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Rowan County Marriage Equality & Religious
Liberty Project

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Suzanne Tallichet

Interviewer: This is a conversation with Sue Tallichet for the Kentucky marriage equality and religious liberty oral history project. We are in studio A of Breckenridge Hall on Morehead State's campus, located in Rowan County, Kentucky. It is 10:06 on March 15th, 2017. My name is Ricky Nelson. Hi! So, I'm just gonna have you give me some background to start out with. So, if you could, tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

R: I was born in Washington, D.C. I grew up in Fairfax County, Virginia, right outside of D.C. My father worked for the CIA in Langley and my mother, both my parents, actually, were military, after you asked for those names it's all coming back. They both were Army officers during World War II. Both deceased, both buried in Arlington. Just to give you some background. So, a lot of people end up in northern Virginia who are part of the government or part of the, anything to do with ancillary services to the government.

I: Okay. Now, were you, could you tell me a little bit about some of your childhood experiences, just being in a military family like that?

R: Fairfax County itself is rather rural, at the time. We watched a lot of suburban development encroach on rural areas. I think that's why I ended up getting a Ph.D. in rural sociology. I had good childhood experiences. I really enjoyed being outdoors, and we always had dogs and it was nice. It was good, growing up. I have one brother I haven't talked to in decades. That's another issue, but anyway. It was good growing up. We were compatible then. (laughs) We're not compatible now.

I: Were you raised religiously in any way, or raised to believe certain type of things?

R: That's a really good question, because I was baptized in a Presbyterian church, and as I started to grow up, like, when I was 6 or 7, I remember my mother, we'd go to church, you know, no pun intended, religiously. And at one point, they changed the services, and my mother said "why did you move the services up? Why are they earlier?" "Well, we have to compete with the Catholics." And I think that that sort of mentality of organized religion turned her off. I could tell, you know. When you're a child you're watching adults interact with other adults and you're learning a lot. And I think that that was a big turn off for her, and at one point she asked me and my brother, she said "do you want to go to church anymore?" And we said "well, no, not really. Not after some of the things that you've said." You know, pointing out the sort of materialistic orientation that a lot of organized religions have, and people. The value system wasn't spiritual, it was more material. And so, there was a big turn off, and I think that we picked up on that and said no, we don't wanna go to church, and she said "fine, I'm not gonna make you." So, my mother died an atheist. I know, at the nursing home where she was, after she died a lot of the people who took care of her said "well, I think she really believed toward the end." No, she didn't. she said "I'm on the next journey. I hope I run into..." Her older brother died during World War II, during D-Day. He was a paratrooper, a platoon leader, and he was killed after he shed his chute and met up with the colonel and then they ran into a Nazi patrol unit and they were killed. So, she said she prayed and prayed and prayed that her brother, who she adored, would come back. Older brother. And he didn't. and I asked her one time, I said "Is that when

you started believing, or having doubts?” And she said “Yeah. That’s about the time. You know, I just prayed so hard and thought he’s got to come back and he didn’t.” And it devastated my grandparents and it devastated my mother, and I think that that’s when she started to realize that, and I was, always heard that if you wanna get something done, do it yourself. Don’t rely on a higher power. You’re so the power. So, you need to get it in gear and do it. I mean, that doesn’t mean that if someone else says “look, everything I do is really, I’m an instrument of God,” that’s fine. That’s their, you know, I’m grateful for whatever they’re doing. Their motivation is theirs, but I have my own motivation and I think we’re all entitled to have our own ideas and our own beliefs, and I don’t think anybody should be disrespected for that. One way or the other. It works both ways.

I: That’s a good transition for me, because now we’re gonna start talking about Kim Davis. So, what was your reaction when the U.S. Supreme Court said that gay marriage was legal all over the country?

