

Interview with Kelsey Aiken, commercial fisherman and packinghouse owner

Occupation: commercial fisherman and commercial packinghouse owner

Port Community: Hatteras, North Carolina

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

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Project: The Graying of the Fleet Part II: How and Why Young Fishermen Choose to Fish?

Transcriber: Sarah Schumann

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann. It's January fifteenth. I'm in Hatteras, North Carolina and I'm with Kelsey Aiken. Kelsey, could you please state your occupation?

Kelsey Aiken [KA]: I am a part-time commercial fisherman and a commercial packinghouse owner.

SS: Where is your homeport?

KA: Hatteras, North Carolina.

SS: Is that also where your fish house is located?

KA: Correct.

SS: Hatteras, North Carolina. Do you own a vessel?

KA: We do own a Carolina skiff that we gillnet out of. Then the business also has a thirty-five Bruno that we own that gillnets in the ocean.

SS: What's the name of those vessels?

KA: One is the Raven and the other is just an unnamed skiff.

SS: What's the name of your fish wholesale business?

KA: Jeffrey's Seafood.

SS: Jeffrey's Seafood. Ok. And is it wholesale or retail?

KA: Wholesale.

SS: Ok. And what's your age?

KA: I'm twenty-nine.

SS: Twenty-nine. Just briefly, your education background?

KA: I graduated high school in 2007 at Randolph Macon Academy in Front Royal, Virginia, and then I went to East Carolina University in Greenville and graduated in 2012.

SS: Ok, great. Can you tell me a little bit about how you got started in the fishing industry?

KA: Well, I grew up in Hatteras. You're pretty much surrounded by water from day one. I pretty much just was around the fish house all of my life and enjoyed fishing and this and that and helping to pack fish. So that kind of led me into wanting to catch my own fish and sell and make extra income where I can.

SS: So in addition to your dad, do you have other ancestors in the fishing industry? Or was he the first one in your family line?

KA: The first one in our family line, really. He's originally from Hampton but they moved down here and he started fishing commercially. Then after many years of fishing, he decided that he would like to take the other lead and sell fish.

SS: Ok. So he started that and you're carrying it on.

KA: Yep.

SS: Is he still fishing?

KA: No, he's not fishing.

SS: Is he still involved in the business?

KA: Yeah. He's mostly involved in the sales.

SS: Ok. Do you have any siblings that are involved in fishing?

KA: Yeah. My brother is a year older than me. We fish together during our flounder season and gigging season, and then we run the operation down here, the wholesale packinghouse.

SS: Ok. Tell me a little bit about the kind of fishing you do—the kind of species and gear types and stuff, and seasons.

KA: Mostly what we do, now that we're kind of wrapped up in the packinghouse, we mostly just commercial gillnet in the sound for flounder. So that's four to six-inch webbing and you can only set a hundred yard shots, buoy on both ends, and one end has to be anchored. You

can set an hour before sunset and you have to have it up an hour after sunrise. So we're able to fish that while still working because we get up early to fish, bring our fish in, pack our fish, and then pack everybody else's fish.

SS: And drink a lot of coffee along the way?

KA: [laughter]. Exactly. So we do that. And when the weather is fair enough, and when the tide and everything is correct, we will go out in the night and use lights and gig flounders. We bleed and brine our flounders and sell them on a sushi market.

SS: What markets are you catering to with the business?

[04:03]

KA: Pretty much everything. We sell everything there is to be caught in the Pamlico Sound and in the ocean. Most of our volume goes to New York and up to Fulton Fish Market and is distributed from there. We have some guys in Boston that buy a lot of our sushi fish. We have some customers in Canada that buy king mackerels and sharks and bluefish. Then occasionally, we sell to California and a few other local places around. There's guys out of Wilmington, guys out of Eastern _____ (?) that buy and some people in Hampton and Virginia Beach that buy.

SS: So you're just packing as opposed to processing, or do you do some cutting?

KA: In the summertime, we do do some cutting, and a little bit of retail and freezing and vacuum packing and freezing and storing to sell product through the winter. But for the most part, we're packing whole fish and shipping it out a day or two after, and that's going all to a fresh market.

SS: How many fishermen around here are you buying from?

KA: It all varies, really, dependent on the season. In the summertime, our fleet is fairly small because the fishing is not red hot in the summer. But we do have the flounder guy, so on average I would say we have ten guys selling to us. Then in the peaks of king mackerel season and Spanish gillnet season, it could be fifteen or twenty boats. It just depends on who's where and what's running.

