

Morehead State University

Scholarworks @ Morehead State

Audio & Video History Collection

Rowan County Marriage Equality & Religious
Liberty Project

Fall 2015

Toni Hobbs

Robert Sammons

Morehead State University

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](#)

Recommended Citation

Sammons, Robert, "Toni Hobbs" (2015). *Audio & Video History Collection*. 82.
https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/merl_audio_video/82

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the Rowan County Marriage Equality & Religious Liberty Project at Scholarworks @ Morehead State. It has been accepted for inclusion in Audio & Video History Collection by an authorized administrator of Scholarworks @ Morehead State. For more information, please contact d.ullrich@moreheadstate.edu.

Toni Hobbs

Interviewer: This is a conversation with Toni Hobbs 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 July 20th 2016 10 am. My name is Dakota Barr.

I'd like to thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today.

Response: No problem. It's an honor to be here.

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

R: Okay. I was originally born in Lexington, but I grew up in Beattyville, Kentucky. So, Lee County, around Red River Gorge, and graduated from Lee County High in 1998. Go Bobcats. After I graduated high school, I worked in upstate New York close to Lake Placid for a while, doing web design and it was a bizarre opportunity to do that. Then I, against all, I don't know, things I thought I would end up doing, I came to Morehead State because my older sister was here and I really wanted to be somewhere else but it was affordable (laughs). So, I ended up here as an art major, then I graduated in 02. I started working here as, well really as a freshman with a work study, then I started taking internships and working. I've been working as an employee of Morehead State since 2003, officially, so quickly approaching feeling like an old lady. I obtained my master's degree in 09 in studio art. And then continued teaching, I teach as an adjunct with the department of art and design. I work as the director of creative and branding services at Morehead State. I've been a DJ with Morehead State public radio and worked with a couple of other organizations, and then also now I'm finishing up another master's degree at University of Kentucky in arts administration. So that's kinda where I come from in a nutshell.

I: Could you talk a little bit more about you religious upbringing or ideological background?

R: Sure. I was raised in an extremely conservative Christian home. My parents were both very devout Protestants in the Church of God affiliation. So, there's tons of different religious aspects but my sister and I kinda refer to it as the first church of the Frigidaire. So, like, a little chilly on the reception of things but overall this idea of hard work, you get rewarded, God loves everyone mostly but we probably shouldn't really question that a whole lot, and the idea that hell is very real, demons are very real, and, you know, you're vulnerable at all states of your life to be approached by evil. So, it was very interesting growing up being a very sensitive child, as an artist, an introvert.

My father is a computer programmer, so it was very interesting to be growing up with a computer. I was born in 1980, so we had a computer before I had indoor plumbing, which was not the norm with my friends either, on either end of that spectrum, because we were a little less well to do than most of my friends but we still, like, technology was the thing. So for me, religion has always been very important. When I went to upstate New York, it was to a Bible college. I was working at a Bible college doing graphic design. So it was very, a very important part of my life, this idea of spirituality and a connection with something greater than myself. It was also just very awkward because I didn't exactly fit in to some of those belief systems. I had a

different understanding of how things worked. My all-time goal growing up was to be a military chaplain. That's really the only thing I wanted to do in life. And it didn't really work out, like my understanding of me being able to do that. I didn't think that was possible because of my, of how I identified at the time, especially in 1998 when I graduated high school. Being out in the military was just not an option. So, spirituality has been a huge part of my life. Religion is also a big part of my history but I think it's been great because I kinda can speak both languages. I'm very fluent in Christian theology but I can also speak in a variety of others as well. It was like learning a native language and then being able to translate that to people that have no understanding as to why it would matter if you are worried about hell or not.

I: Are you currently a member of a church?

R: I'm not. I practice mostly what I call Toni-ism (laughs). But it's kind of a mix of Buddhism and probably a little more on the pagan side of things. (pause) I have a lot of respect for Christianity. I think there are a lot of really good things, and if the essential is love and compassion, that absolutely aligns with what I believe in. I feel like Jesus and I would probably be friends. I feel like some of, some of his followers may have missed a few messages but that's just, that's just been my interpretation of that.

I: I'd like to start by asking you how you first became involved in the marriage equality movement.

