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**David Bryant**

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## David Bryant Interview

Interviewer: This is a conversation with David Bryant 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 June 9<sup>th</sup>, 10:30 AM. My name is Dakota Barr.

Alright, so David, first of all I'd like to thank you for taking the time to agree to meet with me today and do this.

Response: Sure.

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

R: I was born in Lynchburg, Virginia. I actually grew up in a very small town close by called Alta Vista, Virginia. I lived in, I also lived in a small town called Appomattox, Virginia, then my family moved to North Carolina and we lived in a small town very close to the mountain region of North Carolina. Then we moved back to Virginia, where I grew up in Alta Vista. Then I went to college in Columbus, Ohio, at Ohio State University. I got a bachelor's degree in music. After that, I went to University of Iowa and got a master's degree in music. Then, I completed a doctoral degree, I went back to North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, and got a doctoral degree in music and then my, at that time partner, now he's my husband, he got a job at Morehead State. He's a bassoonist, he's also a musician, he's the professor of bassoon and music theory at Morehead State. So I moved to Kentucky. We lived in Lexington then, and that was when I got a master's of library science and went into the library field and then I went and got a job in Louisville, I was a librarian at Louisville Free Public Library for about 8 years and then, after that, we got married in New York City, it still wasn't legal nationwide, but that's how I ended up finally moving to Morehead because we got married in New York City and then I was able to get a part-time job as a librarian in Lexington and we moved here, to Morehead.

I: I'd like to touch a little on your religious upbringing, more ideological background that you had growing up.

R: My family, early childhood we didn't, we weren't regular churchgoers. We attended a nondenominational Christian church probably from ages 8 to, I was probably 8 or 10, you know, we did that. Then we, we didn't go to church regularly. I did attend, I started going to a Baptist church when I was in high school, with a friend, and you know, all this time I did grow up in a very religiously conservative area. It kind of affected a lot of my experiences and my upbringing because we were, I grew up very close to Liberty University, Jerry Falwell's church, you know, it's very prominent in that area, in Lynchburg and the area where I grew up. Then I went to college, didn't go to church very much, or ever (*laughs*). Religion just didn't play a big part in my life. I think by the time of my mid-twenties I did start, or early twenties I did start attending Episcopal church and I converted to Episcopalianism, and that's probably what I would call myself now, although I'm not really, I don't, it's not a huge part of my life. But, and also my, my, are you asking about my beliefs in general, my religious beliefs, or just like?

I: Yeah, yeah, if you would touch on those, on how you believe now.

R: I think I would, I think, well I said I technically am still Episcopalian. I think I would probably call myself more of a Unitarian, but I don't really attend a Unitarian church. I mean, I'm at a point now where I, I kind of believe all religions (*laughs*), so I'm kind of like a, I would, you know, kind of Unitarian-esque slash agnostic (*laughs*) but I still attend Christian, Episcopalian services sometimes because I love the music and the rituals (*laughs*).

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

R: Well, I've followed it for many years. In terms of being an active activist or protestor, I would say most of my involvement in it revolved around supporting political candidates that I would, that I thought would, would support marriage for gays and lesbians. I (pause), what was I saying? Marriage equality, right (*laughs*). But yeah, so primarily, I wouldn't really, I've never been what I'd call an activist or, I just, I try to educate myself about politicians and political movements and candidates and who they would support, that sort of thing.

We decided to get married before it was legal nationwide because I had been reading about developments, you know it was starting to become legal in some states at that point, and so I read some information that said if you're in a long-term relationship and you're thinking you will get married, you should just go ahead and do it because, for one thing it's going to be easier, you know, they said everything is showing that it is going to become legal nationwide and go ahead and get married because when it is legal everywhere it's just going to be easier for you, so we went ahead and just, got married in New York City 2014.

I: So how did you first react when you heard the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that all United States citizens can get married?

R: Oh, it was thrilling, I mean, it was unbelievable. Because the buildup to it was really intense, because I'd been following it all summer, I had a link to the SCOTUS blog in my RSS feed, so I would just get all these updates and even though I had, from what I'd been following, experts were saying "oh it's going to happen, it is going to become legal" I still just was really nervous about it, because I felt like I'd be so disappointed if, if it wasn't made legal nationwide, or if there was some sort of partial legalization of it. So, the day that I found out, it was amazing.

I: So when you heard the Supreme Court's decision, did anything cross your mind? Did you think that, were you skeptical? Is basically what I'm getting at.

