Michele Longo Eder Oral History
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Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

SC: Today I'm with Michele Longo Eder, it's July 19, 2014. This is an interview for the Voices of the West Coast Project. Michele, could you state your name for the record please?

MLE: Michele Longo Eder

SC: Great, thank you. I'd like to go back to the beginning and just hear about how you got started in the fishing business.

MLE: Well I got started in the fishing business really when I married my husband, Bob Eder. That was in 1988, I was an attorney practicing here in Lincoln County and had been practicing for about 13 years at that time. And, met Bob, and we got married. And he was a commercial fisherman here in Newport. He'd started his career quite, at least 15 years earlier; 15, 20 years earlier, originally fishing out of Port Orford, then he moved to Newport. He had a fishing vessel, the fishing vessel Nesika, and was fishing for Dungeness crab and sablefish primarily at that time. So when we got married, I became a fisherman's wife.

SC: So can you talk about what it's like being a fisherman's wife, maybe a 'day-in-the-life' of?

MLE: Well it's challenging. And it's also changed over the years. So I started being a fisherman's wife 25 years ago, and some things have changed. Fishery management has changed, and some of the ways we do business have changed. But the fundamentals of being a fisherman's wife have changed, have not changed, they're pretty much the same. Because my husband and I are a partnership in our fishing business, and I do a lot of the work, first of all, for our business, in terms of regulatory issues. So, state laws, federal laws, rules and regulations frequently change and since we're a very highly regulated industry, it's important that one of stays on top of all the changes. And that's part of what I do as a fisherman's wife. That's from a business side. I also keep the books; make sure the payroll is done on time. Do our investing, a lot of our, prepare our taxes, and so I do a lot on the financial end as well. But then there's the part of the day-to-day. Raising children as a fisherman's wife, very challenging, but a wonderful time. It's difficult sometimes because your husband is gone a great deal of the time and whether he fishes in Alaska or whether he fishes off the West Coast; frequently you're a single parent. In the child-raising years, a lot more responsibility, as a parent in a two-parent family. So it's a very good life, but it's a challenging one too.

SC: Can you talk about maybe some of the highs and lows of being a fishing family?

MLE: I think there are, when you're together, it's a very special time. Because sometimes those together times are few and far between. Sometimes our family get-togethers might be a little more precious to us than families that see each other day, where mom and dad are both at home every evening. In a lot of ways, a fishing family is not unlike a family where one or both of the parents are in the military, or where one or both of the parents are a police officer or fire fighter. In the sense that, they're away from home, they engage in a profession that's dangerous, and so those family times are special. There are the highs of being together, there's also the lows of sometimes, the distance apart, the time apart, and also because it is a high-risk industry. Those concerns as well.

SC: So I'm curious how the fishing family and maybe the fishing community come together, or do they? The community connections, I guess maybe describe what the fishing community is like.

MLE: Well first of all, I think there's a heart connection. I can't think of any other way to express it. But I think that, when you are a commercial fishing family and there's a short hand, and understanding when you're talking to another fisherman's wife. And they're talking about an event, maybe a family gathering or

somebody's invited them out somewhere and they might say, well I'll be there, but I'm not so sure about... they're referencing, they don't know whether or not their husband's going to be there. If you're a commercial fishing family, you automatically understand what that means because that's just what your life is too. One of the things is, because our industry is so driven by factors outside of individual control, whether it's management or weather, you can't always know when your partner is going to be present for any event. And so there's that connection there, just that unspoken understanding and I think that's, that's how fishing family relates in the fishing community in that way. The unspoken understanding. I think also there's a lot of compassion for fishing families within the community because they understand how difficult a life it is at times for the spouse that is at home. And, there's a sense of extraordinary support for one another that I have seen, personally, and experienced personally, as well as contributed to, in terms of supporting each other, when times are tough.

SC: And beyond the general community connectivity, are there associations here in Newport that you've been involved with or are currently involved with?

