

**Interview with Zack Davis**, commercial fisherman and high school teacher

**Occupation:** commercial fisherman and high school teacher

**Port Community:** Marshallberg, 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 interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann. Today is Monday, January fifteenth, I think?

Zack Davis [ZD]: Fourteenth.

SS: Fourteenth! I can never get this right.

ZD: The only reason I know is that it's my daughter's birthday today.

SS: Oh, yay! Happy birthday! January fourteenth. I'm in Marshallberg, North Carolina. I'm here with Zack Davis. Zack, could you please state your occupation?

ZD: I am a full-time high school shop teacher and I guess you'd consider a part-time commercial fisherman.

SS: You consider Marshallberg as your homeport as a fisherman, right?

ZD: Yeah.

SS: What is the name of your vessel?

ZD: The Addie and Dallas.

SS: Addie and Dallas. How old are you, Zack?

ZD: I just turned thirty-five.

SS: Ok.

ZD: Does that exclude me from the interview?

SS: No. You slid right in under the deadline.

ZD: Slid right in. If you round down, we're good.

SS: Yeah. What's your educational background?

ZD: Obviously a high school diploma. Undergraduate bachelors of arts in geography from UNCW. And then a masters of arts in education from North Carolina State University.

SS: Alright, so why don't we start at the beginning of your fishing career? How did you wind up in this industry?

ZD: That goes way back. My uncle was a fulltime commercial fishing [unintelligible] in the family history. My great-granddaddy was a fulltime commercial fisherman and a boat builder, off and on fulltime his whole life. Later on, mainly boatbuilding, but early on, he dabbled a lot in commercial fishing until the boatbuilding industry took off. My uncle kind of carried that on. I went as a young boy with my uncle, as early as five or six. But my daddy and granddaddy took me in skiffs probably before that. I kind of got involved and got interested, and when I was twelve, my granddaddy give me a skiff and a shrimp trawl and I started shrimping in these local creeks and selling the shrimp and saving up money. Kind of blasted off from that when I was in high school. I saved up and bought a bigger boat, a thirty-three foot boat. Kind of expanded out into Core Sound and the Neuse River. Nothing too far away from home—the most, maybe a couple-hour steam, maybe fourteen or twenty miles max from our home, all inland waters. When I got out of college, and got a fulltime job, I still shrimped during the summer. I had summers off, which is the best of the season, so I was kind of catching the best of both worlds. Saved up my money a little bit more and bought a little bit bigger of a boat and did real good. Then I bought another boat and did pretty good with that. I sold both of those boats and built one. That's where I'm at right now. We just built this boat. I spent three years building it. I was kind of out of the loop of fishing and the industry for two or three years, as far as packing out and catching seafood. Still involved a little bit in keeping up with regulations and stuff. As far as fisheries, shrimp has really been my mainstay, because I've always either been in school or teaching or as a student. I dabbled a little bit into gillnetting in the fall of the year, a little bit, in the ocean, but I've never really gotten big into it. Shrimping has always pretty much been it. That's the only fishery that I've really been through and through, nonstop.

[04:01]

SS: This your fifth boat—did I get that right?

ZD: Yeah. Five boats. This is a fifty-six foot boat. The industry's really changed a lot since I got into it. There used to be a lot of local fishing piers around. We were doing a lot of shrimping around, where they were kind of close to creeks. It was shallow water, maybe four or five feet. We'd catch a lot of medium to small shrimp, but there was always a market for it with the fishing piers. We got a decent price for it for the time, especially given the fuel prices. Hurricanes come along and changed the fishing piers. Some of the regulations changed. Some of the markets changed. The imports have driven the price down. We were making

decent money on small shrimp. Now you don't even try to catch them. Just a change. When I first got in the industry, it was nothing to see fifteen, twenty, thirty boats come down Core Sound with shrimp all night long. They were day boats. They'd go out, come in the same day, unload the shrimp. There was always a fresh product going to the beach or going to the local markets. That kind of dwindled down when the imports drove the price down. We went from making two dollars a pound on shrimp to making a dollar a pound to making maybe seventy cent a pound on those same shrimp. All of a sudden, you had to catch a little bit bigger shrimp to get that same two dollars a pound and actually make a good paycheck. Unless you get a run of migrating shrimp, about the best you're going to do here locally is like a thirty-one/thirty-five or a thirty-six/forty count shrimp. To catch the twenty-one/twenty fives and the sixteen/twenties, we had to go in Neuse River or Pamlico Sound or in the ocean. That's really why I upgraded to bigger boats.

