Asheville, North Carolina for a just a short while, very short while, and were involved there a little bit with some of the LGBTQ groups working on different legislation. And then, when we moved to Morehead, I mean there wasn’t anything locally. We lived here for a few years when we first came back to Kentucky but we were involved with the Lexington group. We participated in a lot of events when the constitutional amendment making marriage between one man and one woman was passed. You know, we fought against that so. I mean in some ways, you know, on and off, we’ve been involved for a long time I guess. Not as hardcore as some people. I mean, it wasn’t, I don’t think it took up as much space in our lives until things happened in Rowan County. But we’ve always been, we were part of a same-sex parenting group in Lexington, so we’ve always, it’s, you know, sort of been involved.

I: Would you consider yourself an activist on that matter?

R: Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

I: How did you first react when you heard the Supreme Court's decision that marriage equality was the law of the land?

R: (laughs) It was really overwhelming. I mean, it was, immediately I was just stunned, you know. I think coming to that point, knowing it was gonna happen was still unbelievable. Shannon and I, my partner, would have these conversations, and I'd say to her, "I think, you know, this year by the summer. I think it's really gonna be legal," and she would say "I don't think so. I can't see it really happening that we're that close," and she was like "and even if it happens, it's not gonna happen here in Kentucky." And so, I think I was just numb, a first, when it actually happened. You know, and then seeing that, the governor of Kentucky issued a statement saying that marriage licenses were to be issued that day, I mean, that people were getting married the same day that it became legal was astounding. I mean, and then I just, I mean, you know for the first 30 minutes I was just sort of numb and then here, (laughs) I was just crying, and then, you know, it was on the phone and on social media with different friends and family. Unfortunately, not all of that, you know, within an hour probably, you know, my cousin had written to me just heartbroken that her sister had posted something nasty. And she's a lesbian and that her sister had posted some religious statement, you know, just because it's legal doesn't make it, mean it's right. You know, and just that we couldn't have, she didn't even get an hour to celebrate before having to already face that kind of stuff in her own family. There was the good and the bad. It was just, we really hadn't even talked about what we were gonna do, Shannon and I. I mean we really, we had a commitment ceremony in 95 and that was our wedding. I mean, we never, at that point, talked about oh, maybe someday we'll be able to get legally married. We just acted as if we were and really didn't think it would happen in our lifetime, we really, really didn't until the last, you know, year. Before it looked like it was going that way, we didn't expect to see it. So yeah, so that was, and then just, you know, a lot of joy, a lot of trying to like get our heads around what does this even mean, you know, what is this, how is gonna affect our family, legally what does it mean, what does it do for us financially, it was a big deal. So that's how we first found out.

I: When did you choose to act upon the Supreme Court's decision?

R: Shortly after we heard the decision was legalized, my son, Evan, and Shannon were watching the news, and they were like "oh, they're not issuing licenses in Rowan County." I'm like you have got to be kidding me. (laughs) You know, like I couldn't believe it. I had, she had even jokingly said well, probably won't happen in Morehead. I'm like, no, Morehead's pretty progressive, comparatively, you know, to other places in the state. I don't think it'll be a problem there. And I was just dumbfounded. I mean, I was just dumbfounded that someone here, where I grew up, would you know, stand up and say no to what was essentially law. I knew right away that we were gonna be involved. I think, you know, the first, I was also blown away, I did not expect the community response to be so sudden and supportive of marriage equality. And, you know, as soon as I saw that there was a movement, I was like well we're gonna go up and protest, you know, and I think it took us a day or two to be able to get here but I mean, it wasn't a question that we were gonna go. And it was, for me it was something, it was immediate that

this is a place that matters, that I could stand up, you know? And that I needed to. I felt like I had a responsibility, being from the area and also having young people in the area that are LGBTQ that I'm related to and that I love, who aren't able to easily make a stand because of who their family is or what their relationships are. It was something I knew I had to do. So that's, we made the decision, and I think it took us a few days, I had a lot of angst about it, actually, right before we came. Because it's, you know, I've been out for a really long time and have been active, but it's a very different thing to be standing in the place where you grew up, you know, holding a sign saying I'm gay or that's gonna let people think that you are, whether you are or not.

