

Kelsea Retherford Oral History

Date of Interview: August 19, 2015

Location: Toledo, OR

Length of Interview: 24:47

Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

SC: Today is August 19, 2014, 2015! I'm in Toledo, Oregon near Newport, Oregon with Kelsea Retherford and this is an interview for the Voices from the West Coast Project. Kelsea would you mind stating your name for the record?

KR: My name is Kelsea Retherford.

SC: Perfect, thank you. So I'd like to start and just hear a little bit about what it was like growing up in a fishing family.

KR: Well what it was like growing up in a fishing family. To me it's a little bit difficult to put into words because it's all that I ever knew. My dad was a fisherman. I'm the only girl out of 3 boys, okay, so once my older brothers became of age they began to fish. And then once my little brother became of age, he began to fish. Being the only girl was difficult because my whole family, they fish. Finding my role in my family has kind of been... what's the word? It's been a long process. But growing up in a fishing-related family is just my life, I don't know anything different. None of my brothers have done anything other than fish, my dad's never done anything other than fish. My mom runs our business and so that's our life.

SC: So what roles have you played?

KR: Well growing up with only boys, I wanted to fish. My dad, being his only girl, he didn't want me to. I grew up almost jealous or envious of my family that they did have that opportunity and there really wasn't anything for me. So my life actually... I went the other way and well how should I say this... I screwed off my life for a good while. I got out of high school and I went and partied a lot and got really messed up. A few years back, it's been 3 years ago, I finally came back to my family and chose to get my life right. Since then, I got a job at the fish plant where my family delivers to. So the processing plant that they deliver to, I ended up working there and I worked there for a good two years. That, one, helped me get my life straight because it was just day in, day out, it was a really good spot for me. But I also got to learn that side of the industry. Since I couldn't necessarily be on the boat, I was able to be a part, but on land. It was winter of 2013, I asked to be able to go crabbing and my dad said okay. So I was able to go and that was my first crab season that I've ever done. Since then I've done a lot. I've done bottom fish, I've done crab, recently I've started shrimping. I used to hake when I was a little kid I'd go out with my dad. Anyway, so I worked at the plant for a good two years and did some fill-in trips or just ride-alongs on both the Winona and the Excalibur. It was May of this year, I asked my dad, I was like, 'Dad, I want to fish. Can I have this opportunity?' And he was hesitant and wasn't too certain about it and then he was like, okay. I said, 'give me one year'. He said yea, so I quit my job and I've been fishing since. So I started off on survey as a night driver, which was super easy. And I get that family time. I'm working with my brothers. Since then I've been shrimping with my oldest brother, Mikey, on the Winona. Anyway, but over the duration of so many years... I've been clean for 2 and a half years so since then I've been getting boat time. In the off season when I wasn't working at the plant I was able to go on bottom fish trips or just go out with the boys. Last year was my second year of doing a crab season. I don't know, I'm working my way into the family business. It's neat for me, because like I said, I did get to... I feel like I'm kind of making a circle. I started here working on land and now I'm working on the boats and eventually I'd maybe even like to tap into the political side and see where that will take me.

SC: Do you have a favorite fishery so far?

KR: I love crab season; crab season is just awesome. Shrimping is great too, but crabbing is fun. It's dangerous and you're up for hours on end. You have to push yourself. That first season I've pushed myself harder than I've ever... I didn't even know I had that in me! And my brother, Kyle, he's my best

friend, he's two years younger than I am, he likes to say that I outworked two grown men. And that's a good feeling. Yeah, I'd say crab, Dungeness.

SC: So what is it like being a female on the boat, especially in crab season? I have to say, recently a gentleman said that crabbing is for men. That women can get involved in other fisheries, but crabbing is really for men.

KR: Being a woman fisherman, you have to, like I'm vertically challenged, I'm not very tall [laughs]. You're working with men who are tall and strong and you have to compensate for that. I wouldn't say that crabbing's not for women, but you have to work twice as hard to work as hard as the guys do. If that makes sense, but women can fish, you just have to work harder than you would do in anything else.

SC: So it sounds like you're enjoying it.

KR: I love it.

SC: So where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?

KR: 5-10 years? Well that's a very good question.

SC: I know it's not an easy one.

KR: Yeah. Right now I'm kind of just going with the motions. I'm seeing where fishing takes me. I don't want to be fishing full-time in 5 years just because it's physically exhausting and I would someday like to find a man and get married and have kids. But I do, I intend to be a part of the fishing industry in some way. I haven't yet dialed in on where that's going to be, but it will reveal itself, it will come with time.

SC: Yeah, that's awesome. So as a young adult currently involved in the fishing industry, however new it may be, can you share some of the perspective that attracts young people into the industry?