SS: To go in the ocean?

ZD: Right. I was kind of exploring those areas and getting into it, and I spent two or three years and I realized, "Hey, this boat's a little small for what I'm doing." So I bought a bigger boat. Then I was really good at what I was seeing. We didn't have to worry about weather so much. The boats that I had were still, at the time, a little bit small. I mean, we could get blowed in pretty easily, even in Pamlico Sound. In the ocean, you really got to pick and choose your days. So we built a little bit bigger boat. My goal was to have a boat big enough that you could pretty much work when you wanted to, when you wanted to, in North Carolina. We've accomplished it. It's proven to be a pretty good boat.

SS: It certainly is a beautiful boat.

ZD: Yeah. I appreciate that.

[07:08]

SS: Let me make sure I understand. You've been building or acquiring bigger boats so that you can go further and go into different spots so that you can catch the bigger shrimp because the market is such now that you need to catch the bigger shrimp to be profitable.

ZD: Yeah. If you bring any quantity of anything over a thirty-count shrimp, the odds of you getting anything over a dollar a pound are slim to none. We're talking a dollar, \$1.25. A lot of that's supply and demand. When we first start out in the spring, the price is real high for the first three or four weeks. But then once people start going and once the shrimp actually start moving and we're catching a few of them, the supply goes up, the demand goes down, and your price falls out. And in the spring of the year, we might get the same price for a fifty/sixty count shrimp that we sold for a sixteen/twenty during the summer. So a lot of it is supply and demand. But through and through, your twenty-count and sixteen/twenties, stuff like that, twenty-one/twenty-fives, are your market shrimp. That's what you're trying to catch.

SS: Ok. The price drip is all due to imports flooding the market, and being price competitive with local shrimp?

ZD: Yeah, pretty much. I mean you could argue some points on market fluctuations like the fishing piers going out of business. But when it all boils down the brass tacks, the imports are driving the prices down. I mean, that's a known fact across America.

SS: But they don't affect the larger shrimp prices as much as the smaller shrimp prices?

ZD: I would say they probably affect it some, but not as much. A lot of your local restaurants are buying—not even local, I mean we've got shrimp going to Raleigh, Durham. We've got shrimp going north. We've got some going south. In other words, when we sell to the fish house, if that fish house can take that same shrimp and retail it or wholesale it to somebody other than the breeder—you know, your big processing facilities—they stand to get a better price for it. If they can't sell that, then they go to the breeder with it, and we get, you know, the processors. The processors are buying—I'm not in the processing business, so this is all hearsay and grapevine—but they're buying wholesale in the millions of pounds from all over. They're just trying to maintain income on poundage so they can flip it over and retail the same poundage out. They're going to pay the same marketable price across the globe. If they can get it for a dollar a pound from overseas, why are they going to pay us three dollars a pound, when they can get the same product—in theory, at least in terms of poundage. They can get the same thing. I know personally it's not the same product. It's farm-raised junk. But your average consumer in America that's eating in the grocery stores or in a chain restaurant is not looking at it as a wild-caught seafood. Your local restaurants are. That's what their big market is: advertising fresh, local-caught seafood. That's where we have a high dollar market. But when you're talking about the middle of the summer, and any given time there's ten thousand boxes of shrimp on the market, it's hard to fill all that out and maintain a high market price. Then you start to see your price go down because of supply and demand. The fish houses—it's not that they can't get rid of the shrimp, it's just that there's too many on the market, they can't sell it all at one time. So then you might see your sixteen/twenties go for that \$1.30, where everybody's just got to put them on the breeder because there's nowhere else to put them. You either tell the boats, "Tie up," because there's nowhere to put the shrimp, or you sell them to the processor for a cheaper price.

[11:34]

SS: Who do you sell your shrimp to?

ZD: All of our shrimp are sold either to Quality Seafood in Cedar Island or Avon Seafood in Hatteras. If we're working on the north end of North Carolina, we'll go into Hatteras. If we're working anywhere locally or on the south end of Pamlico Sound, we'll go into Cedar Island.

SS: You're fishing on summer times and weekends?

