

LGBTQ+ VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITIES
IN WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
with
Mikaya Green

By Emma Wiley
American University

Virtual Interview using TheirStory

November 3, 2023

LGBTQ+ VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITIES
IN WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATOR: Mikaya Green
DATE: November 3, 2023
INTERVIEWER: Emma Wiley
PLACE: Virtual using TheirStory

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

This is an oral history of Mikaya Green that focuses on LGBTQ+ visibility and communities in Wheeling, West Virginia. The oral history covers some of Green's childhood, growing up in Bridgeport, Ohio, her family and how she grew up not knowing many LGBTQ+ people. Green discusses moving to Brooklyn in New York City for college and how she discovered her queer identity, before returning back to the Ohio Valley after graduating. Green spends most of the interview talking about LGBTQ+ communities and activities in the Wheeling area, particularly the formation of The Friendlier City Project, a local non-profit. She describes the formation of the group, some of their activities like their sticker campaign and Pride on the Plaza, and the reception of the Wheeling area.

INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

This was the second attempt at an interview. The first interview a few weeks earlier had to be rescheduled due to technical difficulties.

Mikaya Green uses the pronouns, she/her/hers.

COPYRIGHT STATUS

Mikaya Green 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
Bridgeport (Ohio)
College
Community life
Homophobia
LGBTQ+
Queer

Family
Appalachian Region
Identity
Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.)
Closeted
Biracial
The Friendlier City Project

LGBTQ+ VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITIES
IN WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcription of Interview with Mikaya on November 3, 2023 (virtual)

00:00:01 **Emma Wiley**

Alright, please state your full name for the record and where in the world that you're calling in from.

00:00:06 **Mikaya Green**

My name is Mikaya Green and I'm currently living in Wheeling, West Virginia.

00:00:13 **Emma Wiley**

I'm the interviewer, Emma Wiley. I'm currently in my house in the Cleveland Park neighborhood in Washington DC. It is November 3rd, 2023 and we are on a video call today to talk about Mikaya Green's experience with LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling, West Virginia, The Friendlier City Project, and more broadly just in the Ohio Valley. So the first question...we're going to kind of take it back a little bit...can you tell me about when and where you were born?

00:00:46 **Mikaya Green**

So I was born in Wheeling, West Virginia. I grew up in Bridgeport, Ohio, which is only like five minutes away from Wheeling, West Virginia. So I've lived in the Ohio Valley pretty much my whole life except for when I went to college.

00:01:03 **Emma Wiley**

Okay, can you describe your family?

00:01:06 **Mikaya Green**

So I have a mom and I have a dad. My dad actually passed away in a car accident whenever I was a senior in high school. I have a stepdad and then I have a little sister. And right now I'm actually engaged, her name is Kayla. And yeah, we have a dog and we live in Bethlehem, West Virginia right now.

00:01:33 **Emma Wiley**

And just for people who may not know the area a little bit better...can you describe where Bethlehem is kind of in relation to Wheeling?

00:01:41 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah. It's really weird Bethlehem is like Wheeling. It has a Wheeling address. So it's literally not even like two minutes away from Downtown Wheeling, but they have their own like mayor and stuff like that. So yeah, it's practically Wheeling. They just have their own "city officials."

00:02:00 **Emma Wiley**

Yeah, I knew was the slightly odd situation. So, just for future people who may not understand, I wanted--

00:02:06 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah, I just moved there and I thought I'd be able to vote for like downtown Wheeling City Council and I just found out that I do not, which I'm a little upset about, but it's okay.

00:02:19 **Emma Wiley**

So kind of going back a little bit. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood, what it was like, that kind of thing?

00:02:26 **Mikaya Green**

Hmm hmm. So, like I said, I have a little sister but she's only 11. So I grew up basically as an only child. I grew up in Bridgeport. And yeah, I don't know, when I look back on my childhood, I feel like that it was kind of isolating. I had like a lot of friends, but I was wanted a sibling. I'm glad I have a little sibling now.

But yeah, I grew up with my mom in my life and my dad in my life and obviously there's a bunch of stuff that goes on with that. My parents like weren't separated--I mean that they weren't together, which I feel like is a really weird concept because they both wanted to raise me. So, we lived together until I was like in middle school so that they could both be in my life and like raise me at the same time, which I'm very thankful that they did do that so I could have both of them in my life.

00:03:22 **Emma Wiley**

Nice, that's interesting. Can you describe a little bit about either your neighborhood or the community that you grew up in?

00:03:31 **Mikaya Green**

I would say Bridgeport is barely like...I don't know...I don't want to say like poor, but not wealthy middle class...it maybe like a little bit under middle class. I look back and I feel like I had a good childhood because we were still in that generation where like iPhones were just kind of--not iPhones--but phones were just starting to come out. So, a lot of us didn't have phones, like we played outside a lot which I really enjoyed having like that sense of community.

Yeah, what else do I want to say about where I was from? Just small town, you know, kind of closed-minded. I was very different than a lot of my classmates because I was weirdly political and then like a liberal way which is really bizarre because my parents, like they weren't religious and they weren't political at all. So, I kind of just like got into that on my own...not really sure how, but I did.

00:04:33 **Emma Wiley**

Can you go into that a little bit more? How did that manifest like in your childhood? What types of activities were you doing?...Like when you say political mindset?

00:04:45 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah, when I was younger, I was really into documentaries and I read a lot of books about like presidents. I was really into like reading about like John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy and Hillary Clinton and all these people, which is really weird and I really don't know where it came from. I guess maybe just like having history class and then diving deeper into it. But I was really always into like strong powerful women in history. And I think that also stems from me being eventually, not realizing at the time, but like a queer woman. I was really into like women who had power and reading about those types of people and I feel like those types of people tend to be a little bit more like liberal, if that makes sense.

