



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview April 2, 2017

Grave, Hector ~ Oral History Interview

Corinn Williams

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Background

Name of person interviewed: Hector Grave

Facts about this person:

Age 33

Sex Male

Occupation Owner of Lionel's Nets

Residence (Town where lives) New Bedford

Ethnic background (if known) Guatemalan, Maya K'iche

Interviewer: Corinn Williams [CW]

Transcriber: Corinn Williams [CW]

Interview location: Community Economic Development Center, New Bedford

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Key Words

Gill nets, self-employment, ropes, buoys. quality, sacrifice, needles, knives, gloves New Bedford, Portland, Maine, Guatemalan,

Abstract

Hector Grave came to New Bedford from Guatemala at age 14 and went to work on the waterfront. He worked for several years at gillnet companies until starting his own business, Lionel's Nets, which makes and repairs gillnets. He discusses the challenges and sacrifice of self-employment as well as the passion for making a quality product.

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[00:00] Intro; self-employed, repairs and makes gillnets. Came to US in 1998 from Quiche Guatemala at 14 years old with his mother. There were Central Americans in New Bedford at that time. He learned to speak Spanish in school in Guatemala, but he didn't go to school in the US although he would have liked to.

[05:00] His first job was at a seafood plant, it was hard work; a job for men but he was a child. He learned a little bit of everything: packing scallops, loading. Worked at a warehouse then got a job making nets. A friend showed him how to make nets and he picked it up quickly. The job was near his house, 4-5 people at the company. Then he got another job at another net making company. He started making nets in 1999 and has been making nets ever since. Now works for himself, it is a lot of responsibility to meet customers needs. The work is good, but it includes long hours with a lot of sacrifice of time away from your children. Starting a business is hard, you lose money at first. He didn't have customers at first, but he developed his customer base through word of mouth.

[10:00] At first he had to build up his business, he worked for 2-3 months then had no work and a lot of expenses. He almost quit but had faith and hope to continue, now he is doing well. Most customers are from Maine, some from New Bedford.

There is a difference between the nets used for state and for federal waters. Each net is about 300 feet long, 15-20 feet wide. There are nets for monkfish, flounder, redfish and cod. Each have different sizes for the openings, 5.5 inches to 14 inches. To make a net you need two kinds of rope, one that floats, one that sinks that has lead inside. The other rope has buoys so it floats. Each net has 50 buoys. The nets are left in the water for 8 hours or overnight then the fish is harvested.

[15:26] Making a net. The two lines are attached to the net with thread. Inside of nets are imported from suppliers and through an import broker on the customs paperwork. He learned how to do this without involving too many intermediaries.

[20:03] Grave likes to learn how to do the business by trial and error. Fortunate not to have made many errors. He hires people to help on the production; it is impossible to do it alone, especially when there is a rush order. For example, the 15th on the month he has 2-3 customers who need their nets by a certain date. If they don't have their net they can't fish even if they have a permit. The regulations affect a lot of people, for example if a permit is for 5,000 lbs but the fishermen gets 7,000 lbs. that have to throw it away and they lose money. So they don't have a stable income and it depends on the price of fish and the demand. Some fish get a very low price. There are times of the year when there are few orders for nets. But you learn how to adapt to these ups and downs.

Tools used: needles, knives, gloves to protect hands, nothing special. The upfront investment can be costly if you don't have customers and you buy materials that are not very popular, or the fishermen are not permitted to use that type, even if you give them a good price. But if one

started a business with customers it does cost a lot of money to get started. Some nets cost \$4.00/lb. You can't buy much with \$10,000. It is expensive.

[25:47] Grave didn't have experience running a business before, he only knew about how to make nets. The regulations changed the kinds of nets that can be used to conserve the fish. He has noticed the reduction in fishing over the years, some have left the industry. They were spending more but earning less. His greatest challenge is finding labor because of the specialized nature of net making. People claim to know how to make nets but they don't make them well. He compares netmakers to mechanics that are good ones and bad ones. He doesn't make nets for the money but for the passion for his work and his philosophy is quality over quantity. Most other netmakers do it for the quantity they can make 15-20 nets a week, but he makes 12-13 a week that are very well made and he gets no complaints from his customers. Reputation as a good net maker is very important.

[31:09] Advice to others who might start in this business is that it takes a lot of effort and sacrifice. Especially starting a business; he almost gave up and wanted to get a job where he gets a check every week. Sometimes you have to wait a month or two to get paid for a net. He has to pay his workers every week and buy the materials but you have to wait for the money. It is not easy.

He has three children but he wouldn't advise them to work in his business; he wants something better for them. Maybe he would like for them to help him but he thinks it is too much of a physical job. He would like his children to study a professional career. He wants to give them the opportunities that he never had.

[35:33] He is one of the people with more experience in netmaking than others he knows. Now all the gill netmakers in New Bedford are Guatemalan, he is not sure why, they like to do hard work. It's difficult to find other nationalities to do this kind of work. It's a job that men do, it is physical work and that is why it's all men who do it.

Explains how some nets are patched and repaired.

[40:09] Discussion about connection between netmaking and weaving. He was too young so didn't learn how to weave in Guatemala. Customers are in New England, he delivers to Maine but likes to travel on the weekends to avoid the traffic. Travels a lot to Portland, has customers in New Bedford, Hull, Portsmouth, Newport and Little Compton, Rhode Island.

His desire is to continue his success and to obtain the American Dream, you can achieve it but it requires a lot of sacrifice and time away from his children.

[45:16] End of Recording