

Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

The Freedom to Marry Oral History Project

Cameron Tolle

Cameron Tolle on the Digital Campaign at Freedom to Marry

Interviews conducted by
Martin Meeker
in 2015

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Cameron Tolle of Freedom to Marry

Cameron Tolle was the Director of Digital Action for Freedom to Marry, where he led the organization's digital strategy for state campaigns across the country. Over five years, he directed digital programs in more than 25 states, including several key marriage victories in Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, Oregon and Rhode Island. In this interview, Tolle tells of his education and entry into social justice work and the various state and media campaigns he supported while at Freedom to Marry.

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Evolution of Freedom to Marry into Freedom for All Americans — Shifting focus to nondiscrimination issues

Freedom to Marry Oral History Project

In the historically swift span of roughly twenty years, support for the freedom to marry for same-sex couples went from an idea a small portion of Americans agreed with to a cause supported by virtually all segments of the population. In 1996, when Gallup conducted its first poll on the question, a seemingly insurmountable 68% of Americans opposed the freedom to marry. In a historic reversal, fewer than twenty years later several polls found that over 60% of Americans had come to support the freedom to marry nationwide. The rapid increase in support mirrored the progress in securing the right to marry coast to coast. Before 2004, no state issued marriage licenses to same-sex couples. By spring 2015, thirty-seven states affirmed the freedom to marry for same-sex couples. The discriminatory federal Defense of Marriage Act, passed in 1996, denied legally married same-sex couples the federal protections and responsibilities afforded married different-sex couples—a double-standard cured when a core portion of the act was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013. Full victory came in June 2015 when, in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution’s guarantee of the fundamental right to marry applies equally to same-sex couples.

At the very center of the effort to change hearts and minds, prevail in the courts and legislatures, win at the ballot, and triumph at the Supreme Court was Freedom to Marry, the “sustained and affirmative” national campaign launched by Evan Wolfson in 2003. Freedom to Marry’s national strategy focused from the beginning on setting the stage for a nationwide victory at the Supreme Court. Working with national and state organizations and allied individuals and organizations, Freedom to Marry succeeded in building a critical mass of states where same-sex couples could marry and a critical mass of public support in favor of the freedom to marry.

This oral history project focuses on the pivotal role played by Freedom to Marry and their closest state and national organizational partners, as they drove the winning strategy and inspired, grew, and leveraged the work of a multitudinous movement.

The Oral History Center (OHC) of The Bancroft Library at the University of California Berkeley first engaged in conversations with Freedom to Marry in early 2015, anticipating the possible victory in the Supreme Court by June. Conversations with Freedom to Marry, represented by founder and president Evan Wolfson and chief operating officer Scott Davenport, resulted in a proposal by OHC to conduct a major oral history project documenting the work performed by, and the institutional history of, Freedom to Marry. From the beginning, all parties agreed the Freedom to Marry Oral History Project should document the specific history of Freedom to Marry placed within the larger, decades-long marriage movement. Some interviews delve back as far as the 1970s, when a few gay activists first went to court seeking the freedom to marry, and the 1980s, when Evan Wolfson wrote a path-breaking thesis on the freedom to marry, and “domestic partner” legislation first was introduced in a handful of American cities. Many interviews trace the beginnings of the modern freedom to marry movement to the 1990s. In 1993, the Supreme Court of Hawaii responded seriously to an ad hoc marriage lawsuit for the first time ever and suggested the potential validity of the lawsuit, arguing that the denial of marriage to same-sex couples might be sex discrimination. The world’s first-ever trial on the freedom to marry followed in 1996, with Wolfson as co-counsel, and culminated in the first-ever victory affirming same-sex couples’ freedom to marry. While Wolfson rallied the movement to work for

the freedom to marry, anti-gay forces in Washington, D.C. successfully enacted the so-called Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. The vast majority of the interviews, however, focus on the post-2003 era and the work specific to Freedom to Marry. Moreover, OHC and Freedom to Marry agreed that the essential work undertaken by individual and institutional partners of Freedom to Marry (such as the ACLU, GLAD, Lambda Legal, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Haas, Jr. Fund, and the Gill Foundation) should also be covered in the project. Once the U. S. Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell* in June 2015, the proposal was accepted and work began on the project.

After an initial period of further planning and discussions regarding who should be interviewed and for roughly how long, an initial list of interviewees was drafted and agreed upon. By December 2016, 23 interviews had been completed, totaling roughly 95 hours of recordings. Interviews lasted from two hours up to fourteen hours each. All interviews were recorded on video (except for one, which was audio-only) and all were transcribed in their entirety. Draft transcripts were reviewed first by OHC staff and then given to the interviewees for their review and approval. Most interviewees made only minimal edits to their transcripts and just a few seals or deletions of sensitive information were requested. Interviewee-approved transcripts were then reviewed by former Freedom to Marry staff to ensure that no sensitive information (about personnel matters or anonymous donors, for example) was revealed inadvertently. OHC next prepared final transcripts. Approved interview transcripts along with audio/video files have been cataloged and placed on deposit with The Bancroft Library. In addition, raw audio-files and completed transcripts have been placed on deposit with the Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives, the official repository for the Freedom to Marry organizational records.

The collected interviews tell a remarkable story of social change, the rate of which was rapid (although spanning more than four decades), and the reach profound. Historians of social justice and social movements, politics and policy, and law and jurisprudence will surely pore over the freedom to marry movement and Freedom to Marry's role in that for explanations of how and why this change occurred, and how it could happen so rapidly and completely. Future generations will ask: What explains such a profound transformation of public opinion and law, particularly in an era where opinions seem more calcified than malleable? What strategies and mechanisms, people and organizations played the most important roles in changing the minds of so many people so profoundly in the span of less than a generation? Having witnessed and participated in this change, we—our generation—had an obligation to record the thoughts, ideas, debates, actions, strategies, setbacks, and successes of this movement in the most complete, thoughtful, and serious manner possible. Alongside the archived written documents and the media of the freedom to marry movement, this oral history project preserves those personal accounts so that future generations might gain insight into the true nature of change.

Martin Meeker
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December 2016

Freedom to Marry Oral History Project Interviews

Richard Carlbom, “Richard Carlbom on the Minnesota Campaign and Field Organizing at Freedom to Marry.”

Barbara Cox, “Barbara Cox on Marriage Law and the Governance of Freedom to Marry.”

Michael Crawford, “Michael Crawford on the Digital Campaign at Freedom to Marry.”

Scott Davenport, “Scott Davenport on Administration and Operations at Freedom to Marry.”

Tyler Deaton, “Tyler Deaton on the New Hampshire Campaign and Securing Republican Support for the Freedom to Marry.”

Jo Deutsch, “Jo Deutsch and the Federal Campaign.”

Sean Eldridge, “Sean Eldridge on Politics, Communications, and the Freedom to Marry.”

James Esseks, “James Esseks on the Legal Strategy, the ACLU, and LGBT Legal Organizations.”

Kate Kendell, “Kate Kendell on the Legal Strategy, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and LGBT Legal Organizations.”

Harry Knox, “Harry Knox on the Early Years of Freedom to Marry.”

Amanda McLain-Snipes, “Amanda McLain-Snipes on Bringing the Freedom to Marry to Oklahoma, Texas, and the Deep South.”

Matt McTighe, “Matt McTighe on the Marriage Campaigns in Massachusetts and Maine.”

Amy Mello, “Amy Mello and Field Organizing in Freedom to Marry.”

John Newsome, “John Newsome on And Marriage for All.”

Kevin Nix, “Kevin Nix on Media and Public Relations in the Freedom to Marry Movement.”

Bill Smith, “Bill Smith on Political Operations in the Fight to Win the Freedom to Marry.”

Marc Solomon, “Marc Solomon on Politics and Political Organizing in the Freedom to Marry Movement.”

Anne Stanback, “Anne Stanback on the Connecticut Campaign and Freedom to Marry’s Board of Directors.”

Tim Sweeney, “Tim Sweeney on Foundations and the Freedom to Marry Movement.”

Cameron Tolle, “Cameron Tolle on the Digital Campaign at Freedom to Marry.”

Thomas Wheatley, “Thomas Wheatley on Field Organizing with Freedom to Marry.”

Evan Wolfson, “Evan Wolfson on the Leadership of the Freedom to Marry Movement.”

Thalia Zepatos, “Thalia Zepatos on Research and Messaging in Freedom to Marry.”

Interview #1: September 21, 2015

01-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is the 21st of September, 2015. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Cameron Tolle for the Freedom to Marry Oral History Project, and we are here at the Freedom to Marry offices in New York. The way in which we begin all of these interviews is you telling me your name and when and where you were born.

01-00:00:40

Tolle: Cameron Tolle. I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1988.

01-00:00:46

Meeker: Can you tell me just a little bit about the circumstances into which you were born, maybe what kind of work your parents did?

01-00:00:54

Tolle: Sure. My mom worked in a school mostly while I was growing up. My dad started as a machinist at a local factory and worked his way up to be the plant supervisor. But when my parents divorced, when I was thirteen, my mom actually was in a relationship with a woman. So since I was thirteen, the idea of marriage for same-sex couples, the freedom to marry, has been very much a reality, especially being able to view firsthand why it's so important.

01-00:01:33

Meeker: Did your mother and her partner go through any kind of ceremony at that point in time, or around then?

01-00:01:39

Tolle: No, not really. By the time they had divorced, we were probably just kind of fresh off the passage of Missouri's marriage amendment, and so I just don't even think that vocabulary or the idea that that is something that a same-sex couple could or would do was really even on the radar.

01-00:02:00

Meeker: What was that like for you, to grow up in a household that experienced that?

01-00:02:08

Tolle: Obviously now, I'm really grateful, because I think that from an early time it really gave me perspective—because not only now is it about me fighting for marriage or me fighting for nondiscrimination about me because I identify as gay, but because now I also know how children of LGBT parents have to feel.

It was a lot of never wanting my friends to come over, never wanting my friends to really know about my home life, and keeping those very separate. So I think in high school maybe, I finally told my first friend, probably around my junior or senior year. Otherwise from seventh grade on, I really tried to keep those two areas separate, which obviously can be an isolating feeling.

01-00:03:02

Meeker: How did your friend respond?

01-00:03:03

Tolle: The one friend who I told was great, which is why, out of all the friends that I could've told, that was the one I chose. So it was great. I mean, ultimately, after graduation, I came out personally a month after high school graduation, so I was able to put all of that behind me.

01-00:03:36

Meeker: Had you continued to live in Kansas City?

01-00:03:43

Tolle: For that summer, and then in the fall I moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, for college at Xavier University.

01-00:03:46

Meeker: Why did you choose Xavier?

01-00:03:48

Tolle: I applied to a lot of schools, and one of my requirements was probably just to get out of Kansas City. Not sure if Cincinnati was a much better choice. But they had a really great program called Philosophy, Politics, and the Public, so it was kind of like an applied political science honors program. Ultimately that's why I chose there.

01-00:04:12

Meeker: I imagine that, given the circumstances in which you were raised, it wasn't a Catholic school education that you were looking for.

01-00:04:18

Tolle: No, not at all. Just a coincidence.

01-00:04:21

Meeker: Can you tell me what it was like to go to Xavier and what your first couple of years there were like in comparison to high school, perhaps?

01-00:04:30

Tolle: Xavier's a great school; it's very small, so you get to know everyone really quickly and it's a really easy campus to, if you want to take on a leadership role in a particular program or a particular interest, you definitely can. So academically it was pretty strong, and my program was really great and lived up to what I hoped it would be.

I spent a lot of my time on campus working with the gay-straight alliance on campus, Xavier's alliance, and so I was vice president my sophomore and then moved up to be president my junior and senior year. That was an interesting experience, doing that kind of work on a Catholic campus, especially it was kind of a paradox, because it's a Jesuit campus, so there's a lot of focus on social justice.