R: I actually did have a, kind of like a sense of disbelief. Like, "woah, did they really (*laughs*) make it legal everywhere, for everyone?" Because I think I had, part of me had, I had half expected the Supreme Court to say "your state may not have to allow you to get married, but they would have to recognize a marriage performed in another state" or something like that so, I was really kinda surprised that it was just 100% it's legal everywhere immediately. So I did, and I also, I did have a sense in the back of my mind, you know, is there gonna be another challenge to this, because a lot of these decisions would come out, like California or another state it would "okay it's legal, but it's temporarily on hold until this appeal" but, you know, the Supreme Court, it was "that's the final decision" so I was, I was kind of in that mindset where ok well there's gonna be some holdup to it for a few days, that was kind of my mindset.

I: So you and your husband were already married, so the court's decision didn't necessarily directly impact you. But what was your reaction when you first heard that the Rowan County clerk had decided not to abide by the law and not issue marriage licenses?

R: Well, I would say that it actually did directly impact us because we were, we were married but, but for example I couldn't go on his health insurance, he worked at Morehead State, and because our marriage wasn't legally recognized here there were still quite a few benefits and legal protections that weren't open to me, and then once the Supreme Court decision came through it was like, you know, he was on the phone that afternoon calling HR saying okay, we're gonna, you know, "he's gonna go on my benefits" and, you know, so it really did make a big impact, it was just a little bit easier for us because we didn't have to go fight the county clerk to try to get a license, which is your second, gets at your question.

I think, I can't remember exactly, I think it was a few, roughly it was maybe a few days after that people started finding out that she was denying people. It could've, I can't really remember.

I: June 29<sup>th</sup>.

R: Ok, June 29<sup>th</sup> was the day that, what day did the court issue? Do you know? I can't remember. There was a little bit of a gap between the decision -

I: Kim Davis, the clerk, on June 29<sup>th</sup>, made her official announcement.

R: Yeah. I was just kind of-

I: Which was three days after the court's decision.

R: Honestly, I was a little surprised that it happened in Morehead. I was expecting smaller counties all over the nation really to try to fight it and try to be holdouts. My experiences here, while I can't say it's been overwhelmingly gay positive, I just haven't really had negative reactions to being gay in the Morehead, you know, the town of Morehead, which is where I spend most of my time, I mean I don't spend a lot of time out in more rural areas in eastern Kentucky. So, I was a little bit surprised. I was frustrated by it. I thought it was, I thought it was ridiculous. (laughs) I thought her reaction to it, of her saying that she didn't, her religious beliefs wouldn't allow her to support, or I can't remember her exact wording, but she wouldn't validate a marriage when all she had to do was sign a piece of paper or even get someone else in her office to issue the licenses. I thought it was, I thought she was really overplaying her value (laughs) or her importance in the process. So it really just showed me that, I felt like what she, because she could do that she obviously just has a dislike or disapproval for gay people.

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

R: I do now. I mean, I've been here many times over the years because my husband has taught here, I think 17 or 18 years. You know, even in the years when we were in long-distance relationship, I was here a lot during the, over the course of a year, in summers and weekends, you know. So I spent a lot of time here. So I definitely consider it my home now.

I: So you said that you expected this kind of response from smaller counties but that it was surprising that it came actually to Rowan county. Considering that you consider Rowan county your home, does that have any, any effect on your feelings there?

R: Well, I should say I actually expected it not only from smaller places, I mean I expected it in a lot of more religiously conservative places and some of those are larger cities too, but in terms of, I mean it doesn't give you an overwhelming sense of feeling welcome (laughs) when a government official is denying you legal rights. I would say that in terms of feeling like Rowan county or Morehead is my home, to know that an elected official who's supposed to be serving the government, serving people, not people serving the government (laughs) you know, it's not the other way around, and that's, just to jump ahead a little bit, that's one of the things that really bothered me. Afterwards, it was some of the decisions with, or some of the accommodations that had been made for her, like with Bevin or, you know, or other things. It's that the people, the citizens, they don't make, they're not supposed to make accommodations for the government. The government and its representatives are supposed to serve the people that are elected, or, the people that elect them, and the people that live there. So that's just really bothered me.

I: So after you heard that the Rowan county clerk wasn't issuing marriage licenses, what was your immediate action? Did you just, did you participate in any of the protests or?