R: I thought it was great. It’s about time. I watched a lot of gay people, including myself, get subtly discriminated against, one way or another, and sometimes not so subtly, and I thought it was about time that there was equal privilege. And, you know, having equal privilege doesn’t mean that this detracts or erodes the privilege of the members of the dominant group, which would be heterosexual people. They act like we’re robbing them of something, you know, that we’re stealing from them, and it really speaks to a basic insecurity or fear that they must have. Now, not all straight people feel that way, but apparently, Kim Davis did. So, I was very surprised. I thought, I never thought I’d live to see this. But, there it was. Which, I think it was a victory but also, its time has come, okay. This is what, 2015? Not 1915. So, you know, times have changed and we need to move on as a society and recognize that these relationships are just as legitimate as any relationship between heterosexuals.

I: So, what was your reaction when you learned that the Rowan County clerk, Kim Davis, was not issuing marriage licenses to either straight or gay couples, because she didn’t want to issue them to the gay couples.

R: It was a head shaker. You know, I mean, I wasn’t too surprised. I was a little at how far it went and how much publicity Rowan County got, but I was not surprised that she did that. You know, before the whole issue, the whole Supreme Court issuing gay marriage decision, I knew Kim Davis to be a product of nepotism, someone who was not altogether ethical, someone who, on occasion, had ridiculed me when I just went to get my, register my vehicle. You know, I’m been an outspoken opponent to mountaintop removal, not underground coal mining or coal, per se, but mountaintop removal mining. And, she one time asked me, “Sue, don’t you want one of these Friends of Coal plates? Are you sure?” And I said “Yes Kim, I’m sure.” And on another occasion, I had been here 15 years, and after 15 years they give you choices of little gifts to recognize your years of service, and one of those gifts was a license plate. And the license plate itself, not the taxes, not the registration, not the court fees, but the plate, was supposed to be free. And I went to the courthouse and I plunked down my certificate that showed that this plate was free, and she said “oh no, no, that’ll cost you \$20.” And I said “no, that’s not right. That’s not what Morehead said. That’s not what Morehead has told me.” “Well, you know how Morehead is,” she said. And I thought oh no, here we go. So, I said “well, forget it.” And she said “So,

you're not gonna register?" And I said "No. I'm gonna go back. It's a matter of principle. I don't care if it's 20 cents. I'm gonna go back and find out who's telling the truth." So, I went back to Morehead and I talked to somebody in HR, Human Resources, and I said "What's the deal here? Is this a \$20 plate or is it free?" And they said "oh no, no, that's free. Did you show her your certificate?" I said "I showed her everything that you gave me." And they said "well, did you give her the \$20?" I said "No I did not give her the \$20." They said "well, when you go back, don't give her the \$20 and have her call us and we'll straighten this out." I said fine. I went back. She demanded the same \$20. It got a little loud. I mean, you know "you owe me \$20." I said "oh no I don't." And finally, her mother, Jean Bailey, who was started to pace nervously behind her, intervened and said "what's wrong?" And when she found out what was going on, she said "oh no, Kim, she doesn't need to give you that \$20." Now, where was that 20 bucks going? Her pocket? So, you know, this was all before the whole gay marriage issue in Rowan County and her denial of gay rights, you know, that were clearly legitimate at this point, by law. So, I just know her to be a, well, that whole family has taken full advantage of Rowan County taxpayers for a long, long time. And there are too many, unfortunately, people in that courthouse who see their public official role as some kind of personal interaction. That their job is somehow an extension of who they are as a person. And I'm afraid when you take an oath, whether you're in the clerk's office or the sheriff's office or whoever you are, you need to drop your bias somewhere along the line, or at least try real hard. So, I just, I have a real problem and I'm a very strong proponent of the separation of church and state. I mean, I don't, without, you might hear music playing here in a minute. No, seriously. If you look at the Declaration of Independence. I'm a traceable relative to George Clymer, who signed the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and, you know, it's in my blood. And so, our founders, we weren't founded as a Christian nation. A lot of those guys were deists, and many of them didn't believe at all. So, to sit here and say that she's going to do her job in a way that imposes her religion on everyone else is just in defiance of what we stand for as Americans. I mean, freedom of religion is the reason why my other side of my family came here. They were French Huguenots. They were living Lyon which is in the southeastern part of France, and they were told convert to Catholicism or leave. Well, they packed their bags and left. Some of them went to Switzerland, some of them came to the U.S. That was a matter of religious freedom. So, you know, we're all about diversity. We're all about religious freedom, and it makes us stronger, and Kim Davis, obviously, needs several civics classes to bring her up to speed. She really needs an education and I doubt she'll ever get it. So, she's quite the hypocrite.

