

## **Michelle Cottrell Oral History**

Date of Interview: July 8, 2014

Location: Newport, OR

Length of Interview: 29:05

Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

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SC: Today is July 8, 2014. And this is an interview for the Voices from the Fisheries Project. I'm with Michelle Cottrell. Michelle, would you mind stating your name for the record?

MC: Michelle Cottrell.

SC: Great, thank you. Okay, so, I want to start from the very beginning and ask you how you first got involved in the fishing industry?

MC: Well, I met my husband, we've been together 11 years. And I was working on the bay front, helping to run a store and I met him down there. And I always swore I'd never date a fisherman, and my parents had actually tried to set me up on a date with a fisherman two months earlier, when I first moved home, and I had told them repeatedly, I don't date fishermen. And then I met this great guy on the bay front so we started talking and we became really good friends, then a few months later we started dating and I brought him home for Thanksgiving and it turns out he was that fisherman. So we've been together now 11 years and that's how I was involved in it.

SC: Okay, so now that you've, since you made that life-changing decision to date that fisherman, can you talk about what it's like being a fishing family?

MC: Yeah, you know it's really different from what I thought. I was always under the impression, well fisherman are gone all of the time so what's the chances that it would be a good relationship or a solid one. And it's completely different. It is the most solid relationship you'll ever have. And it's kind of nice, you get to miss them and then they come home again and you're happy and they're home, and then they go away. And you kind of have your own life, it's a very independent lifestyle, but you have to stay connected all the time. And communication's so important and it's really, it's a great way to raise your kids. I mean, my husband's from a fishing family and I hope our kid's fish, so.

SC: So I wonder if there are maybe some highs and lows of loving a fisherman, someone who's gone like that.

MC: Well the hardest time we ever had was my oldest, who's going to be 6 this month. Right after she was born my husband had to leave for two months. And that was really hard, she was about 2 months old and he had to go sword fishing and he used to be gone for 6 months at a time, but he hasn't been gone for more than two months at a time since she was born. He now fishes locally, sometimes it's hard, you know, he misses 4th of July almost every single year. And sometimes he misses holidays and he missed my daughter's graduation from kindergarten that was with a promise that he'd be there for high school graduation, which seems a little more important, so. I mean you make sacrifices, but there's definite highs, I mean, being in the blessing of the fleet. My husband's been the lead boat almost every year since he started running the boat out of Newport. And the community being there together, and the women are a great group of women. When our husbands are gone, if something happens, watching the women jump into action to be there for each other or... One day I was kind of frazzled and I was running late for dance class and one of my friends, who's husband is also a fisherman, literally swooped my kids up, took them for the entire day, no questions asked and then dropped them off at dance class later on. You know, it's a community. So there are highs and there's lows. Another hard part is of course, it's kind of feast or famine, so you have to learn how to save. It's something, it's a learned technique, and how to live on an income that it comes and goes.

SC: Okay, can you talk about what some of your roles are in the fishing business and then also outside of the fishing business. How do they overlap or don't they?

MC: So, my husband is captain. There's someone else that owns the boat, which is wonderful so we don't have to worry about boat repairs and things like that, but all of my husband's financials. I mean he doesn't know how to balance a checkbook. He never has, because he's not home often enough to send in a monthly payment to anything, so I have to handle all of our family financial stuff. He is his own business so we have to, you know pay taxes and do all of that. And so I don't know that our accountant even knows his phone number, so I keep track of everything, all of his expenses throughout the year. And then before we had kids, I used to go and help with gear work, I'd help paint buoys, but since we've had children I've had to step back from that a little more. Because the kids can't be around the paint, but we do go down there when he's offloading, we'll ride on the boat down to the dock and the kids get to see him offload and especially my oldest who's 6, spends a lot of time on the boat with her daddy; handing him tools and driving the boat, you know, kind of sort of, steering when it's not actually hooked up to the wheel [laughs] down the bay, even my little boy, who's 3, loves going down there. I think they've owned extra tuff boots and grundens since they were about 6 months old, so, it's very much a family business, even if we're not down they're making the money. He's down there 24/7, even when he's home, he's on the boat from sun up to sun down, and sometimes after.

SC: And so, I know your children are still young, but can you talk about maybe the fishing family from their perspective, or what kind of future do you see for them, in the fishing business?