R: Well as an undergrad here there really weren't any options. There was a group called ALSO, the Alternative Lifestyle Student Organization, and that's when LGBTQ+ were considered alternative, you know, kinda crazy, listening to Green Day and Nirvana, Melissa Ethridge and you know, whatever, wearing flannel. And again, like coming out in Beattyville was not an option for me, so I came out online. I was huge into the online presence, chat rooms, chat forums. We were the first house in both counties to have Internet service. I would have to like, open up CompuServe, dial in long distance to Lexington and have limited time, so I spent my allowance on phone bills (laughs) to dial in to the Internet to talk to people that I'm still friends with today, which is bizarre. So, I came out in what I considered a very safe environment because nobody knew me, I was just pixels on a screen, and so for me, what we think of as social media now and bullying and all that, that was not an option. Like it was people like me, or people from India talking to me about stuff I'd never even heard of. What is Hinduism, what is this? You know, so for me, that's kinda how that got started, with me being able to look beyond my little tiny bubble.

When I was in college, I was a super introvert. Like, in high school I was pretty popular, well I was, I was popular and crazy and, you know, depressed and doing drugs and drinking, but when I got to college all of that stopped. I was very introverted, I was in the art building, didn't really have a lot of friends because I was mopey and angsty. And I came out my sophomore year and there really, just, there was no support except for my sister. My roommates turned me in for being suicidal. It was their thought, I think, to get me out of the room because they didn't want this weird lesbian living in the room with them in Thompson. And so I just thought that was kinda bullshit because there was no support from the administration as far as what do I do when this isn't fair, so that was a problem. I started pondering this idea of why don't we have anything like this, continued to ponder and kind of be a little more out than I wanted to be. Like I'm not a

huge fan of being like “oh hey, I’m Toni, I’m a lesbian, that’s the only thing that defines me” but it sort of started turning into “oh yeah, that Toni person, she’s a lesbian, she knows what the gays are thinking, let’s ask her opinion” especially once I became a full-time staff member. I would get calls from people, and again it’s great that they were asking the question. I’m not upset that they were asking me the question. It’s just funny to be like “yeah, let me call the gay underground and I’ll get back to you on what we think about that issue.” And that kind of continued to lead into this idea, some of my friends and I were talking and we were like, we really need some sort of an organization that is for awareness and support, both from the administrative side of things and for the students. And that’s how the alliance kinda came to be.

I know I’m kinda going the long way around but my involvement is in 06 I helped found the alliance. I was a member of the president’s diversity council, which was interesting and eye-opening. And then in 08 I founded an endowment scholarship fund. It’s called the Hobbs Endowment for Equality and it sounds really pretentious when I say it. I really didn’t want my name on there but all of my friends were like, “look, someday you’ll be gone, you’ll be dead, you want your name on there.” So, it’s a \$50,000 endowment scholarship and it was the first LGBT scholarship at MSU. And, I don’t know, like from there I just, I’ve been very involved in the fight for equality. It’s just, I’ve tried to be more in the background of it because I feel like revolution is important, but I think evolution is probably more effective when you’re dealing with social change. So I feel like I’ve kind of been in that situation where I’ve been the token gay person, we’re gonna put this person on this committee because she can speak for everyone and I kinda had to be a lot more open about who I love and what I do and answer questions about people, you know, their thoughts about what I do in the bedroom. It’s none of their business. So, I don’t know.

That’s why I was really interested in helping with this, because David is one of my friends. David Moore. He was an intern for me years ago. He’s now a graphic designer for me and we’ve been colleagues, we’ve been friends, we’ve worked together volunteering, we’re both graphic designers. He speaks to my class when I’m teaching, as a guest speaker. So, I have known him for a long time and it just was unacceptable. It would be unacceptable for anyone to not be able to get married as long as they’re legal consenting adults but for me, it was very personal this time because David is so sweet. (laughs) You know, like he’s worked here, I know him, and I was like you know, I’ve been called pretty much everything already anyway, so let’s, let’s do this. I’ll stand with you. So that’s kinda what happened. I mean, I stood up for him as my friend, I stood up for him as my employee, as an alum, as a fellow eagle, as citizen of Rowan County, as Kentuckian, as a human.

I: With your experience at Morehead, do you think that the community has been welcoming and supportive of the LGBTQ+ community?

R: I think it is more so now. Like, when I was an undergrad, again, very introverted, and I say that because I was not vocal, I wasn’t out, I didn’t talk to a lot of people. So, the fact that people even knew that I was a lesbian was very odd to me. Like, how do you know that? I don’t talk to people. I talk to people online that live in California, Texas. I don’t even talk to you guys. But people would slip notes in my art locker like “God hates fags” or under my door in Thompson Hall, you know. I had somebody email me, “you really should just go kill yourself because you’re pretending to be a Christian but yet you’re this vile whatever. You should just go shoot yourself.” So, it’s like I already tried that, so I’m not gonna focus on what you’re talking about.

