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## Interview with Gabriel Paxton

Gabriel Paxton

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #151  
PAXTON, Gabriel**

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Political Science major and founder of Rock Hill for Equality

*Interviewed:* February 18, 2015

*Interviewer:* Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

*Index by:* Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

*Length:* 00:45:07

Abstract: In his February 18, 2015 interview with Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard, Gabriel Paxton shares the story of founding the grassroots organization Rock Hill for Equality. Included are his experiences as an ally in the Southeast and the partnerships he made to support Rock Hill for Equality. Paxton provides insight on this civil rights movement and speculates why the South is slow to change. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Rock Hill for Equality, LGBTQ, Ally, Affirming, Churches, Religion, Politics, Student Organizations, social media, Democratic Party of York County

**Interview Session (February 18, 2015): Digital File**

**Time      Keywords**

00:00:00    *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:00:20:    *Question:* Where are you from and why did you decide to attend Winthrop? *Answer:* From Rock Hill. Father is an employee of Winthrop. Winthrop has a strong political science program.

00:00:50    *Question:* What does your father do at Winthrop? *Answer:* Track coach.

00:01:14    *Question:* Why Political Science? *Answer:* Drive and passion for public policy – could work for non-profit or human rights watch.

00:01:45    *Question:* Did your major influence your decision to create Rock Hill for Equality? *Answer:* Family is very political.

00:02:20    *Question:* What is Rock Hill for Equality? *Answer:* Grassroots social media

organization. Focused on same-sex marriage rights, specifically in York County. Want a Rock Hill for Equality in every county in South Carolina.

- 00:03:12 *Question:* When and why did you create Rock Hill for Equality? *Answer:* February 2014. Organization came about unannounced – stemmed from a Facebook argument. Facebook argument drew a lot of attention.
- 00:04:00 *Question:* What did the Facebook argument entail? *Answer:* A Facebook friend made a derogatory post against LGBTQ individuals. GP realized issue wasn't hate, but a lack of knowledge.
- 00:05:05 *Question:* Reactions you received? *Answer:* Overall positive. GP surprised. Rock Hill for Equality had 500 likes on Facebook within 48 hours. Some hate mail, mostly people from GP's past in churches and religious camps.
- 00:06:05 *Question:* How did people rally behind you? *Answer:* Tom Adams, Congressman, asked GP to speak at an event. George Battle, running for Congress in North Carolina called GP. People at Winthrop reached out to GP. Blake White, now head of social media relations for Rock Hill for Equality.
- 00:07:05 *Question:* Why were you surprised to get support? *Answer:* GP speculates that South Carolina is a conservative state. Rock Hill being a college town helps.
- 00:08:00 *Question:* Have you ever been bullied as an ally? *Answer:* Yes. Picked on for views. People were skeptical of his orientation – still continues till today. The people who are not happy found a way to personally attack GP. Most hatred came out face-to-face. Messaged via Facebook. High School was pretty rough.
- 00:09:45 *Question:* How does Rock Hill for Equality serve York County? *Answer:* Social media allows people to communicate locally and nationally. Rock Hill for Equality shares news, goes to events, shares and listens to personal testimonies. Began partnering with businesses and politicians. Non-partisan. Promote a lot of groups. Provides counseling – weren't planning on doing so – "it's a big responsibility."
- 00:11:39 *Question:* Do you partner with anyone on campus? *Answer:* Working on a partnership with Safe Zones – need to get certified. Worked with Stephen Lovegrove. Trying to bridge the gap between Winthrop and Rock Hill. Winthrop is a safe zone, but not so much Rock Hill.
- 00:12:30 *Question:* Certification? *Answer:* Go to a seminar. Learn about rights and duties and what role they play in Winthrop.
- 00:13:10 *Question:* How did you reach out? *Answer:* Most found Rock Hill for Equality. GP

