

Morehead State University

Scholarworks @ Morehead State

Audio & Video History Collection

Rowan County Marriage Equality & Religious
Liberty Project

Fall 2015

Jennifer Reis

Robert Sammons

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/merl_audio_video



Part of the American Politics Commons, Appalachian Studies Commons, Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, Inequality and Stratification Commons, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Sexuality and the Law Commons, and the Sociology of Religion Commons

Jennifer Reis

Interviewer: This is a conversation with Jennifer Reis for the Kentucky marriage equality and religious liberty oral history project. We are in the Barber Room of Camden-Carroll Library on the campus of Morehead State University. It is 2 pm on October 25th, 2016. My name is Rob Sammons.

Hello, Jennifer. Thank you for agreeing to do this with us today. I'm gonna start out with a little bit of biographical information, just to get started. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Response: Northeast Ohio. I was born in Canton, Ohio and then grew up in North Canton and Akron.

I: Jennifer, just to give us a little bit of background information, tell us a little bit about some of your childhood experiences growing up in that part of the world.

R: Well, I always say that I kinda grew up, well I did grow up in the Rust Belt. I came from a blue-collar family, factory worker and steel workers. Pretty close family on my mom's side. Not so much on my dad's side. But, you know, lived geographically close to my grandparents, my mom's parents. Spent a lot of time with them. Also, spent a lot of time with my great-aunt on my dad's side in more of an urban area, in Canton. So, a lot of time with family. I was lucky enough to be able to be outside a lot, be in the woods a lot, do a lot of kayaking and camping and stuff like that. I liked to read and do art and stuff like that. But small family, one brother.

I: What about your religious upbringing or any ideological background?

R: So, I was raised Catholic. I come from a family that, not so much my parents. My parents were Vatican II, so that refers to, you know, in the 60s, the liberalization of the Catholic church. But, my aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-aunts, were more conservative Catholic. And at one time I had three or four nuns and one priest in my family. And my brother would've become a priest had he not wanted a family. And my dad almost went into the seminary, so we were pretty Catholic. But we were raised pretty liberal. So, I always clarify that for people, because when I say my background the make assumptions that it was a conservative family when it wasn't.

I: So, would you consider yourself as having been a believer at that time, growing up?

R: I think of myself as an aesthetic Catholic. So, I believe in a higher power but I don't believe that there's a white man with a beard sitting on a cloud, and I don't believe in hell. I believe that humans always have need a mythology and that's one particular mythology.

I: What's your current occupation?

R: Well, I'm a gallery director. I'm also a college instructor. We have a minor in arts entrepreneurship, so I teach classes in that and arts administration, which is cultural nonprofit work. And I'm a working artist, so I do that as a side gig.

I: How did you become involved in the religious liberty movement or the marriage equality movement?

R: Well, are we putting a date on this?

I: If you like.

R: Well, I've always, in my mind, fair is fair. In the United States, marriage is a legal and a financial agreement, and it's not tied to one religion. So, I guess since I was mature enough to think about it I've been involved. So, you can say from being, as far as my viewpoint on it, from, you know, being upper level high school student. If you would've asked me then I would've been like "yeah, okay." Specific to Morehead, Rowan County, you know, last summer is when I became active beyond signing a petition or agreeing with someone's Facebook posting or something like that. So, active active would've been last summer.

I: Before that, thinking into the past, was there some reason why you identified more so with one side of thing argument versus the other?

R: I think there's a couple reasons. Again, I've always been very passionate about things being fair for people, regardless of gender, sexuality, socioeconomic issues, issues of race, age. Anything like that that plays to not being an equal playing ground makes me very upset, and it always has. My parents were very, they came out of a political activism in the late 60s, and I was always raised that you treat people fairly, regardless of, sort of, the little identifiers that we may give to them. And you treat people with respect and how you would like to be treated. I also think that culturally, you know, going to art school, being in urban areas for most of my life before I moved to Morehead and the friends that I had and I have, I do have a personal tie into it. So, with things happening in Morehead, it was sorta the perfect storm of my already sort of philosophical mindset of things needed to be fair for everybody, hitting personal friendships, the people that I'm very close to, and also that it was happening in my chosen community. Because I've been here for 16, now going on 17 years. It was all of those three things colliding, you know, got me pretty interested in the whole situation.