SS: Are there other fish houses here in Hatteras?

KA: Yeah. Well, you know of Wanchese Fish up in actual Wanchese. They have a plant down here. They have a lot of guys who come from up the sound down here when the bite's good here. They fish here and sell there. Then they just take it to Wanchese. Then there's also Avon Seafood, which is Tillman, and he's right down the street from us, and he has a similar fleet to us.

SS: So it sounds like this is really a fishing town?

KA: Pretty much.

SS: Pretty much?

KA: Mostly, if you don't fish, you're in the retail industry or construction or anything like that.

SS: How have you seen Hatteras change in your lifetime?

KA: It's changed a good amount. I would say a lot of people have actually been getting out of commercial fishing—the old-timers. There is some young and up-and-coming fishermen down here. But I just feel like a lot of the old ways have kind of got away from being taught to the youth and to the young kids, and more higher education and all is being pushed. Which I'm not against at all. But it is good to know that you can stay here and make a living and enjoy a lifestyle and make a living. The fishing has changed too. The seasons have changed. We've had milder winters, which brought less sharks. That's kind of what I love about it. It's never the same thing. You don't know what to expect, and sometimes it's amazing and sometimes it's absolute garbage. [laughter]

SS: [laughter]

[08:00]

KA: Yeah, I'd say the people have changed. The times have changed. The regulations have changed, which has pushed a lot of people out.

SS: Like what, for example?

KA: Like the sizes of the net and how long you can leave the stuff. Oh, just the seasons and different fish, shutting the fishing down before the season's actually over. The fish are still here, they're being caught, but you can't keep them. You're throwing dead fish overboard. People just got over it. They've either sold their boat or switched their gear and gone somewhere else to do something else. You know, it's just been one thing after the next, to where people were just not into just switching and buying new gear and this and changing every year. So they're going with something more consistent.

SS: When would you say those changes have been taking place?

KA: Probably in the last ten years. I mean, and of course, some of the older fishermen are getting a little older and they don't want to work as hard, stuff like that. But that's become what they've made it and a lot of the regulations have made it become, is more work. Because you already have all this gear that you've been using for years, and now you can't use it. So you got to hang all new gear, and you got to change all this. I'm all for regulations and stuff like that, but if it makes sense, if there's science behind it.

[09:55]

SS: When did you say you started fishing personally? What age?

KA: I fished a little bit when I was sixteen, seventeen. Then I went off to high school, and fished in the summers when I'd come home from college and stuff. Then after I got home

from college, that's when I fished. I did most of my fishing then. King mackerel fishing. Shark fishing. Then after I did all that stuff and got more involved into the business, really all I could do is the gillnetting, with the time consumption.

SS: I see. So do you have a license in your name?

KA: My dad assigns me his license every season, just because it's been easier for us to do that I haven't got my own license yet.

SS: Ok. So how does that work? Is it just within a family that you can assign a license, or is it anybody?

KA: No. You can assign them to anybody.

SS: If you own a license, you can just say, "I'm letting somebody else fish it," and it's signed over temporarily.

KA: Yeah. They just carry a copy of that with them and use their boat and all their stuff.

SS: Interesting. That sounds relatively simple to do.

KA: It's simple. Yep. A couple signatures and a notary, and you get a commercial license for twelve months. Then you have to reassign it every year.

SS: Is there a limit on the number of times you can do that?

KA: I don't think so. I don't think so. You can reassign it as many times as you want. But it comes back to you after the assignment is up. So once you've assigned it to that person, I don't think you can take it back until the assignment is up.

SS: That makes sense. So, you went to college and you were fishing here in the summers? What was your degree in?

KA: Business and economics.

SS: So that must be pretty relevant to what you're doing.

KA: Yeah, that was the plan—eventually, overall, to come into the family business and sell fish. You know, we have dreams of doing a retail market, eventually and whatnot, down the road here, and entertaining the wholesale-retail thing together, to supplement the lack of fish, I guess you could say, or the change in everything. We have to adapt with the changes. So, I feel like we can make it in the commercial industry. But with the retail side of things that we have down here, and the summer influx of people down here, it's just a huge advantage to make some cash in the summertime. Most of these retail markets have to second-hand fish. I would just be taking it straight from the producer straight—no third party involved. That's one of the goals for the next few years.

[13:21]

SS: What are the steps that you need to do to make that happen?

KA: We have a location. We just need to do renovations at a building, get the permitting. Really, it's just down to getting the cash to do all that, and then getting good people. In a small place like this, good people are hard to find.