- walked in to Democratic Party of York County to meet with Amy Hayes. Before GP could introduce himself, Amy knew about them. Amy Hayes has taken GP to events to meet with politicians. Met with Anne Close who owns Greenway in Fort Mill. Met with the Primetimers in Charlotte. Met Jim Thompson. Met Larry Jenkins, member of Episcopal Church.
- 00:15:40 *Question:* How do you maintain partnerships? *Answer:* Productivity down a little since enrolling in Winthrop – other activities and work too. Other individuals have ramped them up when there is a lull in activity.
- 00:16:50 *Question:* Does it surprise you that you're the youngest at events? *Answer:* Yes, because this is a social issue millennials rally behind. GP says he feels so young at political events. GP has brought some students to events. A lot of events are formal galas, though. Planning to do a rallying event.
- 00:18:39 *Question:* What will you use funding for? *Answer:* Can't accept funding because Rock Hill for Equality has filed a 501c3. When they do accept funding plan to use it to set up events, large symposium, and travel costs – can only go as far as Columbia.
- 00:20:10 *Question:* Have you seen Rock Hill for Equality grow beyond York County? *Answer:* Yes. GP has friends in Asheville who helped GP start up organization. GP does see promise in spreading.
- 00:21:05 *Question:* Make it a student organization? *Answer:* Yes. GP wants to open it up to Winthrop. Could be a future plan. GP wants to see this organization exist beyond his time at Winthrop.
- 00:22:15 *Question:* How do you reach the general public? *Answer:* GP reached out to churches and spoken to members of those churches. GP talks about religious hold ups and LGBTQ issues. Spoke with College Democrats and Socialist Student Union at Winthrop. Had a plan to go door-to-door, but backed off that idea.
- 00:24:15 *Question:* Is it still unsafe? *Answer:* It depends. Campus is a safe place, people in higher education and students are understanding. GP says the South is hesitant to change. GP doesn't feel unsafe, but feels like there is a better avenue to reach out. GP reaches out to influential members of Rock Hill – people who work with the masses.
- 00:26:05 *Question:* Why is the South so slow to change? *Answer:* Cultural issue. GP doesn't want to say it's religiously rooted. "It's a good ole' boy culture." GP mentions how the South handled other social issues. Fewer major cities may, less diversity. "I feel like it's separated from the rest of America, at least in the Southeast."
- 00:28:30 *Question:* Surprised to get a positive reaction from religious organizations? *Answer:*

- GP grew up in a religious household. As a whole, GP genuinely surprised. There is a strict interpretation of religion.
- 00:30:00 *Question:* Are you still religious? *Answer:* “I’m searching.” Raised United Methodist, thankful for church. GP questions what he believes in. Believes in a higher power. GP doesn’t say any one religion is right or wrong. GP identifies as a religious person, but it’s hard to define himself.
- 00:31:55 *Question:* What is Rock Hill’s attitude toward LGBTQ issues? *Answer:* GP says Rock Hill is the most progressive city in South Carolina – says it has to do with the connection to higher education. GP still speculates if Rock Hill is really progressive.
- 00:33:25 *Question:* Why does higher education create a better environment? *Answer:* Those people have a deeper understanding of culture and different ways of living. GP speculates hatred comes from ignorance. Many people change/grow when they go to college.
- 00:33:30 *Question:* What changes would you like to see? *Answer:* Improve the treatment of LGBTQ people. Rock Hill abides by a “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” mentality. GP wants to see public schools to implement programs to support LGBTQ people and allies.
- 00:37:30 *Question:* Future goals for Rock Hill for Equality? *Answer:* Student organization, bridge gap between Winthrop and Rock Hill, and wants to see businesses come forth and show that they are allies. Wants to become an Angie’s list – have a list of resources for people to seek help.
- 00:39:20 *Question:* What do you think about same-sex marriage in the news? *Answer:* It’s going to happen, even though they are still states left. The fight doesn’t stop there. GP says this is the tip of the iceberg. GP wouldn’t be surprised to see more protesters. GP expecting the worse. GP talks about Jon Stewart and his opinions on South Carolina.
- 00:41:45 *Question:* What would be the worst? *Answer:* Push back from politicians. Attorney General may find loopholes to make it difficult for people to receive their marriage licenses. Compares it to voting rights in the 1960s.
- 00:43:00 *Question:* Why can people get behind this issue? *Answer:* It’s been legalized by the circuit courts. It’s easier to grasp because of hindsight from other civil rights issues.
- 00:45:07 *End of interview*