I: Thinking back to last summer, how did you first react to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on marriage equality?

R: Oh, I was thrilled. I was like "okay, great," you know. This is, you know, politicians were slow to get on board. The tide was turning. The Supreme Court made a decision that was based on the objective information, based on people being able to be treated fairly as a civil rights issue, which it is. So, I was very happy. I was excited about it.

I: Is that something you thought you would see at this juncture in life or did it seem distant still?

R: I think, for the past, I think, if you look over the past decade, I think that people could see that being something in the foreseeable future. I think you go back twenty, thirty years, not so much. I think a big thing that changed is that people started to, I don't wanna say be comfortable, but they felt like, that they at least needed to have a conversation with their family. So, then, because

of that, you had a domino effect of people, including politicians, understanding that their children may be gay, lesbian, transgender, whatever, whereas before I think that conversation might not have happened and things would've just been ignored. And so, when families had to confront the fact that people who they loved, were close to, were this way, then that brought upon a change of, sort of, attitude, towards it. Might not have been welcome news, but they had to deal with it. I think that really affected a lot of the ways politicians thought about it and dealt with it. A number of them went on record and said, well, you know, my son's gay, so, boom boom boom. Whereas, if that conversation hadn't happened or that information hadn't been put out there then, you know, their perspective may not have changed.

I: Again, thinking back to last summer, at what point did you decide to act upon the court's decision?

R: Well, I was looking through pictures before I came over here because my memory, you know, I recollect a lot about, like, August and September, but, like, earlier, especially because I had an overseas trip in the middle of it. But, I can tell you how it started. So, I saw something on Facebook where people said Kim Davis is refusing to sign this and that, we're going down there. And I got a little nervous and I don't know exactly why. I got a little nervous and I just thought to myself, like, okay, you know. Are you gonna go down there and this and that and if you go down there what are you gonna do and if such and so happens how will you react to that? So, what I decided to do is I was like okay, if I go down there I'm gonna have a point of going down there. And I'm not gonna make a sign as my point. So, I went to Dollar General and I bought a bunch of bottled water and some ice and I got a cooler and so I was like, okay. So, I'm gonna show up with this stuff and that's what I'm giving and if I feel like it's the place for me to stay, then I'll stay. So, I ended up, you know, dropping for the water and staying for a while. And then, there were a couple other meetups in my recollection, like, in late June. And then, in July, I ended up, I was actually in Spain for about a week and a half and that's when David's videos went viral and I remember telling my husband, I'm like this is blowing up back home. So, when we got back in late July and in August, I started being down there a lot. You know, it was convenient for me because it was on the way to work. So, to work and during lunch and, you know, on the way back home, then I could go. So, and I think it was worthwhile to do it. But I did think about it before I did it.

I: Okay. Specifically, what was your reaction to the Rowan County Clerk's decision not to issue the marriage license to either straight or gay couples?

R: Well, I was upset. I thought that she should leave her job. I thought it was a grandiose performance of entitlement. You know, we don't need to get into nepotism or anything like that but I do think that she was used to a certain, and is still used to a certain type of difference in treatment, and she took advantage of that. And I think it's wonderful to have values and stand for those values, but you cannot take money from the people you serve while at the same time denying them services. It was astonishing to me. So, that was just on, that was just my perspective hearing it. Going down there and being in the room when friends were being refused was very, very upsetting to me. So, you know, I think it's unfair. It was an unfair treatment of people, of a certain type of people, and then she decided to expand it out as, basically to cover herself. And she just should have quit. That would've been, if you want to protest, then that's a

great way to protest. You say “I totally disagree with this, I think it’s wrong and, in protest, I am going to resign from the position and have an active political life or do whatever.” So, that’s my thought on that.

I: Were you an activist before these protests?