ZD: Pretty much. Most of the time, we won't start until the fourth of July. Heart of that season is only about eight weeks. About the time I'm having to quit to go back to school, it's at the end of the season anyway. Fall, any weekend that's pretty enough I can get in the ocean. We can shrimp in the ocean seven days a week so I don't have to worry about inland waters regulations. I can't shrimp during the weekends on inland waters, because of state regulations. The ocean waters, you can shrimp twenty-four-seven. In fact, New Years was the last time I went. If I can get the weather pretty enough, I might go this weekend.

SS: The resource doesn't change? It's always there?

ZD: Well, they're migrating. We're at the very tail end of shrimping. Everything's pretty much played out. I'm going just to get some extra spending money. But everything, for the most part, is wrapped up for the year. There's always those last two or three weekends that you go burn four or five hundred dollars worth of fuel and you don't catch nothing. [laughter] But you got to keep going just in case that one little warm snap might have pushed them back into the beach. See, these shrimp will migrate out, and as the water gets colder and colder, they'll just go further and further offshore to where you can't drag on them. It's rocky bottom out there and you just can't get to them.

[13:41]

SS: Did you ever consider being a fulltime fisherman?

ZD: Yes. Yes, I did.

SS: When was that? When were you thinking about that?

ZD: I would say high school. My parents kind of give me the ultimatum to go to college or get out of the house. So I went to college and spent four years there and got a degree, somehow. [laughter] Then my wife was in graduate school at UNC, so I went up there and got a masters degree so I could go back in teach. I considered teaching in high school, but I really wanted to fish fulltime. In hindsight, I think the Lord led you in the right direction for what you needed. I'm glad that I'm teaching and that I have something to fall back on, because at any given time the regulations are right now, this could go out the door. We fought some heavy regulations, I think in 2005. No, it wasn't 2005. I think it was 2012, and again in '15, and again this past year. It seems like the past five or six years, it's not little regulations that are proposing. It's like shut-you-down regulations. Me personally, if they had passed any one of the last three big regulation pushes that they tried, it would put me out of business. It's not just me. One was to cut down the trawl time. On paper, it didn't look like it was that big of cut. But when you look back over your logbooks that you've kept, and do the statistics on if that regulation had been enforced, it was like ninety percent of our towing times would have been cut out in the last ten years. When you talk about that kind of regulation, that's big time stuff. That's not just me. That doesn't affect just me on this boat. That's across the industry.

SS: Wow.

[16:11]

ZD: There have been other regulations that would affect just me. It would put me out of business. The income requirement is one of them. If they require a fifty percent income, I'm out. I can't shrimp. There's no way that my eight weeks of income would surpass a state salary. Automatically, if they propose that, I'm out.

SS: So you're referring to the regulation that was proposed to sort of nullify the licenses of part-time fishermen?

ZD: "Define a commercial fisherman," I think is the way they put it. One of the stipulations is you need to make fifty percent of your income in the industry. Personally, that would have put me out of business. I've been in it for, well, twenty-three years now. For what I consider, I shrimp fulltime during the summer, as much as possible, and at times it's been one hundred percent of my income. Up until 2008, it was my whole income. I just happened to work three months out of the year, and went to school the rest of them. It would be mighty hard for me to leave a state job and go shrimping fulltime. As far as salary and yearly income, without a doubt, I could make more shrimping. Without a doubt. I could quit my job right now and as far as my yearly income, I could do better shrimping in the commercial fishing industry. When you talk about retirement and health benefits, you really got to kind of walk a tightrope. Because then, when you add that in there, it would be a struggle for me to do as good. As a father of two and a married man, it all of a sudden becomes a whole lot more difficult to just drop a state job and go out shrimping all the time. I love it. I'd love to be able to say I could quit my job and go shrimping and everything would be great. It probably would. But as far as financial security and home life security, it's in my best interest to stay teaching. A lot of that has to do with the insecurity of the industry, because if you take any one of the last regulations in the last eight years, would have put me out of business. Then what do you do?

[18:55]

ZD: That's tough. But I know two or three different people that I've went to school with, that have good college degrees, that have good state or federal jobs, quit their jobs, and they shrimp and they make a real good living shrimping.

SS: They're your age, more or less?