00:05:31 **Emma Wiley**

Yeah, definitely, in kind of thinking about that kind of like strong women and the other aspects of your community...in what ways were you taught either by your family or your community to think about gender and sexuality?

00:05:56 **Mikaya Green**

I feel like I really didn't have like the concept of me being gay really wasn't in my mind all growing up and I think it stems from not really having a lot of like role models or exposure to LGBTQ+ people. I really didn't know like anyone that was gay growing up. I just always knew that I was a little bit different and I didn't really realize that until I moved away and I moved to New York City. I was introduced to a whole new world and education while I was in college of things that I wasn't really introduced to in a small town like Bridgeport.

But, I was always raised, especially by my dad, to be very independent, original, like he would always put my mind like, you know, you're not like anybody else, you're special, you don't think like other people and I was really celebrated for those things, which I think was very good for me, and not a lot of people have people in their life like that who are kind of celebrating them for being who they are, despite me not realizing I was queer, if that makes sense.

00:07:13 **Emma Wiley**

Yeah, no, definitely and I think you already answered this a little bit, but just wanted to make sure or maybe think about--both in your community, but in that kind of broader world, broader region or world as well--did you know about any LGBTQ+ individuals growing up? Even, kind of you said, maybe not in your community, but like on a larger scale?

00:07:41 **Mikaya Green**

I really didn't. There was like that I knew of--and I'm sure they existed because as I'm aware of now they always exist and they would have existed and they just might not have been as like public about it. But growing up, I was very unaware and ignorant of anybody that was LGBTQ. My neighbor was LGBTQ, but she was a lesbian, but she was also kind of like, not the best role model, if that makes sense. So I didn't really, I didn't know anyone if anybody I knew like Ellen from the media, but other than that, I would see like girls occasionally on TV. But yeah, I know I was very like ignorant of that. I didn't realize and I didn't know anybody.

00:08:29 **Emma Wiley**

Thinking about how you have a younger sister who--I don't want to assume but is she growing up kind of in the same area that you grew up in?

00:08:39 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah. She currently lives in Wheeling, so same area.

00:08:44 **Emma Wiley**

Do you--obviously she has role models in her life, like you in particular, but I'm sure others--do you see a difference in the way that she's growing up--almost a decade later--with role models?

00:09:02 **Mikaya Green**

For sure. I think, so much, even just, I graduated only like ten years ago, but I think so much in those ten years has changed. Yeah, she is very like, also original, she dresses how she wants, her gender expression is very like not based on

societal norms. I love letting her grow up to be who she wants to be and I always tell her that she doesn't have to be any type of way. She just has to be who she is and I think that yeah--a lot has changed, even looking at--I graduated from Bridgeport High School. And as I said, I wasn't aware of anyone that was LGBTQ in my graduating class and now they have a GSA at their school (the gay-straight alliance) and there's a lot of students who are publicly queer which I think is amazing.

00:10:02 **Emma Wiley**

That's awesome. So kind of moving away from childhood a little bit. Can you tell me about your experiences kind of leaving the Ohio Valley and going to college?

00:10:16 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah, I grew up with a family friend who lived in New York. So ever since I was a little kid, I always said I was moving to New York. And as soon as I graduated, that was the first place I went. I went to Brooklyn College in Brooklyn, New York, smack dab in the middle. It's like Midwood, Flatbush. It's like as diverse as you can get, so it was a huge culture shock. I am biracial, but I'm very white passing and I grew up with a lot of my white family. So it was very like culture shock when I moved there and I took a lot of courses like women's and gender studies. I took LGBTQ course while I was there and I realized I was making friends who were a lot like me. I feel like when you grow up in an area, you're kind of like stuck with those people and I consider a lot of them friends, but it's because we grew up together and now I was starting to actually make friends that I didn't grow up with and I realized that a lot of those friends were queer and I was kind of introduced to a whole new world and I was learning a lot about myself.

And yeah, so it was it was very strange like learning those things about myself privately and secretly and then coming back to the Ohio Valley for like Thanksgiving, Christmas and kind of keeping it a secret on the DL [down low] because the area wasn't so accepting. I grew up with my grandparents kind of like making jokes here and there when they would see things on the TV and you don't realize how much that affects you. So I was like, oh they must not like this, you know what I mean? Like, oh, this is bad, so I kept it a secret for like the longest time.

00:12:20 **Emma Wiley**

Which--sorry say that again.

00:12:25 **Mikaya Green**

I was like, we could get into that more.

00:12:27 **Emma Wiley**

Yeah, we definitely will, I'm like thinking about the way to kind of lead this path. Before we get super into that because I want to think a little bit more about college. How did you end up at Brooklyn College? Like there are a lot of colleges in New York. You talked about how you had the family friend, but how did you kind of end up in Brooklyn specifically?

00:12:54 **Mikaya Green**

So I wanted to go to school for like film production and television and radio production and I was just like looking at colleges online that were in New York and honestly Brooklyn College had a really good film program and they weren't as expensive as NYU and I knew that I would never be able to like afford to go to NYU and also, Brooklyn College was the only place I applied to, and then my dad passed away middle towards the end of senior year, and it was the only school I'd applied to and I kind of was just stuck, I got accepted and I was like, okay, this is it like this is the one place.

00:13:46 **Emma Wiley**

You talked a little bit about once you got to college and the friends that you found...but how did stepping away from the Ohio Valley, where you lived your whole life...what did that feel like?

