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Rowan County Marriage Equality & Religious
Liberty Project

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Julie Sloan

Interviewer: This is a conversation with Julie Sloan for the Kentucky Marriage Equality and Religious Liberty Oral History Project. We're in the Barbara room of the Camden-Carroll Library on Morehead State's campus, located in Rowan County, Kentucky. It's 2 pm on November 29th, 2016. My name is Dakota Barr. First I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet me today Julie.

JS: My pleasure.

DB: I would like to start if you would with some biographical information such as where you were born and where you grew up.

JS: Well I was born in Germany. My mom is German and my dad was in the army, the American army. And so I grew up all over the place. Germany—my grandmother lived there so that was kind of home base, but by the time I was ten I had lived in Massachusetts, Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Kansas, Washington and Germany.

DB: How long have you lived in Kentucky?

JS: Sixteen years.

DB: How long in Morehead?

JS: Sixteen years. Yeah. I've been here—actually I've lived here twice as long as I've lived anywhere else in my life.

DB: Would you consider Morehead to be your home?

JS: Yes. Definitely.

DB: So in the time that you have been here in Morehead, what have you noticed in terms of change? In terms of culture and just the town itself?

JS: Honestly I don't think the culture has changed that much. The people are as they were. The town of course has grown a lot. Lots of new construction and streets are where they didn't used to be but the people are—I think this whole, I'm not speaking real well here. Honestly other than the fact that the town is growing and there has been more construction, new streets and stuff I don't think it's changed a whole lot. Since I've been here, since 2000.

DB: Okay. Is this town similar to other towns in Eastern Kentucky in terms of its culture do you think?

JS: No, I think probably because of the presence of the university, it's a bit more liberal. It's more diverse for sure.

DB: Okay. If you could just, other than moving a lot can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

JS: Well I'm an only child. My dad—my parents are very Republican, very conservative. And as a matter of fact I know my dad voted for Trump. My mother did not this time. Usually they're both straight Republican ticket—my dad was in Vietnam and well I was raised real conservative and I was sheltered from a lot of what was going on at the time. Kent State for instance. I didn't know about it until years later, which made me not very happy with my parents once I figured out that I had been living under this blanket of protection of not knowing what was going on in the world. And that made me more liberal I think in general.

DB: And what about your religious upbringing?

JS: We went to church until I was old enough to say I didn't want to go anymore and then my parents apparently didn't want to go either. They were just going on my behalf. My dad has always called himself an agnostic. Now he's—after his second time in Vietnam, he became atheist. I have experimented with different religions and now I am probably somewhere between pagan and atheist.

DB: So the church wasn't that important to your family?

JS: Not really. The way I viewed it now—it is a way to teach children morals with the threat of punishment or you know reward. But eventually we have to grow up and do things because they're right, not because we're afraid of punishment or we're going for a reward. That's how I feel about religion now. You have to be your own supervisor.

DB: And what do you do for a living?

JS: I was in the—building trades, an electrician for twenty years. And did some other construction before that and now I'm more or less retired. I'm self-employed. I have chickens and sell eggs and that sort of thing.

DB: Okay. I would like to know how you first became involved in the movement for marriage equality.

JS: Well I was overjoyed when I saw that Obergefell won and just you know a few days later I learned that Kim Davis in the county I live in was one of only three that was not going to comply. And of course that made me really angry and unhappy with our county officials. That's when I learned that they're not really as progressive as I thought they were. I happen to be driving by and saw the protests and the next day I came out and joined them. I've had gay friends all my life before I realized that they were different. I had gay friends in junior high school—middle school now. And I moved a lot. Everywhere I went, some of my closest friends happened to be gay and I've never had a bias against them, so I was really happy when this equality came through. Like I said I was disappointed that my county was one of the ones—kind of ashamed that the county I live in, that I like being here—that they are resisting this progress.

DB: You said earlier that this is one of the more progressive counties in the state.

JS: I sure thought so.

DB: So how did it change your view and your perception of the county that you live in?

JS: I was disappointed very much in the county officials. I actually Doc Blevins was one of the first people I met when I moved here and my husband—my late husband introduced me to him and said he works for us. He was a good guy. And now he is the county judge executive and honestly he was being in my opinion, cowardly in not standing up to this—what would you call it? Misbehavior among his county employees. Yeah, I was really disappointed in him and I heard that the sheriffs are also on the Kim Davis side, which is wrong. They need to be on the side of the law and not on the side of opinion or religion.

DB: Do you think that these views were solely expressed by your elected officials? Or do you think that these were views that were most closely held by the people in the county?

