

Name of person Interviewed: Kristin Decas [pronounced Deecas/long e] [KD]

Facts about this person:

Age (if known)

Sex Female

Occupation Executive Director of the New Bedford Harbor
Development Commission

If a fisherman (if retired, list the ports used when fishing),

Home port,;

and Hail Port (port fished from, which can be the same)

Residence (Town where lives)

Ethnic background (if known) Norwegian (on mother's side);

Interviewer: Millie Rahn [MR]

Transcriber: Janice Gadaire Fleuriel

Place interview took place: New Bedford Harbor Development Commission

Date and time of interview: Sept. 21, 2007

INDEX / KEYWORDS

KEYWORDS: Women; Port of New Bedford; Fishing Industry; Regulations; Norwegian ethnic background; Regulations;

[Start of File WAV_0004_001]

- [00:00] Born and raised in New York State; Economics degree University of Vermont; Moved to Massachusetts after college to be with her now husband; Graduate school Colorado and then married, came back to Mass; Husband is third generation cranberry grower; Jobs before becoming HDC director;
- [02:43] Fishing heritage on mother's side, Norway, Philadelphia; Views on gender aspect of her career—not a significant issue compared to personal hard work;
- [04:47] What the job entails; Operational aspects—HDC manages twenty properties including wharves, Pope's Island Marina, public mooring fields, ferry terminal; New business and economic development aspects; Serves on Port Professionals, a state group; Member of North Atlantic Ports Association, Amer. Assn. of Ports Authorities;
- [07:45] Only female director on east coast, not sure about west coast; More focused about proving self individually, personal work ethic than based on gender; Trying to do projects to engage fishing industry, meeting its needs, help it move forward;
- [10:06] Importance of fishing community to New Bedford economy; Wants to go through an open harbor plan process; Women are geared to multifaceted work, juggling lots of different things; Spends time with her two children at night; Has been on boats to include them on tours, e.g., but would like to go out on a fishing trip to see what it's like;
- [13:12] More men on boats, more women doing shore support, both equally important; Has had some requests to speak, etc., because of her being a female in this role;
- [15:49] Wants to work with fishery councils, similar other organizations, to help regulations make sense for fishing industry; Need to campaign Port of New Bedford in positive light, focus on beautiful harbor, resources—looks forward to changing the negative perception; Need to fix immigration policy so it makes sense, but not her area of expertise;
- [19:07] Wants to develop formalized marketing program that portrays fishermen as conservationists, producing a very natural product; Feels fortunate to be in this position; Wants visitors to learn how fish gets to plate, appreciate brave men who do the work.

[End of File WAV_0004_001/End of Interview]

TRANSCRIPT

[NOTE: Buzzing on right speaker channel starts after a couple minutes, can't discern much of what MR says and occasionally what KD says— indicated by “[?]”]

[Start of File WAV_0004_001]

[00:00]

MR: Today is Friday, September 21st, 2007. My name is Millie Rahn, and I'm a folklorist working with the Working Waterfront Festival here in New Bedford. We're in the Harbor Development Commission Offices. And, I'm going to be doing an oral history interview with Kristin Decas. And she is the first woman director of the Harbor Development Commission.

So why don't we start... Tell us a little bit about...., your full name, where and when you were born, how you got into this industry, your connections to New Bedford, and we'll go from there.

KD: Ok. Sure.

I was actually born in Manhattan in New York. And the first six months of my life I spent in Yonkers. And my family relocated to Chappaqua, New York, which hadn't made the map until recently when Hil and Bill moved to town. So a lot of people where that is [chuckles] now.

MR: [laughs]

KD: And I grew up there. I went to public schools in Chappaqua. Then went on to college when I was eighteen. Went to the University of Vermont, where I got a degree in economics. Lived in Massachusetts—well I actually met my husband while I was in Vermont but we were just dating at the time. And, after college I came to Massachusetts to be close to him and I lived up in Boston. And, from there I actually went on to graduate school in Colorado and then came back and married Greg Decas, which is why I now have the name Decas. Formerly I was McFadageon[sp?].

He's kind of glued to the state of Massachusetts. They're a third generation family cranberry business, started in 1919. The Decas brothers have been growing cranberries, for, a long time now, have a lot of history here. So, I located with him in Wareham. And I went on and pursued a career here. In Boston for a few years. And then I—working for the Department of Environmental Protection on the alternative fuel vehicle program.

Switched gears, and came—started working in Fairhaven for a gentleman named Rick Armstrong in the governor's seaport council, where I really started getting my background in port development. I worked there for about six years. My role was articulating maritime policy, and we had a three hundred million bond bill that we would make infrastructure investments around the commonwealth. And so that's where I gained all my expertise in ports and whatnot.

And then, most recently, came on board here in January, and just launched this career as the port director for New Bedford.

[02:43]

MR: Do you have any, fishing heritage in your family?

KD: Well it's interesting you ask that question [laughs]. I'm Norwegian descent on my mother's side. And my, great great grandfather was the harbormaster of Bergen, Norway. And *his* son, was a fisherman, that used to make ports of call primarily

out of Philadelphia, but did make visits to New Bedford. And so I think it's kind of full circle that I'm here today and it's somehow in my blood that they directed me to this [laughs] spot.

