

Interview with Joe Kowalsky, commercial oyster farmer and fisherman

Occupation: commercial oyster farmer and fisherman

Port Community: Milford, Bridgeport, and Stratford, Connecticut

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]: Alright, my name is Sarah Schumann. Today is February 25, 2019. I'm in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and I'm with Joe Kowalsky. Joe, could you please state your occupation?

Joe Kowalsky [JK]: I'm a commercial oyster farmer. That's the best way to put it, I suppose.

SS: Is that fulltime or part-time?

JK: Fulltime.

SS: What is your homeport?

JK: Technically, Milford, Bridgeport, and Stratford. Milford—the boat's documented to Milford. Right now, we're at our nursery, which is where we're at during the summer months. We have upwellers set up. This is the only space we could really find where we have waterfront access to do that. This is what we call a nursery. There's a lot of other companies that use the garage and stuff. Here, we rent this office building and some outside storage and the docks.

SS: What's the boat named?

JK: I have four.

SS: You have four boats? Can you explain that a little bit?

JK: I own the Sea Skimmer free and clear myself. With my partner, I own a vessel named the LeClair, a vessel named Mohawk, the Phoenix, and a Carolina skiff. It doesn't have a name. It's a Carolina skiff.

SS: That's five vessels.

JK: Yeah.

SS: Ok, let's come back to that in a minute. Can I get your age first?

JK: I just turned thirty-one.

SS: Thirty-one? And what's your educational background?

JK: High school.

SS: Around here?

JK: Yup.

SS: Have you been in this area your whole life?

[01:50]

JK: Yeah.

SS: Ok. Those are the only biographical questions I have. But before we dive in, let me just get this a little bit clearer. I know you're an oyster farmer, but you also do wild fisheries as well, right?

JK: Yeah, here and there. Wild is where I make the money. Wild is where the money comes from. I am trying to actually work on the farming aspect of it. If you were looking at it with a notebook, you'd be like, "Why are you doing that?" All the money we make doing wild goes into the farming. I don't know where the money goes yet. I have this idea. I don't know. It's stupid. I want to make a hybrid. When it comes down the shellfish, cultured, farmed oysters are what everyone wants to see on the plate. Wild oysters are what people want to eat if their eyes are closed. It's what tastes better. I'm trying to mix those two. I've been trying to figure out whether I use wild oysters and then cage them and grow them that way, or use hatchery oysters and then bottom plant them. Then you've got a hatchery oyster that you paid a ton of money for. I don't know which way works better, but I could try and screw around with both of them with all of my free time [laughter].

[03:24]

SS: Does bottom planting give it the flavor of a wild oyster?

JK: Yeah, that's the idea. It helps because you're tumbling it. A lot of the hatchery oysters, you get this thin shell. A guy in a restaurant, as he's shucking them, he's breaking the shell, and it's just a mess. Even though it looks good, it's not great to handle. You get this thin little shell. Do you have areas you've ever been, like brackish oysters, where the oysters are not as strong? That's almost like what a hatchery oyster is like, if you don't get it out in the deep saltwater. All up in your area and up in Cape Cod, it's all hatchery stuff. They dumped and clogged the market this year, and slowed everybody down with all these hatchery oysters, and they were selling them way below market value. All of a sudden, we were all stopped in our tracks. Nobody was buying anything, and all of a sudden, the orders came. We couldn't even keep up, because everybody was buying all these hatchery oysters, and the chefs were getting

them and they were like, “They’re garbage.” I want to try to make it so that there’s something in the middle. I’m trying to make it sustainable. But, at the end of the day, the wild stuff is where I’m making my money.

[04:49]

SS: Wild oysters, specifically? Do you do any other wild species?

JK: We do fish trapping. It’s hard to make money. Really, really hard. My neighbor does a little bit, but the fish traps, I couldn’t survive on it if I was doing it full-time. There’s no good lanes left in the sound for pulling nets. The only guys that are really using nets down in our area are gillnets, and they’re doing that for bait. You can’t make the money. There’s so much restriction. The quotas are not flipped in our favor at all. It’s tough. I do it because if anything changes, I’ll be able to. It’s more like, I wouldn’t say nostalgic, but I run the fish traps and that bottom gear so that if the quotas open up a little bit, we’ll be able to do it and we won’t be a new entry, because new entries don’t work. It’s mostly wild oysters pay for everything.

SS: What are the fish that you’re trapping?

[06:08]

JK: Blackfish, sea bass, porgies, scup. Is that what you were looking for?

SS: I was just curious.

JK: Blackfish, scup, and sea bass. You can’t keep stripers, which is insane. Striped bass are so overpopulated in this area. They are literally the reason we have nothing else. I don’t care what anybody else says. Between spraying for mosquitos and striped bass, we’re never going to see another lobster in Long Island Sound. It’s all to do with the politics of the way it’s run. Every lobster in the sound died in one weekend in 1999 or 2000. That was in one weekend. I don’t care who you ask. Any Long Island Sound lobsterman you ask, young or old, knows the story. They sprayed that weekend. It was a big rain. Lobsters that were in the trap prior to yesterday were dead by Monday. That’s it. They died in a weekend. I don’t care what anybody says. They died in a weekend. Going from that you had all these guys that tried to get into all these other fisheries, and shellfish is the only thing that actually stayed sustainable here to work. Everybody went after conch because they were just modifying their lobster traps to go after conch. They fished them out, because you had thousands of lobstermen that had no job the next day. Literally, it was just like, I don’t know how to explain it. I’m sure you’ve heard plenty of times how in Long Island Sound, the lobstermen just like [snaps fingers] shut off, it was done. The striped bass—because we caught one off Block Island—it had seven baby lobsters in it, so you can’t tell me that an area that is so populated with striped bass as Long Island Sound—nothing has a chance. We’re having issues with sea bass getting eaten by stripers all the time. Nothing has a chance because of the striped bass, and Connecticut is absolutely run politically by people who want the sports fishermen to be happy. I don’t get it, because there’s so much struggle to be a commercial fishermen, politically, in Connecticut. You go on social media and I see these pictures of head boats and party boats with a hundred passengers, sixty passengers, with piles of striped bass being filleted, piles of sea bass, piles of blackfish. It’s like, “You’re limiting me to ten fish a day?” These things are massive. I know guys that run head boats and I like them. I don’t want them to have to stop. But why are they allowed to go out and be a kill ship and if I go out and bring three striped bass in and sell them to a restaurant, I’m going to get arrested? That’s insane to me, but it is what it is, so you

have to do the only thing that you can make money at right now, which is really shellfish. People have tried seaweed, but seaweed kind of looks like a little Ponzi scheme right now. There's a few couple guys that really started marketing it and opening up processing plants. They get help. They're subsidized to get other people into that industry. It seems like him and the person under him makes a little bit, and then a little less, and a little less, to where I've got a permit for kelp and bought all the gear, sat on it—because it took a while for us to get the ground—awarded us the property. My neighbor, boat-wise at the marina, the guy next to me—had a permit also and he says, “What do you want for your coils of rope and everything?” I said, “A couple hundred bucks.” He took it all, and I think that without counting his time, he was positive like two hundred dollars on his first season. He did it exactly, spent all this time with the first guy that started it. It's like, nobody's making any money except these first couple guys, so I just stay away from it. People like that idea, “Oh, we're 3D ocean farming with seaweed.” That's great, do whatever you want, but there's a whole lot of bullshit marketing that people use to try to stay viable. I don't really do any of that. I just kind of know what works for us, and I stick to that. Wild oysters, I harvest out of rivers. Housatonic River. Farm River. There's a few rivers in Branford that are open. The Bridgeport natural bed. There's a few other natural beds like New Haven and stuff, but they really take a long time to take. Even when it's wild oysters, me and the guys that work for me and the partner that I have, it's all focused on a “save something for tomorrow” and try to actually farm the wild product. We take it out of the natural bed and take it to our bed, where it gets a depuration period. Connecticut's pretty different than a lot of states. We're allowed to go to a prohibited area. We can harvest, not for sale, but for relay, load the boat up, bring it to our property, which is designated in a clean water section, put it down for—there's two week, four month, six month—so we put it down for whatever that area that it came out of, and it stays there. While it's on the bottom, we're tumbling it, checking it. You see how its looks, put it back down, kind of keep it looking nice, see how nice we can look. We turn it over, and when you're doing that, you're chipping the edges of the shells to try to make them look rounder. It's a lot of boat work. There's a lot to it, a lot more than people think. “Oh, you go to the river, you get oysters, and then you sell them.” There's so much more to it than that. But that seems to be what works for us. I think that Connecticut's niche in the market—for at least the East Coast, but I've seen them go across the country—is we are a major provider of bulk wild oysters. Like the guy Scott that you interviewed down in Virginia—Scott Wivell—it's funny when me and him talk, because a good day for him is when he's bringing in sixteen bushels. A good day for me, I'm bringing in 140.

