

Kevin Ireland

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SPEAKERS

Sopphey Vance, Kevin Ireland

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- S** Sopphey Vance 00:00
This is Sopphey Vance with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I'm interviewing Kevin Ireland. Say hi, Kevin.
- K** Kevin Ireland 00:16
Hi, V. How are you doing?
- S** Sopphey Vance 00:18
I'm good. I'm good. To start, Kevin, tell me a little bit about yourself. What are some formative experiences that make you who you are today?
- K** Kevin Ireland 00:34
Wow, well, I'll give you hopefully a short version of that. I grew up in a suburb of Kansas City. I went to a privileged high school and got an education that allowed me to go to University of Chicago. I studied there for four, five years, more or less, and dropped out to become a musician. I played in a band for many years in the Chicago area and lived in the 18th of Michigan in a loft and then moved over to Wicker Park and made a bunch of records and did some touring. Lived that life for quite some time in Chicago, and then ended up moving with my wife to a small town in rural Kansas, where we bought a little

motel, and we had two kids and raised them there while we were running the little sort of mom-and-pop 1950s style vintage drive-up motel. During that time, I started doing some work for the Chamber of Commerce some other groups and ended up helping to start a company that did biodegradable plastic that was made from plants. We opened the doors of that in 2011. I worked there for about eight years. During that time, I also started serving a little congregation in a small town called America's Kansas as their authorized pulpit supply. That kind of led me into wanting to spend the rest of my working vocational years in ministry. That led me back here to seminary. Fortunately, it's going better than it did the first time around. My family and I have been thrilled to be welcomed in this community. We all love Austin and the seminary community a lot.

S

Sopphey Vance 02:50

That's a really big move. But I'm curious to know more about your family, your family dynamics. It's a different environment, moving from a musician's lifestyle, to little motel, to seminary. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

K

Kevin Ireland 03:24

I've never seen a big conflict in moving from one position to the other. Although I think that people certainly have perceptions about you based on what you tell them of your past. For instance, when we started running the motel, we took a lot of our passions that we had from Chicago. Rachel was a massage therapist in Chicago and had a practice, so we converted several of the rooms so that she could have a practice there in the little town that we were in. I showed movies outside that were interesting at times to people. We were very big fans of *Free to Be... You and Me*, which was a television show and was made into a sort of a curriculum that was used in the seventies. It was formative to my years as a kid, and then finding those on sixteen millimeter films seemed a sign that I should show them to every kid that was my age that happened to be staying at the motel.

K

Kevin Ireland 04:36

This is not really radical stuff at all. We got some push back from some evangelicals, I guess, but besides that - but there are things about a boy that wants a doll and that's okay. Or a boy that cries and that's okay. Or mommies can do everything that daddies can do, or things like that. I always thought of that as just being romantically cute and nostalgic to my upbringing without knowing that, in fact, that was something that was still, at least in rural Kansas in the aughts, seen as liberal propaganda maybe, or affirming certain values that they didn't see were biblically based. I don't know, there weren't that many of those types of people. But that was, I guess, surprising. It's kind of an example of

some of the things and assumptions that you carry forward. These are things that weren't from my artist friends or artists lifestyle or anything. This is from when I was a little kid, when I was growing up. But sometimes these things, you get different receptions for those things that you assume are things that everybody thought were okay, maybe aren't.

S

Sopphey Vance 06:20

So these gender, societal roles, they weren't strictly divided in your childhood. Is that what you're saying?

K

Kevin Ireland 06:36

If you want to be more specific about that, yeah, it was really interesting when I was growing up, because my father was a musician also, and a music educator. When I was a young teenager, my father made the decision that he would give up his teaching job, which came with a steady paycheck and a pension, health insurance and things, and would become a full time musician, and did private lessons as well, but did a lot of gigging and things like that. He was the one that was always home. When I would come home from school, he was the one that was supposedly going to make dinner, although quite often when he was teaching lessons, that would fall to somebody else. We certainly were not chefs in the kitchen, so to speak, there were a lot of frozen pizzas and TV dinners that were eaten at the Ireland household in those days.

K

Kevin Ireland 07:37

But my mom, at that time, was the person that was working and probably making a lot more money, honestly. There's always been this kind of back and forth in their lives, I think, where one has led maybe in a certain direction or the other. Certainly, when my mom decided to go to seminary, my dad had to leave everything and go follow her out there. I would say when I was growing up, although my dad was probably the disciplinarian when there was need for that, certainly my mom was the authority figure in the house. She was also a woman that cut her hair very short back in the seventies. Back when that early androgynous style was cool, but she didn't even know it was that because she lived in Iowa, and it was hot, and she thought it was more comfortable to have shorter hair.

