



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

January 5, 2017

Bergeron, Mark ~ Oral History Interview

Madeleine Hall-Arber

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

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Interview with Mark Bergeron, January 5, 2017

Background

Name of person interviewed: Mark Bergeron [MB]

Facts about this person:

Age 60
Sex Male
Occupation Co-owner of Bergies Seafood
Residence: New Bedford
Ethnic background: (if known) French

Interviewer: Madeleine Hall-Arber [MHA]

Transcriber: Kyle [KZ]

Interview location: Bergies Seafood, New Bedford, MA

Date of interview: January 5, 2017

Key Words

Trawlers, Scalloping, Fishing Industry, Unions, Waterfront, Business, New Bedford, Restrictions, Government, Policy, Cutters, Fisheries, Community

Abstract

The son of a scalloper, Mark was introduced to the waterfront early. Not knowing what he wanted to do as a career after graduating from high school, he started buying and selling fish. Eventually, he and his partner worked their way up from nothing to buying Bergies. He discusses the changes in the business from when he started, especially the harsh realities of today that are a consequence of strict regulations (so fewer fish being landed) and changes in technology that has taken the jobs of many workers. Nevertheless, he has three children in various aspects of the business, so his goal is to provide both a living wage for his workers and a viable business that will continue to provide for his family. Mark also comments on the unions and on women on the waterfront.

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[0:00] Introduction; Owner of Bergies Seafood --- New Bedford owned and operated; Family involvement in the fishing industry and the Greater New Bedford Area.

[5:00] Fishing Industry Regulations --- Mark talks about how things used to operate on the docks before massive government regulation became instituted. Mark points to the hurt that the waterfront in New Bedford is feeling.

[10:00] Regulations and Driving for Success in a tight industry --- Mark talks about how the waterfront used to allow for ambition and working long hours

[15:00] Quality Fish and their Market Value --- discussing prize fish, hundreds of thousands of pounds of catch per boat, to a lack of weight and smaller sizes seen today in fish.

[20:00] Sustainability, Long Hours, and the World Market's lack of regulation

[25:00] Fishing used to allow for a chance at making money. Now it is difficult to ensure that workers' expectations are met.

[30:00] The old bustling waterfront, high weekly wages. The crippled industry now.

[35:00] Government is choking out the Fishing Industry with regulations that target their jobs instead of finding definitive causes for trends of sustainability in fish. Seals could even be an answer.

[40:00] Mark is discussing the possibly future trajectory of his business. What will become of the industry and even small businesses such as his.

[45:00] Mark talks about having a working class sense of pride. Discusses the existence of unions before they disbanded.

[50:00] A female labor force on the waterfront and the kinds of jobs they do.

[55:00] Sacrifice and impending retirement – Mark talks about what it takes to be a member of the New Bedford Fishing Community

[1:00:00] Retirement for Mark --- Mark tries to think of ways to phase himself out of his business in the near future.

[1:05:00] Talks of vacationing in Aruba and Galapagos Islands with MHA.

[1:10:00] Meeting with Mitt Romney and Healy during gubernatorial campaigns.

[1:12:20] End of Audio

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Madeleine Hall-Arber: Okay, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourself. Just give me your name and I'll check to make sure it is picking you up.

Mark Bergeron: My name is Mark Bergeron.

MHA: Okay great. I'm going to give a little formal introduction just for the purposes of the tape. This is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center funded by an Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress. As part of this project we are interviewing shore side workers in the New Bedford-Fairhaven fishing industry to record their stories, document their skills and knowledge, and better understand their important role in the fishing industry. The recording and transcript will become part of the permanent collection at the Library of Congress. I am Madeleine Hall-Arber and today I am speaking with Mark Bergeron at Bergies. The time is about 9:20

MB: [unintelligible]

MHA: Um, so again, can you tell me your name and what your job in the fishing industry is?

MB: My name is Mark Bergeron and my partner and I started Bergies Seafood back in 1984, if I'm not mistaken. And we would go down and load boats and sell fish and we watched a lot of things take place from an abundance of fish to laws of restricting fish and as years progressed, if I'm saying the word right, the changes were remarkable where it hurt quite a few people. Some of the things are necessary that have had to take place. A lot of the things we feel that are very unnecessary.

MHA: So you've noticed that with the numbers of boats and the amounts coming in that kind of thing?

MB: Well the number, when we... we... I have been down, Bergies seafood has been here, I think now, for 32 or 33 years, but where I have been down here since maybe 1975, with my father. I used to go unload my father's scalloper when he would come in from fishing and that's how I got introduced to being down here. Uh, which my father didn't want me to have anything to do with being down here

MHA: Really?

MB: Well, not for any special reason, just figured that there was something else better in life to do than, than what they did and I had no damn clue what I wanted to do to be honest with you. You know, most people when they went to high school, they had an idea of what they wanted to do when they wanted to come out of high school. I was one of those kids that didn't have any clue and, you know, God had a direction for me to take and I've taken it and never looked back.

MHA: So did you ever actually go out fishing with your dad?

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MB: No, I never went out fishing with my dad. I did go out and it just wasn't for me. Uh, I've done it. I actually went out on one of my boats with my youngest son maybe 4 or 5 years ago and I had no issues with it and they actually wanted the, figured they were going to make fun of me and everything like that, and they were surprised that I would be able to keep up with them because the way they fish today and what it was back then is completely different. Today they have it easy. They have luxury hotels out there, its not what it used to be but you know. And we used to work very hard back then for very little. You know. And it's just--

MHA: So where did you, I assume you grew up here-

MB: I grew up in New Bedford, Yes.

MHA: And where was your father from?

MB: My father was from New Bedford. Yeah my father started fishing after he came out of the, a career, started fishing in the early 50's. My father fished over 40 something years.

MHA: Wow. Always scalloping or?