I: Did you try to get a license?

R: We did, yeah. We came up the first day we came to protest. We weren't sure what we were gonna do. There were, you know we kinda talked with some of the other couples that were there, and talked to people who were involved in the case that had been filed at that point about how we could help. And the consensus was, at that time, you know, we didn't know because we weren't from the county, whether it would make a difference or not. My sister was with us, and she also really just wanted us to do it. So, we went in and applied for a license the first day we came to protest.

I: And you were denied a license?

R: We were denied a license, yeah.

I: How did that feel?

R: It was infuriating. I mean, really, really infuriating. Even though you know what's gonna happen and there are other people who have gone and asked, to have someone stand in front of you and tell you, quite frankly, that because of what they believe, they're not gonna follow this law and they don't think you deserve to have this license. I mean, it was heartbreaking. It made me more angry than anything though. The first time we applied, I wanted her to make her, we got, we spoke to Kim Davis, and we insisted on speaking to her directly. I wanted her to be crystal clear about why she has denying it. You know, for her to say it was based on her religious belief. And she actually looked at us and said "I am not going to allow this." It was infuriating. I mean, it was just (laughs) it defies reason. You think a reasonable human, like if they see you as a person, couldn't possibly do this thing, and she did.

I: Did the fact that this event took place in a setting that you would call home have an effect on your viewpoint?

R: I think it definitely, yes. (pause) You know, from 95, when Shannon and I first got married, you sort of learned to make these, you make your own life when you're not gonna be able to have a legal marriage. You can't make the assumption I can get married in my hometown. You can't, you know, and so that had been fine. We have a good life. I have friends and I have family that support me and so maybe it wouldn't have mattered until someone told me I couldn't. This is the place where I grew up. It's the place where my family still lives. It's the place where my

nieces that I love dearly, you know, still live, and to be told you can't do this thing here. I mean if I can't then who, what right does anybody have? It felt very wrong to me.

I: So, after you were denied your license what was your immediate action? What steps did you take?

R: I think at that, we called the ACLU because we wanted to let them you that we were willing to do whatever they needed to be helpful. They wanted to focus on cases that were just in Rowan County and, you know, we, at that point, were just committing to continuing, and we knew we were gonna be a part of the protest movement in Morehead. We knew that we were gonna continue to be a part of that fight. And honestly, it seems weird, but we still, we kinda had to make the decision when we went and asked for the license because we hadn't talked about it yet, when we were gonna get married and if we were legally married because we considered ourselves married and it was more of a financial and legal thing than maybe a sentimental thing to us at that point. So, we sort of talked about, on the day that we protested, like "are we ok with making this political," you know. And for us, it was more about the politics at that point than the personal. It felt right. It felt like the right thing to do. We weren't a young couple that this was their first wedding, you know? It felt like we were in a place where we could do this. So, I mean we called the ACLU and we kept participating but we never, we hadn't decided yet. We weren't in a big hurry to get a license. We were gonna hang in there to do what we needed to do in Rowan County.

I: So you, after you were denied a license, you participated in the protests. Tell me about that.

R: We would, you know, it was pretty heartening actually, to see that as long as licenses were still denied there were people from the community who were showing up. I mean, maybe just one or two a day and some days there were bigger crowds but my schedule is pretty flexible so we were coming up probably at least once a week just to hold sign and sit with people, stand with people. And it was great in that it, you know I met some really great people that I had never known, but I also reconnected with people, you know, that I had known. Mary Hargis, who's a trustee of RCRC, I have known since I was probably four and she was friends with my family. And to see those people out there, I mean it really meant a great great deal. And I encouraged people to come out, you know. So, we got friends to come stand with us and to show up for that too.

