

## **Interview with Kenneth Murgo, commercial fisherman**

**Occupation:** commercial fisherman

**Port Community:** Bristol and Newport, RI

**Interviewer:** Sarah Schumann

**Date and year:** February 2, 2021

**Location:** online

**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]: Okay. My name is Sarah Schumann, and today is February 2, 2021. We're recording this interview on Zoom, over the internet. Would you please state your name for the record?

Kenneth Murgo [KM]: My name is Kenneth Murgo.

SS: Thanks. And you go by Ken or Kenny?

KM: I usually go back Ken.

SS: Great, Ken. What's your occupation, Ken?

KM: I am a fulltime commercial fisherman.

SS: Perfect. What home port is that out of?

KM: My boat is currently in Newport, Rhode Island. I'm actually hoping to get it back to my hometown of Bristol, Rhode Island. We have a dock expansion project that I think is behind schedule, as are most things right now. It was supposed to already be started and done this summer. But it's funded, it's gone through CRMC, so I think it'll be here eventually.

SS: Okay, and Bristol.

KM: I'm from Bristol. I grew up fishing out of Bristol. I started with boats on trailers. We kept them at our house, drove, put them in the water. Now that I have a bigger boat, I bounced around a couple of ports in the state. There's just not that many slips for boats my size. Currently in Bristol, there's no room.

SS: What is the name of your current vessel?

KM: What was that?

SS: What is the name of your current vessel?

KM: F/V Johnny B. It's named after my grandfather, who started bullraking in Narragansett Bay in the 1950s.

SS: I'll come back to that in just a second. But first, could you just tell me your age and your educational background?

KM: I just turned 31. I have an interesting education story. I actually was pursuing medical school for a while. I have a bachelor's degree in chemistry. I also grew up in a fishing family. I was pretty much told that I wasn't allowed to fish, because I was too smart. But when I got out of college, I decided that I wanted to fish anyway. After a few months after school, I kind of decided I was going to give it a shot, and we're still going. I think it's worked out pretty well.

[01:57]

SS: Great. Do you want to take me back? You mentioned your grandfather was a bullraker? Is that when it started, or does it go further back?

KM: Yeah, around here. My grandfather started bullraking, back when the poles were still wood, out of Bristol. Two of his kids, my dad and my uncle, both got into bullraking. Then, when bullraking kind of declined, we switched more into the conch fishing. Now, I do every kind of fixed gear you can do. If you can buy a trap and trap it, I do it.

SS: You said that you were told not to fish. You were told you were too smart. Go to college.

KM: I was told to not fish. I was not allowed to be fisherman.

SS: When did you start? Did you still have some exposure as a kid?

KM: I lived on the boat with my dad. I remember opening day of Greenwich Management Area. It opens every December. It was like Christmas for me. I got to skip school and go with my dad. My dad always tells me the other diggers used to kind of make fun of them. They'd be like "Oh, do you need daycare?" Because I'd be out there in December, as a three- or four-year-old. They were just like, "The kid cries if I leave him home." Yeah, so I grew up on the boat, practically. I fished all through high school with my dad and I got my own twenty-foot Romarine to bullrake on in high school. Even in college, every single break, I just came home and fished. All summers. I never really stopped fishing. But it wasn't what I was supposed to pursue as my career. Yeah. I was too in love with it to not.

[03:28]

SS: How did that process internally work for you, in terms of thinking—?

KM: Internally, it worked pretty good for me. My mom was the one who was really upset. I enjoyed my education. I really do like science. I was in operating rooms, and I was just like,

"This is not for me." I might have always been good at science and math and all that, yada, yada, but I was like, "I do not want to be a doctor. It's just not my thing." I kind of pursued it for a while because I was good at it—you know, the school thing—but I worked in a biomedical lab, and I just I hate computers. I don't like sitting behind them all day. I get really frustrated, really easy. I mean, my dad is better at computers than me, and that's not usually how it goes generationally. That was a big part of it. I just like being outside. No, I haven't regretted it.