SS: Oh, wow. You said you were dredging for them?

[13:27]

JK: He dredges too.

SS: He dredges too. Ok, right.

JK: It's the same. So he's doing a bushel. In a bushel, there's probably three market bags. When I say, when I'm coming in harvest-wise, I'm thinking of bags. So if I bring in a hundred bags, that's probably more like fifty bushels, somewhere around there. But still, I'm legally tripling what he's doing. There's no limit to what you can take in Connecticut. It's kind of more like a Mother Nature-regulated thing, because during the day, you can only fill your boat so much, and the regulations that were put in place to keep people doing the right thing kind of keep it to—I don't know how to say it right. I guess you could edit a lot of this stuff

out. Out of a natural bed, I'm limited to two-and-a-half-inch oysters. Can't take anything over two and a half inches.

SS: Over it?

[14:41]

JK: Yes. Everything has to be two and a half or under. That's because they think that in optimal conditions, a two-and-a-half-inch oyster will reach three inches in four to six months. Three inches is the legal harvest size. That's their way of trying to keep us doing the right thing.

SS: Giving it enough time in depuration?

JK: Yeah. Now, a lot of these rivers are loaded with oversized oysters. The Housatonic River is a major, major provider of wild oysters. I don't think I'd be crazy to say that a third of what goes out along the East Coast comes out of that River. It's huge what can come out of there. I'm on the shellfish commission in Stratford that is managing that river, and I moved to Stratford for that reason. I wanted to have a hand in it, because there was no shellfish commission and it went back to the state. Once I was in this business and saw how it was managed, the state was up in arms, because you had guys going into the river, and they're running their boat in there for three hours, putting three hundred bushels, a deckload of bottom material on it, and taking off. It's all oversized. It's all illegal. They're taking the shell out too. They're just stripping it. They're going out. They're putting it on their lot for two weeks and selling it. There was a ton of poaching and things like that going on. The state needed to figure out a way to regulate it. Basically, they got to a point where they shut it down completely and nobody could work. A whole bunch of guys were going out of business. That's when I got on the shellfish commission. We actually formed it again. Five of us formed this commission again and kind of worked with the state. Now we actually use like a GPS tracking device. Every boat has a tracker that's in the fishery. Every boat that relays has a tracker. The thought is now the state knows that when we come out of a relay area and put it down, that we're not going to harvest it. Every boat I've got has a tracker on it, every boat I run. Anybody else that has a permit to relay has a tracker. Of course, there's a couple boats out there that have the same names. There's always going to be somebody trying to do the wrong thing. Now, that's what the state is focusing on is weeding out the last couple guys. It's funny, because all of us at one time had to do whatever we had to do to survive, it's like now that we got this program working with the relaying, and it's producing for us, it's like now, all of a sudden, we're like little cops ourselves. Maybe three years ago, we had this different mindset where you needed to do what you needed to do, within the parameters of not hurting anybody from the public. Now it's all like, "Oh, this guy, he's going to screw it up!" It's sort of self-governance now.

SS: That's really interesting. How many guys are there fishing in the Housatonic?

[18:03]

JK: Last year, there was a big federal dredging project that went through, and that would have had the potential to probably destroy about fifteen or twenty million dollars worth of product. So, basically, we open the river up, and take everything. In order to take everything, you had to have this GPS unit, so you know you're not going to go to it early. There were probably three or four hundred licenses applied for last year. It was just a gold rush. When that river

opened, I would go in there with my thirty-six Stanley. I'd go in there in two and a half hours and put on a hundred and fifty bushels—real bushels, baskets—go out to my lot, dump it, come back in, do another one. Maybe it was one o'clock. "Are we going to do another one or call it a day?" Two, three trips a day. We were moving three, six, eight, nine hundred bushels a day sometimes, out of there. Do you know the volume that is? Three or four pickup truck loads was going on the boat every time. It was insane the stuff that was coming out of there. Up to January was channel-only, so that we were getting the stuff out of the way for the dredge. There were a lot of big companies telling people that they were going to buy their oysters, and sort of inciting people. "We're going to be rich. This is going to last forever." I know a lot of guys that bought boats last year. None of them are working. None of them are around. Last year was the craziest thing I've ever seen. I know three or four guys. A kid that grew up with me, I had him running my Stanley once I bought the new one. He realized, "Oh, how much are they paying a tote?" "Ten bucks." He's like, "Wait, I could be making a thousand dollars a day." I'm like, "Listen. It's not going to last." So he goes and talks to this company, and they tell him how it's going to last forever, this is great, and they're going to send him down to Jersey to do some stuff if he gets a boat. He goes out and spends sixty grand, finances a boat, refinances his house. He's got three kids and last week he's begging me for fuel to try to move the boat and stuff. He's cutting lawns and stuff. It's pretty sad. There were a lot of guys in that position last year. This coming year, we didn't find out until the day the river was opening that the new law was going back to two-point-five-inch oysters. I started this year with, "Oh, we can take everything." Just this year is the new two-and-a-half-inch rule. Previously, it was two inches. Basically at two inches, it was the Wild West. It was, "Get in. Get your load. Get out. Don't get caught." That's how a lot of people were doing it. It just finally came to a point where the state couldn't police anybody. The guys were just doing what they had to do to get it done and it was just a mess. They just had to close the river completely until they formulated a plan. You had a lot of displaced lobstermen that were all straight fishermen, no tomorrow thinking. That's kind of what came into shellfish. That's kind of what started a lot of issues. I don't know if I'm even saying anything right, because usually when I'm interviewed, I'm talking about our upwellers and sustainability and green this and that.

[22:07]

SS: Let me ask you a clarifying question. If I'm understanding this, the wild oysters, you can only harvest them up to two-and-a-half inches, and then you're expected to plant them on your lease and wait until they're three inches to harvest. That must mean that in order to harvest wild oysters, you need both a commercial fishing license and you also need to have a lease? Or can you partner with someone else who has a lease?

JK: That is the hardest thing in the state. That's what the state has been trying to change, but they've been sued seven or eight times now. There's no way for somebody new to get into this business. It's impossible, because you need a lot. You need something workable. The state has these leases up in Branford that are available. They're five acres apiece. I daily run my thirty-nine-foot BHM—overall, it's like forty-five-foot—I can't turn that thing in a five-acre circle and legitimately harvest oysters. In order to get a lot, you want something that's at least twenty, thirty acres just to get started with oysters. Now, clamming's something totally different. To clam, you need like fifteen hundred acres, because clamming's just a different game. You need to transplant to it. You need areas that are nice, muddy bottom, where the clams can actually regenerate themselves. You need a lot of space for it. To become a clammer, you need to buy somebody out who's got all this property that can regenerate on its own. Somebody like me, unless I can pony up a million dollars, which is unrealistic,

