

## **Jennifer Shock-Stevenson Oral History**

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Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

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SC: Today is September 2, 2015. I'm with Jennifer Stevenson in Newport, OR and this is an oral history for the Voices from the West Coast Project. Jennifer, would you state your name for the record please?

JS: It's Jennifer Shock-Stevenson.

SC: Wonderful, thank you. So I was hoping we could just kind of go back to the beginning here and hear about how you got started in the fishing business, or became a fishing family.

JS: I grew up in a fishing family. My parents started fishing... well my dad started fishing in California and that's where they were married. Eventually [they] migrated up in the 80's, actually late 70's up to Newport. My dad ran several fishing boats and then became very political in midwater trawlers and Otter Trawl Commission. He kind of really took on the political aspects of fishing and his background where he had worked as a communications major, he had worked with researchers in Antarctica before so he just had a really good background and just kind of dove headfirst before anyone really realized the value of it. My parents bought their first boat in, I think 84', and then a second one a couple years later and just did trawl and midwater fishing. I grew up in that environment from the beginning. Actually I was born a few hours after the fishermen's wives ball. My mom kind of danced herself into labor so I guess I was a fisherman's wife in utero [laughs]. As I grew up, during the trawl crisis, my dad had passed away at that time and my mom just found managing the business very difficult as a woman. She ended up selling the boats so we were done in fishing and I was married to John in 2003 and lived in Portland, OR for 10 years. My husband was just really kind of burnt out with his aviation job and my stepdad who works as a diesel mechanic and owns his own business, just kept telling him, 'you should do fishing! You'd be great at it! As long as you don't get seasick.' So he started on a couple trips and then we had a third child and the next day he started a new job in Newport and we sold our house, packed our stuff, and moved to Newport, OR and here I am back in fishing. [Laughs].

SC: So John has been fishing ever since?

JS: Yeah, yeah. So I thought I was done with it and it sucked me back in.

SC: How does that feel? How do you feel about being back in after being separated from it for that long?

JS: I really... I love it. I was really close to my dad because unlike my brother and sister who are quite a bit older than me, they experienced my dad gone a lot for fishing where I had more of the luxury of seeing him a lot even though he was at a lot of meetings and what not. For me, I feel like I'm making him proud by contributing and so I try to look for every opportunity that I can to try and kind of carry the torch of how I think his mantra was about fishermen and fishermen's families and the industry. It's just something I'm really interested in. I don't think I've fully found my role, because I think it's... the industry isn't set up for women's roles as much. I mean certainly there's more opportunities now, but it's not something easy to... unless you have power or money, it's not something that's easily... I don't know, I just try to make a difference where I can.

SC: Can you talk a little bit about that? Kind of what roles you have developed over time?

JS: Sure! The first thing I did was join Fishermen's Wives (Association) when we moved back just as a member and then I was vice president and then president for 2 and half years now. The helicopter is kind of an interesting thing. So I was really good friends with the Lasaines. Cindy Lasaine was definitely a very instrumental person in the first helo cause to get it stationed here so it's just kind of surreal. I remember my mom as the secretary being instrumental in Fishermen's Wives and getting the helicopter here and how important it was, especially after the different tragedies that occurred. It just seemed like the stars

were aligned. I feel like I have the background to kind of take on that challenge. Certainly I had huge support from Ginny and Michele, and Taunette and the group. It was interesting to have experienced the first campaign and then to be involved in the second campaign to keep it here is just... it just seemed like I was put there for a reason. I'm really proud of that contribution to our community and our fishing communities. Yeah, I think that's good and I've tried to platform other interests or causes that we can help out in. Just kind of trying to kind of expand it where Fishermen's Wives as a group can assist in our mission.

SC: Politically?