SS: Was else about fishing was so irresistible to you, despite having this other option that you'd already invested in?

KM: I don't know anything else. I just grew up doing it. I don't know. To me, it's just a continuation of what I've always been doing. It's just where I like to be. Like I said, I had plenty of fun in college. I enjoyed my education. But I was done with the inside life. I don't know. I just like it. Personally, it really was the only option. I mean, I guess I didn't acknowledge it for a while. But I should have known I would always end up doing it. So yeah. I don't regret it. It's good to have the education. It helps a lot.

[04:57]

SS: In what—excuse me [coughs]—in what ways would you say the education helps?

KM: Management and regulation. I can read scientific papers. I've written scientific papers. I might not have the education in marine biology or whatever. But I can read. It helps me. A lot of fishermen misinterpret the scientific papers. I don't blame them. They're very dense, and they have a lot of words. That's the biggest thing, I think, is just having such a strong science background. Actually, what I'm interested in now, I want to learn how they model fish stocks and stuff. I wish I went to school for it. But I still find that stuff fascinating. Yeah, it helps.

SS: What ways have you been involved with that kind of stuff?

KM: I am really involved at the Rhode Island level. I still stay away from the federal. It took me long enough to figure—it's more about learning the system. Now that I'm at meetings and I know what's going on half the time, people are talking, and I'm like, "You missed this meeting. You needed to say this a month ago." Just learning that whole process, where you propose ideas, where you comment on things, learning how the rules actually get changed, and where it happens. Learning that process took a long time. You mentioned Zoom, which is funny. It's nice that, now, I don't have to leave my house for DEM meetings, because I live in Bristol and they're all the way at URI. It's a little bit of a ride, especially after a work day. But I still hate it. I like being in person. I feel like you lose so much of the back-and-forth and, not like reading people, but I don't know, there's something. I feel like I don't speak as well on the camera, whereas in person, I feel like it comes out better. I guess there's pros and cons. Like now, I don't miss meetings because as much, because they're easier to attend. Going to meetings for just the little state of Rhode Island is like a second job. I don't know how people do even more than that. Some of the bigger offshore guys who are involved in that, and wind, and CRMC, and Atlantic States, and the federal councils, it's kind of daunting. I like working with Rhode Island. I like the people at DEM. It's gone well over the last few years. We'll see.

[07:09]

SS: You've seen a change recently in management for the better?

KM: I asked for a change that they put through. There was basically an old regulation on the books from back when scup was much more restricted than it is now. There was a fifty-trap scup pot limit. They basically said, "Oh, yeah, that's from when the limit was eight hundred pounds a day. Now it's fifty thousand pounds a day. No problem." They bumped that way up to a hundred and fifty pots.

SS: Wow, so you actually [had] a successful experience.

KM: Yeah, it's kind of like it don't hurt to ask. I just asked, "Hey, can we do this?" They were like, "Oh, yeah, that's fine." I was like, "That's cool. That's nice." I mean, it makes sense. I mean, the limits were just totally out of whack. They kind of said it was there from a while back, and nobody ever revisited it. That was cool. A lot of small things. I actually almost have come to sort of resent how every year, every species is up again. It's like, sometimes I'd want them to say, "Can we give this three, four years?" They make these little changes in the seasons all the time. It's why we have so many meetings. But we asked science to be more flexible, not less, so I guess we probably should stay that way. Yeah, science and management.

[08:22]

SS: Do you have an actual position on any of the councils?

KM: I am on the Shellfish Advisory Panel, which is a panel that advises the Marine Fisheries Council. I joined that one because aquaculture is my pet peeve. I don't really like oyster farms, because in the bay anyway, they're offsetting wild harvest fishermen. You don't have to get voted on that or anything. They needed volunteers, so I signed up. Anything shellfish-related goes through that council before it goes to the Marine Fisheries Council. Long-term, down the line, I would like to be one of the commercial fishing reps for the Marine Fisheries Council. I've gotten to know the two now. Two of the eight on the Council are commercial fishing. It's good to have that representation. The people who have been there now have been around for a long time. I'll put in my time, and maybe one day, I'll get to represent commercial fishermen.