Interesting, when the conversation turned to LGBT people, how sometimes we would not be included in that conversation in social justice. At the beginning of my freshman year, I was the only out person in my class that I knew of. Ultimately I think we did a lot of programming on campus, we did a lot of education, we advocated for more LGBT-inclusive curriculum, we added gender identity to our school's policies. A lot of kind of like helping this school that maybe hadn't really been pushed on LGBT issues to be pushed and really make some changes.

01-00:06:05
Meeker:

So you were there, I guess, 2006 to 2010, is that right? Okay. You said you were the only out LGBT person in your junior year—

01-00:06:18
Tolle:

Freshman year.

01-00:06:18
Meeker:

Okay. Yet this organization had already existed? So it was mostly sort of friends and allies?

01-00:06:27
Tolle:

There were people who were older than me who were out. I was the only one in my incoming class. At that time, you could search on Facebook for men interested in men, and so you could kind of go through your entire incoming class and see who else was, and there was no one else.

01-00:06:47
Meeker:

Gosh, it's amazing how different that is now. This—2006, 2010, obviously the freedom to marry issue is on the front burners of politics. I mean, 2004, even before you were in college, was the loss of eleven states that year; 2006 there's some more, and of course 2008 is when Obama is elected but Prop 8 passes in California, that I think was a big disappointment to many in the movement. Were you focused primarily on what was happening at your college, or were you also paying close attention to what was happening more broadly?

01-00:07:36
Tolle:

I was definitely paying attention more broadly, but I think like a lot of people of my generation, it was Prop 8 that really kind of woke me up. So immediately after Prop 8 passed, there was a big national movement of organizing protests in hundreds of cities across the country, and there was no one stepping up to organize Cincinnati's, so I created a Facebook event, not really knowing what exactly organizing a rally entailed. It ended up being like a whirlwind of a week, and ultimately a couple—probably four or five more people joined in with me, and we planned a rally for about 1,000 people in the rain on the steps of City Hall on a Saturday, and spent the whole week, like I did a radio interview against a state rep who sponsored Ohio's DOMA, so it really just immersed me into advocacy outside of campus in a very big way. I

think that's really how I started going down this path that ultimately led me to Freedom to Marry.

01-00:08:41

Meeker:

I'm wondering, I witnessed Prop 8 firsthand, I mean, living in California. So for me it's obvious why it was so important and devastating. But I'm wondering, there you are in Ohio, I don't know if you'd ever been to California, why do you think it was Prop 8 that was galvanizing for you?

01-00:09:08

Tolle:

I think it was the juxtaposition of the excitement, especially among my generation, for Obama. Then I think people realized shortly after we celebrated Obama's victory, they're like, oh, there's this really horrible thing that just happened. So it's definitely a much-needed reality check, to some extent, the fact that this discrimination does still exist, despite the fact that we're all celebrating this really great thing nationally.

01-00:09:38

Meeker:

When you were speaking to the Ohio representative that you mentioned, or when you were putting this event together on the steps of City Hall in Cincinnati, were you engaging with any national or statewide organizations at that point?

01-00:09:52

Tolle:

A little bit. Definitely at first, a lot of the organizations kind of stepped away from a lot of these protests, and for good reason. I mean, I think that there's something that they couldn't have a lot control over, and now I know that message discipline is very important. Ultimately we did end up partnering with the statewide organization to some extent in Ohio, and a few national organizations helped. But it was primarily led by a lot of college students, unaffiliated activists.

01-00:10:25

Meeker:

Where were you getting your talking points from? Where were you getting your ideas?

01-00:10:29

Tolle:

That's a good question, especially now that I do communications work professionally. I definitely did not have the direction or handling on messaging that I'm sure I should have. There were a few talking points distributed by HRC [Human Rights Campaign], I think, had some talking points. But ultimately I don't know if I was necessarily going off of a well-tested script.

01-00:10:57

Meeker:

It was sort of based on things that you had engaged with overall in the public sphere?

01-00:11:04

Tolle:

Yeah. And at that point it was very different than how we talk about marriage now, at Freedom to Marry. That was before there had even been messaging research really showing the importance of talking about love and commitment versus equality. So I think at that point we were still making this really political argument, whereas now we know it's the emotional argument that is really going to lead people to grow in support.

01-00:11:27

Meeker:

So you were probably talking about the thousand rights or something along those lines.

01-00:11:30

Tolle:

For sure, yeah.

01-00:11:31

Meeker:

Eventually you did, however, go to this training as part of the Creating Change conference that Freedom to Marry had been holding, I think, almost since the beginning of Freedom to Marry. They were doing it in conjunction with NGLTF a couple of days before the main conference, it was like a mini conference or something like that. What year did you attend that?

01-00:11:58

Tolle:

That would've been 2009, probably in the spring.

01-00:12:04

Meeker:

Yeah, I think they held them in like February or something along those lines. Can you tell me about this? How you learned about it and what you got out of it?

01-00:12:15

Tolle:

I started to become more involved with Equality Ohio, which was the statewide LGBT organization in Ohio. So I started going to a lot of their events in Columbus, which was about an hour and a half from Cincinnati, where I went to college, and started to develop a really close relationship with the executive director, who knew that this type of campaign, political work, was what I wanted to do. So she heard about this opportunity and helped me fundraise for it, and was able to secure all the money I needed to book the plane ticket and book the registration and book the hotel.

Which was really incredible for the leader of a statewide group to put that much investment in me as a student. So I was really excited about it, and went for probably three or four days. It was really enlightening to see all these different facets of the campaign. I think that I went into that kind of thinking, organizing these protests, which, while they do definitely serve a useful purpose, or was the biggest way that I could make change, and then I came to realize that actually there are all these very concrete, specific ways that you can be really well trained in to make a big impact on campaigns.

That just really opened my eyes to the fact that there's a professional world out there in which you can do this as an occupation and become really good at it.

01-00:13:35

Meeker: Where was the conference held that time?

01-00:13:36

Tolle: Portland, Maine.

01-00:13:38

Meeker: And I think that they had just maybe voted, or was it coming up?

01-00:13:44

Tolle: It was going to be on the November ballot. We did a lot of training, and then we would actually go out in the field and do these things. So we went out and canvassed around Portland, which was my first time ever having a face-to-face conversation with a voter like that.

01-00:14:02

Meeker: Was it a one-day training for the Freedom to Marry, and then the conference followed? Do you recall the structure of it?

01-00:14:11

Tolle: I think it was three days, because it was divided between different topics. So there'd be fundraising one day, so we'd do the training, and then we would actually hop on the phones and call people and ask for money, and then there'd be training on canvassing, and then we'd actually go out and canvass. I think it was all kind of integrated into the three days.

01-00:14:32

Meeker: Tell me about those three days, the different things that you were introduced to and how they were taught to you. I think it's important to hear it from you, because you were one of the young people who has trained, and now you've spent the last five-plus years now actually doing that kind of work.

01-00:14:56

Tolle: Most of the training was focused on field organizing, which is, I guess, where I got my start in campaigns. It's really focused on how to connect with volunteers and be able to recruit them to be part of the campaign, about how to talk directly to voters and how to lightly persuade them or get their commitment to go to the polls. And then it was also focused on fundraising. And a lot of how do you build a large campaign or a large team of volunteers just by kind of meeting people where they are in terms of what they're passionate about.

In that regard, I learned a lot about training and how to recruit volunteer teams—I mean, I definitely learned a lot of concrete skills, but I think primarily I just learned that it's something I was really enthused about, and

it's something that really got my adrenaline going and something I didn't mind doing for fourteen hours a day.

And I don't know if I'm skipping ahead, but that's what led me to skip class for three weeks or whatever that following November to go back to Maine and volunteer as a full-time field organizer on the campaign. And then November 2009 was election day.

01-00:16:19
Meeker:

And then you graduated in 2010. When you first start to go out and do this canvassing, do you have any recollection of any specific experiences that taught you either how it could be successful or how it might be really challenging, or perhaps both?

01-00:16:42
Tolle:

Yeah, definitely. You experience a wide array of people and their reactions. Certainly people who have never had someone knock on their door, especially in 2009, maybe even had anyone ask them how they feel about gay people, so it wasn't even just going up and asking them how they're voting on the specific ballot question, but it was like this huge cultural question of who gay people are that most people, especially when you would get out in the more rural parts of Maine, they weren't prepared to answer. Because as a country, we hadn't even had these larger conversations, which I think the marriage movement has really helped spur.

I can remember, even in my first week, having someone calling the cops on me for trespassing, even though I wasn't trespassing, or definitely having several doors slammed in my face. But at the same time, definitely having a lot of really heartfelt conversations.

I remember there was one—I was in the suburbs of Portland, and this woman answered the door holding her baby, and she was very nice and explained to me that she was going to be voting yes in 2009, which was yes to repeal the marriage law. So I asked her what were some of her hesitations, and we started talking through it. I had a chance to kind of share my story as what it was like growing up with a mom who's a lesbian and her partner, and kind of the experiences that I had. And we probably had a ten-minute conversation. And when you leave, you want to check back in with them and see if they've moved at all in terms of their vote, and she said that after that conversation, she was planning to vote no.

So someone who probably just hadn't thought that much about it and had just seen some of these TV ads that said that gay marriage was going to be taught in schools and all these scare tactics, and was drawn in by that, but really all it took was one real conversation with a real person with real experiences, and just ten minutes, to be able to move her to be voting with us.

And that was really my first time, I think, where it was like, Oh, all these things actually work. We're not just like sitting in a room and learning these things to feel better about ourselves. These are actually tactics that work, and they did work.

01-00:19:14

Meeker: Were you doing much social media or digital work at this point in time?

01-00:19:18

Tolle: No, none at all. Just a lot of in-person, face-to-face volunteer, canvassing and that stuff.

01-00:19:27

Meeker: But you probably had a Facebook page, a Twitter feed, or something like that yourself?

01-00:19:30

Tolle: Yeah, I did myself.

01-00:19:32

Meeker: But it wasn't meeting at this point in time.

01-00:19:35

Tolle: Yeah, they were two separate worlds.

01-00:19:38

Meeker: You said, then, come November 2009 you sort of take a hiatus from your schoolwork and you go off and do some work on the campaign. Tell me about how it was that you got wrapped up in that and brought into it.

01-00:19:53

Tolle: They called through the list of people who attended the training in Maine earlier that year and asked people to come as volunteer vacationers, so basically it means it's not much of a vacation.

01-00:20:03

Meeker: It means they're not going to pay you anything.

01-00:20:05

Tolle: Right. It means going there and working definitely more than full time on the campaign. And I wanted to do that, one, just because I knew that this campaign was really important; we had never won at the ballot at that point.

01-00:20:18

Meeker: Which one was this?

01-00:20:20

Tolle: This was Maine, 2009. So we had never won at the ballot at that point, this was our first ballot fight after Prop 8 nationally. I had never really been immersed in a campaign, and I knew that with graduation coming up the

following spring, having some solid hands-on campaign experience would be really beneficial.

01-00:20:41

Meeker: It was your agenda at that point to try to find some work in the movement.

01-00:20:44

Tolle: Ideally. Oh, no, at that point I think I still wanted to go to grad school, but I thought that that would still just be good for grad school applications.

Originally I went just for a week, so this was probably three weeks out before Election Day, and after I was there for a week, I couldn't leave. So I pulled together some money and paid to have my ticket changed and stayed there through Election Day.

01-00:21:10

Meeker: Where were you headquartered?

01-00:21:12

Tolle: I started in Portland, but then I think a few days later moved out to Ogunquit, which is like a beach resort town forty-five minutes or so north. Then we got moved to another office for the final week and a half of the campaign, which was in Biddeford. So that's probably like an hour out of Portland, and it's pretty suburban-slash-rural, that part of Maine.

