Interview keywords/topics: Ireland and Appalachia, Community, 2024 Election, Hurricane Helene

Interviewer: DB

Interviewee: KM

1. What year are you, what is your major, and where are you from?
    a. I am a sophomore. My major is English: Literary Studies and I have two minors: 'Womens, Gender, and Sexuality studies' and 'American Sign Language'. I'm from Pelion, SC. I also consider myself from Houston, TX because I lived there part time from when I was 14 years old until I started college.

2. How would you describe your identity/identities? (race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, etc.)
    a. I am a disabled straight white woman. I consider myself lower-middle middle class, spiritual, and a leftist. I am privileged in many ways such as my race and sexuality. But in other ways I am not. I had to learn how to navigate society disabled, I grew up low-income, and I learned at a young age that being a woman was not easy. This nuanced view allowed me to develop an open minded mindset. Many aspects of my identity I cannot change but how the world reacts to that is changing. I notice that many movements that began way before my time have grown in size and visibility. Feminism, queer liberation, disability advocacy, and anti-racism movements have dominated current cultural topics and I believe we have the internet to thank for that. I think that in the future words and categories we use to define ourselves will change and evolve. I can only hope it's for the better.

3. What political/social values do you hold? How do these values shape your engagement with the current socio political climate?
    a. Just to name a few: I believe in abortion rights, racial equality, children's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental protections and I support combating climate change. I am anti-war, anti-capitalist, anti-death penalty, and I believe the police and the military industrial complex should be defunded significantly. I believe housing and healthcare is a human right and that our country needs significant

prison reform. As far as values, my values align with these stances. They are entwined and connected to my actions as an American voter. I am now a leftist but my views have changed a lot throughout my life. Growing up I was taught core values most children are taught: treat people with kindness, treat everyone equally, and be as selfless as you can. I was also raised in a conservative nazarene church that my stepfathers family was a part of. As I became a teenager, I began to question and doubt what I had been taught, even if it scared me. And the more I learned and questioned and angrier I got. I would debate for hours with my stepfather. For years these debates grew from emotional and volatile to calm and civil. He never raised his voice or ended a conversation. Even though we were completely opposite in most beliefs, almost comically, I understood why he always welcomed a discussion. He taught me how to stand my ground and solidify my own beliefs. He taught me the art of debate and argument. I carry that with me now, even though he has passed away, and that's something I am extremely grateful for.

4. How has your hometown/family/childhood shaped your identity and your values?
    a. I come from a really big blended family. I am adopted as are a lot of my siblings, and growing up we struggled financially due to disability and uncontrollable factors. I think that shaped my outlook on my future and made me understand the value of education. My stepfather always emphasized education as a man with 2 degrees in STEM and my mother always made sure I knew to be self sufficient and to not rely on others, specifically men, for my own well being. I'm grateful for receiving that support to create my independence.

    I was raised in Pelion, SC. Pelion is an extremely small town in the middle of nowhere about 45 minutes from Lexington, SC. It’s a town of farmers and blue collar workers which I believe shaped my respect and appreciation for that aspect of America. The culture of a small town is one of selflessness and generosity and I saw that reflected through my mother. There would be many times where I'd see her sacrifice and offer up whatever she had for someone in a worse position and that impacted my worldview significantly. My mother was from Pelion and after

her divorce from my father, she moved back to her support system and her hometown became my hometown. I never felt really connected to that town despite loving the people and community. I always knew I wanted to leave even as a child, and I eventually did. When I was 14 I was diagnosed with cancer and so I moved to Houston part time for the doctors there. I think Pelion taught me how to build and contribute to a community but Houston showed me what else was out there. The culture shock from small town living to now living in a diverse and culturally rich city 1000 miles away from my family was immense. I met so many people from differing backgrounds. In Pelion everyone was pretty similar but in Houston, no two people were exactly the same whether it be education, religion, jobs, economic status, or race. I saw my mother thrive in that atmosphere despite what was happening with me, and I saw who she wanted to be. Seeing that made me confront the sacrifices she made and that I had a choice on whether or not to take advantage of that.

