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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Galen Koch (The First Coast) and Griffin Pollock (College of the Atlantic)

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Interview Description:

Tim Sheehan a former teacher from Pembroke, ME, cofounded Gulf of Maine, Inc., a shellfish wholesaler. He talks about the innovative techniques he and his wife have used to recruit diggers and grow the company, the importance of monetary assistance for removing barriers to work, the plight faced by Native American diggers Downeast, and the barriers that new families face when trying to enter into a fishery.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Griffin Pollock

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GK: Galen Koch
GP: Griffin Pollock
TS: Tim Sheehan

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GK: We're just toughening up in here. So how do you say your first and last name?

TS: Timothy Sheehan.

GK: And where are you from and what's your occupation?

TS: I am from the town of Pembroke in Washington County, down on Cobscook Bay. An, uh I am a consummate entrepreneur, business person, biologist, former high school science teacher. And, yeah I guess that's it.

GK: What's your, uh fishing history? Do you have—

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TS: Well it's funny, I'm not a particularly—I'm like a three headed chicken. I'm a biologist, I studied science at University of Maine, and I live in this unique marine area, so I consider myself a marine biologist. I also have to maintain a bunch of fishing licenses, commercial fishing licenses to operate my marine life supply company. So I have a green crab license, I used to have an eel license, I've had perch licenses, I have a clammer's license, a mussel license, I have to have practically every license in the book. But I'm also a business person, and a shellfish dealer. So I'm buying and selling clams, scallops, periwinkle snails, sometimes I dabble with worms, I've messed around with green crabs before. Always looking for, kind of niche, value added, little emerging markets. Sea cucumbers—haven't really done much with urchins, but there is some potential there. And being in eastern Maine, we don't have much for the harvester. There's not a lot of dealers.

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TS: So I've—I started as a teacher in the area, I started doing some guiding and running an eco-tour company, had a Master Maine Guide's license, I still have that, and a captain's license. I went out into the marine environment, I took people sea kayaking, took 'em tide pooling, taught 'em about the seals, and the eagles, and the tidal changes there in eastern Maine. And then that brought me into the world of sea life that's there, it's very productive environment. And I said, "Hey, wow, look at all these starfish. I bet I could sell those to someone. And, oh look, look at all these sand worms! Or oh wow, look at this kelp bed." And, you know, there's literally a market for anything, so in terms of what I do, I'm not really a scientist scientist, I'm not really a fourth generation lobster dealer. I'm not really a big business man, but I'm doing these several different

jobs that all kind of work well together, but it's a real kind of a hodge-podge of occupations, if you will, or enterprises.

GK: When did you start the shellfish dealing?

[0:02:43.9]

TS: Um, shellfish dealing started in the late 2000s, we had our science specimen supply business which did very well in the '90s and into the early 2000s, but when the economy kind of crapped out, no one was buying anything. I mean, we were literally doing over a million dollars a year in scientific specimens. And like, I think it was 2008 or 9 it went from 1,000,000 to half a million down to, like, 70,000. And like, I couldn't sell anything. So my wife and I looked around, we said, "Well, what else can we do around here? Are we gonna just quit, split, and head to Portland, or . . ." And I said, "Well there are some clam diggers, I mean, I don't know much about it," and talked to some guys and they said, "Oh, you should buy wrinkles," which are periwinkle snails. And that's a lot easier, because in order to buy clams you have to get a certification of bivalve shellfish, interstate shellfish shippers license, you have to have a certified plan, treated water, all these sorts of things. But, if you want to buy snails, you just get a scale and say, "Hey, I'm buying snails," and guys show up.

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TS: So we start with periwinkles, and lo and behold, who would ever have thought, you know, we've bought 1,000 pounds, then we bought 10,000 pounds, and then we bought 100,000 pounds, then we bought hundreds of thousands of pounds! I was like, "Really? I've lived here for—since '91 in eastern Maine," and I've seen people wrinkling, but I never would've realized how much one product is there on our beaches, and also the value of it. At the end of two years, we're like, "My god, we've passed half a million dollars through this company on just this little tiny, quarter-sized snails." And then as we're buying snails, some guys also dug clams were like, "Hey, why don't you buy some clams?" And, like, "Okay, what do we gotta do?" Got the permit, got the license, found—took our little shop, built a cooler, and got up and going. And once again, people said—you know, there's always naysayers to everything. They're like, "This is never gonna work, this is never gonna happen!" (Laughs.) Like, "Number one, there's no clams! Number two, it's hard work! No one—who the hell wants to do that?" I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, I know. Everything sucks, and it's never gonna work."