SS: I can imagine.

KA: We just can't do it all between the sales, the operation, packing, and then our summertime operation. It's just a lot.

SS: Is it all you doing it right now? You and your brother?

KA: Me and my brother are pretty much running the whole—yeah.

SS: You don't have any employees?

KA: No, we have some employees. But you can understand in the fish house industry, where there's good times and there's bad times, to hold a part-time employee is extremely difficult, unless you offer incentives or work outside of just packing fish. Because in the summertime, there's much more lucrative jobs down here.

SS: In the tourism side of things?

KA: Yeah. So we just kind of get by in those times with just us and maybe one or two employees. Then in the fall and summer when we're busy, and things slow down for the retail industry, we normally get some more people and get more help.

SS: You said a minute ago that your getting the degree in business and becoming part of the fish house was part of the plan. Can I ask you how that plan was formulated, and from what point in your life did you know that was the route you were taking?

KA: Hmm. I would say it wasn't until after high school into college and I was studying and stuff like that and coming home and working summers and fishing and stuff like that, that I realized that, "Man, it's a different world down here. It's a unique place. Even though it's drab in the wintertime and there's not much to it, it's just somewhere that I want to be. A lifestyle that I enjoy. Surrounded by the water. Surrounded by good people." Although my dad did stress out a fair amount over fish and fish sales and stuff, it's still, you know, we get by every year. I just feel like it's somewhere I want to be and something I want to do and something I enjoy.

SS: Did you consider doing anything else?

[16:18]

KA: There were times early on when I wanted to be a mechanic, when I wanted to go to NASCAR Institute and do that kind of stuff. Then I realized, I busted a few knuckles here and there, and I was like, "Man, I don't know if I can do this for forty years." Down here, it's just special down here as a community. I'm sure you see the same thing in Rhode Island. It's maybe bigger, but the fishing industry is tight-knit. People help each other. Like a case in

point would be, one of my guys who's fished for us for a long time has come into some hardships. He's a fulltime commercial fisherman. His motor blew up. So we financed a new motor for him. That got him back running. He's able to pay us back instead of having to pay a bank and high interest and all that stuff. It's just helping people like that, to keep them going, not for just them but us and for the community and everybody. I don't know. It's a unique place down here. I think that's what draws me to it.

SS: The sense of community. It sounds like you're doing what you can to keep that community intact, through your work.

KA: Yep, trying to. I've been trying to get more involved in the fisheries advocacy. I went to Raleigh this past year and went and talked to the legislators and tried to get them to not pass a bill and then to just tell them why we're there and fight for what we have down here and what they don't understand. Really, it's more about trying to get the image in their heads of what we actually do and who we are. Instead of having other people, such as the CCA and other different advocates for other things, just beating us down all the time and already putting this picture in their heads of commercial fishermen, and that's just what they think. You know?

[18:57]

SS: Describe the picture that you think they have in their heads.

KA: I just think that they just don't see us as a working class group of people. We're just fishermen. I don't know. Down here at least, it's not like up north where there are big companies that have big scallop boats and interests in this. Down here, it's like everybody's making their own. But what they don't realize is that we're still supplying down here and the East Coast with massive amounts of fish and food for people to eat, and then providing income for them as well as our local economy. I just don't think they see it as beneficial to the whole economy of North Carolina. But I think if they broke it down and they saw the numbers as to what amount of income comes from the fishing industry in this state, it'd probably be mind-boggling.

SS: Does anybody have those numbers? Do they exist?

KA: I'm sure they do exist, but I don't know who would. Probably the state somewhere would have them. I'm sure it's a massive amount of income from just fish, and scallops, and shellfish. Just think about how much stuff comes out of the water here, and how much used to. Now, it's not as good. The fish might not be here. Climate's changed. Regulation's changed. It's all—(phone rings). That's one of my fishermen there.

SS: Do you need to take it? You can feel free to if you need to.

KA: No. He's probably asking me about an old tote hook or something. He's been wearing me out about his hook.

SS: That's a precious possession.

KA: "I've had this hook for twenty years," he said. "Somebody just up and walked off with it."

SS: Aw. One time I was on a lobsterboat and I dropped the gaff over. The captain had had it for twenty years.

KA: Oh no, you'd never hear the end of that, ever!

SS: [laughter]. I felt so guilty. I still feel bad about it.

KA: Yeah. Anyways.

SS: Yeah, so how did that feel when you went to Raleigh and talked to the legislators? Do you think it made a difference?