5. What is your personal experience/connection to Western North Carolina/Southern Appalachia?
    a. Like many out-of-state students here at App State, I've visited Western North Carolina numerous times in my life. It's a beautiful and culturally rich region. My father got his masters at App and I lived here with my parents and two older brothers when I was around 2 years old. I have family friends here in Boone and almost every year we would visit to see the changing leaves and sometimes the snow (A rare sight back home). Every time I visited I felt more at peace and relaxed. The views never ceased to take my breath away. App state was always one of my top choices for college and I knew that even when I was in middle school. Now that I live here, I feel more connected. I've now learned more about the culture and history and I don't think there is a better place to live.

6. How would you describe your community at App State?
    a. Diverse and open minded. I think that this campus really encourages individuality. Like, even seeing people dress in the craziest outfits makes me feel happy and

gives me a sense of safety? If that makes sense. I love seeing how different everyone is and how nobody cares. That's not something that was embraced back home much. Seeing the different people, interests, clubs, subcultures, and crowds just thrive so effortlessly is like a breath of fresh air. I also like being around people who share my views and being able to talk to people about issues I care about and having those conversations taken seriously. As far as my immediate community, I truly feel so lucky to have met my friends and to have their support. If my time at App State was worth anything it's at least worth getting to meet them.

7. What does it mean to be a part of Watauga Residential College?
    a. Community is the first thing I think of. Coming to college was extremely stressful for me specifically. My stepfather had just died 6 weeks earlier and I had been homeschooled most of my highschool career. But Watauga made the transition so much easier. Everyone was open and kind and embraced each other. We were all in the same boat. When I think deeper, I think about their approach to learning styles. Everyone learns differently and I've learned the most in my life through open discussion, observation, and debate. My first year here at app and in watauga residential college, the seminar classes i took were one of my favorite classes. There was this understanding that your ideas would be respected and discussed seriously. If I had to do it again I wouldn't think twice.

8. What has been the most challenging aspect of your time at App State?
    a. Learning to be self sufficient, managing my time, cultivating my individuality, and finding my place. The amount of times I called or texted my mom to ask the stupidest questions or ask for advice about simple things was record breaking. Learning how to do things myself and feeling a sense of empowerment was an amazing feeling. My confidence grew and I was less self conscious about simply existing. But it wasn't easy and forcing myself out of my comfort zone was terrifying. Also, figuring out how to complete assignments in a timely manner, and learning how to prioritize my workload to make things feel less daunting was

a tough lesson but I think I figured it out. Seeing others embrace themselves unapologetically made me feel like I could too and I ultimately did.

9. How would you describe the current social/political climate on campus?
    a. Anxious. These interviews are being done in the middle of one of the most important elections in our lifetime and after one of the worst recorded floods Western North Carolina has ever experienced. Climate change, women's rights, and numerous other issues are on everyone's minds. The general political atmosphere is pretty left leaning aside from a few groups. It's super common for casual conversation to include heavy topics but there's a general collective understanding that we all want things to go back to normal or at least a sense of safety about our futures. There's also a lot of nihilism regarding our futures and I want for one day to have a little optimism or hope instead.

10. How do you think Generation Z will be remembered? How would you like us to be remembered/perceived?
    a. I hope people remember my generation as one that is tenacious, trailblazing, and accepting. Our generation is already the most diverse, open-minded, and educated yet and I see that reflected through my peers. I don't agree with older generations' perception of us. Thinking of us as lazy, entitled, and immature. There is so much we have to deal with. Climate change, social issues, and many of us not knowing if we will ever be able to even own a home. It’s a lot to grapple with and as ‘digital natives’ we are more aware of world issues than previous generations and that gives us a sense of dread and anxiety but also the feeling of wanting to change the world. I hope we do and I feel like we can set a progressive standard for future generations.

EDIT: This interview was written before the 2024 presidential election. It has not been modified since to preserve the optimism and previous perspectives, outlooks, and opinions.