S

Sopphey Vance 08:48

So this question of gender and the gender roles you experienced as child. How did that change or form you when your children are like, "Oh hey, dad. I'm a new person." How did that work?

K

Kevin Ireland 09:17

Are you asking me about my kids coming out? Or are you asking me about how I perceived gender roles when I was younger?

S

Sopphey Vance 9:27

Both. How you perceived gender roles as as you grew up, and how did that transform or evolve with your children?

K

Kevin Ireland 09:41

Well, I think when I was growing up, the *Free to Be... You and Me* sort of messaging, the way I saw it was that a woman could do whatever they want, or look however they want, and it didn't make them any less a woman, and likewise, a man as well. I think now, as I understand where my kids are coming from on this issue, I think that they would say that the identity, their gender identity, comes first, and that that's more fluid. Their gender identity could be one thing and even sort of expressing as another. I don't know, it's much more fluid. It's much more like the gender identity itself is more fluid, I think, than the way I understood it when I was younger. Does that make sense?

S

Sopphey Vance 10:51

It almost feels like a learning curve. Would you describe it that way?

K

Kevin Ireland 10:57

I wish I could remember this. There are some technical theory terms, but I think I fell earlier on in the more essentialist camp, that there was this sort of essentialism to womanness that was not always defined biologically, but somehow always fell in this - you say like, "I always knew I was a blah, blah, blah." Whereas I think now people are more comfortable saying, "I feel more comfortable as a blah, blah, blah. I might have been more comfortable earlier on as something else, and I might want to go back to be something else later. Don't don't lock me in here, you essentialist." That's where I think the difference is. There's some other term for that other way of thinking. But I think weirdly - none of those kids have read Judith Butler - but they anticipate this quite well, in that if you don't really hold firm to gender as a construct in this essentialist way, then you don't have any responsibility to it really, in how you talk about yourself or think about yourself.

S

Sopphey Vance 12:24

That makes a lot of sense. What is it like living in this intersection of your children are part of the LGBTQIA+ world and then your current social world that we're in now? What's that like on an everyday basis? Especially in Texas.

K

Kevin Ireland 12:51

Let me give you three weird points on this that are not altogether connected, but I think maybe give some context. When I was a teenager, I was a child actor. All the cool people I knew who were slightly older than me - when I started doing this, I was twelve or thirteen. So all the cool theater high school kids that could drive and could take me places and could do things with me, they were all gay. Every single one of them. I thought that those were the cool kids. You know what I mean? Those were the kids that I wanted to hang out with on the weekends. Those are the kids that whatever they were doing, whatever party they were going to, that was the cool thing to do. It wasn't because they were gay, it because they were theater gays.

K

Kevin Ireland 13:43

But when we were in Kansas, there were no cool gay kids. In fact, shortly after we had moved there, there was a guy who was out and who was a beloved bartender and got hit by a guy who was probably drunk, who probably swerved to hit him intentionally. This was never alleged to be a hate crime, was never even - people would have been shocked if you had made those sort of allegations. And yet, it seems fairly obvious that there was something going on there. But coming to Austin now with my kids, I think again, the gay kids are the cool kids. They're the people that are much more self-aware. They're the people that are doing more interesting things. I don't know, I wouldn't say there's a social cachet to it necessarily, but there's certainly not any stigma. Again, they're doing the interesting things, and listen to the interesting music, and I don't know, into the interesting animes or television shows or movies or whatever. So I don't know. Does that sort of answer it?

S

Sopphey Vance 15:10

That answers your perspective. I have a further question. In terms of relationship between you and your children and Austin, what does a supportive environment look for you? You as Kevin, not just you as husband, student, seminarian, father. But for you.

K

Kevin Ireland 15:43

You mean supportive as far as open and affirming toward LGBTQI? Okay.

S

Sopphey Vance 15:52

And for you as a person who is caught in this intersectionality of you're the father in a very progressive city at a liberal seminary.

K

Kevin Ireland 16:09

I might push back a little bit. I wouldn't want to say I'm feeling caught in any sort of intersectionality. I would say I'm feeling very embraced. I would say I'm feeling very affirmed. I'm very grateful that in the public school system in Austin, that there are policies in place that affirm LGBTQI people from the get-go. And this is not to say that people still don't face a lot of struggles, in their families, in their churches. I mean, I heard a story the other day, this woman is in her thirties and finally came out to her parents who are longtime members of the church, and they're shocked and trying to figure out what how to deal with this. I'm like, "How could you have a daughter thirty years old and not know that? And how could you have a problem with it?" But I mean, there you are. But I don't see that in the schools, and I certainly don't see it in the seminary community, and I don't see it among any of my friends in Austin or elsewhere. I didn't see it in any of my friends in Kansas. Not to say it's not there, but that's a blessing certainly.