ZD: Yeah. Yeah. The fellow that runs that boat [in the next slip over], he's actually ten years younger than I am. He had a state job on the ferry. I went to school with a fellow that had a contracting job. He shrimps fulltime. I'm pretty sure that he does a lot better shrimping than he did at the federal job.

SS: So there is opportunity in it?

ZD: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

SS: It's just not the same level of security.

ZD: Well, it's like any industry. You're at the mercy of Mother Nature. This past year, we were seeing a real, real good fall crop locally, and then we had a hurricane and that got wiped out. The insecurity and up and down of the income fluctuations is a little bit risky. But if you're young and you're responsible and you're smart, without a doubt, you can make a good living. There's a lot of people making good livings in the commercial industry. But you got to be smart and you got to be responsible with your income. There's also the flip side of the coin. I'm sure this is ongoing epidemic in the industry, especially up y'all's way. You know, drug use. Or big money and just big spending. You know, it's not just that you might have somebody that's got any kind of substance problems, but when they get thirty grand, they go buy a thirty grand truck, and then when the next month, when they don't have any income, there's nothing to fall back on. It's not necessarily just a clean liver. You got to be

responsible with your finances in the industry. It's easy to look at a ten thousand dollars week and say, "Oh, we're rich, we'll go spend it on stuff that we wanted." In reality, February's right around the corner [laughter].

[21:21]

SS: What role does fishing play in your life? You have a fulltime job, a steady job, teaching. Why do you keep fishing?

ZD: Oh, I love it. It's in my blood. If I won the lottery today, I'd shrimp for the rest of my life, without a doubt. I love being on the water. Personally, I love the challenge of catching shrimp, although that can get stressful at times. Every day's different. Those little bugs swim. It's not always easy to go out and find them. But when you do, you can hold your head up. You realize you've accomplished something. I like being out on the water. I like being on boats. I've grown up around the water my whole life. Without a doubt, I like fishing.

[22:17]

SS: You mentioned your cousin earlier. How many other members of your own generation in your family are fishing?

ZD: He's the only one. He's the only one. He's fulltime. He has no other occupation—well, other than duck hunting. He does run duck hunting guides. That's another thing too. A lot of the young people, it's easy to put in stipulations where a commercial fisherman got to be a fulltime commercial fisherman. They got to make fifty percent of their income. That may work for three years. Then you may have a hurricane in June and another hurricane in September. That particular year, you got to have something to fall back on. That year, you may go work construction business. Or you might run duck hunting guides and make more than fifty percent of your income that way. A lot of young people, in wintertime, they do other stuff. It's not like they're solely fishing and that's all they do. A lot of the young people in the industry are dabbling into two or three other occupations because it seems like the cost of living goes up and the cost of shrimp stays the same.

[23:32]

SS: Tell me about your community here, Marshallberg.

ZD: Well, not just Marshallberg, I would say just about any coastal town in North Carolina, or up and down the East Coast for that matter, was built, historically was built by either the boatbuilding or commercial fishing industries. I would say up until the mid-eighties to 1990s, it was still a big, big employer. It seems like some of the regulation changes in the nineties and the eighties and some of the price fluctuations in the nineties, and then some of the fuel fluctuations—little bit by little bit, you realize, some of the older guys—. You know, I was preached pretty hard to as a boy. "Do not, under any circumstances, get into the commercial fishing industry. Because it's just a downhill trend." Some parts of the industry have gone extinct. There's no more shad fishing in North Carolina. There's no more fly netting or groundfishing south of Hatteras. There's no more dogfish gillnetting, at least not this side of Hatteras. Hatteras still got a pretty good dogfish industry. A lot of the industry has changed. There is no doubt. In the last twenty years, a lot of the industry has changed. The boats

changed. The people's changed. The industry's changed. But that's part of it. In the 1900s, all we were doing was catching shad. As that withered out, something else took its place. As far as Marshallberg, boat building and commercial fishing kind of put it here. Now, I'm trying to think if I'm the only one who fishes fulltime from Marshallberg. Well, I don't even fish fulltime, so I can't even say that. I would say, Cayton is the only local resident.

SS: Is that your cousin?

