

LGBTQ+ VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITIES
IN WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
with
Rosemary Ketchum

By Emma Wiley
American University

Virtual Interview using TheirStory

October 2, 2023

LGBTQ+ VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITIES
IN WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATOR: Rosemary Ketchum

DATE: October 2, 2023

INTERVIEWER: Emma Wiley

PLACE: Virtual using TheirStory

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

This is an oral history of Rosemary Ketchum that focuses on LGBTQ+ visibility and communities in Wheeling, West Virginia. Elected to Wheeling, West Virginia's City Council in 2020, Rosemary Ketchum was the first openly transgender person elected at any level of government in the state of West Virginia. The oral history covers Ketchum's childhood, growing up mostly in East Liverpool, Ohio, homeschooling and how she came to understand her own gender identity and the communities she was raised in. After a house fire prompted her family's move to Wheeling, West Virginia at the end of high school, Ketchum describes her experiences as a trans person coming of age in Wheeling, going to college, and finding purpose in community organizing. Ketchum talks about how she decided to run for Wheeling's City Council and how her election affected LGBTQ+ communities and visibility in Wheeling, and more broadly in West Virginia and the Appalachian region. Finally, Ketchum describes recent events and activities of Wheeling's queer and LGBTQ+ communities, including the non-profit organization, The Friendlier City Project.

INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

Due to headphone issues, every time Rosemary Ketchum speaks, the first word or two does not get picked up on the recording or is very muffled. The interviewer, Emma Wiley, has tried to put the word(s) back into the transcript, but sometimes it was too inaudible (in which case, it is noted).

As a warning to readers, there are a few outdated words and terms used to describe a transgender person that some may find offensive. They are used only once by Ketchum to exemplify the stereotypes of trans people when she was growing up.

Rosemary Ketchum uses the pronouns, she/her/hers.

COPYRIGHT STATUS

Rosemary Ketchum has relinquished copyright of her oral history to the Ohio County Public Library, located in Wheeling, West Virginia, but retains the right to

make use of any of the information in the recordings or transcripts for her own purposes.

INDEX TERMS

West Virginia—Wheeling	Community life
East Liverpool (Ohio)	Transphobia
Ketchum, Rosemary	Homophobia
Transgender women	Gender identity
Transgender legislators	LGBTQ+
Transgender people	Queer
West Virginia Northern Community College	Politics and government
Community colleges	Family
	Appalachian Region

LGBTQ+ VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITIES
IN WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

*Transcription of Interview with Rosemary Ketchum on October 2, 2023
(virtual)*

00:00:00 **Emma Wiley**

Do I have permission to record this interview.

00:00:05 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yes.

00:00:05 **Emma Wiley**

All right, can you please state your full name for the record and where in the world you are calling in from?

00:00:10 **Rosemary Ketchum**

My name is Rosemary Ketchum and I am calling in from South Wheeling.

00:00:17 **Emma Wiley**

This is the interviewer Emma Wiley and I am currently in my house in the Cleveland Park neighborhood in Washington, D.C. It is October 2nd, 2023 and we are on a video call today to talk about Rosemary Ketchum's experience with LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling, West Virginia. We're going to start off kind of where it all started. So, can you tell me about when and where you were born?

00:00:49 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yes, so I was born in New Cumberland, West Virginia to a pair of lovely parents, Brian and Diane Ketchum. We shortly thereafter moved to Ohio where we lived with my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, Bernadine Ketchum, for really the bulk of my childhood. And so when folks ask where did you grow up, it's a hard question to answer because I feel so drawn to both of those places. But born in New Cumberland and moved shortly thereafter to Ohio.

00:01:23 **Emma Wiley**

All right, you already described your family a little bit, but could you kind of elaborate on your family however you want to define that?

00:01:33 **Rosemary Ketchum**

[Nods] Okay, so Brian and Diane Ketchum are my parents and they grew up in the Ohio Valley. My father worked in the local factory for as long as I can remember growing up, the whole China factory and then METSS[?] manufacturing. And then my mother was a waitress for as long as I can remember as well and recently was diagnosed with breast cancer and has no longer been working. To her chagrin, frankly, because she loves waitressing. She's a people person and really enjoys being out and talking with folks. I have three siblings, Matthew and Nathaniel. They are younger than I am. And then an older sister, Jennifer. My two brothers live in East Liverpool with my father and my sister lives in Martins Ferry, Ohio, just across the river here from Wheeling.

00:02:26 **Emma Wiley**

Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood, what it was like growing up?

00:02:29 **Rosemary Ketchum**

As I mentioned before, the bulk of my childhood was spent in East Liverpool, Ohio. Shortly, we moved to Dover and New Philadelphia. We kind of moved around a lot. And I have incredibly fond memories of my childhood. I, you know, being younger than my older sister, who was about ten years older than I am, I felt like the older kid in the household. So I took on a lot of kind of older kid responsibilities. And I really loved that.

You know, growing up in East Liverpool, if folks aren't familiar, it's a really, really small town of less than, I think, 11,000 folks. And we hit really hard by the economic crisis of the 1970s and 80s. And, you know, everybody that I grew up with kind of struggled financially. And that was just part of our lived experience. And it wasn't until I grew up that I realized that, oh, everybody was not just poor, but we're pretty poor. [Laughs] And it's a testament to the hard work of my parents that they were really able to shield us from a lot of those kind of economic woes. Still as the older kid, I was a eavesdropper. And so I knew everything that was happening. But I do know now that I am an adult, how impactful particularly the 2008 financial crisis was on me and my brothers, not our household necessarily, although it was, but on our perception of what we thought was possible. For us growing up, I remember being a kid and not thinking I'd ever go to college because student debt seemed to be so overwhelmingly dangerous for people to take on. And in many ways it has been for people who aren't using their degrees or aren't able to afford their payments. But I've been able, thankfully, as an adult to dispel a lot of those, you know, falsehoods or those beliefs that I had as a kid.

00:04:32

I was homeschooled for the majority of my schooling experience. I went to homeschooling, I believe in fourth grade, and then through the rest of my middle school and high school years as a result of kind of an incident in the boys' bathroom when I was in fourth grade. I have very kind of blurry memories of it, but my mother remembers it clearly, that I was kind of cornered in a boy's bathroom for being queer or just like not being like the other kids. And I remember, you know, I didn't say anything, but a fellow student spoke to our teacher, I guess, and said that an incident had occurred and that my parents should be aware. And I do remember distinctly, while most of that is kind of a blur to me, I remember my mother asking me really point blank, like, you know, you can remain in school and this may only, this may be a one-time event, this may happen again, or we could kind of experiment with what schooling at home looks like. And I am also, like my mother, a people person. I love being with others and I'm a team player, but you ask any 10-year-old, do you want to wake up at 7 a.m. every morning or do you want to stay home and go to school? I decided to, you know, engage in homeschooling. And I think my mother was really prescient in that way because it might not work for everybody, but for me, it was really kind of formative and allowed me to build a kind of sense of confidence and esteem and identity in a way that I think might've been thwarted if I was, you know, always trying to defend myself or, and maybe that would've happened and it would've been great, but you may never know.

I really am grateful for that decision that my mother gave me at, I don't know, 10 years old, because I think it has set me up in some really kind of exciting ways to, I think in part, be very eager to be involved because for many years I had, I didn't have any peers in the way that I think people who go to public school do. And so I remember when I graduated high school, I was like, I want to make friends. [Laughs] I want to dive into this community and get involved. And so, that's what I did.

00:06:52 **Emma Wiley**

Wow. Thank you. That's really interesting. Did the rest of your siblings kind of also get homeschooled or did they stay in school? How did that affect your family, like your homeschooling experience?

00:07:08 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Great question. So Nathaniel, my, the brother that's just a little bit younger than I am did attempt to be homeschooled after I was, I think in part there was a bit of FOMO [Fear of Missing Out] that was just like, this seems really good. And our mother was a really great teacher and he did not do well. He needed kind of one-on-one attention from somebody who has, who is a teacher. And so, and it requires a sense of discipline as well that not everybody has. And frankly, now that I'm an adult, I barely have, I don't know how I did homeschooling so well for

so long. But so yes, I think he attempted it for a very brief period of time, was not successful. But I did excel. I really did enjoy it and felt like a self-starter in that way.

00:07:59 **Emma Wiley**

Nice. So I know that you described a little bit of how it was growing up and the impact both on your family and the larger community, specifically at the time that you were growing up, but can you kind of describe your neighborhood or the community that you grew up in, however you think of it?