SS: A minute ago, you said you do every fixed gear type that you can do in the bay. Paint that picture. What is your annual [cycle]?

[09:45]

KM: Conch pots. Conch season's like May, June, July, October, September, November, December. On top of that, I do sea bass pots whenever it's open and they're inshore. We fish the whole summer, basically. May through September. It opens and closes a lot with the sub-periods, but whenever it's open, we fish our sea bass pots. I rattled off those months for conch. There's a mid-summer break. Basically, when it gets hot, the conchs don't pot. I go scup potting then. It's actually been pretty good the last few years. It just so happens that

when the scup push way up the bay, the big, big draggers and the fish traps aren't landing them, so the volume's down a little bit. We seem to get a decent price by late July, August, into the beginning of September, whereas earlier in the spring, you can see some penny prices for scup, because some of the volumes that come in are huge. That's worked out. I also use fish traps for tautog. I personally fish the May sub-period and the August one. By the fall sub-period in October, they're kind of out of the bay, further south than where I go. I still do some quahogging. We have a couple of small salt ponds in town. We wear waders, and we walk out with small rakes. The one in Bristol has been really productive lately, which is kind of odd. The whole bay is not. The quahog resource in the bay is not looking pretty. But for some reason, this one little salt pond seems to be a little heaven for them. We've been on there pretty extensively, the last couple winters, doing pretty good, actually. Conchs, black sea bass, scup, tautog. Oh, and lobsters and crabs also, and that finishes it. I fish Jonah crabs and rock crabs, which in Rhode Island, they would call rock crabs and sand crabs—the two species of cancer crabs—and lobsters. I've been really growing that side of the business. I kind of came in doing the conch full time, but it's not really a fulltime job, because it's so seasonal. So, I started adding all these fisheries on top of it. I just bought another permit, or I bought another big bunch of tags, to really expand my lobstering from a couple hundred pots to over six hundred. That's my task this year. Talking about regulatory things, I was just complaining. Very arbitrarily, the lobster fishing year is set from June 1 to May 31, when the tags are good. When you do a tag transfer, the transfer window opens in June. It's open from June through the fall. You can buy somebody else's tags, but you don't actually get those tags until next year's tags. June 1, 2020, I paid an old-time lobster fisherman out of Warren, who still has his multi. He still bullrakes, but he knew he was done lobstering. He sold me all the tags, kept his license. I don't get those tags now, or those tags don't become valid, until June 1 this year, which is already into the start of lobster season. It's sort of too late to be putting your pots in the water. All the best spots are taken. We usually get them in in April and May, so by the time that lobster comes in June, you're ready to go, your gear's all set and stuff. In my head, I was like, "Wow, it's two years." I'm going to get like sixty, seventy percent of a season, say, out of these tags this year. It's two years from when I paid to when I get to fish those tags for what I call a full lobster season. I talked to the marine biologist at DEM. He's like, "Yeah, I've never been a fan of that date. Maybe we can look into it." I was like, "That's cool. But it's a little too late for me." It's a big outlay of money, and I can't even fish those traps until a year later. I only get a portion of this lobster season. It's two years until I get a full season out of them. It's a very specific thing. But, I mean, I do appreciate that Rhode Island DEM is always willing to go back and forth and work on these things. But it's just another one of those things, I was thinking, that contributes to making it so hard to get into this industry. You buy something and pay. You should get it immediately. I currently own 650 tags that used to be thirteen hundred tags, through all the reductions. I just figured that out. I bought out what used to be thirteen hundred tags, and I still don't have a full license. The little things that contribute to what makes it so hard to get into the industry.

[14:32]

SS: Let's go there. What are what are some of the other things that make it so hard? Did you find it hard to get into this industry?