ZD: Yeah that's my cousin. He fishes one hundred percent fulltime. Now, Thomas Smith keeps his boat here. Allen Smith and Kenny Rustic all keep their boat here. They fish fulltime. They're one hundred percent commercial fishermen. But they don't live right here in Marshallberg. Thomas and Allen live to Beaufort and Kenny lives to Gloucester. He's pretty close. He's knocking on our doors. Where thirty years ago, half the community was involved in the fishing and the boatbuilding industry, now, shoot, less than ten.

SS: That's a big change.

ZD: Yeah. Big change.

SS: What are those people who would be fishing or boatbuilding, what are they doing instead?

[26:38]

ZD: Well, some of them still boat-build, just not on Marshallberg. Jarrett Bay is a big employer. There used to be two big boatbuilding facilities here. My daddy owned one of them and Jarrett Bay was the other one. Before, that was my great-granddaddy's and Mr. Willis' establishment. Same facilities just grew out of it. Then Jarrett Bay just opened up a big industrial park out at Beaufort, and a lot of the guys just drive fifteen minutes to work instead of the three. We still have some boat builders. But that's not commercial industry. That's all sport fishing associated stuff, mainly. There's a little bit of commercial out there, but no new construction commercial. A lot's changed. A whole lot's changed. I guess as older people get out of it, or maybe it's their bodies become wore out a little bit, they realize that they just can't work like they used to and make the income. They get out of it and they either go on the ferry or a tug or a dredge. Something that's a little less strenuous on the body. They've got the sea time because they've fished their whole lives. My wife's daddy was a fulltime commercial fisherman all the way up to 2010—'09 or '10. And he got out of it and went on ferry service. Young people don't think about benefits and retirement. It's just not in their nature to think about what they're going to do when they're sixty-five.

SS: Too far away.

ZD: But a fifty-year-old does. A fifty-year-old starts to think, "Am I going to work until I die, or am I going to go get a job that's got a little bit better than nothing?" A lot of the old-timers that were in it right up when the prices started to fall and the fuel prices started to fall and the income started to go away, they saw it as, "This is it. We need to make a change." They got out. Either they went on a dredge or a tug or a ferry. They saw that, "Hey, this is steady income. It's not that bad. We can do it." Nobody young kind of filled that void in the industry, so whereas locally, there was twenty or thirty boats here, now there's only five.



That's up and down. That's not just Marshallberg. That's Davis Shore, Atlantic, Cedar Island. When I got in it, there was probably fifteen fish houses down east. Now in terms of pack-you-out, pack-seven-or-eight-boats, there's only one—Bradley Styron. That's it.

[29:46]

SS: What's the reason for that shrinking of the fish house population?

ZD: Well, if you don't have boats, you don't have product coming in. As fishermen get out and they don't bring the product to the dock.

SS: Ok. It's a consequence of the shrinking of the fleet?

ZD: Yeah. It's funny how it all kind of coincided. It's like a generation was going away. You had the old man that run the fish house. When he was ready to get out of it was the same time that other fellows that was old and run the boats was starting to get out of it. It's like within five years, it was just dropping like flies.

SS: That quickly?

ZD: Yeah.

SS: Five years?

ZD: Yeah.

SS: Big change.

ZD: Within five years, I had to switch fish houses five times.

SS: What were those five years, date-wise?

ZD: That would have been 2008 to about 2013, 2014.

SS: That's practically overnight in terms of the history of the community.

ZD: Yeah, in industry terms. Yeah. Very, very rapid. A whole lot of that had to do with fuel price issues and shrimp price issues. That was the same time when we had the hurricanes in the Gulf that drove the fuel prices up to like \$3.50, \$4.00 a gallon. Shrimp was staying at a dollar and \$1.50. It was a struggle. There was one year there when I went for five weeks. At the end of five weeks, I was sitting there scratching my head, thinking, "I've only made a hundred dollars a week here and I've been every night for five weeks." I could do it because I was a college student and I didn't have a family to feed. But if you're a guy with a family to feed, then, "Hey. We got to have some income." Those four or five years, it was a pretty rapid decline real fast. A lot of boats got sold. A lot of boats. That's another thing. A lot of boats around here were at the end of their usable life. Without some heavy maintenance, they just kind of fell by the wayside. The boat that I bought, I got what I consider fairly cheap. But we had to rebuild the thing stem to stern, because it hadn't been run in four or five years. The decks were all rotten. We had to replace all the decks. All the rigging had to

be rewet. We did a lot of work to it. But that was just one of thirty boats in the county that was in the same state.