clamming's out. You're going to start with oysters. There's people that'll let you clam their ground, but that's other deals you make. It's irrelevant. I'm sure there's guys that would let me clam on their ground and you give them a percentage, but I would like to try to be a little more independent. So, ok, it's oysters. So, now I need some ground. Can't get any space anywhere. I came across this business where I knew the guy. I saw his boats working. It was in terrible shape, sales-wise. He was selling off his cages to pay his mortgages. My partner was never a fisherman. He built sailboats growing up, and he was older. He was never into the business as a fisherman. He was a salesman. He had a fish market and other things. This kind of came along to him at the right time, very cheaply. He had got involved with another partner that came to him every other week, looking for a little loan, and eventually he loaned his way out of the business. Eventually, it was just this guy Chuck. At the time, he had working for him all the rejects from everywhere else. It's like, this guy got fired here, or this guy can run a boat, or this guy thinks he could do an oil change, but maybe not. He was in a position where his wife was sick at the time. She's passed away now. He was in a position of survival, where he knew he was not going to take the boat out. He needed someone to run the boats. He was kind of relying on what he could. So these guys that were running his operation for him, some guys completely took advantage of him and ran it ragged. Some other guys did the best they could, but they just didn't know. It was like survival, from maybe 2012 to 2016, when I got involved with him. Me, I had run someone else's boat for a long time on percentage deals. I was really looking to be on my own completely. When it came to Charles Island—that's the name, the Charles Island Oyster Farm—he said, "Please, can you take my boat out a couple times a week?" I was like, "Listen, I'm not looking to work for anybody. I'm going to try to figure out something for myself. But I'm not doing anything, so yeah, I'll take the boat out a couple of times a week." It was his other boat, which is actually here in the water. It's totally like a crazy jalopy. So I'm going out here and operating on a natural bed because everything else is closed. The first day I go out with it, he had his other boat—they're mine now, but at the time it was his other boat—the LeClair. That guy went out and we were working a real hard area. He did like six fish totes that day. He did maybe twelve or fourteen bushels of oysters. I probably did like thirty. We offloaded to the lot. Chuck's asking me—he didn't really say much, but he seemed a little shocked—and I'm laughing. Time went on, and the other guy was not showing up, so I started taking the LeClair out. I was now his relay guy. Then the river opened and I was going in there. I was putting up some pretty big numbers. I was up and down the coast, doing different things. I just stayed longer. The money kept going up, and it was going up enough that I wasn't looking to go anywhere else, but I wasn't thinking of staying. Then, something happened with his main operator that was doing the harvesting. He was just a wacko. He caused a lot of damage. He actually ruined about a hundred thousand in cages one day. Then another thing happened. He had a difference with a deckhand, so he brings the boat in early, says, "I'm not going to be talked to this way," and goes home. There was an order that had to be done the next day or that afternoon, but this guy's mad. He's not coming in until someone else is fired. Just a lot of bullshit going on. Chuck's like, "Oh my God." I'm like, "What do you need?" He's like, "We need fifty bags. We needed to fish two days," because at the time, they were only selling twenty-five bags a day coming in. So I'm like, "Ok. I'll take those guys with me on the LeClair. We'll go out. We'll do it." I took the boat out for four hours and we caught sixty-five bags, had them all bagged up and tagged, brought them in. He couldn't believe it. He was like, "Oh my God. How did you do this today?" I'm like, "What are you talking about?" because I used to run on percentage for a couple other guys and a long time, this guy Larry. It was nothing for me to go out and get a hundred and eighty bags—a long day, but it's percentage, so I'm just all about money. So I said, "What do you mean? I could probably double this." The next day, his captain came back in, took his boat out, and worked thirteen hours. They were there in the dark, chipping oysters, and they got like fifty-one bags. Then Chuck asked me to harvest

again. Next thing you know, now I'm running the harvest boat. The other guy's gone. He quit. He's like, "I'm not going to watch what I've done be destroyed." I'm like, "Oh, yeah, because I suck so much. Sorry."

[29:43]

JK: It was one of those things. Now I'm running his harvest boat. I remember my wife's like, "What's wrong?" I was punching the bed one morning. I'm like, "I don't want to be stuck here. I feel like I'm stuck." Now, I'm running everything. I was in charge of everything here. I'm in charge of the boats that are working relay, which there was another guy. I'm in charge of the lot where everything's going. I'm like, "I don't want to do this." I wanted to work on my own. I'm like, "Whatever, though. I'm getting paid." I got a couple offers from other captains—owners that run of our Milford. I was like, "Chuck, I'm just doing this until I go on my own. I'm not going to take another job because they want me to be there long-term. I think you understand that I will be leaving. It's flexible." Chuck was like, "You do what you got to do." Like if I want to start at ten, I can work until whenever. It's like, "Whatever. I don't care what you do. If you bring it in, thank God." Then I bought my boat and he dropped me off to pick it up. He was almost in tears that day. He's like, "Please don't abandon me. We'll figure it out." I had just paid for my boat, literally.

[31:06]

SS: What were you planning on using that for?

JK: I had bought my boat, and I was going to try to lease a lot from someone and just do something. I just wanted to operate how I wanted to. I'm like, "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere yet." I figured I'd buy the boat, set it up, do what I had to, and then over time, if something came up, maybe work it on my own a little bit of the time. The next thing you know, the harvest boat catches on fire. The Mohawk burned. It didn't burn completely, but it's inoperable. Here I am, with this boat I just bought. He's like, "I can't lose you. We need a boat anyways." I still own the boat a hundred percent myself. He said, "X amount percentage is yours, of the company. That is just a thank-you. Thank you for turning everything around. I'll give you this much percentage for what you're doing." Then he was like, "Do you want the company to buy your boat?" I was like, "No. If I own this business also, I can use my boat here, but I want to personally own my boat." That's the thing. He had purchased the boats that were here on his own, so why would it be any different if my boat was working too? If the company owned my boat, and I owned thirty percent of the company, then if I ever just wanted to take my boat and go, all of a sudden, I owed back sixty percent of it, or whatever percentage. It wouldn't really be all mine anymore.

SS: Is that the Sea Skimmer?

[33:08]

JK: Yeah. I don't know. I kept it. I also have another lot that's totally separate from this business. I don't do much with it, but I'm slowly planting it. There will be a time when it's either another piece of ground that we use with this business, or it'll be something else.

SS: Is that lot in your name?

JK: It's in my other business name. I don't have it as like a vengeful, "I'm going to get out of here and go on my own," thing. It's just the way ground is here, in order to get a lease is impossible to get it from the state. It's because all these other bigger companies, if you bid a hundred dollars an acre—it's a hundred dollar minimum—if you bid a hundred an acre, you have to have a check up front for the first year. You pay it all there. These big companies say, "Yeah, but we're willing to pay eight hundred an acre." They're never going to touch the ground. They're never going to put a dredge down on that lot. But they don't want you to have it. That's really the biggest problem here. It used to be four dollars an acre, an average lease. Then it went to six. You had younger guys like me, people your age, my age, we're going in with these bids and we're handing them our envelope with our check, and we're bidding eight dollars an acre, and Mr. Whoever over here doesn't want anyone to be his competition. They open yours, they say, "You bid seven-fifty." They open mine, they say, "You bid eight dollars." I'm like, "Wow, I got it." They open somebody else's, and it's ten dollars, and it's like, "Fuck, I lost it."

SS: It's to the highest bidder?

[35:02]

JK: Then they open this envelope and it says nine hundred, and it's like [gasps].

SS: Forget it.

JK: "What the—?" That's really what started happening.

SS: How did you manage to get the one that you've got, then?

JK: It's still owned and leased by somebody else. It's a sublease.

SS: I see. It's not in your name, expect you've leased it from them?

JK: I've leased it from the other owner. It's complicated, but that's the only way to do it. I know a guy, and he's got a lot of ground because he's a clammer. He himself is very like-minded to me, in that I don't want to be a big company. Unfortunately, it's like slowly I am bigger than I want to be.

SS: What do you mean by that?

JK: Actually, right now, I'm pretty content and happy. But I always, in my head, it was being on a boat, and maybe having one other boat doing relay, and maybe a skiff to get into some shallow areas. There's a lot of one-boat operations, where maybe the guy's got a skiff, but other than that he's just got his boat. There's plenty of those around. Those guys do ok. Someone like Bloom, they've got thousands and thousands of acres out here, and they've got fifteen to twenty boats going out every day, something like that. Another friend of mine works for another company. They have two harvest boats. One harvests clams. One harvests oysters. Those are running pretty much daily, and then there's three relay clam boats and five boats relaying oysters. Tons of boats and tons of people. I like to try to stay a little smaller. I came from a different background, excavating sewers with my dad. I thought I was going to do that forever. We were a boating family. My dad had a boat, a wooden Chris Craft, a big one. Always working on it, so I kind of learned my way around fixing them. He got into offshore fishing, so he bought a big Buddy Davis twin engine sportfish, fifty-foot. So I was always

around these big boats and these guys that owned these big boats. I just liked them. I had my own pleasure boats and built jet skis and racing jet skis and all this stuff. There came a time when there was a lot of property in my family that was sold. My grandfather died without a will. It was a family business that went back to the thirties. My father had run it, and he was buying out and taking over the business from his brothers, who didn't really want to be involved. They didn't want to work. They just wanted their money, which was fine. It got really, really nasty. With me working there, then it's Jay and Joe—me and my father—trying to take over or whatever, and then them. My cousins would come and go from working, and I said, "I don't work here. No third generation thing." That's kind of like a family agreement. Whatever was going on with the purchasing and whoever wants to retire, let that all be the second generation of this family. Let all the cousins stay out of it. I was an only child. Let all of us stay out of it, because we don't need it with each other. We don't need all the negativity, so let's just stay away from it and let them handle it. Then, after like fourteen years, pretty much, of just working for my dad, I found myself with no job.

