



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

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Kelsey, Debra ~ Oral History Interview

Madeleine Hall-Arber

Kelsey, Debra. Interview by Madeleine Hall-Arber. *Workers on the New Bedford Waterfront*. New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. January 5, 2017

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Background

Name of person interviewed: Debra Kelsey [DK]

Facts about this person:

Age 49

Sex Female

Occupation Navigator at Fishing Partnership Support Service

Residence (Town where lives) New Bedford

Ethnic background (if known) Puerto Rican

Interviewer: Madeleine Hall-Arber [MHA]

Transcriber: Amanda Peabody [AP]

Interview location: New Bedford at Fishing Partnership Support Services office

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Key Words

New Bedford, Puerto Rico, Spanish, Latino, health insurance, dental care, awareness and drug abuse prevention, mental health counseling, financial planning and safety training, scallops, lobsters, fisherman's wife.

Abstract

Debra Kelsey of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Growing up, she attended Catholic school and had no interaction with the fishing industry. She initially worked as a commercial printer until she was laid off. She then enrolled as a full-time student at Salter School for 10 months, then began to work as a medical assistant, but didn't like it. Shortly afterwards she was offered position as a navigator at Fishing Partnership Support Services where she works today. In this interview she elaborates on her journey to her current position and what sort of services the company provides for fishing families.

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[0:00] Tape intro; born in 1967 in New Bedford; did not come from a fishing family; is Puerto Rican, lived with mother and three brothers in Puerto Rico for a brief time; lived in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood; how growing up bilingual has helped her in her work.

[8:43] More about being bilingual; discussion about prejudices growing up; going to Catholic school; discussion about being a minority.

[20:53] How she was introduced to the fishing industry; first impression of fishermen; how she got her job as a navigator at Fishing Partnership Support Service; services the company provides such as health insurance, dental care, awareness and drug abuse prevention, mental health counseling, financial planning and safety training.

[32:05] How many people are aware of the company and the services it provides; outreach; going to the waterfront to do outreach.

[35:26] Most “advertising” is through word-of-mouth; a lot of young lobstermen and scallopers; difficulties regarding transitioning into being a fisherman’s wife, i.e. unpredictable income and hours; continued discussion about domestic, drug and alcohol abuse; discussion about being a woman involved in the fishing industry; lack of push back from other women; observations of other women in the industry.

[40:02] Hardest part about job is putting personal feelings aside; best part about job is being one-on-one with fishermen and helping them in safety trainings

[45:05] What type of person it takes to be a fisherman

[48:50] Discussion about the dangers and possible traumas related to life at sea; Federal and state grants; other Fishing Partnership Support Services in New England.

[55:12] Final comments; previous job as a commercial printer; studying medicine at Salter school and being a medical assistant for a short period.

[58:06] End of recording

[0:00]

Madeleine Hall-Arber: There we go okay [laughing]. Okay so I'm going to give a little formal introduction first. This is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center funded by Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress. As part of this project we're interviewing shore side workers in the New Bedford/ Fairhaven Fishing Industry to record their stories, document their skill and knowledge, and better understand their important role in the fishing industry. Both the recording and transcript will become part of the permanent collection at the Library of Congress. I'm Madeleine Hall-Arber and today I'm speaking with Debra Kelsey at the Fishing Partnership Support Services in New Bedford and the time is about 11 o'clock. So you did give us permission to record this, right?

Debra Kelsey: Yes I do.

MHA: Okay. Can you introduce yourself?

DK: So I'm Deb Kelsey and I'm a navigator here at the Fishing Partnership Support Service office in New Bedford.

MHA: Okay great. When and where were you born?

DK: So I was born in 1967 right here in the city of New Bedford. Born and raised.

MHA: Do you come from a fishing family?

DK: I do not come from a fishing family. Ironically, growing up in New Bedford, I really didn't know much about the fishing industry as a young girl; it was only in my adult life that I started to become more and more aware of our fishing industry that was so big here in the city of New Bedford. So, you would think that being born and raised here I would have known about fishermen from the get-go but for some reason that wasn't-- I didn't learn about fishing or fishermen in school. I didn't learn about it from my immediate family. And it took getting to my adult life for-- before I realized there was this great big industry here that supported my city, my community, and the people I care about.

MHA: So what is your-- did your family come from New Bedford originally?