00:14:03 **Mikaya Green**

I mean it was scary. But when I like look back at the person I was then, I was very brave and I was very like--when my dad passed away I was like, oh I'm living for him. Like I'm doing this. I was very motivated and just accepting like any new adventure that was kind of thrown my way. I just yeah, I mean it was definitely scary going to a city by yourself and just being dropped off but you know, you're like in school and I was consumed with school a lot. So, I took courses like the women's and gender studies, which eventually led me to LGBTQ studies.

00:14:52 **Emma Wiley**

Going back to what you were talking about in terms of being at school and finding this new group of friends and kind of discovering in yourself an identity that you didn't really--you haven't discovered yet. Can you talk a little bit about how it felt in terms of realizing that you were queer and in school and, maybe you know in the context of New York, but then also thinking about the context of where you're from.

00:15:27 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah, I cried a lot. I kind of use media as my outlet because I knew before I had any experiences, which I think is really important for people to understand, that

you don't have to have actual experiences to understand, to know that you're queer, you know. So, I had like known, but then in the back of my mind, I was always like maybe I'm not because I hadn't kissed a girl or something like that yet. But I would really lean into media, like I would watch like--I remember the first time I watched Carol, which is a movie with Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, and it's obviously a lesbian love story and I had such a visceral reaction to that that I kind of was like wait, are you okay like this? I never really felt that way about watching a heterosexual love story. So I really leaned into media and listening to music and stuff like that and that was really my safe space.

And yeah, it was really isolating because I didn't tell any of my family members. I'd only told like my closest friends, like a few friends from back home knew and all my friends from Brooklyn knew. And I would always make hints here and there like, I was really obsessed with Melissa Etheridge and my mom took me to a Melissa Etheridge concert in Ohio. And the whole time, we're in the car, I'm like, I'm just going to come out to her. I'm just gonna tell her and I couldn't.

So yeah, it was really hard because I was scared that people were gonna think...I don't know it...comes with all this stigma. I didn't want all these stereotypes added onto me like, oh, I don't want my friends thinking I've always been attracted to them or something like that, or I didn't want people to think that I was disgusting. I don't know, it was really hard because the area was so conservative and I didn't really know anybody growing up that was queer.

00:17:38 **Emma Wiley**

What were the kind of reactions to you at school of being from West Virginia or more broadly like Appalachia the kind of region? Because I think that that kind of comes with its own assumptions and stereotypes. And especially, maybe as you're kind of exploring your LGBTQ identity, what were people's reactions in New York to that?

00:18:11 **Mikaya Green**

I honestly had pretty good reactions. I don't really remember being treated any differently besides people telling me that they thought I had a country accent at times. I don't really have anything negative to say about that. Am I freezing? [Emma replies "nope"] Okay. My screen is frozen on my end. But just as long as it's good on your end. But yeah, no, I feel like everyone in Brooklyn was really supportive and I had like New York native friends. And then I also had friends who also came from other places like one of my best friends came from Missouri. So she was also kind of grew up in a conservative area. And she came to New York and was able to be herself as well.

00:18:57 **Emma Wiley**

All right, kind of outside of your kind of circle of friends...did you get involved in any type of groups or organizations while you were at school?

00:19:13 **Mikaya Green**

Besides taking courses, I didn't really take--like I wasn't in any LGBTQ organizations or like women's organizations. I leaned into the TV and radio production aspect and I did like radio and me and my friend had a radio talk show and we would talk about movies and songs and stuff like that and then I did like internships. So I didn't really do anything related to that. I did do an internship and it was for a LGBTQ film and it was the first time I was really ever introduced to trans people and we had like a whole thing that we--they sent out like a memo and although I was finding myself being LGBTQ and kind of identifying as I guess a lesbian, but I still like to say queer just because I don't know, it's a whole thing.

But that was the first time I was really introduced to the whole like notion of trans people and trans identity and the movie was about a trans person. So we had pronouns and all this stuff that they had handed out and that was, I remember, like that first time kind of not really knowing like what should I say? Like, how do I go about being? And oh, I felt so stupid when it came to it. But it was such a learning experience that I would probably only get in New York.

00:20:46 **Emma Wiley**

I had a very similar experience. My last kind of question in the college world kind of thing is kind of a more broad question of how did leaving the Ohio Valley and experiencing other LGBTQ+ communities--you know in New York, or maybe you know, anywhere along the way-- how did that affect your understanding broadly of, not necessarily just LGBTQ+ but like more broadly, the idea of community in the Ohio Valley?

00:21:26 **Mikaya Green**

How did it affect my idea of community in the Ohio Valley? I feel like I learned a lot coming back from New York about community and how there's so many different types of community and family and things like that because a big thing in the LGBTQ community is kind of having that chosen family, and I think that that exists in a lot of ways and the area. For example, me and my friends, a lot of us, we have lost our dads and stuff and we might have complicated family dynamics. So like, we are a chosen family and I guess I didn't really--other than just kind of not knowing how to be queer back home. That was really my biggest struggle until I came back from New York. I don't really know. I'm really know how to answer that question. I'm sorry.

00:22:34 **Emma Wiley**

Oh, no worries. If something comes to mind any time along the way, feel free to add it into whatever we're talking about the time, but it moves right into kind of my next set of questions, which is...as you transitioned out of college, what did you do post graduation and what made you come back to the Wheeling area?