K

Kevin Ireland 17:51

As I'm thinking about this, I think the intersectionality of it really is more on how we're called to embrace it and learn from it more than some sort of - even with all this stuff going on in the Texas Legislature that's so hateful. When you see the people that are down there, and they're testifying, and lobbying for these laws that are just ridiculous. Even with that, I think that it brings out all these people that see these kids who are spending a lot of their time, but more importantly, a lot of their psychic and emotional energy constantly getting beat down by these people, but going out day after day after day. That's inspiring. That's the kind of stuff that you can learn from. I would say, I don't experience that type of intersectionality, but I see those kids that do, and I guess to that extent, I find it just incredibly inspiring. I can't imagine what it must take. I had so much pride as a father when my kid's up there testifying. That's amazing. I know you're not supposed to feel pride, but [laughs] damn you, Calvin.



Sopphey Vance 19:35

There's so much - we could talk about that at another time, Calvin. I want to throw one theological question.



Kevin Ireland 19:44

I kid Calvin. I like Calvin. Sure he was a nice guy.



Sopphey Vance 19:48

On the record, Kevin has said he likes Calvin. So one more, just kind of a theological question. The life that you're living, your lived experience, what does that say about God?



Kevin Ireland 20:12

Well, I think what I have experienced is that in my life, I would say about every ten to fifteen years, my life has dramatically changed in ways that I never would have predicted at the beginning of that ten or fifteen years. I think that what that has shown me is that your life is really a series of transformations from one thing to the other. We always have these ideas at any given time of who we are, what our vocation is, what our calling is, even what we believe. But I think that if you're honest with yourself, you will find that that changes pretty dramatically. It may not change on my schedule, but if you walk the earth long enough, you will see that you are a fundamentally different person than you were twenty years or so before. That's the kind of transformation I think that a lot of theologians talk about when they talk about a Christ experience. I think that's the kind of transformation that you see talked about in a lot of the stories and the sermons, and even the poetry of scripture.



Kevin Ireland 21:35

So much of it is talking about coming from one place and being transformed and moved into another. I think, what better demonstration of that than the lives of some of these people who literally are transforming in their gender? But I mean, it's indicative of the transformations that everybody's making, it's just maybe they're more astute about it because of this intersectionality, because they get some push back, because it's not always easy, and people aren't always understanding. But at the same time, it's a model that I think is just borne out again, and again, and again. I mean, all of life is just processes of transformation, so that's where I would bring about theology. I think even when you talk about the traditions of the Reformed faith and the Presbyterian tradition, what is that motto? Reformed and always reforming. That the Spirit always leads us into new

understandings of what our relationship should be with each other and with our God, and that we are okay with that. We don't see it as something that challenges our tradition, we see it's something that's fundamental and upholding about our tradition.

K

Kevin Ireland 23:02

So in that sense, I think the reformed tradition is very much like something that affirms and uplifts a lot of issues that we see raised in the LGBTQI community. I wish there were more pastors, and certainly once I get my stripes, I'll be out there forcefully. But I wish there were more people that would make the case from that faith tradition, from that foundation, that I think that we probably share across the divide of that issue. But somehow, there aren't enough of us that are speaking that language to uplift and affirm. We need to do more of it.

S

Sopphey Vance 24:00

Thank you for answering. Do you have anything else you want to talk about that embodies who you are and how you're living? Maybe not so much in the intersection, but this life that you're living?

K

Kevin Ireland 24:19

Well, I'll say it's much weirder being a fifty year old dad in seminary living with two teenage kids in very close proximity than any sort of LGBTQI issues. Adolescence is way weirder than being queer. I'll just state that for the record. If you're gonna rank things, that's not nearly as high as some of the other weird things going on [laughs].

S

Sopphey Vance 24:49

Sounds like there has to be a part two five years later once they're exited.

K

Kevin Ireland 24:55

Are you familiar with that documentary series, I think it's called Seven Up, it started back in the late sixties, early seventies. They followed these British kids, I think through every seven years. It's like that.

S

Sopphey Vance 25:46

That sounds awesome. I'm going to stop the recording now.