JS: Well not even politically, but even just education. I still feel like there's a lot of misunderstanding of fishermen, the stigma, you know what is a fishermen's family. And then just seafood in general is still kind of a culinary mystery to a lot of people. They like to order it at restaurants, but still it hasn't gained... there are a lot of species that haven't gained popularity just in the home. If we can contribute that way of just educating and then safety of course, because certainly we all have vested interests in fishermen safety, that's our family and friends out there. Yeah, just kind of keep plunking along at where I can find little projects to do.

SC: Do you have any involvements with the schools like k-12 education?

JS: We don't. I know that Fishermen's Wives had their 'Fish is Delish' program back in the 80's and we haven't really gotten into it. I feel like we're really... now that the helo, not that it's done, but now that it's not the main focus, I feel like this is where we're starting to look at other projects. We're currently meeting with Kaety Jacobson about some different ideas to try and have a display or information we can have to educate. Certainly I just feel like going forward, now that we've gained some attention and a little more respect, not that it wasn't there before, but just more like, 'oh yeah! This is what they do.' Now we have a little more traction to do now what we want to do.

SC: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm interested too in some of your roles in the home or in terms of the fishing business as well with your husband. Do you own a vessel?

JS: We don't own a boat. My husband works as a deckhand, but I'm certainly in charge of all the finances that goes along with it, just maintaining our personal finances. I keep in contact with the Retherfords, which is who he works for and gather receipts that he brings home because he has, you know a business card that's attached to the boat, and just try and help them out because I know what that's like growing up in a fishing family with my mom doing bookwork and its pretty time consuming. Or if the boys call, I'll run errands and pick up equipment with the kids in tow usually, or I've driven to Coos Bay, Astoria. If they need me, I'm kind of on standby, but not so much running a business per se, but certainly all the other aspects of receipts and taxes and fun stuff. The other things.

SC: All the bits and pieces that make it all run.

JS: Yeah! Make sure he's up to date on everything.

SC: I'm curious, since you're in Fishermen's Wives and different involvements in the industry, and you said your father was politically involved as well beyond just fishing. Do you have any interest with regulations or meetings or anything like that?

JS: [0:10:00] Yeah I do. My mom often thinks, why would you torture yourself in going to those boring things, but yeah I do find interest. I try and keep up to date with any literature that is shared with me on the quota system or other regulations. My husband participates in the NOAA survey, the West Coast Trawl, so it's nice to meet with the scientists and hear what their perspective is. I think it has to be a collaborative effort in any fishery because you can't just bury your head in the sand and think that it will go away. I think it has to be a partnership between the scientists and the fishermen, but that's just my opinion on it. Yeah, I would like to... but also as a fisherman's wife I have family duties and so time! And

can only do what you can do. But I try to stay up on it as best I can because it could affect us even at a deckhand level so I think it's important.

SC: So then talking about your kids, they are young, but I am interested if they have role currently in fishing and if not do you think they will soon or in the future?

JS: Mostly just grocery shopping on the occasion and we'll visit, but not so much. Larry has run crab line for the boys, but I don't know. I don't have that expectation of them so even my brother never, my parents never had that expectation of him having to go into the family business or anything like that. So to me, I think kids are individuals and what their interests are or what their goals are is more important than something that you just grow up into. I think though fishing families tend to produce natural interest in their business because it is such a huge part of your life. Like yesterday we saw daddy coming in through the jetty, we go up to the Bay State Park and look for him. It's such a focus from the family, I think that's why you tend to see a lot of multigenerational families because it is a really nice way to support yourself. I know some women are like, 'how can you stand your husband being gone?' and this and that. I grew up in it so to me it's not abnormal, when he has time off, he has time off. It has a rhythm to it and you get used to it. That's just your life, you just kind of plunk along with it.

SC: So you sort of answered this, but do you think you would find yourself encouraging or discouraging your kids as they grow?

JS: I'd encourage them if that's what they wanted to do. I just think that they're their own little people and they have their own little interests. I wouldn't say, oh if you don't grow up and become a fisherman than what are we to do! I don't have that worry.

SC: Okay. So I want to explore the intergenerational piece or the multigenerational fishing piece and I'm curious about, if you're thinking about young adults in general, what attracts them to the fishery? So what attracted your husband to moving from Portland?