01-00:21:37

Meeker: Can you tell me about your experience there? I mean, what was it after a week that convinced you that you should continue on?

01-00:21:47

Tolle: In a campaign, it really like kind of grabs you and it becomes all-consuming. So I definitely experienced that. I was fortunate to be working in an office with some really great leaders, so the field director and a couple of other staff were really investing a lot to teach me and empower me to move up through the campaign.

Like in the first week, I started as, I was mostly phone banking and canvassing, going door-to-door. Ultimately I ended up leading all the training in our office in Biddeford, which was one of the busiest offices during GOTV [get out of the vote] for hundreds of volunteers. So it was one, just the passion for the issue, but then also just being able to see how quickly I was able to grab things and take on a leadership role. So that was just really empowering, especially as a college student who had never really had a job before.

01-00:22:50

Meeker: What was it like to train other volunteers? What were you emphasizing and what were you perhaps de-emphasizing?

01-00:23:00

Tolle:

I think overall the coolest thing was, people would walk in really scared to go knock on a stranger's door and say, "Do you support marriage for same-sex couples?" That's not an easy conversation to have if it's something you haven't done before. So my favorite part—we would probably train for thirty minutes, maybe, and my favorite part is just seeing how someone would get there so visibly scared, and the point of my training was to make them feel comfortable and empowered to be able to go have these conversations, and then seeing how people would still be a little nervous when they would leave, then they would come back and they would have all these stories and so much excitement. Being able to see that transformation and knowing how quickly someone can go from being terrified and not wanting to really take action, to now becoming a dedicated volunteer for the next two weeks. That was a really great progression to be able to see.

01-00:23:55

Meeker:

Were you getting any non-gay volunteers?

01-00:23:59

Tolle:

Yeah, definitely. I would say it was almost like fifty-fifty. We had a lot of volunteers who—because Maine was the only LGBT related ballot measure in 2009. That might be incorrect, but it was definitely the highest-profile LGBT ballot measure in 2009. I think there might have been a couple of city ordinances on the ballot or something. So we obviously had tons of Mainers, so people in Maine who were volunteering. Lots of grandmothers were coming out to volunteer, which was really great. And then we also just had groups who would kind of bus in from around the northeast, so college students would come in, or a church group from a couple of states away would come in.

So it was definitely a very diverse mix of people in the office, which was really amazing to see. There's no other reason all those people would have been in the same room, except for the fact that they were all there for something they cared about.

01-00:25:03

Meeker:

One of the things I'm always interested in is, on any campaign, particularly one that is local or statewide yet draws national interest, you're getting a lot of external parties involved, whether it's donating money or whether it's canvassing or something along these lines. Did you get a sense of the response of Mainers to so many people from out of state coming in and trying to sway opinion?

01-00:25:27

Tolle:

Yeah, you definitely have to be careful about that. We definitely would never have publicized that there are hundreds of people from out of state coming in to volunteer and knock on doors in Maine. I would never had said, I'm a college student from Ohio knocking on your door. So you definitely have to

strike a balance, because it's important for a state-level campaign or a municipal-level campaign to really feel like that state—and most importantly to be driven by the people in that state, who call that state home.

So you definitely have to strike a balance, which can be really tough, both in terms of the actual staffing of a campaign and making sure that that staffing is balanced, but then for sure in terms of public perception, because then we just really open ourselves up to these unnecessary articles about out-of-staters coming in and distracting from the issue that we want people to talk about, which is marriage.

01-00:26:23

Meeker:

Was there much online component to this campaign that you participated in?

01-00:26:27

Tolle:

I was not a participant in any of it. There was an online component, I think it was pretty strong, especially for 2009, which was, digital wasn't quite as advanced as it is now. But I had no involvement.

01-00:26:42

Meeker:

How long did you stay there for?

01-00:26:44

Tolle:

In Maine? Three weeks.

01-00:26:46

Meeker:

So you didn't stay till Election Day.

01-00:26:48

Tolle:

No, I did.

01-00:26:49

Meeker:

Oh, you did. Okay.

01-00:26:50

Tolle:

I flew out the day after Election Day.

01-00:26:52

Meeker:

How did your university respond to your absence? Were your professors understanding and allowed you to make it work?

01-00:27:00

Tolle:

Pretty much all my professors were really understanding. I actually don't remember any that made it really difficult. It was my senior year, so I was taking a pretty light course load, comparatively, and all of my classes were kind of upper-level political science classes, so they all just thought it was great that I was being able to get this experience. So no, it didn't really set me back too much in school.

01-00:27:23

Meeker:

Tell me about Election Day.

01-00:27:27

Tolle:

I think I woke up at five a.m., maybe even earlier, and I just couldn't sleep all night, really nerve-wracking. So a really intense day of lots of trainings, and then going and knocking on the doors until the second the polls closed. Then we all went to the Election Day party at the end of the night, which was at the Holiday Inn in downtown Portland. The numbers started coming in, and—I mean, I didn't know that much about campaigns at this point, so in my view, I didn't really understand the ins and outs of polling, so in my view I had had really good conversations with voters, and I felt all this momentum, so I just thought that there was no way that we could be losing.

Then shortly after the Election Day party started, we found out we lost, and that was really, really heartbreaking, to see all these people—I had only been there for three weeks, but most of these people had been working on the campaign for two years, and this was the state they lived in, so just kind of seeing the tears around the room and realizing, Whoa, this is not an easy thing for us to win. We have a really big uphill battle. It was definitely sad, but it was also, again, a pretty big reality check of, if we can't win on the ballot in Maine, then we have a long way to go to win in all fifty states.

01-00:29:04

Meeker:

Other than just what you said, did you ever, in the weeks and months that follow, start to develop your own interpretation of maybe what went wrong or what could have been done, just based on your own experiences?

01-00:29:23

Tolle:

Not really. The position I was in in the campaign was, I was very much in a bubble in this one office, and very much removed from the central campaign, and I just don't think I necessarily had enough campaign experience to know what the communication strategy should have been, what the messaging should have been. So I think it's also why I probably felt more shocked, because I don't think I necessarily had the context that I would have now in looking at a campaign, and the various pieces of what was effective and what wasn't.

01-00:29:56

Meeker:

But you must've done some soul-searching after it and done some thinking on your own about what's going on here. What was coming to your mind at that point?

01-00:30:07

Tolle:

I mean, the definite roadblock that we could not overcome was this kids in school argument, the argument that if this passes, then someone's kids were going to read the princess book in their kindergarten class and learn about gay marriage. I can't even count how many times we would knock on someone's door and they would say, "Oh, I believe in treating everyone equally, but that—what they're going to the curriculum in schools, I have to vote yes." It was definitely clear that we just didn't have a response to that, and that was

something that just really resonated with people, and the people didn't even need it really proven to them, they just needed to hear that argument once and they would probably vote with our opponents.

01-00:30:54

Meeker:

Do you think it was an argument that they really believed in, or was it kind of a cover that allowed them to vote yes and maintain the distinction between conventional marriage and gay marriage?

01-00:31:12

Tolle:

I don't think that for many people who voted that way, I don't think they passionately felt that that was their true conviction, but I think that they definitely were really unsure who gay people were, and they didn't have the context of gay people being a part of families, gay people having kids, and kind of building similar lives that they were building. So I think that our opponents were really able to take that lack of context or familiarity with gay people, which is just kind of inherent, when people are uncomfortable with something, then they're going to be unsure and they're going to be a little scared. So our opponents were really able to penetrate into that and get people on board for something that they didn't have to really make much of a case for, they could just run one ad and claim that, and the majority of voters believed them.

01-00:32:07

Meeker:

So, November 2009, this campaign wraps up, you graduate the coming May 2010. Were you just mostly focused on your studies during that period of time?

01-00:32:24

Tolle:

No. During Christmas break I went—I think we got two weeks off for break, then I added a week and skipped my first week of classes, and I went and worked on the legislative campaign for marriage in New Jersey. So a lot of the same people who I worked with in Maine, after Election Day they just moved down to New Jersey, so they recruited me to come and do a similar volunteer vacation for three weeks.

01-00:32:48

Meeker:

So, legislative campaigns are different than referendums. How did you find that experience to be different?

01-00:32:57

Tolle:

Legislative politics, instead of the millions of voters across the state, they're focused on fifty voters, fifty elected officials in the House. So I was assigned one specific legislator, and then figuring out more and more about him. So figuring out where did he go to school, was he in the military, what kind of sports does he like, figuring out all these individual details about him, to then be able to find people in his district who represent those things and would then go talk to him about the marriage bill.

That was just such a great learning experience for me, just to be able to see the contrast between a ballot campaign and a legislative campaign, especially because they were only a few months removed, so I definitely still remembered all the specifics of the ballot campaign and was able to see how that was different legislatively.

01-00:33:56
Meeker:

Who was your legislator?

01-00:33:57
Tolle:

I've worked on like fifteen legislative campaigns since then, so—I cannot remember his name.

01-00:34:09
Meeker:

We can write it in. Under what auspices were you working? Was it the New Jersey statewide campaign?

01-00:34:17
Tolle:

Yeah, so Garden State Equality, the statewide organization, all the marriage fight at that point was funneled through them.

01-00:34:24
Meeker:

What was it that you learned about this legislator, unnamed? Was there anything that you felt like was useful in swaying his vote? Whatever happened with that? What was the outcome?

01-00:34:41
Tolle:

Well, he didn't vote with us. He was a Republican, and he was a moderate Republican with teenage kids, and lived in a very moderate district. But ultimately none of the Republican Party voted with us, because they just weren't given the okay by leadership.

I remember, I think, finding a teacher who taught at his daughter's school, finding someone who went to the church that his family went to, so really trying to find all these personal connections. The thing that really struck me is, one day we had a lobby day at the statehouse, and I think this was maybe a day before we were expecting a vote, and you basically just have to stalk your legislator all around this building. So I was leading a volunteer team of four people, and I think we were texting, or we might have had walkie-talkies, and we were like running around the building trying to find this legislator, and then try to put this constituent in front of them. And seeing the lengths that he would go to to avoid us was pretty telling. It was pretty telling that obviously he knows he's doing the wrong thing. Obviously when he would have to actually face the consequences of his opposition, he would rather not. That was just a preview into the legislative politics that I'd be working in for the next five years.

01-00:36:15

Meeker:

Let's talk about that. You graduate in May, and you start working here [Freedom to Marry] within a few days after that, right?

01-00:36:24

Tolle:

Yeah, I moved to New York two weeks after graduation.

01-00:36:28

Meeker:

So tell me about getting this job. Was it something that you interviewed for, or were you recruited?

01-00:36:33

Tolle:

I had applied for a lot of jobs, primarily in LGBT work, but also a lot of Democratic Party campaigns anywhere in the country. I had originally accepted a job in Columbus, Ohio, and that was my plan. I even went to look at apartments. Then a friend, Chris Geidner, who is now a reporter for BuzzFeed, he was from Columbus, and so I got to know him a lot through Equality Ohio, and he suggested that I apply for this job. It was an online communications manager, was the position.

I interviewed for it, quite a few interviews, so I think had probably five to six Skype interviews with, at that point, pretty much everyone who worked in the organization, because it was pretty small at that point.

01-00:37:24

Meeker:

This organization?

01-00:37:25

Tolle:

Mm-hmm. So after all those interviews, Michael Crawford, who is our digital director, asked if I would be willing to fly out to New York for a final interview, and so obviously I said yes. I came to New York, I don't remember much about the interview, it just seems like such a blur. Immediately after I walked back to my hotel, Michael called and told me that he didn't think I was—he thought I had a great interview, everyone really liked me, everyone thinks I'd be a great part of the team. Ultimately I wasn't qualified for the online communications manager position, because, to be frank, I had no communications or digital experience. But they created a position for me as online organizer and asked if I would be willing to start in two weeks.