R: Well, I’ve always been politically engaged even in high school. Greenpeace and did Habitat for Humanity, involved in NOW. I’ve always been very, Planned Parenthood, Amnesty International, I just hosted a thing. So, yeah, I mean, I just believe that if you believe in something and you have the extra money and time, then you should make an investment in participating in the type of society that you want to have.

I: Earlier you mentioned a feeling of nervousness. Let’s expand on that just a little bit by answering what do you think the environment was like? Did you feel safe?

R: I think I felt fine until the media circus came to town and a lot of outside people came in, where you had the nuts with the, in fact I was just thinking about the one guy, because I called the MSU police on him. He had the van that had all the fetuses and stuff on the side of it. And so, he was parked by the Sonic off of 60, and I called the cops and I said there is a vehicle obstructing, because it was. That is not a parking spot, you know. You can go park on a side road. Now, people won’t see your nasty things, but that’s fine. I did feel nervous in Huntington, or, I’m sorry, Ashland. Yeah. That was a level of crazy that I have not experienced before. So, but really, I thought, by and large, the protests that were here were respectful and calm until things started ramping up and you had outsiders come in. And I think that that was proven by the fact of the, you know, the most recent Pride festivals that we had here. And there was one person. One person. So, it’s not really a local, you know, thing, that much. You know, they had to bus a lot of those people in. so, yeah, for the most part it was fine.

I: So, they bussed in persons on the other side of the issue?

R: Yes.

I: And the folks who were supporting marriage equality were faces you recognize?

R: For the most part. There were people who were coming in, say, from Lexington occasionally, or Mount Sterling, but it was only like one or two people. Yeah, so the people who were for marriage equality, I mean that was very much a grassroots county, Rowan County thing. But there were only like two people that I recognized, and they only showed up like once that were supporting Kim Davis.

I: Do you believe that your tactics and the tactics of others on the marriage equality side were effective? (pause) In specific, you mentioned that things were peaceful, it was a peaceful protest. Did that seem by design?

R: I think that there were people involved in the leadership, especially with the Rowan County Rights Coalition, who were very much about keeping the dialogue respectful and the actions

respectful. So, by design, yes. I think that most of the people I knew involved with the marriage equality protests are by and large nice people. I mean, I think anybody can be pushed to be nasty, but, you know, I think that the attitudes and, as well as the slogans, and just the sort of coaching on, you know, you're not gonna get anything by being a jerk. There's no reason to get nasty because it's just gonna spiral downhill. So, like, when people were, you know, if someone drove by and yelled out something nasty, and people just wave and smile. And I do think that's the best way to deal with it. You may wanna run up and confront somebody but you're not gonna win. You're not gonna win an argument when someone is, like, that set in that kind of opinion. And again, it just, it didn't get nasty until, you know, there were just some oddballs that came out of the woodwork. And then, you know, all the media and stuff.

I: Looking back, what do you think you might have done differently?

R: Personally, I should've been interviewed more. I felt nervous about it. I felt like I was kinda, like, giving all that I could by sort of showing up and being supportive. All the media made me feel very, just nervous. And I was also afraid of getting my words twisted on me. So, I just kinda shied away from that. You know, having a full-time job, too, you know, there were limits on the amount of time that I could spend. So, I tried to be as supportive as I could but, you know. I tend to get sucked into work and stuff and that has to take precedence. I don't know if the organization could've done much more. I mean, it's the (pause) I think that it was a situation where the majority, everyone I talked to, and continue to talk to, because I travel around, you say Rowan County or Morehead and they go "oh." I was at a conference in Decatur, Illinois, about two weeks ago, and they're like "Where are you from?" And I'm like "Morehead, Kentucky." So, most people were very pro-marriage equality but then you get into our community and see those protests and then see what happened with our state election, and think I'm living in an alternative universe here. So, but that's Kentucky. So, we're still red when other polls show a lot of America going blue. We're still red. So, that's, I don't know how much more could've been done. I thought, by and large, the marriage equality protests were handled very well. They were very positive and they needed to happen.

I: What difference do you believe was made by your involvement?