MC: You know it's sometimes hard for them. They miss their dad when he's gone, you know that's been something; we've had to come up with ways to make it a little easier. Like we blow kisses to the moon every night and the moon is bouncy so they bounce to daddy and then we catch the ones that come back. Sometimes they have a hard time with it, but they also love the boat. Every time my daughter says I wish my daddy didn't fish, I'd say, well, would you be okay with never going down to the boat again. Well no, he'd still have to have the boat. And they love, they love being on the water, they love being on the boat. My daughter would go fishing now if I let her. I see them both fishing. My husband's goal is eventually to buy his own boat and be able to take the kids out in the summer time as his crew, and I'd love to go too, but it's a culture. His grandfather fished, his father fished. It's in his blood and it's in my kids' blood. And I love it. I can't imagine not being a part of a fishing family.

SC: And have you spent much time fishing yourself?

MC: You know, I haven't. I always said I was going to, and then we started a family. And I work, I've always worked. At least two to three jobs and so to take that time off to go fishing and not make money on my end, when he won't make anymore if I'm there, he'd probably make less... it has never been financially, you know haven't been able to. I have gone out on the ocean with him a few times, but never for a long trip or anything.

SC: Can you talk a little bit about your other jobs?

MC: Yeah, I'm a CNA; I work with an in-home care agency. I actually work in the office and then I also go out in the field and work with clients. I work with the elderly and disabled. I love it, I love working with people, and it's just very fulfilling. And then I'm also the children's director at our church, and so I run Sunday school, vacation bible school, and our family groups. And that job just started in December, but I've always had two jobs, I mean I can't imagine just having one so.

SC: Is it something you enjoy or is it something more out of necessity do you think?

MC: You know it's always been out of necessity before and then we decided, when I took the job at the in-home care agency, at first I was a caregiver and I had to go back to school, which was not easy with two kids and a husband that fished. So I got my CNA and was moved up a little bit, now it's really because I enjoy it. I love both my jobs so I kind of make it work. And the job as the children's director, I can bring my kids with me so it's around my schedule. My other job I'm on call every Tuesday and every third weekend so that can be kind of difficult, if Kinder's gone. A lot of times I'm talking to clients on the phone while my kids are in the background and I'm going, shh, [laughs]. But everybody knows my husband's a fisherman and it's just part of the way it works. I have a really amazing boss, on both jobs.

SC: Okay, that makes me think a little bit about the fishing community, and how it might be unique in that sense, having supportive employers, because maybe they're in a part of the fishing community as well. Can you describe the community here in Newport?

MC: Yeah, you know everybody... So there's the community of Newport, but then there is a separate fishing community. And it's interesting because we kind of work with in it and together with each other, but it's like any job. You know, if you're in the healthcare field or if you're in, you know there's certain people you might spend more time with because you know them from work. I actually got both of my jobs, or my leads on both of my current jobs through my church. My in-home care agency I work for is my pastor's wife and she offered me a job. I was in a completely different field and wanting to go back to school to be a nurse and I had done caregiving before, but it had been many years. And, you know they, the community that's not part of the fishing community really finds the fishing community interesting, I find. I get a lot of really random questions, sometimes like; Oh is it like on the deadliest catch? Which always makes me cringe, because it's really not. [Laughs] If anybody flew out on a rope off of the boat in a real fishing vessel that wasn't being taped, they'd be in a lot of trouble and probably fired. [0:10:00] But it's, it's kind of interesting, but you know Newport has a real love for the fishing community. Any job I've ever worked at, people have understood that my husband's a fisherman and it's just part of it. You know, if my kids get sick, my husband's not going to come home from 60 miles out at sea to come home and take care of them. It's me. So, it is, it makes kind of an interesting balance, but the community itself loves the fishing community it seems like. Maybe it's because we give them seafood. It does seem like the community of Newport's very supportive and especially when there's a tragedy. Everybody kind of pulls together and you really see the love for the fishermen.

SC: That brings me back, you mentioned the blessing of the fleet and I was curious if you could describe what that is?