MB: No, both scalloping and dragging. It was just as it is today. Its good to know both trades and so I got to see, not understanding other than being gone from home, the sacrifice that was made and being young never realized when you didn't come home it meant that you were dead. And what they had to put up with back then, again the boats back then were nothing like the boats they have today. Along with the way the way the weather forecast and all these things from the time that they left and it was it you know? But I've seen huge things. I've seen it where boats would come in, draggers,

(5:00)

MB: (continued) sometimes a common hundred thousand pounds of fish and all nice size fish and everything but to where it got very bleak, where'd you go out for 8 to 10 days and come in with 8, 10 thousand pounds of fish and that's where government started to step in blah blah blah. You know, I don't know. I'm not very well educated on how it all took place but then that 200-mile Russian limit thing took place and they just, I think they just made way too many boats and never really studied the impact of what would take place and you know sometimes, there's a saying too much too late or something - [interrupted]

MHA: Too little too late, yeah.

MB: So now they are trying to correct all of these mistakes but in the meantime, it's robbed everybody. It has taken everyone, a lot of us have aged. I mean we are all going to age but it's a lot of stress. More than one of us. Just trying to figure out how each year, you figure this is the last year according to how they-- when they go and make their plans on, on, this year of fishing. If we do this, if we do this, then everything should be fine. We'll do this for so many years and every year it's something different, something different, and each year there is less and less and

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less. And I remember once being at a meeting and the guy said, I think there was 1600 dragging permits at the particular time, talking maybe 15 to 20 years ago. They said as far as they were concerned, they want to get down until there were 4 or 5 hundred permits. They didn't care how they got down to that and who stood it, but that was a number they wanted to get down to. So it's like, basically for someone who really doesn't understand that, may one person said it was like a piece of pie. You have so many people you are going to feed and you cut up that piece of pie to where that piece of pie doesn't satisfy you or it is not doing you any good so you drop out. You know, and the longer you stay in, of course the more you have to put in, in order to stay in, hoping that it's going to turn around so the thing that you always wanted to do would always be there but in a lot of the cases it's not... it didn't come out that way. So there's a lot of hardship.

MHA: Yeah, um let's see. Your father grew up here in New Bedford. Did his family as well? And your mother too?

MB: My mother came from- my father - my mother came from England. She came over just after the war. She was, she worked for, I think it was AT&T over in England and then she was on a work program or something where she would come over here and they were teaching one another different things, cause that was the old days where I remember you going down as a little boy over here, oh I forgot what the street is, and there would be maybe 40 computers with all these little wires and like you are with the thing on and that is what my mother did and that is what I remember about my mother.

MHA: So I assume that you have a lot of neighbors and friends who are also in the fishing business.

MB: Quite a few, yeah.

MHA: And so that's where you've seen some of the impacts, I imagine.

MB: Yeah, we have quite a few people over the years, of course as part of the industry, that like I said are left and never come home. A lot of the ones of us that invested into the business lose almost everything, if not everything. And it's just a sad sight to see. Slow death.

MHA: So how did you- you started you said, you and your partner founded-

MB: My partner's name is Sunny Stanley.

MHA: And how, what made you decide to start Bergies?

MB: We just, we worked for a man named Eddie Apposa and just, what we did for him we just figured we could do for ourselves. Started with nothing. The man that owned this building, he gave us the opportunity to work in this building. We were supplying with fish. We would go out and take turns and work x amount of hours everyday.

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MB: (continued) Sometimes you'd work, believe it or not, 48 hours, 60 hours, or even longer. But you had to do that, because that's what you did. That's what the industry required you to do in order to be successful.

MHA: So how did you get boats to come to you rather than-

MB: Well you just went and did what you would do when I worked, when we worked for Eddie the Polack and we just did the same thing. We'd just go over there, you'd bid on fish, and you would buy their fish and they would come and if they liked you, its just like you go to a particular supermarket or a particular show where its something you like and that brings you back, and honesty for the most buyers, but its hard to come by, if you talk to other people down there and its just part of the character I guess this industry brings, but you do have a relationship to build with people after a while and some of the people that choose, like my partner and I chose to do this, and we have friends that chose to go fishing and because of the relationship beforehand, they'd come here and give us a crack and just before you know it, you just went.

MHA: So when you started out, you bought fish on the auction?

MB: We would buy fish from the auction or boats would come and drop off their lobsters and that's what you did. You started small and it didn't happen overnight. It took us 33 years to get to where we are now along with all the cutbacks and all the crap that we have had to go through and it's just trying to rearrange everything all the time each year. Every time they make a move, you got to make a move and hopefully its the right move but you never really know but you have the faith in the man upstairs and you make it work.

MHA: So what kinds of species do you take now?

MB: Everything. I mean nothing really changed other than like- When my partner and I started we used to have swordfish, we used to have tuna, we used to take out Rodney Avila's boat. He used to come in with swordfish, actually maybe 5 or 6 boats and that's all gone. That's something we really won't see anymore. That's taken away.

MHA: The swordfish

MB: The swordfish is taken away. I mean we were taking out swordfish from, O'Hara would have contacts from Boston and he would send his boats over here. Swordfish you chase that, you chase that and it goes to Canada then it goes up into Portugal, then it goes down into South America, so when they are chasing it, of course you lose that business because they have to go to the nearest ports. But when it came time to get back here, when O'Hara would get his boats, we would always take them out, but before that we would have our own like Rodney Avila, *Southern Seas*, his partner, Bobby, [unintelligible], *Harry One*, *Rosemarie*, *Unicorn*, *Quits Australia*. People have done this their whole lives. You could see, you'd get 5-6 hundred pound fish and then there'd be, you could see as the years went on that the fish would drop down sometimes to like 20 or 30 pound fish. You wouldn't see a lot of that, but you know when you started seeing that, you knew there wasn't as many big, they were smaller. You knew something was going to take place. And it's done.