KA: I think we got some good information across to some good people, and found out who is interested in helping and who's not, just by the way they act when you just give them your speech. But I think it was good. They do like a seafood festival there, and they invite all the legislators and the house representatives to come to this gathering that we have. There's local seafood from probably twenty different seafood markets and retailers and wholesalers. There's probably twenty different guys sitting there cooking it and frying it. And all the legislators eating fresh seafood. And we're just promoting, "Where do you think this came from? How do you think this got here?" Just kind of put the picture in their head, that if you support this bill or if you support this—the CCA or whoever—you might as well not even eat this, because you're not going to get this. Because we can't get this, if you allow these regulations to be passed. The more and more we let them do becomes more and more permanent. I don't know. It's been that way for a long time, I guess. But I feel like it's gotten worse, because there's not as many people fighting. Half the problem is the fishermen are the ones that need to fight, but they can't, because they got to fish to make a living. They can't go to Raleigh. That's why I think that Susan West and a few other people have kind of taken an interest in us and the younger group and the people who are the next generation, to kind of try and get their foot in the door, now, so we can start fighting, and keep fighting, and try to turn it around and try to make a life out of it, and grow the industry instead of watch it slowly shrink. Because that's what it's done is slowly shrink. You listen to the older fishermen or you listen to my dad. "We used to pack 50,000 pounds of croakers this time of year, or we used to do this. We don't have any croaker boats anymore. The croakers aren't off the beach." But it's all due to the weather change here. The cold water's not coming down here anymore, so the croakers are up north and all the boats are up north. It's just all change and stuff. I don't know.

SS: So you've mentioned the weather and the climate a little bit. I'm interested to hear a bit more about how that's affecting fisheries around here.

KA: I'm no weatherman, but every year's been different. We've had more mild winters, which hasn't allowed the cold water to come down below Cape Point. We used to get really cold water on the beach down here. There would be sharks all winter. Dog sharks. And there'd be bluefins off the beach, where you could go catch bluefins, and the commercial bluefin tuna boats would make a winter out of it. They would come down here and they would catch as many bluefins as they could.

SS: They were coming from somewhere else and following the fish?

KA: Yeah. Most of the people who are catching bluefins are doing it up in Oregon Inlet, out of there and north of there. I just think that that cold water not coming down here, we've just lost that whole industry there. You know, that may change. In ten years we may have the coldest winters ever and the bluefins come back down here and we get the yellowfin tunas too. Every year's different. We get warmer waters or the Gulf Stream may be closer. I mean, they were catching king mackerels like four days ago. This time last year, half of Pamlico Sound was frozen. Then we were catching dog sharks all winter, and now king mackerels, nothing else. Then, this winter it's like a complete change. There's no given. There's no constant in any of it. You know?

SS: Yeah. Unpredictable.

KA: Yeah. We just kind of got to adapt to whatever it is. I think that's what a lot of fishermen have done, is adapted to changing what gears they can, and being versatile, and either having a couple of boats or having all kinds of nets or just being able to flip-flop. Those are the people who are making it in the industry.

SS: People who can diversify.

KA: You can't just, "Well, this is not here, so I'm just going to wait until it is." You're not going to make it like that. Like I said, I'm not a weatherman or anything. But I've definitely noticed how much we're affected by a complete change in the weather and in the water temperatures and everything. Like last year, we were packing sea mullets—whiting. Up until almost this point right now. As much as they could catch, just about. This year, we had about a week. They caught them for a week and then they were gone. They started catching dog sharks early. Then the dog sharks left. Then they were catching kings up until this point, like an oddball year. Then we were like, "Oh man, it's going to be a good sea mullet season compared to last year." When it was like nothing. And then it's like, 'Well shit, I hope the dog sharks come.' You know?

SS: How does that kind of variability affect you from a marketing perspective?

[27:51]