R: Well, I think one difference was, I work with students. Art and design students. Graduate students in particular knew, and students who take my classes that I know, saw me there and knew it was okay for them to be there. I gave a student gas money to get back from Ashland. Worked our schedules out so we could go participate in things. I think that they, so, in that way, with what I see as the community that I serve, I thought it was important for me to show up and have them see me being there. Because, you know, if I, you know, talk the talk, walk the walk, sorta thing. Also, some students who I mentored were involved in the leadership of it and I thought it was very important to be supportive and to be there. If someone got upset, be there for them to talk to and stuff like that. I also think that, you know, I, you know, I'm not gay, and as a straight person, if I think that something is wrong, and someone is being mistreated, it doesn't matter if I am not like them totally. I need to show up and say this is not right. So, I think that was important.

I: Did you become involved with any of the organizations that sprang up as a result of this battle?

R: No. I mean, through social media I did. Unfortunately, I was called away for a training on the day of the Pride festivals. I did help clean up a little bit, Morehead Pride when I got back into town. But, that was one of those things that is just a time thing. It's like, my job already takes up a significant amount of my time. So, I have to be strategic. So, I decided to spend my time on the ground instead of in meetings. I know that's kind of a rough, you know. It's just the decision I had to make.

I: Did you think that the Rowan County Clerk best represented the cause of religious liberty?

R: On behalf of whom?

I: On behalf of the movement of religious liberty. So, someone in, on that side, looking at the Rowan County Clerk as a role model, as a figurehead, as a spokesperson. Was she the best person to be in that role?

R: I think, for a limited group of people. I think for people who are Apostolic, Pentecostal, Evangelicals, perhaps. I do know that, you know, there are a lot of people who didn't wanna be represented by somebody who is from that particular branch of religion and who looks in that certain way, because it is something that's pretty easy to dismiss and put into a stereotypical category, because you have some cultural indicators there. And her husband, certainly, participated in that. I don't know. I mean, I'm not of that. I think about my husband's family, who is conservative, traditional Catholic, at least some of them. They probably would have preferred someone like Mike Huckabee. Somebody who was probably a little bit more mainstream. Now, I know she really excited some people. But then there were other people who were like well, you know. Is this where we really are in the 21st century? So, I can't really answer that as sort of a blanket answer.

I: Some folks have chosen to frame that question in that she is speaking from a authoritative position while having flaws in her own past. So, from that perspective?

R: Well, you know, yeah, that does. Is this the person who's gonna, you know, speak on a position of religious authority or purity? I just think that whole thing is just so complicated and bizarre to me. I did not, I was not raised in that religion where you talk about finding Jesus, because Jesus kinda never went away. You just knew He was in the, you know? I just think that that whole thing is very bizarre. I'm also, you know, I tend not to go to look at someone's personal choices. I look at what their actions are. So, as kind of bizarrely compelling as that all is, I think that the thing is her actions and her actions did not square with her job or the rule of the Supreme Court. She's getting paid \$80,000, which is more than I make and more than most of the people I know. And she cannot do a basic part of her job, and she kept her staff from doing it as well. So, honestly, I mean, her background does add an interesting twist to it, but my concern with her is the action that she chose in that job, which was, you know, not to release the licenses.

I: What should've been done to handle the situation?

R: Well, she should've done her job, number one. Number two, legal action should've been taken against her. Or pressure. I don't know, I'm not an authority on impeaching a public officer. I think that some things that I chose to not take seriously or to consider sort of a, oh well, that's just the way things are kind of, came front and center. Like, "Oh, we just do whatever we around here and it's just all fine and good." That was sort of like, kind of a slap in the face. I think even though, you know, it was a fair election and I'm not saying it was rigged, but, you know, it's a shame that, you know, Bevin was elected. But I think that it was a good thing for him to hitch his wagon to and I think it made a difference in that election, unfortunately. (pause) So, that's my opinion on what should've happened.

I: Do you believe the Rowan County Clerk deserved to be imprisoned?

R: Oh, yeah.

I: Was it adequate?