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TS: So, you know, a couple of the snail pickers brought us some clams. And we're like, "Oh good." we'll maybe get a hundred pounds a day, on a good day maybe five hundred pounds. And so, typically how it works in our part of eastern Maine, is you buy the product as a dealer, you sell it to, like a Midcoast dealer, and they bring it to Boston, they sell it to the dealers there. I said, "Well, I'm smarter than that, I'm gonna go right to Boston." So I got a commercial drivers license, bought a truck or two, and started delivering my product down to the big shellfish dealers in Boston, and New Bedford, and Gloucester. But it was weird, 'cause it was almost like they knew where I was coming from. And if I were to sell my clams to a dealer midcoast, he

might pay me 50 cents a pound. So I say, “Hey, I’ve got 5,000 pounds of clams.” He’s like, “Alright, I’ll give you 50 cents over, so I got 2,500 dollars. I thought, well if I jump around him, bring it to Boston, maybe they’ll pay me 70 cents, or even a dollar. But by the time I got to Boston, it was like someone Downeast had tipped ‘em off that I was coming. And when I got there with my clams, guess what the price was? 50 cents. ‘Cause they didn’t want—really want a guy being enterprising and cutting out the middleman.

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TS: And, what I was naive about in not really knowing, is that the coast of Maine is divided into buying territories. You know, you can’t just set up a shop and start buying seafood, like, “Who the hell is this? Is he, you know,” pick any last name—famous last name of fishing families in dealing—shellfish or seafood dealer families on the coast of Maine, like, “Who’s this new guy?” You know, people—we literally got people calling us and saying, “You need to stop what you’re doing.” You know, once the whole network of people knew that there were these new buyers in eastern Maine, Gulf of Maine, and we weren’t just gonna subscribe to the age old practices of, you know, let’s not say “price fixing,” but agreeing upon a price that the harvester will get, and agreeing on who will buy where, and who gets what product. Um, I’m just like, “Hey, I’m Tim Sheehan, I’ve got some clams! Want ‘em? I’ve been getting 20 cents, can I have 50? And I’ll bring ‘em to you.”

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TS: And, uh that worked pretty well, but we grew the business. That, lo and behold, we went from a dozen diggers to 30, to 50, to 100, to literally hundreds of people in the course of a year that would bring their product to us. And people were eager to do the work, it’s just that we found there were all sorts of barriers holding people back from reentering the shellfish field. ‘Cause over time, over decades, it used to be years ago, a family wanted to go dig some clams, mama and papa got in the pickup, went down, brought all the kids, and everyone went digging. There was no town license, there was no, you know, you dug, you made money, the family got it, and that’s what helped pay the bills, put food on the table. Well now it’s like, you gotta have a clam ring, you gotta have an open area, you gotta have a closed area, you got red tide, you got flood tide, you got town license, you got state license, you got marine patrol—there’s all these things. And the average working, say clam digger, over time is just gonna be beat back by the regulations, and not fully understanding them, and not a lot of communication from the state.

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TS: So what we did, and the way we were successful in growing our company was, in short of recruiting all these diggers back into the fishery was to sort of remove those barriers. So, uh Jim Bob comes in, “Geez, I’d like to dig clams, but it’s a 200 dollar license.” I’m like, “Well, you seem like a good guy. Here, I’ll write you a check for 200, go get the license.” So it was the little microloan program. And most Jim Bobs would go and get the license, they’d pay us back over three or four tides, but then they’d have their license for the rest of the year. So guys who hadn’t been able to come up with that capital, all of a sudden, were able to get a license. Or, like we have a digger that is in trouble with backed child support. So he can’t have a license. So we’d

make some calls to DHS, and we'd try to help figure it out, and then we'd get him back working. Kids would come in, and they're like, "I wanna dig clams! What's a clam, where do I get it?" You know, here's the tide charts, we printed tide charts, we'd get their—their cell phone so that we could text them every day, and we ended up with a big network of people that wanted to work.