01-00:38:16

Meeker:

What was the difference between and online comm manager and online organizer?

01-00:38:22

Tolle:

Online communications manager was responsible for pretty much all of our written content online, so all of our blog and any resources, and social media at that point too. They were primarily responsible for all of that content, and I can say with certainty that my skill level was not there yet. So the online organizer, in that position I helped who was hired as the online communications manager a lot, and ultimately ended up taking on pretty much

all of that within my first six months. Definitely at that point I agreed that I was not qualified for online communications manager.

01-00:39:00

Meeker: Were you happy with the offer?

01-00:39:00

Tolle: Oh yeah, it was amazing. I had never thought about moving to New York before, really, it hadn't been on my radar. I'd never even really thought that I would be able to work for a national organization after graduation; I thought that might be more a long-term goal and I would have to work on a bunch of state campaigns to be able to get there. So yeah, it was pretty surreal flying back to Ohio knowing that I was going to come back to New York in two weeks for good.

01-00:39:29

Meeker: I'm not going to ask you how much they offered to pay you, but I imagine working for a nonprofit, moving to Manhattan, or New York, is sort of a challenging proposition. How did you manage that transition?

01-00:39:46

Tolle: I had quite a bit of money saved up just from various jobs in college. So I had enough, and Freedom to Marry did help me financially to be able to make the move as well. I didn't have a lot to move. I had a car, a tiny two-door car, and I filled everything up and drove it here, then I sold the car here. And I was lucky to find an apartment where I didn't have to pay a broker's fee or anything, so it was not too stressful of a move compared to how moving can be in Manhattan.

01-00:40:26

Meeker: Where'd you move to?

01-00:40:27

Tolle: An apartment in Harlem.

01-00:40:30

Meeker: Roommates?

01-00:40:31

Tolle: Yeah, I had two roommates who I didn't really know; knew through like friends of a friend of a friend. And the day that I found out I got my job, one of them had posted on Facebook saying that they had an open room in their apartment, so didn't have to go on the New York City apartment hunting spree, which was great. I've since had to do it like three or four times, and it's hell.

01-00:40:58

Meeker: Tell me about what starting work here was like. Was it pretty clear to you what the position of online organizer would be? How was it explained to you?

01-00:41:09

Tolle:

Yes and no. I think that I came in at a really exciting point of Freedom to Marry, where we were just starting to become this really public-facing organization. Previously we hadn't had much of an online program or much of a communications program, because we didn't need to, we weren't becoming this public-facing campaign. So there were definitely some expectations for what the position would be, but I think there was also just a little bit of uncertainty as to what would Freedom to Marry's digital program even look like. So it was hard to determine what exactly this position is when we weren't even quite sure what this overall program would be.

01-00:41:48

Meeker:

You know, the organization did have an online presence; they had a website, they had a lot of material on it, they had the Voices of Equality program, marriage stories or something like that. There was quite a bit of effort put into it. But it sounds like it was kind of communicated to you that you guys were starting in some ways with a blank slate, that you were trying to sort of pivot, is that—

01-00:42:12

Tolle:

Yeah, definitely. It was kind of Freedom to Marry 2.0. The branding was redone, new website. And to expand our audience, I think we knew that if we were going to truly take on this role in the movement of being the national campaign for marriage, then we would also need to be the go-to resource for marriage supporters across the country. So that meant building a really, really large digital footprint, which we just didn't have yet.

01-00:42:48

Meeker:

Especially in social media. So what were you charged with? I mean, I imagine you're given a desk and a computer and go to work, but what did that mean?

01-00:43:00

Tolle:

The first probably six months or so, it was a combination of I led our participation in the National Organization for Marriage's Summer for Marriage tour, and so they did a bus tour of, I don't know, twenty, twenty-five cities across the country. I worked directly with local partners in each of the stops to organize a kind of counter-event or some kind of response, some kind of positive response.

That was a nice way to start, because it was still really rooted in my field background. It had some online components, but was just a good way for me to get immersed in organizing and this world and acting as a Freedom to Marry staffer.

After that, I started taking on social media, so I did all of our Facebook, all of our Twitter, which I just kind of learned as I went. Then I did all of our blog for about a year or so. But then it was towards the end of the year, as we were

gearing up for 2011 legislative sessions, that I started really focusing on state-level work, which ultimately would grow into the Digital Action Center.

01-00:44:25

Meeker:

Tell me first about the social media work. I read through some of the board letters and dashboards, and it's clear that every month the Facebook account and the e-mail list is growing by 10, 15, 30 percent. And I know I'll be talking with Michael a lot about that as well, because I think that was sort of one of the things that he was really focused on, but I know that you were involved in that as well. How did you approach something like Facebook and Twitter? How did you go from accounts that were used but not widely followed to very central aspect of the media campaign?

01-00:45:15

Tolle:

I think at the beginning, especially where social media was in 2010, we focused on—we would prioritize three pieces of content a day and push it out, and the share text, the language they actually used on the post, was really, really important. I think at that point a lot of organizations would just share links or just put something up with a couple of words, and so we would really play around with how we were actually presenting each post.

Then we'd also focus on, especially when our online platforms had lesser reach, but also really focused on individual engagement, so any time someone would retweet us or comment, we would always try to be sure to really engage.

01-00:46:03

Meeker:

What does that mean?

01-00:46:06

Tolle:

Like tweet back at them and say, "Thanks so much for retweeting!" Or be sure to answer their questions, or just thank them for a nice comment. So really showing that we weren't just kind of a one-way social media machine, but there are actual people and a real organization behind it.

01-00:46:26

Meeker:

The share text thing is kind of interesting. I wonder if you can tell me how you learned to optimize that medium.

01-00:46:35

Tolle:

Facebook's algorithm changes every eight months, so the way I would write a post a year ago is not how I would write a post today. At that point, we tested out a lot of different—I mean, even like a matter of do you put a line, like a full line between—do you have two different paragraphs or do you have it all in one paragraph. We would test out a lot of different things and ultimately came up with, I think at that point I had like five different formats of a post that were acceptable and were engaging well.

At that point, too, we found that you could ask people like in the post, Click Like if you support Freedom to Marry, something like that. Especially then,

that was something that really increased our numbers. Since then, that doesn't perform as well on Facebook, but back then, kind of before it caught on, that was a really good way that we were able to increase our engagement.

01-00:47:35

Meeker: Were you consulting with experts in the field about how to do this, or was this kind of research done on premises here?

01-00:47:45

Tolle: Definitely just research done on premises, and frankly research might be a bit of an overstatement. It was just a lot of—

01-00:47:53

Meeker: Spitballs, sort of what sticks to the wall kind of thing.

01-00:47:56

Tolle: Yeah, and just being able to see—from a couple of months of posting, you would just kind of get a handle on what—you could look at a post and estimate how many likes or shares you were going to get on it. So you just kind of got a handle of how certain content, what kind of reaction that elicited from our supporters.

01-00:48:19

Meeker: And you started, I know, and this is, I guess, related to the Digital Action Center and going out to state campaigns, but I know part of that, speaking of social media, was that you started to work with statewide campaigns, teaching them how to best use social media. What was part of your sort of educational program around social media? What were you teaching them?

01-00:48:46

Tolle: Well, just to give a little background, going into 2010 we had three states where we were hoping to advance marriage bills in 2011; that was Maryland, Rhode Island, and New York. So Maryland had the first priority, probably seen as our best bet to win. So at that point we were just running campaigns through statewide organizations and not through these broader coalitions that we've since—that have since become the structure of a campaign.

And by and large, statewide organizations are probably—they could always use more capacity, whether that's because of not being funded—so I think at the time that we started working with Maryland, I don't even think they had a communications director, and they definitely didn't have anyone doing digital. So we realized that as we were assessing our involvement, because this was really the first state that Freedom to Marry was hoping to play a leading we are the national campaign for marriage kind of role. So we thought that maybe they could use a little help with digital.

What we ended up finding is that this was a huge value add to the organization, because at that point their executive director was spending time scheduling out tweets and Facebook posts, which would distract from what

you needed to do, which was leading the lobbying strategy. So ultimately we took some on, and we would write a fundraising e-mail here or there, we would guide the development of their new website and various things, and then ultimately we just ended up taking on the whole program.

It happened gradually. I don't think we ever went into Maryland or even the next state, Rhode Island, thinking that we would become the central hub of digital organizing for states, but kind of all the pieces fell together and it just became clear that we were really, really providing a capacity for something that otherwise that capacity would not exist, because especially at that time, 2010, no one was going to prioritize digital in the budget, and we could hardly hire a communications director.

01-00:51:11
Meeker:

I know one of the things that happened, I want to get back to the statewide stuff, but in order for you to actually serve these statewide campaigns, you had to build out capacity here, you had to build out staff here at Freedom to Marry. I know that you got to what, eventually five or six full-time staff. Did that include Michael or not?

01-00:51:32
Tolle:

No.

01-00:51:32
Meeker:

So that would include you and other people—

01-00:51:34
Tolle:

Designers, and then organizers who did most of our writing.

01-00:51:38
Meeker:

Okay. So you ended up managing all of those people, I would imagine. Can you give me like a narrative of the building out of that team, maybe start there?

01-00:51:50
Tolle:

In Maryland and Rhode Island, it was primarily just me. Design wasn't as important to digital at that point, like Facebook wasn't as centered on visuals, so we were mostly able to make it through that campaign without needing a designer, although we did hire a web designer who redid the whole website. So primarily me doing a lot of written content and strategy for those two campaigns.

As we moved into, trying to think years, 2012, yeah, as we moved into 2012, and then especially into 2013—the end of 2012 was when we really started taking on every single state that had a legislative fight that we thought was winnable. At that point, I brought on a design consultant who, I think we had him on a ten-hour-a-week retainer, and for a couple of campaigns I hired a separate web design firm to design the websites, and then probably three weeks into that it was clear that I was not able to do all the writing for it. At this point we had Rhode Island, Illinois, and Delaware, so we brought on a

part-time consultant to do a lot of writing for twenty hours a week, and that got us through that round of legislative sessions, barely. We mostly had the capacity we needed.

After that, so probably the beginning of that summer, is when we brought our designer, who was Christian, who was on for ten hours a week, we brought him on full time. So that gave us the capacity for any type of design, so Christian designed all of our websites and did all of our online and offline designs, which was a pretty incredible capacity, to be able to walk into a state and say, “Oh, that \$15,000 item on your budget, the website, we’ll take care of that.”

Then I hired one digital organizer, and then probably six to eight months later we brought on another digital organizer and another designer.

01-00:54:07
Meeker:

So that’s in 2012, ’13 that those start to come in. Freedom to Marry did well as far as raising funds and getting good foundations behind them, but obviously there’s a limited budget. How were you justifying these new spends to Evan and Mark, et cetera?

01-00:54:28
Tolle:

The good thing is, for digital, it’s a very tangible impact, and so we can show the difference between having a website and not having a website. We can show the difference between having an e-mail program that can activate people and not having that capacity at all.

01-00:54:44
Meeker:

Because there’s numbers, is that what you mean?

01-00:54:46
Tolle:

There’s numbers, and there’s, like anyone can look and see, oh, that website’s not good. Or when our lobbyists in a state say we need a hundred people to show up to the state the next day, we know you need a strong digital program to be able to get those numbers. So after we did it a couple of times, after we ran two strong digital programs, not necessarily on winning campaigns but we were able to provide a really solid resource for states. It was almost implied that we would keep doing that, because it was such a value add for these states, and we could see—concretely we could see numbers-wise what the value add was.

It ended up just becoming a really important contribution that Freedom to Marry very specifically gave to states. No other organization was going to offer this very specific comprehensive resource, but it’s something that we uniquely could and did. So I think that it wasn’t a hard sell, I don’t think, to keep building the program, because I think we were able to, right out of the gate, show its real value. And then the reason we needed to keep building the

program was because we kept expanding the number of states we were potentially winning marriage in.