But I'm not gonna say that didn't hurt. Obviously, that was one of the driving forces for me to actually get up and do something because, I mean I have stared into that abyss of dealing with depression and the struggle of, you know. If a divine deity despises you, where does that leave you? If there's no redemption for that, what happens? I must be worthless or maybe I should be dead. So, I had already went through that in high school and tried that and, I mean people didn't know. Nobody had any clue that that's what was going on. So by the time that started happening in college I built up some sort of defense or XP or had a buffer or something to be like, you know, no. This is not okay. It's fine for you to say that to me because I know a little bit more about how I feel about things but if you were to say that to other people, they may not have support, so screw you. (laughs) Like you're not gonna do that. So, for me, I don't know. The community was not always welcoming. It has been much more so now. It does seem like my sister and my brother in law and my colleagues and student and former students and people I don't even know show up at protests or you know, even to see President Andrews come to certain events. That would never have happened in the late 90s. The president of a university would just have avoided that whole mess and I think there's no, there's no denying that it has shifted for the positive. Even when there's lots of snark and negativity being thrown around. In my experience, anyway. I don't get called a dyke on a regular basis when I walk down campus so I'm gonna count that as a win.

I: So, coming from a time where being a member of the LGBTQ+ community was less acceptable, did you ever foresee a time where the Supreme Court would rule in the way they ruled?

R: No. It's a funny question because for me, my sister got married in 96 so she's been married for like 20 years, and that is mind-boggling to me because that was just not on my radar. Like I didn't think it would ever happen, so I didn't even really think about what I would do. So, there's this whole, it's been very confusing (laughs) to think "oh, I may have to like, enter into a legal binding contract with someone I love now." That was not on my radar. I did not see that happening. Maybe in other states but certainly not in Kentucky, and really not until I was like a really old, cranky lady that would be like, in a walker trying to get married. I did not think that was gonna be something that happened for me, or that it would be possible. Anyway, hasn't happened yet. It's been very confusing to have to retrain my brain into thinking "oh, I am a valuable member of society that can enter into this agreement." It kinda screws with this super cut-off from that side of things person I've developed into.

I: So, after you heard the decision, did you ever expect there to be the kind of backlash that we saw, particularly here in Rowan County?

R: I assumed people would be really snarky. I figured, especially given MSU's position, Morehead State would be fine. The community would kinda be like don't ask, don't tell. I did not anticipate the level of obstinance. "I will not do this, I will not sign this." Because, I mean, all sorts of people have gotten married that really, if you're gonna take some sort of moral stand, probably shouldn't have. So, yeah, I did not anticipate that level. I knew there would be some snark and maybe some protesting or, I don't know, some fiery letters to the editor and some probably pretty fire and brimstone messages from a few pulpits but also some that were very

welcoming and loving and so I did not anticipate that particular level of vitriol, let's say, that happened.

I: Can you walk me through how you felt when you heard that the Rowan County clerk, Kim Davis, we not going to issue marriage licenses?

R: (laughs) Yeah. My first thought was "what? That's crazy. What is going on here? Oh, okay, well she's probably just trying to like stand up for (pause) her understanding of what that is. She must not understand Supreme Court makes this ruling and you have to do something, not just eh, I don't feel like doing that today." So, at first I just thought it was a misunderstanding. Then I thought, you know, I come to work every day, I am working really hard, I have busted my ass for this community. I have volunteered, I've sweated, I've donated many, I could've moved somewhere else but I really wanted to stay here, no. Like, you will do your job. I voted for you because you're female (laughs) and because you were on the Democratic ticket and to me, all things being equal, I would give a chance for a minority to have that office. So, then that really chapped me a bit, because I had put this person into office based on a platform that was very chill. I mean, it was like, this person's been working there forever, they've always done a good job, I've always had a positive experience when I went to the clerk's office and so I didn't anticipate that not happening. She didn't run on a platform of "I will follow God's law over Rowan County or Kentucky or the U.S." so I had voted for the person who was telling me "I'm not gonna issue any marriage licenses to anyone and I'm not going to do that because of people like you, because people like you are going to send me to hell and I can't have that." That was my interpretation of it. (pause) It's unacceptable for me. It's insulting. I work with people all the time I don't really like. I work with people that may or may not be ethical. It's not really, that's not my problem. So, yeah. I got really angry (laughs) about it, and trying to have compassion for what she believes and understanding, coming from that background, it still did not make sense to me. Like, I know compassion. I know spirituality, and I get that, and I understand standing up for things you believe in and fighting for what is very important to you and what you think, in a long-term moral end, will happen. I know because I have also done that. I have also fought for things I believed in and stood up when no one around me was standing up. I know what that feels like. I know what it's like to be the only somewhat ok with Christian person in a room. I've also known what it's like to be the only person that's super agnostic and not religious in a room. So, I can have empathy with her on that part. It kept going through my head that like, you don't have the right to do this. Just do your job or step aside. We voted for you to do that job, you don't want to do it, move on out.