KM: Yeah, I mean, it's hard for *me* to do. I mean, it's financially hard. I was thinking this earlier, after I was reading the document. I looked it over. I couldn't even do what I did, if it

wasn't my fishing family. First of all, generational knowledge. I didn't have a huge financial step up. But just the knowledge. Then my dad built our first lobster boat by hand, which I don't have the skills for. We used that boat to make some money. Then I was able to secure a loan and get my own brand-new boat built. Without that generational building, it's not even possible. I had a pretty big step up, having a dad in the industry. It's been nine years since I graduated college. If you average it out, I probably spent \$200,000 a year, related to building a fishing business. That's a lot of money over time. If I didn't have that step up, at least in knowledge and help and boat building skills and all that stuff, it might not be money, but it's worth something. If I was just somebody who had no background, you're not getting into fishing like that, because you're never going to get that kind of capital. And you'd probably waste it without the knowledge of having grown up on a fishing boat. It's really hard. Like I said, I had every advantage, and it's still been difficult. It's been a slow slog. I mean, it's been nine years and every off season, it seems like I'm going into a new fishery. Wire is currently really expensive, for various reasons—caught up in the tariff and all the political nonsense and yada, yada. Wire has gotten really expensive. I bought a hundred and something scup pots last winter. I finally have enough of those now. I don't need to buy more. But this winter, I'm buying lobster gear. It just seems like it's always something. It's expensive. It's going well, but, yeah. The regulations are just set up against it.

[16:40]

SS: In what way? Can you elaborate on that?

KM: I pause, because, so many ways. I mean, everybody's grandfathered in. That's the first thing. Even a lot of the regulations lately have been designed to keep the people who are in business in business. I'm thinking of the aggregate program that Rhode Island's currently piloting. I'm not a big fan of it. I'm thirty-one years old. I fish every day. I don't need to catch all my fish in one day and stay home for six days. That's what the older fisherman who's closer to retiring than starting wants to do. It makes perfect sense. He can limit his expenses and his danger and yada, yada. I actually always liked the idea of letting two licenses on one boat. I know it plays into some of your comments I've seen from when you work on the gillnetter. If you have a licensed deckhand, I don't know why you shouldn't be able to keep that extra limit of sea bass. To me, you give that deckhand landings. It's an easy way to climb the ladder. It's more money for them. Or say tautog. I get ten fish a day. I get ten fish in one trap, most days. I fish little tiny three-trap trawls, and I don't even need them. I just don't fish singles because you lose too many, when you lose a buoy. If you got two buoys, it really reduces how much gear you lose. It's a joke, but I don't see why if my deckhand is licensed, he couldn't take ten, and make some extra money, and you'd actually have a chance to grow in this industry. The licensing is hard. It could be worse. I think we're lucky in Rhode Island to have the multipurpose license. In Mass, every fishery is all chopped up. You got to buy every single individual thing. It could be worse, but it's still next to impossible. I mean, like there is some growth. I do like the program, how Rhode Island reissues the surrendered licenses. I've had deckhands get licensed, because I pay them, and they get tax documents, and it gives you priority, and they can get a restricted finfish and a quahog license, depending on how many applicants and stuff. But even with that, it's just so hard. I mean, the money's up and down. When I talked to most banks, they looked at me like I had three heads. I got lucky. I got a loan through Farm Credit East, which is a forestry, fisheries, and agriculture bank. I know up in the Northeast, they finance a lot of dairy farms and cranberry growers. The people I talked to only work with fishermen. I think they're Northeast-focused. I'm sure they