DK: No, so actually mom is from Puerto Rico and she moved here with her parents when she was 12 and so she attended school here and my dad is from a surrounding town but I didn't grow up with my dad, I grew up with my mom in a Puerto Rican household and culture. So, I don't know if that was part of the reason-- maybe they didn't know about the industry, not being from here.

MHA: So did you grow up speaking Spanish?

DK: We did. We actually, when I was in the fourth grade my mom moved us, my three brothers and myself, we actually moved to Puerto Rico for a year and that's where we really learned to read, write and speak Spanish at home. My mom would speak to my grandparents in Spanish but she would speak to us in English so we did pick up words. Sometimes my grandmother would start speaking to me in English and then she'd cross over to Spanish or the other way around so we did grow up having a second language.

MHA: So did that-- has that helped you here because I know there's a fairly large Spanish-speaking population that's moved into New Bedford.

DK: I think what helped-- I think it helps me with all different cultures. It helps me to understand that not everybody is brought up the same, with the same beliefs or the same way of handling situations. So I think it has helped me to embrace the Portuguese community and culture and the Latino community and culture. I think it just helps me understand-- because the industry is full of different cultures. I feel it helps me to understand their way of thinking, their beliefs, their fears, whether they be culturally-based or factual.

MHA: So... what brought your mom here?

[5:00] DK: You know that's a great question. I know that when my grandmother, her brother, lived here. So when I was growing up it was my grandmother, and then she had a brother that lived here, and then we had several cousins so we all-- it was weird, it was like-- all-- I felt back then, this is in the 70s, that all the Puerto Ricans, we all lived in the south end of New Bedford. So my grandparents lived there and next door were Puerto Rican families, then the next door would be my uncle, you know, her brother. I'm really not sure exactly what brought them to New Bedford.

MHA: It's interesting though I didn't realize there was a whole--

DK: Oh yes, there was-- I mean I just-- it was all-- I can remember at Christmas time, you know, them coming-- they would come from house to house and they would be singing in Spanish with their little maracas and these, you know and I totally felt that I lived in like, little Puerto Rico. Even though I was born here, I felt, I was surrounded by Puerto Rican communities, we went to Spanish churches. Big time.

MHA: How about in school? Were there groups of?

DK: No in school I felt-- that was-- so I went to a Catholic school. I didn't go to public school so maybe that's why-- I went to Catholic school, so I felt that I was in the minority back then. Definitely, I felt I was in the minority by having a Puerto Rican mom.

MHA: Did you have any-- did you feel any prejudice?

DK: I never did. I personally didn't. I'm very sensitive though to how people stereotype others, I'm very sensitive to that. I don't-- I'm not the type of person who would categorize an industry or a culture or a race or a sex by the doings of one person. If that makes any sense to you.

MHA: And how about the neighborhood that you grew up in? Were any of them in the industry? Probably not if--

DK: No. I'm honestly trying to remember any... any fishermen that I encountered back in the day and I can honestly say, no. The families that I knew they worked at like the mills, you know, that's what they did.

MHA: And how about in Catholic school? Were any of the kids children of. . .

DK: I also don't recall ever meeting. I never-- you would think in the city of New-- and I'm not sure if, you know we're going back a long time. I'm not sure if it was because it was a Catholic school versus-- I don't know if the public schools here in New Bedford ever taught about our fishing industry. I don't know. I just know that-- no, you know I remember those dads being like business men but coming to pick up their daughters in their shirts and their ties. No, it was only into my adult life that...

MHA: What was your first introduction to...?

[8:43] DK: So it was actually-- I met this-- I met a man who was a fisherman. So when I met him he was actually working on land; he had not fished for a couple of years. So I met him working on land and he had said that he had been a fisherman, but he was trying something new now, so we had a relationship and... even though he was no longer a fisherman, his life was surrounded with fishing families. His father is a fisherman, his uncle's a fisherman, his brother is a fisherman-- his son's a fisherman, his friends. So I got to know fishing families and in all honesty my impression of fishermen once I was older, was the stereotype, which I'm so against and can't believe that I-- I had a stereotype of fisherman. And so I felt that that wasn't the type of lifestyle for me, so it was never something that I was interested in or pursued. I was ignorant and I just didn't know. So then in meeting this man, and now again he goes back to being a fisherman and so I'm thrust into that world and I came to meet families that are just like me. I met these men who go out and work hard, who feed the world, who sacrifice their time, their safety... I realized that not every fisherman is that stereotypical drunk, drug addict, whatever you may think it is. And then it was like my-- it was very important for me to share that information with the rest of the community, because I wanted people to know who these families really are; that they're people just like you and me and just like there are bad apples in any industry or community... fishermen, they weren't who I thought they were. They were so much more and they did so much more for our community and for our city and I grew a great appreciation for them and their families and grateful for what they have done for our city where I can live and work and where I've raised my son. That is a great deal, I believe, because of the industry. It employs so many. It

brings so much to our city. If we didn't have this industry I don't know what we'd be. I hate to even think of that. I really do.