00:22:58 **Mikaya Green**

So, I was attending Brooklyn College and the whole time I was there I was struggling a lot with mental health, losing my dad, being away from my family, missing my little sister. It was really really tough for me those last few months of school. My dog passed away my last year of school at college. And it was just, it was a lot. My junior year of college, I studied abroad in Scotland and that was my first experience kissing a girl and then it was solidified at that point that I knew I was LGBT--I knew I was queer. So, then when I came back from Scotland, I was like, okay, I knew that I was LGBTQ in a way, but like now it's like solidified. And then I knew that I didn't want to be in New York anymore because it was just a lot for me. I really enjoyed the culture there, but I miss being able to drive my car and being with my family and everything. So, I knew for sure that I was coming back to the Ohio Valley and I was graduating with my degree in television and radio production. So, I had connections at the local news station in our area, WTRF 7 News, and I accepted a job position as a director there.

I move back and still closeted, my family doesn't know that I'm queer, and I struggled a lot with that being home and just kind of feeling like a failure because I thought I was going to live in New York my whole life and then missing that sense of I love my friends here, but missing that sense of community that I had in New York where I could be my authentic self and not feel like ashamed about it. So, I think I was really searching for that.

And I remember vividly, we had like some sort of parade going on in downtown Wheeling and I had to be there for the news and I saw Rosemary Ketchum and a group of her friends and I could just tell I was--I said in my mind I was like, wow, I want to be friends with them and they were having a little party watching the parade and I just remember saying that.

And I think a year or so had gone by, and I was at a Halloween party at River City and I ran into Rosemary in the bathroom. And I said to her, I was like hey, like, my name is Mikaya, I work at the news, I was just wondering if you guys in Wheeling were ever going to have any sort of LGBTQ meeting or something like that. And she was like, oh my gosh, yes! And we exchanged numbers and not even a month later, we had our first meeting. And again, I was still closeted and we met and I finally was like, okay this feels good. I went and I met with people who were allies and people who were members of the LGBTQ community and that's kind of how The Friendlier City Project was started which is funny because I just talked to Rosemary the other day and in her phone my name is still like "Mikaya River City bathroom girl," and she's like, I'm never changing it just because it's super funny. But yeah, so that is how The Friendlier City Project started and

honestly like The Friendlier City Project changed my life completely and I will gladly talk about it for hours because it literally changed my life.

00:26:52 **Emma Wiley**

What a great happenstance! I also spent a fair amount of time in River City when I worked, you know with Wheeling Heritage, and walking through there every day. So, I can picture it. So, I want to get into The Friendlier City Project, but I want to talk a little bit first about kind of Wheeling as a city and more broadly, the LGBTQ community or communities. So, for people who might be listening this in the future, who don't know what Wheeling, West Virginia is, who have never been there--can you describe your definition of Wheeling, West Virginia? However broad, interesting, intricate, you know, your definition.

00:27:42 **Mikaya Green**

Hmm. So obviously like Wheeling has the nickname The Friendly City and I really love that name because I feel like what we are doing with The Friendlier City Project is we're truly trying to make it a Friendly City. I think that there is a lot of diversity in Wheeling. Sadly, I think that there's also a lot of mental health problems in Wheeling. I don't really know how to answer this question without kind of just like rambling, but I, I don't know, I think Wheeling has a lot of potential. It was a booming city back in the day and I feel like it lost a lot of its spark obviously because of, I don't know, like the coal industry not being as popular now and I'm sure a lot of other scenarios that I'm not really well-educated on, but I think that it's really making a turn around right now and there's a lot of money coming in for infrastructure and I think that there's a lot of possibilities in Wheeling. And yeah, I don't know, I just think it's--there's a lot--it's complicated how to answer this question.

00:29:06 **Emma Wiley**

There's no wrong answer either. So like rambling, totally fine. Like that's what I do when I describe Wheeling to people as well.

00:29:12 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah. I don't know. I feel like Wheeling is definitely more accepting than Bridgeport. So like Wheeling to me feels like a obviously, a small, more city vibe, it feels more like (obviously not like New York) but whereas Bridgeport is more like small town, Wheeling is where I feel like I can go to be my true self. I can go to downtown Wheeling and I can go to Clientele (which is an art studio) and I can talk about The Friendlier City Project and meet all these different types of people and I think that there's a lot of good about Wheeling that people aren't aware of and they need to be aware of. I think there's a lot of change that's happening right now too which is really exciting.

00:30:02 **Emma Wiley**

That's a great explanation of Wheeling.

00:30:08 **Mikaya Green**

Can I say something else really quick?

00:30:10 **Emma Wiley**

Yeah, of course.

00:30:11 **Mikaya Green**

I felt like being in New York, I was obviously that small fish in a big pond and it was so easy to feel like you were kind of just walking around aimlessly and you don't really matter because I don't really know any of my neighbors and things like that and that sense of community in that way was really there. Where I feel like with Wheeling, it's not that big of a city that I feel like there's a lot of change that needs to be done and is happening and I feel like I can make a lot more change in Wheeling than I could in New York if that makes sense. So many kids and people leave because they want to be their true selves and the thing is, we want kids to stay and be able to be their true selves in Wheeling, and not have to leave and go to New York City to be their true selves. Which ties into The Friendlier City Project.

00:31:11 **Emma Wiley**

Totally makes sense. I feel like I've heard a lot of a lot of people in Wheeling, especially in their 20s and 30s, talking about those opportunities. So, definitely. Can you describe kind of the overall state currently of queer or LGBTQ communities in Wheeling, maybe not specifically to The Friendlier City Project, but just kind of more broadly in the city?