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TS: And I mean we'd landed almost a half a million pounds of clams. And these are people that—we don't even know—you know, we're not from Washington County, but it was things like that that really sort of built our little business back up. And, you know, it is hard to work, there's all these things that prevent you, a lot of our diggers don't have their own vehicles. So we actually ferry diggers to the beaches. Um, other things we did was we started building clamming gear. Say, I don't know, Sharon likes to dig clams and she's bringing in a bushel a day, and all of a sudden Sharon doesn't show up, and you're like, "Hey Sharon, where are you?" "Oh, I broke my digger, you know, my clam fork!" Like, "Well . . . do you need one?" "Yeah, but I'm waiting on Harry to, you know, to make one for me." And I was like, "I'll make one for you, come to the shop tomorrow." So we started making gear: rollers, kibbons, clam rings. We'd take a two inch piece of plastic pipe, cut it into little discs and make our own little clam rings. Because if you don't have two inch clams in your roller, you end up with a fine. When you get a fine, you can't pay it, you stop digging, and then you're out the—out of the industry.

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TS: So we help people pay their fines, we help them get tide charts, clam rings, we loan 'em the money. And, I mean, at our height we had over 400 names on our register of diggers. That doesn't mean 400 diggers showed up every day, some of 'em only dug in June and July when the price was high. Some of 'em only dug on Christmas break, some of 'em only dug, you know, for three months straight, and then for some other reason were in jail for a while, and we didn't see 'em. But, you know, 400 people is a lot of jobs, it's a lot of people, and we tracked all this on our computer system, and we're like, "my gosh. This is millions of dollars of payroll." And here we are in Washington County where there's no jobs, there's no payroll, there's very little economy. Um, and that really—I mean, we're pretty proud of that. It was amazing, I would never have thought that that could happen. And even, you know, the Department of Marine Resources came to us and said, "You're selling the most licenses how are you putting all these people to work clamming?" And I just told 'em exactly what I just told you. You know, that like, if someone wants to become a carpenter, you train carpenters, you show 'em how to use this tool, you give 'em the—you know, the knowledge that they need.

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TS: And so if the state wants clamblers, we gotta train clamblers, you gotta show people, you know, even having a bathroom—we had twenty—I'd say about twenty women in the 18-45 years of age that came from Pleasant Point, a Passamaquoddy reservation. These are women that, as little girls, went to the beach and dug clams with their uncles, and their mothers, and cousins, and it was kind of like a big party. Well, they hadn't dug clams in years. And the biggest, sort

of—one of the biggest barriers for them was having a bathroom. A guy can take a leak on the beach no big deal, but these women didn't wanna go down to the beach, dig their clams, by the time they're done digging their clams, yeah they could stop somewhere on the way, but they—having a bathroom, and we kept a clean bathroom, and it was private. And so when someone was done digging and they came to our shop to sell clams, they could bust a move to the bathroom, you know, relieve themselves. You know, just things like that.

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TS: Free candy for the kids, we would put out tubs of, uh waters, and lemonades, and cold beers on the hottest of hot days when, you know, guys were coming in—and when I say guys, I mean guys, gals, kids, everyone. Our diggers. So that they could have a drink, we kept a water cooler. And these are things that you don't see in shellfish shops. You know, that there's a lot of harvesters from other towns would come in, and they'd be looking at us like, "What is this place?" You know, we'd put maps on the wall charts. So that when—if someone went missing, or we were trying to figure out what cove, or what little niche, you know, we could just stroll over to a big wall sized map and say, "this is where I last saw, you know, Dave's canoe." Or, "This is where those really big clams are, there's an incredible set of clam spat at this place." And, you know, other than that, you're talking—one guy's saying—calling it Bumpah's Cove, and other person's calling it, "No, that's Old Man Smith's Cove!" And, you know, the—it all kind of gets lost in the translation, but yeah. It was a really good project, and uh we built, kind of rebuilt the shellfish industry down in that area, and so

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GK: Are you still doing it too?

TS: Uh, we are, but we ran into a little hurdle. We, uh . . . I don't know how to explain it, but we lost our shop, not of our own—our decision. So we were kind of put out of business for a couple of years. And this Spring we've leased another building. And we're in the process of renovating that. But all the while, we've still been able to buy some periwinkles, and some scallops. Um, as well as doing a little bit with seaweeds and other things.

GK: Did your—did you stop at any point in that process, did you stop getting calls from people telling you to—

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TS: To cease and persist?