MC: Yeah, so the third Saturday in March, every year, the Newport fishermen's wives puts on the blessing of the fleet. And it starts out with a service, which is beautiful, and it's in the fishermen's memorial and it's dedicated to all the men and women that we've lost. They go through the names of the people that we've lost in the last year, in the fishing community. Whether it be someone who's died at sea or someone who has just died, even of old age. If they were a fisherman at some point in their life or part of a fishing family then their name's usually mentioned. That's one area where I've helped out with the fishermen's wives and this was the first year in I think 4 that I wasn't able to because we were out of town. Even the year before when my brother got married on the day of the blessing of the fleet, I was there that morning doing the memorial because it's just a beautiful, beautiful service. You know it's very sad, but it's also, it makes you feel a little better, like you're still connected to those that you've lost. And then after that they have the survival suit races, which are a little more fun. Teams of 3 get in survival suits and jump into the freezing cold bay at 9am, I think it's 9, no it must be about 10, somewhere in there, jump in the bay and swim to a raft. And it is hilarious. Because you get the coast guard and the fishermen who all want to beat each other. And so everybody practices, and then you get the poor loyalty days' princesses who never win, but those girls are troopers because I would not jump into that bay no matter how thick that survival suit was. [Laughs] And my husband and I always get a good view because his boat is docked right where they have the raft so we go and we stand on the boat and we kind of watch them all swim in our nice warm boat. And then at noon, my favorite part, other than of course the memorial is the blessing of the fleet itself. And the boats, they start lining up about noon and they get into the bay and then I think it's at 1 o'clock we actually go out and you go out in groups. First you have, I think it's first the trollers, and the crabbers, the shrimpers, and they all go out in groups, and they also have the group of, just guys that go out fishing for fun. You know the pleasure craft as well is in it. And they all sign up ahead of time. You go out and you drive under the bay, and then you come back around and as you come back around and come through the bridge, on the coast guard boat there's usually three different pastors or ministers from three different congregations. And they bless the boat. And then the whole thing is broadcast over one of the local stations and this year, for instance, we were at Disneyland, so I wasn't really thinking when I planned that trip. So our boat was blessed in absentia, so that means even though we weren't there, they said our boat's name and it blesses the boat for the year to come for a safe year for the fishermen. And it just feels, it feels very good, and it's a very community, you know there's such a community feeling to it.

And there's ribbons, there's a trail of ribbons for all the fishermen that we've lost. And every year it grows. But it's really... you can walk from the memorial down to the bay front and you can see all the ribbons going all the way down, it's really a beautiful addition that they started doing about 8 years ago. But, yeah they've been doing the blessing for many, many years.

SC: That's really beautiful.

MC: Yeah, it's a great event.

SC: That sounds like something I might have to come down, I'd love to come down for and see.

MC: It is a lot of fun, we took my friend, Christina, who was a research student out one year on the boat, and she loved it. She does not eat seafood. But she loved it, she had a great time at the blessing and she kind of got to see the feeling, you know, all the friendships that are there. And you might not see people for 6 or 7 months, but at the blessing everybody takes pictures of each other's boats and that's one of the ways Facebook is kind of nice, you know you see your boat, because while you were out in the bay too, and everybody posts their pictures and it's just a very, very fishing community, but the whole community really enjoys it.

SC: Yeah, that sounds really great. So you mentioned the fishermen's wives association, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that and also maybe some of your involvements?

MC: So, when I met, or about a year after I met my husband, I was asked to go to a meeting to Newport Fishermen's Wives, and I want to say I was on the board for two years. I was the treasurer. And I've been involved with them since then. Unfortunately, life just got really busy and between church and my jobs and my kids, and occasionally you know my husband, I'm not able to be on the board anymore. But I'm still involved as much as I can be, and they know to call me when they need someone to serve, you know, hamburgers on fishermen appreciation day or to help out with the memorial if I'm not in Disneyland. You know, it's a really great organization; they have funds for if you lose a fisherman. And if a boat, a vessel goes down, not only do they have funds for if you lose a fisherman, but they have funds for the fishermen that survive and also for the families. You know if a family member, even years later is having issues with depression, especially children, you know we like to maybe send them to camp or help them get some professional help. And it keeps them connected. That was one of my favorite things about working with the group, was being there for the families who had lost people. Because it is such a hard time and you want to be there for people, and sometimes it means that when of the fishermen's wives, not necessarily from the organization, but just a fisherman's wife, is, you know, diagnosed with a cancer, but the fishermen's wife will get together and get her meals and get them to her, and you know it's just a great support group and it's a great place to meet people. It's actually, it started out as two different entities, one was to raise money and was a support group. And then they joined together and the fishermen's wives are a huge part of the community in Newport. They brought the helicopter here and the helipad, it was initially going to go to North Bend I think in the '70's. And the fishermen's wives really pushed to have it here and they're very active in the community. It's nice because you have fishermen from all different areas, you have trollers, you have, you know, line, you have crabbers, you have shrimpers, you have all these women who's husbands are in quote, "competing fisheries", and you can't get the husbands to sit down and agree on anything, but the wives have a meeting once a month and we all agree that we should work together to make sure fishing is known as sustainable and that fishing locally is so important. Not to import low-quality fish when you have high-quality fish here, and that it's so important to educated people on the quality of fish.