I think it was, for me it was really very powerful to be in the place where I grew up, and in a lot of ways never felt like I quite fit in. It was never questioned that I was gonna leave at some point, that I would, you know that I would have to go away to be able to survive. And so most of my activism hadn't been in, you know, anywhere near Morehead. I mean we were out, and we were out here, but it, I wasn't actively involved in any type of movement here. So, it was, I mean there was a moment that was really surreal and sort of felt full circle for me, when I was out holding signs I could look down the street and see where my grandmother lived, you know, most of my life and it's probably the most accepted or the most belonging I had ever felt. You know, I felt like I was with a group of people that I belonged with where I'm from, which was a very unusual experience for me.

I: Were these the first protests you ever attended?

R: No, no. I had, you know, in other parts of the country we had done, you know, and we had done some protesting for environmental stuff, we've gone to D.C. for some marches and that kind of thing.

I: Describe the environment at the protests. Did you feel safe?

R: I did. But, you know, for me, I guess (pause) in being part of a same-sex couple and being out a long time ago, and we have kids, and I made the decision that I was gonna be out, and so somewhere you know there, you can't be completely safe. It doesn't matter what you do. And so, you make the choice to live in fear or to not, and so I choose not to. I know there were some people who were real concerned about being out, but that, for me, while I always know there's a chance of something happening, it wasn't a big concern. And overall, the protests here were not nearly as vicious as, and I mean especially when it was just local people in Morehead, it was pretty moderate. (laughs) There were opposing views, but there was no violence, there was no, there were no threats of violence, there was no, you know. I didn't feel, at least in those early days, I didn't feel unsafe.

I: Do you think the protest took a relatively positive stance or negative?

R: I think it took a positive stance, yeah. I think overwhelmingly.

I: On both sides?

R: Yeah, on both sides. I mean, as much as you can, it's really hard for me to say that because I strongly, strongly disagree with the other side, but they weren't, I mean there were people walking over saying hello to people they know on our side. Like you know, it wasn't (pause) don't get me wrong, there were definitely clashings of feelings and there were days when some negatives stuff happened and people got angry, but there was never violence. There was never, you know, that I saw. At least in the early days, you know. As things progressed and groups came in from other places and things got more heated, you know. By the time we went back to apply for a license, it was, you know there was some real fear in what could happen just because there were so many people involved.

I: How did you combat that negativity?

R: I think I have so much positivity. I mean I think overwhelmingly for me I was not unaware of the attitudes and opinions of those people on the other side, you know, and the religious freedom or the, you know, against same-sex marriage. I knew those people existed here, you know? I mean, so whatever work I needed to do to do with that mostly I had already done. So, for me, it was a positive experience because I was not as sure of the people who supported us. And so, for me, it was always just this really positive thing that there were people who, you know, most of whom, many of whom, were not gay, you know, were not a part of the queer community, but were willing to spend their time coming out, standing up, saying this is wrong and we don't wanna see it where we live. So, I think that positivity overwhelmed most of the negativity. The only place that was really hard for me is that the whole thing opened up some issues with my

family, my extended family, who, you know, we had sorta made peace with. I knew they were religious, I knew they didn't believe in what, you know, our lifestyle (laughs) but they accepted us, you know. When we were at family barbeques together and we were, you know, but to see them take sides, to take the other side and to actively work for, you know, against legislation that would support me and my children, devastated, I mean it really devastated me. It was, you know, it's hard, it made me rethink (pause) those relationships. I mean, not that anyone said to me "we don't want you here," but I had to remove myself from some situations that I normally would've been in, or family functions that I would've attended, because I was too angry, you know? I felt like I was being expected to give them more understanding than they were willing to give me. And I think it's probably a point in my life where that just isn't okay (laughs) anymore.

I: Did the viewpoints of the, your extended family members have an impact on your decision to act?