GK: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, um, I mean, the scariest ones were—we were told that buildings burn down, that wells get poisoned. Um, you know, why don't you stick to your science business, because we have a business of selling marine life to labs and whatnot. For me, at any point, yeah I could quit doing it, but I'm really excited about the—I don't know what you would call it, but the socio-economic

benefit of what I do. I mean, you can make money anywhere. You can get a job, feed yourself, feed your family. But to think that Gulf of Maine, and Tim Sheehan, and—or Tim and Amy Sheehan and the kids have been able to pull this off in this rural area where there's so many barriers is really pretty exciting. And I wanna keep doing it. So, you know, over the two years that we've been—haven't been able to buy clams, if you will, I haven't really lost sight of that, and wanna continue. Although, there's times—and you know, my wife and and are just like, “Ugh, let's get outta here” (laughs). 'Cause it's a tough place, it's very remote. There's not a lot of resources in that area. And that's kind of why it was so—what we did I think worked so well. 'Cause it wasn't just us feeling the lack of resources, it's everyone there, you know? The working waterfront if you will. So—

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GK: Yeah, do you feel like any—I spent a month in Lubec.

TS: Oh, you did?

GK: Yeah, interviewing people, and getting to know the community. And I relate to what you're saying about this—like people not wanting a newcomer to start. But, in your opinion, you know, living up—down that far east in Maine, do you feel like that is itself a barrier to people getting work, and a barrier to the—like an economic barrier?

TS: You mean the remoteness?

GK: No, the lack of—like, not wanting new people to—

TS: Yeah, I've had various people in my town, uh that are proponents of what I do come up to me and, you know, pull me aside and say, “Listen, you can't please everyone, you know. In fact, you're really gonna have a hard time pleasing anyone, but your best—keep up what you're doing, and know in your heart you're doing well by people, and don't worry about the bucket of crabs.” And, you know, just as they're about to climb out, another crab pulls you down. A lot of folks, in one way, shape, or form, said that same sort of thing. Quietly, and like, “Hey man, keep it up.” And so it is—obviously it'd be a lot easier if you had a bunch of people around you going, “Ra ra ra ra! This is great, this is awesome!”

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TS: You know, a big challenge that we had in our area with our Native American Passamaquoddy diggers is: their land that the tribe owns, the reservation if you will, has almost no, um productive clam flats. Yet, the diggers there are some of our best diggers. And when our towns—our towns used to be open. Eastport didn't have a clam ordinance, that meant anyone from the state could get a state license, drive to Eastport and dig clams. Pembroke and Perry had an ordinance, but they didn't limit the number of licenses. So as we built our company and we sorta used our hard work to leverage and bring people back into the industry, and we were growing our landings. At the same time, the good ol' boys, the people who had been clamming, and the select men, and other people are like, “Oh, we gotta put a stop to this! Too many diggers,

we're gonna dig out all our clams." And we never found that in our data, that we were getting less and less clams. In fact we found, each year, our landings were growing. Which isn't, you know, a very scientific study, but it still felt like we weren't depleting it. And as dealers, why would we wanna deplete it, which would mean we should be shutting—you know, cutting our own throats.

[0:18:42.5]

TS: But, um the people, the naysayers if you will, got to a point where they organized and said, "Okay, we're gonna limit licenses." And what's really tough is the Native American diggers that I had, some of my best diggers, now have no place to dig. The tribe has maybe three or four acres of productive flats, as opposed to these towns, which collectively Eastport, Pembroke, Perry, and Robinson own 4,000 acres of productive clam flats. And, you know, to me, if a Native American Indian, who's been here for thousands of years is not allowed, legally, to dig a clam, there's something really wrong with that. You know, and I went to the DMR, and I met with Patrick Keliher and some of the state attorneys, and I said, "Tell me that this reservation, which is in the town of Perry," and the reservation pays taxes to the town of Perry, "Tell me that my native diggers can be considered residents and can get a resident license." Because there isn't a cap on resident licenses. There's a cap on nonresidents. So as it sits right now, the Native Americans, of all things, the *Native Americans*, are nonresidents.

GK: That's pretty crazy.

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TS: That is crazy. So a lot of our production, and a lot of our diggers, I'd say over 100 of our diggers were Native Americans. And there's only two or three out of 100+ that are still digging. So the—the clam committees did allow one or two of the local Passamaquoddies to get a town license as non residents. But at the DMR, the state attorneys looked at it and they said, "no, no. The way it—" I don't know if it was the land claims settlement, or what it was that says that even though that reservation is in the town of Perry, they're not considered Perry residents. So they cannot get a resident Perry digger's license.

GK: Even though they—and they pay taxes in Perry.