finance a lot of the Maine lobster fleet and stuff like that. But I went and talked with People's Credit Union, my local bank, and the guy didn't have a clue what I was talking about. No chance. I walked out of there. I don't think I even sent an application in. I was just like, "It's not even worth your time." Maine, they've had it lucky for the last fifteen, twenty years, with that lobster fishery booming. They have their whole own little bubble. The young kids that can get a license can get financing and actually get into the fishery. It's different down here. I don't know. It's a grind. But that's why we do so many things. What I noticed [is] all the old timers who did one fishery are gone. He can't do one fishery anymore, really. It's hard. Not without some other sort of supplement. My answer to that was to just do every fishery I possibly could. I'd say it's worked. I'm still slow though. This time of year, even inshore lobstering and crabbing around here is very, very slow. Even if you have every pot you could ever want, there's still not much I can do without expanding into federal waters and offshore and stuff like that. Personally, I've always wanted to stay home. I worked on a trip boat for one winter, and that was enough for me. It was fun, but it's nice to come home every day. What else? There's just not a lot of support. I mean, this affects the whole industry, not just new entrants, but the lack of buyers is crazy. Especially where I live, because I'm not near Point Judith. There's practically nothing left. Lotzzo's fish moved from Tiverton to Little Compton and that put them out of reach for me. We're lucky that we have one guy in town who's basically a conch buyer. He pretty much buys the fish as a favor to us and ships it to another fish house. I don't think he really even makes too much money on it. It's more of a favor. We're just barely hanging on with places to sell the catch. I meant to bring this up earlier, when you asked where I was out of. I actually sold a lot of product in Bristol this year, because that's where I'm from, even though my boat isn't docked here. There's a public use pier that I would pull into and sell lobsters and crabs for a couple hours. The new dockside sale program actually had a provision for delivery for live lobsters and crabs only, not for the fish. That was big for me, because I don't want to sell in Newport. I don't know anybody there. They have the lobster shack down there, the cooperative, which I think is pretty cool. They have an agreement not to do dockside sales down there, but I think they actually suspended it due to Corona[virus], so there were a couple of boats selling. But I like the coop, and I do not want to compete with them at all. It's a really good idea. They got a pretty cool thing going on down there. I exclusively sold in Bristol. And again, I don't know anybody in Newport. It's not really my community at all. It just worked out that way. That was kind of cool this year. That was different.

[21:54]

SS: Who were you delivering to? Households or restaurants?

KM: Households. I sold to one restaurant. We had an old dockside sale program for lobster and crab. It was end-user-only, meaning only customers; no restaurants, no seafood markets. [In the] new program, I can sell live lobster and crabs to restaurants and wholesale businesses and all that. I sold to one restaurant and honestly, the only thing that kept me from selling to more was I only had 240-something trap tags last year. I actually hope to expand that this year. I have a lot more traps. Theoretically more lobsters, if all goes according to plan. I could look for more wholesale accounts like that. That was the one shining star of this year. I sold every lobster I caught to the public, which is pretty cool. It went a long way to us, because we don't fill our traps with lobsters. Making a little bit, getting the higher price and stuff, goes a long way. That was cool. But even as we talk about this, the lobster fishery is so hard to get into. Tags are just disappearing day by day. I

searched and searched to find this one guy who I bought tags off of. It wasn't easy. It's only getting harder. Every time you transfer one, ten percent disappear. Some of them don't get renewed. Those disappear. They're just slowly whittling away. Rhode Island, as a general fishing industry, I'm less pessimistic. But the lobster fishery itself, there are no new entrants, practically. It's just so hard. It's even harder to get into than the general finfish fishery. We'll see. It's definitely becoming more and more of a conversation, so maybe we'll see some changes over time.

SS: Do you see other young people your age and younger?

KM: I moved to Newport, and Russ Sylvestre is down there, who's my age, lobstering. He is the only other one lobstering that I know of, who is anywhere close to my age, I think. There's young quahoggers, because it's a rather low entrance fee. You can get away with a twenty-foot skiff and not nearly the expenses of running a bigger boat like I am. There are some young quahoggers. There's not really many young fishermen, other than that. Like I said, there's a couple around. I'm sure in Point Judith, there's a few. I don't even see how you would start as a fulltime fisherman right now. You'd have to work your way, I feel like, through being a part-time fisherman, and maybe something else, and slowly building it. Well, that's not true. I know the Briana James out of Point Judith. He's younger, too. He just built a dragger. There's not none of us. But he comes from a fishing family, also. I think his ancestors did a lot of lobstering in the bay back then. Other than that, it's pretty tough.

[24:57]

SS: Have you seen people who have tried to get into fishing, but have not been able to make it? Even if they're from a family?