01-00:56:09

Meeker:

Why don't we walk through a few of the key states. Why don't we start with Maryland. You described a little bit about how they didn't have the capacity and it sort of evolved naturally. What was it that you felt like you ended up producing, what kind of messages were you getting out there?

01-00:56:30

Tolle:

In Maryland, like I said, we didn't have the kind of statewide coalition, but we were just working within the confines of the LGBT state organization. We were able to redo their entire online presence to some extent, so a new website, really upgrade social media, so be able to increase the audience, and so we were able to—I think this was the first campaign where I really—I mean, this was the first campaign we really took on digital for, but also it really showed me the importance of rapid response and digital's role in that. So being able to quickly turn around an e-mail and get that out to 20,000 people about an amendment that could be voted on in a matter of hours, that proved to be really valuable.

So as we worked throughout the campaign, the goal was to ensure that digital was really integrated with everything, so every time that a press release would go out, we would also be posting to Facebook and we would also be getting the e-mail out or getting the blog post up.

But I didn't know any of those things, really, before Maryland. Or at least I don't think I understood how they all kind of worked together in the context of a legislative campaign, so for me that was a really big learning experience, just by doing without a whole lot of guidance in terms of how all these things work. I'm sure there are e-mails that went out on that campaign that I would probably be embarrassed of now, but it was a really huge learning experience and was really great and a little terrifying to have kind of such a big stage to be learning all these lessons that we would ultimately translate to being our best practices moving forward.

01-00:58:23

Meeker:

Can you remember any examples, perhaps, of when it started to come together and you realized what you were developing?

01-00:58:35

Tolle:

Yeah. So after that round of legislative sessions, so we won in New York and then we shifted all of our focus to being on the ballot in 2012. So each of the ballot campaigns did hire their own digital staff, and so my role was kind of consulting with each of the states, so that was my role up until 2012, and I went back to Maine for a couple of weeks and helped around digital there.

But then we realized after the excitement of all of these marriage victories, that we have legislative sessions coming up, and we had three states that were preparing to move bills, but we didn't necessarily have the campaign infrastructure, let alone a website, and so as we started to price out our different options and a timeline for bringing on various digital consultants and bringing on website consultants, and especially for three states, it was just a lot of different vendors to manage, a lot of timelines to manage, and generally consultants don't have the quick turnaround that we would want in a campaign.

01-00:59:42

Meeker:

What states are you talking about?

01-00:59:44

Tolle:

This is Rhode Island, Delaware, and Illinois. So probably in late November, we really started having a conversation about, okay, what should our role be in all of these programs. That's really when we made the commitment to—initially at that point we were just running Rhode Island and Delaware, with the goal of having these campaigns launch in the first or second week of January, which was right when their legislative sessions started. And then probably three weeks into January we added Illinois as well.

01-01:00:20

Meeker:

Is this 2012 or '13?

01-01:00:22

Tolle:

Now we're in '13. Going through that—I had never really gone through that process of—because in Maryland, the statewide organization already existed, in Rhode Island the statewide organization we worked through already existed, so this was the first time that we had really launched a series of coalition-based campaigns. So again, that was a learning experience, a lot of doing without a lot of guidance, not because there weren't people there to give us guidance, but just things that hadn't really been done before.

So we ran digital for those three campaigns, and that's really when our program came to fruition. When we had the design capacity, when we had the capacity to turn around e-mails within a matter of an hour, when we had all these various pieces that now are at the core of our program, it's during those legislative sessions that it all really started to fit together into one comprehensive program.

01-01:01:34

Meeker:

Why don't you talk about each one of those pieces in a little bit of detail and maybe what the protocols were that were established to support that work. You talked about the e-mail turnaround; what are the other pieces to this—

01-01:01:52

Tolle:

Sure. I can just kind of walk you through how we would launch a campaign, and then the different elements after that. When we would find out that we

needed to launch a campaign, our team was always one of the first steps, and so we—Christian, our designer, his first step would be to design the logo, and so we would work with the in-state groups to make sure that it's something that they felt really was authentic to their state and something that would play well in the legislature, et cetera. So, design the logo.

01-01:02:24
Meeker:

Did the states at this point, had they already developed like a vision or a mission or a series of values that they thought had resonated with their voters or their legislators?

01-01:02:37
Tolle:

In some states we had done polling, but primarily I think coming off the 2012 marriage victories, we saw that the way we won was this really strict commitment to this love and commitment messaging, and so our campaigns were really focused around that. But then they were also really focused on—so the love and commitment messaging really lifted up stories of same-sex couples and their families, and then we were also really focused on third-party validators, so whether those were Republicans, grandparents, faith leaders. Also all of our campaigns were state name united for marriage, and so we wanted, the goal of the campaign, to not just seem like it's LGBT advocates asking for this bill to be passed, but that it's a really diverse coalition of people in the state.

That was kind of the core messages, we're going to have the core goals of the campaigns, then obviously the messaging was slightly adapted from state to state, but generally it stayed pretty consistent.

So after that, Christian would get to work on a website, and so we have had many different iterations of kind of our standard website design as we kept learning what works, what doesn't, and just as best practices in web design evolve. But we would be able to turn around a website—and by we, I mean Christian—in probably two weeks, which, if you hire consultants, that could probably take up to six weeks, maybe longer, and six weeks would be like a rush job.

So we were able to really turn things around quickly, which is something our movement really needed, because a lot of times we just wouldn't get a lot of advance notice before we would need to get something up and get something up really quickly.

01-01:04:39
Meeker:

What was the baseline, the format for the website? What was to be included on it? How was it to be arranged? Was that something that was well established?

01-01:04:48

Tolle:

Yeah, I mean, so we went through several different designs of the home page, the goal always being to optimize for list growth and optimize for people taking action. So we would kind of have staggered opportunities throughout the website for people to take actions, whether that was get updates on the e-mail list, or to contact your legislators, or to donate. But the goal was really to get people on our e-mail lists, so that then they're in our universe of supporters, and then we could communicate with them and mobilize them whenever we need to.

But also, and this became even more important moving forward, was also to—was a lot of storytelling, and so we wanted to be sure that when someone came to the website, they are seeing the real faces of real people who live in that state, and so to really make sure that each site has a really local flavor. And also just a high level of professionalism. We wanted our campaigns to be taken really seriously, both by supporters by also by legislators, or by media who were checking out our website. So we wanted to be sure that everything was really, really professionally done and was high quality.

01-01:06:06

Meeker:

So obviously that means writing, no typos, easy UI [user interface], all this kind of stuff.

01-01:06:12

Tolle:

Yeah, and so me and our organizers would work on all the written content for the sites, so whether that was talking points around the bill, whether that was stories about same-sex couples, and definitely ensuring that there were no typos and looking over the website ten, fifteen times before we would actually flip the switch and make it go live.

01-01:06:36

Meeker:

So you were a content producer as well. It sounds like you were writing things too.

01-01:06:41

Tolle:

Yeah.

01-01:06:41

Meeker:

Is that a unique role, do you think, for somebody in your position to actually be writing as well as sort of managing digital initiatives?

01-01:06:52

Tolle:

To some extent. I think the dynamic of our team was a little different, just because we were constantly in campaign mode and the needs of different states would constantly be fluctuating, so one week we'd need to spend a lot of time on this state, and then the next week maybe that state would be pretty quiet. So our approach, and definitely my approach, is how do we get the work that needs to be done today done. Everyone would really pitch in, so sometimes if we were really busy on a lot of writing, Christian, our designer,

would take on and do a lot of social media; he would run the Twitter account for a different campaign. We were all very involved in every aspect of every state, and so everyone was really informed as to what was happening in every state at any given point. So that's why we were all able to jump in and do whatever was needed to be done, which was really crucial when it came to these really busy moments where we just like hardly had enough hands to get all the work done.

01-01:08:05

Meeker:

So you're working with developing a logo, developing the website. What then comes next in helping establish a state campaign digital initiative?

01-01:08:15

Tolle:

An e-mail program is probably the most important part of a digital campaign, and so we would assess first, do we have an e-mail list going into the campaign, and so sometimes the statewide LGBT organization would in-kind their list, so that would give us a good starting point.

01-01:08:32

Meeker:

So, what, like an HRC [Human Rights Campaign] or something like that?

01-01:08:35

Tolle:

No, it was like the statewide LGBT organization. So that would give us a good starting point, and then we would need to figure out, if we really want to have maximum impact, what size do we need to get to, and then what's the budget for that and what's the plan to get there.

We would also launch social media platforms and ensure that—usually we would launch each campaign with several thousand dollars of Facebook ads, and so we'd be able to build up each page from zero to 15,000 just in a couple of days, and so just making sure that we were really able to hit the ground running was important because one, it got supporters enthused, but then it also just like showed legislators like, oh, okay, this campaign isn't just going to launch and go away, it's pretty serious.

01-01:09:24

Meeker:

I mean, actually seeing the ads and then if they're paying close enough attention, to see the number of likes or whatever, participation.

01-01:09:34

Tolle:

Or, ideally, a few days into the campaign, once they're getting a hundred e-mails to their inbox from constituents who are mobilized through one of our e-mails—it's definitely not the most important way to show political power, but it's definitely a way to show political power, especially in state legislatures, where a lot of legislators just aren't used to there being like a well-organized digital effort, and so a lot of times it could really kind of take them by surprise, which was great.

01-01:10:05
Meeker: That's what you wanted to do.

01-01:10:06
Tolle: Yeah, totally.

01-01:10:07
Meeker: You know, when people like or follow you on Facebook, is it possible to harvest their e-mail addresses?

01-01:10:14
Tolle: No.

01-01:10:14
Meeker: That's not something Facebook will do? Interesting. What about other social media platforms, any one allow you to do that?

01-01:10:22
Tolle: No. I mean, your goal is to kind of post content that will drive people back to your website, then you will be able to capture their information by them signing a petition or something like that. But we aren't able to just extract names from social media.

01-01:10:38
Meeker: What was the goal here? I mean, you know, did you have a pretty clear agenda for each of the states that you went into about what you were trying to accomplish with this campaign? Obviously the end goal would either be the ballot initiative or it would be what's happening in the state legislature, so therefore to influence the legislators. But did you have a goal of: "We have to get this many people on e-mail and we want them to behave in this particular way as a result of their engagement through e-mail." Did you have that kind of strategy set up?

01-01:11:16
Tolle: Roughly. I mean, it's hard to say what the one goal was, because digital is unique in that we really have our hand in everything, so we're fundraising, we're recruiting people to go to volunteer events, we're asking people to contact their legislators, we're pushing out stuff that the communications team is pushing out to the media. So our goal, I think, was always to ensure that we're strengthening each aspect, each of those aspects of the campaign so that we're making fundraising stronger, we're helping the message in the media go even further by posting it to social media, and really making sure that every component of the campaign is reflected in the digital presence.

And so that really entails really thinking through strategically like what does social media content look like for this week for the campaign, to make sure that we're hitting all the points that we're otherwise trying to hit publicly, whether through our field team or whether through the communications team. And then ultimately, the end goal is to activate people to do something

meaningful, whether that is contacting their legislators, calling their legislators, showing up for an event at the statehouse.

But part of that is you can't just throw up a Facebook page and throw up two posts and assume that someone who just liked your page is going to show up at the statehouse. That's a very hard ask, and so we always want to launch early, in advance of the legislative session, so that we can essentially build this relationship with supporters. So we constantly want to be breaking news of all this momentum that we have and really getting people excited and kind of becoming this trusted go-to source both on social media, and then also in e-mail too, so when something big happens, we want to be prepared in rapid response to be the first ones with something out to our e-mail list or on social media, so that we become the go-to trusted source.