MLE: There is. There's Newport Fishermen's Wives, which I think had its beginnings maybe in the '50's or '60's, I don't know if that there's an actual, and it might have been earlier than that. And it's gone through a number of iterations over the years, but always its commitment has been to supporting family, promoting seafood, and promoting safety. One of the great things about Newport Fishermen's Wives is that it's a very embracing group in that everyone is welcome who is connected with commercial fishing. It's not just wives. It's moms, yeah it can be brothers, and it can be anybody who supports commercial fishing I think. And that's one of the really good parts, but the other thing is that, Newport Fishermen's Wives has been wonderfully successful in not being a political organization in that, people come together. It's an organization that pulls people together and it's not based on political differences in different fisheries. So that, that's been really, really important. And they're respected, a highly respected voice in the community, here locally, as well as nationally. And certainly in the political forefront, in terms of being respected, by state and federal legislative offices.

SC: Well I think that makes a good segue. I want to revisit regulation and management, and I'm curious if you could talk about changes in those over the years and how they may or may not have affected your fishing business.

MLE: That's a tough question, because there's not a simple answer to it. So, some fisheries off the west coast are managed by the state, such as Dungeness crab, pink shrimp. Some are managed by a combination of state and federal regulations in terms of the commercial field, in that salmon would be an example of one of those. Then there are fisheries that are managed exclusively by the feds and that would be things like tuna or groundfish, which is a major fishery off the west coast. So I would say in both Dungeness crab and in the groundfish industry is where there's been major changes in management over the last 25 years. Dungeness crab has changed in that crab management used to be: you had a boat, you bought some crab pots, and you went out fishing. Crab is managed by what's called: size, sex, and season, the three s's. Crabs have to be a certain size, they have to be male crabs, and there's a restricted season from about December 1st through, technically through August, but most of the fishery is conducted during December, January, February. And as I mentioned, it used to be you had a boat, you bought crab pots, and those were the three regulations that were in place. Since we started in Dungeness crab fishing, it's changed to where there's been a limited entry [0:10:00], management system in place, which meant that you need to have a limited entry permit. The participants in the fishery were limited to a certain number of people and then those people have permits and those permits have what's called a length restriction on them so that the permits can only go on certain size boats or a few feet up, maybe up to ten feet more if you bought another boat. So it's constrained in terms of the number of participants, the size of the vessel that you have that your permit is endorsed for. And then the third, probably major change is that it's managed in terms of pot limits. It used to be that you could, if you chose to, say invest your money in buying crab pots as opposed to real estate or a new sport boat, and that's how you chose to invest your money. You were able to purchase crab pots and choose based on the size of your operation and how you wanted to fish, you could fish as many crab pots as you wanted. Instead, in order to attempt to reduce effort, in the fishery, the state decided to manage it with what are called pot limits so that depending on your history in the fishery of landings, you were assigned a certain number of pots that

you could fish, either 200 pots or 300 pots or 500 pots. It was a highly controversial and difficult management measure that took place and as a result, for some people they received the right to fish more pots than they had ever fished and for other people, including ourselves, we were highly constrained by the limitation on pots that you could fish. So it was a real challenging period for us. As it turns out, to some extent there's benefit to not having as many pots in the ocean, potentially, if you don't take good care of your gear. But the flipside is, that it's… I'm not entirely sure that that management measure was necessary, certainly not from a biological standpoint for the crabs. It's really a lot of times, fishery management is about some people wanting to, in my opinion constrain the efforts of others. So that's one fishery that I can give you an example in terms of how management has changed. Do you want me to tell you more?

SC: I think that's good, thank you.

MLE: Yeah, I think that's plenty [laughs].

SC: So I'm curious if there have been economic changes that have kind of aligned with these changes in regulation?

MLE: There's been a lot of economic change in the industry and it doesn't necessarily have to do with regulation. Obviously the recession hit everybody really hard, I think what is really difficult, economically, in the fishery is that, where as prices for fuel and other expenses for the boat, whether it be repairs, supplies, or fuel in particular, taking the boat in for maintenance and haul outs. Those expenses have all increased astronomically in some regards, whereas the price of fish and crab has not increased proportionately. So there are occasional spikes in price in terms of the market, recently the Dungeness crab price has shot up some because there is demand for some of the product from China and that's been a really good thing for Dungeness crab fishermen. But as recently as a few years ago, really we weren't getting much more for our crab than we did 15-20 years ago, and that's in the face of increasing expenses. So it's very, you know it can be very frustrating. And it's very challenging, but there are also tremendous financial rewards too at times and that's been good too. A well-managed business does well. But again, with commercial fishing, there's so many things that are out of your control: markets, price, weather, risk. Those are the uncertainties that we deal with everyday.