MR: And those are the thing that warms the hearts of [buzzing right channel/can't hear].

So, tell us a little about [?].

KD: Well, I guess I don't always look at it that way. I just worked hard my whole life, you know? Since, you know, growing up in Chappaqua, it's just been ingrained in me to succeed and work hard. So I did. I went on, you know, to school. Got my degrees. And, was just determined to be successful. And I really enjoyed working with ports at that state job. And so this was really just an exciting stepping stone for me and my career to have this new responsibility. I guess I haven't looked at it as being gender related but just more of another stepping stone for me in moving forward in my career.

MR: That's one of the things we're looking at it this year [?]. And is it gender related [?]. Do you think [?].

KD: Well what I find from my personal experience is that I've been very well received. And I feel welcome. I don't feel in any way disrespected. I enjoy working with the industry. I just don't think it's been an issue, that, to date, I've had any kind of controversy.

[04:47]

MR: So tell us a little bit about [?]. There's probably no typical day.

KD: Mm hm. Well, there's a real operational component to the position. You do have the—you know, the HDC manages the five fishing wharves on the waterfront. Which services five hundred boats. Or the, harbor, services five hundred boats. We service the lion's share of those. Three hundred are home port New Bedford, and the other two hundred are transient. So, you know part of my job is to ensure that the facilities are adequate. On the operations side, and working with the fishermen. We also manage a hundred and ninety-eight slip marina called Pope's Island Marina. HDC has twenty properties that it manages. We run the mooring fields—the public mooring fields for the harbor. And we also manage the ferry terminal that runs service to Martha's Vineyard. Permanently and we actually have a pilot project going on right now where we're running service to Wood's Hole. Those are the big operation pieces of the job. And then, another real task of the Harbor Development Commission is to bring new business and economic development to the city, to the port. And so, exploring new export and import opportunities. Something that's near and dear to my heart is short sea shipping. Getting freight off the highways and onto barges and bringing business here. Making a port that all of these systems can work collectively and together and that's—certainly we're the number one fishing port and we want to maintain that status.

MR: Do you [?]

KD: Well I work—I serve on something called the Port Professionals, where port directors from the five other deep water ports in the commonwealth also participate. And that would be Gloucester, Salem, New Bedford, and Fall River. We work very closely with those ports. Considering yourself somewhat the Port of Massachusetts collectively. Marketing itself with each port having its own niches. But we have synergies there that we can work off one another. In terms—I'm also a member of something called the North Atlantic Ports Association, which is a member of port directors on, just that, on the coast. And we share information on certain things. We also work together on regulatory issues that are impacting all the varied ports. We're kind of a voice for those ports on the coast. I'm a member. And one of those things that we're building there is that short sea network that I was speaking of. And then another organization I'm a member of is the American Association of Ports Authorities, which is actually a national organization and includes the west coast. And I participate in that very regularly. And I was just actually recently up at a meeting on port security matters. So, try to stay tapped into what's going in all the ports. And know what's going on and make friends out there, because I think that bodes well for the City of New Bedford.

[07:45]

MR: And are there other [?].

KD: Interestingly, no. I think I'm—I'm not sure about the west coast but I know that I'm the only female port director on the east coast. There's one pier manager in Fall River that is a female. But in terms of port directors I'm the only one right now.

MR: Because you might not see it as [?]. But it's certainly interesting [?]. And [?]. [?] watching the industry change [?]. This is somewhat related but [?].

KD: Well I always feel like I can prove myself, not I think based on gender, but it's just [laughs] my nature to want to succeed. And if it's going to mean staying up all night then I'm going to stay up all night because I'm determined to put out the best that I can do. So I guess I feel no matter who I'm trying to impress it doesn't really go back to my being a female, it's just more my general work ethic, how I want to move things forward.

MR: And do you work with [?].

KD: Well, what I would say is that is what I'm trying to do is do a lot of projects that engage the fishing industry. And, I'm trying to work with them and create an open, transparent policy so I can hear what their needs are and I can work with them. For instance, next Tuesday, we'll be holding a meeting on looking at the berthing crisis that we have. We have such a limited amount of berthing space, and such a large number of boats. And so I want to work with the industry and hear from them how we can come up with different alternatives to meet the needs—their berthing needs. And I have retained some consultants and we're having a big meeting, and hope as many people come out as possible. So I'm trying to network with the fishing community to ensure that I'm doing things that they want to be done. And that, I'm helping the fishing industry move forward.

[10:06]

MR: Did you have to learn [?]

KD: Oh I think I'm still very much getting my feet we in this new job and in this new role. But I think my motto has always been be myself, and just work hard, and do the best that I can.

MR: What is your [?].

KD: Well I think that..., you know, I'm working hard with the fishing community and I certainly recognize the importance to New Bedford, the economic impact that they have and I want to make sure that we have a state-of-the-art infrastructure for the fishermen. And then I also want to see...you know, we have a lot of room for growth. We have the [?] here on the waterfront. And I want to work with the community in painting that picture and creating a real economic engine. On the other parts of the port that are less [?]... For instance, there was going to be an oceanarium. I'm not sure what's going to happen there. So I just want to go through a harbor plan process, an open, transparent process, work with people to really bring [?].