I: So, did you participate in any of the protests?

R: I was there twice.

I: Can you tell me about being at the protests? Like, what you saw, if there was any hostility between the two sides, because I know both sides were there.

R: It could've gotten out of hand, and it didn't. and I understand the sheriff's office didn't want any of the protestors there, period, on the lawn, at all. And I understand that the Morehead police came along and said "no, we'll handle this. This is in city limits, you don't have to worry about it. We'll control the crowd or whatever happens. We'll take care of it." So, I think right there, that tells you something about people in the courthouse, period. Not just Kim Davis. One of the

things that was interesting that happened, two things I want to tell you about. One, I went in with a gay couple who wanted to get their marriage license. They went in to see Kim and one, in particular, knew Kim personally, and said “Kim, why are you doing this?” And she said kept repeating that it was her moral conviction. That was an experience, because it was almost like you were in the Twilight Zone. You went walking in there and of course, when we all walked in there, everybody knew what was going on and that this couple was going to try to get their license. We had been sitting in Kim Davis’ office and trying to persuade her, and she just continued to say, politely, no, no, no, no. The other thing I wanted to make sure I told you when you asked me to do this interview was what are some of the memorable things that happened. Not everybody who was on the other side of this issue, who identified as a Christian, was exactly alike. And I remember one of the two times I went to the protests, Terry Blanton, friend of mine who’s also an activist on a lot of different issues, called me and said “Hey, I’m gonna be in Morehead. Meet me down by the courthouse.” And I said sure. We went down to the courthouse, and we walked in and then out again to see what was going on in the clerk’s office, and as we were walking out, there was a woman who was clearly with the Christian side of this, because not all Christians agree with what this is all about. She looked at us and was extremely polite, and said “Hello, ladies.” And I greeted her back. And then, later, the same woman was standing in a knot of people outside, and they must have started to get a little bit, I don’t know, be derisive about those other folks who were for gay rights. And she backed away from the little circle and said, loudly enough for all of us to hear, “I didn’t come down here to hate anyone. I don’t like what you all are doing. I’m leaving.” So, that tells you that even among those folks who were opposed to gay marriage, they’re on a continuum. There’s a degree of disdain and there’s a degree of disagreement among those folks as well. You know, when you say the word “Christian,” it’s just like saying the word “gay.” Well, there’s many different Christians, as there are people who are gay or anything else. So, you can’t lump them all in one category, and I remind myself of that any time I start to feel like it’s us and them. No, it’s all of us, you know. It’s really, I refuse to go there. Although I get irritated with people who, it really, after a while, some of the most extreme negative views against gay marriage took on a circus-like atmosphere and had a circus-like quality. I mean, it was almost humorous, some of the things that, the beliefs that were being put forward, and the rigidity, the inflexibility of the thinking that some, not all, but some of those folks who were on the quote other side of this issues demonstrated or displayed. I had to laugh.

I: What did you think when, after the federal judge told Kim Davis she had to start issuing marriage licenses and she still did not, and then she was taken to jail. How did you react to that?

R: I thought it was funny as hell. For a lot of reasons, not just because she did what she did. I mean, she defied the law, she broke the law, so it didn’t matter anymore who her mother was, how much money that family’s made over the years, how much control she thought she had and could impose on other people, she broke the law and the law applies to everybody and she went to jail. And now, Kim Davis is a jailbird. So, you know, I was very gratified by that. I thought they were kinda lenient on her. However, the point was made and I think what they were really trying to do, they were worried about this place exploding, I think, and they wanted to make sure that they didn’t, nobody went to extremes to anger anybody. You know, the possibility of bombing and sniping and all that kinda stuff is always there. There’s always the threat of violence whenever you have kind of a tinderbox and you’re just waiting for that one match to

ignite the whole thing. And that could've happened. If I was in law enforcement, that's what I would've been looking for, and I think that's what they were doing. My hats off to the Morehead city police for the way the handle a lot of things. It kept it calm, it really did.