And then when you're two months down the road and you have this really important make-or-break day, we built this relationship with supporters online, they trust us, and if our campaign says this is the most important thing, it's happening right now and we really need you here, then they're going to listen.

So I guess to answer your question, the goals are one, just to strengthen these other areas of the campaign, which is, the results are a big part of that and the actual action that we're driving. But then two, it's just to constantly build this relationship with supporters and drive forward this narrative of momentum.

01-01:13:46
Meeker:

How do you come up with a strategy, which I imagine involves some sort of message discipline, to know how to weight certain pieces of news or certain asks as "worth paying attention to" to "extraordinarily urgent." Because, you know, given the media of Twitter or Facebook and social media, there's a tendency for everything to be top priority, and then if everything's top priority, nothing is. So did you kind of come up with a strategy for learning how to weight and communicate the different kinds of things that are happening? Does that make sense?

01-01:14:35
Tolle:

Yeah, it does make sense. Yes and no. I mean, I think also at the core of our work in states was building a really strong relationship with people on the ground. So we were constantly in communication with the communications director or the campaign manager, and so we always knew what the priorities were, and we really advocated for digital to always have a seat at the table of the campaign, just for that reason, so that we would always know what the priorities are and then we could translate that into what the digital plan is.

So I think, above all, that was probably our most important way, is not just kind of saying that digital was at the table, but like really shoving our way in there and making sure that we were.

01-01:15:24

Meeker:

Was that ever, I guess, a moment for debate or contest within Freedom to Marry about you're starting to develop a real expertise around messaging and around weighting different messages and understanding what works well on Twitter might not work well on Facebook or versus e-mail. Then there are people in the organization who have maybe different agendas and don't particularly understand those specificities. Did those kinds of conversations happen, and how did those transpire?

01-01:16:01

Tolle:

I mean, not really internally at Freedom to Marry, and I'm not just saying that. I think one, Freedom to Marry has always been very strongly invested in digital. You can see that by, we had, our digital team is our largest department in the organization, so I don't think that we've ever really had to make that sell. And two, I think one of the great things about this kind of campaign structure that Freedom to Marry has had staffing-wise is that we've hired a lot of people who are experts in their particular fields, and so there's just a lot of trust among our staff that the people who are doing this particular job know what they're doing, and that they're the best at what they're doing, and so there was never this sense of needing to justify digital or anything like that. We were really collaborative, and every day I worked with members of our state's team, whoever was our lead in a particular state, or our communications team, and just the way we were able to integrate our work was just really incredible.

01-01:17:14

Meeker:

Maybe we can talk in some more detail about working with individual state campaigns. You know, there are certain organizations that have a really bad reputation for being almost imperialistic and going into localities and states and harvesting dollars and members and leaving little more than like a bumper sticker behind or something like that. I assume that you knew this, that there's always this concern, coming from Ohio, and I don't know what kind of interaction you had with the national organizations. I know in San Francisco there's like people have a lot of concern about this. Maybe a little overwrought, but still concerned. How did you approach that? As somebody who's coming from New York City with a national campaign going into states, what was the approach to smooth that interaction?

01-01:18:23

Tolle:

We definitely wanted to be really intentional. And I actually think this dynamic, like the dynamic between Freedom to Marry and in-state groups is probably like the most indicative of Freedom to Marry's values as a national organization. I think we pretty much always operated by the rule that we always elevate the stories in-state, the in-state group, the in-state leaders above us. So it was never our goal to go in and kind of wave a Freedom to Marry flag in the state. And really everything we did, every investment that we made, so like our digital investment, was like really just focused on building the state brand and building the in-state capacity.

So I think we were able to build a lot of trust really quickly, because it became clear that, like when our design team comes in and creates a logo and then we build a whole website and we run this digital program for a state, we're never mentioning Freedom to Marry in that. We're just there to help boost up the really great work that's already happening on the ground. And so I think that's been one of the greatest parts about working for Freedom to Marry, going into a state, is that over time, since we did that, there's just kind of this implicit trust, and obviously there are certain challenging situations, but by and large, I think because we decided that's how we were going to operate in a state, and that's really the reputation that we developed within the movement, ultimately it just made it a lot easier on both ends for us to work in the states, because we didn't have to kind of jump through all these hoops of people being really hesitant, generally, and we're really able to just like get in a state and really get to work. And I think that really positioned us as being this very trusted go-to resource in the movement.

01-01:20:30
Meeker:

But you are bringing in knowledge, vision, that may differ from the sort of home-grown knowledge and vision that exists in locations. I don't know if this is something you worked on or not, but I had a conversation with Thalia [Zepatos], and she was talking about, I think it was maybe an organization in Wisconsin, I think it was called 1138, it was named after the rights—

01-01:20:58
Tolle:

Minnesota.

01-01:20:58
Meeker:

Minnesota, right. It was named after the rights that were denied same-sex couples. That wasn't on message, right. And so there was, it sounds like, you know, at perhaps times a difficult conversation to convince them that while it might be rights that you want, that's not the message that's going to work with the broader public. Do you have any memories of these kinds of conversations? And I'm not doing this to muckrake, because these are problems that are inevitable, or conflicts that are inevitable, that beg some sort of solution, so I'm kind of interested in what the debates were, and then how resolution was achieved.

01-01:21:49
Tolle:

Even something as simple, or sounds simple, as I think probably our most consistent conversation around this, would be the use of marriage equality as opposed to freedom to marry. So our research really showed that when you talk about marriage equality, people are going to think about rights, people are going to think about all these things that don't help move public opinion forward. And so but when we would come into a state and really kind of insist on using freedom to marry, it kind of came across as maybe sometimes us just wanting to brand ourselves, which really wasn't the case. And so but definitely just in general, messaging was probably the—and I wouldn't even say tension, but was just maybe the most drawn-out conversation in states.

Sometimes we would—I'd pick my battles. So if we're going to use marriage equality in this one e-mail, it's okay. But yeah, I think that was definitely a conversation in each state, and depending on the state, was a more elevated conversation.

01-01:22:56

Meeker:

Marriage equality is instantly recognizable, it's sort of why it was maybe first used, it was first to market. It rolls off the tongue easier than freedom to marry, which again doesn't bring the equality thing that I think a lot of people want to emphasize. Can you recall any specific conversations around this and how you would've presented your point of view?

01-01:23:25

Tolle:

Yeah, I mean, I think, just in general, our messaging that we found to work is not necessarily messaging that really gets our base going. It's messaging that's designed for people who are on the fence. And so I think a lot of times in implementing this tested messaging, you kind of find this tension of this isn't what gets the base excited, so maybe the base feels a little disappointed in this messaging, and it doesn't speak to them, but ultimately the goal isn't necessarily to speak to them. And so finding out, I guess, kind of striking the balance of like, "Here's the messaging that we know we need to use." We want to be sure to use that messaging when talking to our supporters, because we want to model how we hope that they are talking about this to their legislators or to their neighbors, while also needing, especially for digital, needing to kind of add in these layers that we know will really grab our base.

So I think that was always, and just in LGBT work generally, is an ongoing kind of dilemma for campaigns.

01-01:24:41

Meeker:

There's also the fact that activists tend to run really hot, and I mean, I know this from personal experience, and oftentimes very difficult to rein in to a particular message. And sometimes totally resistant to it, because they're activists and they kind of know, based on their passion, what really drives them and why they're committed to it. I mean, was there a particular way of engaging with people along those lines, how to deal with that sort of activist passion?

01-01:25:21

Tolle:

Yeah, I mean, you know, I think sometimes our in-state leaders would be able to sit down—I mean, I think you would especially see this as we moved into like redder and redder state legislatures. So we were not just needing to get Democrats on board, but like we were needing to get Republicans, who had probably done some like not great things in the eyes of a lot of activists, to vote with us. And so we had to be really disciplined in our messaging, both to ensure that our messaging was Republican-friendly, but that we also weren't slamming any Republicans, or that we were being very clearly nonpartisan.

So a lot of times, just sitting down and having that conversation about, we want to win marriage but standing in between us and marriage is three Republican votes in the Senate, and the only way we're going to do that is if we get these votes, I think eventually would kind of sink in. And sometimes it wouldn't, and that's—I think what we found is that's okay. In any movement there's going to be this kind of wide spectrum of voices, right, so we were the campaign, and so we were always kind of right down the middle and very balanced, and sometimes there would be voices that were very far to the left, or very far to the right sometimes, but were on our side but were not matching our voice. Sometimes that could even be helpful strategically.

But knowing that that's not going to go away, so I think just maintaining our kind of down-the-middle messaging and knowing that I guess that kind of—other messages have a place too, they just aren't necessarily coming from us.

01-01:27:13
Meeker:

Did you see, looking back upon it, a turning point in the digital campaign? One where kind of everything came together, it worked well with your state partners, and you had the desired outcome?

01-01:27:34
Tolle:

I mean, so we definitely had one campaign that was by far our strongest. I think we had kind of had our turning point in terms of when we started figuring out all of our best practices and kind of making, running a digital campaign fairly standard across states, was in 2013 with Rhode Island, Illinois, and Delaware. So we refined all that. Later in the fall we had two campaigns, two legislative campaigns in Hawaii and then Illinois again, because it didn't pass earlier in the year, where I think we were really able to kind of underscore a lot of what we learned earlier in the year.

But then in 2014 we ran digital for Freedom Indiana, so it was the statewide campaign to stop a marriage amendment. So Indiana was one of three or four states that either didn't have the freedom to marry or it also didn't have an amendment in the constitution banning marriage, and to amend the constitution you have to pass—the legislature has to pass an amendment in two consecutive cycles, and then it would go to the—and then it has to go to the ballot.

01-01:28:49
Meeker:

So similar to Massachusetts.

01-01:28:51
Tolle:

Yeah. And so it had passed through one cycle, and so had it passed in the legislature in 2014, it would've been on the ballot in 2014. And it was an overwhelming 85 percent Republican legislature, so definitely not our most friendly territory. And there was also like really no—there wasn't a ton of LGBT infrastructure in the state, and there definitely wasn't really any digital infrastructure. But we were able to—like the campaign was strong on many

fronts that had nothing to do with digital, so it was heavily supported by the business community, it was led by a Republican, kind of all of these things that now we know are really crucial, and especially like moving forward on nondiscrimination, these are kind of that's how we want to structure a campaign now. But this was really the first time we did that.

Then also just digitally we were really able to, I think we had all of our kind of best practices down in legislative sessions, we were really committed to rapid response, we really had our messaging down, and so we were able to build this really powerful digital program where we went from—I think we started the campaign with 6,000 e-mail addresses from the state organization, and we ended the campaign with like 50,000, and none of that was paid.

01-01:30:19
Meeker:

And how many people live in that state? Like maybe seven or eight million, I think.

01-01:30:26
Tolle:

And it was a matter of every day we would log in and see that overnight like 1,000 new people had signed a petition or joined our e-mail list. So we've definitely seen a lot of tangible impact for digital in many states, but that was definitely our most impactful digital campaign, I think. One, we worked really seamlessly with other departments on the campaign, so we were constantly very much in communication, probably more so than any other. Two, it does help that it's a lot easier to mobilize people when they're on the defense unwillingly, and so this marriage amendment hadn't—it was a bad thing that a few extreme lawmakers were going to push through, as opposed to getting people excited about something proactive.

And so ultimately we were able to stop the marriage amendment from going to the ballot, which ultimately ended up killing it. We were able to raise over \$100,000 online, we were able to generate 250,000 e-mails to legislators. And so that's definitely, I think, the campaign we would point to as the Digital Action Center at its strongest.

01-01:31:47
Meeker:

Indiana, I think, went for Obama in 2008, not 2012, still a very red state, as you had mentioned. What was the process for developing state-specific messaging for the digital campaign?