R: No, not really. Not really, no, because, fortunately, and I'm very fortunate and I know this, they're not the people who are closest to me. I mean, they're extended family members, and that hurts, but everybody who's an active part of my daily life, my mom, my siblings, you know, even a lot of people in my extended family, cousins, aunts, are very supportive. When we came back to apply for a license, you know, I had aunts and cousins and their kids who came out specifically to be with us. So, it didn't, it didn't really. The only, it didn't really effect my action at all. I did have to stop and pause to think about my mom, who is very personally supportive, but she's also a very private person, and so I tried to, when we knew we were gonna come back and apply for a license and there would be a lot of media around it, I thought, you know, I better give her a call just so she knows what was going on. And I couldn't reach her, but, you know, I talked to her afterward, and I'm like, "I just, I want you to know this happened, we showed the license, it has your name on it," and she thought I was worried about her disapproving in some way, and was very, she was like "I hope you know that I'm not ashamed of you or ashamed that you're my daughter, or that," and I'm like "no, mom, I just want to make sure your privacy is, I know where you stand, and I appreciate it." So, we had that conversation but that was really the only, you know, opinion that I, that really mattered to me.

I: What was your goal with the protests?

R: For me, for me it was really all about (pause) I think speaking up for people who maybe couldn't speak themselves, or speaking up for the teenager I was growing up here who didn't have a voice and couldn't have at that point taken that action. I think it's real different to be from this area and to understand what that means but I don't have a lot to lose. You know, I have stability and I have family and I have support now. And I know that that is not true for everybody and I felt like I wanted to add my voice as someone from the area. You know, the other thing that bothered me about the conversation that happened during the protest is that a lot of people on the other side said "these aren't people from here. These people who are standing up are with the university or they're from out of town or they're not locals." Not that that doesn't mean Morehead isn't your home, but for those of us who have grown up here and who this is our hometown, well first of all, a lot of us left because we had no choice. If we, you know, in the rural community, religious community, if you're gonna be open and out, a lot of times it's better for you not to be here. And it made me angry to (laughs) we are here. This is not just happening

to strangers or from people you don't know or for people who didn't grow up here or don't know the people here and there are more of us. I mean, there are certainly, I'm sure, a lot of same-sex couples who wouldn't come forward in this area because of, you know, what the impact would be for them, and who didn't want the attention. And so, I just felt like it was a place for me to, that I could say something, you know, that it was a place where I could do what was in front of me to help. And I did.

I: Do you regard your tactics at the protest effective?

R: I think that, for me, yeah. Depending on (laughs) for me, the importance of the protest was not necessarily to change action but it was to show, to have a vocal part of this community be seen by the people who needed it, to know, you know, for the gay kid who hasn't come out, you know, who lives in a religious, a fundamentalist family, to know that there are people within the community who would be there for them and support them. I also think tactics were effective in that I know some of the couples applied before the protest started, but as things got more and more heated, I think it was incredibly helpful, I know it was for me, to have a group of people show support. It was, it's a really difficult thing to do, no matter how out you are or how much of an activist you've been, to walk into that office and know you're gonna stand up to homophobia. I mean, to know you're gonna see, it's not something people want to do. (laughs) You know, it's not fun and so to have the support of people who are, you know, they are with you and that you know was really great for me. So, I think that was really effective. And I do think, without having an active group of protestors, I'm not sure things would have changed so quickly, I'm not sure, you know. I mean, I know the court system had to make the decisions that eventually led to licenses being issued, but I don't know if that would've happened as quickly or the way that it did without protesting. So yeah, I think that it was effective.

I: Would you have done anything differently?

R: I just, I mean, the only thing I can think of is maybe getting involved even sooner and being there more. I mean that's really the only thing I can think of.

I: Do you believe that you made a personal difference by your involvement in the protest?

R: Yes. Yeah, (pause) I think, well for one thing, and this matters to me personally, I have a niece who is involved with a woman and they're engaged to be married next year. She would never, ever have wanted to go through a protest, that isn't who she is. The whole situation scared her. I know right after she came up to me and was just like thank you, you know. So, for that, on a very personal level, like I know that it made a difference.