R: I think with her, to my recollection, when she gave permission for her staff to sign, then yeah. It was adequate. It was not the perfect solution that I would've wanted in an ideal world, but I am not the type of person who wants to see somebody being punished just for the sake of being punished, you know. I've always come at things from a very pragmatic perspective, and my issue was that everybody who was now allowed to get a marriage license was not being allowed to get a marriage license in the county. So, if that was going to happen, and that was happening, then sure, she should be released. I think she should've been fined. Again, I doubt that there's some sort of structure to fine a public official who doesn't want to do their job, but I think you need to take a hit. I'm sure she could've done some sort of fundraising to cover it. But I think there should've been some sort of monetary penalty.

I: What were your thoughts upon her release? Not just the fact that she was released, but the environment in which she was released into?

R: Are you talking about the Huckabee Cruz festival? Carter County festival? You know, a lot of political grandstanding, you know, reality TV show moment. I think that people can really get caught up into, you know, having a messiah moment. You know, it's just (pause) for the past year, and it seems to not go away, just all these sort of great TV moments, media moments, and that was just, like, here we go. I used to live in that county. So, but, you know, I mean, there's a certain audience for that and she tapped into that audience. Now, the other reason I'm glad they released her is because it was really adding to the martyr complex, which wasn't doing any good. So, I was happy. But, you know, I think, I mean, I was there in the courtroom after they, Bunning asked her the first time "will you do this?" and then she said no. and then, it was presented, "well will you allow your staff to do this?" And I did not see her say this because she was taken into another room, and she told her lawyers that she would not. So, the option that she eventually agreed to, she had. And so, then that's your choice. I mean, we make choices and we are supposed to be a nation of, we're a democratic nation based on laws and some sort of consensus on how we behave. And so, she made that choice. So, I'm glad she went to jail. Needed to happen. It's unfortunate that she did, because she just came out the same result as before she went in. Or she was given that option and she chose not to do it.

I: For a moment, let's look specifically at our other elected local officials, not just in Rowan County but in Carter County as well. What are your thoughts on their reactions and their behaviors?

R: Well, the ones in Carter County I'm not that aware of. So, you want me to speak just to Rowan County?

I: Sure, but I'm just thinking about the spectacle which we saw in Carter County. Is that a common way that prisoners are released from jail?

R: Well, I will say this. When I moved from Cincinnati, which is not that far away, to here, in 2000, my mom said "you are moving down to the Bible belt, you know what that means." And I said no. And I feel like life has decided to teach me what that means. So, that's what I'll say about Carter County. There seems to be absolutely no distinction between the personal and the political and the professional. It's just all wrapped up in one thing. And religion is part of that personal thing that gets combined with all your choices.

I: As far as the Rowan County local officials, do you think they could've done anything differently?

R: Yeah. I think that there was, from an executive leadership position, in Rowan County, I think that there was a complacent and complicit environment.

I: In your eyes, was the media attention that this event received, was it appropriate?

R: I think it was something that needed to be reported on. I think that it was another opportunity to trot out a lot of stereotypes. I live near her church and the way that the New York Times described where I lived is not the way that it looks to me. But, so, that was, you know, that was just disturbing that it's just another, you know, opportunity to drag a bunch of old stereotypes out. However, I mean, all the players were there, so I mean, I don't blame them for taking the bait on that or going after it, because it's just so easy. I was happy, you know, some of the things that I read were thought, some were thoughtful. Some media actually went into the community. There were some articles in New York Times. NPR did a segment that was thoughtful. Some of it was the same old stuff. So, that was unfortunate. I was shocked, just personally, because I've never been in an environment where I've seen something like that happen. So, it has really changed my perspective on when something hits a community, and with our 24-hour news cycle, what that means to that community and how disruptive and disorienting that can be. I never thought about how that, what that was like until, you know, seeing it and, it was bizarre. It was a strange thing.

I: What's your opinion on the outcome of the religious liberty movement?

R: Well, I don't think that there's one particular outcome. I think, so there's a couple ways you can look at it. I think that there are people who are like, "we won!" Because in one county, or I don't know, maybe there's another one, you know, someone doesn't have to put their name on it

if they don't want. Okay. Good for you on a micro level. That's on a micro level. On a macro level, they can still get married. So, I think, you know, a lot of this stuff is two steps forward, one step back. I think in a lot of ways our country had made a lot of progress on some issues. Race, gender, sexual orientation, particularly. But, whenever there's progress, there's some sort of resurgence, or backlash of anger and action. There's a variety of things we can say about America right now that shows that. So, I think that, that's my opinion about that outcome.