01-01:32:04
Tolle:

I mean, it's a lot of adapting. Each state—and especially for Indiana, because we had only worked on campaigns that were pretty straightforward: we want to pass this bill to extend marriage to same-sex couples. Whereas Indiana was a little bit different, because we weren't talking about marriage, we were talking about an amendment to the constitution that would limit liberty and restrict freedom—we essentially had to take our messaging and move it over to the right very significantly. Which took a little bit of adapting, but

ultimately after a week of writing e-mails or doing social media on the messaging, you're like, okay, I got it now.

But this was a big learning experience too, because as our team, way down the road, as we kind of started working on nondiscrimination at the beginning of this year, that need for message adaptability is even so much more crucial, and so I think, and another reason why Indiana was such a turning point for us is that we learned to apply our tactics to different messaging and realized that it's, yeah, some things change, but also not a lot changes. You just have to have a good grasp on the messaging, but otherwise the tactics and the approach and kind of your overall philosophy of the digital program isn't that different, which I think will—it's something that is going to benefit the LGBT movement and kind of be a legacy of the marriage movement long after Freedom to Marry shuts down.

01-01:33:50
Meeker:

One of the parts of the messaging in Indiana was that you're not voting to create the freedom to marry for same-sex couples, you're just not writing, you know, whatever, call it discrimination or, you know, limitations on liberty into the state constitution. Is that something that you were trying to figure out how to do, I mean, to sort of have in some ways a pro-liberty argument but also remind people that they weren't going to be—

01-01:34:25
Tolle:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, we would even have op-eds by particular Republican spokespeople that would lead off saying, I do not support marriage for same-sex couples, but I know this amendment is wrong for our state.

01-01:34:39
Meeker:

That must've been a little hard to swallow.

01-01:34:41
Tolle:

Yeah, a little bit. I remember, you know, even sending a couple of e-mails and like drafting e-mails from someone who didn't support marriage to our list, with this messaging, and just sending it to them and being like—it's just a weird feeling to be like, "Thanks so much for helping, even though you don't believe in the very thing that's kind of the mission of the organization that I work for."

But at the same time, I think that one of the bigger political lessons I've learned at Freedom to Marry is just that, is we did a really good job of working with unexpected allies, and by "we" I mean the entire marriage movement, but I think that was really at the core of Freedom to Marry. You can see that a lot with our bipartisan work. And I think that was ultimately a key to our success, especially in legislatures. Like we couldn't have passed bills without Republicans.

I think moving forward, as a lot of us move on to other LGBT work or just any other work in the political realm, I think we've kind of learned this trick that might be hard to learn otherwise, that we can work with people we don't agree with everything on, because we are singularly focused on one end goal. I know definitely my kind of self-described radical liberal self when I was twenty-two probably could not have foreseen by the time I was twenty-six, twenty-seven, I would probably spend more of the day on calls with Republicans than I do Democrats. Which, yeah, was I think a really beneficial learning experience.

01-01:36:38

Meeker:

This was 2014, right, Indiana? You know, by that point in time, the ruling had already happened on DOMA [*United States v. Windsor*, 2013] and the Perry [*Hollingsworth v. Perry*, 2013] decision about Prop 8, looking forward to 2015, where obviously the Supreme Court does support the freedom to marry, and this is totally speculative, but I wonder the degree to which those Republicans who signed on to *not* vote to send the constitutional amendment to the voters, yet said they didn't support the freedom to marry, I wonder if it was politically efficacious for them to do so, and maybe recognizing that they wanted it out of their hands. This is, again, totally speculative, but it seems that there's a certain point that people see where things are headed and they're maybe thinking about how they're going to be looked at historically, so they just want it taken out of their hands.

01-01:37:50

Tolle:

Yeah. I mean, I think to some extent for sure, but maybe not even to that extreme. Like I think that they did see where trends were going, and I think that maybe they saw that civil unions were coming to Indiana in two years. They saw that there was going to be some protection for gay couples under the law in the state, but even at that point, I don't think we would've predicted that we were going to be having a Supreme Court ruling just the following summer.

So I think there was a sense of inevitability, there was a sense that it would be overturned in the courts or something like that, but I don't really even think that at that point most people had the sense that we were only fourteen months away from a Supreme Court ruling.

01-01:38:38

Meeker:

Was there ever the use of inevitability in your campaign?

01-01:38:44

Tolle:

I mean, messaging-wise, no. You never wanted it to come across as one, inevitability that would kind of disengage supporters, so someone's like, "Oh, well, this is going to happen, so I probably don't need to really get up and do anything in my state." And also inevitability, on the other hand, for legislators, you didn't want to feel—or even voters, really, you don't want them to feel like something's being forced on them, and so you really want—we really

want to create a climate where there's this kind of broader conversation around marriage and everyone's engaging in it, and ultimately the state decides for themselves that this is something they want to affirm.

So no, I think while we might think of it, thought of it in terms of inevitability, we would never talk about it that way.

01-01:39:44

Meeker:

With the state campaigns, were you traveling a lot? Were you actually going to the states and meeting with the people?

01-01:39:47

Tolle:

Oh yeah. Yeah, I traveled most Mondays through Fridays for the last—like especially during legislative sessions, I was pretty much never here. Yeah, I mean, I think during the Illinois campaign, I went to Illinois twenty-five times. Each state I probably went to at least ten times during votes.

01-01:40:13

Meeker:

Were there any people who you encountered during those visits, either established allies or activists, or maybe unexpected ones, that were particularly impressive that are worth remembering for the record? Particularly effective?

01-01:40:32

Tolle:

I mean, yeah, definitely. I'm just trying to think of where to begin out of all the states.

01-01:40:41

Meeker:

Well, you had talked about those three states, Delaware, Illinois, and Rhode Island. What about—anyone in any of those places that—

01-01:40:48

Tolle:

In each state there was always one key person who just had such a good handle on—because, I mean, every state legislature is just so drastically different, and so even like the terminology they use to describe the legislative process, in terms of the actual process, some will have—we would have a committee hearing on a marriage bill, some would be ninety minutes in and out, and others, like Rhode Island went till five a.m. one day. I mean, every state was just so different that you always just had to have—we did always have someone who just really knew how the state legislature worked and really had the relationships, but that just like knew the process and was kind of able to be like the in between of like us and the legislature.

01-01:41:38

Meeker:

I guess kind of like Marc [Solomon] probably was in Massachusetts.

01-01:41:40

Tolle:

Yeah, totally. But that role was, I mean, we couldn't have passed any of these bills in any of these states without the local expert who was always able to guide us.

- 01-01:41:53
Meeker: Were they usually employed by the statewide LGBT organization, or not?
- 01-01:42:01
Tolle: Yes and no.
- 01-01:42:04
Meeker: A mixture.
- 01-01:42:05
Tolle: Yeah. I'm trying to think, there was like probably half and half. I mean, the statewide organization always played a big role. Their role varied based on just because the capacity of each statewide organization was different, so some were able to kind of lead the charge for the campaign, and then others helped in other ways, but maybe lesser ways.
- 01-01:42:30
Meeker: Were there any statewide campaigns that—this might sound not very kind—but were pretty backward and like required a huge amount of work to get them up to speed? And I guess I won't make you say what states, because you never know, right?
- 01-01:42:50
Tolle: I mean, I think one of our maybe biggest setbacks in launching a campaign would just be getting to launch a campaign. So there'd be a lot of discussion and deliberation amongst national partners and the in-state partners over signing the MOU and kind of the terms of that, and so a lot of times that could take two months, three months longer than anyone wanted it to. But then what we always found was—so that was representatives of each organization working to sign an MOU, but then generally once they've signed the MOU, then they hire campaign staff, then the campaign staff takes it from there.
- So while there was not always, but generally, like campaigns are never really launched when they say they're going to launch; we probably always launched two weeks after, sometimes three months after. But then once we would get them launched, generally we were able to hit the ground running. So the biggest delay was just getting them launched.
- 01-01:43:59
Meeker: So it's that MOU phase where the difficulties transpired. Were you involved in any of those negotiations?
- 01-01:44:05
Tolle: Thankfully I was not. I was able to have the best of both worlds. So no, it was usually whoever our lead on the state team was, was representing Freedom to Marry in those conversations.
- 01-01:44:19
Meeker: And I'm going to be interviewing them, so I'll let them talk about it. Were you involved in the "Democrats: Say I Do" or "Obama: Say I Do" campaigns?

01-01:44:30

Tolle: Yeah, but not a ton. I was still doing Freedom to Marry social media during then, during that time. So I wrote some blog posts and I did social media around it, but I wasn't totally involved in the planning, so I guess just kind of more reporting back on it.

01-01:44:47

Meeker: And how did your campaign here at Freedom to Marry shift in anticipation of the Supreme Court's hearing and ultimate decision? I mean, what were you guys, what were you thinking as far as your own messaging kind of beyond the states, back to the home office?

01-01:45:13

Tolle: So meeting, like once we knew that we were going to the Supreme Court?

01-01:45:17

Meeker: Right, yeah.

01-01:45:19

Tolle: Yeah, I mean, so a lot changed. We suddenly went from an organization—and I say this just from the perspective of working in the states, because that's really all I've done for the past three years, and in the states we shifted from passing bills to being solely focused on public education campaigns. So that brought us into states that we previously did not anticipate launching campaigns in, so Utah, Wyoming, states that were certainly never on our radar.

01-01:45:53

Meeker: Oklahoma.

01-01:45:55

Tolle: Yeah. But also it posed the question of how do you run a public education campaign, like what is that? Because we had really kind of refined, and to some extent perfected, what a legislative campaign looked like, and then all of a sudden we have to figure out, okay, we need to launch this campaign in Oklahoma, what do we do with it? And so it was a lot, again, of kind of learning as we go.

01-01:46:22

Meeker: So the public education campaigns you're talking about are basically in response to all these district court decisions that are coming down, trying to, in essence, prepare the populace of the state to accept this? Or what was the charge of the public education campaign?

01-01:46:38

Tolle: Yeah, it's to grow public support and more broadly it is to create the climate for the court to do the right thing. So knowing that like a state court or a district court or the Supreme Court don't exist in a vacuum and that—so the more that we can help shape public opinion, the more that we can—and not even necessarily grow majority support, because we were already there, but to highlight the unexpected voices. And this is when third-party validators and

unexpected voices became infinitely more important. So how do we—because we knew we already had majority support, but how do we make it clear publicly that this very diverse array of people in Wyoming who you may not expect support the freedom to marry, they do; this is one issue they can all unite around. That was ultimately our goal with these public education campaigns.

01-01:47:35

Meeker:

How did you run them? How were they different to run than like a legislative campaign?

01-01:47:40

Tolle:

They were very earned media driven, probably 90 percent earned media driven, and so we were constantly building towards what is our next earned media moment. So we would start by building a list of faith leaders. So we would recruit people online and offline who were faith leaders to sign on to our faith coalition. And then we would launch that, we would send out a press release and we would try to get some good media out of that. And then three weeks later, we would release a study on the economic impact the freedom to marry would have on a particular state, and then three weeks later we might do a TV ad. Always making sure that marriage was a part of the conversation, especially at this point, because marriage was just starting to become part of the media coverage everywhere in the country where it hadn't been before, with or without our help. It's like as we were leading up to the Supreme Court. And so we wanted to make sure that we were shaping the stories in the way that they needed to be shaped, which was showing support and showing these unexpected voices that maybe some undecided people could really relate to.

01-01:48:50

Meeker:

That's the big difference between social media and earned media, is that social media you really can keep a pretty tight hold on your own message. There's an exception to that, but we won't talk about that. But earned media is a lot trickier, especially when you're going out into places like Oklahoma and Wyoming. How did you work with media outlets there, and did you feel like you got the kind of coverage that you would've hoped for?