KA: I mean, it affects us a good amount in the numbers. I mean, New York and these other places are going to buy whatever fish we have. We don't have to be like, "Well, we're going to have sea mullet this time." They know the same deal that we know, that it's all dependent on the weather. It's all dependent on the season and how much fish there is around. We don't have to worry too much about marketing it. Whatever we have, pretty much they're going to take. This time of year, we're already into the dog shark season, which I don't know if they do the same up there with the dog sharks, but we vat them, in two thousand-pound vats. And then we send them to New Bedford. And they process them, fillet them, and vacuum pack the meats and then ship it overseas to England and France and Europe for fish and chips. So that's like our main deal in the winter. Normally, we don't have anything but dog sharks until the spring, when stuff starts showing up. But this year, it's been like we had two weeks of dogs. It's like, "Here we go. We're in dog season." Then, all of a sudden, the next week, we had a week of southwest wind. All that warm water blew up, and then we had no dogs and king mackerels and there was a bunch of king mackerels on the market

from down below us and in the Gulf. The market was just crap, so we could be making more money on a twelve-cent dog shark than a \$1.50 king mackerel, just because the market's busted. You can't move them. There's not as much volume as there should be. I've seen my dad stressing about it a bit. He just said, the other day, "I wish the dogs would just show back up. It was just a lot less stressful." Because there's one market for the dogs. It's no change in price. It never changes. There's a consistency unlike anything else. When there's king mackerels and there's albacores and there's all this other fish, as soon as there's a certain amount of fish on the market, it's just like bottomed out. You might as well not even try to sell it there.

[30:40]

SS: Yeah. So you said your dad was stressing. Do you ever feel stressed?

KA: I do, yeah.

SS: What are the things that stress you out?

KA: Not having enough help. Not having enough fish. Learning the ins and outs of mostly what he's done and what he's trying to teach us, which is the sales side of things and the relationships that he's built with the customers over the years. Stuff like that. It's tough for us, because he's not always face-to-face. We're most of the time communicating over the phone.

SS: With your dad?

KA: With my dad. Then with the customers as well. It's always over the phone. It's tough for us. We're getting on three-way calls.

SS: Why is that? He's not local?

KA: Yeah, he's living in Virginia Beach right now. Then he comes down. He was living down here a lot more this last year. Then his wife and him, they've been living in Virginia Beach for a while. As we're taking over the business, he's like, "Well, I'm just going to be up here with my wife." Which I understand. But it's made it stressful and hard for us to really gauge how he does it.

SS: Right, because you're trying to learn from him, and he's trying to teach you remotely?

KA: Yeah. It would be easier if we were sitting side by side. "Alright, let's call this person." "Let's make this call." "This is why I made that call." It stresses me out. Then he's like, "You're not learning anything!"

SS: Oh. [laughter]

KA: "Well, it's kind of hard. We got to get together." But we're good. We'll get it figured out.

SS: You'll figure out your own way to do it. Maybe you need your own way, not necessarily the same ways he uses.

KA: Yeah.

SS: So you mentioned earlier—you mentioned Susan West, who's a local anthropologist?

KA: I think so, yeah.

SS: She invited me down here a couple of years ago to the Day at the Docks festival, so I know she's really involved in fishing, keeping fishing heritage alive, written a couple of books. Can you tell me a little bit more about what you've been involved with through her and through other fishing community activists?

KA: Well her husband fishes for us—Rob West—so we've had a longstanding relationship with their family. She's always been a huge advocate, like you said. I never really got involved with all that or knew how involved she and some of these other people were, until they invited me to do the Fish Camp thing. Then, I got involved with that. She put me in there for the two-day Fish Camp. I don't know if you heard anything about that.

SS: I've heard about it, but tell me about it.

KA: Yeah. It was pretty cool, I thought. I didn't know what to think, because they didn't really give us a whole lot of information. "Oh, Fish Camp. Come share." They didn't tell us who was going to be there or anything. It was just a bunch of young fishermen. People who I knew and had met over time. Sarah Mirabilio from Sea Grant was in charge of that. It was really cool. She had laid it out like, "What do you guys see as the problem in the industry? Where do you see the future going? What do you do and how are you advocating? And what can we do?"

SS: A lot of the same stuff we're talking about.

KA: Yeah, yeah. It was just pretty neat to see everybody's different perspectives and see that there is a different generation coming up. People who do care. Kind of gives you a little bit of hope and faith. That it's going to be good and we are going to have another group of individuals coming up. Because you just see it in the old-timers, they're just getting over it. Then she had a few guests come in. One from one of the news stations, UNC TV. She did like a little personal interview with us. Like say you're going to do an interview for a representative or a senator or that anybody's asking you questions, this is how you answer them. Kind of gave us a rundown of how to speak with somebody in that way. They are going to try to do another one, I think, this year. And move more forward into it and get deeper into it. I think that's one of the things that pushed Mike Blanton into getting into the commission and trying to promote change and the whole thing. I think it was pretty good. We had to share. She gave us like a little assignment kind of thing where you choose to do something within the industry and make a change. Mine was going to Raleigh and doing that. I can't remember what everybody else's was. But it kind of just gave you like a something to keep into it.