SC: And so one of the uncertainties that come to my mind is the ocean, and changes in the ocean, and what's going on out there. Can you talk a little bit about what changes have occurred?

MLE: Well, it's not; frankly it's not my field. But we all know that ocean acidification is a huge, we can't even begin to get our arms around what's happening in the ocean in terms of the potential changes. Whether it's to the hardness of the crab shells, available feed, whether it's availability of forage fish, acidification, climate change. Sometimes, in fishing, you're not going to find climate change deniers. They see what's going on in terms of changes in the ocean. But it's so beyond our power, if you will, to manage those issues, it's really kind of a, it's overwhelming at times. But we do know that change is happening. And it's not to say that it's necessarily bad for the resource. Some ocean changes may be beneficial to some of the fisheries in some regard. But, man-made change to our world's resources, to our oceans is a significant concern. One of the things that we do in our business, and that Bob really enjoys is that we do a lot, a fair amount of collaborative research. Both with scientists from Oregon State University in terms of wave energy development, and also surveys of fish species. And so, he has worked with NMFS, NOAA, and with UC Santa Cruz and the state of Oregon. Whether it's mapping marine reserves, looking at getting baseline surveys of what marine life is actually in marine reserves so that there's some understanding of what's there before you start to withdraw it from the public, if you will. And doing surveys of fish stocks, so that's one of the very rewarding parts of being on the ocean also, is working collaboratively with scientists.

SC: Michele, you are a wealth of knowledge on a lot of these changes, and so I'm curious if your roles have changed at all over time.

MLE: Over time I think there's a natural change. The... 25 years ago I was much more focused on our direct family's needs and that of the fishing business. Although I did begin 25 years ago then to enter into appearing before state and federal agencies to represent our interests and the interests of other fishermen and I've done that as part of my career, if you will, as a fisherman's wife. But as children grew and left home, I became perhaps more involved. I'm 60 now, and although my husband continues to actively fish on the fishing vessel, Timmy Boy, and our son Dylan, skippers the vessel some of the time, I'm looking actually at stepping back a bit. I think I'm, I'm more ready to retire, if you will, than my husband is. So I've cut back my roles some, not much [laughs] but some. So I think it's just, really what's changed for me is just simply getting older in the business.

SC: So you mentioned that Dylan is a skipper on one of the vessels, is there a future in the fishing industry for Dylan?

MLE: Absolutely, we just have one boat, the fishing vessel, Timmy Boy, and he's, Dylan has fished since he was, he's been on the boat since he was a kid. He has grown up around commercial fishing, he graduated from college, from Whitman college, and after that traveled for a few years, did some other things, and then a couple years ago decided that he did want to fish full time and return to Newport. And he's fished out of a number of different vessels and with different captains and so it's a great evolution to see him working with his father and I'm very proud of him.

SC: And what are your greatest hopes for fishing in general?

MLE: I think that we continue to have a sustainable resource [0:20:00]. That management becomes more sensitive to fishing businesses. When I, when people come to town, or people who are not familiar with commercial fishing, and that it's primarily a family-based business, particularly on the west coast, but also in Alaska in many ways and many communities. Or if I'm talking to the Chamber of Commerce for example, I point out the docks to them and say, you know, recognize that every fishing vessel that you see there is really a small family-business. Just like the mom and pop store or the gas station that's locally owned, or the restaurant that's locally owned, that every single one of those fishing vessels represents a family fishing business. And I think that, one of my hopes for the fisheries is that fisheries management continues to make an effort to understand that these are small family businesses that are being regulated and that more effort be put into understanding, before enacting regulations. What effects that those regulations can have on families and communities. And I think there's an effort made to do that, but there are so many unintended consequences and the regulatory process itself is pretty unwieldy for the most part. It's open, people are encouraged to participate, but part of the problems with the regulatory process is that people who are on the ground running a business, I have to say; our family is the exception not the rule. It's very unusual for one partner to be able to spend their time monitoring what the state and feds are doing in regards to our fisheries. That's the exception, like I said, not the rule and so there isn't enough... There isn't enough ability of the state and feds to, in terms of their resources, to engage in the communities as much as I think needs to be done. I'm not, I don't fault them, I understand they're under restricted time constraints and budgets, but they're not hearing from enough people about how regulations can affect the fishery.