JS: Oh no, elected officials and the people who have old money in this county. The ones that keep their jobs in the family. The common people—the ones that are not in the government, they started—at first they acted like they didn't see us, protesters. "We'll ignore you and you'll go away," but as we were out there every day and we weren't holding signs of hatred like the other side was, more people started waving at us and blowing the horn and we had a sign that said, "Honk for equality," and it just sort of snowballed. More and more people supporting us and more people came out to stand with us every day. I think at first people were afraid to show support, or afraid to show that even they were not on the other side. Everybody was pretending to be, "this is the right side." But once they realized even some of their neighbors were supporting marriage equality, they became less afraid to show that they also supported or at least were not against it. I still have a pretty high opinion of most of the people in the county. I'm still talking to—it comes up in conversation what happened last year. And people who—yesterday a friend, who says she's not political. "You'll notice on my Facebook, I never comment on political stuff," but honestly she said, "I'm a county employee. I do a lot of things that I don't want to do." She said she used to work in the food stamp office and she said, "there were people there I thought didn't deserve food stamps or didn't need them, but it is my job to do it and that's how any county employee or government employee ought to act. It's your job. You either do it or you get a different job."

DB: So you didn't see her making the marriage license issue as infringing on her religious liberty?

JS: Oh yeah. Oh no, no. Her issuing marriage licenses—no, that was not an infringement on her liberty. She was trying to force her views on the general public and people don't understand. If—the U.S. is supposedly 80% Christian, but there are a lot of different Christians and only some of them are these extremists, which I lump almost into the category of the Westboro Baptist. The ones that don't believe in a lot of things. You can't have a holiday that's not Christmas in December, that sort of thing. No. She had a job to do and she needed to leave her religion at home.

DB: And when she didn't what do you think should've been the next step? What should've happened to resolve the issue?

JS: She should've lost her job. She should've been given a warning, "Either you comply or you're out. You're in a different position maybe or you're just out completely." That's what should've happened.

DB: This went on for a long time.

JS: It sure did.

DB: And a lot of court cases and a lot of legal action was taken, and ultimately as you know she ended up in jail. Do you think that that was the appropriate step and that was necessary in order to get the marriage licenses issued?

JS: I think it was necessary to get the licenses issued. But it really didn't solve the problem because she really wasn't in jail for enough. She, herself is not issuing licenses. The one member of her office who is gay is the one issuing the licenses. So they sort of have a gay marriage clerk now, so the rest of them don't have to be contaminated by the issue. No, I don't think that solved it, but I do think it was appropriate to jail her for it. I think she ought to still be in jail, personally. Or unemployed. It really makes me mad that she is—after this term, after this elected term of three years she will be eligible for her full pension and I don't know. That's just wrong. She's not doing her job. She put up roadblocks for other people doing the job. That was misconduct.

DB: So I want to go back to those protests. So you were involved in them right?

JS: Yes.

DB: When did you first become involved in the protests?

JS: The second week. It was early July.

DB: Would you have considered yourself an activist before these protests or were these the first ones you attended?

JS: No. Yeah, it's the first time.

DB: What was your immediate goal when you went to these protests? Did you want to see Kim Davis punished? Did you want marriage licenses issued? Did you just want to spread love and joy to all the people watching?

JS: I wanted people to realize that we are not as backwards as some of the world thinks we are. I wanted the licenses issued, you know that was the main thing, the licenses issued. And I wanted to express my displeasure at the resistance to what is now law.

DB: So what were your tactics when you went in? Did you—what exactly—how did you protest?

JS: I held a sign. I waved signs at people as they drove by. And when they gave me the middle finger I gave them the middle and the index back. People sometimes stopped to argue and I would argue with them. Pretty much I was there to support the others. I would—well hold signs and chant. We had some chants like, “Obey the law of the land,” “Separation of church and state.” That was one. That was fun. And I met people that were more of my mindset than people I’ve known before.

DB: You keep talking a lot about job responsibilities and the legal aspects of this. Did you find that to be more effective when trying to persuade the other side than using a religious argument?

JS: Yes. Job aspect is more effective. With the religious argument, I tend to get less respectful of the other side, of their beliefs. I can’t help it.

DB: How many people attended those protests?

JS: Sometimes we had as little as five. Usually it would be more like a dozen and on weekends we had more especially on the weekends when the courthouse is opened on Saturdays. One Saturday a month. I saw probably close to a hundred people there a couple of times.

DB: Did you think there was more people on the marriage equality side or more people on the religious liberty side? Was it kind of balanced?