R: I did not participate in protests until much later, much later in the summer. I followed it really closely on social media. I had a sense, and I think a lot of people felt this way too, that they had no idea it would go on as long as it would. I mean, I thought probably she would hold out for a week or two and then something would happen that either forced her or she would give in. So initially I didn't join any of the protests. I followed it a lot. I didn't, and I also didn't really know any of the other people protesting. I mean I would see them when I was driving to work and I would try to show support. But for the most part, I (pause), I think, let's see. So it was June 29<sup>th</sup> that she refused and then when did they, when did the judge issue his decision that she had to, and then after jail and all that stuff. Was that like a month later? Two months? I can't remember. (laughs) Anyway, it was, I didn't really participate in any protests until a few days before the first licenses were actually issued from the clerk's office.

I: At the protest you did participate in, what was the environment like there?

R: There were a lot of people there. It was, there was a lot of energy. People were very supportive of each other. There was a sense that people had come together to fight, to speak up against something that was just really blatantly wrong.

I: At any time did you ever feel uncomfortable or unsafe at the protests?

R: I never felt unsafe. Some of the protests I saw other people attend, like at the courthouse, the federal courthouse in Ashland, I felt like there was, you know some of the things I was seeing on TV, that looked a lot more (pause) I don't know if I'd say dangerous, but more threatening. Like a lot of the signs people were carrying and the things that they were saying to people, it seems like they would, some of the opponents, you know, seemed like Kim Davis' supporters would,

they seemed a lot more confrontational. I mean, the protests at the courthouse in Rowan county, I mean they were fairly orderly. On one side, you had the marriage equality supporters, on the other side the Kim supporters and there was some exchange back and forth, but I didn't feel, I certainly didn't feel like the marriage supporters were going after anyone or targeting anyone on the other side.

I: What difference do you believe that you specifically made at the protests?

R: Well like I said, I didn't attend until the last few protests. I, you know I think that a lot of individuals come together as a group and I think that, I think the group of protestors represented the town really well because most of the people were (pause) they were respectful, nice, you know. They weren't representing the town in any kind of unseemly way or anything like that. So I mean, I think that individuals coming together as, as a group, I mean there are certain standout people in a protest but (pause) but yeah.

I: Did you have any level of involvement after the protest? Did you, were there any organizations you joined or started any causes afterwards?

R: Yeah, I mean the, the group that kinda formed as protesting was, they called themselves the Rowan County Rights Coalition. I'm not so sure how soon that actually happened, you know after the first protest. I got involved with that group probably in November, the November after all of this happened, and I just started attending a couple of meetings and that group went through a little bit of changes. Then I got involved in the Pride festival planning committee, so I'm co-chairing that, that committee. And that's gonna be a great way, I think, to bring people together again. You know, I mean the initial protests got a lot of people involved and then when that kind of, you know, when she started issuing licenses it faded a little bit but I think this will be a great way for us to get people interested again and get involved with the organization.

I: So you're bringing Pride to Morehead? What are your thoughts on that? I mean, a town such as Rowan county, a very small town, made news for, for these protests and they showed unity on both sides of the issue, and now you're bringing a Pride festival to Morehead. Do you think that's going to send a different image to Rowan county?

R: Well I certainly hope it sends a positive image to people. I've had, or we have had a great response, a lot of enthusiasm from people that I've talked to, both in Morehead and elsewhere in the state. You know, a lot of people have a sense that Kim Davis really made the state look bad, really look unwelcoming and misinformed. So I'm hoping to show, I'm hoping this pride festival shows people, there's two things I want it to do, mainly. I want to show people that there is a large gay community in Morehead, for a town it's size. I'm continuously amazed by how many gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people live in Morehead. I keep meeting more and more people every day.

And then the other thing is I'd like, as a committee we've decided to have a rural Pride festival, we really want to reach out to people in rural areas who may not have the access to meet and be around other gay and lesbian people. It can be really isolating for people who live in really small towns or rural areas. So we're reaching out and trying to get people from eastern Kentucky. I

mean, we even talked at one point it might turn into eastern Kentucky Pride, not just Morehead Pride.

I: So you said that the county clerk, Kim Davis, you believe that she has given Kentucky a bad reputation. You think that this issue has spanned much further than Rowan county, and that from the outside looking in, it makes your whole state look bad.

R: Yeah, I mean I think it's really unfortunate that she has portrayed the area, and the state, yeah I mean she's a joke on Saturday Night Live (laughs). You know, and then I think that it's hard for the state, or the area to disassociate themselves from that. So (pause) repeat the question?