KR: Like Tia said, money. Money is one of the aspects that is attractive to the industry, but what I found is there are fishermen who fish for money and then there are fishermen who fish because they actually enjoy the physical labor. Fishing is not your average 9-5 job. I'm not able to just go home at the end of the day. You're out on the ocean for days at a time. Being out on the ocean is almost like a world of its own and often times you don't have cell phone service so you just, you're out there and you're working and you're making money, and then you're able to come home for however many days. But you're making a good amount of money. I think it's not the work that attracts you, it would definitely be the income.

SC: Are there obstacles for young people getting into the industry? Any barriers?

KR: Hmm. What I've noticed is I feel like the younger generations, they don't work the same as the older generations. They don't have the same work ethic. The older generations, from my observation, if something doesn't work, they fix it. In my generation, if something doesn't work, you go buy a new one. And there's just not the same value of things. So getting into the industry, I don't know what obstacle it would be, but I feel like you have to want to work. And finding and getting a job on a boat, a good boat. And then having to put up with people. It's not always happy time on the ocean, you have to find a good boat with a good captain or be able to work with other people. Where was I going with this? What was the question again?

SC: An obstacle or a barrier, was it challenging be able to find that?

KR: I guess just keeping up the endurance of fishing. You have to be able to push yourself and enjoy what you're doing. I've seen so many people [00:10:00] try to fish and either seasickness or the work is too hard or they can't stand being away for so long. It's a lifestyle that you have to become accustomed to. Does that make sense?

SC: Yeah. That kind of leads me to my next question, is do you think most young fishing family kids or just young people in the fishing industry in general are satisfied with their work in the commercial fishing industry?

KR: I don't know. I don't know how to answer that. Do I think that...

SC: Well it's hard to because your kind of thinking about other people. I guess if you think about you and your brothers and any other crew members that you work with, do you feel like everyone is satisfied with what they do?

KR: Oh completely. I would say that there is a satisfaction. There's actually a gratitude, not gratitude, but gratifying. It's gratifying being a fisherman and doing what you do and bringing in... you're supplying food for millions of people. And being able to withstand the weather. I think for me, being able to fish, I'm grateful for it. It's a gratifying feeling. Like Tia said, I'm proud to be doing what I'm doing. I think that, I would hope that other people in the industry would feel the same way.

SC: Yeah, sure. What are your key skills and abilities that allow you to fish and help you to be a good fisherman?

KR: I don't get seasick. Never have been seasick so that helps because I'm not having to battle that dynamic of being a fisherman. My particular skills; I've been told that I'm a moral officer. I smile constantly and I keep, how do I say this? I'm happy most of the time, even when the work is hard. I enjoy working hard. My family has taught me and my brothers how to work for what you have. My little brother pushes me harder than anybody. He told me once, we were crabbing, 'when you think you can't, dig a little deeper.' So holding onto those little things and having to compensate, like I said, for being a girl, that keeps me going. But I don't think I have any particular skills other than just being a light to the boat and a light to the industry I guess.

SC: Yeah, I think that's great. Do you think those skills or being that light is transferable to other industries?

KR: To other industries, what do you mean by that?

SC: Just if there were other work, it sounds like you want to stay in the fishing industry so you wouldn't need to transfer them, but if you had to do you think all those skills are transferable?

KR: Completely. Even when I worked at fish plant. Working at the fish plant was a very dark and ugly place at times. People are grumpy and they hate being there and it's just... the work done there is hard work. Plain and simple you're working long hours, 12-hour days, 7 days a week. That plant runs 24/7. But being that light, I felt like, and I've been told this, I actually lit up the Bay front because I'd be going from plant to plant you know just bringing my smile and my good vibes and my happiness, it lifts other people up.

SC: That's a good thing. Well I want to hear a little bit more about working at the plant because I know there can sometimes be contention between the processing and the fishermen, do you feel you have a view of both sides of the industry?

KR: I would say so yes. I haven't worked at any other plant, but I know how it works at our plant and the general manager, his way goes. Sometimes the explanation behind his reasoning or decisions, nobody really knows or understands. Can you elaborate on the question a little bit more?

SC: Just thinking about the two different sides, the fishing side, the extractive sector and the processing sector. And it's just interesting to have experience in both of those.

KR: I feel like I've actually been able to take a lot of what I've learned at the plant and apply it even on the boat. I worked quality assurance for a year at the plant and seeing how things are caught and seeing the

way that it's maintained on the boat and then knowing how it's processed has kind of changed my outlook on the product itself. So you get this product and people are like oh its bad product, or it's good product, yada yada. Like shrimp for instance, the workers will be like it's really fishy. But for me, this last trip, got to experience firsthand that fish swim with shrimp! Sometimes the bags we'd pull up had a lot of little smelt in it. If there's only two guys working the back deck, it's really difficult to get all that fish out and for it not to go down in the fish hold with the shrimp. It's neat for me to know both sides or even ice. We've been getting ice from a different plant and seeing how they actually ice the shrimp, I don't know, it's just cool.