SS: So you sort of made a commitment that you were going to do this one action item.

KA: Yeah.

SS: Oh, that's cool.

KA: Yeah, so it was cool. For a lot of the guys that were in there, it was very out of the ordinary. Like, "This guy's just a crabber, man. All he does is crab." It was cool to see everybody get involved and do that.

SS: What are some of the other examples? You said you went to Raleigh. I'm curious about what some of the other young fishermen did, if you know.

KA: I can't remember what Mike did, but he did something about getting in the commission or something like that. I'm trying to think of what Brian and them did. Some of them didn't take it quite as serious and kind of slacked off on it. Sarah wasn't like, "You have to do this." It was on your own. You weren't obligated to do it. I can't remember. I'll have to call Brian and ask him what he did. I don't know. It was cool. It definitely sparked an interest in a lot of the guys. Then thereafter, I decided to go to a fisheries meeting where they were discussing what it is to be a commercial fisherman. I don't know if you heard about that whole—
[phone rings]

SS: I've heard a bit about it. This is where they were suggesting that you had to earn fifty percent of your income or your license was going to be voided, right?

KA: Yeah. Mind if I answer this?

SS: Oh, yeah. Go ahead, please. I'll just shut this off temporarily. Hold on.

[recording paused]

[39:22]

SS: It sounds like you have had a pretty good social network with other young fishermen in the area, even before Fish Camp. Is that right?

KA: Yeah. Yeah. I know most of all the young fishermen who sell around. They may not sell to us, but I know who they are and whatnot. But this is our thing over here—the Pamlico Sound, the Hatteras Inlet, and all this. But I didn't realize how far west the fishing goes. Like even just crabbing and all that. And to see that these guys are trying to come up and make a living off the water. They're struggling to do it because they're dealing with the same things that we're struggling with. Regulations and change and all kinds of stuff. I think it was a pretty good eye opener and a good spark into trying to make change and get more involved. It's hard for me to get away to do these meetings and stuff like that, with the way that our setup is with our employees and never knowing, you know, "Well, the wind might be blowing. I don't know if they're going to fish." At least I did get to that one fisheries meeting like I was saying. That was an eye-opener for sure, because of the way that they held that meeting. The things that they did within the meeting were very surprising. They had the public comment, which is what everybody goes for is the public comment. I realized the next day that the public comment was useless. Because they do not give a shit what we have to say. They already had their minds made up about what they were going to do with this bill. I realized that, because I decided to stay the next day. I went in the next day to watch the proceedings and watch how they made their decision. It was incredible. I mean, they had the

list—fifty percent of your income, ten thousand dollars or more, or whatever. Then, so we get into the meeting in the morning, and the one guy, the head guy of the CCA there, Chuck Laughridge, and one of the other guys, said, “Well, this is what we propose.” They just started laying out seven new stipulations to keeping what it is to be a commercial fisherman, keeping your license. Barely anything said what the list that we all commented on yesterday said. I mean, it was insanely different. It was like, “How can they do this?” Like, we had 250 people in here commenting on the stuff that you guys laid out, and then you came in the next day and changed the whole thing.

SS: Nobody else stayed for the second day?

KA: Nobody else stayed. I was mind-blown. They were going to let it go through. It was all going through. One lady, who was on our side of it, said that she wanted to have a vote. At any time, they can stop and they can have a vote as to which way or the other they think it needs to go.

SS: And does that vote count or is it just to test the waters?

KA: No, that vote counted. So they do it right in action.

SS: Oh, wow.

KA: She was like, “We want to make a vote as to if this can even pass or whatever, or if it has to go through review.” I can’t remember exactly what it was. She held that vote. They didn’t pass it. It went on our side. They were mad as they could be. It was pretty tense in there. I just realized right then and there, that there’s something going on within that whole thing: that there’s special interest groups involved and somebody’s pushing this stuff under the table where nobody gets to see it. Then they make these bills and they pass them without any public knowledge, and stuff like that. After they dealt with that whole “what it is to be a commercial fisherman” thing, and they decided that they couldn’t vote on it right then and there, or they voted for it to go into the next cycle or whatever and be overlooked again, they went on to the next thing. The next thing was the commercial flounder industry, the summer flounder industry or whatever. They were proposing, well first the scientist came out and he said that they don’t have enough information to really talk about the season, and they needed another six months to gather the proper information. Chuck Laughridge, the CCA guy, was saying, “The summer flounder’s overfished, and they need to immediately shut down the whole flounder industry in the Pamlico Sound.”