I: Did you feel a sense of betrayal since you had a hand in electing her?

R: Somewhat. I mean, you know, hindsight. People said well, you should've known. She wore a bun. It's like, that's not how I choose, that's not part of it. I would never not elect someone because of their religious belief because to me that's not different than not electing someone because they're gay or because they're, I don't know, Latino or because they play Dungeons & Dragons. Like, you know, like I'm gonna, that's not why I would elect someone or not. So, it was kind of a betrayal because I'm like "girl, I put you in here. Why are you doing this?"

I: So, after you heard her decision to not issue marriage licenses and you saw that people were being denied a license, what was your immediate action? What did you want to do to handle the situation?

R: Well, my first reaction was to talk, talk it out. Talk it over with my sister, who has a history and sociology degree, who has a very good understanding of government and is very logical. While I may be a little more on the creative and a little other side of the brain, she is very logic, system, law, government oriented. So, our initial thought, talked it over with her, talked it over with my girlfriend, talked it over with my friends, and we were pondering things. We decided we're gonna start, we're gonna write some emails. I wrote a letter to the county clerk. It was very succinct. Not blaming, just saying "I'm one of your elected peeps. I helped elect you. I'm a citizen of the county. You need to do your job," but in a nice way. It was not hateful, it was just very academic and to the point.

The next round of things ended up being "okay, so we've written letters. We're gonna see what happens." Nothing. So, then we continued to call or write or something because you don't really have the right to ignore people writing these things. And then we heard news of a protest and I have long since not been a fan of protesting. (laughs) Pride, those things, they're just not really for me because it's a very extroverted activity and there's people and I have to deal with them and talk to them and stand beside them and it was hot and frustrating and I didn't want to do that. But I also had this thought of, you know, okay, if you're not gonna listen we'll come to you. We're not gonna bother you. We're not gonna be up in your face, but we'll be visible. So, okay, sure, I'll stand out there. That's fine, grabbed sunny, let's go. And took some vacation time at work and took my lunch breaks and started making some signs and hanging out. (laughs)

I: And what was your immediate goal with this protest? Did you just want licenses to be issued? Did you want some punishment for the clerk?

R: That's a good question. Why was I protesting? I protested because I wanted, I wanted people in the community to know that it wasn't just one person that was interested in this. I assume that laws are in place for a reason, so I assumed if she broke the law, the law would deal with it, so I didn't really want punishment per se. I just wanted justice. So, I assumed that that would occur with or without me standing out there. I did not plan to be married at that time so I wasn't seeking a license, you know. I had friends that were immediately like "you guys should totally go get married. This is the best," you know. I'm like no. Like, I don't want this to be my memory of when I get married, "Oh we got married in a courthouse with angry people playing drums and yelling faggot at me." One, wrong slur because I'm female. If you're gonna insult me at least use the right one. And two, I mean, a marriage is really private and it's gonna be awesome but that wasn't why I was there.

I was there because the alliance, affirmative action statements, LGBT offices, Pride events, protesting, to me, those are beacons. Beacons of light for curly haired girls that live in Beattyville that think that not only is the world against them, but their entire religious system is against them. Or for little dudes that live in far eastern Kentucky that haven't had the opportunity to tell their parents "hey, I'm gay" and for them to be like "That is so awesome! I love you! Your boyfriend is amazing!" Like, to me that is why I was there. Because it wasn't fair for people like me to be treated that way, but it's insulting for my friends. It's insulting for my girlfriend, who is just super sweet and positive and not really like me (laughs). You know, like I'd take that

personally. That is insulting. It is not okay. It is not okay for students that live in Rowan County, that are in college, to be hearing these things. And it's not okay for high school students and elementary school students, you know, to be faced with this dilemma of "oh my gosh, am I really that horrible?" I mean, that's why I was there. What I wanted to accomplish was, I'm tired of this and I will stand out there so you guys know that I exist, and people like me exist. The law will take care of what it needs to take care of. But you're not gonna just do this and there not be any commentary on it.

I: How would you classify the environment of the protest?