SC: Yeah, that's neat. You get to see it from the ocean to the dinner plate essentially. I'm wondering if you could talk about if there certain kinds of places besides Toledo or Newport, but are there places that come to mind that you'd like to work and live?

KR: I don't know. I'd like to visit Alaska, I've never been. I would like to experience that, I even considered doing some tendering during the summer, I think that would be neat. But I wouldn't want to live anywhere else I don't think. I haven't traveled too much, but on survey we traveled down the coast of California and we stopped in the different ports and stuff and home is where the heart is. I want to stay here in Newport because this is where my family is and I don't want to get away from that.

SC: Sounds like you have a really tight-knit family.

KR: Yeah. It's pretty neat actually. We live in this little town of Toledo and a mile to the right is one brother, and I actually live with my parents in this house, but my oldest brother is moving into this house, but anyway a mile to the left is Mikey and Tia, a mile to the right is Chris and Angie, and a mile inward is my little brother and his fiancé. So we're just a super tight family.

SC: That's awesome. So when, this is again the theoretical question of what would it be like for your family if your family fishing business was sold?

KR: I don't ever see them selling the business. It just isn't ever going to happen. But if the industry crashed or anything like that, it would be devastating. I hope and pray that that never happens. That fishing would continue to be a sustainable resource and that the industry just never falls. But if it does, who knows what would happen. They could probably get into construction or build something, or whatever, but that's... fishing is what my family knows. They know how to plenty of other things, but as far as a job, what would they do? I have no idea. What would I do? No idea.

SC: Sure. So you mentioned you might want to get more involved in the political side of fishing.

KR: Yeah.

SC: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

KR: I would like to. Being that I'm a girl and I don't want to fish for the rest of my life. I would like to see what I can do to continue to keep fishing open. Whatever I could do to protect my family and the fleet from areas getting shut down or whatever the restrictions they're trying to place on them. Basically just be a voice for the industry. I don't know a lot about it, but it's something I would like to learn more about.

SC: Are you involved with any other networks in the fishing community?

KR: Not right now, not really, no. Working at the plant kind of consumed my life for those two years [00:20:00] so I haven't really been able to branch out. And I've been on the ocean all summer so I haven't really. But I do plan on branching out and maybe getting into... There's this lady, she's a lobbyist for the industry and I would like to learn more what she does and start attending meetings and stuff like that. Once I have more time on my plate and am a little more stable, that's what I plan on doing.

SC: You have some goals.

KR: Yeah.

SC: So I'm curious if in your time being in fishing, maybe you haven't always been out on the ocean, but have you seen changes in the ocean or in fishing over time?

KR: Yeah, actually I feel like the industry is, like crab for instance, I feel like there is a cycle going on. Hake right now is down, the fish are super far away or instead of making day trips, they're having to make two-day trips. Crab, this last winter, we were out for a week and we dumped our pots and stacked our pots within a week and that's not normal. There just wasn't many crab. My brother Chris, said his first year of crabbing it was the same way, but the next year was booming, like the biggest crab season they ever had. I just think that this earth goes through cycles.

SC: You kind of touched on this a little bit, but more directly, what brings you the most joy in the industry?

KR: Being with my family. Just being a part of what my family does is what brings me joy. And being able to be a part of it. I love being out on the ocean. I absolutely love everything about it. I love the sea life. We watched a pod of orcas off the bow of the boat for like an hour and a half on survey. Right below our feet! There was like 12 of them! It was so beautiful! Getting to watch the sun rise over the mountains and it set on the horizon, it's just... I love everything about it. But most of all, I love being with my family and being a part of what my family does.

SC: So what are your greatest hopes for fishing?

KR: That it will not ever... that it will continue to be sustainable and that the industry will never crash. I hope that, not just for the industry, but I hope that for my family, it will continue to get passed down from generation to generation to generation. My dad's an incredible fisherman and so are my brothers. I hope that my nephews or even someday my kids, they will carry that on. As for the industry, I hope that it just keeps on trucking along.

SC: So I have one more question for you, but I wanted to see if there was anything else you wanted to talk about before we finish up?

KR: I don't think so.

SC: Okay. So if you had one word that you could associate with fishing, what would it be?

KR: I was thinking about this one when you asked Tia. I honestly don't know. One word that I could associate with fishing... for me it would be 'life' just because fishing is what my family and my life has revolved around.

SC: I like it.

KR: Something that Tia, to touch on what Tia was saying about being proud. We are an incredibly proud family for what we do, but what I cherish most about us being proud is that we may be proud yet we're humble. Nobody's arrogant, they're not puffed up like I'm better than you. Everybody is incredibly just humble. They love what they do and they fish because they love it and it provides for their family, but there's no competition. They don't put themselves above anybody and I love that about my family. Incredibly humble.

SC: Great, well thank you Kelsea.

KR: Yeah, thanks.

[End of Interview 00:24:47]