MHA: So how did you get involved with the Partnership?

DK: So, I was a wife who was very involved in my husband's life, so when he went to get gear work, I was with him and when he grubbed up, I was grubbing when he left, I was there to pick him up. So I met a shore side business owner, Kirstin and I remember we had gone into her shop and he was working on some nets and I walked in and she said, "you looking for a full time job because Fishing Partnership is looking for a fisherman's wife to be an advocate" and she said, "I thought of you immediately." So that to me, that was like a dream come true for me, because I wanted to help my husband and I wanted to help my family. I wanted to help other fishing families and it was also a way of me being able to show our community what the industry is and what the industry does. So it was like a... wow... I was like, "absolutely" and she called the vice president of Fishing Partnership up while I was there and we spoke over the phone and I sent him my resume that night and a couple weeks later, five years ago, here I am.

MHA: So what do you do on a day-to-day basis?

DK: I do-- I have a variety of fun things that I get to do. We're Navigators for the Commonwealth of Mass, so that I get to assist fishing families, as well as anybody in our community, to enroll into healthcare. That's not an easy task. They call us Navigators because we have been trained through the Commonwealth how to navigate through that system so we can assist families with applying for health insurance, understanding how to enroll, selecting a plan, going through the plans, making payments, this is just a little way to assist our fishing families. These guys are out for 10 days, 14 days, in for one or two, they don't have time to sit down and spend hours going through the marketplace, so this is a benefit. Come on in here, I'll do it with you, hopefully we'll get it done in an hour, you can go back to spending time with your family, your kids, you know the things you need to do. That's one way, we promote the health and wellbeing of fishing families and we do that by, again, the health insurance assistance. We offer free safety at sea trainings for commercial fishermen, drill conducting courses, CPR courses. We do-- we have these discounted dental cleanings where they can come into the office, we have a dental hygienist set up, they get their teeth cleaned, oral health check. It's \$25, you can bring your family. If you have Mass Health, it's free, if you don't, if any other coverage or if you don't, it's a \$25 fee and your whole family can come in and get their teeth cleaned. We offer financial workshops. I have one coming up next month. This is going to be about successful credit and debt management; just teaching you how to look at your credit score, ways to help increase your credit score, different ideas on when applying for student loans, when looking to buy a car, just little things to help our families save money, just some helpful tips. We're also now doing opioid awareness. These courses have been amazing. Our community is in the middle of this epidemic; it not only affects our fishing industry, it affects our community, so we're doing these opioid awareness trainings. We're showing fishing families how to administer Narcan, have a plan of action if an emergency were to happen and not only is this for, as I said, our industry, we tell

these families this could be your neighbor's son. It could be the little old lady next door to you who forgot she took her meds and took it again. The life you save could be anywhere, grocery store, the gas station, the pharmacy, the waterfront, the car. So, that's-- on a daily basis I'm dabbling in any of those, all of those offerings, always trying to figure out what more we could do for our families, always grateful to hear from fishermen's wives or mothers or daughters or other people that are in the-- shore side support. What are the needs? What can we bring to you that could help? In the past we've heard free flu shots, free tetanus shots, so we do that as well. We partner with Southcoast Health. We bring flu shots, pneumonia, tetanus; we'll check your cholesterol, glucose, blood pressure. We partner with them to do oral cancer screenings. I feel like a lot of fishermen smoke and this is important to have these screenings available, they're free, so we just try to keep them healthy and safe not only physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. We have this Riverside Trauma Center that we have partnered with. They have offerings so if there was an overdose, we have a psychological first aid team that could come out specifically to speak to you and to yours -- in November we had some fishermen, New Bedford fishermen who went out on their pleasure boat and they're lost at sea and they've not returned so we have services where we actually assisted those families with this psychological first aid. I feel that... this service is going to be something that is really going to be needed as we move forward with the way this epidemic is. And with all these safety hazards and regulations that they face, I really think this service is going to be something that's going to be really utilized as time goes on.