R: Well, the first day it was fun. Friends, people I hadn't seen in a long time, people are showing up and there's flowers, signs. Lots of rainbows. And it was interesting to watch because I've never really had to deal with that. Not really had people showing up in, I mean, I've had people show up in support but not because something had happened, so it was "that's interesting. What do we do here? We stand, okay. Oh, let's chant. Yeah, good, I don't wanna chant. Let's all hold hands. Nah, I'm probably good, I don't wanna hold hands either." It was interesting. Kinda fun. Hot. As the days went on, however, it became, it was frustrating because people from outside the area started coming in. I found that ridiculous. Like, why are you here? You don't vote in Rowan County. Why are you here to pray? Like, there are people that pray on both sides of this so you're not exclusive and God doesn't only hear the prayers coming from this side of the sidewalk and ignore the prayers from this side of the sidewalk. Why are you here? Why are you bussing in from North Carolina? You don't even know me. You don't this place. You don't know these people. You don't know Kim Davis. And then it was insulting because there were, you know, some not so friendly exchanges. Probably on both sides. I didn't really hear a lot on the side that I was on but I'm sure it occurred. Because it's hot and tired, people are cranky, so I'm sure they said all manner of things on both sides of things.

And then, then it got a little scary. Because by the end of it, we had reports of this armed militia on its way in and they were really gonna show the police chief what they were gonna do and (pause) people playing drums and trumpets and stomping around and retirees in camping chairs with Bible verses. You know, like "I have respect for you because you're not so different from my parents who had my sister and I on the steps of the Capitol to protest abortion when we were children." I understand, I get that, I've done that. But you are saying things that are very hurtful to people who've already been ostracized and now you're bringing guns into this. Like, this is out of control and this is not okay. Plus, having to deal with a plane that kept flying over what I considered free airspace every day. Every day, I would hear from my office (plane noise). You know, and there was an anti-LGBT movie to help convert on how people like me would go to hell and so I couldn't get away from it. I couldn't get away from it at work because David is my employee. I couldn't get away from it at home, because we'd be trying to decompress and I'd get tons of Facebook messages and I had to delete, like I just deleted messaging for a brief time because it brought up a lot of stuff from being a teenager and dealing with stuff that I thought I had already dealt with. Hearing this stuff that was coming out of the mouths of people that claimed to follow Christ was just very difficult for me because I'm trying to have compassion for you, and I want to love you and have compassion because I know that you're scared and you don't understand what you're saying but what you're saying is not okay. It hurts my feelings and I don't care if that makes me sound sensitive. I don't care. It's not okay. So, by the end, it was very stressful. It was scary. It was hostile. When David had asked if I would go with them,

absolutely. It felt like being a bodyguard. Like, I'm not prepared to be a bodyguard, you know? I don't want to, obviously, I want to do this, but like I shouldn't have to do that for someone to get a marriage license.

Hearing that stupid plane go over all the time. It was very stressful. Like, I would, I cried several times in my office. I was really angry. You know, like close the door and just start crying about it, which sounds really kinda ridiculous but it's just frustrating because it's like this annoying buzz that keep telling you you're going to hell. And for people that don't believe in hell, I'm sure it doesn't matter, but for someone like you, you know. Your parents think this. So, this is what's gonna happen. You suck. (plane noise) And there were some really disgusting signs that were on one vehicle in particular that would park around town. Dealing with AIDS and just things that are (pause) cruel. And I don't have a tolerance for cruelty and bullies. So, it felt like I couldn't get away from it. When I would go home, the plane would still be flying over where I live and I live outside of town. So, we literally were surrounded. It wasn't just the protest. Like, if I could've just went and protested and went home it would've been different but it was everywhere I went. When I went to the store, when I went home, when I went to get a cup of coffee at the duck, you know. It didn't matter. There were always people on both sides ready to give me their opinion or ready to be like "hey, what do you think about this?" I don't know what I think about it and I'm tired and I'm really stressed out right now and I feel like everyone is looking at people like me right now and I don't like it. It's invasive and I can't protect myself from it. I mean, I can't protect my girlfriend from it, and she's certainly not used to any of that. And it's affecting my sister, it's affecting my brother in law, it's affecting everyone. On the other side, my parents have no idea that this is even really going on. "Oh, there's something in Morehead. Okay." (laughs) so it's just very stressful on all fronts for me. That is what I would describe that summer as. Encouraging to see support, but very stressful because it brought up a lot of stuff that I did not wanna have to sort through again.

I: So, how did you and your fellow protestors attempt to combat this negativity and hurt feelings from the counter-protest?

R: Well, my initial reaction is to get really angry and yell at people but, now that I'm older, I've learned to ignore that. So, my thought was, I'm just gonna ignore you and continue to stand here. Now, some people were angry, and they yelled back. Not mean things, just giving their side of the story. Made a lot of signs. A lot of fun signs, clever signs. Probably maybe a little more intelligent than many of the protestors on the other side. It was probably over their heads because they, not that they're not intelligent, they just were not interested in being in that frame. So, they probably didn't even really understand what we were saying. Probably didn't really see them, but it didn't matter because it helped garner some chuckles. I think mostly we just sorta stayed chill. Carol was a good asset to have during that time because she, while yelling positive things out, was not engaging and was very good at trying to like, go over to people that were obviously a little bit on the struggle, being like let's calm down a little bit. Sunny was also very good in that because she's very positive. She's like "let's just all be glad that we're here and let's not let fear and anger be part of this discussion. If that's what they wanna talk about, let them. That's what they're focused on. Let's focus on the positive." So, tried to be mindful of that and I stayed pretty quiet because I'm more likely to observe than to be screaming at people at this point, now that I'm 36.