SC: So if you had a piece of advice for a family thinking of getting involved in the fishing business or if you were to hand down the fishing business to Dylan or somebody, what would that advice be?

MLE: I think the best, the biggest asset you can have, in a commercial fishing business, is a strong family. I think that it does take a special kind of people, with certain abilities to pursue a business successfully. Some of it has to do with qualities that you find in any sound, small business: good financial management, good partnership working together, good communication. Those aren't necessarily specific to commercial fishing, but I think that those are qualities that are true of any small business. I think also, people who are willing to accept risk, that is, that has to be part of it, because there's so much that you don't have control over. And so people who are comfortable with a certain level of risk in terms of how they pursue their livelihood is something that is important.

SC: So I'm coming towards the end of my questions and so I want to offer an opportunity to you, is there anything you'd like to talk about that I haven't addressed?

MLE: It's really hard for me, to talk about this, and I've kind of, oh stepped around it in regards to the risk issue in commercial fishing and I think that, that's something I would not be, I would not feel that I had really told our story without mentioning it. But we did have a vessel, the fishing vessel, Nesika that was crabbing back in December of 2001. And onboard was Rob Thompson was the skipper, and Jarod Hamrick, and Steve Langlot were the crew, and also our oldest son at the time, Ben Eder, who was 21 and just home from college. And Ben had, like Dylan, fished on the boat since he was a child. And he was home from college, over winter break and on the boat out crabbing, and unfortunately it capsized. And all four men were killed, and... That's something that, to not, you know, recognize and acknowledge, would not be, if I didn't, I wouldn't be telling our story. So it's, there's always the dichotomy, the paradox, if you will, of loving the ocean and the joy that my husband and son Dylan do have from being at sea. And their interactions with nature and how much a part of them that is and yet the loss to all of the families of their sons, their brothers, their fathers. And how painful that loss is and yet to continue even after that loss to be a commercial fishing family. One of the, as well as remembering our men. *Pause* What I also want to emphasize about fishing communities is the strength, and not just our fishing community, our community as a whole, of Newport. Of the strength with which they support us. Through that time, and really still today, that they honored our men, supported all our families, and continue to remember them today. So, that's part of our lives too.

SC: I can imagine that it's very hard for you to talk about that, but it does bring up your book, A Memoir of a Fisherman's Wife, which I have read, and I think would be a wonderful read for anyone that's interested in getting a real glimpse into the life of a fishing family. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that book? What that book meant for you.

MLE: The book, thank you. Salt in our Blood: A Memoir of a Fisherman's Wife, and I started the book because, really originally after doing that video with OSU Sea Grant in 1997-98, whenever that was, I realized that we had a unique story to tell. And that's why I appreciate so much what you're doing today in terms of talking to fishing families and fishermen's wives, because from a cultural perspective, really other than OSU Sea Grant, nobody was telling our story. And I felt that there is a cultural story here, that needs to be told, needs to be preserved. And so I started to keep a journal and I began in December of 2000, talking about our lives as a fishing family and what I kind of did day-to-day with the kids. Interacting with my husband and our business, the things I did for our business as well as practicing law. And it just kind of… I wrote when I had time and had something to say and just kind of kept journals throughout the year. And then in December of 2001, as I mentioned, the accident happened and I documented and wrote about that. And also, the book tells what happened, but also throughout the book I used other ways to tell the story. I interviewed, I gave tapes and tape recorders to people who were very close to me during that period of time and asked them to record their memories of what had happened and I included those interviews in the book. The chief of the Yaquina Bay Coast Guard station at the time did that, and that's part of the book. Ginny Goblirsch, who's OSU extension agent, she recorded her experiences and observations and feelings at the time. And that's in the book. So I used different ways to tell the story as well [0:30:00]. But even after the accident I kept writing, and then kept writing through the following year and ended the book at the beginning of crab season of December 2002. So it's a period of time of our lives, of two years, and it does range, tell the gamut, kind of from A to Z I think of what a fishing family does experience.

SC: Yeah, thank you. So I have one last question for you (MLE: Okay) it's a short one, but not an easy one. If you had one word to associate with fishing, what would it be?

MLE: Hope.

SC: Hope, thank you very much Michele.

MLE: Thank you.
[End of interview 0:30:44]