00:31:44 **Mikaya Green**

So there's a lot of LGBTQ youth and in West Virginia, when you look at the statistics, and I don't know them off the top of my head, but LGBTQ+ youth and West Virginia is really really high as well as transgender youth in West Virginia is really high. And so there's people here and from my understanding just meeting people and doing our events, they exist and they're out there and it's just trying to get those people to be more public and be their true selves, but that's what I love about this younger generation as they are so unapologetic about who they are and I love that so much. I'm a teacher at Shadyside High School. And that's where I'm at right now. And there's a lot of LGBTQ kids here. And this is even more smaller town vibes, even though it's only 10 minutes away from Wheeling. So yeah, I think that there's a huge huge amount of LGBTQ people in West Virginia and in

Wheeling specifically and there's also, with that though, there's a lot of people who deal with mental health problems and housing problems and stuff like that. So, yeah, it's just a lot. I don't even know.

00:33:17 **Emma Wiley**

You were talking a little bit about kids, but also understanding that Wheeling's population on average tend to be tend to skew a little bit older than I think the national average, can you talk a little bit about what it's like to be a young queer person in Wheeling in their 20s?

00:33:38 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah, like I was saying a little bit earlier, I have these like little avenues to escape and go to like our Friendlier City Project meetings, going to this art place called Clientele, which is like a really fun art studio in downtown Wheeling, like Waterfront Hall. There's a bunch of fun places for young people nowadays to gather and you know, hang out and stuff like that. But yeah, I'm still skeptical to hold my partner's hand when I walk down the street sometimes because like you were saying, there are a lot of older people and you don't really know what their opinions are of things like that.

So getting into The Friendlier City Project, that is why one of our first initiatives was to do this like sticker initiative where we went around to local businesses, and we asked them to put an allies sticker on their door or on their window, that way when LGBTQ people were shopping or maybe wanting to go eat somewhere, if they saw that sticker, they knew that the people in there believed that they should exist, right? So, that was really nice to be able to do.

00:34:58 **Emma Wiley**

Did you have any businesses that refused?

00:35:01 **Mikaya Green**

We had about one or two businesses that refused and their saying was that they didn't want to, no matter what it was, they didn't want to be political, if that makes sense. So, we were very nice. We're like, we respect your decision as a business to do whatever you want, but honestly overwhelmingly we had support. If you go down Centre Market in Wheeling, you'll see our sticker pretty much on every single window or door. So that was really great to be able to see like all that support. Yeah, because there's a lot of politicians in Wheeling who are in West Virginia and in Wheeling, honestly, who don't support the LGBTQ community. So that was really nice.

00:35:52 **Emma Wiley**

So I guess before we get too far down into talking about all these activities and things that you guys are doing. Can you just kind of, you know, brief thing kind of describe what The Friendlier City Project is?

00:36:07 **Mikaya Green**

Yep. So The Friendlier City Project is made up of allies and LGBTQ+ people and we are an organization that just wants to make Wheeling The Friendly City. We want to have a safe space for any LGBTQ+ people, any allies, we want to just have this community where people can come and be their true selves. It's pretty much as simple as that. We just want safety, people to be able to come and have fun, and we're slowly getting more into organizing. We've had a lot of really great events, but I would really love for us to kind of lean into being able to give healthcare advice, maybe suggest therapists to people who are needing them, more things like that. Leading them towards like a good mental health place and give all these good resources to the LGBTQ community. Because I know when I moved here, one of the things I was really looking for was a good therapist that, you know, supported the LGBTQ community. So I think being able to provide those things to LGBTQ people. But yeah, for the simple version, we just want to have a safe space for queer people and allies.

00:37:32 **Emma Wiley**

That's awesome. You talked a little bit before about kind of your reasonings for starting The Friendlier City project, but if I'm not mistaken--and please correct me if I'm wrong--you didn't create it by yourself. So what was kind of the larger impetus or kind of what set this in motion in terms of all of the people organizing it and who are those people?

00:38:03 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah. So we have Rosemary Ketchum who is running for mayor of Wheeling right now. We have Ellen McCroskey she works at Orrick law firm and she is an ally, her daughter is queer. We have Doug, he is LGBTQ [Mikaya corrected by text message later, she misspoke and meant to say Jim, not Doug]. He is a really great person to talk to, I'm not sure if you've talked to him yet, but he has a partner who like passed away during the AIDS pandemic. So having him, we always call him our gay elder, having him to kind of talk to is really interesting because he has a lot of insight of how kind of Wheeling used to be. Yeah, we have right now. We have Ellie. She's an ally, she works at the library, Ellie McGregor.

We have so many amazing people, but apparently before I came along, there was a pride group that existed but they ran into a lot of problems because some of the people who were in that group weren't really like handling funding the right way and their mindset into things weren't really the best way of going about things. So Rosemary had already kind of wanted to maybe like have another group. So we just kind of, yeah, just started this other group and everything has been really

great. We all get along very well. We haven't had any problems. We're very like professional about how we go about doing everything. So it's really nice to be able to have such a supportive group that we can go to, talk to, not have any like problems and things like that.

00:39:57 **Emma Wiley**

What was the/what is the reception of the larger Wheeling community to the activities of The Friendlier City Project or even when you first started, you know, what did the larger community think of you?

00:40:12 **Mikaya Green**

We had a lot of support. Trying to think when we had our first meeting,,it was like maybe November or something and we didn't have our first event until summer. It was a pride event and it was a drag show and I think we really got people excited for the drag show. There wasn't really a lot of that obviously going on. We all kind of are very creative and know how to do marketing pretty well and things like that. So we were able to market it, kind of use social media as a way to get people excited, and we had like a huge turnout at Clientele Art Studio and I was so scared that nobody was going to show up and it was crazy to see how excited people were and how accepting people were. I remember there was so many young kids there and they came up to me and they were like, thank you so much, pretty much saying that they felt really safe there and I remember that and it was such a good feeling.