I: Do you think that, because you spoke about religious freedom, do you think that Kim Davis represented religious freedom well?

R: She represented religious freedom? No, not at all. I think she represented a lack of freedom. I think that she - who's freedom are we talking about? Is really what it boils down to. Her freedom or mine? And, you know, as a public official, and when you separate church and state, she is a state public official. She should be doing her job. I mean, there are a number of times that I have done my job and not agreed with what I was doing, but that's what I was told to do because I'm paid to do that job. And how I do it has a lot to do with it too, but at the end of the day, here's the goal, here's what you need to do. Do it. And she could've had her other clerks do this. She just didn't want her name on things. From now on, every time I go in to register my vehicles, I don't want her name on my check, so I pay in cash. You know, the feeling's mutual. If she thinks she's the only one that can impose her views on other people by doing what she did, well, that's just wrong, what she did. And if that was her religious freedom, then she should've resigned as clerk and gone on the lecture circuit and made herself some money, instead of staying in a job where taxpayers, gay and straight taxpayers, are paying her salary. My gay money is just as green as anybody else's.

I: Do you think that the media attention that these events received was appropriate? That this even deserved that much media attention? Because there were lots of media outlets down at the courthouse and at the clerk's office when this was happening.

R: Oh yeah. I do think so. You know, there was actually another county where a clerk pulled the same thing as Kim Davis, and there was no media attention because there were no protests. And I think Morehead did itself proud when people came out in the numbers that they came out and said we don't agree with her, she needs to do her job or step down. I really, Morehead's kind of a sleepy little town most of the time, and when something like this happens, I think it deserved all the media attention it could get. I do feel one thing is that probably could've hurt tourism and could've hurt people wanting to visit here. On the other hand, it could've also been a draw, you never know. And, you know, media is like garbage. It goes out in the garbage and it's gone and people forget and, you know, the other day I was telling somebody who was from out of town that I was from Rowan County. They said "So?" I said "Well, don't you remember the..." "Oh, yeah." See, people tend to forget. But I think it got all the media attention that it deserved.

I: Do you think that there was anything wrong or right about the coverage? Like, maybe specifically the way that Kim Davis was being portrayed in the media?

R: Not really. But then, you know, I've got my bias too, so. I don't think so. She could've handled it a lot better. I mean, when cameras came in, she stuck her hand out and she glared at them and then, next thing you know, all the cartoons, caricatures were being drawn, and in the news and, you know, she could've handled it differently. Actually, she could've handled it differently by just doing her job. Had she just done her job, she could've avoided a lot of

ridicule. But I'm beginning to wonder sometimes if she doesn't enjoy the attention. The other thing, because she's kind of a spoiled brat, to tell you the truth, and she probably enjoys the attention. You know, something else, too, a lot of people who go to real extremes to demonstrate that they're anti one thing or another, especially in this case, I've found that people who are that anti-gay are usually hiding something in here. They're fighting against some desires or some fantasies or some feelings they've had. So, there's a lot of latency out there, and you find out later that somebody who committed a crime against a gay person actually has feelings for that person or is a latent homosexual themselves and they just are fighting it. So, I don't know. Maybe Kim Davis will come out of the closet someday. I mean, she hasn't done a real good job at being married. (laughs) She keeps trying though. I mean, I gotta give her A for effort.

I: Do you think that the marriage equality movement, would you call their efforts a victory?

R: Yeah, I would.

I: Could you tell me a little bit why?