I: Do you believe that Kim Davis has had an effect on the state as a whole?

R: Yeah, I do, because I think if you look at what's going on throughout the, especially southern states in the country there, I think she's contributing to the overall sense of discrimination, like anti. You know, some states are doing whatever they can to try to limit gay marriage, you know. If it comes down to making them, making gay couples use a separate license, a separate form, you know, any kind of limit they can do, they can impose to make it harder for people. And then now we see this moving into transgender bathroom restrictions. I think that she, her beliefs and the way she represented herself just contributed to that overall sense of discrimination.

I: In your eyes, does Kim Davis, the clerk, does she represent the cause of religious liberty well?

R: Well I have a little bit of issue with the term "religious liberty" because in my mind, religious liberty is "I can practice my own religion however that needs to be carried out for myself, but I can't impose that upon others." So I think in her mind, her religious liberty would be the mentality that you don't have to do anything that affects your religious beliefs. I don't know if that, I mean I don't know if I'm saying that exactly right, but to me, her not issuing a license is the same thing as a nurse or a doctor saying "I'm not gonna give you a blood transfusion because it violates my religious beliefs" and I, so, I think, I don't think she does represent true religious liberty well. At all.

I: Do you believe that the clerk deserved to be imprisoned?

R: Well I think that it's not so much a sense of that she deserved it but I think that there are consequences to your actions and when you violate federal court orders, there are certain procedures, law enforcement, you know the, you know, that are in place that will give you, that will force you to comply with them. So I'm not sure, I mean when you violate a federal court order it's a very serious offense, so I don't know that he had that many options to, to, you know, encourage her to comply. My sense was that maybe he thought the threat of going to jail would deter, you know, encourage her to comply. And I'm trying to, if I remember correctly, she was given multiple opportunities not to go to jail. And I think he even told her "as long as you say your office issues the licenses you won't have to go to jail" but she even said she would block that so, if I'm remembering that correctly. I think that, you know, she knew what was at stake, and the court stepped in and the system took over.

I: So do you think her punishment was, was adequate?

R: (pause) I haven't really thought of it that way, whether it was adequate. I'll say yes. (laughs)

I: What were your thoughts on some of the reactions of your local elected officials?

R: Well I remember reading on social media, Facebook, that the mayor of Morehead had posted – now reactions in terms of marriage equality or to Kim Davis?

I: The whole issue.

R: The whole issue? I felt like that the local, local and county officials could have done more. I think that they didn't out of fear of political retribution. I always felt like she was violating a law by not complying with that, and I think she could've been arrested or, you know, some sort of similar action. Like, I felt like everybody, including local law enforcement or local government, I think they just were kinda hoping it would go away. Like, it would just, a week or two, and then they could kinda pretend they didn't have to take a stand on it. But it just carried out much longer than people had hoped. Because it wasn't really to their advantage to support the plaintiffs, or the, the people trying to get licenses, because politically, you know, outside of Morehead a lot of the, or even in Morehead, there's a lot of religiously conservative people. So it was more to their advantage to try to step back and to let the courts handle it than getting involved, is how I felt.

I: So you may know Morehead has a fairness ordinance and, considering that ordinance, do you think they had some kind of responsibility to take action?

R: I don't, I can't say that I know the specifics of the fairness ordinance. My understanding was that it was, it dealt more with employment issues. I think I'd have to, to really answer that question, I'd have to know what the fairness ordinance specifically covers. But no, I mean I think in general, I think that in a lot of places the, you know, the local officials would've stepped in and tried to do something. But I mean, I'm not, at the same time, I think there was, people kept saying "well she's an elected official in the state of Kentucky, they can't just remove her from office" so I think it was just a really, not, it was an issue that wasn't easy to deal with all the way around.

I: Can you give me some insight into your reactions on the mass media and the covering of political leaders on this issue?

R: It was, it was pretty impressive (laughs). I mean there was a lot more media attention than I was expecting. Morehead will probably not have New York Times, CNN, MSNBC - I mean hopefully not (laughs), unless it's something really good – here all at one time. I thought for the most part the media coverage, wow I have to think back to make sure I'm answering this correctly. The question was how did they cover it?

I: What were your thoughts on the reactions of the mass media?