And then you have the other side, which basically exists solely on social media, something like Facebook, where you know, the news gets a hold of it and they say like, oh, there's a drag show coming to Wheeling and then you have all the negative comments and we had a lot of hate but it was specifically from, a lot of the hate came from like the same five people if that makes sense. So I try to remind myself that those people aren't the only people in Wheeling and look at the amazing turnout that we had at our event and events moving forward. So yeah, we definitely get a lot of negative backlash at times on Facebook. But other than that, we have amazing turnout.

00:42:18 **Emma Wiley**

Trying to think about what I want to talk about next...so that's kind of the reception, you briefly touched on this I think in that answer, but what do you think the impact--I know that the organization has only been around for a couple of years at this point--what do you think the impact of The Friendlier City project has been in Wheeling?

00:42:43 **Mikaya Green**

I think that we really created--I think we did create a safe space for the LGBTQ community. We've had drag show, we had drag show karaoke, we just had normal karaoke. We've had a few normal events. We had a LGBTQ Thanksgiving and then our big thing was Pride on the Plaza, which was insane and we had--I had a list written down because I wanted to mention it. We had a letter writing station, we had NAMI [National Alliance on Mental Illness] (which deals about mental health), the public library, Oglebay, Legal Aid, the ACLU project, Hope [probably Project HOPE] that did like HIV testing. We had like so many amazing people come to our Pride on the Plaza and now we're starting to kind of gear back from big businesses in Wheeling like Oglebay, the Capitol [Capitol Theatre] just reached out to us, WesBanco Arena. So I think it's crazy seeing that support in downtown Wheeling--I mean if you come here, WesBanco, the Capitol, and Oglebay--those are the main three things that you can do around here and to have their backing is really really great. Yeah, I don't remember what the original question was...

00:43:59 **Emma Wiley**

I mean, I think you answered it, just like the impact. I want to return to Pride on the Plaza in a sec, but quickly...or not quickly...but like what do you think--so that's the impact on Wheeling...what do you think the impact has been kind of on the larger region or West Virginia as a state?

00:44:22 **Mikaya Green**

So, I mean I think any time you have the support and cities it's going to make a difference in the state. So, we filed with Orrick (which is the law firm in Wheeling) Pride in Wheeling Day. So, it's a city day now, so June 10th is now Pride in Wheeling Day and being able to have the backing of City Council and be able to do those things I think is really important for the state because it's like okay, here's another city in West Virginia that is supporting the LGBTQ community and I think the more cities that we can get that are supporting the LGBTQ community, the more that we're going to be able to actually make more of a difference statewide with like changing policies and things like that.

So yeah, I definitely think that we're making some sort of an impact and we really want to start lobbying and going down to the State Capitol, we're just obviously still getting our feet and now after doing Pride on the Plaza, we definitely think that we would be ready to go like lobby and do stuff down at the Capitol, we just need to go do it one day.

00:45:38 **Emma Wiley**

So, to return to Pride on the Plaza for a little bit, and thinking about how The Friendlier City Project and your activities have kind of changed the physical space of Wheeling, and I'm thinking like your stickers on the businesses and I read the Weelunk [local Wheeling online magazine run by Wheeling Heritage] story with

all the pictures that Wheeling Heritage Media did at Pride on the Plaza...can you speak a little bit to kind of what it feels like to do an event like that and to be kind of so out there and so public in a space that hasn't always felt the most welcoming?

00:46:32 **Mikaya Green**

So, yeah for the most part, we had these events like I've mentioned at Clientele and we would have our meetings at the coffee shop and things like that and I started to feel like we were hiding still, you know what I mean? It's like we're having these events, but we're having them in a safe space and then, I'm not sure if you're familiar, but a drag group from Pittsburgh was supposed to come to Primanti Brothers [regional chain restaurant] in Wheeling up at the Highlands, and it got shut down because there were threats being made to the queens, to the workers at Primanti Brothers. So, they shut it down and it gained a lot of media attention. And it kind of made me realize like we were having these are drag events, but we are having them in our safe spaces and as amazing as that is, there should be able to be a drag show at the Primanti Brothers and it not get shut down because of death threats. So we really wanted to be able to have this event in Wheeling and be able to publicly be out on the streets of Wheeling and not be afraid.

So yeah, it was scary at first and I was very scared of doing it and posting about it and kind of becoming like a spokesperson for it because like I said, I'm a teacher, I have my own business, I have a photography and videography business. I have a partner now and I was really scared because I mean, Rosemary and Ellie we were starting to be on the news more and we were really advocating for this big event during Pride month and I was scared to throw it. And we however people feel about like police department and how they treat LGBTQ people, we did go forward with getting the Wheeling Police Department to be involved. So, they were there and I'm really glad to say that nothing transpired at all, and it was so peaceful, so amazing family friendly. We didn't even have anybody like picketing there to be against it. I, for sure, thought that at least that was gonna happen. Yeah, it was like a perfect day, it was insane.

00:49:13 **Emma Wiley**

That's great to hear! I wish I could have been there, I saw all the kind of aftermath of the news and was jealous that it didn't have that while I lived in Wheeling. You kind of touched on this in a couple different answers, but kind of as a larger answer, what is next for The Friendlier City Project?

00:49:44 **Mikaya Green**

I definitely still think, if I can speak, I definitely think still having these safe spaces obviously for the LGBTQ community, making it more of a habit to get together regularly be able to chat with one another hang out with one another.

