

Interviewee: Michael Sinclair (A married man who took his wife's name for feminist reasons)

Interviewer: Hershall Cook

[Introduction and Consent] I was wondering what exactly was your 'last name story.' I know you took your wife's last name, but I was hoping you could elaborate. I married my wife in 2005, and after three years of marriage, on our anniversary, I went to Brookland Civil Court and legally, you know, I waited around for eight hours in civil court--which was a wild experience--and waited for a judge to basically check that I had no criminal record and to stamp my papers and whatnot. But I had to do all kinds of other stuff. Yeah, I would say reasons were we were both schoolteachers at independent schools and we watched a lot--

--so many families where the parents had different last names. And it just didn't sit right with us. I consider myself a feminist and was excited about flipping the norm...it was a move of solidarity with the feminist cause, it was a desire to have the same last name as my wife for practical reasons (hospitals) and we knew we were going to have kids. I wanted the same last name as my kids and my wife. So you didn't feel any pressure in keeping your name, from say, maybe your father or any more traditional people? Not at the time. Although I certainly had to think about that before I did it, I decided that all the reasons I mentioned were more important than those other issues. Then, of course, once it was official and I actually did it, people's responses were very interesting--and I hope you'll ask about that. But to get to the story in this, both my parents ultimately expressed surprise and disapproval in different ways. But you still went through with it, even though it took eight hours waiting in a court, which I think is very impressive. Have there been unforeseen consequences of having your name as your wife's? The one surprising thing...I figured that living in a place like Berkeley, and you know, it's liberal New York City. You would assume that it would be very accepted. Yeah, exactly! But I got responses basically like "You're on a short leash." The vibe I got from the people around me was just disdain versus like [garbled] Yeah. For whatever reason, you know. You could read into that any way you want. But I was surprised that my friends, my male friends who I was politically and philosophically aligned with, I was surprised how few of them were correct. Or, you know, expressed approval.

Understandable. But I assume if you had to go through this whole process again, you'd still make the same choice. It's not like their views influenced you. No, no, I definitely would. I'm all in, and I'd recommend it to other people too. I think that even in a place like Berkeley patriarchy is more intact than anyone wants to believe. And it [changing his name] was a way of putting my money where my mouth is on gender equality, as I myself do support gender equality and it was my big feminist move.

Do you think your choice of doing this really helped in intervening in the whole concept of women being erased by marriage? Do you think that if more men were to take their wife's names that this would lessen or decrease? Hm. Well, that's a question I have to process for a second. I think that in the world that I'm most engaged with, which is privileged liberal people, their tendency is more to keep their names. Both of the people keep their original name and nobody changes their last name or they hyphenate. Something about that is forecasting divorce or something. I agree. It's less unitative, maybe. Like it's less of a uniting focus. Exactly. And so, for me, it's like pretty old-fashioned at this point in this world for the woman to take the man's name. So, I guess this is the intermediate step that most these folks would take where neither person can change their name. But I think the big step is for the man to change his name to the woman's last name. And, after a while, yeah, I don't know. Right...men aren't going to start getting erased, that's for sure. This isn't a problem that men could legitimately argue, that "Oh, but then the men are going to start losing their identities." Bullshit, you know man? They'll still have so much power in our society in my mind.

So I know you're not a huge fan of the whole keeping the name, giving the kids the hyphenated name, but what do you think is going to happen when children with all these hyphenated names...what do you think is going to happen when they marry someone else with a hyphenated name? I don't know, but I think the sound of these hyphenated names is often pretty appalling and to triple hyphenate or whatever would be further repulsive to me. I'm not sure! It's a conundrum and I think it's also confusing when your parents have different last names. What does that mean for your identity? It [the name change] was as much about the fact that we were planning on

having kids in that next year as anything. I was like, "Yeah, I want my kids, we're the Sinclaire family." You know? Yeah. Is there anything you would like to add to either our personal conversation or the larger one? Hm-mm. That there are barriers put in place by society because it's so abnormal for a man to change his name. It's hard to do. Because basically the men that change their names are people that are trying to erase the past. Criminals especially. And so, for a woman to change her name is a much easier process than for a man. That could be state by state, I shouldn't speak so broadly, but...I had to do this old-fashioned thing and post it in the newspaper for two weeks, I had to deal with the social security office, had to do this with my passport, any number of things that were really inconvenient at the time. It's inconvenient, but hell, any gesture of, you know--Of going against the norm. Yeah, it tends to be inconvenient. Whatever, it was worthwhile. And I was psyched when I heard you were going to interview me.