KM: Not really. If you put a concerted effort into it, and you're from a fishing family, so you have sort of some baseline knowledge of what you're getting into, I feel like you can definitely be successful. You see a lot of people bounce around. You see people get into quahogging and then they're working on offshore boats as a deckhand, because quahogging's tough right now. They're still in the fishery, but I don't know if they're--I don't want to tell them they're not doing good, but maybe they're not thriving. You don't see a lot of growth through the industry. Like, I started quahogging, and then I fished conch pots out of basically a quahog boat. It was a twenty-four-foot Romarine with an outboard. Then we built the thirty-six-foot lobster boat, fished that for a few years. Then we got a forty-five-foot lobster boat built. I call it a lobster boat, because that's what everybody would call it, but I really am a mixed species boat. I fish all kinds of traps. I fish like a lobsterman. Almost all those traps are trawled up in long trawls, with hauling different kinds of traps other than lobster traps. But lobster boat is the best way to describe it, I guess, that most people from Maine to Virginia will understand. Yeah, you don't see growth. I don't see too many people starting as quahoggers and then going to more. There's been a little bit, I guess. I've mentioned a few times that quahogging has been tough. A lot of those guys will go conch potting in the fall. That's the best time of year for conchs. You can feasibly fish single conch pots off a small quahogging boat and make a few bucks. Quite a few guys did that this fall. I do see more people kind of learning what is my number one thing, [which] is just being able to pivot. Catch what's there. Don't force it. If it's not there, go do something else. It's easier said than done, because you need a license for every little thing. [That] plays back into why it's hard to get started. Just regulations and licensing. People will always fish. There'll always



be fishing. It kind of ebbs and flows. I don't think it's all that bad. I mean, I catch lobsters in the bay. But then you have Save the Bay on Channel 12 saying there are little to no lobsters in the bay. That's what everybody in Rhode Island is watching on TV. Meanwhile, I'm out there catching, not the biggest catch of lobster ever, but we're getting a couple hundred pounds a day of lobster in the bay. There's lobsters in the bay. Going on TV and saying there are little to no lobsters in the bay is false. There might not be as many lobsters as there were back in the nineties, or whenever it boomed. That's a whole other problem. A lot of times, I think they're trying to manage back to booms and peaks. That happens in the ocean. The same thing happens in quahogs. They boom. You try to manage back to that, you're never going to get there. Even without fishing, that boom would have come back down for some natural reason or other. I think people expect the bay to be, you know, lobsters piled up on top of each other, back like they used to be. That might never happen again. But there's not none, either. I would tell everybody. I'm in Bristol. We have the Mount Hope Bridge. You can see Hog Island Light from the bridge. I would tell people, "I caught these right under the bridge." Nobody believed me. Or they were... they were pleasantly surprised, let's say. That was cool.

[29:31]

SS: When the public has information like there aren't any lobsters in the bay, or preconceived notions about fisheries, does that affect you at all?

KM: Yeah, I think in a roundabout way, it does, because every few years Atlantic—I think it's Atlantic States—threatens to shut down the Southern New England lobster fishery for five years to rebuild it. When, if you ask most fishermen, you could remove the fishing effort, and it's not really going to change anything. I truly believe everything is predation- and species-to-species-interaction-driven. It's happening right now. This latest round of regulations meeting has been full of recreational—everybody's crying where the fluke go. I guess it was a tough fluke year for recreational fishermen and stuff. And of course, they immediately start blaming the commercial sector, but nobody wants to think that, "Oh, maybe the sea bass are just eating all the food or taking over the habitat." Because that matters. Habitats and niches and all those species-to-species interactions matter. At this point, we haven't had any fishery on winter flounder or blackback flounder in the bay in thirty years, and it used to be completely carpeted with them. The only theory that I've heard that makes a little bit of sense to me is they lost their niche. When they originally got fished out, this guy theorized—I'm not saying he's right or wrong—that the spider crabs moved into the mud and started living where the flounder used to live, and eating the worms and the other invertebrates or whatever, that the flounder used to eat. You stop fishing, you think they're going to come back. But now, their home is taken up by another species. They're not going to come back, no matter how much you restrict fishing. That's probably what's playing out in the cod fishery, too. It's the same thing. They barely fish them anymore, and they don't come back. I think when the public thinks the fish are gone, the first thing they jump to is, "Blame the fishermen." They don't necessarily realize that these are complicated things, and how cyclical things can be. Our public sentiment this year was great. People loved coming to the boat. My dad has stories of, like, back in the eighties and nineties, of the lines that used to form in downtown Bristol, when all the lobster boats would come in, to buy the lobsters and the sand crabs and all that stuff. It was crazy. I pulled in a couple times—mind you, this was Corona[virus] times, so we were trying to not get in