SC: So I wonder, since you brought up quality of fish and sustainability, if you can talk about if you've seen any changes in the actual fishery itself over time, and maybe what some of your hopes are for the fishery?

MC: You know, I have. It seems like there are a lot less trollers, but it also seems like there's a lot less fishing, I mean to be honest. It seems like there's less boats, there's less new people coming into it. You see a lot less young people coming into it. But at the same time, the people that do come into it are

dedicated. I mean, you see guys working for free for months to be able to get on a boat to go crab fishing and half those guys may not last a week because they realize they get seasick, but the other half are going to be lifers. And it's, you get some really intelligent, really stubborn people. I have a lot of faith in the fishing community and the fishing culture, I think it will continue. And I really do believe that fishermen don't want to overfish and, you know, ruin their populations of fish, and so that we have more money for the future. I believe that fishermen in general are wanting sustainability, but you know sometimes it's hard to be told what to do and a lot of times they want to do it themselves. Everything is cyclical, you know, it's something I've talked to a lot of the older fishermen, who said, you know 30 years ago we were having these same conversations and it's just a cycle. And it comes and it goes. It ebbs and flows and it's something that, you do see them come back. I mean the salmon are running right now like crazy and they said that they wouldn't come back, so. But, I do believe that it'll continue, we have too many stubborn fishermen for it to not. [Laughs]

SC: Do you know why there may be less young people coming into the fishery?

MC: You know, I think a lot of people come into the fishery thinking it's a lot of money. [0:20:00] Unfortunately as great as deadliest catch is for getting people interested in fishing, it really paints a very different picture from reality. You know, sure you make a lot of money, but you're a private business so you're going to get taxed as a private business, you're going to pay twice the amount of taxes that anyone else pays that works a 9-5 job because you're going to pay the employer tax as well. So it's, there's a lot to it. Also, when you're young and you get a huge lump of money, chances are pretty good you're not going to save that even though you're not going to be working for the next three months. And so, you know, those things. People are going to have to go out and get another job and they may or may not come back because they might just remember the famine and not the feast. And it is, you don't make as much money as a lot of people would think you would. I mean there's a reason I work two jobs, other than I love them. I have to in order to help support the family. And I don't know many stay at home fishermen's wives, it just doesn't happen anymore.

SC: Do you think in the past there were more stay at home fishermen's wives?

MC: There were. You know, there used to be a lot more money in fishing, but things were less expensive then too. I mean the price of housing has gone up; the price of food has gone up. Unfortunately the price that the guys are getting for seafood has not gone up in the same vane that the other areas have gone up. So I think that's a big discrepancy and it's a big issue where people don't want to pay more at the supermarket for seafood and so you know they don't raise the price, but meanwhile our guys are only getting a percentage of that because the processors make so much.

SC: Do you have any thoughts on fisheries management?

MC: You know, it's kind of hard. I feel that a lot of the processors are owned by the same person and I don't feel that that's right. You know it's interesting to me that we have, we're not allowed to have monopoly and yet when it comes to somebody that has a lot of money, he can monopolize the fishing market all he wants. Which is frustrating, as someone who doesn't necessarily get to sit in on the meetings, but I read the paper, I read the reviews, I read the reports, and I feel like the fishermen should have more say in what a fish is worth. And they should get more of what the end cost is, you know, to be paid a dollar and then have it turned around and be sold for \$5 dollars a pound. It doesn't feel right to fishermen. But if they say no, they want \$1.25, then the plant will say fine, then you can't fish. And so then we strike and then all, the whole month of December, the crab fishermen almost every single year go on strike and usually by February our fishermen are hungry enough they'll take \$1 dollar and be happy with it. Not happy, but content with it because we're all behind on our bills. So, it's hard when the management gets to have so much power, and it's not necessarily that all of the processors aren't good people, it's that there's one person controlling so much that he's the one that gets to make the choice. And he doesn't understand what it's like from the fishing perspective, or from the fishermen's perspective. He's looking at it as, just a money, you know, just a numbers game, he's not realizing that his numbers affect so many families, and those families affect communities. So.