00:08:24 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yeah, so I grew up in East Liverpool in the township area. So it's a kind of a small community and we grew up right outside of city limits on a hill. It was called Ruth Street, where my father still lives. And I remember we lived next to the woods. And so it felt very rural, although we were probably, you know, five minutes from the city. And, you know, I remember feeling really free and like I could live with some kind of abandon in that way that I didn't, we were able to, myself and my, my younger brothers really explore and experiment and create. My parents were really kind of, they really encouraged us to use our imaginations and they would, you know, we were very spoiled as kids. And so they'd buy us anything we asked for or wanted. And I think in a way for my parents, it was overcompensating for maybe some of the things they couldn't give us. We didn't go on vacations. And so we got big Christmases instead. And I think in retrospect, grateful for that, for that effort, of course.

00:09:33

But growing up, I remember feeling very connected to my siblings, but not to my community in the way that I feel now. I definitely felt like I, you know, didn't belong or that I couldn't, you know, almost kind of like the hunchback of Notre Dame. And I was just like, just something that maybe wasn't, that people were not prepared for. And I, and I knew that early on I was a very unapologetic kid, I knew that I was different and that people looked at me differently. And in those years, we didn't have the language, I didn't have the word transgender. I just, I knew I was different. I knew that gay people existed. And so I thought maybe that's the world that I'm a part of, but I don't know. I know my parents also didn't have that language. And it wasn't until I was, I think, 12 years old when my mother found a therapist in town who she contacted to kind of help me, help guide me and also them. I think my mother also wanted to make sure that there was no kind of self-harm happening and that, you know, I was healthy. My mom watched a lot of Oprah. And so there was always a, a kind of traumatic story about a kid growing up. And so I think she wanted to make sure that, that I wasn't going to, that that wasn't my experience. And it was the first time I remember learning the word transgender. It was, I remember it distinctly because our therapist was like, I've only ever had one other case. And it sounds

like this is the 1950s. This was like 2005. This was not that long ago. But I guess in the kind of the momentum of our culture, that was a long time ago. We've grown a lot since then. But my mother and my father both, I think I remember attended that session where a therapist said, you know, this is not incredibly uncommon, but this is what it looks like. And here's some of the history. And I remember very distinctly that for me, it was liberating to hear because the term gay never really fit. And when it was described to me, what the experience of having a trans identity was, I was like, oh, that's definitely, that felt, that felt very liberating.

00:11:50

I know though, for my parents, it was not liberating. It was quite terrifying. They didn't describe it to me then. But, you know, in retrospect, my mother remembers how afraid she was when she learned that because I, in, in 2004, 2005, we had a general cultural understanding of what it looked like to be gay. And it might not be incredibly safe, particularly in small rural communities, but it was possible. And, and, and many of the storylines and narratives and stereotypes were kind of tropey and, and maybe unethical or unkind, but they weren't necessarily disastrous for gay people, but for trans people, particularly trans women, I don't think my mother had ever heard a success story about what it looked like to raise a trans kid or, or having a person who is a transgender adult, even the term transgender, I mean, they use transsexual or transvestite or drag queen. I mean, that's how undeveloped our culture was in that way, or the zeitgeist for, you know, trans issues. And so I think in my parents' brain, understandably, like when they heard that, rather than what I heard was just like, you know, I heard my whole life experience up to then reflected in a single word, they saw just, just kind of the rest of my life becoming fraught and dangerous and, you know, scary. And only now do I realize it was almost as if I was diagnosed with a terminal illness at that point for them, they would never say that they would probably be very upset that I made that comparison. But I think for them, it was, it seemed that dire. And my mother jokes, because she thought that we would live together as old spinsters, that she would just like, keep me safe at home, and we would just like knit together or something. Her fantasy, not mine.

And, you know, I think, for my parents, it has been kind of my somewhat subversive goal to, to push away all those stereotypes and try to represent a thoughtful and successful lived experience as a trans person. And obviously, you know, I feel a lot of privilege that it's much easier to be a trans person in 2023, than in, you know, 1953, or when my parents were growing up, so their perspectives are valid, because that was the world that they lived in. But thankfully, much of that has been dispelled.

00:14:16 **Emma Wiley**

Wow, thank you. So, in thinking about language and how language changes, using the language kind of of today, with the note that, you know, it might not be

the language that you use then...growing up, did you know about any LGBTQ+ individuals or any sense of community, kind of more local, like, I know that you may have seen on a national scale, but more local to where you were growing up?

00:14:52 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Okay, so in our family, or in our community, there were none that I that I could actually pick out. Obviously, there are queer people everywhere. But there was not this sense of openness. And we didn't have pride flags on, you know, businesses in East Liverpool in the early 2000s. And, and so no, I don't remember being able to look across the street and say, oh, there is a family, or a gay person or whatever. But we did have, or I do have, an aunt who is a lesbian. And I didn't know it when I was a kid. But she took, she took me under her wing and in some way that I was not aware of it. She was just my aunt. But obviously, my parents and the other adults kind of knew that we had a special connection.

00:15:42

There's just one story that I think is very interesting that I look back on from time to time. My father is my greatest advocate and is absolutely exceptional. But he struggled with, you know, what it looked like to raise a queer kid. And I think for his whole life, he struggled with his own masculinity. He's a musician, but you know, growing up in rural communities, it's not always, I think it was always some subtext there. And then, you know, his firstborn son turns out to not be his firstborn son after all. It's kind of a hit, [laughs] I'm sure. So, but growing up, my, you know, I would, my mother would, we'd go thrift shopping, and I'd pick out an outfit, and we'd have to hide it for my dad just in case. And, you know, those kinds of things. But I remember, it was a really kind of point of contention that I would play with Barbies. I loved Barbies. My mother would buy them occasionally, and then they would go missing. And I would wonder what happened to my Barbies. And my mother would play silly and go like, I don't know. My dad would throw them away.

And I remember, we would have this big Christmas party with all of our family. I mean, there were probably 50 to 100 people who would show up. And I remember, you know, all the kids were asked what they would want. And I wanted a Barbie. And I remember not getting a Barbie that year. I don't even remember what I got. But I was devastated that it wasn't a Barbie. And we were at this house. And I remember that my aunt and a couple other women, kind of at the very end of the night, all the guys were drunk, and everybody was just having a good time. And the kids were just hanging out in the kids room or whatever. They found me and they said, hey, can you like, follow us this way? And I remember there was like a guest bathroom somewhere. And they all we all huddled in this bathroom and they revealed a Christmas Barbie. And they showed it to me and they gave it to me in the bathroom. And I was just, I think I blacked out. I was too excited. [Laughs] And they were like, this is for you. We're gonna put it, we can't play with it right now. You can take it home. But we just we

know this is what you wanted. We couldn't give it to you in front of everybody. And I was so, I was just elated. And that was just a core, core memory for me. And very bittersweet, obviously, but for me a little bit more sweet than it is bitter.

And I think that's an example of like, queer people, recognizing young folks who I had not, I didn't, you know, come out then I didn't even know I was a kid kid, I was probably seven. But they could they could see it. And so just a small example of what being an ally looks like, because there were plenty of women who were part of that my family and that group were, you know, not queer, but we're definitely moms and saw how, you know, how much I wanted that. And so while there weren't many LGBTQ folks out in my community, the folks that were, kind of really stepped up in so many ways.

00:18:41 **Emma Wiley**

That's such a sweet story, warms my heart. So, shifting a little bit to kind of Wheeling, can you tell me how you ended up in Wheeling?

00:19:00 **Rosemary Ketchum**

It's a kind of convoluted story. But, you know, we, as I mentioned before, grew up, was born in West Virginia, moved to Ohio shortly thereafter, and had no other connection to West Virginia. We had no plans of moving back. We lived in Ohio. But in 2010, we experienced a house fire on Ruth Street, and was really a kind of turning point for our whole family. This was a house that my that I grew up in, that my father grew up in, that his father built. And it was New Year's Day. When our house caught fire, we had a wood burning stove in the basement. And it was incredibly traumatic.

And we lived with our neighbors for months until we figured out my parents again, blue collar folks, they didn't have a house and home insurance, they didn't have a savings account. This was 2010. So we're still in this kind of financial crisis. I think my father had been laid off not long before that. So, it was a really tough time. And this was also a time that my parents relationship was, was kind of in, I think this, they had never been a kind of perfect couple. I think it was a relationship of convenience. And this is what they would say as well. And it wasn't until that moment that they realized that they could not, they could no longer both, you know, experience this trauma together, and then also build a life, rebuild a life together. And so there was a moment, I think, in late 2010, mid or late 2010, maybe this summer, where my father said, I'm not, I'm going to rebuild the house. And my mother said that this is, I can't be here any longer. This is too, too many memories attached to this place.