trouble. And there were like forty people waiting for us. I was like, "Oh my God." It worked out well. Everybody wore their masks and yada, yada.

[30:58]

SS: You got to feel like a little bit of a celebrity there.

KM: Yeah. We're going to see how this summer goes. Oh, yeah, people loved it. People really came out. We were selling a lot of lobsters, really quickly. That was cool. People, they like it. I mean, it's downtown Bristol. People want to go to the down to the waterfront and see the boats and stuff. It just rubbed me the wrong way, when I'm out there, and I know there's lobsters, and Save the Bay—I totally appreciate what they do, and their whole mission of keeping things clean. I want to clean [the] bay too. But it was the director of Save the Bay. I mean, he's the head honcho. To have him say that. I mean, that's wrong. I don't know how else you want to say it. It inspired me to post more lobster pictures on my social media. Because my brother's a good photographer, I don't take any pictures myself.

SS: Your brother, I've seen his photographs and video. Does he fish as well?

KM: He worked with us for a while. For a couple years now, he actually has a job in film. He works for Gnarly Bay. It's an ad agency down in Westerly. They make a lot of promotional materials. I think he's been shooting LL Bean commercials. He went to college for video, but he's had a camera or a—oh, God, I don't know why I can't think right now. He's had a camera in his hand since he was like twelve years old. It's more of a lifelong passion. He was working on the boat. He just took tons of pictures because he was there, and that's what he does. Even the video that came out last May, kind of about connecting people to fishermen and encouraging the dockside sales program. Basically, when Corona[virus] hit the company he worked for, they got a little slow. They canceled a couple of shoots, when things were getting real hairy, like last March. They basically said, "Take the company equipment and go do a passion project. Do something you care about." That's kind of where that video came from. It was something he had been thinking about. It's a pretty cool company he works for. He works hard. He flies around the world. He'll be gone for a whole week, shooting sunup to sundown, shooting these commercials for all these different big companies. But then when that happened, they let them kind of just go do whatever they want. We made that video last spring.

SS: Oh, that's great.

KM: Yeah, no, it's good. His pictures are amazing. I think that's kind of why I don't take pictures, because I look at them, I'm like, "I can't. That's terrible." I should probably remember that he edits them all, so it's cheating.

[33:42]

SS: Are there any other members in your family in your generation who are fishing or is it just you?

KM: Just me. My dad fished. My uncle is still out there bullraking every day, but none of his kids are in it. My brother, even though he worked on the boat as a little kid and growing up,

he did not like fishing. I think because I liked it too much, so he had to go do his own thing. But it was fun having him on the boat, because I got some amazing pictures and videos and stuff. I'm sure we'll get out there again. I need some content for selling lobsters. I'll have to drag him out there.

SS: You are married, right?

KM: Yes, I'm married. This spring, during Corona[virus], we did the old backyard wedding. We decided we didn't want to wait for all this to end, which is looking like the right decision.

SS: Is your wife involved in your fishing in any way?