SS: What age were you at that point?

[39:07]

JK: I want to say twenty-five—twenty-four, twenty-five. I started at my dad's shop at like eleven, sorting bolts, doing stuff. But it was like a real job that I got paid for. I think I've been getting a paycheck since I was like eleven years old. My dad is not the type of guy—he's pretty comfortable, but he's not the guy to help you before you need it. He can hear that you are fucking struggling. He would never let me starve. If he heard that money was tight, he'd be like, "Ok, here's a hundred bucks if you got to go buy food." But it wasn't like, "Here's a new truck and here's a hundred thousand. Just do whatever." It wasn't like that. Anything I did that I really needed help with, I really didn't have any of that help. It was kind of like after the fact, if I did. Then he kind of showed up and wanted to see what he could do, after I'm already done with it. Like, when I had bought that boat, the Sea Skimmer, I had to borrow some money, had money saved. I buy it and get it back here. He's like, "Oh, so you did go buy that boat. How many loans do you have?" I told him and he's like, "Oh, can I help you get rid of the loans?" It wasn't like I could go to him and ask him for a loan. He's more of a "Do what you're going to do"—because I don't work for him—he's like, "Do what you're going to do. If you get it done, maybe I'll help you afterwards." Like a matching grant type thing [laughter].

[40:55]

JK: I literally was jobless, working for this guy. I was actually really good at what I did, which was running excavating crews and jobs. I did school ball fields. I can run the machines, run a dozer, run an excavator, do all the piping, plumbing, or I could stand in an office trailer like this and run the job, just because I'd been around it forever. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I went to a marina and I had a boat there and I started fixing it, and the guy was like, "Oh, you're pretty good with that. I need some help fixing this motor." I helped him. He paid me. He owned oyster boats. Before that, I'd worked the last season with my dad. I was doing a massive wall in Westport. I did an eighteen hundred linear foot stone wall that was almost half a mile by twenty feet wide at the bottom, eleven feet wide at the top—big slope-paved seawall, with rocks the size of this couch and these chairs at least. I saw these stupid little brown-gray boats out there, all winter long, and I was like, "I'm doing that." My dad's cousin, who he stayed partners with, his only one now, and I got along really well with, he was like, "What are you, out of your mind? It's freezing." I was like, "I want to do that."

[42:28]

SS: What was it that spoke to you so much when you saw that?

JK: Being on the water. I always liked it, ever since I was a little kid. Everybody knows the guy around here, Freddie's Marine Transport. I saw this guy swearing, yelling. He was a drunk, falling down, drinking at the same time, hauling boats at the marina. I'm like a little four or five year old. That night, I'm using garbage ties taped with tinfoil and I'm building a boat-hauling trailer for my little trucks. I always built my own toys, which is real weird. Milk cartons—the paper ones—and tinfoil and toilet paper and paper towel tubes, I made everything myself. I was an only child, and I wasn't weird like I always wanted to be alone, because I had friends who I did stuff with all the time in the neighborhood, but when it was home time, after it was dark, I wanted the tape, the scissors, the garbage ties, and that stuff, and that's it. You couldn't buy me toys to replace it. I brought it everywhere and it would get destroyed and I would build new ones. Always making something. After that, I had grown up. I had built a few boats and repaired some. I had a pretty good idea. Luckily, my dad did have a big shop. At night, I could use it, as long as it was cleaned up by the next day. I always had a project going, so I found myself without a job and I'm working on my boat. The guy that had oyster boats was like, "Oh. Fiberglass this and that." Ok, I'll do it if it pays me. I'm at a marina and I'm making some money. Maybe I don't need to find a job. Maybe I can do this. I started learning how to fix stuff. Started working on other people's boats, doing a lot of wiring. I'm like, "You know what? I'm going to get certified so I can really do it." I became a marine electrician, over like six months. Now I'm going all over. The guy passed away that owned the marina, and his wife took over. So my dream of oystering, that's done, because he had oyster boats and I didn't know anybody else who had oyster boats, so that's over. Now I'm a marine tech. I never worked at one place [but instead at] a bunch of marinas around this area. A bunch of guys know me. I worked every day, but it was like two days here, three days there. I was a subcontractor, basically. I went to people's houses. I had insurance. Out of nowhere, I had a marine electrician business all of a sudden. I'm going along, and this guy calls me up to come down and work on his boat. He wanted a radar system put in. It was a lobster boat that had some weird stuff going on that didn't look lobster-y. It looked similar to what I had seen with this guy, Joe. I'm like, "What, you use this big thing?" He's like, "Yeah. We don't just sell relay oysters." Because what I was going to do was use a little boat in the river that the guy owned, and they load onto a bigger boat from a big company, and they sell them that way, and they never leave the river. He's like, "No. I have my own ground, and we work up in the river on a couple different natural beds, load it on the boat, and then we travel to our own lot with it. And then we also harvest it." I'm like, "Really?" I learn all this in this conversation with him. It was still summertime. By Thanksgiving, I had gone through everything on his boat, because he said he had trouble finding guys that he trusted to work on his stuff, especially when he wasn't there. It was almost like a daily habit. At two o'clock, I'd be at the dock. Whatever jobs, I would get them done or stop by one thirty. At two o'clock, I'd go to his boat, and I was like his fulltime mechanic in the afternoon. I just learned so much. He's telling me this and that, and I'm helping him build dredges and do this stuff. I just learned so much. He's telling me this and that, and I'm helping him build dredges and do this stuff, but I'd never been out on a boat and seen it. He's like, "You're really good at handling the boat." I would move it around when I was working on stuff. He's like, "Have you ever thought of working on one of these?" I literally started laughing. I was like, "You guys don't make any money." It never clicked that these are big, expensive boats that I'm working on, and I think they don't make any money.

SS: Why did you think that?

[47:10]

JK: Because of what everybody says in regular society. You think of the Gorton's fish man. You think of the old man and the sea, struggling, rowing some little shit boat. Society kind of has a view that fishermen are like these social outcasts that barely survive. That's what I had thought, and anybody that I ever talked to kind of had that same idea, like it's a hard life that you can't really make anything at, so you work your job and on the weekends, you use your boat. He's like, "Listen. I need somebody to run the Valhalla tomorrow. The other guy's not coming back. It needs this, this, and this. Can you stay late and do it, and tomorrow run the boat? It didn't work out, so the next day, I worked on the boat all day and had it running. I took the boat out to test it as he was coming in that day. He's like, "Oh, great. It's working." I'm like, "I don't know what we're supposed to do." He's like, "I'll give you two guys, two deckhands"—or it was three guys—"They'll do everything with the rigging and everything like that. You just go figure it out." I'm like, "Figure it out?" He's like, "Yeah. You're going to pull against the current. Other than that, these guys will deal with the dredge." Not one of them spoke English. I'm like, "Ok," so I went. You have to hand crank on natural beds. You can't use hydraulic power. That's something that's different. On natural beds, you got to use manpower to bring the dredge up. That's why you always have a lot of deckhands when you do relay. On your beds, you can use hydraulics. I'll show you a hand crank when we're done. He goes, "Here, let me give you a check, just for today." He goes, "Listen. You give me two hundred bucks back for the day for the boat, as like a rental payment. The rest of it, I'll give you ten bucks a bushel. I'm like, "Ok." I don't even know what a bushel is. I take the boat out the first day, and he writes me a check for 380 bucks. I don't have to pay the guys. I don't own anything. I'm like, "Wait a sec. I just made this in like five hours? Scrap everything else. This is what we're doing. There's a couple closure months in the summer, but that was it. I just started doing that. I was still doing repairs and stuff on the side. I couldn't believe it. It's January, and I'm making eighteen hundred, two thousand dollars a week on this total junk gas-powered inboard. I'm like, "Oh my God, this is insane. How did this exist my whole life?" I couldn't believe it. I loved it. I was so happy. That's what I did. I stayed with him for a while. The engine blew on that boat. We put another boat together. His brother was really struggling, and as his father passed away, he said, "Take care of your brother." He always had to take care of his brother. Now I'm running his brother's main boat, and his brother's not even working. As much as I got along with Larry, his brother was like a total fuckster. He never really did anything to me, but he treated the guys terribly. He treated my deckhands absolutely terrible. I'm taking six guys out a day. There's a couple times he would bring me breakfast and tell the other guys, "You guys don't deserve it." He was really nasty. I told his brother, "I just can't anymore." I went to work for somebody else. The more I would read about it—because I would just search and search and search online about what I was doing—I was like, "We're not doing this right." The more that I would think that or even say it, it was like, "How much money are you making here?" "I think we're fine." I was basically told, I'm making X amount of dollars. It's a ton of money. I should just be happy. In my head, I'm like, "Yeah, but we're eventually going to kill this industry. There's more to it. You can do it like farming." They're like, "Shut up."