JS: Money. If they didn't get paid well then nobody would do it. That's basically the main motivator. My husband though, he's worked for a pharmaceutical company as a rep and he hated it because he was inside all the time. You have to have the personality; he loves being outdoors. He'd rather be outside getting rained on than being stuck indoors looking outside. That's the aspect that I guess attracted him, being outside and the money. To be able to support your family as a middle class family. I'm a nurse, but being able to stay home and raise my kids is a value that my husband and I value. That's important to us, so it's all the other sacrifices, or people could say sacrifices, of not having him home every night, to us that's okay because he's outside, he's in an environment that he likes to work in and he likes the challenges of it. He likes the engineering aspect of, I mean most things aren't made for fishing boats, just the challenges that come along with building something and troubleshooting stuff. But certainly the paychecks that are coming in are exciting too. Because you put all that hard effort and you know that... it allows flexibility of what you want to do with it.

SC: Are there obstacles or barriers to young people entering the fishery?

JS: [Pause]

SC: Or the industry.

JS: I would just say it seems like a lot of young people don't realize the work that goes into it. I guess they just tend to not have the work ethic. I would say certainly that most the time when they see young guys or gals that come into the industry, I think that those captains or owners are a little hesitant because it just seems like that's become the new trend. But I don't think that there's any challenges per se no.

SC: So there is some data that shows the average age of commercial fishermen is now in the 50's and I'm wondering if in your opinion this has always been the case or if the fleet is actually graying?

JS: I would say it's graying. I think because it is hard work and it doesn't attract as many people, younger generations. And also, I think it's very discouraging with how the current system is set-up. It doesn't allow... for example my parents were able to buy their first boat, certainly they had to give reports to the bank of income and whatnot and it just doesn't seem like there's the small business loans and even if you could get a loan, it's so expensive to enter into it because of the quota system, at least with drag that I'm speaking mostly of or midwater, or even crab for that matter. It's too expensive. I don't know if we'll ever be able to buy a vessel because of the startup costs. There's just not the opportunities and I think that a lot of the older generation that's looking at retiring, I don't think that they... I shouldn't say I don't think, I don't know. I just think that there's not the collaboration with the younger guys to try and bring them up to give them the opportunity to do maybe sweat equity or blood equity as they call it, into buying a vessel to buy out an owner. So a lot of these boat owners are looking at just cashing out really quick. It's kind of given processors and other companies' opportunities to not only process the fish, but own the quota and own the boats and so pretty soon instead of being fishermen owned small businesses that are owned by families it will just become corporate owned boats and quota and processors will just be company owned fishing.

SC: Currently in Newport, what is the balance like for fishing family businesses versus corporate owned vessels? Do you know?

JS: I don't know. I can think of like 2 big boats that fish Alaska, well there's probably more than that. It kind of depends because every fishery some of them deliver in Newport, some deliver in Astoria. It's not a huge number, but I guess I get worried of what... because some of these bigger boats have just you know, well we're just going to cash out and be done with it [0:20:00]. What the smaller guys are going to end up doing, especially when you can have multiple permits on a single vessel. There's no, with the quota system, the way that I understand it, there's no incentive for permit owners, quota owners to operate and run a vessel. So if they can stay home and lease their fish to someone else, they get their paycheck in the mail. They don't have to deal with crew, they don't have to deal with boats, the maintenance, insurance, they don't have any overhead. They just lease their fish, they get their paycheck. And so that's real enticing and unfortunately it hurts the industry as a whole because if you aren't fishing your fish then you're not providing jobs. You're not providing shoreside services with your business. It's just a trickledown effect. My personal feeling is while I understand the quota system and the need for regulation and to keep bycatch as low as possible I also feel that it needs to encourage people to fish their own fish. Not just allow multiple permits on one boat. Eventually you'll start, Alaska I guess has already started seeing it, but you'll start seeing fishing communities where there's less family paying jobs just dry up. I'd like to see it continue where you still have family owned businesses, but there's nothing currently set up that is enticing to young people if you can't buy into it, if you can't even work into it because would much rather cash out, make their millions, and move to Palm Springs, then I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. I wish they would look at the long term aspect of what the costs will be and how can you keep people in this industry just like anything else.