And so my sister had lived in the kind of Triadelphia area. Again, we weren't incredibly familiar. We'd never been to Wheeling very often. And I'd never explored it. But we had no other choice. That was where some family was. And so in the summer of 2010, we moved to Wheeling, I was in high school, just about to

graduate high school. And my brothers were, I think were kids. Matthew was, I believe, nine years old, and Nathaniel was maybe 13 or 14. And so we moved to Wheeling. And we rented a house on Wheeling Island for a couple months. And we moved around, I think we probably lived in five or six houses before we really found a spot. And, yeah, 2010 was a really big year. And it brought us to Wheeling. And in many ways, it was obviously traumatic and, and I think set some really unfortunate things in motion.

00:21:44

But for me, at least it was a really exciting experience, because I got to be a young adult in a new city, and make friends, frankly, for the first time as an adult, and really get involved and lean in in a way that I didn't actually think was possible for myself. I kind of internalized the kind of hope that my mom had that we would be two bitties spinsters living together. I was like, I'll never get out of here. And, and then also, as queer people, you make up these beliefs that you will never have a good, thoughtful, romantic relationship, or you'll never have a great job, or you can't go to school, like all of these things I internalized as a teenager. And Wheeling, being the friendly city, kind of really, really dispelled all of those things. And the people that I met here and the opportunities that I got here, really, I mean, blew my mind, frankly, because I had no idea that it was possible. And doubling down, the kind of stereotypes we build about West Virginia, none of those things are true when you actually meet the people and you engage with the community. And so, I mean, that set me up for, I think, a life of public service in a way, because I feel not only honored, but obligated that it was given to me, and I ought to give it back.

00:23:11 **Emma Wiley**

You talked a little bit around the edges of what Wheeling is, what people think Wheeling is, and how that's different from what Wheeling actually is. As we kind of go into talking a lot more about Wheeling specifically, can you give a brief overview of what Wheeling is, for people who may not have ever been there, or know what it is, you know, what is your interpretation of Wheeling?

00:23:41 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yeah, Wheeling is the best city in West Virginia. [Laughs] I think, well, there are a couple just facts about West Virginia that I think are fascinating, or Wheeling that I think are fascinating. Wheeling is the first state capital of West Virginia, 1863. Again, not long after, we moved the capital to a more centralized location in Charleston, West Virginia. But it doesn't take long to walk around the city of Wheeling and really recognize the reverence and the history that we do have here.

Having been the first state capital, we have some of the most incredible amenities that a city our size can have. I attended a symphony event the other night with a two-time Tony Award winner. We have the largest symphony for a city our size in

the country, which is really impressive. We share part of our symphony with Pittsburgh, which is in the metro area, and we're excited to be able to share in that economic vitality that they experience.

We have an incredible business district in our Centre Market, a historic business district, that is also the oldest cast iron market house in the country. It was something, it's a community that I represent on City Council, and something that I am incredibly honored to have the opportunity to engage with, both our small business community, but also the history.

00:24:57

We are in many ways a shrinking community. In West Virginia in 2020, we had the sharpest population decline of any state in the nation, and only a handful of counties had either a plateaued population or small population growth. Wheeling has in many ways struggled to increase population, not I think in particular because of who we are as a city, but who we are as a state, and the kind of perceptions that exist here, and real challenges with workforce, and broadband access, and child care, and all of these important things, and inclusivity, and I think this perception that maybe West Virginia is not a welcoming place. I think all of those things impact the kind of ability for people to see West Virginia as a place where they can start a business, or raise a family, or be an LGBTQ person, or a person of color. And so those are some of the challenges that we're working on as a city.

00:25:54

I think Wheeling is also, we call ourselves a friendly city, and in some days that seems more like an aspiration, other days it is more of a reality obviously, but I took that to heart when I moved here. There's a small, I remember kind of driving from Bridgeport, Ohio, crossing the border into Wheeling, onto Wheeling Island, there was a small rusted sign that said, welcome to the friendly city, and it's cliché, but I remember going, there it is, that's the sign, this is a sign of good things to come. And occasionally some of my detractors on Twitter [Laughs], they go, Rosemary, she won't stop talking about the friendly city, and she's, whatever. But I just think that it is important to drive home because it is a promise that we should attempt to keep every single day, both as elected officials, but also as just community members. And so I think Wheeling is a place of opportunity, it is a scrappy, fun community that I think, [inaudible] for involvement, you know, we make the joke all the time that all you have to do is raise your hand, and people will give you five things to do, and you won't be able to do them all. And I think that is the kind of spirit, ultimately that's the spirit of Wheeling.

00:27:20 **Emma Wiley**

That's a lovely, lovely summary of Wheeling. So going back to how, to you coming into Wheeling for the first time, can you describe how it felt to be a trans person

moving to Wheeling?

00:27:38 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yeah, I remember, remember making the decision, you know having, feeling like I had a choice to either continue to be afraid, and to worry, and to be skeptical of people, and really just fear what my experience would be, or to kind of anticipate bad things to happen. Or, and what I ultimately chose to do was to lean in, to be unapologetic, to kind of really lead with joy rather than fear. And looking back, I'm like, oh, okay, whatever. It sounds silly. But when I was a teenager, that felt like the ultimate choice.

And, you know, I also felt there was an opportunity to grow up in a way that I'd never, I'd never have because of, you know, my homeschooling experience, and growing up in a small community, and create an identity for myself that was, could have kind of transcended my own gender identity, and that identity of a community member, and a student, and a neighbor, and all of these things. And I look back on the relationships that I built, because I decided to lean in, and just really be enthusiastic. And it's somewhat embarrassing, the folks that I met in the first couple years when I moved to Wheeling, sometimes I'll see them at Kroger, or at the library, and they go, Rosemary, you were crazy back then. You didn't say no to anything. And they'll just talk about how they've seen me grow up, and how quickly that also happened.

00:29:12

I think part of that is, you know, I really give a lot of credit to my college experience. I went to college, I was a late, I was a non-traditional student. I believe I started at 21 or 22 at West Virginia Northern Community College. And again, just by, through happenstance, I was doing some, some work for a neighbor. I was painting a neighbor's house, and who I'd met, I don't know, in that summer of 2014, 2013. And I remember him saying, like, what's your life plan? Like, what are you going to do? He was in his 50s, and he had, you know, a master's degree. And I said, I don't know. I was a bartender for my sister at her bar. And I said, I don't know what my plan is, but I want to get involved. I want to do these things. And he said, you should go to college. And I had flashbacks of the student debt crisis. And I was like, I can't afford it. Nobody in my family has gone to college before, you know, I don't want to be strapped with debt, all of these things. And he said, well, depending on your income, you probably can go for free. And nobody had ever said that before. And I thought, is that, I didn't know what a Pell Grant was. I didn't know what a FAFSA form was. And he, you know, he said, well, there's a community college downtown. I went there in the 90s or something. I haven't been there for a long time, but like, maybe next week we'll walk down and get our paperwork. And I, and we did that. And he literally held my hand as we walked through the building and like got the paperwork and filled it out.

And it was, it was a kind of happenstance experience, a small thing, but I guarantee you, I would not have done that had he not said, Hey, what are you, what's your plan? What are you doing? And in that set in motion, my first leadership experience is being a member of the board of governors of West Virginia Northern Community College, joining the student government association, meeting my peers and future people that I would ultimately lead with as a member of City Council. And I think back about the randomness of life. I'm not a religious person or particularly spiritual, but I do believe in the power of just leaning in and that energy will match energy and, and people, and you have to be open to, to saying yes. And I've made that decision very early on to just be open to saying yes. And it has only given me good things.

And I guarantee you that had that neighbor, not, you know, helped me fill out the FAFSA paperwork and giving me the confidence and the language and the tools to do this stuff. I would definitely not, I would not have obviously been a college graduate, a first generation college student, would not run for office. And he probably has no idea the impact that that small experience had. I think again, if I could give a descriptor of Wheeling, like that's, that's one of what it looks like to be, to live in a friendly city.

00:32:16 **Emma Wiley**

Wow. Can you go a little bit more in depth about your experiences going to college in Wheeling, both kind of, as a non-traditional student, as at a community college, like there's so many layers to this, but then also as, as a trans person.