SS: What do you mean exactly, that they weren't doing it right?

[51:38]

JK: They would work the wild oysters, get them on their lot as fast as they could, harvest them out as fast as they could, and grind and grind and grind on it until it's all gone. Like, if you have two hundred bushels that you can go catch, go get that two hundred. Not, "Hey, let's go get a hundred." A lot of guys do it. They dump. They offload onto their lot, and then they work that to death until it's all back off. Some other people, maybe they strategize as to where you're putting what, so that during the spawning season, you have shell over here and it's going to drift and catch a set. I try to work out lot so that it is also a little bit reproducing on its own. I'm not just using it as storage. A lot of these guys are using it as cold storage. It's not like I'm against that. It's just how they operate. I don't think they have as good a product as we can give, because of the way we manipulate it so much. That's just my idea. When I was working, it was also, as much money as I was making, it wasn't always the right turn. We had to make quite a few lefts to make the money. I'm thinking to myself, "I want to be in this industry. I want to be on the water. I want to do it right and be sustainable and be here in ten years or fifteen years. Maybe it's not all about money. Maybe I got to leave here, because if I stay here, I'm either going to get my license pulled or it's going to be one of those days where it's like, "We don't have anything to harvest, so go home." I wanted to do more. I wanted to do it, like the idiot who instead of wanting to make a whole lot of money, wanted to go have a real working farm. I do that with the wild product. I like the way that I do it. One day I walked up the dock, I took everything of mine, and that was it. I was done. He would call me and say, "Look. You got to do this. I need this much." I'd be like, "Listen. We can't do that. If somebody sees me, there's going to be a hell of a lot of trouble." "Well, then I'm not paying your deckhands today." "Alright, dude. I'm done here." It got kind of like that.

SS: In the Charles Island Oyster Farm business that you're now a partner in, who else is in the company, besides you and Chuck?

JK: Owner-wise?

SS: People-wise.

[54:38]

JK: Employees, I have six fulltime pretty much. We got up to ten or twelve in the busier times.

SS: All working on the water?

JK: Kind of. Me and Chuck, Chuck doesn't go near the water. He does what I don't want to do, which is deal with the sales and logistics. Then we have two—really, it's one employee, but it's a husband and wife, so they're always together. We only pay for one person, but they're always together. They run the van. They do all the deliveries. We have two vans. One is all lettered up, and then I needed one for a month so they took all the letters off, but they left the glue on, so you can still see it. In any event, I regularly run with three or four guys on my boat. Then we'll put the LeClair out, and we'll put two or three guys on the back of that. Coming through this winter, it slowed down a bit, and I took the people that I wanted to keep for sure, like the guys that I would definitely always have, I kept with me, which was four guys. I could be doing the relay with only two, but I take four guys out. Usually, right after New Year's, it kind of slows down, and it slows through February. That's the trend. Sales are slower. End of February, just like it is, right on time, it starts to pick back up. For those slower months, usually I'll run one boat and I'll harvest one or two days a week, and I'll relay three to four days a week. A lot of bigger companies put all their boats on relaying during that time.

We could do that, but if we run out of money and if something else happens, then we're out of money and we're done. Unfortunately, we had to keep who we could keep. Actually, tomorrow's the first time I'm putting the other boat out. More so, because I'm going to the dentist and I want to see how Mike does tomorrow. That's what I was doing—starting the other that's been in the water all year but I haven't started it in like a month. He's taking the thirty-six out tomorrow.

SS: So you're basically managing the water side of things.

[57:18]

JK: Yeah. Everything on the water, I deal with.

SS: Sounds like a good arrangement.

JK: Well yeah, and honestly, I can do sales. I can do the books, if I need to. It's just I don't want to. I'm like so busy, especially during the warmer months, when we're really pumping out orders. Between the nursery running and the boats harvesting, to try to go then and answer a phone call for sales, it's like no way. It really just seems to work. If I were on my own, with just my boat, I would probably just deal with one wholesaler and just stay small. Whatever they want, just give it to them. That way, I wouldn't have to deal with too much of the calling and figuring out logistics and somebody to pick up. A lot of the little guys, a lot of the little operations, they have basically one buyer. They come every day at three o'clock. You just have to be there with it. We have a cooler. We have storage for things. Small guys try to cut out that cost. It's weird. We're kind of a small business. We are definitely a small guy. But we have some of the things that the bigger guys have. I wouldn't even say we're in the middle. We're small, but we operate more efficiently. We have some stuff to make us more efficient. A cooler makes us more efficient. If I have a big order, I don't need to send three boats out that day to go harvest it. It's not a stressor. I can say, "Oh, two days left to harvest it." I have a cooler to put it in. Without a cooler, you can't really do it. You have to sell every day if you don't have it.

SS: Is the fish trapping part of this business too, or is that separate?

[59:21]

JK: That's kind of separate.

SS: That's yours?

JK: Yeah.

SS: Ok. What's the story with that? How did you get that?

JK: I got some tags from a guy, and basically, if I have something worth selling, I can give it to my neighbor who actually does it and makes some money with it. He can just deal with it. I don't go to fish markets. I don't go to restaurants. I just kind of go out for fun and pull them up. I like to think that one day, it will kind of tip in my head. When I daydream, I like to think, "One day I'll have a nice little twenty-foot with a hauler on it. My guys will be oystering, and when I come in, I'll head out on the fast boat and I'll go hit my traps." It would be nice.

SS: That's your dream?

JK: Yeah, I would like to. My biggest problem is the way we operate when we're busy and we have two boats running fulltime, and sometimes we've even had a third boat running fulltime, it's like, I should really not be out on the water every day. I should be fixing dredges, doing this, doing that, making sure everything's up on its oil changes and maintenance. I think if I just managed them, it would be optimal profit. But that's not why I do it. I do it because I want to be running my boat, seeing the product, and that's what I want to do. It's probably a little bit of a hindrance, but at the same time, I don't care. It is what it is. I can let somebody run my boat. I'm not insane in that aspect. Like, tomorrow I'll have Mike take the thirty-six, but over the summer, I actually went away, believe it or not, for a whole week. The whole month before, I was trying to find excuses not to go. Finally, I did go. Nothing happened. They went out every day. They took my boat. The guy took my boat out every day, went right where I told him to go, and everything went smooth. So yes, I can let somebody take it, but I want to be taking it most of the time. That's why I'm doing this. And I like to see the product and know what I have. If I don't like what's coming up and what I think is going to go into bags, I can kind of adjust it. I have one or two guys that I can really count on, but really it's just one other guy that'll think the way I think. Other than that, nobody's going to work your business like yours. "We need seventy bags today. I'm going to go out and work that seventy as fast as I can, get it on the boat, tie up, and go home." That's what it's like. I have some really good guys that are really good on the water. I've gone through fifty guys, probably, that suck. When you're looking to hire, the majority, nowhere else will take them. They've cut grass. They've done this. They've done that. They're at the end of the road. I always say the Sea Skimmer is the end of the road for a lot of these guys. They work like that. It's like, "Thanks a lot. Here's a hundred bucks for the day. I'm done with you." Or you get guys who are ok. They heard about the job, heard they could make decent money as a hand, and they're willing to work, but they really don't enjoy it. They just want to do the job because they can do it or they're good at it, and get out of it. Then you have a guy, probably like myself or like this other guy I have, named Mike, Big Mike. He doesn't want to be anywhere but on the boat. While everybody's puking, going through thirty-knot winds, he's sitting there eating a sandwich, laughing. There's those. I like it. Other people, they just love being on the water and want to be there. It's like, for somebody in Mike's position, where I have him running the other boat and also thinking business-wise, it's hard to find a guy that is good with the vessel, can do the job, wants to be out there doing the job, and wants to succeed together. Too many people are boss or employee. I'm more like I want to do it together. I want to do well, but if I'm going to do well, I want my guys to do well. I want my guys to have nice cars, nice clothes, take care of their families, or buy their girlfriends nice stuff or buy their kids stuff. That's kind of how I measure it. A lot of times, I'm the first one to not take money if it gets to a tight spot. Maybe I could do more money-wise if I wasn't that way, but I also think, once you have your guys that are that loyal because of what you're doing for them, you could do anything. I could tell them, "We got to do this, this, and this. It could be quadruple what we did yesterday. They're going to work. If it kills them, they're going to do it, because that's the type of guy I am to work for. I worked for assholes. I hated it.