SS: Commercial?

[46:08]

KA: Commercial. Yeah, he said to the commissioner, “Mr. Commissioner, I want you to use your proclamation power at this time to make a proclamation to shut down the whole commercial industry.” He went to the scientists and said, “What’s your opinion of this?” And the scientists said, “Well, at this time, we don’t have the data. We don’t have the proper assessment in order to make that claim. So I don’t think you should make this proclamation.” And the other guy looked at him and said, “We don’t have the proper science.” He was relentless, asked him three times. “Mr. Commissioner, will you please use your proclamation

power to shut down the industry? It's overfished and there's no flounder." It was just wild. I don't know if you follow up on how the whole commission and stuff's going on here. Roy Cooper appoints people onto the commission. You're supposed to have an at-large seat, and a scientist, and two commercial and two recreational. It's just been super lopsided. There's been like three recreational, one scientist who's on their side, and then the head commissioner, and two commercial interests—well, the head commissioner was a commercial interest, and he's, for sure, getting tipped off somewhere, because he was not on our side. It was just wild.

SS: So the representation from the commercial industry is inadequate on that commission?

KA: Yes. One who was on our side, she is one hundred percent good. The other one, somebody was slipping him something. Anyway, I think it's a good thing. Mike Blanton, I believe he was at that meeting as well. I think this is where he got his interest, and then the Fish Camps, and pushed him into getting himself a seat on the commission, which is pretty remarkable in that short a time. But I think people were really losing their mind over it. They went to Governor Roy Cooper and were like, "You have to reappoint some new people on the commission." They just, like wiped four people, and were like, "Put four new ones in there."

SS: Ok. So it's gotten more balanced since then.

[48:55]

KA: It has gotten more balanced. I haven't been to any meetings up to this point, but I don't think they had their annual meeting for this year at least. But yeah, that was a huge eye opener for me. To see how lopsided it was and how were we ever going to get anywhere with this. There's no way. Chuck Laughridge was just sitting there jamming this stuff down their throats.

SS: Now, let me clarify to make sure. The flounder question about shutting down the flounder fishery was at the commission. The question about the defining a fisherman as fifty percent or more, was that at the commission or the general assembly?

KA: The public hearing was the general assembly. And then the next day was—

SS: Oh, the vote was at the—

KA: Yeah, it was the same meeting.

SS: Ok.

KA: But they had public comment and then they go through a little bit of proceedings after the comment. But then, the next day, they review the whole thing and actually make the votes and do that.

SS: Ok. So it was the commission that voted on it as well.

KA: Yeah.

SS: Ok. Just making sure I understand.

KA: Yeah, it was the commission that was making all these decisions. I was just sitting there shaking my head the whole time ready to scream. My wife's like holding me back. I'm like, "How can they do this?"

SS: It's funny, because you're saying all these things, but you have a smile on your face. I talk to a lot of fishermen and I hear a lot of, you know, pessimism and experiences, but you've had this experience, it was an eye-opener, but you still seem fairly upbeat. Or at least, your body language seems upbeat.

KA: Yeah, I'm still optimistic, as far as what can be done. I just feel like it's crazy that they can operate like this, and this is the way they make the laws for us, and one sentence in that room, courtroom, whatever you want to call it, can change our livelihood, just like that. It's just crazy to me. It is upsetting, but I feel like there's been some changes and things are continuing to change. More advocacy going into the places where it needs to go. I'm optimistic that it can be changed. That things can change and that we can continue to live this way. Like I said, I'm all for proper regulations and different sizes of this and seasons and that. But if you're going to make the laws, you better have some damn good science and some numbers and something to put in front of us to say why. Because just saying that it's overfished? That's not good enough. That's just not good enough. We need to know why. Because when I go out there and I go fish and I catch, and I see more flounders than I've ever seen every year that I've been flounder gigging. I'm not seeing the bigger ones; I'm seeing the babies and the next growth, the next stock. I mean I don't know what the trawlers are doing in the ocean, but I know there's a healthy stock in the sound. Everywhere I go, there's fish out there. The pound-netters, they've been consistently catching the same thing, year after year. Better some years, worse some years. But there's not no fish in the sound. For them to say that is just lack of knowledge.

[53:05]

SS: It sounds like you interact with a lot of other young fishermen. Do you have the sense that they share your sense of optimism? That with a little more advocacy, that things can get better?