JS: No, I think all the people on the religious liberty side were bussed in. The very few local people actually came to protest on Kim’s behalf. A few from her church, which is over in Farmer’s. And the guy who ran for Senate I believe. Rocky Adkins seat, he ran against Randy Fletcher for that and he’s local. He’s a preacher, but mostly they brought in church groups from other states and these people really didn’t know what they were coming to protest about. Because at one point on one of the crowded days, one of their people—this woman said, “This is not what my Jesus is about.” And she left. She was angry at them for some of the foul stuff they were talking about. I’ve actually got that written down if you want I can tell you what I observed that day.

DB: Yeah sure, be my guest.

JS: It’s just an entry in my journal for that day. “Yesterday morning—,” this is speaking about Friday, 4th of September 2015. “Yesterday morning I arrived at the Rowan County courthouse at 7:45. There was a crowd of Kim supporters. About 80. And only two of our freedom fighters were lined on the sidewalk. In my white, “Love Wins,” t-shirt I walked up to the courthouse entrance to face them. My two guys followed me. Within fifteen minutes there were about fifty of us. James and Will got their license as soon as the doors opened at eight. The haters had a vile preacher who talked filth including graphic descriptions of sexual acts. There were children present in their crowd. He had a megaphone, which the sheriffs didn’t make him get rid of until Michael and Lisa went in to complain. There’s a lot about no electronic enhancement in the

freedom of speech area. We drowned them out with our chants. ‘Love has won,’ and ‘Obey the law of the land,’ ‘Separation of church and state,’ ‘Gay or straight, black or white, marriage is a civil right.’ And we sang, ‘Jesus loves the little children,’ changing one line to ‘gay or straight, black or white, they’re precious in his sight.’ When we didn’t have gay couples to protect, we mostly ignored the ranting and at one point a whole bunch of us burst out laughing at him when he said, “Gays don’t live past fifty years because of their gay lifestyle.” And then he said, “Just like heroin addicts,” which made some of us laugh even harder. Eventually they got tired of being ignored, drowned out, and laughed out. He gathered his flock and went to Grayson to protest at the jail. The other vile preacher, Randy Smith was pretty benign after listening to that one. It was probably a bit subdued after that too. The afternoon went more or less peacefully. The high point was one of their women defected loudly her “Jesus didn’t preach hate,” and getting a round of applause from us.” That’s about it.

DB: So you said that day you went in and there were two of you and eighty of them.

JS: They were little guys too. I’m tall. I’m 5’10 and weigh 200 pounds, and these guys were probably 110 pounds each, and there was a big crowd of them. So they were kind of on the other side of the street waiting for somebody else to come up, and I can’t blame them for that.

DB: Was that overwhelming or intimidating to have so many people against your cause and so little of you?

JS: Ahm. It just made me angry and made me want to get in their face. Just dare somebody to touch me, besides I had just had knee surgery. I was carrying a cane.

DB: Did you ever feel intimidated during these protests?

JS: Only when the cameras were looking at me, that’s when, yeah.

DB: If you could do anything differently during the protest, what would you do?

JS: Oh that day that I just read about, if I had—when I got there, I should have spoken out, interrupted the vile guy and introduced myself and said, “I’m straight. These are my friends, and I have other friends. And if you harass them, you’re harassing me. And if you want to harass them, you have to go through me.” And there a lot of us like me who feel that way. And just give them something to think about. That’s what I would’ve done differently. I would’ve opened my mouth more.

DB: Do you believe that the protests made a difference?

JS: I think it made a difference to the people who live here, to show them—like I said, there are people who don’t care if you’re gay or straight. But they’re afraid to voice that because they think they’re the only ones who feel that way and I think it showed those people that it’s okay to come out of the non-hater closet. That’s the difference I think it made.

DB: Did you become involved in any groups or like any other causes related to this because of your involvement?

JS: Well I got involved in Rowan County Rights Coalition for a while. They were for—still are I suppose, for the all marginalized groups. We parted ways and I got involved with Morehead Pride, which works only for LGBT causes and also for our annual Pride festivities. Yeah that's about it. I still work for Morehead Pride.

DB: Do you think an organization like that is necessary in a community such as ours?

JS: Yes. I think there's always going to be some hate and there has to be a group that shows other people that not everybody feels that way. That it's safe to not be with the loudest group, the ones that are causing all the uproar.

DB: Okay. You talked a little about the reactions of your local elected officials. I was hoping you could elaborate on that more, even branch out and talk about—do you think there was much that these people could've done? Did the law allow them to do such or was it just—?

JS: I think they were all worried about the next election, whether they get to keep their jobs or not. So they were being in my opinion, cowardly by not doing the right thing, because they were afraid it wasn't the popular thing. I'm really disappointed in them—Walter Blevins in particular.

DB: Do you mind if I ask if you voted for the county clerk?

JS: No, I did not. And she's a Democrat, and I voted against her.