I: You've talked previously about how you formed organizations here on campus to combat inequality and to promote causes that are important to you. After these events, did you join any organizations or start any further involvement for this cause?

R: You know, I didn't because there was a lot of drama. It's a very odd position to be in when you feel like you don't fit in any group. I (pause) I have had enough drama. And by drama, I mean just stuff that I don't find to be useful for the ultimate goal, so whether that be not being able to pick leaders or being disorganized or whatever. Like, I just didn't want to deal with that. I've already dealt with forming organizations and it's really (pause) it's a lot of work. And I guess kinda my thought was "you know, I'm glad you guys are here now. Many of you were not here previously. So, I'm gonna let you take this one. You do what you need to do. I'll support from afar. I'll vote the way I need to vote. I will rally people, I will raise money, but I just cannot be in the public eye of this again. I've already done that. I don't wanna do that." (laughs) My decision was to support yes, the supervisory, attend meetings, be part of a Facebook group, sure, until it gets really snarky on both sides and then, no. Because people were dealing with a lot. People are gonna be snarky during those times because they're stressed out. They're getting it from all sides. People that were new to the fight were very energetic, but they also had their own stuff to deal with. People that were new to the community were energetic, but they had their own stuff to deal with. And so, I feel like the younger me would have totally been all in, vocal, super involved, going to meetings, organizing, you know, making lists. Lots of checklists. Figuring out what to do. The me now is kinda like "you know, I can't control all of these things. I can't fix this right now. I'm gonna let you guys do that. I'm just gonna send you some good vibes and if you need my advice or you need my support, just ask what you need and I'm happy to consult and help you out." That's kinda how I got with it. I retreated into a sanity bubbles (laughs) I think is what I'd refer to that as.

I: I wanna go back for a minute to the Rowan County clerk. You, as somebody with a heavily religious background and upbringing, you've obviously developed your own sense of what the term religious liberty means. So, do you think that Kim Davis best represented the cause of religious liberty?

R: No, and the reason why is because it was exclusive. As a Toni-ist, if you came to my office at Morehead State and you said "I work for the library and I'm gonna need a poster for this program we're doing about, I don't know, animal testing, because we have discovered in is very useful, and we are for animal testing, we work in the library, and we need this poster." I would probably have some questions as to how you actually got that to be approved (laughs) in 2016, but I would do the poster, because that is my job and it doesn't make me a bad person. Now, if you came to me and said "I have decided I'm going to kill someone," that's different. And I would say "I can't help you with that because that is morally and legally not okay." I feel like what Kim Davis did, and I don't know her, so this is again, just my observation of this. She is someone who has went through a lot of struggle. She has dealt with a lot of criticism and she has found some level of solace in her religion. She then, I think, probably a little bit manipulated by the Liberty Council, just, again, my observation, into this idea that if she stands against this wave of the government, then God will somehow reward that. And perhaps that is true. But I think, unfortunately, she was not standing for Christianity, because Christianity doesn't specify that and you have Christians on both sides of the argument. So, to me, you can't have a Christian over

here that's saying "well, this is what God says and I think this is totally fine" and then one over here that's like "eh, you're going to hell." To me, it wasn't about that at all. I don't think it was about religious liberty at all. I think it was, Kim Davis was unfortunately a pawn, and she's from a small city and a large organization swooped in, played up this particular view of God, and it's nice to be popular. And once you make that decision, it's really hard to go back. She was in a no-win situation. She couldn't say "okay, you're right. This is stupid. I'll go ahead and do this now." She didn't really have a choice as far as I can see, at the time, other than to remove herself from that position, because she had all these people fighting for her and pulling her up and I mean, that's a great place to be. I've been in a situation where I had tons of support and people behind me and Toni Hobbs and "yes, we believe in you! You've got this! You stand up," and that's a great place to be. It's really hard to think "oh, man, I made the wrong decision," or "I don't really believe that." I don't know what I would do in that situation, but I sure know that it would be about me. It wouldn't be about God or my friends or the community. It's not about why I'm there. It's all about me. That's kinda how I see her. She made a snappy decision, it got really blown out of proportion. Then it got lots of fire and power behind it. She was not going to renege on that, and it's not because of God. Because, I mean, He doesn't really cover that (laughs) in any writing that I've read, or theology. I don't really see God as saying "and you shall not issue licenses." In fact, it's kinda the opposite. "Render unto Caesar," you know, what is Caesar's. So, when you're in this land, you will do what the law says. I don't think that it was about religious liberty. I think it was personal. I can't say for sure because I don't really know her, but that is what I, that is how I interpret that. And I have compassion for that. It sucks to be in a situation where you have people that are following you and you feel like no matter what decision you make, you suck. I've been there. I've been on both ends of that and you should just be really careful when you make those decisions before you get yourself in that spot. Better make sure that you're on the side of compassion is how I see that.