MHA: So do you serve mainly as sort of a gatherer of these different services?

DK: I like to think that we're like-- we try to be the human resource department for our fishing families. And that's what I want. I mean I may not have everything right here on my desk but if you need something and you call me and you ask me, I'm going to do everything that I can to find out what you can do or who you can go to so that's what I like for our families to know, that I'm here for anything. You have-- you want to talk about opioid use and abuse, I'll do that with you. I'm not a professional but I can start that conversation with you and see where it goes. You want to talk about alcoholism, you want to talk about financial planning, I got that for you too. You need your teeth cleaned, I can help you with that. You need CPR, wait a minute? [Laughing] We've got that too. You know, I just want them to know that we're here. We're here. They're not alone. There are people here on land, we got your back.

[20:53] MHA: How many people know about you and come in and utilize your services? Can you estimate?

DK: Jeez. I mean, I wish I had some numbers in front of me.

MHA: It doesn't really matter, just-- I guess what I'm really asking is, do most people know, the crew members... are they the ones that come mostly?

DK: It's a variety that come. I feel that a lot of people in the industry, they do know about us because of our safety trainings. I don't think-- I think they know about Fishing Partnership, they see the hats, they see the logo-- they might know Fishing Partnership. Oh they're the health insurance people. Oh they're the safety people. Oh that's the girl with the van. I don't think that they know all the services that we have to offer. I think that if you-- if I got down to the waterfront, they either see me as safety-- you know this group of guys might see me as a safety girl, and this group of guys they see me as the—oh, that's the health insurance girl, where the other guys will be like oh, that's the shot lady, she always wants you to come and get shots.

BOTH: [laughing]

DK: So I think that there are a lot of fishermen that don't know about us. But I think that there are more fishermen today than there were 5 years ago that know about Fishing Partnership and that have utilized the services that we've been able to offer. I definitely believe that. And I think that the more we do these events, the workshops, the CPR, the word spreads.

MHA: And you-- it sounds like you do go down to the waterfront.

DK: I love to go to the waterfront. That's my favorite place to be. You have to go to where they are, I do-- I find-- I make out-- I will see way more fishermen, obviously, if I got to the waterfront than if I were just to sit here all day. I mean lots of guys-- this is a heavily-- you know there's the sector manager downstairs and then we have Joan doing the settlements. So there's a lot of fishermen that come in here, but for me the waterfront-- on my way to work, I drive down all three just to see what boats are in, what boats are out. Just so they keep seeing me. I feel like the more I go down there, the more comfortable they are with talking to me. They're actually happy to see me now. I can see the smiles from all the way down there when they-- you know. So yeah, I go-- I attend industry meetings. I volunteer with other fishing organizations to do Veterans Day, to take out inner-city kids, I mean, you got to go where they are and you have to be part of their life. And I am. And I'm happy to do that. I go to MLA meetings. I go to Boston Harbor meetings. I, whatever, that's how I let them know who we are and what we have to offer and if I didn't go to those things, it would just be pointless.

MHA: So most of-- probably most people know about you through word-of-mouth?

[24:43] Yes. Definitely, through word-of-mouth. And like I notice with the health insurance for example. Like four years ago-- I mean, I still see the people, I see some of the same people coming for insurance today, as I did four years ago. Those were like captains, boat owners, shore side-- I see more now... crew. Oh, my captain told me you helped him out, he told me to come here, come see you. Or I'll have a captain come in, "hey, I brought these two, they need help"-- it's just-- so yes, word-of-mouth. Definitely. Word-of-mouth.

MHA: So do you see any change in your-- in-- well it's only been 5 years but have you seen change at all in say, the age? The average age of the fishermen?

DK: It's so funny because I-- you know it all depends on the fishery, when you think about it. I see these young lobstermen. I see these young scallopers. So when people ask me, oh-- or say fishermen are aging out, aging out, I don't know-- in some, yes, but in others I see younger-- especially in the lobster and the scalloping industry there's younger fishermen. It is only been a short time. If anything I've noticed I'm-- in the last 5 years I've assisted more younger fishermen, then I knew there were. Especially when I'm assisting with Maine fishermen. Those are all 16-year old young boys, that's amazing to me. I love to see that. I think that... I think part of the reason why there aren't so many younger fishermen maybe in the fisheries that we are most familiar with is... all the regulations and all-- it just-- I hear guys saying to their kids, "no, you don't want to be a fisherman." I'm like Wahhh! That's hurts my heart. But, it's like, it's not worth it. They should go to school or get another job because it's not going to be here anymore or, it's just not worth it. They're not talking about the danger. It's the going out and being limited and so, I don't know. I feel that I see-- I've seen a lot more younger fishermen then I thought there were. Maybe that's because I've gotten more involved with... in other fisheries.