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MHA: Yeah, I've talked to Rodney about that before. He said he thought that the harpooning was a better way.

MB: It is a better way because you get, as the fish breach you can more or less judge the size and you know you wouldn't- It's like going out shooting for deer, you don't shoot a Bambi, you know what I mean? I mean that's foolish. But some people could give a rat's ass about that and they want to kill it anyways. If I'm out in the woods I'm going to come out with something cause that's the wrong way to be because that way is where we are today. Just like with halibut, halibut. They used to take out halibut way back in the late 70's early 80's, my God. We used to have large yellowtail bigger than some halibut. But now with the new restrictions its, some of the restrictions and laws are good in order to save this industry. Now the halibuts you can see over the last two or three years, beautiful. They are 40, 50, sometimes 100 or more pound fish. Last year one time it was

(15:00)

MB: (continued) most probably on accident but we had a halibut off, I can't remember the boat but it's in the Standard Times. 357-pound fish.

MHA: Wow

MB: 7 1/2 feet

MHA: Oh my goodness.

MB: Huge, Huge! Huge. My God.

MHA: So where can you market something like that [laughter].

MB: My partner ended up selling it, but it's difficult to sell something that big. A nice marketable halibut is 25 to 75 pound fish, those are those are premium fish. It's like a 2 to 3 pound lobster. Those are premium, you know, so. You just have to go out there and find the people that are looking for a product and hope that you can, can have their trust and hopefully the boats bring that in and you market that and they keep calling you, all through word of mouth in the beginning and put the right people in the right places, and let the man upstairs direct you.

MHA: So you don't go through the auction these days, right?

MB: Oh yeah, we buy from the New Bedford auction here, and the auction up in Boston and then we also buy from Cape Anne auction up in Gloucester so we have 3 different auctions we buy by fish from. Plus we source fish from other people like us that have their boats and... We buy fish from everywhere.

MHA: And then you cut it?

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MB: We bring it in and then we cut it and then my sales people go out and they don't stop.

MHA: How do you get your customers?

MB: You got to get on the phone. And again it's all, I could sell you something and what I'm selling you there's 50 other people trying to sell you the same thing and you have to build a relationship and hopefully, I mean we all basically, not all the time have the same kind of fish. Sometimes yours is a little bit better, sometimes yours isn't, and then you just got to be able to know where to go with it, you know?

MHA: So do you have to, or do you direct your boats at all? You don't have any boats that you own, right?

MB: 3

MHA: Oh, you do!

MB: We have 3.

MHA: So do you tell them [phone ringing] what species you'd like them to bring in?

MB: It's not that easy because you're given x amount of fish each fishing year. So you might not have as much fish. Like if I want codfish, to go get codfish for a particular time of the season, maybe Lent, or whatever, codfish is very limited to all our boats. So if you use, if you go and use that fish and you can't buy it. If you take more fish than what you've been allocated, you have to go to the sector. The sector gives you the fish, but once there's no more of that fish, your other fish that you haven't used yet you can't go get, because in case you catch cod, you're screwed. But now you have to be very careful, very selective of when you can go and try to pick the right times of the year. It's difficult. I mean, this year for the first time, flounder as a rule are very cheap in the summer time. Summer time it's more of a, especially around September, Labor Day, Memorial Day, um Fourth of July. But anyways, summertime is usually a lot more with lobsters and sword and tuna and clams, blah blah blah. I mean there's still fish, but fish is cheaper. But because of the big shortage, they had a 60% reduction last year of flounders. So if you had 200,000 pounds of flounders to go get the year before, they took 120,000 pounds away from you. Now you have 80,000 pounds of flounder to go get and you have to be very careful that, because you don't know when you set your net. You could get a big set and catch 20,000 pounds and now you, how many trips you got left? 3? You know? So you have to be very careful on how you're fishing but to get back, this year flounders were extremely high, they were in the 4 dollar, for summer and they are usually 60-80 cents. They lost that 60% but the price being where it was helped them, but the consumer had to pick it up. So there is a cutoff before when you go and sit down and go eat. Am I going to eat prime rib at 15 dollars a plate or I'm eating a piece of fish

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MB: (continued) for 30 dollars. Where restaurants would be forced to take that off. The boat and the boat would go out and would always say well what are you going to do? What are you going

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to do? We have to have this. At one time that would be okay, back in the 70s or 80's but because you can get fish from everywhere now. From China. Our fish is no longer. People are going to go and get the cheapest they can because they have to manage their households, you know. And that hurts our boats because of the quantity that they can bring in, it's very limited. So if they don't get a decent price that particular trip, they only have a few more trips left in the year.

MHA: So do you see that the general push for buying local is that helping at all? Have you seen that yet reflected in your business?

MB: I mean you always try to, always try to convince people that buying local is the best way to go but again it's what-- If local is like no you've got codfish this week, for whole codfish it's 5.50 to 6 dollars a pound before you cut it and sell it. So if you were to cut it and sell it and I mean, I'm not one of my people and I overheard them say today, codfish would be 15 dollars or 17 dollars a pound. Now you can go buy refresh fish cod caught in Alaska or from Norway for like maybe 6 or 7 dollars a pound and not really tell that much of a difference. So if your budget in your household and your buying something at 17 dollars or you're going to go buy this at 6 or 7 dollars, so it kind of hurts us locally, but it's good for the boat, but it kills us here.

MHA: It's good for the boat only if you can sell it [laughter]

MB: Yeah, only if you can sell it. Like, I bought 1500 pounds today, it doesn't, I mean 1500 pounds, my god that's nothing, but it will probably take you the rest of the week to get rid of it, and I'm hoping that the market, and the only reason why cod is so high is because there is a strike in Iceland. So that supply isn't coming here, you know? And then you got the people in Alaska that see all these things going and they are just like, we have to pay attention to all the markets that are taking place and they see rules and the supply that we're going to get and they see what's going on in Iceland or Norway and then they, their prices go up. So everything continues to go. I don't know if I'm saying the right thing, or not.