01-01:49:21

Tolle:

Yeah, I mean, we got really great coverage in a lot of these states. I think we made the front page of the *Casper Star-Tribune* in Wyoming three or four times. Because ultimately this is a national story that is really kind of seeping into the states, but reporters in these states never had a local hook, and so were like constantly giving them this local hook, so where it wasn't just a story about the Supreme Court or a story about—

01-01:49:53

Meeker:

San Francisco.

01-01:49:54

Tolle:

Right, exactly. It's actually like a home-grown story. And so I think that we were—we got probably even stronger media coverage in some of these states than we could when running a campaign in an east coast state or something, where that was a little more expected.

01-01:50:14

Meeker:

Just because there's not much happening, or—?

01-01:50:17

Tolle:

I think maybe that helps, but also like it's—when you have ten priests and—ten faith leaders in Wyoming who support marriage versus ten faith leaders in New Jersey, that's going to make more of a splash. One, just because I guess there's less happening. But also it's just more unexpected, and so I think the stories were able to kind of go a little further in some of these states that just where the marriage conversation was just really starting.

01-01:50:49

Meeker:

Interesting. You know, thinking of messaging and social media, how did you guys deal with, you know, comments and unscripted responses to the carefully honed message that you were putting out there?

01-01:51:11

Tolle:

It depends on kind of the severity of the comment. So ideally in social media, I think you would not want to delete a comment, you would hope that one of your supporters would kind of go on and either not necessarily refute, but kind of make our case. And sometimes that would happen, and that would kind of spark a conversation, which is not a bad thing.

But then, of course, in doing this work we obviously saw a lot of like pretty horrible anti-gay comments, and so we didn't tolerate that, and so those would be immediately removed. And definitely as we got into the redder and redder states, those would surface a lot more.

01-01:52:00

Meeker:

So there was kind of a policy there about addressing things that were beyond the pale, I guess.

01-01:52:06

Tolle:

Yeah. I mean, if someone said, I don't support this, we probably wouldn't delete it. But if someone were to use anti-gay slang and things like that, any of our social media property should be safe spaces for our supporters to come to and not have to see that.

01-01:52:33

Meeker:

That would be a lot of work, wouldn't it, to go through every response?

01-01:52:36

Tolle:

Yeah, it's quite a bit. I mean, we have it divided up. I think at the most we had—we ran social for ten public education campaigns at the same time, and

so that would kind of become hard to constantly be keeping tabs on. So we would maybe miss one here or there. But generally we were able to keep up on it.

01-01:53:00

Meeker:

How were the states responding to what was happening nationally, such as the anti-DOMA decision and the 2015 [*Obergefell v. Hodges*] decision? Was there much engagement of the state campaigns, some of whom, I guess, would've shut down or something by that point? What happened when there was a resolution in states?

01-01:53:24

Tolle:

So like, so once we pass a bill? I mean, really the state campaigns would generally shut down. So probably have a wind-down period of a month, where we're trying to get good press for people who are celebrating the decision or the win, there's a bill signing, we're thanking all the people who are part of the campaign. But then generally at the end, probably a month or so after, we would kind of have our final e-mail that was basically saying that the campaign shut down, and our final social posts, and then we'd leave it be.

01-01:54:01

Meeker:

Would you close the pages? The Twitter feeds and the Facebook pages?

01-01:54:05

Tolle:

No, no. Mostly all of the Facebook and Twitter feeds are still live, so you can scroll through and see our tweets from 2013 or whatever. Some shut down, because, I mean, we also, we wanted to be sure that we were leaving the state in a stronger position than we came in. So the e-mail list that we would build in a given state would be given back to the state group, and so hopefully we would be able to double their e-mail list. Then we would also, for the social media properties, we had generally built a pretty sizable audience, sometimes larger than what the state group had, and so if that's something that they wanted to retain and take over and it was useful for them, we would absolutely hand it over.

01-01:54:53

Meeker:

So those state social media sites, was there any thought to kind of go back and reactivate them in anticipation of Supreme Court decisions that would be impactful nationwide?

01-01:55:08

Tolle:

Yeah, there was. There were a few pages that we did reactivate, maybe some of our most recent ones. And I think in a perfect world, had we had even more capacity, we could've done that, but we already had ten active campaigns, and so I think it was, while it would've been great, we just kind of had to pick where's our highest impact going to be, and that's going to be in states where—because ultimately, like digital doesn't exist in a silo, and so, I mean, because ultimately our rule for offering digital help to a state is, is there going to be an actual full campaign, so is there going to be an earned media plan, is

there going to be a field plan? Otherwise digital doesn't really have anything to push out, and we're not getting the most impact we can out of digital, because there aren't these other components. And so in that instance, for these other, reactivating these other states, we just kind of found it might've taken, sucked a lot of capacity but not necessarily given us a ton of impact.

01-01:56:14

Meeker:

Okay. Can you tell me what Blue State Digital is and the role that they played in your work?

01-01:56:21

Tolle:

Yeah. So Blue State Digital, I mean, they worked with Freedom to Marry really on two fronts. One, it's the digital tools that we used in each state, so it's where you would create sign-up forms, online donations, e-mails. Another great thing that we were able to offer to states is that we were able to—so Freedom to Marry uses Blue State Digital for Freedom to Marry branded things, and then we were able to create chapters—It's like the back end of [inaudible], so it houses the list, it's where you do—

01-01:56:58

Meeker:

So kind of like a cloud service or something.

01-01:57:00

Tolle:

Yeah. It's where you create different sign-up pages on your website, like any time anywhere on the website where you see, where a supporter is inputting information, that's probably a form that's in Blue State Digital. And then we were able to create chapters for each individual state, which was another really big added bonus for states, because we were able to get it cheaply and we paid for it, as opposed to if a state campaign wanted to go set up their own account, it would probably cost like five times the amount that we were paying for it.

And then separately, Blue State Digital consulted with us on Freedom to Marry branded digital content. So I did work with them in my first year or so. Ultimately I didn't work on any Freedom to Marry related content for probably the last three, three and a half years.

01-01:57:49

Meeker:

Okay. So really it was in that first year that you were doing home office stuff, and the rest was statewide campaigns. Well, let's see, I think we're kind of reaching the end here. I'm sure that there's a lot that we haven't covered, but I think we've covered quite a bit in just two hours. Is there anything that you feel like we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

01-01:58:22

Tolle:

No, I don't think so.

01-01:58:23

Meeker:

Anything that requires more detail or explanation? Can you tell me where you were and what you thought when you heard the Supreme Court decision come down in June 2015?

01-01:58:41

Tolle:

Yeah. I was sitting right there at the end of that table. We had—you know, because there were probably three or four days before that where we thought that the court could rule, so every single one of those days, we all sat around the table, we all had our Freedom to Marry shirts on, and were all hoping that was going to be the day. But for some reason, the day, on June 26, when it actually came down, like it really felt like it just from—I mean, I remember not being able to sleep that night, waking up at like five in the morning and just being like, “All right, well, I’ll just go to the office.”

And we were all sitting here and they started releasing decisions at ten, and so at about 10:02 we’re all reading SCOTUS blog, we’re all refreshing Twitter, and Evan [Wolfson] just kind of quietly says, like, “We won.” And there’s just complete silence, because no one could really believe that’s what he said. And then it all showed up on our feeds, too, that we had won. It was just surreal.

We were obviously hugging each other, I think most of us were shaking. We did a champagne toast, and then we all went right back to work getting out all the press releases, getting out all the e-mails. But I even remember, just as I was sending—we had like two state e-mails to send, and as I was sending them, like my hands were literally shaking to where I wasn’t sure if I could type well, because it was just such a feeling like anything I had ever really experienced before.

01-02:00:08

Meeker:

What was the shaking about? I mean, can you describe the feeling at all?

01-02:00:14

Tolle:

I mean, it’s just, for something that I worked for five years, but like Evan had worked for decades, and knowing that there was one moment that everyone’s been working towards, and like that was that moment that we just experienced. You never again were, we have to try to pass a marriage bill in the state, never again—it’s just, there aren’t many moments in your life where, at 10:01 this was what the world was like, and then at 10:02 the world’s completely different. So it was just a lot to take in, in a really unbelievable, amazing way.

01-02:01:02

Meeker:

Did it not matter that it was five to four? It was just the victory that mattered?

01-02:01:07

Tolle:

Yeah, just the victory.

01-02:01:10

Meeker: What did you do that night?

01-02:01:12

Tolle: We worked a full day, so we were here until about five o'clock, and then we all walked down to the rally in front of the Stonewall, and all went as a staff, and then we were all able to celebrate a little bit after.

01-02:01:30

Meeker: Cool. Anything else you want to add?

01-02:01:34

Tolle: I don't know. We didn't really touch on this, so, since the beginning of the year, my team specifically, as we won a lot of states, there weren't a lot of states left for marriage campaigns, and so my team specifically started working on nondiscrimination. So still it's a Freedom to Marry, still has Freedom to Marry employees but doing all the things we did as the Digital Action Center for marriage, but for nondiscrimination states. So we worked on five over the last year, while still in our Freedom to Marry capacity.

01-02:02:13

Meeker: So this is called Freedom for All Americans, right?

01-02:02:15

Tolle: Now it is, yeah. When we first started doing the work, we just received a grant from some of our national partners, because Freedom for All Americans didn't exist yet, but there were a lot of states that were moving bills, and we knew from marriage that we had to have digital to be able to run these campaigns successfully, so I think we started our first nondiscrimination campaign in November 2014, and worked on them all through the legislative sessions.

01-02:02:46

Meeker: So what is this campaign going to become? Is it going to be modeled on Freedom to Marry?

01-02:02:51

Tolle: Yeah, so it's definitely taking the Freedom to Marry playbook and really applying it to nondiscrimination. So being a singular focused campaign and not kind of this broad organization, working across party lines and really taking almost all the elements that we found to be crucial for a state campaign, so including digital, including earned media. Hopefully the idea is that we're not reinventing the wheel, we're just kind of adjusting the wheel a little bit to fit for nondiscrimination.

01-02:03:27

Meeker: Who are the key players in this?

01-02:03:30

Tolle:

So I mean, it's a lot of the same players for a lot of the same national funders. Several of our staff are moving over. I think right now, four to five of our staff have committed to move over full time. And then a lot of the leaders of the organization are people that we've worked with on marriage throughout the years, so our executive director, Matt McTighe, was the campaign manager of the Maine 2012 campaign, a lot of the senior leadership worked on different marriage campaigns in their states, or worked for other national organizations. It's a pretty small world, so it's definitely all people who are very familiar to us at Freedom to Marry.

01-02:04:18

Meeker:

So Matt McTighe is going to be the director of it. And you're going to be involved in this, yes?

01-02:04:25

Tolle:

Yeah, I actually, I moved over 100 percent on October 1, so I'm the digital director, and then our graphic designer also moved over with me, and we've hired more staff.

01-02:04:38

Meeker:

And your first round of work, how did that play out?

01-02:04:43

Tolle:

It was a lot of good and bad. I mean, not bad, but we learned a lot of lessons. We had never run this kind of—these kind of comprehensive campaigns for nondiscrimination, and so I think—and especially like in very, very red states, so I think we learned a lot about what are the elements of a marriage campaign that we can carry over, what's going to be a lot different. What's a lot different is that our messaging has to be even more conservative, it has to be very rooted in business arguments and things that are very appealing to a Republican legislator from one of these states.

01-02:05:33

Meeker:

What states are on the docket?

01-02:05:37

Tolle:

So right now we are running digital for—Houston's equal rights ordinance is on the ballot on November 3, and so we're working on that, we're working in Houston. We're also working in Pennsylvania to pass a comprehensive nondiscrimination law, and then in Massachusetts to add gender identity to the state's public accommodation law.

01-02:05:58

Meeker:

Well, we'll have to see how that all plays out.

01-02:06:01

Tolle:

Hopefully we'll have some good news for you in a couple of months.

01-02:06:03

Meeker:

Hopefully. All right, should we wrap up? All right, excellent. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]