MHA: Now when you first became involved with the industry as a wife; did you find that hard to adjust to?

DK: Oh my gosh. So like these-- these financial workshops that we hold now are in part was something that-- so I worked on land and I was used to getting paid to either every week or every other week. My household, I knew how to budget based on every week or every other week and now I get married and now I don't know when my husband's getting paid and I don't know how much my husband's getting paid and I don't know if this month it's going to be \$400 or if it's going to be \$4,000. That was very stressful for me. I was always worried. I never wanted to spend any money because I didn't know-- I knew what was going out, I just didn't know what was coming in. And that was very stressful and I didn't know how to budget and I didn't know who to turn to. And then I felt a little embarrassed to try to talk to other people about such private things. So it was a big adjustment. I was used to my partner being home at night, taking out the trash, being an equal partner, not all of a sudden for 14 days I'm running this house, I'm the queen of the castle, I have all the responsibilities. And then, all of a sudden you've got to step aside because now your man's home and he wants to be the king of the castle and he wants to run the house. So it was very challenging. And I wished back then that I had a group of wives... that I could ask these questions to or just say, hey, I feel like this sometimes, like I can't wait for him to go, like is that bad? So that's what I like--- a part of what I do here is that we do have these financial workshops and we do have these opportunities where we can gather and talk freely and comfortably and you're with your own. So yeah, that was quite the challenge. It was scary. I just never felt... comfortable because I never knew when he came in. What if the price of fish went down? What if, whatever. You never knew, nothing was like-- nothing was for sure, where at least with an on land job, you know that in two weeks you're going to get so much and you can plan on that. In this crazy world of fishing, you can't count or plan on anything. You're going to be in for Christmas? I don't know. You want to schedule a doctor's appointment 6 months from now; how the heck do you know if-- like that was part of the problem with my own husband.

Part of the reason why we did partner with the van. Like for a simple flu shot or a tetanus shot. They don't have time for that. So it was like well, maybe if we can bring it to them at least they'll get their flu shot, at least they'll get their tetanus shot, at least they can get their blood pressure checked. Oh, if your sugar's high, at least it gave them-- it was something, more than nothing, which that's all they had time for. Nothing.

[32:05] MHA: I'm curious too about the health-- the mental health aspect, I know that a lot of people are under pressure from the regulations and the changes.

DK: Absolutely, that's part of the reason why--I think that's part of why Fishing Partnership has partnered with this Riverside Trauma Center to help... to help talk about these issues. To help... realize that whatever feelings you're feeling are valid and that everybody can deal with things differently and that mental health is part of your whole health and we-- you know we've been focusing all on the physical stuff, but we're hearing more and more-- we know-- knowing more-- there's the mental part is needed as well to keep you all in balance. So I mean, I think that it is a challenge to get people to talk about mental health. But it was also a challenge to talk about opioid awareness and alcohol abuse. But the more you talk about it the more people are-- they've been open about it...

MHA: How about abusive family relations. Are those showing up at all?

DK: So if they are... if they are, I've not had that conversation or any... well... that's not true, there is one family in particular where I-- the husband actually said something to me about his wife, when she drinks, hits him. And it was-- we were actually-- I was volunteering for another fishing-- and we were doing a Veteran's Day for the vets and there was like 20 lobster boats and we were all just talking and I-- you know I met his wife because it was like my third year doing it so I was like how is your wife? And he was like, ugh, things are not good. Things are not good, I don't know if it's going to work out and I'm like, I'm so sorry and he's like, well it's not cheating, it's not cheating and I'm like, oh, okay and he's like, but when she drinks she just like to [claps]. Oh my god. So I just-- you know, I listened and all I could say to him was that if at any time he wanted to talk about it that I could-- I'd be happy to talk to him about it, but that I was not a professional, so that if he was looking for somebody that could really help him out I could connect him with that person and it's thank you but it's not-- it hasn't come to happen. But at least we had that conversation.

[35:26] MHA: Right.