MR: [?]

KD: Oh certainly. Yeah.

MR: It's been amazing.
How [?].

KD: I think—

MR: That could be you personally or observation [?].

KD: I guess I just, from my perspective, women are just geared to do that. We're multifaceted folk, and, we can juggle a lot of different things. I find that, you know, I have two young children—I have a five year old and a two year old, and I go home at night and I play bingo and I just make sure I do the things that are needed to make them feel loved and the biggest part of my life. As well as my husband. You know I think that, family is key. And you've got to keep your priorities straight. I just think that we're sort of geared to do that. And I find that it's working well for me. So, we're happy on both sides.

MR: I personally [?]. There are times [?].
Do you ever go out on boats?

KD: I haven't gone on an official fishing trip. But, I have set up things where, for instance, we had a tour come through the port. And I made sure they had a connection with the working waterfront. We set up tours of fishing vessels, and I participated in those, been in the fish houses. So I've been on board the vessels. I've worked closely with the fishermen. But I haven't—I would *love* to go on a fishing trip. But with all the restrictions and days at sea I don't want to cut into those either, which is unfortunate. But if anyone wants to take me I'd really like to go on a trip. See what it's like. [?]

[13:12]

MR: We sort of touched on this. But in your opinion, do you think [?].

KD: I guess it depends—are we speaking directly about the fishing industry? Or just various industries?

MR: Well it could be the whole, industries [?].

KD: Well I think I would say that it seems from my parents that a lot of the crew members tend to be male. And, you know, a lot of the onshore work tends to be more female. But I think they're equally important. It's an observation that I've made. I know that there are women that go out to sea, as observers. And there are women that are actually fishermen. But I would say from what I've seen in the industry probably more male are going out to sea, female are doing inshore work, in the settlement houses, the banking, [?], those sorts of things.

MR: Since you've been in this position, [?].

KD: I have had a few people approach me and ask me to speak at various events and that sort of thing. And send me e-mails. I think there's some...women in maritime business approached me. And some churches believe it or not asked me to speak. So, I think that other people may perceive that, sure. But, you know again, I guess, sitting here every day. When I come in, I don't think, Oh, I'm a woman going to work in a male industry. I just go to work. And I want to work hard and do my job. So.

MR: That's a nice way of, you know—because, [?].
What were some of the [?]?

[15:49]

KD: Sure. I think just in terms of the fishing industry, I want to partner with them and help work for conservation, but in a way that it works for the fishing industry, and they're not economically [inconvenienced?] because of regulation that doesn't make sense. And I think that's a real struggle for the fishing industry right now. And, you know, I look forward to working with the fishery councils and those sorts of organizations to help, you know, effect change in the regulatory environment so that it makes conservation sense and it makes sense for the fishermen. That's been a real obstacle for the industry. In terms I think of some more community-based things that I find, is a perception that we need to overcome as a community is that people think of New Bedford as [?]. And I think that this is one of the greatest places to be. We have a beautiful harbor. We have wonderful resources. And we just need to campaign our port in a positive light. And that's something that I look forward to doing is working to change that perception.

MR: [issues of immigration?]

KD: No, I feel that we're all humans. And people are here. And I think that we just... It's a hard issue. I think that, you know, to be fair to those that have gone through the process correctly, I think we need to stick to our rules and regulations. As a nation, but we also have to be sensitive to the needs, to the families that are here now and working, and sort through that with some sort of effective federal policy. I think that's what—we really need to take a look at the immigration policy, fix things so that they make sense. But the answer to that is I don't know, I'm a port expert [laughs]. Immigration law's way out for me. But, you know, I have the compassion for people, that we just need to come up with logical laws.

MR: Yeah. And it's not [?]. It's the same issue, it's just a different [?]. But [?]. One of the things [?] waves of immigration [?]. But I know [?]. There might be that element [?]

[19:07]

KD: Yeah. [?]. In fact, another thing that we're looking to do is come up with a formalized marketing program, that will get a different message out there. That, fishermen are conservationists. That the product that they produce is very natural. It's one of the best things in the world for you. So, we're going to try and effect a positive campaign.

MR: And the other part of the story, [?].

KD: It's one of the neatest industries in that way. In that, I think most of the fishermen that you'll meet on the waterfront actually have a family member that was part of the fishing industry, so there's always a good story to tell and they go over generation to generation.

MR: [?] the ups and downs of the industry [?].

Is there anything that I haven't asked [?]?

KD: I just feel very fortunate, you know, that I'm here and that I'm working with this tremendous industry. I have the utmost respect for them. And, it's just really my pleasure to be here [?].

MR: Is there anything [?] a message to get out [?]?

KD: I would just kind of go back to the general theme of the overall event. Learn how fish gets from the ocean to your plate. It's important. We have brave men out there working for you. And learn what it's about and appreciate it.

MR: Thank you very much.

KD: Thank you.

[End of File WAV_0004_001/End of Interview]