SC: And what kind of involvement or maybe lack of involvement do you see in the fishing community, or the fishermen, or the fishermen's wives, in trying to move management in the right direction?

MC: You know actually these last couple years I've seen a lot more, these last few years, there's crab commissions, it seems to be becoming more above board. The fishermen seem to be getting better prices. There is still a disconnect, um, unfortunately I don't have the answer. I wish I did. You know the wives all joke; maybe we should just sit down and figure it out. [Laughs] the truth of the matter is, it's the guys that go in there and they sit down and they work hard to try to come to an agreement. And they can't talk about what happens in those talks, but you see them come out, you see them frustrated and you know it doesn't go well.

SC: So, it sounds like you have a lot of hope for the fishery in talking about your kids being involved and you know, the cyclical changes, do you have any greatest hopes?

MC: You know, I would just hope that there would be enough fish for everyone to catch and that we would be able to continue. It's such a wonderful culture. My husband's family is Portuguese and so for him it's not just something he does, it's something that is a part of him. And I want it to be a part of my kids. My greatest fear is if something were to happen that they couldn't fish. I don't necessarily want them to fish full time, I'd love for them to go to college and do whatever they want in life, but I think it's important for them to fish at some point. My nephew fished with my husband and it was the greatest thing he ever did, because after one summer he looked at us and he said I'm going to college. [Laughs] you know it's a hard job! You work really hard, but it teaches you so much. It teaches you to be strong, physically and mentally. It teaches you to be independent, it teaches you to think on your toes, but it's such an important rite of passage for a lot of families and it would sadden me to see that go away or see families not want their kids to fish. My husband doesn't do it just for the money, to be honest, he's been offered better jobs on land, and he won't leave fishing. He loves it; it's a part of him. He tried a 9-5 job once and my happy, wonderful, sweet husband was the grumpiest man I'd ever known. He was unhappy; he didn't want to go to work because he wasn't fishing. The ocean is a part of him.

SC: So, we know that fishing is a male-dominated field, mostly the men out there, what do you think about your daughter becoming a fisherman?

MC: I would love it if she could be a fisherman. Although she likes to say she wouldn't be a fisherman, she would be a captain. She loves going on the boat, she loves her boots. I tell you what, that little girl will wear a bow in her hair and boots on her feet any day of the week. She's a girly-girl to the max, but she would love to get down in the engine room with daddy and work on that engine. She loves being a part of the fishing community; one of her first pictures is her with her hands on the wheel in the fishing boat in the blessing of the fleet in her little grundens, just barely big enough to sit up. It's important for her to be a part of it. I wish that I had been able to go fishing before we had kids, but it just wasn't in the cards for us. But I, one day when our kids are older, I would love to go fishing. I just can't leave them right now.

SC: Well we can't neglect the importance of the fisherman's wife in taking care of, there's a lot of business that has to be done on land.

MC: Yeah, yeah, it would be impossible for both of us to be gone all the time. Even though I work quite a bit, I work 5 days a week at one job, 2 days a week at the other, every Tuesday, every third weekend on call, so I work a lot, I work 7 days a week. But I'm always available if the kids are sick, or if the kids need anything, I'm here. If I was out fishing, there wouldn't... thankfully we do have my parents, I have to say I would be lost without grammi and poppi. Because they definitely help out.

SC: Family is important.

MC: They are, very important.

SC: So what advice would you give to a young woman thinking of marrying a fisherman?

MC: Never let him leave port when you're angry. Because you will regret it the entire time that he's out. He will probably come home safe, but the entire time he's out your mind is going to be going every terrible place it possibly can. So no matter how angry he makes you, before he walks out that door, give him a hug and tell him be safe. And, also just to know there's going to be hard times. There's going to be times, especially when you have a new baby, when you are standing there with a crying infant and you are thinking, I bet he is sleeping on that boat. [Laughs] and it makes you mad, but at the same time, if he worked a 9-5 job, he wouldn't get a month off here, a month off there. I'd rather have him a third, you know, a third or two thirds of the year and have a happy person than have an unhappy person all the time. It's a hard life, but it's worth it.

SC: Well that's all the questions I have for you, do you have anything else you'd like to add before we finish up here today?

MC: No, not really, thank you.

SC: Thank you, it's been really wonderful talking to you Michelle.