R: Okay. (pause) Like did they, like was there too much? I mean is that what you're getting at? Okay. No, I didn't really think that. I mean, I thought a lot of people were interested so they, it was a good story for them to cover. They would get a lot of interest. People were following it closely. Yeah, I mean I think the other thing that people need to remember that gets lost in this, there were a lot of Kim Davises all over the country doing the same thing. But I think with some of the information about, details about her personal life came out, it became a lot more sensationalistic, and so there was a lot of interest. You know when people found out she had been married four times and was denying other people the benefit of marriage because she disapproved, I think all those details kept coming in and just made it a much more sensationalistic issue. And then also, with social media, because the videos of, that people were sharing, of being denied, those just went out of control, they got like millions of views, so that just blew it up into an even bigger, bigger story.

I: What were your thoughts on some of the political leaders using this issue as, towards their campaigns?

R: Yeah, I mean, I thought it was pretty disgusting honestly. I mean, you know, Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee, they have no connection to this area, they were blatantly just using her ignorance and the ignorance of other people to benefit their campaigns. She was a Democrat, you know, they were Republicans, so I think that, I mean I guess it's not unexpected that they would try to take advantage of it but I did not like it at all.

I: Some of the statewide representatives and political figures also had opinions on this matter. Do you, what are your thoughts on there?

R: Well, I think it's kind of a difficult thing because I know that a lot of the people who were denied licenses, they feel very betrayed, because in some cases, or a lot of cases, they were people that they voted for, and they didn't take a stronger stand against, I mean they didn't really speak out against it at all. I think, I mean really the only thing I know of is Bashir saying you have to do this, this is not optional. But, in this state, I think that there are still so many religiously conservative people that the elected officials, they saw no benefit to taking a stand against it. And I think especially if you're not one of their constituents in the immediate area, then it's even harder to get that support and it may not even really carry any weight for the people who want the support, you know? I mean, it just minimizes it. I certainly understand the frustration that people had over that. And actually, it's not just the people who are trying to get licenses, I mean it's anyone who believes that an elected official should have to do their job anywhere.

I: What are your thoughts on the outcomes of either the religious liberty movement or the marriage equality movement?

R: I think in the big picture, people are able to get marriage licenses here. I said earlier that I thought I don't like the way that there were some accommodations made for Kim Davis and they seem to be specifically tailored to her. But I do think it's a better alternative than having two separate forms. I just try to focus on the overall picture and that's that same-sex couples can get married. It's not exactly the way I think it should be, I mean I think, and then the whole issue of

whether her signature would be on the license or not, that was also I think a concession they made to her. I just try to focus on the big picture.

I: So would you, would you call your involvement in the movement a success?

R: Yeah, I would. Ultimately, it's a success.

I: Do you believe that the tactics of the protestors were effective?

R: I do, because I think in any issue like this, it helps if there are even just a few people who stand up and they got attention, and they were able to show people what was going on, and then that got the attention of group like the ACLU that offered legal counsel to people. So I definitely think their actions helped.

I: Would you have done anything differently with your actions?

R: My personal actions? I probably would've gotten involved in a protest sooner. That hopefully won't happen again. (laughs) But I probably would've done that sooner.

I: Do you think that the debate over marriage equality and religious liberty is over?

R: No, not at all. I think, I almost see parallels to the Roe v. Wade pro-choice movement. I think that, in that example, the Supreme Court said women have the right to have an abortion, so the states now are just doing whatever they can in any way to limit that, short of abolishing the right to choose. So I think that in conservative states people, politicians will, they're just going to look for anything, any way they can to limit it. I don't know that it will have the same, like it'll go on as long, because I think it's harder to make an argument against something that two people are doing that effects no one else. And a lot of people have gay people in their families, so they, people get more and more accepting. So I don't think this issue will give the same amount of fuel to the fire, so to say, but I do think it's going to continue for a while.

I: So how will you continue to go against that backlash?

R: For me, I stay educated about political candidates, what their positions are. I also try to support businesses, support organizations that are pro-gay marriage, I mean pro-gay equality in general. I'm involved in a group, Rowan County Rights Coalition, that is committed to that. The Pride festival that I'm involved with also is part of that. And in addition to just gay rights, I really believe in complete separation of church and state, so I support the Americans United for Separation of Church and State and groups like that and I try to educate people just in my daily life about the issue.

I: Are there any other comments or thoughts you would like to add?

R: I don't think so.

I: Okay, well I'd like to thank you for your time David.

R: Thank you.