R: Sorry. Didn't mean to leave you hanging there. If you go back, I don't know a whole lot but I know a little bit of the history of the gay rights movement. If you go back to the very first time there was pushback, it's been recorded at the Stonewall Bar, I think it was in New York City, where cops used to regularly raid and harass gay people that were in the bar, and one night they came in to harass and they regretted it. So, you know, and that kinda marked the beginning of gay people saying "hey, get over it. I'm not hurting you, I'm not interested in you, nobody cares about you, so just get off our backs. Leave us alone." And I think it was a victory because, again, I never thought in my lifetime I would ever see this happen. And I remember growing up, you know, the only people who were gay were the gym teachers and guys that ran the flower shop. And that was sorta the image that gay people had, but I think it's changed to a great extent. And when you turn on TV and you accidentally get a soap opera, because I don't watch soap operas, but you see two guys kissing, or you see two women holding hands or doing something like that, you know things are changing, and you know there's an acceptance. And then, you may hear the story about how people have been working with one another for 20 years and all of a sudden, somebody else I've been working with for 20 years says "By the way, I'm gay." What? Even if they have any negative feelings toward gay people, now all of a sudden they've got to reassess all that. They can't live with the dissonance, you know, the cognitive dissonance, so they've got to figure out a way to no reconcile the fact that I've worked with this person for 20 years, I really like them, but I don't like gays, but now they're gay, what do I do? You know, that really seems to change a lot of minds, and it makes gay people look and seem, be perceived as normal. Gay people are normal. There's nothing wrong with that. You go back to 1973 and the elimination of homosexuality in the DSM manual as a sickness, as an illness, and that also marks a huge difference out there in the professional field of clinical psychology. You know, psychologists were at odds. Some said it's not an illness, others, yes it is, but when it got eliminated from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Health, you knew something, that gays are now normal people. Or at least the label of normal is there.

I: Do you think that these events and these protests for religious liberty and marriage equality, do you think that they brought Rowan County as a community closer together or tore it further apart a little bit?

R: I think, at first, it...well, first of all, it was a conversation we needed to have in Morehead. So, Kim Davis actually, I'll pat her on the back for allowing that to happen, because if you were in Morehead and you were in any way, you pretty much had to be closeted. And I think that it opened that up a little bit. Also, brought the conversation out, made it more explicit and I think that since then, there's a recognition now, because the conversation was, we had it, that we're now dealing with it. And I think it may actually have made people think and may actually bring some people closer together. So, I'm really proud of what happened. I think that what happened was fantastic, because it just showed that you can't do this to people, you know. Speaking of freedom, I mean, it is about individual freedom, and if I'm operating well within my rights, then you have no right to impose your beliefs on me as a public official. None.

I: Let's talk about Westboro. Were you, did you receive any notification in advance that Westboro was going to be here?

R: Yeah, I heard they were coming and that's when I thought oh, if nothing happens after they come and go then nothing is gonna happen, we're not gonna have any problems. Because I really thought that if there were gonna be problems it was gonna be when they came here.

I: Did you go and attend their protest?

R: I walked by them on purpose, because I just didn't really want to be in the middle of it. Because I really thought that if there was gonna be violence, it's kinda like dying. I don't mind dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens. (laughs) You know what I mean? I just really didn't want to be a part of that. From a distance, I saw and heard and I snapped a couple pictures of somebody who was going around, and I think they may have been with Westboro, but they had all these placards and stuff all over the side of their vehicle and it was kind of amusing. But, no, I really didn't have too much exposure to Westboro. I stayed away from it on purpose.

I: How has this experience, the protests, the marriage equality, how has it changed you as a person if it has at all?

R: It made me feel a little freer, a little more open, because when I first came here I didn't have to say anything to anybody, I never did, but it, after being here about a week I had a line of students who were all gay who were dropping their advisor to pick me up as an advisor, and I had said absolutely nothing to anybody. So, I might as well wear a sandwich board, you know. But, a lot of those students expressed fear that they be beat up and that kind of stuff, and I think that now that things are out in the open, I feel like I can come and go and I'm more legitimate. That people can, if they still don't like me for that reason then that's too bad. That's your problem. Maybe you need to go take a long walk in the woods and figure it out. So, I just think that people feel like they can be more open and more honest with themselves and with the community about who they are, and not really have to worry about being hurt or being discriminated against.

I: Are there any other comments or thoughts that you'd like to add?

R: No, not in particular. I think I covered most of the – when you said you were gonna interview me, I thought long and hard about some of the things that you might ask, so I sort of anticipated those, but no. I can't think of anything. Do you have any more questions?

I: Nope, that was it.

R: Okay.