

Participant: Jim Protiva

Title: President, Newport Area Chamber of Commerce

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Courtney: So we talked a little bit about the Voices from the West Coast project, and I was wondering if you could just tell me a story that comes to mind for you about what it's like to live and work here in Newport.

Jim: Well, certainly, um, living and working here in Newport is amazing just because we're on the water and we have a working bayfront and, um, we have plenty of, uh, excitement that happens seasonally as things come in. But one of the things that I find most, um, exciting is that we can go and walk the docks and buy fresh fish or crab, crab you can buy, you can purchase right from the people who catch it, and it's still alive. And so you can't get any fresher than that. And the fish could've been swimming that morning and they could be dinner that night. And it's just really wonderful to have that opportunity for fresh fish. So I would say that would be my favorite thing about living in a fishing community like Newport.

C: Great! Did you grow up here or did you move here at some point in your life?

J: Um, I did not grow up here. I grew up on the East Coast, and I was more of a suburban person. So, uh, I've only been in Newport 11 years now. And, uh, so it's still super exciting. I still get excited to, uh, watch the boats go out and come back in. And, um, our bridge is, uh, is spectacular. And, uh, so I... and I love boats. So, it all sort of mixes well with me.

C: What brought you here?

J: Um, well, interestingly enough my girlfriend got accepted to OSU and, uh, so she worked on her doctorate there in, uh, the early 90s.

C: Great. Awesome. Do you have any memorable stories from either your time as President of the Chamber of Commerce or even working for the City of Newport. Any either really good days or really bad days or just anything that's particularly memorable?

J: Well, certainly. We've had some amazing weather here. And, uh, so I... uh... have the fond memory of winds howling at 110 miles an hour and the roof just shaking and, um, so I... and everything was fine. But, um, certainly the changing weather here on the coast, uh, seems to be the most memorable thing for me.

C: That's interesting. Great. Can you tell me a little bit more about the community from your perspective? Tell me a little bit more about Newport, whether that's demographics, the economy, the people here.

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J: Sure. Newport is, uh, a great little community of about 10,000 that swells to about 30 or 40,000, uh, during peak weekends in the summertime. And so we have a great mix of, uh, people from all over the world that come here and enjoy some of our treasures like our lighthouses, and our beautiful, walkable beaches or, um, you know when we have a season opener and the whole south beach is just packed full of trucks and trailers and boats are going crazy just, uh, trying to get out to the fishing grounds. And that's more on the recreational side, uh, so, so Newport is just a fun, ever-changing community. Sometimes the locals here, uh, get a little frustrated that you can't take a left out onto the highway all summer just because the steady traffic so sometimes you have to go right to go left, uh, and just kinda work your way around, uh, but there's back streets and there's ways around that. And so Newport is just a great little community that really sticks together. Um, we like to partner and, uh, combine resources and, um, there's just sort of an undertow of working together here that's super refreshing and I don't think you'll find that in any of the big cities like this.

C: Great. Can you tell me more about the role of fishing in the economy?

J: Um, well fishing is a major part of, um, of the economy of Newport. And it's, um, year-round, so, um, it really stabilizes our tourist base, um, whereas, uh, you know we have people working and things happening all winter long. And, um, those are the ... the season where we see less visitors from other communities or other countries for that matter. So the fishing fleet really helps normalize our community all year long.

C: Do they play a role in your Chamber?

J: Um, we do have several fishing boats that are members of the Chamber, but fishermen, uh, are interested in gearing up, working really hard, and then disappearing and by that I mean they go off and do other interests and most of 'em do hunting or jump you know to the mountains or do something that is a little more land based. So, uh, I would say that they don't really have the time to come and spend an hour on a Friday, uh, at lunchtime because they're working. So we don't get a huge participation but we do have some.

C: Sure. What about the role of fishing in the culture of Newport? Do you think that it adds anything unique to the culture of this place?

J: Oh, absolutely! One only has to go down to the bayfront and look at all the shops and look at the places to sit and to walk and you can look out and see our fishing fleet. So it adds without even having anything to do with the fishing initially because people come and love to see all the beautiful boats and look, love to see the working ports. We're a very working town, and, um, so that's part of the charm. So the, the actual fishing nobody really gets to see, but it's all the activity leading up to and coming back from and offloading and, um, it's just kind of fun to see big boats moving about.

C: Yeah. That's great. Have you seen a lot of family based fishing businesses here in Newport?

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J: Sure. There are many family-based businesses here. Uh, and some families own multiple boats. And, um, so those are the ones that, uh, are all in. But they employ lots of, um, locals and those locals have children and so those are the ones you see at the basketball games and you see at the you know they go to our schools and go to our rec center and do play on the baseball teams and so. They're integral to our community for sure. But they're just like everybody else. They don't wear a sign that says you know 'I'm a fishermen's kid' or 'I'm a fishermen's you know family.' They're just regular people.