[75:05]

SS: In terms of age demographics among the crew in your business or in other businesses, are there other young people? Do you see other motivated young people?

JK: Most of the young guys I've had are terrible. They are terrible. There's no drive. The ones that do have any bit of drive—I've had guys come on and after two or three weeks, I'm like, "I could really make something with this kid," and at the end of the month, he's wondering why he's not the captain. That's it. It's such an entitlement. It's also like, my generation—I'm thirty-one, and I'd say people who are up to thirty-five and afterwards—something happened where it flipped. It's just an entitlement. They want it now. They want it yesterday. I had one guy tell me, "I felt like you stabbed me in the back when you hired this other captain." I'm like, "What are you talking about? Number one, you weren't working for me. I'm the boss. How did I stab you in the back? How did I stab you in the back if I'm the boss?" "Well, I smoked him the day I went out." "I asked you to take a boat out, because he was unavailable. You caught the same load as him." "I was done before, so I could definitely do better." "Ok, great. You had one good day. One good day. But the other guy, at the end of the week, every week he hands me receipts, and I pay him for those receipts. He hasn't called me and said, 'This doesn't work. That doesn't work.' That's why he's there. He's not there because he's the world's greatest fisherman. He's there because I know he's going to take the boat out every day. Anything that happens, I know he's going to handle it. He can fix it. I wouldn't say, 'Oh, go buy me a new transmission.' I'd pay for that stuff. But the little things, in his mind, it's easier—'I need some caulk. It's three dollars. I'll buy it, and I'll give Joe the receipt.' Obviously there's tools and materials there, that most of the time, he doesn't have to buy anything, and if I know ahead of time, I'll buy it for him. But everything maintenance-wise and all the repairs, everything's happening. I don't need to be there doing it. That's why he runs that boat. That's what matters to me. You call me and say the boat doesn't start. I go down there and all I got to do is turn the battery switch on. That's the difference." The guy didn't get that, and he's just so angry. It's like, "Then I just can't deal with you." It's a lot of that entitlement to be employed. I had this kid this season, and I walked up to him, and I was like, "You have no drive. What we are doing here? You think you just deserve a job? You look like a slug, the way you move. Why don't you come sit inside with me the rest of the day, because I can't have you out here." He's like, at the end the day, he asks me what time to come in. I'm like, "What? No, no, no. Don't ever come back here again." I've had a few guys like that. They don't care, but they don't see that that means you're not going to work here. They think that just being there is enough.

[68:49]

SS: What do you think makes a person like you different?

JK: I think it all has to do with the way I was raised. That's what it comes to. After eleven or twelve years old, and I was given paychecks. My dad would say, "You need shoes? Let's go buy them." We'd get there, and I'd have to pay for them. He would then do that same thing. He would give me the money back, but he made me take my money and do it. He kind of forced that value of it on me. A lot of times now, I'll drive places to buy something, see it, and I'm like, "You know, I really don't need to have that," and I don't buy something because, "Wow, it was a lot of work to get the money for this." It's just a different way I was raised, with the value of it. My father in law has a great business. He has a garbage company. His kids were given whatever they wanted. My wife was just disgusted by the way her brothers took that. She wanted nothing from her dad, bought her own car, bought her own cell phone. Her dad would say to me, "I don't know why I can't give her anything." I went to high school with her, so I've known her. That was the thing that I had interest in her, "Oh, she does everything on her own. It's somebody kind of like me," whereas her brothers were given everything. Two of them are just lifelong junkies that aren't allowed to work there. Another one just finally got a job with the town, at forty years old, because he knows the company's

being sold. It's like no drive. They were given anything they wanted. They all drove, not brand new, but they all had either a Mercedes or a BMW to go to school in. They weren't new, but they were nice. They all had anything they wanted. They had apartments right at the garbage company, so they just lived there. If they wanted it, they had it. And now, at forty years old, you're a fucking junkie and you can't figure out why the bank is trying to take your house—because they want their money, and you didn't go to work. I guess it's how you're raised. I don't know. I figured I could either do it or not. I could either do it or wait. If you're waiting for somebody to do it for you, it's never going to happen. I just wanted to be on the water and do this.

[71:42]

SS: What do you find are the most stressful and the most rewarding parts of your job?

JK: Managing people.

SS: Which one?

JK: Stressful. Managing people is the most stressful part of the job. Absolutely, hands down. It would be a zero stress opportunity if it was just me and my fish traps out there, relying on myself. Having to rely on people is the thing that is the only stressor. Not only—there's things. My boats sinking while we're there, or things break, but that doesn't stress me out. Major failure doesn't stress me out, like mechanical failure. I'm going to fix it. Whatever. Boat's sinking. "Ok, I'm going to try to plug it and we're going to get it fixed. I understand that we have this order and we need to get it done, but I will." It's managing the people, because it's not the stress of I will get it done, because I will. "Alright, guys, we got to work. I know we're usually done at two o'clock, but we're going to work until five or six tonight, because we got to get this done." That's the thing that stresses me out. It's managing people and personalities, stuff like that. It's like, "You're going to make me come out here and be your boss? Really? You know what we got to do. You know what has to happen right now. You're going to make me come out here and tell you? Why?" That's the thing. Other than that, I can get through anything I have to.

SS: What would you say is the most rewarding part of what you do?

[73:20]

JK: Just doing things that nobody thinks can be done. Just still plugging away, when guys say, "You can't make money at two and a half inches. It doesn't work," and we're there and we're working, I'm planting a lot, and we're bringing in a beautiful-looking product, and knowing that society thinks that this can't happen. We just keep going.

SS: Because of what you said earlier, that society thinks you don't make money in this industry?

JK: Yeah. People, "Wait, you do what?" My wife works as an executive now. She's higher up at Priceline. People are like, "What does your husband do? What? He's a fisherman? Oysters?" People are blown away, and they ask question after question after question.

SS: Because it's so exotic?

JK: It's so insane for them.

SS: In a good way or a bad way? Like really intrigued by it?

JK: No, all in a good way. Yeah. Nobody can believe that we even—like, “Wow. What do you do all winter?” Like, “Winter's our busiest time! What are you talking about?” “What about when it ices up?” “I break ice.” You know? My dad got me a heater this winter. That was the best gift he ever gave me in my life. He got me a scooter in seventh grade, like a go-ped. Remember those little gas scooters? They were almost like a skateboard with handle bars and a motor? That was the coolest thing I thought I ever got, until this year when I got a heater.

[75:06]

SS: Nice [laughter]. You said earlier that you got some financing for the Sea Skimmer. Can you tell me a little bit about how easy that was?

JK: That was all private. It was not easy at all. Nobody's giving you money to buy a boat—no banks.

SS: Did you try with banks?

JK: Yeah, I tried to get a personal loan. They were like, “How old's the boat? What size? No.” You cannot get a boat loan, because they all want it to be new. So I tried for a personal loan, and they were like, “How are you going to pay for it?” I showed that I got regular checks, and they were like, “We just don't see the investment.” There's like no financing out there.

SS: But you were able to talk to people you knew, and get loans?