I: Similar question, only this time what is your opinion about the outcome of the marriage equality movement?

R: Well, I think that in America, right now, at least on paper, you can be an equal person and get the same protections, I won't even say benefits, legal, financial, health care protections of the person who you want to spend your life with. So, that's great. I don't believe in like, winners or losers, but, you know, that's where we need to be and that's where we are. Everything is not rosy, perfect, but at least, under the law, that's recognized. And that makes a major difference. And I think, culturally, people are catching up. I think in rural areas a little slower, but I think the majority of people do see it as a civil rights issue and not a religious issue, because it's not.

I: How has our community at large changed because of these events?

R: Well, I can tell you that my car registration is long overdue. (laughs) I mean, I will go in and eventually pay it, but I will try to give my check to Brian, who is the guy who was signing the marriage licenses while she was in jail. You know, I know that some people, so I've got a close friend that said this had fractured Rowan County forever and blah blah blah. I don't think so, and I think for a couple reasons. One, you know, my county is relatively the county that it was before this. But as a fairly religious, progressive, liberal person. The other thing is, I know people who I know were supporting Kim Davis. In fact, I changed my Facebook filters as to not offend some people who I was friends with, who I knew were, because of religious affiliations, pro-Kim Davis. But, you know, I'm still friendly with them. We just, if you live in a small town I think you make decisions on who you talk to. Who do you talk about what topic with? And you're also, again, you're, have some respect, you know. Treat each other kindly. And a lot of those people who were being quite nasty, again, were not from Rowan County. So, I didn't know them. I won't know them. They went away to wherever they came from. Even if they are from Bath County or Carter County, they're still, it's just not my community and I don't, you know, interact with them.

I: Do you believe this debate is over?

R: Well, I think that the highest court in the land voted on it. I still think there are gonna be skirmishes about different things in the name of religious liberty, which I think is one of the more ironic names for a movement. I think it's gonna just take people watching what's going on, really thinking through, again, even if they're not one of the group, thinking "is this a fair way to treat somebody?" Because even if you're just being strictly self-oriented, it's a slippery slope. You can go after anybody for anything. The other thing is just being a decent human being, and if you see someone being treated in a wrong way, or someone's rights being taken away, I mean, that's what being an American is supposed to be about. We're supposed to value our individual

rights. And my attitude is, if I wanted to live in a theocracy, there are plenty of places I could move to, but I don't live in one and I don't intend on living in one.

I: How do you plan to continue the fight?

R: Well, (pause) I'm pretty aware, as far as news, pretty engaged, you know, social media and watch stuff. I don't know, honestly, I hope not, I hope nothing happens again, especially close to us, where I feel like I need to go out and protest. I do write letters and I make phone calls, you know, and I join organizations and I donate money. I would not be against, if I got upset about something, going to Frankfort. So, that's, you know, how I would consider being, well, that I'm active now, and you know, would consider being in the future.

I: How has this experience changed you?

R: I think that certain people get really caught up in things, in an almost irrational way, and I have learned that, and I counseled students on this when it was going on, that being calm and standing your ground is a much more productive thing to do than to engage with an irrational person. So, that means, unfortunately, that you can't have a conversation with somebody, but I think you need to decide when there's room for dialogue there or when somebody is just...and then, you know, sometimes, if someone's acting irrationally and violently without actually starting to be violent, then you should be aware of that behavior and not engage.

I: Are there any comments you'd like to add? Anything I might have left out?

R: I think a good take away from that is that, you know, I think that we do have a nice community that, by and large, is supportive of one another. And I think that it was good for our college students and younger people in the community to see that there was a wide array of people who showed up to be supportive. That it just wasn't people who were, like, college age or of a certain type of person. That there were people from the community, people from the colleges, some people from the churches. So – (interview cut off there)