[32:44]

SS: Who do you have for crew on your boat?

ZD: I, typically speaking, take a couple of high school kids that's young and inexperienced and don't know jack diddly squat and are interested in going on to be on a tug or a dredge, and say, "Alright, boys. Let's go!" They kind of learn the ropes and experience sea life a little bit, or just get an idea of getting on the water. They can save up sea time, so when they get out of high school, they'll have sea time. They'll be able to get an able-bodied seaman ticket. If they want to stay in the industry, then they'll be able to go get on a trawler and try to work up the ranks or if they don't, they can go get an AB ticket and go get on a dredge or a tug or the ferry. Since before 2009, I worked by myself. It was just me on the boat by myself. But since then, I've had, let's see—one, two, three, four, five—I've had seven different kids working for me in the last ten years. Five of those are fulltime on a boat now. They're all on tugs and dredges and ferries.

SS: No commercial fishing boats?

ZD: Well, Cayton. Cayton worked with me for just a little bit. He didn't work with me long. Maybe a couple of weeks here and there. But like I said, he went and got a state job. Once he got out of that, he went back into the fishing industry and has been real successful. He's a good young captain, real good young captain. The other two went into being a welder and being a lineman. It kind of gives the kids an opportunity to give the kids some experience if they want to be in the industry. I'm not talking about commercial industry. I'm just talking about marine industry. It gives them some experience to get a foot in the door. I've taken family members just on weekends. My daddy goes with me a lot. My granddaddy goes with me a lot on the weekends. Short trips, they go with me. My uncle goes with me some.

[35:14]

SS: When you think about what the future might hold for you and for commercial fishing, what's your prediction?

ZD: That's a good question. The group of commercial fishermen that's actually doing the fishing are not strong enough politically to stay in business. But the consumer is. That's where our strong point is in this industry, at least in North Carolina. We've got a lot of people that enjoy eating local seafood that don't have a shrimp trawler, that don't have a gillnetter, that don't have a boat. Their only means to fresh product is if somebody's willing to go out there and catch it for them. The only reason that those three big pushes of regulation haven't been passed by the legislation or by the marine fisheries, is because we've got people in North Carolina that realize the importance of somebody able to go out and catch stuff for them. I think as long as this industry is willing to provide a fresh, local, organic product, I think there's a future. I really do. For young people getting in, I'd say you better be ready to adapt and change, because something's different every year. Every single year, something's going to be different. Where you catch the shrimp is going to be different. Where you catch the fish is going to be different. The weather's going to be different. And

just as soon as you think you've got it figured out, they're going to throw you a curve ball. As far as regulations, I can only really speak adequately on shrimp. Personally I feel like the shrimping industry has gone above and beyond on many different levels on regulations. I think we're doing a real good job on where we drag, how we drag, the equipment we use, the bycatch reduction devices. Every year we're doing more studies on how to reduce more bycatch. How to get fish out of the bags without ever bringing them on the boat. I'm without a doubt certain that there's going to be more regulations. There was a lot of resistance back in the nineties about pulling TEDs. People didn't want to pull TEDs, because they were going to lose shrimp. I wouldn't put a shrimp trawl overboard without a TED. I wouldn't even consider it, because it doesn't just eliminate turtles. It eliminates jelly balls. It eliminates sticks. It eliminates fish. It eliminates trash. As far as bottom junk—king crabs. I wouldn't even think about towing a shrimp trawl without a TED in it. There's too much stuff on the bottom that you got to dig through if you don't have it. In fact, I pull a close-bar TED just because it does shoot more stuff out the net. I'm sure that it reduces a little bit more shrimp, but you don't have to handle near the amount of bycatch. A lot of people think that fish is bycatch. Jelly balls are bycatch too. I've made some tows this fall where if we hadn't had jelly ball shooters, we wouldn't have got them on the boat. We had that many of them. But with jelly ball shooters, you don't see a dozen of them.

SS: What's a jelly ball shooter?

ZD: Well, the turtle shooter has got a grid. The bars are either close together or far apart. The widest you can have it is four inches, bar to bar. A jelly ball shooter shrinks that down, because those cannonball jellies are small enough to get through three or four inch bar. But if you put a two and a half inch bar in there, it'll shoot them out, so you don't catch them. And we've made trawls where I just keep getting the try net over the side of the boat with jelly balls, and you haul back and there's not one in the big net. You know, where they're all going out by that shooter.