MHA: No, it's, uh, fascinating. The, um, you know you always - in high school and college, you hear about supply in demand but to hear it actually in real life terms is very helpful. Real examples. So let's see. So you guys started, how has your day changed over the years?

MB: Well like when we first started I used to have, on the back dock, we used to work out of three plants. That's how many boats there were, and we had a good business. But as the boats disappeared, you didn't need the other facilities, you didn't need as many people. But now I'm down to on my back dock maybe 6, 7 people from about, maybe at one time a good, 20 to 30 people throughout, and we would be 24 hours a day. It's still a 24 hour a day business, but basically everybody's trained - you try to train everybody to come in at a certain time, so you don't have to be up for the 24 hours anymore. You know. Which at 60 years old, it's a lot better for me. You know. It was tough and you know people don't realize the sacrifice on all the ends of this business that when we, when it was at the peak that, you try telling somebody that you would be up and watch the sun come up and down two or three times before you went to bed. I mean there would be times I'd go home sometimes and be like maybe two and a half days before I went to the house and you sit down

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MB: (continued) and because of the heat because you're out in the cold all the time and then you get in to the house and you've been up that long, you just start falling asleep at the supper table, but it's the way it used to be. Because then there would be times after a storm would go by, your whole fleet would be tied up and you wouldn't work for a week. So if you could get 80 or 90 hours in, in that one week, it would spill over for that week you only got 20-30 hours. It balanced out, but nothing balances out anymore. It's very difficult now. Very difficult.

MHA: How about your employees? How many employees do you have here?

MB: From both sides I would say maybe all together 60, 65. At one time maybe well over 100.

MHA: And how do you find the employees?

MB: A lot of people just come off the street or you get somebody that is good and their friend is looking for a job, or something to that effect. I mean down here it's not like, working in a lawyer's office or an accountant's office where you need a degree or anything. You just got to be willing to put up with the crap, you know the weather, sometimes stupid hours. It's not the glamorous job in the world, and there have been a lot of people that aren't very well educated, you know? And they end up down here, that's how I ended up down here. I had no idea. And again, like everything I've been through, has been with the grace of God and keeping my faith and you know, always being tested, at every moment.

MHA: So have you found young people still coming in?

[26:59]

MB: It's difficult for the young person coming in because the young person coming in today - same way when I was, when I came down. You're young, you get married, you want kids, you chase the same American dream that you always - that everybody tries to chase. You want to get married, you want to have money, you want to have a nice car, you would like to have a house, you want to be able to put your kids in a good school system. And before, when we first came down, you were able to achieve those things, but today it's very hard to look somebody in the eye and, knowing that this is, why this person chooses to come down here to go to work, or anywhere and tell them I can't guarantee you 40 hours a week. Hopefully, you can and you try to achieve that. That's why I could put a few more people working, but by doing so it lessens for my- So the people that have been with me for years and years, I feel obligated to making sure I come as close as I can to make sure they make a living, so they can do the things that we just talked about. And I got a couple of young kids that I just bring in and I try to guarantee them about 35 to 40 hours and they seem to be content with it. And I mean today it's a whole different time too. Today- Back then, you give me 90 hours, I was looking for more. Today you give a kid freaking 35 hours, he's looking for less. I mean it's unbelievable. I don't know how they do it, but they're content, you know. I'm not really content with something like that because you tell someone to be here at a certain time, "I overslept or didn't feel good. I couldn't find my phone." It's terrible, it's terrible today. That's why you know, it's a few more years, I hope I can get out.

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My son, he's here now, he's been here with me for, I don't know, maybe 15 years. I have my youngest boy he fishes on my boats. He'll do that until long after I'm gone. Hopefully, my partner and I, we can back out of here and still keep the business and the sales, a couple of the-- my partner's brother, and Johnny upstairs, because they still have 15 or 20 years to go. We'll still be able to run the place. And it all depends on what government does. I mean were not going to throw money in if the government's going to keep- I mean there's a point where you're going to realize that enough is enough. And hopefully we're not at that point.

(30:00)

MB: (continued) But I don't feel that we are, although it is hard.

MHA: So how about the cutting side, the filleting side. I assume people come in without skills. Do you have to train them?

MB: Yes, you do. You got to have - One time you couldn't even find a parking spot around here. Now you can come park anywhere you want around here. And there was always people willing to learn and it was a thriving business. Just like when they went to California for the gold or whatever, and it was a beautiful thing and then what's taken place now. Of course technology, you have these cutting machines and they've taken away from the cutters, because at one time it was unions and it was, you had to go by their rules and blah blah blah. Anyways, someone came up and put these machines and, I didn't even know there were people that smart in the world that can put these machines together. And I got a machine over there that can cut in a minute more than what 10 people can cut.

MHA: Clean?

MB: Clean. So you know what I mean, it's kind of like you have to do what you got to do to try to survive and keep going. You know, and then as time started to march on, we got less and less people willing to come down here to learn how to cut fish because again, at one time you could work whatever hours you wanted, you could take home 500 dollars a week back in the early 70s and 80s which was a lot of money, to over 1000 dollars a week. But then these machines came in and less fish, and blah blah blah and pushed them out. With all of the bad publicity in the newspapers about the industry. These people don't float down here anymore. It's very hard.

MHA: So what kind of- Do you have a diverse ethnic population here?

MB: You do. You do. You have a lot of people from South America over here. A lot of Portuguese people. That's been for the most part of my life was the Norwegians and the Portuguese. Then for a time there was the Vietnamese, for a very short period of time and whatever. They all went, I guess, down shrimping.

MHA: They didn't like the cold, I bet.

MB: It was, I mean the government helped them out a lot which made it easier for them, but then as things got tough, they just, they had nothing to lose. But anyways they went down there

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and did their thing. But for the most part it's always been, I believe, Norwegian and Portuguese and who else... I'm probably one of the few French people left down here. Myself and Tichon. And there's probably a few others but you know Cape Verdean.