And I think when we, Shannon and I came back after Kim Davis was in jail, and we were the first couple to apply after she was released, and that was, it was a really tough decision to make because it was scary, at that point. For one thing, there was just a lot of media and a lot of protesting and a lot of groups going on, but we had been committed to doing what we could to help. And even the night before, when we had let people know that we were gonna do it, that we were willing to do it, but I was calling like "you know, if someone local comes forward (laughs) you don't have to save this for us. We're okay." And it was, you know, the night before was probably, it was the hardest night for me. It was a really sleepless night and I felt sick (laughs)

like I can't believe I'm gonna go do this thing in front of all these people and it's so antagonizing. You know, you sort of, I mean I am from this area, this culture where you don't make waves, and you know, here I am, gonna go make a big wave right now and everybody's gonna know. So, you know, I wouldn't have been sorry if someone else has stepped up, but on the morning that we were supposed to come, I think I'd been focused on the political and on the battle politically and on what, you know, but when I woke up that morning it hit me, you know, that after 20 years together, Shannon and I were gonna get a license. I mean, it was, like all of a sudden it was just about the joy of that, really. Even though it was sorta surreal and you had like CNN, I mean, as soon as I realized like what this meant for us personally, it just became a very joyful thing. You know, my aunt and my cousin and her daughter were there and my sister came to be with us and, you know, to be able to walk in there and get a license in the place I grew up in (pause) I never thought it would happen. I really never thought it would happen, and to have people who had loved me all my life right there and, you know, as we were applying, my dad passed away in 2004, Mary had known him, and she just whispered to me, "your dad would be so proud of you." You know, it was really, people talked about it who saw it and were like "I'm really sorry you had to go through that," and there were protestors and there were chanters, but for me, personally, I mean it's probably one of the best days of my life. I mean, it was really meaningful in a personal way outside of what the bigger picture of the political aspects of it were. And, you know, it's hard, sometimes you get caught up in that whole political thing. But on that day, for me, it was really just about being so, so loved and so, so supported in the midst of all of that. It's something that I would never, ever in my life have expected.

I: So, after the joy you received from signing the license, walk me through what you felt walking outside into a large crowd.

R: You know, there was, you get kind of adrenalized, but really, the people from the Rowan County Rights Coalition were there with us, plus we had family around us, and the press just created this whole circle, so we felt very safe. We felt very, you know, we couldn't see much that was going on around us directly. I was really happy, just really, really happy. I couldn't believe, you know, we actually had a marriage license. And we felt very taken care of. You know, there was a lot of press there but there were a lot of people working behind the scenes to make that work and make sure we were taken care of and that we went where we needed to go and that nobody was inappropriate. So, it was aa whirlwind for sure (laughs) you know? Actually, I felt very joyful and, you know, from that morning I just felt very calm. You know, it was like this inner sort of calm, like I had worried about it the night before, what would I say, it didn't, it just sort of happened flawlessly on that day. That's honestly (laughs) you know?

I: You mentioned feeling safe because RCRC was there.

R: Yes.

I: Can you describe to me what that is?

R: Rowan County Rights Coalition, that's RCRC, was, it was sorta born out of the group of protestors who stood up over the Kim Davis, when she started denying licenses. It was the group of people who showed up to protest and who kept showing up and who sort of organized, helped

walk people in as they went to the courthouse at that point. Yeah, they were there to support us. I mean, they were the people who called and said “we’ve got your back and don’t worry about this.” You know, group of local citizens, again, most of them not gay, not a part of the queer community but just really unhappy with the fact that this injustice was happening in our community and were willing to come out and bodily put themselves between us and harm. That’s really the truth of it. To make sure that justice was done and, you know, to say this is not the kind of community we want.

I: And are you currently a member?

R: I am, yeah. I’m a trustee.

I: What kind of activities do you guys do now?

R: Well, we’re doing, the mission is to stand up for disempowered people, to protect the civil rights of disempowered groups within this community. And we have a legislative education committee who stays on top of, you know, what laws are being passed that effect civil rights and helping the citizens here engage in that process and having a voice and knowing what’s going on in Frankfort and further on. And then we have an inclusiveness committee that works on actively holding events or arranging things to help marginalized communities be more active with the rest of the community. So, some of the things we’re doing, we do an outreach to the local nursing home. People go there once every other week to play bingo and to read with people and that sort of thing. And we, a couple of people have worked really hard to get open caption movies shown at the movie cinemas, you know, for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. And our biggest project right now is working on LGBT Pride festival for Morehead, which will be the first festival of its kind in eastern Kentucky, to let the community come together and show their support in this local area. So, those are, that’s most of, you know, what we have going on right now, but the overall mission is to respond to the civil rights of marginalized people in the community.