But like I said, I really want to be able to expand and offer resources to LGBTQ people. Right now, it's mostly having events, having those safe spaces, but I think that mental health is a huge priority right now in West Virginia and for the LGBTQ community. So, I think being able to like offer resources, doing more partnerships with maybe NAMI and places that like provide mental health resources and yeah. I don't know, just like expanding in those ways. I would love for us to have an office one day and have an actual space where people can come in, have books and things, and all of that good stuff. So yeah, I'm hoping in the future one day we can have some sort of actual space and also be able to offer a bunch of more resources to LGBTQ+ people.

00:51:04 **Emma Wiley**

Kind of thinking about the space and you've talked a little bit before about kind of like your safe spaces that you have in Wheeling that you can gather as a community or as a group and I know that you've named like Clientele and the Waterfront Hall...can you explain a little bit more about those spaces? And what makes them safe for the community?

00:51:27 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah. Our number one safe space for sure, hands down, has been Clientele Art Studio. They have been so supportive throughout everything. That was the first place that we ever really had our first meeting. All of our events that we've had have been there pretty much and I think it's just showing how important it is to have allies. Like the people who--like Will is his name, Will Wallace. He runs Clientele Art Studio and he's not queer in any way but he is an ally and he's very supportive and I think it's amazing that he offers up his space and lets us have events there and do things like that. So I think being an ally in Wheeling is very important and having those allies has been amazing for us. And then also seeing all the businesses that have reached out to us and wanted to be a part of Pride on the Plaza, some of those--a lot of those businesses were LGBTQ people. So that's also interesting is seeing these people who you didn't really realize were LGBTQ+ kind of coming out and being a part of Pride on the Plaza and kind of realizing that.

00:52:42 **Emma Wiley**

That's awesome. My last kind of question in regards to kind of like The Friendlier City Project or larger communities in the area is that...are there other any other distinct queer LGBTQ+ organizations or groups kind of beyond The Friendlier City Project? Either in Wheeling or in the larger...?

00:53:17 **Mikaya Green**

There's not really any other LGBTQ+ organizations and the Wheeling area that we really know of. As I mentioned, there's a lot of like GSAs [Gay-Straight

Alliance] at schools and I think us being able to provide resources to them would be very interesting and I would love to be able to do that as well. So I think just building this bridge between like the Gay-Straight Alliances and us as The Friendlier City Project and then also building those bridges to other businesses and organizations in Wheeling.

There's a lot of organizations that deal with LGBTQ+ people, you know, like the housing crisis is really big, so like YSS (Youth Service Systems) and like NAMI and stuff like that. So yeah, all those organizations are really really important and they have a huge portion of LGBTQ+ people. So I think yeah, there's not a lot of other organizations in Wheeling, but there are a lot of amazing organizations like around the country. So I think also kind of learning from them and trying to be more like them, like Project HOPE and stuff like that. Yeah, I think that's good.

00:54:30 **Emma Wiley**

Awesome. Kind of thinking about...I think we may have skipped over this a little bit in our narrative, but I want to kind of return to right as you kind of came back to the Wheeling area and you've talked a little bit about how your dad died kind of right before you left, or in the kind of the year before you left, and a lot of your friends or people back home didn't know that you were queer...what did that feel like coming back home? And how did you kind of navigate those spaces?

00:55:10 **Mikaya Green**

Yeah, I would love to end with this because as I mentioned it was really hard and I think that forming The Friendlier City Project, as I mentioned, completely changed my life. It gave me another avenue to lean into being my authentic self and I kind of found myself being this spokesperson for The Friendlier City Project and I'm like, how can I be a spokesperson for The Friendlier City Project and my grandparents don't even know that I'm queer or I haven't fully come out to my parents yet? So I really leaned into The Friendlier City Project and I gave it a lot of my time and I--through The Friendlier City Project, at actually our second event, my now-fiance came up to me and that's where I met her. So, it's crazy because she grew up in New Martinsville, which is an hour away from Wheeling, and she saw our post on social media about our events and stuff like that. So, she asked her mom and sister, she's like hey, we should go to this event in Wheeling because there's not a lot of LGBTQ events in New Martinsville where she's from. And that night, she just came up to me and introduced herself and I just think it's so crazy because I'm like, if I wasn't like living my true self, I wouldn't have met the person that I'm now going to marry, we just bought our house and I really owe it to The Friendlier City Project for really pushing me out of my comfort zone and being my true authentic self.

Because of The Friendlier City Project, I came out to my parents, I came out to my grandparents, which was not the best experience, but they're now growing and learning and being more supportive. And yeah, I literally owe all that to The

Friendlier City Project because I don't think I would have ever really--I think I eventually would have come out--but it really made me, kind of forced me to be more of my authentic self.

00:57:32 **Emma Wiley**

That's great. I want to ask real quick--I have a couple more questions on different subjects, but I know you just mentioned like closing...do you have time to do a couple more questions or do you have to...?

00:57:47 **Mikaya Green**

No, I could probably answer a few more questions.

00:57:51 **Emma Wiley**

Okay. I want to kind of talk a little bit about Rosemary and your thoughts on her being in City Council and that kind of thing. So, my first question would be--and this might be something that you were, depending on when you were at school, you might have been watching from afar...I'm not sure...but in your opinion, how did Rosemary Ketchum's election to City Council impact the visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities in Wheeling.

00:58:30 **Mikaya Green**

I can remember when she got elected onto City Council. I can't remember if I was in New York.

00:58:38 **Emma Wiley**

I think it was 2020.