JK: Yeah. I was in a good position, because my dad works with a lot of builders, and he himself finances a few builders in their developments and their projects, which like nobody can figure out why I'm not working with him. My father, he drives—I think his truck is a 2008, just a regular extended cab pickup truck, 2500, with a snowplow, and he goes to work every day, drives a pickup truck. He's got some nice cars, like a thirty-three hotrod. We got a big old Cadillac. But he's driving this pickup truck and wearing regular Levi jeans and work boots every day. You wouldn't think he's anything other than an operator or maybe a foreman—nothing special. He runs a pretty large, solid business. He's actually been sick for a quite a while and not doing so great, so now he looks much older all of a sudden. You wouldn't know. Kind of like me, he always has this look to him. I asked him, “How come you don't?” I'd see these other companies, and the guys are dressed up, driving Range Rovers or big Mercedes or even like an Escalade to the job. He was in this old pickup. Before that, it was an older pickup. It was never anything special. When I'm there, and the reason he seemed to always get the job, is no matter who it is we're working for, they see me and they know I don't have any education school-wise, they can tell, but they see me and know, “Nothing else in the world matters, other than this guy knows he will get the job done, and if he has to do it himself, he can go do it.” People know that when they look at me that I will get up and go climb in that machine or do this or that and I will do it myself. I guess I just ended up the same way. My guys, I've had to argue with them, and usually it stops pretty quick, and I'm like, “I don't give a fuck. I'll leave you here today. I'm going to go do this, whether you're here or not. Do you want to get paid today? You can come help me do it, or you can fucking

go home and I'll see you tomorrow, and I won't be mad. But I want to know right now, because I want to leave." I am just that way. I'm not an asshole at all to work for. Actually, my guys love working for me, because we have a pretty easy day every day. At the same time, when things have to happen, usually I don't have to go do it, because most people, after working for me for a while, realize that I'm going to go do it regardless. If they say it's hard or if they have a problem, they know I'm going to come out and do it anyways. I don't care if you say it can't be done. I'm going to show you that it can. I'm sorry. That was a tangent. There were some guys that my dad had financed, and I knew the guys pretty good, and I showed them that I had a chance to get something, and it was a little bit of money from a lot of people. I borrowed some. When my dad found out, he was like, "Who do you owe?" I was like, "The boat was fifty. I had thirty-four. I had to borrow this." He was like, "Really? That's it? Why don't I help you?" He took care of those guys, which was pretty cool. That was nice. Then I told him I'd pay him back, and he was like "I'm getting older. I'm glad that you're—." That was cool. It's so hard. I always thought that if I could really make it, really have some money, that I could definitely like to be able to help some people. There's some guys who just sell seed oysters. I do the same thing. I don't really have any kind of money to be helping somebody, but I still do. There's this kid, who's totally on his own, and would probably be a good guy for you to talk to. He's never drank ever in his life, and he's twenty-seven. He's never had a girlfriend, never smoked a cigarette, none of that stuff, which I can't even believe a person like that exists. He's a real good guy. His dad, I guess, was never around. He's a black kid, so first of all he's a black kid running a fishing boat. You don't see that. He's totally opposite, drives a big lifted truck. He makes me laugh. He gets real nervous about stuff. He goes and buys this boat, and he got loans. He was able to get some personal loans, because he's done well with his finances, like always putting his money in the bank. He got a couple personal loans and stuff, and he's got this boat. When things run tight, because he just started, he knows he can call me and I'll do this or I'll help him do that. My wife's like, "What are you doing this for?" and I don't know why. I can't not help him, because I see somebody trying, and I know that he can't get help anywhere else. Three weeks ago, he'd only worked a couple days and he had to get a new thermostat and get fuel, and he was like, "I'm just done. I don't have any money." I was like, "How much do you need? Come to my house right now. I didn't even think about it. I only had a thousand bucks on me at the time, and handed it all to him. I was just like, "Here. When you get paid, you can give it back to me." He already has paid me back, which wasn't even a long time. Something like that, that's what I like doing. Another young guy that's actually trying, and if I can help him, I really like doing that. Even that whole gold rush time last year, when all these guys bought boats, this kid Andrew, he needed some help rigging a boat that he had bought. He spent all this money on the boat, but he knew if he could sell a few oysters, he'd be able to square everything up. He's like, "I don't have a davit, a hand crank, dredge, anything." I'm like, "I got all of that, and I just replaced it." We set all my stuff up on his boat. If I can help someone else that's younger get into it, I absolutely like to, because there's just not that many of us doing it. In my head, it's like if we could get going, and stick together, and go after some regulations and be a unit, we're so much harder to shrug off. That's what happens. One guy at a time can go into a state office, and they just leave with their tail between their legs, because for the most part, the legislation in place keeps their hands tied. But if you have a group of us, you have to tell us all the same thing, and find a solution together. I have this idea that maybe we'll have a co-op or some kind of association, where young people can stick together. But it's hard finding those younger people. Right now, the younger people that are on their own, there might be three or four of us.

SS: Three in this town?

[83:43]

JK: In the area.

SS: In the whole area? How many are there total? What's the total population of oyster people?

JK: There might be forty companies total. When you think that a boat is a business, that's not much.

SS: Yeah. But three is a very small percentage of forty.

JK: Yeah. There's not many at all.

SS: Not many young people at all.

JK: That's because you can't get a lot. It's so difficult to get leases. There's stuff I'm trying to work on with the state, that I don't really want to talk about. We're working on ways that it would actually be possible for someone to have a chance. If a co-op was granted a large piece of property, there's companies that are going to sue over it and it's going to be a battle. These things that are in my head that we've worked on and talked about, they're really politically intertwined and it's not going to happen next year or the year after. It could be five or six years—ten years—before this industry can really operate and accept new people to operate the right way. You get all gung-ho, and “Yeah, we're going to change this and change that. The legislature. We're going to get lobbyists.” You get so excited. Then you really start to dive into it and see what it takes to make things happen and make changes. It's like, “Ok. If we're going to do it, we got to be here for the long haul, and this is long. It's a long process.”

[85: 30]

SS: But you have ambitions to—?

JK: Yeah, absolutely. It's going to take a while. It's going to take a lot to get there, but it will.

SS: Are there others who share that vision?

JK: Yeah.

SS: Young people?

JK: Yup. The state gets calls constantly of people who want to get into this industry. There's a list that the head of aquaculture has of people that want to get into this business. I have a doctor that I go see, and he says to me, “When are you going to take some of my money?” Like, “What?” You know, people want to do this. It's just everybody is more like, “Oh yeah, sell seed oysters to this guy.” It's like, “No, you don't want to be selling relay oysters, because you're selling seed oysters at ten bucks a bushel. If you had a lot to plant them, you'd be able to sell those for a hundred and fifty dollars. Of course he's going to buy seed from you.” But the bigger companies kind of influence and make it seem like it's a great idea to be just a seed oysterman for them, because they don't have any retail competition from that. When they're done with them, “Just go away.”

[86:45]

SS: I still have a hard time wrapping my head around this. The seed oysters are wild stuff, obviously. A young person can get into that fairly easily?

JK: Yup.

SS: What is the license that you need for that?

JK: Basically, you buy a boat that's going to do the job. You could take an old boat that's going to get scrapped, cut the top off it, put a floor on it, put a ninety-horse outboard on it and a davit, for under ten grand.

SS: Do you need a license from the state?

JK: Yeah, you do. A regular boater's license—

SS: Just a recreational boaters' license?

JK: Yeah. The guy you're going to sell seed oysters to goes and gets you the license. He puts you on his permit. It's like twenty-five bucks. That's it. You're good to go.

SS: So you're kind of like a contractor to the company?

JK: Yeah.

SS: You're not really like an independent fishing business?

JK: That's basically it, and you get a town permit for whatever town you're going to be in. That's twenty dollars. We're talking very low investment, very simple. Anybody can do it.

SS: Ok, but you're stuck at that level of just harvesting seed?

JK: Yup. That's it.

SS: And only selling to the same company that owns the permit?

[87:47]

JK: A lot of times, the guy you're selling to, as soon as he gets wind of you maybe trying to apply for some ground or trying to do a deal, he's going to—. The few guys that are up top, they have a thing in their head, and they are going to do what it takes to put you out. It's just different here. There's stuff I would never say that's recorded. Some of these bigger companies, dealing with them is the Wild West.

SS: Ok, we won't push on this. Where do you see yourself in ten or fifteen years? What do you think the future looks like?

JK: I think I'll be doing the exact same thing. I think in ten years from now, hopefully we have a little more ground. Hopefully, there is some kind of association or co-op operating, where more people will have the chance to grow oysters. I am hoping by then I'll have a fifty-

fifty balance of a cultured oyster and a wild oyster. Right now, it's probably like ten percent cultured. The rest are wild.