I: Do you think this organization is a necessary asset in Rowan County?

R: I think it’s a fantastic asset, yeah. I really do. I think it’s a wonderful thing for the area. I think as, you know, we grow and change and add members, I think it’s something that cannot only react when something happens but can help fully bring, one of the things we’re looking to do is to bring educational programs to help raise awareness and to, you know, help Rowan County be a more inclusive community for everybody who’s a part of it.

I: Do you think these events have brought Rowan County closer together or further apart?

R: That’s a tough question. I think, I think it’s brought groups closer together. I mean, I think there’s a, you know, a progressive group of people who never knew each other before and who maybe didn’t have a voice and who wasn’t organized, who is organizing to do that. And I think it’s definitely, probably, brought, you know, a conservative group of people together, you know, around issues that they disagree with. Now whether or not that’s brought the community together as a whole, I don’t know. I honestly don’t know what the answer to that is. How do you support

the civil rights of everybody in a place where there are a lot of differences about how that should happen? So, I don't know. I think it's brought some people closer together, definitely, but I'm sure it's created a lot of divides in us, too.

I: Growing up in a family with a religious background, does that give you any kind of different perspective on this issue than somebody else?

R: Yeah, I think it's (pause) I don't know. It's less easy for me sometimes to discount other people because I know the people on the other side. I know that they can be otherwise loving, good people. It baffles me, you know, how you could know my family and lovingly interact with us and still, like, what to be active against a law that helps and protects us. Like, I don't understand it at all. Regardless of what your religious beliefs are, I just, I don't get it. But I do understand that it's not a simple solution, I think, and that it isn't black or white, it's not always good vs. evil. And I think it's a complicated situation. And finding a solution, because even with the Rowan County Rights Coalition and progressive people I mean, part of the people you're working for may be kids who are in families that are really conservative, so how do you bridge that gap? I'm not sure what the answer is but, I mean I think it gives me a little more understanding and perspective than maybe it would someone outside of the area. Like, my partner's from Massachusetts and she just doesn't understand, you know? (laughs) Like, how can you, well this is what people know, it's not that they're evil, it's how they were raised and it's certainly, it's a culture that's really important to people. So, yeah, I think it gives me a different perspective, sure.

I: In your eyes, did Kim Davis, the county clerk, best represent the cause of religious liberty?

R: I don't think so, no. I don't think what she was doing had anything to do with religious liberty. I don't think, you know, to me, religious liberty is having the right to worship as you want. Like, it's, you know, if someone were trying to keep you from practicing what you believe, attending the church of your choice, if you were arrested because of something you believe in, if your personal rights were violated based on your beliefs. If she weren't hired because of her religion, okay, but I don't think religion has a place in government. You know, when you're taking a position that says you have to serve all people and you're gonna follow the laws of the state and the nation, I don't think you have the right because of your religious beliefs to impact someone else's rights. So, no, I don't think it had anything to do with religious liberty. That's my personal view,

I: Do you think that she deserved to be imprisoned?

R: Nobody wanted that to happen. I don't know anybody who, you know, who really wanted her to go to jail. They just wanted her to issue the licenses. I don't know, but she was willfully and loudly breaking the law and continuing to do that and refusing to do otherwise. So, yeah, I mean, she probably did. The judge certainly made that decision. But, you know, like I said, I would not have wanted to see that. I would rather her have resigned or found a way to issue the licenses without going through that.

I: So, would you call her punishment adequate?

R: No, because she (laughs) for me, she's still breaking the law, and she hasn't, I mean licenses are being issued, she's refusing to sign them. So, in a way, she gave herself an exception and I know she is signing them for opposite sex couples now. So, she's flagrantly, you know, (laughs) using her beliefs to decide what she does and does not have to do. There were several laws that she broke, you know, misdemeanors in Kentucky. She changed forms without permission, you know, and I don't think she has, I don't think she should still have the position. I mean, that's the bottom line. I think she's really gotten away with using her religion to discriminate against other people and still has her job to show for it.