00:58:41 **Mikaya Green**

Okay. Yeah, I think I was right when I came back. So yeah, I mean, obviously I think that that is amazing and I think people now have to be...like they can't just ignore it right? It's in their face. Okay, a trans person, an LGBTQ+ person is on City Council and it just is what it is. And I think her being elected just shows that there is huge support for the LGBTQ community. And obviously she's the most professional person I've ever met and she will never do anything to, for her own agenda. But it is nice having an LGBTQ+ person on City Council and knowing that at least there's somebody that is going to at least support us or kind of be a spokesperson for us and knowing that she's an amazing person just makes that even better.

00:59:52 **Emma Wiley**

Yeah. What, if anything, do you wish was different about the visibility or reception of LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling?

01:00:04 **Mikaya Green**

I mean, I wish everything was different. I wish that--and I think eventually we're going to get to this point--but I wish people didn't feel like they had to come out. I wish that people didn't feel like they had to leave Wheeling still. Because a lot of those kids that came to our events they moved away for college and it's crazy because they were there during summer because they were at home visiting family, but then the next time we tried to have an event and it was during the school year, they weren't there anymore. And I think it's amazing moving away and having those experiences and educating yourself, but I really would love for people to not feel like they have to move away to experience a lot of things, and I'm hoping that a lot of those kids when they graduate they feel like they can really take Wheeling in and kind of start making it the city that we want it to be, and I think that as time goes on it's going to become more and more of that type of place and I think it's because of the people that stay and it's because of organizations like The Friendlier City Project and Rosemary and all of those things and allies that it's going to hopefully make it the city that we want it to be and keep people here.

01:01:31 **Emma Wiley**

Kind of on the same vein...how do you think the stereotypes of Wheeling or of West Virginia more broadly or Appalachia affect LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling?

01:01:47 **Mikaya Green**

Well, I think overall the stereotype of Wheeling is...you'll hear people in media like talk show hosts saying all this stuff, always talking of negatively about Wheeling, as it being like hicks that live there and all this stuff like that. I think that negative stereotypes in any way really affect people and I'm hoping that people don't really like care too much about the stereotypes or honestly, will lean into it. We can be the LGBTQ hick people of you want us to be, but we're going to be an accepting place in that. At the end of the day, that's all that matters, you know what I mean? If that's our identity, then it is what it is. But at least we're accepting and we're a great place for the LGBTQ+ community.

I know there's a lot of people who like the stereotypes and like being called hicks and stuff like that. But, I was reading a statistic not too long ago that said giving more opportunities to LGBTQ+ people will make West Virginia a more wealthy place. So I think that if we lean into those changes, like Wheeling in West Virginia could thrive more as like a state and hopefully not have those negative stereotypes of being like poor and all that.

01:03:23 **Emma Wiley**

And kind of as a couple like last thoughts, but like a kind of after this whole interview and talking about it, how do you feel about the visibility of LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling today?

01:03:38 **Mikaya Green**

I think that it's better than it was, but I think obviously that it could be better right. There's still a lot of people that don't feel comfortable and I deal with that a lot in school. As I said, there's so many people who are unapologetically themselves and I love it and it's so different than how it was when I was in school, but there's also still people here that are afraid to be their true selves because of those negative stereotypes that still exist and kind of like LGBTQ+ ignorance and it's still not being a norm in some places. So I just think obviously the more out we are, the more people who are being their authentic selves. The more Pride on the Plaza is happening and The Friendlier City Project is doing more things and people feel more comfortable being themselves and they're seeing good role models who are LGBTQ+. I think that that's going to continue to change a lot, and that the amount of people is just going to go up. And people aren't going to want to hide anymore. They're going to want to be their true selves. So, yeah, hopefully, I don't know.

01:04:57 **Emma Wiley**

Kind of as one as a last question. What's next for you personally?

01:05:05 **Mikaya Green**

What's next for me? Hmm? I am going to marry my fiance and hopefully live just a happy life and continue to do the work that makes me happy and help the LGBTQ+ community in Wheeling. And yeah, all I really want is to just kind of live a happy life. So that's really all I'm hoping for.

01:05:32 **Emma Wiley**

That's awesome. Also, congratulations about your upcoming wedding and marriage.

01:05:37 **Mikaya Green**

Thank you!

01:05:37 **Emma Wiley**

So, to kind of close...I just want to offer the opportunity--are there any other questions you think I should have asked? Any topics you would like to discuss in

more detail? Anything else that you'd like to add to this oral history before we conclude?

01:06:02 **Mikaya Green**

Not really. I think just like Wheeling is an amazing place and I love it, and I'm very glad that I stayed here instead of--well, I'm glad I moved back here instead of staying in New York City--because I think that there is a lot of work that needs to be done and I'm very glad that I can be a person to hopefully help make things better. And there's just so many--like the more you look around--there's so many amazing people that are there to help you and be supportive.

And for any kids that feel like helpless, I hope that we can be a safe space for them and kind of be one of those "chosen family" type people for them because there's a lot of kids out there who still need it and it's not perfect by all means, but hopefully with our work we can continue to just make things better. That's it.

01:06:56 **Emma Wiley**

A wonderful way to end, so before I stop the recording, I just want to thank you very much for taking the time and being willing to do this interview with me today, especially with the former technical difficulties. I appreciate your candor and your thoughtfulness and your interview will be, I'm sure invaluable contribution to a more thorough understanding and documenting the presence and visibility of queer and LGBTQ+ communities in Wheeling.

01:07:28 **Mikaya Green**

Thank you. I appreciate it. Yeah, and thank you for doing this. It's amazing to be able to like just talk about the LGBTQ community and my experiences. So I really appreciate it.

01:07:38 **Emma Wiley**

Yeah, of course. Okay. I'm going to stop the recording. [End]