C: Yeah. Sure. Have you seen any changes in the nature of these family-based businesses? And it's fine if you can't speak to that.

J: Yeah. I guess, um, I think that, uh, fishing, commercial fishing is a tough business. It's hard. Those people work hard and so, um, the ones that, uh, kinda drift in and think they're gonna make a killing and slip out are the ones we only see one season. So, um, I think the families are the ones that, um, again normalize the fishing fleet, they're the ones who are, uh, have a little salt in their blood and those are the ones, uh, who really are, are in it for the long haul.

C: Yeah. What do you see in terms of the age of fishermen?

J: Oh, that's, *laughter* that's everything from the teenage kids to the crusty old guys you know that are in their 70s and maybe even 80s and, um, I think, uh, I have to really tip my hat to the older guys who are still doing it and they still love it and they still go out, um, maybe they rely a little bit more on the young bucks to do some of the heavy lifting but, um, they're still going to the fishing grounds and, um, if you think just a little bit about what they've gone through. Because the electronics has changed so much over the last say 50 years from almost nothing to now we've got satellites, we've got radar, we've got all kinds of technologies that, um, have evolved and so these fishermen have had to learn all those different technologies along the way and they're still, they're still at it and they're still, um, you know using the best technology to catch fish. But the game's the same. They're still catching fish.

C: That's super interesting. Do you think that there's always been this trend toward older people in the fishing industry or do you think that it's the same people staying in it and getting older as a result?

J: Yeah, that's a tough question and just from a casual observation, um, it, it feels like it's a, uh, an industry that's fairly difficult to crack into as a young person unless you have some family sponsorship or someone who understands the industry who's willing to advise and guide and then maybe put up some of the financing. Um, I think that a young person who doesn't have that background, that DNA, if you will, um, they're not gonna be drawn to it because it's scary, you know to go out in the ocean, away from the sight of land, for days on end, in adverse conditions and try to catch a fish. It's daunting. So I think that, um, the young ones that are getting in have a connection and that's usually family-based or relative or someone who will bring them along and show them the ropes. Um, so I would say the older ones are just getting older and there's probably a slight

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vacuum where they need to bring in some more of the young ones because let's face it we all have a timeline.

C: Yeah, absolutely. If the fleet is getting older, having this trend toward having more older people and it's difficult for young people to get in for a variety of reasons you already mentioned, what do you think the impact might be here in Newport? If we have this vacuum that we're struggling to fill.

J: You know, um, I think, I think that's a great question. And I'm glad you're asking it. Um, I don't think the, the average person has given that any real thought. And I know I certainly haven't until just now. Um, I think perhaps, um, we will become more attractive to other locations, uh, like California and Alaska and so we'll be bringing more boats from farther distances to our fishing grounds because they're so productive and we have the distribution systems in place where they can offload their product and get paid pretty easily, readily. And, um, so we have, the whole network's in place even, uh, the research, fisheries and the research is all there. So I think that, um, that we'd probably, if our fleet is in fact getting older and there is a decline in local fishermen, which I don't know that that's the case but it seems like it could at some point in the future, I think we'll probably just become more attractive to further, from ports and places that are further away.

C: What do you think that will have, what kinds of impacts will that have on the community if it's not as locally focused and is not local families but it might be different, either different families from California and Washington coming in, or different businesses? Do you think that will have an impact on the culture of Newport or is it just as important that we just have the fishing industry?

J: Hmm. That's a great question. I would say that it would have...everything impacts everything. So there would be some. But I think Newport is big enough now, we're at 10,000 population, and we already get infused with tourism and people from all over the world, so we already have a great diversity and a great mix and so people that, uh, that come here from other places and just happen to be fishermen probably won't rock our boat too much if you will. Again, they're just hard-working people and it doesn't really matter where they come from and it really doesn't matter because people don't necessarily label or treat a fisherman different than a construction worker or a maintenance person or you know any of the trades or, or different industries.

C: Yeah.

J: Could be wrong on that, but I don't think so.

C: Can you speak a little bit more, I was really intrigued by the conversation at lunch about the relationship here in Newport between fishing, and tourism, and research and kind of this inter-dependency if you will or you know this strong link that's being built up between these three and how they're inter-related, how you think that's changing Newport or might impact Newport over time?