SS: Must be nice not to have to deal with them.

ZD: Yeah. So that's a regulation that twenty years ago, people were fighting tooth and nail not to have to pull them. Now, shoot, I wouldn't even think about pulling a trawl without a jelly ball shooter in it.

SS: That's a change in mentality?

ZD: Yeah, just a change in mentality. A lot of that is that all I've ever known is, "You got to pull a TED." I've never known any different, so I'm used to it.

SS: Has the older generation come around to it, eventually? Or are they still grumbling about it?

ZD: Oh, it's a federal mandate. If you want to go shrimping, you got to pull it. So you can either get over it or get out [laughter]. But that's just one regulation that I see as a plus. Some of the regulations, the way they've tried to push the bycatch regulations recently, they don't try to change the net to reduce the bycatch. They just try to reduce the nets. That's a negative way to look at it, to me.

SS: What do you mean, exactly?

ZD: Instead of trying to reduce bycatch out of the net, just pull less nets.

SS: The number of nets?

ZD: Right. This boat legally can pull two hundred and twenty foot of head rope length. A typical shrimp trawler can pull four fifty-fives in North Carolina. Those four fifty-five foot nets are going to catch X ratio of fish to shrimp, in any given area. You're not going to eliminate fish in an area just because shrimp nets are there. Now as you catch them, you can eliminate the fish out of the net. We pull FEDs. We pull fish excluder devices. The way the regulations are being worded is instead of altering the net so we catch less fish, let's just take the net out of the water. Instead of pulling 220 foot of head rope length, all you can do now is pull 110. I'm a simple man, I can do simple math. If you take 220 foot and pull it all year, and then the next year, you only pull 110, you've reduced your income by half. Now that's simple-man math right there. As far as bycatch ratio, you haven't done one thing to that net to reduce bycatch. Those nets that you're still pulling are still catching the same amount of bycatch that they were before. If you want to reduce bycatch, don't reduce the net. The net's not the problem. The problem is getting the fish out of the net. Now that, we can work with. That's where I see this industry's big struggle is, is convincing the rule makers of how to change the industry so we can still provide a product and still make an income, and they can be satisfied with what we're doing. There are some people that it don't matter if you took every gillnet and every shrimp trawl out of North Carolina, they'd not be satisfied until it was done. Those people, unfortunately, have sat on the [North Carolina] Marine Fisheries Commission. That's the mentality they have. "Just outlaw it all." On the other side of that, you also have people on the commission who realize, "Hey. We've got an industry that's important, and we got to try to change the regulations. But we also need to try to keep the industry afloat." That's one of the coming struggles that I would see on the regulations front, is trying to convince not only the Marine Fisheries Commission but the legislators also. Because ultimately, if you got enough money involved, it goes to the general assembly for a vote. That's where we've had to go argue our points the last few years.

SS: Do you actively participate in advocacy?

ZD: Yeah. If there's been a Marine Fisheries Commission meeting, I've been there. I've made a couple comments. I've been to the legislative days. I've met legislators. I've talked to legislators. I think it's real important for our legislators to see there's young, good people in our industry that want to work. I don't want a buyout. I don't want any kind of aid. I want to be able to go, untie this boat, and go catch something and get paid for it. That's all I want. I don't want any kind of buyout. They suggest, "Well, we could start doing buyouts." I don't want a buyout. That's not what I want. I want to go to work. I think you could just about ask anybody in this industry, and they'd tell you the same thing. All they want to do is be able to go to work. It's a hard-working, honest group of people. I'm sure it's the same way up and down the East Coast, everywhere you go. I would assume.

[45:05]

SS: Is there anything we haven't covered yet that you think is important?

ZD: I don't know. I'm not sure whether we haven't covered everything.

SS: Is there anything you would say to a young person who's just starting out in this industry? Any tips or words of caution?