DB: Okay.

JS: Because I knew her mother. I know her cousins. I know a lot of her family, and her mother was one of the double-dippers. She drew salary while drawing retirement. Kim will probably do the same thing. I am not in favor of nepotism. No, I didn't vote for her.

DB: Okay. You talked about being intimidated by the cameras and obviously there was a lot of media attention here in this town, and I just wanted to talk to you a little bit about that. Do you think the coverage that came about was appropriate and balanced?

JS: It never is. Although we had somebody on the Morehead news who was trying to do a balanced job, but I believe she was dismissed of that because the Morehead news tries to not take sides on any issues. Always been that way. Now the coverage—it really depends who runs the paper, who runs the media. Media is about entertainment. It's not about news.

DB: Do you think they depicted our town in an accurate light?

JS: I don't know. I really don't watch television much.

DB: Okay.

JS: So I'm really not sure what they depicted. I know what I read in the papers. That's about it.

DB: So as a champion for equality that you are. What are your opinions on the outcomes of the marriage equality movement? Do you think it's getting better for people fighting for marriage equality? Or do you think we're taking leaps back?

JS: Well in the last three weeks we've been taking a leap back. Hopefully Donald Trump will not be inaugurated, but it's always possible that he will be and I'm afraid he will be. He's going to do what he can to undermine, I'm sure. Once he gets through with the ecology.

DB: So how are you going to combat this? Are you going to in any way try to fight his efforts?

JS: Well I can do myself is be aware of what's going on. See if somebody is being harassed, which a lot of people are being now in Trump's name—and step in. I actually bought a can of mace—first time I've ever owned that, because I've been hearing so many stories of minorities being harassed, intimidated, attacked because well since Trump was elected. And I haven't seen any of that here. I've heard of it happening as near by as Louisville, and I know it's a reliable source because I know them. But if it does happen here in my sight I'm going to step in. And if I have to, I mean I have a can of mace now. Somebody is going to get a faceful of it, which would be better then before I had the mace because I carried a tractor ball in my truck, which would do a little more permanent damage. And I really rather not go to jail. I will if I have to.

DB: Do you feel a sense of obligation to stand up?

JS: Yes.

DB: Do you know why that is?

JS: Because everybody deserves the same rights. It's not right to—I mean signaling out one race or one religion as they're the ones—that's what the Muslim countries do. And I have nothing against Muslims individually and they have terrorists, just like we have our Westboro and out KKK and I say, "we," as a Christian nature. See I'm calling it that and I don't mean it. Yeah, if you want a country run by religion, move to Iraq. And that's just not the way things are supposed to be here. Everybody—this is what America is supposed to be about. Everybody is equal. Everybody has the same privileges, the same rights, protections. But that's not what's going on. People are—and since the election, since Trump's election it's been getting worse at least in the news that I see. That minorities are really being targeted now.

DB: Do you think that—how do you think our city government and our county governments are working to make sure people are being treated equally? I mean Morehead does have a Fairness Ordinance.

JS: We do, and the head of the Fairness committee is the mayor who posts homophobic memes on his Facebook page. That's kind of—I want to say fucked up. I can't think of any other way to say it. Yeah. I think the city government is a bit more in tune with how things should be, than the

county government. The county is full of nepotism and the good ole boy network, the Dixicrats. The city is more integrated with the college people from the university, so it would be more liberal branch—I hate to say liberal and conservative, but progressive—there you go.

DB: Okay.

JS: I don't feel like I'm doing really well at this.

DB: You're doing fine. So we talked previously about how the community at large has changed since you lived here. And you said that culturally not much has changed.

JS: I don't think so.

DB: But do you think these events have sparked a changed?

JS: I think the thing that has changed is people are more accepting. Basically—like I said before, because they feel it's okay to be more accepting, it's not necessary to say, "This is wrong," because their neighbors think it's wrong or because their church thinks it's wrong. That's the cultural change. People are out and straight people are out about not being homophobic, that's important.

DB: Do you think cultural changes is good every now and then?

JS: Yeah. Let's go for more honesty.

DB: Alright.

JS: And more acceptance.

DB: I really just have one more question for you. And I want to know how this experience as a whole has changed you?

JS: I'm a bit louder. I feel more powerful. I feel that I can stand up not for just myself, but for other people. It feels good when I see somebody who is intimidated by a crowd, or you know by a situation, I can go stand by them and say, "I'm with you. You need anything, I'm here." And just the way that they react to that makes me feel more powerful and more effective. I like that.

DB: So you've developed a sense of courage?

JS: Yeah.

DB: Okay. Is there anything else you would like to add?

JS: No.

DB: Well thank you so much Julie.