I: How did you feel when she was released from jail?

R: Curious, more than anything. I was just really curious to see what would happen next, you know, because at that point we didn't know what her take was gonna be and what, you know, what was gonna happen next.

I: There was a large rally outside of the jail upon her release. What were your thoughts on that?

R: It's disheartening, I think. It's disheartening that so many people see her as a hero. Mostly, I had to tune it out because it did make me really angry and she got so much attention for it and there were so many people coming to her side and what she did was really, very hurtful to people. I mean, really, really, very hurtful to people. And so, to see that there were that many people who didn't get that or disregarded that or saw her as some kind of hero was really disheartening.

I: So, while this issue was going on, there were many reactions from local elected officials, statewide, and even U.S. elected officials. Can you walk me through how you felt about these reactions?

R: You know, locally and at the state level, (laughs) the reaction was, there just wasn't much of a reaction, honestly. I mean, there were some pat statements of you know, this is wrong, but no action was taken, and that was incredibly frustrating. Locally, or at a state level, no one was willing to stand up and say, you know, what she's doing is wrong and we're gonna pursue it. She's breaking the law and, you know, no one really wanted to associate themselves with the same-sex marriage cause because I think they felt it would hurt them politically. And so, that was incredibly frustrating. You know, we got more support on a national level from other states than we did, really, in the state or here at home. And it continues to be frustrating, you know, to feel like, I think what we did had an impact on the community and you know, same-sex couples can get licenses now in the county but it was disheartening (laughs) to learn that you really don't have much political support here at home, especially.

I: How about the abundance of media coverage. Did this issue deserve that much coverage?

R: I think it did. I think, while I would rather it have not been an issue, you know, while I would rather same-sex marriage had been made legal and it wasn't a problem anywhere and so it became a non-issue, I think this issue, and I think it's probably not the end of the issue, you

know, really the issue being people claiming religious liberties (pause) in a public workplace, I think that's an issue that hasn't been decided yet, exactly how, if people are allowed to do that and how that will be handled. I do think it deserved the attention, you know? I think if it hadn't been covered, you know, maybe other people would've been, I mean, you know, here, even in counties in Kentucky, there are places that are still not issuing marriage licenses, and that may well be because they don't have people willing to come forward and ask for them. They don't have the support that they need. But I feel like (pause) it's surreal to me that it happened here in Morehead, Kentucky, but that there was gonna be, you know, there needed to be a story about this, you know, that people could understand that just because this ruling was made by the Supreme Court doesn't mean everybody everywhere is gonna have access to the same rights and I think that needed to be covered. I'm not sure, you know, all the coverage (laughs) was always great or you know, anything once it becomes something on a national level like that, whether some of the coverage is frivolous, I don't know, but I think it was a story that warranted attention, sure.

I: Why do you think Rowan County was the one that became the hot button topic?

R: I think it actually is because there are people here who are progressive, you know. I think there were people who were willing to make a stand. I think there are people here who are willing to come forward and ask for licenses, knowing they were gonna be denied. It's such a mix of a place where you do have, I mean Morehead has always been known, especially with the university, to be sort of a haven for LGBTQ people. I mean, I can remember from the 70s, you know, knowing people who were gay at the university and knowing that people came here for that. And everything is relative, but in eastern Kentucky, you know, Morehead is sort of seen as one of the more liberal places in the area. But you still have this undercurrent. For those of us who grew up here, you know, who are from the local community, there's a really staunch conservative sort of religious background to a lot of the place. And so, I think it was in some ways perfect that those two forces just met. I mean, there was someone who is determined enough in her religious beliefs to stand up and say no and there were people who were progressive enough and unafraid enough to stand up and challenge her. I mean, you'd almost have to have, I think, that kind of an environment to be the place where something like this could happen.

I: In regards to this event, would you call either sides efforts a victory or a failure?