I: I know you said you turned to your sister often for legal advice and for advice on bureaucratic structure and whatnot, but, in your view, what do you think should have been done to handle the situation from a legal perspective?

R: I think this was really simple. Issue the licenses or have someone in your office issue the licenses or, if you do, really, interpret that particular order as being ethically wrong for you, do a different job. The end. There didn't need to be this super snarky, "I'm not gonna do that because of God's authority." Like, God didn't elect you. And I know that sounds kinda crass and I don't mean that to be disrespectful, but you live in America, in the United States, so your interpretation of God is very different even than the first Baptist down the road or the Methodist or first Christian, you know. So, (pause) you can't claim God's authority because you know, you can't get that together here. And what if I decided I'm not going to do something so I'm claiming Buddhist authority? Which would be really awkward because that's not really how it works. Some of my friends are like, the goddess authority. By the goddess, I'm not doing this. Should I have the right to do that? Well, based on what she thinks, yes, I should have every right to say "no, according to Buddhism that is not something that I will do and I will defy all laws and will not do that." But yet they were not interested in hearing that side of it. It was only this particular god and not just this particular god, but this particular interpretation of this god. So, I think it should've been really simple. Do your job. If you don't wanna do the job, have someone else in the office do that job. And if that's not gonna happen, then find a job that is more suited to you.

I: When she chose not to issue the licenses, should she have been imprisoned?

R: I think no, that's kind of up to the law as far as what the repercussions would be on that but it's tricky because it's an elected official. If I simply refused to do something I would get a reprimand. If I continued to refuse to do it I would be fired and then I would find a new job, (laughs) you know? And apparently, it's very difficult to fire an elected official so I think that was the frustration. A lot of people didn't know what is the proper legal action that should take place here. Why can't we just fire her? Well, it doesn't quite work that way. Why can't the county just fire her? Well, they did what they could. (pause) Why doesn't the state remove her? Well, I mean, we elected her, so how do we deal with that? Do we have a special election? I don't know. So, yeah, I mean, her going to jail, while I think it was a publicity stunt and had literally nothing to do with standing up for religion, and it's okay if I'm wrong on that, but that is how I interpret it. It was very arrogant for all sorts of people, became a great publicity stunt for Mike Huckabee. Liberty Council got lots of steam and tons of money from that. I don't think (pause) I think yes, she should have been in jail when she directly defied order, but it wasn't an immediate reaction. She had several opportunities to comply, to not be in contempt, you know, these types of things. Am I glad she went to jail? No. I think it's ridiculous it even got to that point. She made that decision and she did it for whatever reason that she decided to do it. But I don't think that it was improper that that was what occurred. If the roles were reversed and I were taken to jail for something I refused to do, and orders that I refused to abide by then okay. So, I'm in jail. It would also be good publicity for me. (laughs) You know? Like, that's just the nature of protesting and probably why I don't like it. Because it gets out of hand very quickly and it turns into a really greedy monster that wants to eat everything around it on both sides.

I: Would you say that any particular side of this issue had a victory?

R: Well, I mean, marriage licenses are issued so yes. I think I just, I think it's just unfortunate because it caused a huge rip in partnerships and bridges that took a really long time to build over the years, you know. This (pause) the relationship especially with the religious community and people on the fringe that didn't feel like they fit in. It's really frustrating to me to see a lot of that being torn apart. People that, prior to all of this happening, were able to sit down and talk about things now feel like they absolutely had to pick a side and I think decorum was lost. I think people that claim Christianity on any realm now probably, well not probably. I know a lot of them are embarrassed to talk about it, because they don't wanna be associated with this hateful, bigoted view of things. People that were (pause) searching for some type of peace and solace no longer see that as an option. I'm not proselytizing for Christianity, it's just, it's unfortunate because people really do find that to be comforting or they really do follow those beliefs and, you know, it just, it can take decades to get to where we were in this, in this city. And a lot of ordinary small conversations on the daily with people. And mending some of those (pause) hearts, I guess, you know? And so, when that came through, and it was a lot of people from outside of the area, it just bulldozed through a lot of that.