00:32:36 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I assumed that my only example of going to college was from television. And so I assumed that it was the big bustling campus with thousands of students. And if folks know about West Virginia Northern, it's a small community college. I think they have less than 1200 kids. And so, you know, I had two brains about it. I was a little disappointed that there were thousands of students I could hang out with. But I think more than that, I was grateful that it was a community college, that it felt really local and that I could build relationships with my, not just my peers, but my advisors and my classmates. I didn't actually walk in assuming that it would be an issue being trans and it wasn't. And the staff and the faculty and the students embraced me in so many ways.

00:33:28

And it was the first time I'd also met other queer people in a kind of peer space. We were all focused on our classes and there were no on-campus students, like people went home and they only came for class. So there wasn't this opportunity to really hang out with people and build those more serious relationships. But I was like, oh, this is totally doable. And I am no different than any of these other students. But I do remember really getting involved in kind of campus life and

joining a couple of the organizations and kind of trying to build strong personal and professional relationships with my teachers, the faculty, and the staff.

And I, again, laugh now because those folks met me in my early, early years. I started transitioning at 12 and 13, kind of experimenting with what it looked like to, you know, live in my gender identity. I fully transitioned by the time I was in college. But any of us looking back at our high school and college years, the way we dressed and how we acted and whatever is just cringe fest. And so I occasionally, an old teacher will come to me and go, do you remember those hats that you used to wear or the, or the whatever? And I'd be like, please don't remind me. But my experience was really, really good. And so, so great. In fact, that I'm invited back to campus often and they have like a, not a plaque, but some like billboard of me inside the lobby. And I'm like, oh my God, I love you guys.

00:35:06

And I will say like, I got involved and I joined the board of governors and was the student representative. And I was getting my community organizing feet wet and we called for the resignation of the president and we invited the media and we organized not a coup, but like an almost coup. It was a lot and intense. And I look back as, you know, and, and regret some of that, but also grateful for the experience. And it was again, the first opportunity I had to represent a community, particularly a vulnerable community like students. But also kind of challenged the status quo in, in a way that I thought was really, I think profound and maybe short-sighted, but ultimately I think formative in a leadership capacity. And so every time they do invite me back, I'm surprised that they don't remember all the bullshit that I got them into while I was a student. But I took nothing for granted and still don't. And I'm grateful for that.

00:36:16 **Emma Wiley**

I want to go back to something that you said in your last few minutes and dig in a little bit more. You were talking about how being young and going to college and kind of doing that transition from a young person to being an adult with all of our layers of identity. In that time, how did it feel to like physically navigate and exist in Wheeling? How did you think about your own self-expression?

00:36:58 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I saw Wheeling as an experiment in a way. I felt like I had nothing to lose. You know, just a few years prior, we lost everything. And so having gone through the worst experience a person might experience as a, or a teenager could experience losing their entire household and their family in the same, you know, and their parents' marriage and these things. I realized that Wheeling was a challenge, but nothing that I had never experienced before. And I didn't want to leave or to feel like I didn't try hard enough to get the things I wanted. And the things that I wanted were, were strong relationships. And I wanted to have a respectable

professional experience as well. I didn't know what that looked like. I didn't know how to achieve it. I made a lot of wrong turns and I made a lot of guesses that worked out and ultimately built relationships out of curiosity and asking a lot of questions and trying to be a good learner.

I took on a lot of mentors growing up, whether they called themselves mentors or not. I saw them this way. And, and really, tried to keep my hubris really low and, and, and learn as much as I could, as fast as I could. And, and so that transition was very scary being, coming from a teenage world to an adult world. And in many ways, I don't feel, even in my early twenties, I still felt like I was 17 years old. And stunted in many ways, because I mean, I didn't have a driver's license until I was in my twenties. I didn't have a state ID until I was in my twenties, because I was afraid that they wouldn't give it to me. And I hadn't changed my name yet. And I didn't know what the process, it was just scary. And so it, I really didn't feel like I had, I'd become a real adult until I was in my, in my early to mid twenties. And I'm only 29 now, so I am fresh [Laughs] in many ways.

But I knew that a couple of things were true. I knew that people were ultimately good, and that I needed to give them the chance to be good rather than to mark them off for whatever reason. And I know a lot of vulnerable communities will do that for, you know, good reason. It's a defense. But I knew that I might sacrifice relationships for the sake of feeling safe. And not always is being safe, or feeling safe, the best thing. Sometimes it actually is against our own best interest. Because when you're safe, you're not challenged. And I knew that I could get an easy job. I didn't have to go to college. I could make ends meet. I could live with my parents. And all of that was safe and fine. But I knew that, you know, my experience was already crazy and insane. Why not just double down on it? And experiment with the city that didn't know me, and I didn't know it? And so far, that experiment is working very well. And we're having a lot of fun.

00:40:07 **Emma Wiley**

So, as you transitioned out of college, what did you do post-graduation? Did you stay in Wheeling?

00:40:17 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I did stay in Wheeling. I graduated from West Virginia Northern, and I transferred to, I graduated my associates, and I transferred to Wheeling Jesuit University, and was the last graduating class of the Jesuit University before they changed their accreditation. We joke now that I ruined it for them. They were like, that's it. We can no longer call ourselves a Jesuit University, because we taught that person. Although, all jokes. And I graduated with my bachelor's in psychology. And during that time, I had gotten involved in boards, and I was a member of the ACLU of West Virginia board. And I was the associate director of the NAMI Greater Wheeling Drop-In Center, which is the National Alliance for Mental Illness, and used my degree as I was getting it. And after graduating,

continued to work there, and really loved that. It was really my first, my first professional job, a job that I felt like I really had made it, and could call myself a career professional.

00:41:24

And while I was working in mental health, I considered what it might look like to run for office. I had applied for an open seat that was vacated by a member of City Council in 2019, 2018-2019. And I interviewed for that, and I ultimately did not get it, and did not let that discourage me, and thought, hey, what's running a campaign about? I might try it. And never thought that I would leave Wheeling. After I graduated high school, or rather college, a lot of folks did. A lot of folks said, you know, I'm gonna be a traveling nurse, or I'm gonna, you know, use my MBA elsewhere. I'm gonna move gonna move to Columbus, or Pittsburgh, or Cleveland. And, and there was a part of me that was a little, I had a little bit of FOMO [Fear of Missing Out] that I thought, oh gosh, I love the city of Wheeling, but I never lived anywhere bigger than, than Wheeling. And then all those fears crept in, that like, oh, I don't want to have to pay for a very expensive apartment, and I don't have a driver's license, so maybe I shouldn't. And so ultimately decided to, to stay in Wheeling, of course, and, and apply for that position, and then ultimately run for office. And in all of that time, was able to tie up some loose ends, and kind of turn off of some of the boards and commissions that I was on. At one point, I believe it was 12 or 13 at a time, which was way too many, and, you know, you can't do that successfully, but I was very eager. And again, if you raise your hand, people will give you, people love for you to volunteer. There are only so many folks.

And so when we mounted our City Council campaign, it was very clear, obviously, that I was in it for the long haul. But it, it also built a sense of community for other folks that said, I could have left, but there is a sense of momentum here. And there are young people doing really exciting things. And maybe that's always been true to some extent, but I felt particularly in 2019, 2020, people, there was this collective momentum, or this critical mass that existed. And I'm not going to credit our campaign with that necessarily. But I think there was a confluence of that everywhere.

00:43:49 **Emma Wiley**

You moved perfectly into my next set of questions, which kind of get to your experience as an elected official, and your campaign, and everything like that. But kind of moving from college and post-grad into politics, how did your kind of community organizing experiences impact your role in politics today?

00:44:20 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I was involved in a variety of organizations. I mentioned the ACLU West Virginia, NAMI Greater Wheeling. I joined Project ID as well, which is one of my most

favorite organizations, working to get homeless folks and people in poverty their necessary ID documents. I also joined organizations like the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. I was with Women's Health Center Charleston Board, and Indivisible, the Indivisible group that existed across the nation. We had a chapter here in Wheeling called Marchers Ohio Valley Empowered.

And all of this really stemmed from the 2016 election, feeling that I was on the outside of politics, and that politics was something that happened to me, not something that I was actively engaged in. And it wasn't until Trump was elected that I thought, this is dire. This is really dire. I assumed that politics was a linear experience that you passed a law, you won an election, and you just maintained. And that was the first time I realized that politics in America, in particular, could regress, that we could actually go back in time. And I felt a lot of guilt that I hadn't been involved before then, and decided that, okay, this is the 11th hour, and we might as well lean in.