KA: I think so. Yeah. There was quite a few kids from down here that went to Raleigh with us and were able to speak to some representatives and senators and stuff like that. They weren't beat down by the end of that. They were kind of like, "Wow, they did listen to us," you know? I feel like it's getting the right information to them at the right time, before their picture is already skewed. There's a few good advocates within that system that already push for us. They were helpful in terms of pushing up to the right people to talk to. Like, "Oh, this person's on the fence." Or, "This person has this view. Go talk to them and see." It was good to see who was for and who was against and who's open. "Oh, I didn't know." That's what most of them said. "Wow, I didn't know that." Like, "What have they been jamming down your throat? You know something."

[54:39]

SS: You said your wife went with you to that?

KA: She went with me to that commission meeting.

SS: Is she involved in fisheries?

KA: No, not really. She's actually the high school nurse down here. She's just involved a little bit with me.

SS: Ok. Do you have kids?

KA: No kids. Not yet. My brother has two kids.

SS: Ok. Do you see people younger than you getting into it?

KA: Yeah, there's actually a few people younger than me getting into it. It takes a lot to actually get into it and get your own operation going. Your own boat and all your nets and stuff. So, more I see younger kids getting into it as just being a deckhand, being a first mate on a commercial gillnet boat or king mackerel fishing or dog sharking. Making extra money. They might not do it year-round, but that's because they have other opportunities when the season's slow. But I have seen a lot of younger kids go into the flounder gillnetting because it's easier. It's not that expensive to get into. They have a little skiff and they can go do it in the morning and be done with it, making extra money and stuff. A lot of these guys across the sound, the crabbers and stuff, that are probably my age or a little bit younger, they have their own crabbing operation over there and they've made enough money to invest in some net reels and stuff, and when the crabbing's over over there, they'll come over here and they'll fish for us or they'll fish for one of the other fish houses and sell. So that's been a really good thing. I feel like there's a fair amount of people getting into it. But I feel like the overhead to get into it with a boat, a really good boat, and all the gear, is a lot of money.

SS: How much would you estimate?

[57:00]

KA: If you wanted to get in, if you wanted to go Spanish mackerel fishing in the fall down here, you'd at least have to have, probably at least sixty thousand or seventy thousand dollars in the boat and the gear. That's minimal. That's not a big boat. That's be just an old ragged out commercial boat that you put a little money into to get out there.

SS: Is that a gillnet fishery too?

KA: Yeah. That's a lot for a young person to bite off.

SS: Yeah, it is.

KA: Like I said, a lot of them are getting their start as a mate. Then learning, if they're interested, if the captain takes interest in them, learn about the boat, learn about the motor. He might let them take the boat out a few times and do it on their own. Then they might spark an interest in doing their own thing at some point. But like I said, you got to make the

money to do that. Some people are getting stuff passed down to them by the older generation and just having it that way—a little bit easier, but still not easy.

SS: Are most of the young people coming from fishing families and coming from the local area?

KA: Yeah, I'd say most of them are from fishing families, and some that aren't. Then there are some that are from out of town. I don't know that they're fully into it to stay until they keep going—just to make some money part-time.

[58:52]

SS: I see. So, to wrap up, if you sort of imagine what you'll be doing and what life will be like here, ten, twenty years down the line, what do you picture?

KA: Well, I'm hoping to still have a decently booming commercial fleet and some younger guys and some new boats. New faces would be great. Then also, starting that retail market. I would really love to be able to do that. I feel like that would give some of my guys an outlet. It would be an outlet for more of my fish to where I could pay a little better to my fishermen, give them more incentive to fish and bring me a certain amount of fish, instead of just, "This is what I can pay you for the bulk of it." You know? So that, and just having a life down here on the water and probably raise a family in the next ten years and hope the fish are plentiful. I don't think much is going to change in the fish house scene, just because it's pretty basic. But I just hope the fishing is good. I hope we have boom years instead of bust years. Hopefully, the climate doesn't affect things too much and the changes like that. I just feel like that's the way this industry is. Like, we didn't have stripers ten years ago and now we're starting to see stripers again. Things just change and change their migratory patterns. So we got to adapt. I think we'll keep adapting. Hopefully we can see a change in the fisheries management issues, and get the right people in the right places, and get proper science into our regulations. Yeah, I hope that's the way it goes. We're going to keep fighting the good fight.

SS: Anything else that you'd like to discuss?

KA: Hmm. I don't think so.

SS: Alright. Well, thank you very much for sharing your perspectives with me.

KA: Yeah, you're welcome.

[61:44]

[end of audio]