DK: And he brought it up. You know? But it was weird because-- but it was outside of work. We were doing a volunteering thing and now this is the third year in a row that I had done it with them and...

MHA: Huh.

DK: You know, and I had... a person approach me who thought they had maybe an alcohol problem and I said I can set something up with such and such, all you have to do is call me and within three days, I just gave him all the info and I haven't heard from him and if I do I will follow through, and if I don't at least he knows that if and when he's ready, there's somebody here who's like yeah, we've got you. We've got you over here, so.

MHA: I know that was one of the few years when we were doing social impact assessments when they started putting in the new ground fish regulations and so on, that there would be more mental health issues, alcoholism and domestic abuse, that kind of thing, so.

DK: Absolutely... I mean, definitely. You know it's just I guess it's trying to take away the stigma that... mental health means you're mental, you know? But I think that it can be done, you just have to do it delicately and you have to be sincere when you talk to these families about wanting to help, because they know a bull-shitter. You can't bullshit a bull-shitter.

MHA: [laughing] So when you first got started was there any push back from women since you were--?

DK: A girl, since I'm a girl. You know, I... I honestly don't feel that there ever has been. And I'm very-- I'm very sensitive that I am a woman working in a man's world and I am very sensitive to spouses and I always try to present myself in a professional manner, caring, but a professional manner because I want-- I never want a wife to feel like threatened or uncomfortable. I want her to be able to come to me with an issue and I want her to feel comfortable that I'm calling her husband to ask him to come to CPR. So I honestly... I haven't felt that way. I really haven't.

MHA: How about other women on the waterfront? Do you see anybody in what were traditionally male-- men's jobs and... do you see any push back for them?

DK: No way, I think the women-- I think the industry is led by women when-- you know, look at Joan Fenner, look at Anne, we've got Edie and Marie over here. We have Virginia. No and I think... nope. I don't know, I ... I don't really know if when these guys look at us, if they see man or woman, or if they just see this is a person who's true and wants to help. That's how I'd like to think that when people look at me. They don't see five feet, you little,... you know, they just see this good person who wants to give back for all that I've been given. That I just--that's how-- when I look at a person, I don't see age, I don't see gender. I've never been like that. That's why if somebody asks me how old do you think I am, I have no idea. Because quite frankly I just see the person-- a person. And either you're good to me or you're not. You know? Simple.

[40:02] MHA: So what do you think is the hardest part of your job?

DK: Oh, the hardest part about my job would be disconnecting my feelings. That's the hardest part. I get-- when somebody's hurting whether it be whatever, they have a toothache or their husband is lost at sea... or they're having trouble with health insurance, I worry and I think about

it and I carry it with me. I definitely-- I try to, I want to make everybody feel like so good, so sometimes I just take on too much and I hold it in my heart. That's I think the-- that's the hardest part for me is like, letting go. You know, I assisted this fisherman's wife two years ago with health insurance. There was a particular medication that she needed to take. So we check that medication is on the formulary, which means it's covered. So she enrolls in that plan, she gets going, then she calls me and—well, she couldn't get that medication, even though it was on the formulary, the reason she couldn't get it was because her numbers weren't high enough. I mean it was just so stupid, but do you know that... that totally freaked me out for a long time. I was like what more could I have done to make sure-- and there was nothing more that I could have done. There was nothing more that I could have done, it was up to-- it's up to the doctors and pharmaceutical companies, whatever percentage you have to be at, in order to be able to receive this particular medication. But stuff like that, that stays with me. She wasn't upset, it was nothing that I did, but I felt like... did I not do due diligence? Could I have done more? I worried because now she can't have her medicine. It was weird. That sort of stuff that-- you know these ladies that, you know, their husbands are lost. I thought about them all Christmas and New Year's, just thinking about what are they doing, what are they feeling, what about their kids. Just ... that's the stuff that... but that's good stuff too, I guess.

MHA: Well what's your favorite part about the job?

DK: I don't know, I have a lot of favorite parts of my job. I guess... I love the safety trainings. I do, I love safety trainings, I feel that that makes a big difference and that it's, we're making it-- we're helping to keep bringing these guys home to their wives and to their kids which is all-- what-- I always wanted my husband to come home, so I mean that's one of my favorite parts. Safety training and watching these guys go through safety trainings and see them shooting off the flares, putting out fires and getting their survival suit on and then hearing them say, “wow that was excellent,” or “I didn't know about this” or, “oh, my survival suit had a leak.” I feel that the safety trainings, after every safety training, I know that we have touched, we've made a difference in at least one person's life if not many. So that's one of my favorite parts of the job is my safety trainings, I love that.