SS: When you say cultured, do you mean hatchery-reared?

JK: Yeah. I think I'd like to see more of a balance. I don't see tons of boats and stuff like that. Just the fact that I make it ten years, I'll be happy. I know I will, because I say so and I will. I just think that we'll turn the tables a little bit, trying to get it like a fifty-fifty of a raised to a totally wild. I'm hoping at that point there are more people. I hope that we can stay together. The thing is, a lot of guys in this business, when you're going to be a fisherman, it's because you want that independence. That's great. I'm not trying to take that away. I'm saying when it comes down to the money, let's put all of our product together and sell it together, and maybe brand it similar, because then we're something that actually has a market share. I sell ten bags, you sell twelve, this guy sells fifteen. Mr. Big Business over here says, "If you want anything from me, forget them. You got to take it all from here." But if we can all show up all together, all of a sudden now, Big Guy says, "If you're going to buy from me, it's only me." I say, "Whatever. If you want to sell to him, sell to him, but I can sell you forty a day too. Or I can sell you four hundred bags a day, too. No problem." That's what I'm hoping, down the road, that we can kind of sell as a co-op. They do that up in the bay. I forget the name of it. So that we have more market share and we're kind of more powerful. It's not to have any power. It's so that we can hold our ground and not keep getting pushed out. I think that would be possible. I'm not saying we all have to have the same tags and all be the same oyster, but when it goes on a pallet, there are seventy-two bags on a pallet. I don't care if every single bag is a different company and they're all labeled different, but I want to be able to say, "We have this pallet." That's what I'm hoping.

[81:38]

SS: As sort of the devil's advocate, provoking question, why does independence matter to you? What would be so bad about just going and working for one of those big companies? You could still operate boats. What's the difference? Because it's obvious that it wouldn't mean the same thing to you at all. Can you elaborate on why?

JK: It's not yours. It's somebody else's idea at the end of the day. How somebody else feels it should be run is how it's going to be run. Like I said, there's not many of us around. I'm not being big-headed, but it's how it is. I'll never not have a job. If I want a job, right now, I can pull out my phone. Before I get to my truck, I'll be thinking about three different places that have already made offers. I'll always be able to work. It's just, because I have an idea of what I want to see. And I have to do what I'm told in order to get paid for it from somebody else. That's it. That's really it.

SS: It's yours—your vision, your chance to make it a reality.

[82:50]

JK: Yeah, and that's what I wanted. I can easily be working somewhere else, making just as much, maybe even a little bit more than I'm taking home right now, because I know what I can do and I know what I can do with their equipment. Anybody knows me knows that the money thing is not what I'm thinking about, because I'm going to make money regardless. I try to provide the best product we can. We sell it. I'm going to make money. Money's going to come, with what we're doing it. It's not why I'm doing it. That's not what's driving me.

It's kind of like the idea of it. I guess I'm lucky that way, because I was also smart when I was younger. I saved a lot of money. I paid off things like my house when I could, and that put me in a better position right now. Also, I don't have any kids yet. It's in my head, and my wife was totally in agreement, that I wanted to be at a certain point before I would have kids. So it's like I set myself up in a way to try to get this done. There's a lot of times when, even here, we don't have the money that we need to do everything that we want to do. It's like, "Alright, I'm ok this week, and next week I don't have anything big coming up, so let's still do what we can, and I'll take my paycheck next month." Luckily, I can do that. It's not because of my dad. That's been the biggest hindrance. I don't let people know my last name, or who or what about my family, because a lot of people, as soon as they get the idea, they think, "Oh yeah, he does whatever he wants." It's very much not like that. Most people that know me personally understand how it is, and know it's not like that. I made some smart choices. When I say smart, I stopped drinking when I was twenty-one already. From twenty-one to twenty-five, that whole time I worked, I had nothing to do with my money, so I paid my house off. I was living on a hundred bucks a week, because I didn't need it. I wasn't doing anything. Do you know how hard it is not to drink at that age? You don't go anywhere. You just go home. So I would just do side jobs after work. And then, "Oh, I made an extra five hundred bucks this week, plus my paycheck. I'll just send it, pay the house off." I was able to do that. Not everybody has that chance. Yes, everybody does have the opportunity to make those good choices, but they don't. Nobody ever does. It's not bad that they don't. People do what they want. They're all entitled and think that they should just have everything for free. I feel like an old man already, like that. I'm definitely the first person to be like, "Oh, the way these fucking kids are, blah, blah. These fucking kids don't know shit. They just want everything handed to them," and the guy I'm calling a kid is maybe thirty-seven. But that's really it. Other than really getting into scientific stuff about the cultured oysters that you're not really interested in hearing about for this project—

SS: No, right, it's about you. It's not about the oysters.

[86:40]

JK: And then the political work we're trying to do, that I don't want to talk about too much, because then the people who don't want that have an idea of what way we want to go to hurt us.

SS: Yeah, I understand that.

JK: For me, I don't know. I just love doing it. I fell into it. I thought it was cool as hell when I saw those guys oystering when I was building that stone wall.

SS: I like that story.

JK: "I want to try it." My cousin's laughing at me, like, "What are you, out of your mind? It looks like it sucks. The guy has a dock for a boat," which he literally did. The story is this old man in Westport. This other company, a big company wanted his ground, so they kept sinking his boats and then they burned his boat. He went and built a thirty-by-fifteen dock and put two outboards on it. He said, "Sink this, assholes!" He would go out there in the bay on a dock. He built this little house on the front, looked like a little boat bow, but it never touched the water. They were clamming with it and oystering with a dock. He's like, "You sank my boat three different times. Then you burned it. So fuck you! Now, sink this!" It worked. I thought that was cool. Then, when I started getting into it, and the way people talked about it like it was

the Wild West, I got into my fair share of situations with guys and stuff. It's like, the older guys are like, "You're going to know right away if you can do this or not." You get going. Guys start pushing you. When you're working, they're coming into you. Guys' boats are hitting you and circling you. Guys at the dock, they want to fight. They're like, "You'll know real quick if you can do it." To me, I was like, "Oh my God, that's a dream. Yes!" just being a stupid young person. It didn't take long at all. A couple guys hit me. I pushed my boat right back into them, jumped on a couple boats. Guys get in your face and you don't back down, and all of a sudden, it's like all these guys that wouldn't even look at me when I'm showing up on these natural beds when I'm getting there with my boat and getting ready and I'm seeing another boat, "Oh my God, this fucking guy," and they're waving at me. They're like, "Hey! Good morning," going by. I'm going to the marina and I'm passing guys that usually would try to push me off the dock or something, and they're like, "Hey, Joe. How's it going?" I'm like, "I guess I made it past the hazing of it, until where they actually respect me a little bit. Ok, that's cool." Once I got past that and people realize that I'm here, that was cool. It looked like a very closed group that nobody wanted nothing to do with anybody. Outside of that little group, guys could be sworn enemies to one another on the water, but if you're in trouble, they're still coming to help you. That's the coolest thing. There was one boat that was on fire—total enemies, hatred, like deep hatred—every guy that was involved in that chaotic thing that was going on was there with their pump hoses, trying to put it out. That's what's cool. It's just different. I wouldn't want to do anything else, really. I tried. It sucks. After I left working where I wasn't happy and really wanted to be on my own, a couple of people were like, "Hey, I got to get this, this, and this done. Could you do the foundation?" I was like, "Yeah, no problem. This is great, I'll make X amount of dollars. It will take me a month and then I'll be able to go back to work." Every day, I was like "Oh my God. I have to go fucking do this. I have to go run this. Oh, I have concrete coming today." Something I thought I loved and wanted to do so bad—run a big excavation company—I'm like, "Oh, I hate this. I just want to be on the boat." If you really love being on the water, as soon as you start working, it ruins everything else. So that was that. I don't know what else.

SS: That's a pretty good stopping point, unless you have anything else you'd like to say to wrap up.

[91:31]

JK: Not really. Just anyone that's young should just be really, really dedicated to it. It's going to take your whole life. Twenty-four hours a day, that's what you do. Windy days, I go to the boat. Morning, day, night. I get up in the middle of the night and drive down to the boat without even thinking about it.

SS: Cool. All set then?

JK: Yeah.

SS: I'll turn this off.

[end of interview]

[82:04]