MHA: So, on the floor do people mostly speak English or is there Spanish a lot now?

MB: A lot of Spanish. A lot a lot of Spanish. There's more Spanish now than, most probably - Just as much Spanish now or more than the Portuguese, you know? And at one time, we all Portuguese. Now you know, I have a fraction of Portuguese.

MHA: How about for you? Can you communicate with them?

MB: I can't. I still can't even speak Portuguese. Excuse me. [aside, "Not now, Chad, not now."]

MHA: So what advice would you give someone starting out today?

MB: That's a good one. I - I wouldn't even have an answer for that right now because I don't know which way - I would just tell the person, always have faith and just got to be willing to sacrifice everything, if you want to succeed. And that's not just in this business. That's in any business, I guess. But in this business, this business, I wouldn't even know what to say in this business. Again, everyday you wake up, every week there's something new. Every year, there's a different restriction, a different amendment and it always seems like when we are supposed to level out, we continue to sink and sink and sink. And then you keep hearing the old timers, which now we're the old timers, but before I, Rodney Avila, and other people, would say it's going to get better, it's going to bottom out and just, my God. The bottom, we don't know where the bottom is. What is the bottom? These other people that seem to control our lives right now, to me, I mean it could just be me being negative because I have a little bit of, I don't know, resentment because a lot of the things they do do - I think it's just like, they want to punish us. It seems like a punishment. I mean some things don't even make any sense. I'm not talking about just somebody that wants to hear themselves speak, but you talk to some fisherman that are very intelligent, that have done it for 20 to 30 years. They see what's actually out there, what's not out there. They keep trying to say it's overfished. How can something be overfished when you're down to maybe 10 percent of what you used to have? And if that is the case, then maybe it's not the fishermen. You know? Maybe they need to go a little bit further and really, really kick the sand around and see what's really - why, why isn't the fish come back to where we thought it wouldn't come back and that's why we put restrictions on it. Is it because of global warming? I mean, what does it take for a fish to be uncomfortable? I mean, I live in the Northeast. If you take someone from Florida and they can't stand being up here in the winter. It's too cold, so they want to go to Florida. Fish, I mean a degree or two in the water temperature might be all it takes for them to move to a colder. And then you have this seal problem that's been going on as we've seen in the last 10 or 15 years. I mean, I just - 2 or 3 months ago I seen a study that they did. An average seal consumed I think 140 pounds of fish a day. A day! An average seal. The seal population has exploded from maybe a few thousand to maybe 20, 30, 40 thousand. So, if that's the case, this is something I saw on the TV from the scientists. They went out on a man's fishing boat and they were - he was talking about that and he says you know, they keep cutting us back. So I got out fishing for the day and I'm only allowed to get 2 or 3 hundred pounds of fish. So I got

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one seal, you know almost half of what I'm allowed to bring in and they keep multiplying. They don't even have an answer for this, but I know a week ago, I heard that they were going to have to, like they do in Canada, figure out a solution because I mean that could be part of the problem. I mean there's an imbalance taking place and they keep blaming the fishermen. The fisherman is the easiest person to go blame.

MHA: Well it's the only thing they can control.

MB: Yeah, but it hurts everybody.

MHA: Of course.

MB: It hurts - I mean it's everybody, and it's wrong. It's like putting someone in jail just because this will keep everybody quiet and the real person is still running around doing what he's going to go do. I hope I'm giving you the right answers.

MHA: Oh, there's no right or wrong in these. It's just what it is.

MB: Well, I don't know if I'm sounding like a moron, that's what I'm trying to say.

MHA: No, no it's very interesting and I really appreciate the time. Now, your kids are both in the business -

MB: All my kids

MHA: All your kids?

MB: I have my daughter, we have a seafood market. My son-in-law and my daughter, they've been over there for, I don't even know how long we've had that market over there. Time goes by so quick. Maybe 10 years now.

MHA: Where is that?

MB: Cape Quality Seafoods on Dartmouth Street. And my son-in-law came in, well, he met my daughter, dated, got married. Been married now for 8 years and have 3 kids and that's what they do and that's why it's important to me that we try to keep everything going as much as I can because all of my kids are webbed into this business, whether it's fishing on my boats or over here on the floor or at the market and restaurant.

MHA: Oh, so there's a restaurant too, there?

MB: Yes.

MHA: So, you have a son that fishes and?

MB: I have a son that fishes and a son that works for me over here, and my daughter works at the restaurant and my son-in-law works in the market.

(40:00)

MB: (continued) and then my grandson, if this is able to stay, and he chooses, because my grandson, I've had him down since he was a little boy. Maybe 3 feet right here. I was teaching him how to cull fish just as Rodney Avila would teach my oldest boy here. But when he was small, Rodney would pay him money so as the scale would come up to say something to Rodney so he knows that we wouldn't put any extra fish in the tub. But my grandson would be the fourth generation. And that's all that anybody would really like to see. I'm not asking, I don't think anybody - You know you just want to do the right thing for your families. And it's hard when someone's trying to take it away and it's only one way. It's that, this is the way we have to do it and there's no compromise, they don't want to compromise with us. They just want to make things - how can they stay in business, how come they are not out of business, how come more people haven't dropped out yet. Because we find a way to survive, you know? And it must puzzle the hell out of these people. It must actually piss them off. [Aside comment]

MHA: So, do you ever get involved in fisheries management at all?

MB: Yeah, one time I did but it got to be too much for me and like I said I'm a little bit hotheaded sometimes. So it's best for me to just do what I do and I have friends. I mean I was on the Trawler Survival Fund with Rodney Avila, Pat Cavanaugh and a few other people. That's not my cup of tea. I don't want to be somewhere to do something that I'm just a figure. I want to be able to be productive. Whatever I choose, I want to be able to be someone that made a difference. Whether, you know, and we all pick our fields, and then someone on the fisheries, God bless them, hope he does the right thing and that's it. I had my chances, but no.