SC: Do you think that the young adults that do have the opportunity to come in or are currently fishing, do you think they're satisfied?

JS: [*Talking to her kids*] Sorry what was the question?

SC: I was wondering if the young fishermen that are making their way in, are they satisfied with their work? Or are they satisfied do you think for the most part?

JS: For the most part, I think there's at least two big classes of fishermen that are content just being deck hands and they just, that's their career path and then you have the other group that want more. They want to make it into the wheel house and they're looking for those opportunities, but as there are fewer and fewer boats then there's less and less opportunities for that. I think they're satisfied, but I also see, and this has always happened, where a lot of fishermen will fish for a while and then they'll buy into other shoreside businesses or something where they are allowed to stay home more. Yeah I think their satisfied, I just think that people are more worried because as fishing has more and more regulations on it, it affects the profit margins. So it feels, not that it wasn't risky before, but it feels more of an uphill climb,

even if you do own a boat. Your kind of holding your breath and waiting for the next big change and if you'll be able to weather it, if that makes sense. Yeah I think people are satisfied, but I think there are the people that are fine where they're at and the people that want more. And the people that want more don't know if it will ever happen.

SC: So if graying is happening, what is, or might be the impact of this in Newport?

JS: I think, like I said previously, the community as a whole will suffer. Because so much money is brought in with fishing and so many jobs are supported by fishing that as the fleet becomes smaller or becomes more company driven that you'll have fewer and fewer jobs. So families are going to find something else to support themselves and so they won't be spending money in Newport so I think that's the concern.

SC: What do you think would happen to Newport if all the fishing family businesses were sold? I know this is sort of a theoretical question, but what would be the impact?

JS: So if all the fishing boats just sold? Newport would be really hurting. I guess people would move. If you take out any major industry, you'd still have tourism, but part of the tourism is driven by the fishing industry so it would have a huge effect, it would probably be pretty tragic.

SC: So I know you mentioned you're not sure if your family will ever own a boat, but do you see yourself here in the next 5, 10 years into the future?

JS: Yeah, I do. Definitely, this is a long-term career choice so yeah I don't see any changes. Especially with my parents, they work in the industry in parts and sales and I think that was a major reason for us moving as well, is just being close to family and friends that we grew up with. As long as my husband is happy then I am happy. Yeah, I think this is where we'll be. I don't know exactly what it will look like, if it will be... maybe he won't be working a local boat here, maybe he'll be working in Alaska or maybe he'll be a skipper, I don't know. Just kind of roll with the punches and that's kind of what we do.

SC: So I've kind of finished up on the questions that I have for the multigenerational fishing stuff so going back to your oral history. You mentioned you have a couple siblings, are they involved in the fishing industry?

JS: Yup. I have a half-brother and half-sister and neither one is involved in fishing. My brother usually was forced to go fishing when he got in trouble at school so he did try for a little bit once he got out of the navy, but it just really wasn't a fit for him and now he's an engineer. No, they're not in fishing.

SC: But your parents, your mother and your stepdad are still involved. What are they doing?

JS: They sell Cummins Parts and my dad's a diesel mechanic so shoreside services I guess you'd say.

SC: And have you spent much time out on the water?

JS: No. My mom's very protective. [Laughs] My mom doesn't swim so I always wanted to go fishing with my dad, but was never allowed. And after he passed away just... no we mostly, my dad had a little pleasure boat that we would play around in the bay and sometimes go past out the jetty, but only on very quiet days so no, I haven't spent a lot of time out on the water. I enjoy it, there's just not the opportunities, sometimes it's best to keep your mom happy. I'm her only child so you just have to, yeah.