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J: It's certainly, um, part of an evolution that, uh, was probably not thought out in the early years. In the early years fishermen came and went fishing to catch fish, to sell fish, to have a livelihood and to, um, harvest from our oceans. And, um, I think that the tourism industry has evolved because of that. And they, I think that we have something that's special and unique, um, unless you're in a port city you'll never get to see up close and personal all of the inter-workings of the fishermen and the fishing fleet and how they, uh, um, deal with their uh, with their livelihood. From offloading fish to how they weigh things to how they prepare all their rigging and even fueling their boats and cleaning, uh, its, all integral and I think people that aren't exposed or have an opportunity to see that really love it. And you see them coming down and just gazing over our peers and looking at all the boats and, um, walking up and down the bayfront and I think it's, um, kind of special to have to wait or get out of, drive out of the way or a forklift driving down the street with a tote of fish. Um, so, uh, I think that, that they work symbiotically, but inter-, they're not, the fishing fleet is not dependent on our tourists. In fact, they probably get a little bit annoyed that they can't get from A to B quickly because all the streets are jammed up you know in the summertime. But I also think they're wise enough to know that that's whose buying their product, and that's whose promoting their product. So the fishing fleet does need the tourists or people to buy their product but everybody puts up with everybody pretty well.

C: Yeah, that's interesting.

J: Yeah.

C: From your perspective, how do you think the graying of the fleet, whether it's happening here or not, might affect either Newport or the Coast more generally, if we have this trend toward older fishermen? Do you have any idea how that might change the Oregon coast?

J: Well, um, yeah I'm not sure I do. I've not really given it a whole lot of thought. Obviously, different industries and different things evolve and, um, I suspect the graying of our fleet would open up new opportunities. And, um, maybe the technology or the way they harvest fish will change to compensate for the lack of fishing vessels. They might come up with a way that they can harvest more fish or be more efficient with fewer boats. I don't know.

C: No, that's great. That's great. What other careers are available here in Newport for young people?

J: That's a tough one because um our, uh, economy on the coast is three or four branches, but mostly its tourism driven. Um, its fishing driven. Um, and then we used to have quite a bit of timber but that's drying up if you will. There's not as much timber, um, and then after that there's not a lot of production happening here. So, um, so what's actually happening is that we're going, um, deep into the sciences and, um, into the education component and the research component and, um, that's all different kinds of wave research, energy research with the waves, with the fishing, um, numbers. So there's lots

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of different, uh, opportunities for youth in those areas but its limited. So, um, the other problem with, uh, with young people in a very tourist area is that the service jobs don't pay the same as other industries so you'll find someone that will want to stay here but can't necessarily afford to stay here. Or they know that if they jump into the valley or go to the big city that they will have better opportunities to make money quickly. Um, and so I think, um, we have a lot of, um, our locals that graduate high school go on to college and then go on to a different area and don't rapidly come back.

C: Does the fact that they may or may not come back, do you think that has any sort of link to maybe this gap or hole in the fishing industry? Or do you think it's more ... we talked a little bit already about some of the challenges in getting in to the industry, you don't have a family connection, you don't have resources, that's a barrier. But, is maybe the dearth of young people at all something that's being felt or talked about here, if you can speak to it?

J: You know, I'm not sure that I can. I'm not an expert in that area for sure. Um, but I think it's a challenge and I think it's, um, it's one of those things that everybody recognizes you know, it's certainly been talked about quite a bit and I think that, um, there's not necessarily a solution to that. Um, and it doesn't necessarily have to mean it's a problem either. It's just what, it's a trend that we've seen take place and that's something that's taking place, uh, probably over the last 20 years. So, I don't know that there's a solution there.

C: Yeah. That's great. My last question, other than just opening it up for your general thoughts. What do you think would happen here in Newport if all of the family-based businesses were sold?

J: Oh. Well, um. If the family-based businesses and are we talking fishing? Yeah. And it went to some level of big corporate it would change the culture of, um, of the docks and how things are done. Um, I think there will always be a need for labor in the fishing industry. It will require people. I don't think that it'll ever go robotics like say the automotive industry went. There are aspects, um, of automation that can help in terms of we're no longer pulling crab pots by hand, we're putting them on a block, and so there are things that help. But there's still somebody that's gotta feed all that and make those decisions and pilot the boats and predict and get on the fishing grounds. So I think it will always be labor intensive. Um, the big corporation mentality might not do as well to find those people. If the market doesn't, um, provide a big enough incentive and so in order to do that it would have to raise the price of the product and what's the...the willingness of the market to pay that and you know, I think its the fishing family that actually, um, has, has the best luck for the future. I think that's the best way for the future. I hope so anyways.

C: Yeah. Great, well is there anything else either related to the graying of the fleet or just to the relationship between Newport and the commercial fishing industry and its role here that you thought we'd talk about that we didn't that you want to mention?

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J: No, I mean I didn't really have a full set of expectations on what we would talk about today. But, um, it's refreshing to know someone like you is looking into these things and asking some of those tough questions and I'll be curious to see what you actually learn and find out at the end of your exploration.

C: Okay, great. Thanks!