And I remember again, at that time, there were many people in Wheeling kind of, as the dust was settling from the election, figuring out what politics looked like in West Virginia. In 2016, West Virginia voted for Trump more than any other state in the nation. And for better, I mean, this was, and maybe continues to be, Trump country in that way. And Trump is only one example of what the issues that we were experiencing, just maybe even a symptom of those things. But it really set in motion my political experience, not because I was anti-Trump, but I was pro-democracy, and I was pro-West Virginia. And I realized that, and I remember listening to all of the vitriol that was coming from the right and the left about communities that lived and existed in West Virginia and rural states. And I knew that we were misunderstood. And I make the joke that West Virginians are one of the only people that kind of defend their state like a person, like we personify West Virginia, we defend her, and you can't talk about our state this way. I've never met somebody from Pennsylvania who says like, don't you dare talk about Pennsylvania like this. And Pennsylvania's great, but there is this underdog, this complex that we have, because we know that we're misunderstood, and that we're victimized, and that we're extracted from. And as a state, we are the butt of a joke, and that is not okay. And I think, you know, that people may disagree with me, but I think that many electeds like Donald Trump make us the butt of the joke in that way.

00:47:27

And so I got involved with community organizing and crowd photography, protest photography. I was an amateur photographer for a couple of years and really enjoyed being involved in that way and capturing the moment, because I knew that this was a point in history that we were experiencing. And at that time, this was 2016, 17, 18, running for office was not on my agenda. We looked around the room and we asked everybody else, would you run for office? But I never thought it would be my lived experience. And it wasn't until I looked around the room and everybody said, no, not me. And everybody has a good reason for not

doing it, obviously. Particularly if you're a progressive or a Democrat, like, it's almost a recipe for failure in many ways. But I thought, what do I have to lose? And particularly because our race on City Council is nonpartisan, we decided to run a campaign, not because of any federal politics or national politics, but because we thought we should, we need to re-inspire people to believe in their democracy and in the importance of civics and of government. And we were at an all-time low right now in the way that people perceive the effectiveness of government. And obviously there were many other issues that we were experiencing in the city of Wheeling that prompted our run, public transit, homelessness, housing, affordability, preservation, blight. But I think all of those things in culmination really made me hopeful for democracy at the local level. That maybe at the federal level, it's a foregone conclusion, but we can still build something that's smart and healthy and inspiring in our community.

00:49:16 **Emma Wiley**

Just now you kept describing your campaign as we, instead of me. How do you understand that we? Who is included in that we?

00:49:29 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yeah, so I'm a team player. I hate to do anything alone. There's something, have you heard of body doubling before? Like people who need to be, the pandemic ruined me because I love being in an office and I love working with people. And so anytime I get the chance to work with somebody else, even if they're just in the same room, I feel so much better. And so that has paid dividends in elected office because it is a team sport. Running for office is not only not fun, but not effective when you do it alone.

So I, in 2020, built a team of community members and neighbors and kind of demographic populations, including our homeless community and young folks and our senior community to just say, we don't have all the answers, but we know what the problems look like. And the people who are closest to the problem should be closest to the solution. And I didn't see that happening or replicated in other political offices, whether that was at the local level or at the state level. And I'm no political savant. I'd volunteered for campaigns before. I'd never run one, but I knew that it wasn't as complicated as people made it out to be. You told the truth, you promised to do the work, and you knocked your doors. And then hopefully on election night, people believe you.

And so building that team was really, really important. But maintaining that team has been much more important and more difficult, frankly, because people love an election, but a candidacy looks different. Like being actually running or like being an elected official looks very different than running for an office. And this is my first time, so it was not something I knew intimately. And so I've been really excited to maintain those relationships. And as we pass policies, reaching back out to the folks who were on the ground with us as we started and saying, here's

what we're doing. It takes a long time. And even if you do pass an ordinance, it doesn't mean that the problems are solved. That has been really exciting and difficult, frankly.

00:51:44

I think one of the things that you, you learn or something that I really take into heart is, is not only being an elected official that passes the policy, but also being a teacher of civics in a way. Because people don't understand how their government works. Even the people who are working in the government don't know how it works in many ways. And so, I found myself really enjoying the experience of helping people understand what works, what doesn't work, how they can make it better as a resident, as a citizen. And also kind of pulling back the curtain and saying like, well, here's how it actually is. Like, I wish we could pass a policy tomorrow and we could fix our public transit system, but it's going to take a lot more work. And I think that is kind of refreshing for a lot of people. It doesn't make people feel better necessarily. They wish it was, it could happen overnight. But I do know that that has been a really kind of fruitful experience for me.

00:52:43 **Emma Wiley**

So how did, can you describe how the kind of campaigning and election process and how it felt like, especially doing it kind of for your first time?

00:52:54 **Rosemary Ketchum**

[Inaudible]. I had, as I mentioned before, I've worked on a couple campaigns, no successful campaigns [Laughs], but worked on them nevertheless. And I worked with the gubernatorial race in 2020, Stephen Smith for governor, and he built a very exciting campaign model. He essentially ran slates across the state of West Virginia, people who are running for offices in different communities, but together on a similar platform. And so I remember working intimately with that group on my platform and my media talking points and all of these things, having been a first time candidate and, and was very excited to feel like I was part of a much broader team, not just a city wide team, but a statewide team of people running for offices.

And ultimately we were the first election to win during this kind of slate experiment or model. And we only won our race by 15 votes. And I talk about that often when I speak to classes or groups, because people are very, understandably, they feel very disillusioned by the federal experience related to elections and politics. And they, I hear all the time when I say, are you registered to vote? When was the last time you cast a vote? They go, well, it doesn't matter, the electoral college, my vote doesn't count, gerrymandering. And those are valid concerns. But folks think that applies to your local office too. And we don't have an electoral college at the city level. And so I tell people I won by 15 votes, had I knocked on 15

fewer doors or made 15 fewer phone calls, I would not have won the election. And that resonates with folks because people don't believe that they can make a difference or they can make the difference between somebody getting elected or not getting elected. And so having that be a part of my elected experience has been very profound because I have in my life adopted the belief that, oh gosh, it's already predetermined and politics and elections are beyond a single person's influence. And that now I know is just not true.

And so my hope now that I am an elected official and that I'm running for mayor in 2024 here in the city of Wheeling, that we are able to inspire people not to just get involved in a campaign, but to run for office. I say that lived experience is your greater qualifier, that people assume you need to have some special degree or you have to come from money or you have to have a political family. Those things help, sure. But I have none of those. And we've been able to do some really exciting things at the local level. And frankly, to pat my team on the back, we've been able to inspire folks to consider running for office across the state of West Virginia. And I don't think those would have happened if we hadn't created this sense of momentum and this energy. And I think there's probably no place better for that to happen than West Virginia.

00:56:18 **Emma Wiley**

How did campaigning make you feel about inclusivity in Wheeling?

00:56:24 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I remember early on, our team did a SWOT analysis, a kind of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats board. And every time we did it, my gender identity would be at the top of weaknesses and the top of threats. Like, this is what's going to lose our campaign. We didn't run a campaign on my gender identity at all. We ran a campaign on these very important local issues. But we assumed that people would pluck that out as a reason not to vote for me. And I knocked many, many, many doors. And I cannot remember a single time that I knocked on somebody's door and it was a problem.

I will say that when I was knocking doors running, I was 26, 27. That was a point of contention for some folks, particularly our older community who said like, you know, they never said it outright, I'm not going to vote for you because you're in your mid-20s. But they'd say, wow, do you think you can do this? Are you prepared for this? And then they followed that up by like, did you go to high school with my son? Or did I babysit you when you were a kid? Not being from Wheeling, none of those things were true. And so that was kind of, I think, potentially an obstacle as well. You know, local politics loves people who grew up in that community.

So my experience being an LGBTQ person, being a trans person running for office in West Virginia, I'm sure that there were conversations that people had

about me as I was running, but I never felt that I needed to address it or that it was something that was insurmountable. And I will say, I think it was in part because I didn't bring it up, both because I didn't think it was relevant, but it was also strategic. I just didn't think that I needed to. And I knew that it would turn people off for me to go, we're going to make history. Like, no, that's not the goal here. And so I know that people were anticipating that, and were waiting on Rosemary to make it a LGBTQ campaign. And I think that that kind of deflated a lot of those folks in a way that makes me very proud because we care about the city of Wheeling and we know that everybody has different issues that they're experiencing.