MHA: Have you ever gotten into a survival suit--?

DK: Oh yes. Oh yes. Because I-- a couple years ago we were at the Mass Lobstermen's Association Weekend and we were doing a pool module there and there were two fishermen and there was an older one and I was-- I said to him, I'll do it if you do it, so the next morning I got in my survival suit—actually, Lauren did it that day too and we went in with the other two fishermen and we did the-- we did all the maneuvers and the worst part was-- by the time we did all the maneuvers I was great, so now I was the second one to get into the life raft and I got up to my waist and I couldn't kick anymore. I had no energy I was like, please pull me in.

BOTH: [laughing]

[45:05] DK: All those maneuvers were exhausting because I can't-- I need to put my money where my mouth is. So then-- now I say, when I hear a guy ugh, I'm claustrophobic, I'm like, if I can do it, you can do it. Or I'll be like, "I'll do it with you if you want." Like with my CPR Class coming up next week, I'm like, "come take CPR with me" because I will be right down there on the floor doing it with them. I'll take one for the team, I don't care, I take CPR every year because-- and they all love it. They all love it that I'm doing CPR with them. Or that I'm going in the pool. They're like wow, alright, she's not all just talk, she will... so get in there-- get in the trenches, get on the boats and-- I'm not afraid. I'll go fishing with you [laughing].

MHA: Have you ever gone out?

DK: I've been out lobstering, just on day boats I've not gone out... lobstering is pretty cool. I would like to go, I'd like to see clamming and I'd like to see how long-lining is done. I'd love to see how clamming is done.

MHA: How many clam boats are there?

DK: There's a few of them here, three, maybe four. Yep. I'd like to see that. But lobstering yeah I've done that. That's all cool. I don't know if I could leave my family like these guys do. It's tough.

MHA: So you have a son, do you have other?

DK: No, just my son. He's 26. He could never be a fisherman.

MHA: [laughing]

DK: He did, he used to come and clean out the hold-- do the boards but, yeah. It takes a special kind of person to do that.

MHA: Can you elaborate on that?

DK: Alright, well first of all I think you have to be like one with the universe. Think about it. Their lives is by the ebb and the flow it's just amazing-- I think you need to be-- you like to be your own boss. You're very independent. You need to be a hard worker. You need to know how to sacrifice: sleep, food, family, deprive yourself of all the luxuries. Yeah, you have to be pretty special to be able to give up all the... to me they're luxuries that we have. You know where you're laying your bed every night. You know you're going to look over and your wife is there. You know you're going to get up you're going to have eggs and toast, your kids are going to go to school. That's not how they live. They may get up thinking they're going fishing and they get up and the tide's this or the wind's that and now it's, okay, switch gears. And I guess maybe you have to be... selfless, because I'm too selfish. I don't want to be away from home. I don't want to be missing my family. I don't want to be afraid out there.

MHA: Do people talk about that at all? Do they talk about the fear?

[48:50] DK: Sure they talk about when something has happened like... the Pilgrim. I don't know if you've heard of the Pilgrim. They're a long-liner. Anyway he's-- the captain was in here and he was like I had to jog for 23 hours before another vessel could-- his mast broke, so the Coast Guard, they had called the Coast Guard and everything but-- so yeah, he sat here and he was just like talking about the 23 hours of jogging and then wondering, because the mast was in the water and he was like, that's why I'm all about safety, and I know-- since I've known him, he's been through at least three safety trainings. Yeah, because I'll ask him, how was it out there? What was the weather like? Yeah, they... they get scared. I think a lot of them don't want to talk about it. Don't like to think about it. And then some might think you're jinxing it, if you talk about it. And then others are just-- because like I said to them, you need to come in March so you can tell your story and he's like, I have no problem doing that. It all depends on the person. But like, yeah. This particular guy, he had-- he's like, "I was scared, we all had our survival suits on." Yep. "Made the Mayday call."

MHA: So did the Coast Guard get him, or?