[0:20:44.5]

TS: Yes, yeah no—the tribe pays taxes to the town of Perry for that land, and so it just seems so asinine and so awful. And so most of those native diggers, they can still pick periwinkles, but that's all they've got. Um, and it's really a horrible pill to swallow. I mean, it's something I still want to change, like there's got to be a way. They oughta be able to dig in any town in the state of Maine, you know? I mean, this was their state before we came here. And, you know, there's all this kind of hate, and separation, and fear, like . . . The natives are us, we're them, I mean . . . If you go to Washington County, there's just as many white Native American couples as there is any other couple, and everyone's intermarried, you know. It's amazing how many people have

Passamaquoddy blood, you know. And they look like me, a white guy (laughs). Yet, they can't dig the clam.

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TS: So, whack, all of a sudden Gulf of Maine lost 50% of their diggers.

GK: Wow.

TS: Yeah, and—and the towns adopted closed ordinances with—and the way that the state model ordinance is, you sell 10 resident licenses, and that allows you to sell 1 nonresident. So even if Pembroke sells, um say 100 resident licenses, that means only 10 Indians can get a license, but it doesn't first go to the Indians, it goes to a guy they know from Calais, or a guy they know from Edmunds, or a guy—you know? And then, you know, a few can get it. But that's something that really needs to be changed. Because those guys have families to feed, they want the same stuff as us. Guys, gals, none of my chick diggers, those native gals that love digging, came out and worked with us, are digging anymore. And none of their little kids are digging. You know, so we've lost that recruitment of the younger, uh kids into the fishery. Cause as soon as the town went closed, the license numbers dropped, the other thing that the clam committees is they upped the license fees to make it more prohibitive. It used to be 100, they doubled it. And there was even talk of going to 1,000. "I don't care what it takes! Let's make the license 1,000."

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TS: Well if you're a lobsterman and you like to dig clams in March and April, 1,000—who cares? But if you're a clam digger, even 200, that's a lot. And, you know, our little microloan program, we loan money for gear, for licenses, sometimes just personal loans to help our diggers, um. 100 dollars was pretty easy to loan out and take a chance on. You know, if Galen wants a license, yeah, here's 100 bucks, here's a check, I'll buy your license. And pay me 20 bucks a tide over the next week and we can—we're all square. But the—to be loaning out 200, plus the state license. 333 dollars to put Galen to work, and we don't really know Galen, what she's—you know, we sort of do. The funny thing is, it sounds like a really scary proposition, in fact I went to some other funders, I said, "Can you help us with this microloan program for the clam industry?" They said, "Ah, too risky, too risky. You know, yeah we can loan you money, but we have to have the digger do a personal financial statement" (laughs).

GK: Good luck! (Laughs.)

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TS: Yeah, these are guys who don't have bank accounts, they don't have jobs, they—I'm like, "Yeah, thanks, I'll be back, uh *never*" (laughs). So we would loan out this money, and over 3 years we loaned out close to 30,000 dollars, and we only lost about 3,000 dollars, you know, over 3 years. Actually, it might've even been less than that. So, you know, yeah for every person we put to work on a bushel of clams, we make 20 dollars. If we loan you, you know, 300 dollars

and you bring us a bushel a day for 300 days of the year, times 20 dollars, you've made us X amount of money. So even though we've, technically on paper in our loan program, *lost* 3,000 of money loaned out, we made on the other end, in product, who knows? You know, tens of thousands probably. So it was quite striking that something as simple as that, you know. And you can read in the, um National Geographic, or just any magazine about people that go to, I don't know, Sub-Saharan Africa, and they loan money out to buy a bunch of women sewing machines so that they can make clothing and go to work.

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TS: And here we are, in America, in the most prosperous place in the world, and a clam digger can't come up with 20 bucks—I mean 200 dollars for their license, and what a simple fix. I mean, I didn't invent that, I just like, “Whoa, they do it in Africa, we can do it here in Washington County, right?” I mean, we are a third-world country, sort of. Where we are, our location—I mean our diggers are being paid the same price for clams in 2019 as they were being paid in 1985! Some of 'em even grew up in the '70s! So, I mean, milk isn't the same, gas isn't the same, heating oil isn't the same, and yet here—here we are. Like, how can this be, you know? And so I just—I like—I get a kick out of trying to fix these things, and trying to make, you know, some sort of positive change with that. And it can be, you know, one digger at a time, or you know, one little town, or one little flat. But I think a—there's still a lot of potential there, but we've got some new big hurdles to get through.

GK: Yeah.

TS: To keep growing it, or get it back.

GK: Well, Tim, we've gotta stop,

TS: Way too much (laughs).

GK: No, that was amazing—

[0:26:17.2]