00:58:47

I will say there was a very funny moment during our first night of campaigning, our first night of door knocking, where a friend of mine--my campaign manager--and I were knocking doors and we couldn't figure out exactly where a specific house was. So, we went to a local bar and we spoke to some folks and we got kind of the lay of the land of this rural community. And we went back to our car and door knocked. And then as we get back to our car, we kind of drive out of the parking lot and somebody from the bar runs out of the establishment to hail our car down. And it was dark outside, pitch black. And I'm like, oh oh gosh, here it goes. I roll down the window and the guy comes out and he walks up and he says, you know what? You are the worst politician I have ever met. And I laugh very uncomfortably. And he says, you come in here asking all these questions and you didn't even introduce yourself that you were running for office. And I was like, oh my God, you're so right. What an idiot. This is our first night out. We don't know what we're doing. And then he said something like, he said that, you know, the bartender said, I think that was a man that just walked in here. And somebody else said, no, I think that was just a very tall woman. And somebody else said something else. And then the guy, he said, well, you know, whatever they are, if they care enough about our community to knock doors at 10 PM, then they probably have something to say. And then he said, the folks inside would like your business cards and whatever else you have because they'd love to vote for ya.

And I was, it was the first opportunity or experience that I had. And I was just like, wow, people don't always have the tools or the language, but they mean well, and they want good things. And I had an opportunity, I had a choice there to either say, oh gosh, you know, to kind of defend myself or whatever, or to lean in and say, thank you. Yes, we've got a lot of important things to talk about. Here's my business card. You know, here's my cell phone number. Give me a call. And that's what we did. And those folks are some of my greatest allies and friends now living in that community.

So I think that's a micro example of like, you know, sometimes we can apply these like broad, and this is tough. And this is where I feel like I'm a bad progressive because I'm like, sometimes you have to, you have to make compromises to do the work. And not everything is an academic argument that you can like make a

progressive stance for. And so that's really hard. But I do think that by and large people mean well, and you just have to give them the grace and understanding that they want to learn, and they want to do well, and right by you in many ways.

01:01:33 **Emma Wiley**

That's a great story. So kind of thinking about you get elected, how does working in city government impact your relationship within LGBTQ+ communities, you know, among individuals in the city?

01:01:57 **Rosemary Ketchum**

So, I think that when I was elected, there was a section of our queer community, not just in Wheeling, but in West Virginia, that celebrated my race, which I'm honored for, but also expected it to be radical, or expected my political experience to be just like boots-on-the-ground, progressive, radical, you know, whatever. And it hasn't been, I'm not necessarily interested in addressing federal politics at the local level, in a way that isn't relevant. And we've done some really progressive things in the city of Wheeling that I'm proud of, and that I was a lead sponsor on and that I fought for. But I do remember feeling like I disappointed some folks by not being, you know, calling things out or whatever.

01:02:50

And I made some, you know, interesting, I wouldn't say missteps. But when I was elected in 2020, we gained a lot of national media attention. And I remember, you know, every time the governor would say something stupid, I'd get a call from MSNBC. And they'd say, like, Hey, can you respond to the governor's remarks on this thing? And I'd say yes, every single time. And I don't regret saying yes to those. But I do think for people, it was either never enough, or it was too much.

And I know that some folks, particularly in the city of Wheeling, who didn't vote for me because I was LGBTQ. And maybe that was one of the reasons they wouldn't have voted for me had I not been good on some of the issues. They resented that. And they thought, you're forgetting our city. And it's almost this like, ha ha, we got you, you did only care about LGBTQ issues after all. And that really hurt because I was like, I'm not asking to be interviewed, these people are calling me. And so I remember within the first six months, needing to make a pivot and say, okay, like, we are focused on the issues. Like we got, we hit the ground running immediately on some of the issues that we needed to like public transit and blight. But it doesn't look like that because I'm on MSNBC calling the governor a dummy, because he [laughs] said this thing about trans people or trans sports or something.

01:04:05

And so by and large, you know, we've been able to build a really strong LGBTQ community here in Wheeling, we have an organization called the Friendlier City Project, which works with local businesses to work on being affirming and inclusive, and then just hosts a lot of incredible events. And then at the statewide level, organizations like Fairness West Virginia, or the ACLU of West Virginia, or the various, you know, Pride organizations, I think we're in better shape than we've ever been. And many organizations or cities are hosting their first Pride events, which I think is really inspiring. I get the opportunity to speak at a lot of events, because having been the first openly trans person elected, we want to maintain that momentum, I might be the first, definitely don't want to be the last. And we want to replicate that in many ways.

And I see that there are young LGBTQ folks who reach out, queer folks who say, I've never wanted to live, or to stay in the state of West Virginia, but your race, or the work that's happening at Fairness West Virginia, or the Pride parades that I'm seeing happen in small communities that I never thought would happen, that's going to keep me here. And I think that's profound and powerful. And these are West Virginians at heart, whether they're LGBTQ or not, and they want to stay in the state that they love. And if it means that we need to run queer people for elected office, then that's what we'll do. If it means that we need to have Pride flags hanging outside of small businesses, if that's what it means to keep our young people in West Virginia, it's a small price to pay. Because I say it more often than not, like our population decline is a mandate, it doesn't matter if you're a Republican or a Democrat, we won't have any people [laughs] to fight for if we don't do the right thing now. And so, I think I'm very grateful, win, lose, or draw for this next election. We've been able to do some really exciting work and hopefully be able to continue.

01:06:06 **Emma Wiley**

You led right into my next question, which I think, unless I'm mistaken, you're involved in the Friendlier City Project. [Rosemary nods]. Can you kind of describe what the Friendlier City Project is and kind of how it came to be?

01:06:26 **Rosemary Ketchum**

So, The Friendlier City Project is a non-profit based here in the city of Wheeling. It really started out of a question. And we had one LGBTQ organization in the city of Wheeling that was kind of in the valley, not based in Wheeling. It was a little awkward. And they weren't doing the advocacy work that we thought was important. And I convened a group of maybe 10 or 12 of my friends, queer people, allies, and I said, should we do something? Like, Wheeling is one of the big five cities in West Virginia and we don't have an LGBTQ organization that's doing advocacy work or hosting events.

And at first we were just going to host or create some kind of social event, just like maybe a mixer or an art gallery show or something. But myself and Mikaya

Green, who lives here in the city of Wheeling and is a teacher, we kind of drummed up this idea of what if we actually started a small organization? And we had no idea that it would be a non-profit. We just wanted to do something maybe ad hoc. And so we thought, what would that look like? What would we want to take on? A Pride festival is beyond our scope at the moment, but we could do trivia events or we could do round tables or we could do a support group for LGBTQ folks.

01:07:51

And it really came out of a necessity. I'd get calls all the time, particularly right after the election from parents or grandparents or queer kids who'd say like, hey, are there any gatherings or like hangouts or support groups? And I'd have to say, no. I'd be like embarrassed because I'd thought, gosh, I'm hailed as this queer person in West Virginia, I don't know anything that's happening. We don't have it. And so it kind of spawned out of that idea that there isn't anything. And so even if we can do one small, create one small event or organization, then that can be something. And that kind of snowballed into a non-profit.

And we held our first Pride festival last year or this year in June. And it was spectacular. We had nearly a thousand people show up and we had bands and food trucks and vendors who said that they'd never sold as much merchandise as they'd sold at our event. And it was such an incredibly collaborative and inspiring experience. Local organizations that I had no idea were queer affirming were like, can we get a table? We want to be there. That was an enormously difficult collaborative effort. But that's the work that I think needs to happen.

01:09:11

And so the Friendlier City Project, ode to the Friendly City name, has a couple arms. We have the policy arm. We want to work with electeds to kind of push for important policies that we think are valuable. We also want to be kind of an advocacy and event based organization to giving queer people and allies something to do that is both affirming and also really fun. And so we're having a Taylor Swift 1989 drop party for the album, the Taylor's version album, this month. And we're doing a couple other really fun trivia events in the future. We host a Friendsgiving for people who might not be able to go home for Thanksgiving. So, yeah, long story short, it's a really great organization that I'm grateful to be a part of.

01:10:01 **Emma Wiley**

Awesome. What has the reception of the larger Wheeling community been to kind of this, the activities of the Friendlier City Project and kind of like the creation of the organization as a whole?

01:10:15 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Well, by and large, absolutely positive. There have been members, the chairwoman of the local Republican Party has come to City Council on multiple occasions to complain about drag shows or the Pride parade or, you know, indoctrinating kids or whatever. And I would not have mentioned her had she not been the chair of the Republican Party locally. But I think that's important because these are widely attended events and they're well supported by community members and nonprofits and for profits. And, you know, people who are establishment status quo folks are like, yes, get me a table. I want to donate, how can we be involved?