And I think it made it difficult for people to talk to each other. I think it made it difficult for people in the LGBTQ*+ alphabet community to talk to each other because they were in various levels of action, acceptance, and spirituality and community and depression, PTSD, like, you know. Like everybody's got their stuff they're dealing with over here and I think it caused

destruction all the way through. It made it difficult for every group to talk to each other, to talk to other groups, to talk amongst themselves. People felt ostracized on all sides and it just was an unnecessary, cruel event, that to me was very needless. There was no point in that. It's not about religious liberty when your mowing down all of these people, you know. It's not about standing up for compassion and justice and equality when you're treating people like crap. And (pause) as someone who's lived here for almost 20 years now, it was very disappointing to see that.

It was encouraging to see people come together, and I think it's been great on that side of things. You know, you meet people that you may not have had an opportunity to know before. You hear a lot of stories that you might not have had a reason to hear before. So, I do see the positive on that side. But as far as victory, I mean, I don't know that I count it a victory when it was something that had already been decided. It should never have even happened because there was a ruling. Do the job. We were very excited about that and we're all pumped and now we have this giant rift in the community. I think it's unfortunate. And it has went from all levels. It affects the mayor. (pause) There were things that were posted by him that, you know, as a result of this, made me really question lots of things as far as his leadership or as far as his ability to be someone who cares about fairness ordinance. I respect people's personal beliefs but it caused a huge mess. And I still think it continues to be there but it's under the surface so people may not see it.

But dealing with the political side of things, city council, or MSU, I mean, people were frustrated that it was even an issue. Why should we talk about this? We shouldn't put this in this magazine, we're not gonna, you know, whatever. It's like, okay, well, it has really caused a divide. And it's still there and it's much worse than it was before this happened. So, victory, yeah, but with some, with a price.

I: So as somebody who's been fighting for equality for so long, you see now marriage equality is the law of the land and marriage licenses in Rowan County are finally being issued. Is that the endgame? Are we still gonna be fighting for equality for the LGBTQ+ community or is that the endgame?

R: I think for me, you know, getting a piece of paper was never my endgame. That is awesome for people that want that. But to me, it's not, that fight is not over when, I know that probably are not gonna be featuring a same-sex couple in an alumni magazine. Which is hard to say, because that's my job. And I love my job and I love my institution but, no. It's not over when I have to, like, because I'm not big on PDA, but when I have to like go on vacation and I have a really fun time just hanging out with my girlfriend and eating dinner and not thinking about it, and then coming back to a place where her coworkers don't know, or her mom doesn't know, or my parents, you know? Like, it's really frustrating because to me that's not equality. It's not equality to be tolerated like an annoying dog, is kinda how it feels like. "eh, we put up with it because we've had it for so long but we'll be glad when it goes somewhere else." That's how it feels. And when, (pause) when you have students or faculty or staff or people that live in the community that still feel really uncomfortable, or are simply not going to get represented or publicized. I don't think the fight's over. I don't think marriage equality is the endgame for me. I think I will continue to fight for equality until it is no longer an issue. Or I'm dead. Whichever (laughs) the case may be. But, you know, when we have students that come here that can very easily identify who they are and not worry about it, they don't get blasted, or when I'm playing Destiny and I don't hear someone call me a fucking faggot because I'm better than they are, you

know what I mean? Like, I will continue to work until that's no longer an issue and until then I don't really think that we can say "oh, well we have reached the plateau, we can get married now, it's all good." And really, I hope that that happens, but it seems a little dark right now in the current political climate so, we'll see. We'll see how that goes.

I: My last real question is I wanna know, has this experience changed you?

R: Yes. Lots of reasons, mostly about assuming that I was in this safe, happy people rainbow bubble that I had felt like I was in for a long time because things were mostly fine here. It's taught me to be more compassionate to people that I don't understand on multiple fronts. It's been very eye-opening to see the level of pain that people are in. And it's certainly helped me find my fortitude for refusing to give in to that. So, it's made me very adamant that I will be who I am and I will be alright with that. (laughs) And you be alright with who you are even if we don't agree. And, you know, it was a really great lesson for me to learn that one person really can make a difference. Because regardless of whatever side you think of Kim Davis, one person with lots of publicity stopped a whole system. And that's inspiring, because it's like "okay, well if you can do that from a negative perspective, what can I do from a positive one?" That's what I'm holding on to (laughs) from this mess. One person can totally make a difference, and have a huge impact on how people see things, to the point that two strangers will sit down and talk about it (laughs) you know, and how it affects them and what this one person did. Then, I wanna be the one person that stands up with my friends who are also that other one person to change the world for better, at least in this community.