DK: No, actually the sister ship went out and got them. So it's Linda McCann downstairs. It was her husband's two boats. So that was her step-son who was one captain, the captain that was out there and then, I guess, her husband. And he said-- oh he said he was calling the Coast Guard and either the Coast Guard couldn't hear him, so that's when he said he called Linda for her to call the Coast Guard. So that's weird too. And that's actually. So yeah, they do, or and it's-- especially at safety trainings, you know, they'll be like has anybody been on a boat that had a fire? You know, somebody will raise his hand and he'll talk about it and then that encourages, oh well, "I had one too," so I think safety trainings is awesome because it is like a gathering. I remember when we first started, the instructors were like, well we should try to keep lobster men with lobster men you know because its different fisheries, and I was like no.

MHA: [chuckling]

DK: No, I was never for that. Let them all be together. Let them all get to meet each other. Oh, this is what I do, oh well, this is what I do. So I think it's great, because we don't segregate or-- it's all, you get to learn what a dragger does, what a long-liner does.

MHA: That's good. So... how many people work here?

DK: In the New Bedford office?

MHA: Mhm.

DK: So it's Monica and myself and then Verna is coming back two days a week, I guess, starting next week. So there's yeah.

MHA: And how many altogether?

DK: There's Nina and Angela in Gloucester, and then there's Morgan and Shannon in Chatham and Laurie is in Plymouth and Monica and myself, and then Verna. So eight of us.

MHA: And I know sometimes you end up going up to Maine? So it is one of?

DK: So what it is, is that's the Maine Lobstermen's association and somehow, I don't know how, but there's some grant money that pays for... the Navigator in Maine. I can't think of her name now. So yeah but I think that's grant money that pays for her to be a Navigator in Maine. So she doesn't do-- they don't do all-- the only thing they do that we do is the health insurance. There's no-- I mean there's safety trainings that we bring up there, those are grants too. I don't think they come from Maine Lobstermen's Association.

MHA: So does the Partnership still rely on grant money mainly to keep going? So JJ is in charge of getting the grant?

DK: Yeah, that's all their stuff. Yeah I don't know anything about that.

MHA: [laughing]

DK: I'm so glad that's not on me. But yeah. I think there might be some... private donations but I think that from what I know it's mostly grants. Federal and state.

MHA: So do you ever have anxiety about whether they'll be able to keep getting grants or?

DK: Well you know what, I figure... I don't worry, I just figure Fishing Partnership has been around since 1997 so if they could go-- if they could withstand these 20 years-- because I feel we bring so much to the industry, it's not like we're just health insurance, it's not like we're just safety. So no, I don't worry because what's worrying going to do? All I worry about is-- doing what I can to do, right now while I'm here, to do what I can. Tomorrow is another day. We'll see-- we'll get to that when it comes.

[55:12] MHA: That's great. So I think I asked you all the questions that I planned to ask you. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that I should have?

DK: I don't think so.

MHA: Or how about anything that you would like to make sure that when we start designing our next couple of exhibits that we... say about either the Partnership or just in general, the services you provide.

DK: You know, I just want people to know that the Partnership is here and that we are from the community, we are fishing families so... we get it. I understand your struggle, I understand your way of life, I understand your challenges. This is a no judgment zone and I'm just-- we're here to help in any way we can. That's it. Plain and simple. I love you man!

BOTH: [laughing]

MHA: And who would have thought when you--

DK: No kidding!

MHA: --were in high school?

DK: Never. I worked in printing for 20 years. Printing was my-- I worked in commercial printing that was what I did. I knew that like the back of my hand. I made a decent living, I was able to raise my son on that pay and then, I got laid off. There was years of layoffs and I was-- I kept seeing three years of layoffs, all of a sudden I was like, "oh my God, my time is coming soon" you know? And it did. I decided well, since printing is no more, I thought I was going to go into the medical field. I went to the Salter School full time for 10 months, I became a medical assistant, I graduated with a 4.0 GPA, and then I started doing it, and I don't like to touch people.

MHA: [laughing]

DK: So I was like, oh, I do not like to touch people and I don't like people touching me. Oh my God. So then it was like, "now what?" Now what? And then like I said, it was like a miracle-- walked into Reidar's and Kirsten was like, you looking for a full-time job? She's like, they're looking for a fisherman's wife to be an advocate and I thought of you immediately and I was like yes, I am!

MHA: [laughing]

DK: And I thought, wow, what a dream come true. How awesome to be helping an industry, to be helping my own. It's the best. The best.

MAH: That's true. Well, Debby, I really appreciate the time.

DK: Awesome, no, this was my pleasure I hope-- I know I'm all over the place because my brain goes like ch-ch-ch-ch.

[58:06]