And even though I feel we've moved so far as a culture and as a community, we still have remnants of people who just cannot understand why a Pride flag matters or why it's important that young people are involved and able to talk about their gender identity openly. And so that is, I would say it's disheartening, but I would rather say that it's illuminating in a way because the people who are detractors are small and they're not well organized, which I'm grateful for, but they do exist. And I think it's important to call them in rather than call them out. And we try to do that every time that we either get a chance to speak or they speak at our City Council meetings rather than, you know, kind of like wagging our finger at them. I try to go, Hey, like, let's hang out, like come to a company event or like, let's grab coffee. They've denied every opportunity to do that, and that's their prerogative. But I never want to match fire with fire. I've learned that, that just doesn't work and it doesn't make me feel good. I want to always kill them with kindness. And it just, even though it doesn't work, I do every time, I do think it helps me sleep at night and maybe one day she'll say, you know what? Yeah, let's grab a cup of coffee and let's chat about it. But yes, by and large, the reception has been incredible. Our local government is in support. Our electeds are thoughtful and our community broadly is all on board.

01:12:44 **Emma Wiley**

Do you think that there's been a larger impact of the Friendlier City Project or, you know, other similar initiatives to the regional area, to West Virginia as a whole? Like, is this something that people are seeing it from outside of Wheeling or is it kind of Wheeling, it stays in Wheeling kind of thing?

01:13:07 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I mean, I hope that people in the region are seeing it. I mean, there are still cities that I think have queer presence without being organized. I'm thinking of Weirton and Wellsburg and Follansbee and Chester, West Virginia. I mean, these are, again, smaller rural communities, but they do look to places like Wheeling to either come to our event or to learn how to do it themselves. And actually, something we've been, an idea we've been kind of batting around at the Friendlier City Project is what does it look like to actually kind of teach this? Because it doesn't come naturally for a lot of folks and, you know, running a non-profit or

hosting a Pride event can feel very daunting. And I imagine there are people in these smaller communities who are like, if only I knew how to do this, I could organize, you know, 15 friends for an event. And also dispelling the worry that it's dangerous. Obviously, there can always be a threat of violence and we have to be safe, but we've never felt unsafe hosting an event. And I remember early on hosting, we take safety precautions and we have law enforcement and we do our due diligence.

01:14:17

But I remember early on, a lot of our older queer folks were like, I don't want to go. It's not going to be safe. I don't feel like I can, you know, I have to watch my back. And that's coming from a lived experience that's valid where they were not safe and they were attacked. And I think that we still have this, this remnant of that. But we, as younger queer folks, feel incredibly safe. And like, we don't worry about hosting an event anymore because we know that the thousand people that are going to show up are going to vibe with us. And if there are two or three protesters, then that's great. Then we know we're doing something right.

And I think that's something we want to not just replicate, but we want to inspire other communities to be brave because it's not as scary or as difficult as you think it is. But I say that being a white person, being a queer person who in some ways passes, being a person who has kind of professional experience in education, not everybody maybe feels as safe as I do. But I do think that in West Virginia, it does not do us any good to anticipate something that might not happen. And then not host an event because we were worried. I think we have to be bold and hopefully be surprised and gratefully surprised that it went well.

01:15:43 **Emma Wiley**

I want to dig into something you just said that I didn't think about before, but I find a little bit interesting. So Wheeling and West Virginia in general has, I think on average, an older population in relation to other states. How do you see the differences in Wheeling between older queer people and communities and younger queer people and communities? Is there interaction? Is it separate? Can you just explain that a little bit?

01:16:23 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yeah, I mean, I'm only one person just to kind of give my perspective, but I found it to be fascinating because I do think there is a divide. And I think the divide doesn't just exist here in West Virginia, but I think this is somewhat national. I think because there has been such a rapid momentum in queer culture and acceptance and inclusivity from 1980 to 2023, there are people who are older, who live in Wheeling, who are queer folks, who remember the AIDS crisis, the AIDS epidemic, who lost husbands and boyfriends and family members. And they now see Rosemary and Mikaya, and we're celebrating queer identity without any

of the trauma. And so I try to be as thoughtful as possible and just try to put myself in their position and go, they want to celebrate, and they do. And yet they have this bank of lived experience that just feels almost forgotten by history. And there is a kind of a tussle in queer circles about like, we need to always be talking about this because young queer people, while we're so excited and we get to celebrate our wins, we get to do that with the privilege of not having to experience any of this other stuff.

And so, yeah, whether it's about safety or whether it's about the HIV crisis, or whether it's about being able to hold your partner's hand, you know, there were, there's kind of micro moments during Pride that I remember where like, young queer couples would hold each other's hands at our Pride Fest, or they'd have a public display of affection, they'd kiss each other or something. And our older queer folks who are in their 50s, 60s, and 70s were just like aghast by it. They loved it. But they couldn't imagine feeling that comfortable enough to do that in public on a park bench, just like hanging out. And that hurts. And that feels like I'm just like, I can't imagine. But I do think that that is just a generational experience, of course.

01:18:34

And one of the other, you know, interesting things is that a lot of the elder queer folks will talk about the bars, the bar scene in the 1970s and 80s, and how that we had like four or five gay bars. We don't have one in Wheeling now. And it's a strange, like full circle moment where most places are so inclusive, we really don't need our own space, but they miss it. And we don't know what we didn't have. So we can't miss it as young people. So I think that's funny.

And the last like interesting generational divide is the word queer itself. So our first iteration of the Friendlier City Project, we thought about calling it Queer Wheeling. And they said, no, they said, We do not like the word queer, it's hard for us to say, it is a pejorative still, we know that we're taking the word back, but we get so uncomfortable. And it didn't even cross my mind. I was just like, Oh, of course, like, that was a word to attack you. And we're trying to like, say, yas, queer. [Laughs]. And they're like, no, it still hurts. And it's just like small little generational moments like that are fascinating.

And it never ends up being a problem, which is always a discussion about history, of course, and culture. And I'm grateful to learn. But those small moments, I think, as young people, we really need to be reflective and to really sit and learn from our older queer folks, because they've been through more than we may ever. So yeah, I wouldn't say that there is a kind of a personal divide. But there, I think, obviously, there's a cultural and generational difference.

01:20:17 **Emma Wiley**

What, and you already talked about this, maybe a tiny bit, but what is next for the Friendlier City Project?

01:20:24 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Well, a couple things are next. So, we have our regular events, including our Thanksgiving event, and then we have yet to start planning for our next Pride event, but that'll be happening soon. We are working with the Capitol Theatre, raffling off tickets to the Rocky Horror Picture Show very soon, which is exciting. As I mentioned, we are hosting a 1989 Taylor's Version album drop party that is really my party and Mikaya's party. We're co-opting the Friendlier City Project to do Taylor Swift stuff. [Laughs] Because she, I guess, is a queer icon, according to us.

01:20:59

And I mean, we're having fun. I think we really wanted to set the tone that this is going to be fun, rather than it being a kind of stuffy nonprofit. We're not looking to make a million dollars. We're looking to be an enjoyable experience for queer folks and allies in the city of Wheeling and take on fun events that don't typically happen. It's one of the things we always look around and go like, man, why isn't the city doing this? And only recently have we been kind of turning around and looking at ourselves and like, this is something we should do. We should take this on. If nobody's hosting a Taylor Swift drop party, we're hosting the Taylor Swift drop party. If nobody's hosting a Pride festival, or at least not one that we think is good enough, we're going to host that. And the only thing, the only ask that we have is that we want folks to be involved and to volunteer and to share ideas. Because I think that's obviously how we increase the momentum. But that's also how we get people to stay in the city of West Virginia, or the state of West Virginia, the city of Wheeling, because they see themselves reflected here. And they don't have to travel across the country to feel like they belong. And that's been the story of West Virginia for 100 years. And we're turning a ship in a small way. But I feel like we're doing that.

01:22:19 **Emma Wiley**

I have just a couple more just kind of wrapping up, kind of concluding questions. Now that you have lived in Wheeling for a fair amount of time, I think it's fair to say, how do you feel about the visibility of queer LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling?