MHA: So, what do you think is the hardest part of your job?

MB: The hardest part of my job is trying to get, keep my people that work for me a comfortable pay. Because I mean, they are giving everything they can to make us where we are today and I, the least I can do for them is try to make them where they want to keep doing it and the only way to do that is by trying to give them as many hours as I can possibly give them. But that's difficult, that's difficult. And the other thing that's difficult is watching everybody that you've grown up with. You see what this industry has done to all of us. I mean it's robbed us. But it's taken a lot of stress, a lot of stress.

MHA: So, what keeps you going? What do you like best about it?

MB: Just every day is different. Every day it's just, it's like playing chess. You're buying fish like everybody else. You might be buying fish and competing against 200 people, 2 thousand people. In order to be in this business for 33 years with all these restrictions, and I'm one of the smaller people, and to be up against some huge, huge people and we're still in here. And to me that's like, that's like being in a Superbowl. You just, you try to get into the playoffs. And being down here everyday is getting into the playoffs. And then just making it work. Making something that

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shouldn't be and turn it into something that is. That's, I get off on that. You know, when someone says that you can't do this and they are well educated or whatever and maybe tons more money than what you have. You take what you have for your workers and your little tools that you have and they're baffled. And then their expression, that look on their face

(45:00)

MB: (continued) to me is like hitting the lottery. I remember one day, I was outside cleaning my parking lot with a hose and a brush and a man came down with a suit and he looked at me like I was a scumbag and you could tell, he didn't really want to talk to me, but he needed to find out where the owner was. But then the expression that he gave me when he saw me with a hose like I was just like a figurehead. And he was trying to sell jacks, power jacks. So I told him because the doors were open, it was in the summertime, you got to go inside so I'll be able to direct you. And knowing that when he walked in, I could see him talking to my guys and then he turned around and when he saw my guys point to me, the expression on his face was worth, again, like hitting the lottery. And then when he came back to me, I told him you screwed up, and I ended up buying 3 or 4 jacks from somebody else, just because of the way he did that. You know, you don't look down on nobody. You know what I mean? You don't look down on anybody. I mean I came from nothing. I came from nothing. My partner and I struggled to get to where we are today. And nobody gave us anything and we fought tooth and nail right to this moment. Trying to keep whatever we have and the build up to be where we are today. For nothing.

MHA: So, was the plant ever unionized?

MB: I don't know if Jimmy had a union at one time. Yeah, all the plants at one time down here - I mean I could be wrong, I think they were all underneath the union at one time or another. I'm almost sure, but don't hold me to that. But, I'm pretty sure at one time, everything, whether the ice company, the fuel company, the water boat, the fish cutters, the dock workers, it was all, I'm pretty sure it was all underneath the union. So this way here if there was a situation with your fillet cutters, everything could stop. The ice, everything. But then again, just like the boats used to be all unionized at one time and they all broke free. As people that worked on boats decided that they wanted to get their own boats and it was unlimited at one time, so you went out and took chances and you went out and bust your ass and more and more people started doing that and more and more people got away from the unions. There was quite a bit of trouble at one time with the unions, and with the non-union people. There were fights and riots and everything down there. And that was the last straw, and the union was done and vanished.

MHA: Were you around at that time?

MB: Oh yeah, I've seen it all.

MHA: We may, we have another project where we are focusing on the union, that period of time. Not this one. This one is more for what's going on now and how people are working on the waterfront, but I may come back to you at some point to get more detailed information about -

MB: And there would be one person I would like you to talk to, his name is Jimmy Dwyer.

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MHA: Oh, I know Jimmy.

MB: And he could, well, most probably give you a lot more than what I could but I'll do whatever I can to try to point you in the right direction and help you but Jimmy Dwyer would be the person. One time, anyway I couldn't tell you how many lumpers there used to be down here, but now, again, every thing is done by fractions. Just to give a number, maybe there was 100 plus lumpers at one time down here. I don't think you have 15.

MHA: Change. So do the boats, do the crew lump their own?

MB: No, you get, like my son will, because there are a lot of boats no longer union, so there's maybe a handful of boats that are union still but most of the people are, we'll get people that have other jobs

(50:00)

MB: (continued) and they'll come down here. Like my son, if there's nothing going on here, if I got one of my boats, I'll let him go on the boat with a guy and they'll go lump the boat. I mean, you're are not taking out a hundred thousand pounds of fish anymore, you know what I mean? You're taking out 20 or 30 thousand. 100 thousand people, pounds, I believe, shit my God you'd most probably need seven to ten people to alternate. But it has all changed. Everything has changed.

MHA: How about women? Are there many women here in the plant?

MB: It's mostly women

MHA: Really?

MB: Yeah, I would - I shouldn't say that - Yeah I would say, if I had to say it would be a little bit more of a percentage of women that work in the plant and they are good. They do their thing and they are good. I'm not taking anything away from the guys or not, but everybody that we have here, they work as a family, believe it or not. You know what I mean? No one is trying to step on each other's toes and no one is trying to be better than the next person. No one is trying to get brownie points. It's not about that. It's just about survival and it's funny when you have to survive. You could hate the person next to but if you need that person, you're going to make sure that person is doing what he's supposed to be doing.

MHA: Are there any jobs that, not just here in the plant but on the waterfront, that you consider men's jobs that women have started moving into?

MB: No, I mean, at one time down here all the boats that were down here, I think I've maybe seen 5 women fishermen. Two skippers, and that's not very many. And now I don't think there's any. At one time there was a lot of women fish cutters and that's almost non-existent now. I think I have one. She's been here forever. And she's a good woman and she can stay here until

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the day she tells me she don't want to be here. And no I don't see women filling in, like unloading and picking up totes and stuff like that? No, I've never had a woman do that for me. No reason why, but I just - I think I would be shocked. It's hard work. Not that a woman can't do it but if there is a breaking point. I mean I've had multiple operations for trying to be a superstar at one moment or another.