ZD: That's a good question. Young people starting out in this industry, I would say without a doubt, can make a good living. But they need to be responsible. They need to stay clean. By clean, I mean stay off drugs and don't get plastered every weekend. That's hard [laughter]. You're talking about young kids that's college age. Sometimes, some weekends, that's hard to do [laughter]. But that's the same, I guess, with college. Kids who go to college and get hung up on drugs or go party every weekend are usually the ones who flunk out. This industry's no different. The young kids that got a good head on their shoulders and stay clean, within a few years if they want to, they can be captain on any boat in the state. There are fish houses right now that are looking for captains. I mean, obviously, they're not going to take a high school graduate that's never been on a boat and stick him behind the wheel of an eighty-foot trawler. But if you take a young kid that's been in the industry, been on the deck, kind of worked up through the ranks, a good clean kid, without a doubt, they could be running the boat. You don't have to own your own boat. You can run a boat and make a decent living. But be prepared to stay away from home. That's the only downside I see. That's a big thing keeping me at my job, is time away from home. You don't realize it as a twenty-five year old. But at thirty-five, it's different. You start to realize your kids are only two once. The time, it flies by. Now, after my kids get grown, I wouldn't hesitate to go back in the fishing industry fulltime and leave everything else, without a doubt.

[48:08]

SS: Is there anything else you've learned along the way, during your fishing career, that you didn't know when you got into it? Things that really surprised you or things that changed your attitude about it in some way?

ZD: That's a loaded question. If you answer it and say "no," you're just going to come off as a know-it-all [laughter]. If I knew what I know now when I was twelve, I'd have been on the fast track to a highliner, that's for sure. Every single day that you leave the dock is a learning experience. If you're not looking at it like that, you're not looking at it the right way. I build my own nets. In fact, I build nets for other people. I think I've built twenty-five or thirty a couple years ago. Kind of picked that up, not on my own. My uncle taught me how to sew, and then any time you're around a net house and talking to old timers, you always ask questions. Always ask questions. Try to store everything. Everybody's got an opinion about this kind of net or that kind of net or the way this cut pulls or the way that cut pulls and how this catches compared to how that catches. It's funny to see the difference in opinions across generations or older fellows and younger fellows and different areas of the ocean or different areas in the sound. Every day's an educational experience. There's nothing that I would say that I know without a doubt to be fact. I don't think that I can say anything, at least in the fishing industry, to be factual information, because every time I feel like I got something figured out, somebody either does something different, or goes here when I think they should have been in this place, or they go there, and, "Well, I was wrong." I can't remember the last experience that I had, but it was just the other day. I thought to myself, "Well, there you go. You learn something every day." Just a little something. You know? Every captain's a rookie. Every captain's a rookie. I don't care if you've been in it seventy

years or seven years or seven minutes. At some point or another, you're a rookie. Some of the best stuff that I've learned has come from the gray-headed men. That's some good education right there. You don't learn that stuff in college. I really don't care what industry you're in. That's across the board. Whether it's fishing, construction, engineering, nursing, if you really want to know something and kind of figure things out, go talk to the gray-headed people, because they've been there and done it. Nine times out of ten, they've been there and done it. They'll give you some good advice. But on the same side, don't be afraid to change something, because we've changed two or three things on some nets that's paid off really, really good the last four or five years. It was just me and another young fellow. He come to me and said, "Will you build me this?" I said, "I tell you what I'll do. I'll build it if you pull it. I'll build it for free. You supply the materials. I'll build it. You pull it. That's the deal." He said, "Alright. Good enough." From that, we kind of got a new style of nets born. Everybody I asked about it said, "No. I've never done that before. I don't think that's going to work." Lo and behold, it did.

SS: Are other people doing it using the same design now?

ZD: Yeah. Actually, there's a couple of net houses that have kind of picked it up. In fact, some of them have called me up and asked me how we did it. There's a few questions here and there. They don't do theirs exactly the same way we do, but it's the same concept, in theory. That's kind of humbling, when you got a fellow who's been in the industry thirty years call you up and ask you how you did this or how you did that or what worked and what didn't. That tells you that you're kind of on the cutting edge. I'm not bragging. We're just two young boys that had an idea and went with it. No different that anybody else. That is kind of interesting, how things work. Every day is an education day, without a doubt. You got any more questions?

SS: No. Anything else you want to talk about?

[53:33]

ZD: I don't think so. Not in the boatbuilding industry or fishing industry. I think we've covered it pretty much all.

SS: Pretty much sums it up?

ZD: Yeah.

SS: Ok, cool. I'm just going to shut off this recorder.

[53:55]

[end of audio]