01:22:42 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I feel pretty good about visibility in the city of Wheeling. We have, right now, through the Friendlier City Project, frankly, we created our small business initiative, where we worked with local small businesses, particularly after our non-discrimination ordinance passed. We also passed a conversion therapy ban

in the city of Wheeling. We wanted small businesses to know that if they are affirming, that it's helpful if they show it, because not everybody feels comfortable just walking into a business and feeling like they'll be treated equally. And we also recognized that, particularly in our tourist hubs, we wanted people from outside of West Virginia to know that, to know who we are, and not assume that maybe they're okay, maybe they're not.

And so we worked with dozens of small businesses and other institutions like West Virginia Northern to give them small stickers that are, it's our suspension bridge overlaid with a Pride flag, or a Pride flag overlaid onto our suspension bridge. And it has no words on it. It's very discreet. But ultimately, that is a signal that this is a queer affirming space. And so we, in 2022, that was our annual project. And that has created a sense of visibility that I think is so powerful, because it isn't loud. It isn't audacious, very simple. And it does something that I think people--it's the thing that if you don't know it, you don't see it. But if you need to see it, you know it's there. And we're very proud of that.

01:24:26

I also think queer visibility in our local government has been increased. We have some incredible folks serving in boards and commissions that happen to be LGBTQ, who bring their lived experience to their professional work, and also are able to, I think, give a part of themselves to their civic experience that we might not get otherwise. And like, it's fascinating, because some of the most influential people in our city are LGBTQ. And it's rarely a conversation. It's just that they hold that position, and it is what it is. I think maybe 10 or 15 years ago, we would talk more about it. But we gossip about different things now, which is so fun. We never gossip about whether somebody is gay or not. We just gossip whether they are good at their job. And that is so refreshing.

But yeah, I feel very good. We can always do better, and I hope we will and can. One of the things we haven't done that we tried to do is have a Pride flag hoisted at Heritage Port. Huntington and Charleston have both hoisted flags, Pride flags, at their city capitals. But the city of Wheeling has not yet done that. So maybe that's a kind of subversive 2024 goal of ours. But beyond that, we're really excited.

01:25:55 **Emma Wiley**

How do you think, and we've talked a little bit about this in kind of earlier questions, but how do you think that stereotypes of Wheeling or of West Virginia more broadly, that I know you deal with all the time, whether it's about LGBTQ or queer acceptance or visibility or whether it's politics or you know, whatever, how do you think those stereotypes affect LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling?

01:26:30 **Rosemary Ketchum**

That's a great question. I think the stereotypes of West Virginia and Appalachia broadly impact every person here in some really, I think, devastating ways. I think they impact the opportunities that we get. I think they impact our self-perception and our self-esteem. I think they also impact our self-efficacy, like what we think we can actually achieve as a state and as a people. And I think that's really unfortunate. It's changing faster than it ever has.

I think particularly through COVID, people are looking at rural communities and giving them a second chance and saying, you know what, maybe it isn't so bad to be in the woods after all. And like, this idea of slow living, I think, is really a part of our culture now. But particularly for LGBTQ people, it is a compounded misunderstanding. You're misunderstood as a queer person anywhere, but particularly in rural communities. But as a West Virginian, you kind of double down in that way.

And so I talk about this with some of my fellow elected officials who are LGBTQ or just people I know who are rural in Appalachia and LGBTQ. We go to national conferences and sometimes there'll be a round table and everybody will introduce themselves and say where they are. And it is a common experience for a West Virginian to introduce themselves and the room goes, whoa, or goes, huh? And it just is surprising to me. But people still, if you are an impressive, professional queer person who is from West Virginia, people are trying to do a math problem in their head. And they're like, how does that compute? And I think that that is a holdover from many decades of just bad politics.

01:28:16

And I don't think that every stereotype is untrue, frankly. I mean, West Virginia, we have a lot of work to do. And I really am disappointed by our state in many, many ways. And yet, as I mentioned before, we're the first people to defend West Virginia. I mean, it's just, it is as if she were a family member. And I know that queer people do that too. And I think there is ultimately, because there is this compounding misunderstanding, there also exists in queer West Virginians, this just like blatant defense of our state. They're like, you don't understand her. You don't understand me. And you don't understand West Virginia. And I love that.

And frankly, like, the irony is that there are some parts of West Virginia or some people who wish that queer people didn't exist, or that aren't real West Virginians. I've never met prouder West Virginians than I do when I meet a queer West Virginian who is just like, this is our life. This is who we are. We're not perfect. But this is the life that we're living. And it's not easy. But there is something really kind of profound in the scrappiness there. And I feel that too. So I think obviously, we can do better in regards to representation. But I think by and large, queer people are leading the state, whether, even if they're not the governor of our state, they are in our nonprofits, and they are running our organizations, and they're teaching our kids, and they are hosting our events. And if it weren't for queer West Virginians, we would not be [laughs] half as good as

we are as a state.

01:30:02 **Emma Wiley**

As we kind of, I have one kind of final question for you. What is next for you? You talked a little bit about how you just started your campaign for mayor. But what's next?

01:30:16 **Rosemary Ketchum**

Yeah, so, I've loved my experience as a member of City Council. And we hit the ground running and dove headfirst into the work. And I remember thinking when I was elected, if I was elected, if I can get two or three really good policies passed, I'll sleep well at night. And we've been able to pass over 15 really thoughtful policies that aren't just the things that we pass all the time, but that are game changers, I think, for the city of Wheeling. And understanding that the barrier to entry for a lot of this work is actually very low, that if you just work really hard, and you come with receipts, and you try to do the work that you're meant to do, and you've been asked to do by your constituents, you can get it done.

And that has inspired me to not just continue to work that I've done as a member of City Council, but to launch a mayoral campaign. We have an open seat for mayor in the city of Wheeling in 2024. And as I was contemplating what the future looked like for me, I thought, I've been able to accomplish more than I set out to do as a member of council. And I want to continue this momentum in this position. And frankly, I think we're turning a corner in, as I mentioned, in the state of West Virginia, in the city of Wheeling. And I don't want to lose that momentum. And I think if we're able to capture this, this kind of incredible forward motion, we need the right people in leadership to do that. And so we're going to, we're putting a team together, we've had our launch party, which was so fun. And we've been able to raise already a lot of money to be able to mount this campaign. So that is what is next in the most immediate future.

I might not win this race. I might win this race. And it is hard to know what is next because the next six months will determine the next five years. And so I'm very hopeful that we are able to run a very exciting campaign and that we're able to win this race and, and ultimately double down on the promises that we made in 2020 and continue the great work that the City Council has done, both I think culturally, but also economically.

01:32:30

I mean, we have got some incredible projects right now. We are seeing the creation of a 50+ million dollar regional cancer center in our business district. We are seeing housing developed in a way that we've never before. We have a 16+ million dollar streetscape. The secretary of transportation, Pete Buttigieg was in town not long ago, getting a tour of our downtown. Wheeling is not used to being

on the map this way. And so, I'm excited to be a part of that. And hopefully moving forward, we'll be able to, again, double down on this work.

01:33:08 **Emma Wiley**

That's awesome. Before we stop the recording, I just want to give you the opportunity. Are there any other questions you think I should have asked? Any topics you'd like to discuss in more detail? Anything else you'd like to add to this oral history before we conclude?

01:33:25 **Rosemary Ketchum**

I would like to say that when I was elected, I had the experience of having a lot of young people reach out to me. A lot of young West Virginians or their parents who said, we never thought something like this would be possible. And I would respond by saying, like, I'm one person. This isn't that important. We're trying to do some really good work. But for them, seeing an LGBTQ person take a position of leadership in a state that might not always reflect our values as West Virginians hit home for me.

And I want to let folks know that your leadership experience is not only good for your own professional development, but it can have broad and lasting impacts on people that you may never meet. And I think that that is why being unapologetic is really important. You know, why pushing the boundaries can pay dividends. I found it might be uncomfortable in the moment, but ultimately it is for the best.

And you cannot give up on communities that have, I think, been given up on by others. You have to really lean in and get your hands dirty. And that's something that I'm grateful to be part of a team of other people. I'm one person of many, many people here in the state of West Virginia who are long haulers, we say, and rolling up our sleeves to get the work done. And I want to make sure that folks know that if you feel like you have something to give to a place like West Virginia, you are welcome here. And we are working really hard to make this the most inclusive place in the state of West Virginia.

01:35:11 **Emma Wiley**

A lovely way to wrap things up. I just want to say thank you so much for taking the time and being willing to do this interview with me. I appreciate your thoughtfulness. Your interview will be, I'm sure, and already is to me just now before I've even stopped the recording, a valuable contribution to a more thorough understanding and documenting of the presence and visibility of queer and LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling. [Inaudible Rosemary]. I'm going to stop the recording. [End]