MHA: Wrecking your back?

MB: Yeah, I've had 2 back operations. I mean I've been diced up, sliced up, all over; hands, palms, fingers, everything. I got a total knee replacement. I have a meniscus tear here that I was supposed to get addressed about a year or two ago. I haven't done that yet. I have a tear in my rotator cuff. I haven't done that yet. It seems to go away. Always there, nothing will hurt until you actually have to go out and physically work. When your boats come and then you, hopefully, you irritate it because you don't have the continued period of where you have to work day in, day out. You get to kind of rest it a little bit. Then the doctors have been trying to get me to do my shoulder but, I don't want to do it until I know I don't have to do this business anymore.

MHA: So you don't want to irritate it again?

MB: Well, I do irritate it every time I go to work, which is kind of like, sometimes the body just gets used to pain. You sometimes, you get used to it and you just work with it. But for someone looking at you, they don't understand why you would do that and I just don't have answers other than you just get used to it. If I can do it without getting it operated on, you just keep working. Like my friend Victor, another one, he'll walk around sometimes. He's got cuts and I'm the same thing. You get cut. One time, it wasn't too long ago, I cut my leg. But I didn't notice it until we came back in. We were doing a boat and my pants was ripped. I was like, well how did my pants get ripped? And I had a big cut. I couldn't even tell you how it happened. No idea

(55:00)

MB: (continued) just, when you work, you work and that's it.

MHA: Very interesting, so I think I've gone through all of the questions that I had to ask you. Is there anything I haven't asked that you would like people to know about either your business, or the waterfront, or whatever? And especially thinking about how you'd like, in this fishing center, the museum, how you'd like it to be portrayed.

MB: That everybody that you see in that fishing heritage that Phil has over there, have sacrificed a lot. More than what people could ever know. Whether it's their home life, or their wives, or not seeing their kids, or their personal, themselves personally, never coming home. As far as - No matter how - Always go after your dream, no matter how hard it is, okay? Don't ever give up, because once you give up it's done. I have maybe, hopefully 4 or 5 more years and I've done this my whole life. And I have no damn idea what I'm going to do afterwards. I don't even know how I'm going to react to it. I've worked my whole life. I have a friend that went on the Trawl Survival Fund together, and I forget what TV program. You ever watch a program, always about Canada, where it got real cold and the trucking had to drive over ice. Well, they were doing the

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same thing here with the fishing boats against the lobster boats against the swordfishing boats. And they would go out and they would - I forget what the hell they called it, but anyways. My friend Joe who owns the *Excalibur*, and worked his whole life to get to where he was. Raised his 3 daughters, put them in school, college, the whole nine yards, which we all want to do. We were on that Trawl Survival Fund, we went to the protests, to demonstrations, everything we've done together down here and someone told me that he gave up. I think at 58 or 59. So I called him, and he said yeah. And he said you know what the hardest part was? I said no, Joe. He said the hardest part was waking up in the morning and having no identity. I had nothing to do anymore. He said, when I owned my own boat, regardless of the weather was bad or I had a shitty trip, when I woke up in the morning, I had a function. I had to go to the boat, I had to get it started. I had to maintain it. I had to get the crew morale and go out and do it again. And that's what I did my whole life. But when I gave it all up, I woke up not realizing I had nothing, I have nothing to do. I have no identity. What do I do, who am I? It's gone. And he was a hard person and that kind of sticks in my mind, as my years are getting close.

MHA: So you have to start thinking about what-

MB: Well that's why, if I can maintain my boats and like step out of the picture, but not be completely out of the picture. I'll always have somewhere to go or something to do. Whether it's, whatever, just to talk to my son or just making sure the boats maintained or whatever. You know, I'm hoping. I don't know. I have no idea. You know, but like Joe, that day is going to come and hopefully my answer when someone else asks me that, I'll have a better answer than what he gave to me. That scared the piss out of me. It scared the hell out of me.

MHA: Well I can really identify that about myself because I'm past official retirement age but, I still like what I do so -

MB: I've done it my whole life, honey. I mean, I don't know what else to do.

(1:00:00)

MHA: Yeah

MB: I haven't been on vacation in almost four years.

MHA: Well hey, you can start there.

MB: I just, my 40th anniversary just came up with my wife and I didn't go anywhere and we were going to go, but it just wasn't the right time. Different things started to take place and I just told my wife, we will, you just never know. You don't know. But even when I go on vacation, when I would go on vacation, I go crazy in the first couple of days. You know, I can't, I go nuts. Oh my god. My wife - Listen, you want to sit on a beach, you want to read a book. I mean I've got to find something to do I go walk sometimes 2 or 3 miles, and go up and get my snorkel gear. I'd be in the ocean 4 or 5 hours and I used to time it by, because Aruba. I love Aruba. SO I would go off on my own and I would love it, and explore. I just love it, you know. And then I would know the time by the uh boats that would bring people to certain areas and drop them off to go

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snorkeling. That's how I judged the time. So I knew like 12 or 1 o'clock I've been out here for 3 or 4 hours already. I'll start drifting back to where my wife would be. I would go up, eat, and then be off in the water again.

MHA: Sounds great to me.

MB: Yeah and that was - I would be entertained.

MHA: Yeah

MB: And I would love it and you know I still do. That's one of the things I tell my wife, we're going to go there again. I've been there so many times. You ever been to Aruba?

MHA: No

MB: It's beautiful

MHA: I was in Jamaica once and we did the same kind of thing. The snorkeling, oh my god it was fantastic.