R: Victory or a failure? You know, I'm not sure. I feel like our side, the side that stood up for civil rights and for same-sex marriage, I feel that our largest victory has been coming together and creating a community who's gonna continue to work for equality in the area. I do think, you know, licenses are being issued, however that happened. I mean, there's still a lot of, a lot of the is unaddressed and I think it's gonna take years to play out in the courts and I don't think either side got that definitively addressed because of this protest. But I do think, at least for progressive people, I think we, at least, have a voice and we have some organization and a way to make things different going forward. And I don't know for the other side, I don't know that they lost much. I mean, because they kept politicians come on and make everything okay, Kim Davis was never, you know, she was sent to jail but hasn't been charged for any of the crimes that she

committed, the misdemeanors that she committed while she was in office, so I don't know that they failed either, you know? (laughs) I don't know.

I: How has this experience changed you?

R: I think it has made me (pause) far less likely to, not that I did before, but far less likely to change who I am to make other people comfortable. You know, even after being out for a number of years, you realize that there are ways that you, especially people that you love or that are close to you, that you accommodate their belief system or their issues with your lifestyle, and I think it's made me far less willing to do that, you know? It's made me much clearer on where people stand and how that impacts me and my family. I think it's made me more outspoken (laughs) for good or for bad, you know?

I: Regarding the debate both for religious liberty and marriage equality, would you consider that to be over?

R: No. No (laughs) I don't think that's over by a long shot. I think it's something that's gonna probably play out in the courts for the next few years. I think eventually there will, you know, it will go to the Supreme Court and there will be some kind of ruling that gives a more definitive answer to that. But I'd say we will see, maybe not just in the case of same-sex marriage but in other places where public officials, you know, feel like part of their job duties violate their religious liberty. A decision will have to be made and I don't think that's been definitively done yet.

I: More so than marriage equality, LGBT equality in general, is this something that's gonna continue to be fought over or has marriage equality settled the issue?

R: Well, you know, 50 people were blown away at an LGBTQ club this weekend, so I think we have a long way to go. You know, it's, and you know, those of us in the community, I think we knew that, we already knew that. We come leaps and bounds and you don't wanna lose the celebration of that because things have changed, but the truth is in most places in the world people can lose their housing, their job, you know. There's no laws against discrimination against LGBTQ people, you know, trans people, and trans people of color, especially, you know, are brutalized on a daily basis and no one cares, for the most part. No, it's definitely not over. I mean, we still have higher rates, insanely higher rates of suicide within the community. Not by a long shot. Definitely, life is better than it was 20 years ago, even, but no. It'll continue to be a fight.

I: How will you continue to fight?

R: Well part of that is, I mean, just showing up and being out every day. Like, I have two kids and, you know, I never hide who I am. And that's really, that's the biggest thing, you know? It's all those time and places where you have to decide, you know, you think you're out but you know, you have a new doctor (laughs), you have a new school, you have new teachers, and you have to explain the whole thing over again. But I also find that on the personal level, just being out and not being afraid and getting to know people is probably the thing that changes things

more than, I mean I've seen that in my personal life, within my family, you know, with in-laws who never knew someone who was, you know, a lesbian or gay before, who suddenly, their whole world is turned upside down about it, because they understand you as a person and not as some other they that they don't know. So, there's that. And then I'm very involved with RCRC and hope to continue that work in Rowan County. And then I also, you know, work with an active arts group, I'm active in a lot of different groups and plan, you know, I'll continue to be. I mean I'd like, in the future, to work more with kids. That's one of my biggest interests is working with LGBTQ queer youth community and I'm hoping, you know, to help kids who don't have support in their families or in their lives.

I: Do you think life is going to get better for people in the LGBTQ community in the future?

R: I think overall it will. I think it'll, it's always two steps forward and one step back. I mean, I think, I hope so, and I do have a lot of faith in the next generation of kids, the kids who are, you know, 17, 18, into their early 20s, for whom, they've just grown up in a very different era with regard to sexuality and gender expression and for a lot of them, this is a non-issue. I mean it really, really is. And I think as we move forward, even in very conservative families, like it's just, their friends and they talk about it differently. The labels are different. And I think, moving forward, that bodes very, very well, you know. I mean I think over time, hopefully, it will become a non-issue.

I: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

R: I don't think so.