SC: Understandable. [Laughs] Sort of a broad question, but overall, what does fishing mean to you?

JS: It's something of pride. I'm proud to be from a fishing family. I think it's something of an interesting heritage that people find very interesting and are curious about it. I'm just proud of how my dad would go to DC and testify on fishery issues and just really work on trying to make the industry better. Any parent that's involved in a worthy cause or industry, their children would be proud of them. The other thing I

really like about fishing is the community that it comes with. I think that's really original in industry or a way to support yourself is the [0:30:00] friends and community that comes along with it. So it's really supportive and I think that's pretty amazing.

SC: So when talking about that community connection, do you think that it's strengthened by associations such as Newport Fishermen's Wives and do you think that connection exists without those types of associations?

JS: Yeah I think it definitely enhances it and it's a contributor because it's made, especially other women who stay at home or work, but just that there is a community. Because a lot of women come into it you know their first generation, maybe they married into fishing. And so it's a different lifestyle. Like I said, some people think, oh how could you stand your husband being gone all the time. Well it's nice to know, your neighbor, a couple blocks down is experiencing the same trials of raising a family and having their spouse absent for several days or longer in some cases. But I think there's always been that community. It's a small town, so small towns tend to have really nice communities. But I just think it's enhanced by fishermen's wives and I think people realize it's a tough industry and it's nice to know you're not alone. So while it's competitive, it's also supportive. It's a unique kind of twist. I think that's what's good about it, is as much as everyone wants to bring... especially during crab season, who's kind of the highliner, but everyone is supportive, because everyone knows that they have families at home that are worried and you're trying to raise and support. It's nice.

SC: So you may have already answered this, but what brings you the most joy in the industry, but also what brings you the most grief?

JS: Just being a part of it brings me joy, it makes me happy to just participate in it. Just being around the people I love and working together on something. So many of my classmates and people I grew up with are still in the industry so it's just been kind of a homecoming in a sense. It just feels right I guess, you grow up in something and you come back to it, it makes you appreciate it more. I think just my involvement, even trying to educate myself on something that interests me and feeling like maybe with what I do with Fishermen's Wives and keeping the helo here, we're keeping someone safe. Or educating the public on the importance of wild caught American seafood. I take pride in that so it makes me happy. Giving back to something. And then what was the other one? What makes me most worried?

SC: The most grief, yeah.

JS: Probably to see it just dissolve into nothing. To just go away. To not be a viable industry anymore, that's probably... regardless if my husband and I ever own a boat, but just the fact that maybe nobody, that no families will be able to own boats and be part of the collaboration or the community will be gone. That's what will make me most sad.

SC: So what are your greatest hopes for fishing?

JS: That fishermen will work together on all aspects of fishing. It's really hard because they're all independent businesses and it's a tough industry so you have to look out for yourself, but I think at some point if you can also look out for the community and fishing in general then, if you can balance that, then that would be the biggest contribution you can do. Working with each other instead of always competing, I guess for the greater good of fishing to work together. I think then it would resolve a lot of issues between scientists, between producers, market holders, or processors, and the graying of the fleet. If fishermen see that they can still retire, but they can also hand over the reins slowly, I think that would be great. I think that would allow fishing to continue on into the next generations. If they can work together with the younger guys that do have interest. I think there are great families who are just looking for opportunities to buy into it or help manage it. I think they're out there, I think that the older generation, if they can be open to it, and not be scared by it, I think that would be a blessing.

SC: So I'm toward the end of my questions, do you have anything you want to talk about that we haven't touched on yet?

JS: Not really, I feel like it's pretty well rounded. Unless there's something else you can think of?

SC: I think we've touched base on mostly everything. I do like to end with one question that's very short, but isn't always easy.

JS: Okay.

SC: If you had one word to associate with fishing what would it be?

JS: [Pause] Pride. It's probably a fairly used one, but I was going to say pride or community. But I would say pride more so because it's a family affair. That's what I would say.

SC: Thank you.

JS: Thank you.