MB: I was, when I was in Aruba one of the last times, I went up a big coral. And you have to be careful, because the water is always moving you. So you think you're far enough but the next thing you know, you could be on top of it and you get cut. So I went around, and when I may, I started to come into deeper water just underneath the bend. I didn't, I don't know who was more scared, me or the sea turtle because I just had this big thing come out like it - and I'm like, oh shit. You know what I mean? Because you don't know. And then I was like, one time there was a moray eel and I - When you get to where they are, you try to, I would always try to keep maybe a good 10 feet away because they like it when the prey comes really close and they grab.

MHA: Yeah, yeah.

MB: And I remember that. I always try to be careful and that one particular time I ended up going out to far so I was just trying to come in and it was just the way the water was and the coral reefs were when I made that turn we were both surprised.

MHA: You know what you might enjoy, and you ought to put it on your bucket list, is the Galapagos.

MB: Where is that?

MHA: That's out in, off of Ecuador. And - But it has amazing creatures if you - we took - Do you know the Goethels up in New Hampshire. David is a fisherman, and his wife. They were both on the Council just at different times. But, anyway, they're the ones that recommended the particular company that we took. Small boat and they go - They're a bunch of islands so they go, they travel at night to the different islands and then in the morning they take you on a hike and you'd see things like, these amazing crabs and iguanas and all kinds of things. And then in the

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afternoon they usually took you out on a zodiac to go snorkeling and it was just astounding. The little - It's really worth a trip if you want to have something that's just, could be in your memory forever.

MB: I've gone to a bunch of different islands in the Caribbean. But the one I always seem to get drawn back to is Aruba.

(1:05:00)

MB: (continued) You know, it's just - My wife and I just love it. And it's just nice. It's one place that I can say, other than the first day or two, I can really find myself wind down. That you actually miss when you get on the plane to come home again. Sometimes we would go, we were fortunate, towards the end, we could go over there for 2, 3, or 4 weeks.

MHA: That's nice

MB: I mean it was nice. But let's face it, when you go somewhere for 7 days or something, the first day you're all, 4 o'clock in the morning, just to be at the airport so that day's already gone and then the last day it's the same damn thing. But then it takes you a couple days, you know what I mean? So I told my wife, if we're going away you got to go for at least 10 days or more. But her, it's I'll go whenever, how long do you want to go for? Now with the grandkids, you kind of want to be home to see them cause you miss them you know? But I can't wait for the day I take my grandkids to there. Try to introduce them to the sea life. You know? Instead of it like being in your place. How it all blends.

MHA: Yes, so many young people today think fish come in cellophane wrappers. Sorry. Well, I think I have asked you about everything that I have wanted to ask you.

MB: I hope I was helpful to you.

MHA: Oh, very helpful. Very interesting. And I - If I have other questions I'll just give you a call, if that's okay?

MB: Yeah, no that's fine, that's fine. The interest that you want to do, people see us as a fishing community but a lot of things took place. I mean there was a time in this business, again with the riots and the unions when there was a divide in how, how - We were all family at one time and then when the divide came, you were actually fighting one another. I mean physically harming one another. Whether it would be with boats or personally, the people on the boats or whatever. But it all took place, it's all documented. I mean a huge riot at the auction when it used to be the auction hall over there. There were a lot of changes that I've seen take place in this industry. A lot of changes. A lot of things.

MHA: Well, we'll hope that it's reached bottom and it's going up now.

MB: There's always hope. There's hope and I'm hoping something good happens to this industry. I mean if they did nothing anymore to cut us back any more, maybe whoever would be left. I

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mean we've found a way to survive this far. I mean it hasn't been easy but you know, you're able to maintain. You just have to watch your lifestyle, you have to watch a lot of things you know? And you got to hope that you can get resource from other places. And you just got to try to make it work.

MHA: What sector are your boats in?

MB: What?

MHA: Your boats, which sector are they in?

MB: Uh, sector, the dragger is sector 13, the scalloper is just in the, that trawler, I don't know what it's called. But the scalloper is in a whole different bracket.

MHA: And so you have three boats, how many are trawlers?

MB: One trawler, and two scallopers. I remember once when Mitt Romney came down to Bergies Seafood when he was going to become the governor and then became the governor. And one of the questions you asked me if I was ever on the—

MHA: Fisheries Management.

MB: Yeah. And he asked me at a meeting, not a meeting, a gathering, I don't know if it was at White's. Anyway, Rodney was standing behind me and he asked me, because he took a shine to me for whatever reason, and asked me if I wanted to go, I said I don't want to go. Why not? And I said listen, I'm not going to stand up there and pretend to be something I'm not. This man standing behind me has way many more years and has a whole lot more knowledge

(1:10:00)

than what I can ever give to this industry and that would be Rodney Avila. He's the man you want. And that was it. It was just like that and I remember when Healy, she wanted to become governor, lost, I can't think of her name. I know it was Healy but I can't remember - Anyways, she came down to New Bedford, and she wanted to talk because it was a big thing with Mitt so she wanted to come down and talk to me again and blah blah blah and wanted me to go over to Eastern Fisheries and I refused and Rodney Avila and Pamela, Rogers, they all tried to get to me, to go and be, so she could make a TV thing and I said listen, you're in the part of the business down there that the scallopers are doing beautiful, the best they've ever done in their lives. I said, you need to come from that area and come down to where people are dying. Okay. You want to talk to me, you got to come down here. Because we're dying. That over there, they are a whole different world over there. Over here, you're going to see the real faces. You're going to hear the real stories. Okay? This is - We are dying. Then she came.

MHA: Good!

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MB: She did, but I stuck to my guns and Rodney kept up, no, Rodney, I wouldn't give up. Yeah, I wanted her to come down here cause there's another side of this industry. Scalping side that's done. Ask Rodney, he'll tell you, if he remembers.

MHA: I'm sure he probably will.

MB: He should. But anyways I'm glad, hopefully.

MHA: Well thank you again, really, so much.

[1:12:20] End of Audio