KM: Yes. Fishing is a family business. There's no escaping it. Oh, she's super involved. She does everything from working as deckhand, stacking pots. She loves digging quahogs. I mentioned that pond earlier. We call it the Mill Gut. It's a little salt pond. She loves it more than I do. We put on our chest-high, there like duck hunting waders, and we walk out in there, and we didn't, we did quahogs. She's instrumental in the dockside sales thing. She's the people person, so she does all the transactions. I just sit there bagging stuff. Yeah, it would be impossible without her, basically. There's so much work. Yeah, she's seven months pregnant. We have hopefully the next generation on the way. I definitely won't tell him he can't fish. Selfishly, I probably want him to, but we're a long way away.

[35:34]

SS: If he does fish, what do you think fishing is going to look like, in ten or fifteen?

KM: I have no idea. We talked about convoluted regulations, and I mentioned the two licenses on a boat thing. I'm going to buy a second small boat, just so my wife, and eventually when my child grows bigger, can jump on that second boat and go grab ten tautog, because that fishery drives me crazy. There's so many of them, and our limits are so comically low. To do that legally, you have to have a second license and a second boat. You can't even do two trips in the same day with the same boat. It's ten per vessel per day. I'd love to have a second boat, so her and my son could jump on and go out and grab ten fish in the afternoon. I mean, it would only take you half an hour.

SS: Tow them in a canoe or something.

KM: Yeah, well, we told my old man that. "We're going to just tie up a dinghy behind you." That's how the floating fish traps do it. They put a person with a license in each of the skiffs. I don't blame them. I think the rules are crazy. If it was me, I would make it two per boat and cap it at two, so you can't bring out like ten guys and do something comical. I really think it would help deckhands own the business more. And the extra money. I mean, you can make good money as a deckhand. But if you really want to make it a career, you need to make more money. I think that boat should be able to double up on say black sea bass or tautog or some of these other fish where the limits are small.

[37:01]

SS: Who do you have as crew? Do you have one, or more?

KM: I have had one or two. I also have my dad out there. It's the two of us and a deckhand, usually. I've had two deckhands in the past. It was when my brother needed a job, so I wasn't going to say no. It was wonderful. I mean, it cost a little more, but it was a lot more standing around, a lot more like slipper skipper for me, which is cool for a little bit. I plan to hire more help this summer because I have more lobster traps. I have a pretty good setup. I can haul gear pretty fast. I can haul through a pretty high number of traps per day. I'll wear my one deckhand out. I've actually been really lucky. I've had mostly family, and if not family, close friends. I have a big extended family. My first deckhand was a cousin. Had my brother. I had two deckhands that were close friends. My best friend from high school started dating this guy who ended up working on my boat and is now one of my best friends. He brought in another one who I call a friend. My current deckhand is another cousin. I got two little cousins who just started graduating high school that we're going to start taking this summer to see how they do and if they like it. It truly is a family business. It's the only way to make it work. It's far too much work for one person, at the level I've tried to bring it to, which is, I think, what you need to be full time. They've pretty much regulated fishing to be part-time, for all but the biggest operations, is kind of how it's been managed in Rhode Island, anyway. It might not be worse than having no industry. I'm not saying it's the worst thing ever. The rod and reel fleet that goes out in the summer and harvests sea bass and fluke, that's cool that we have. It's better than not having any industry. It's a delicate balance. The whole problem is any rule that's going to favor the young people or the people getting in is going to be opposed by the older people who are just trying to ride it out and finish their career off.

[39:18]

SS: Do you have an example of that?

KM: Yeah, the aggregate program they're doing right now. I mentioned it earlier. That's absolutely huge for the guy who's near retirement who has a dragger, who wants to go out and get his fluke limit in one long day and then stay home the rest of the week. I don't mind that. But that doesn't help me at all. I'm not going to go work for one day and stay home like I'm going to go find something else to do. I'm trying to grow my business, not just coast. I understand it. I understand the benefits of the aggregate. You can miss bad weather. You fish when the weather's good. You stay home when it's bad. I mean, I totally get all that. I just think, like I said, it just benefits certain parts of the fishery over others. But yeah, great. Our sea bass limit is fifty pounds. I'd love to catch 350 pounds in one day, but I'm not going to not go to work tomorrow. But if I was, you know, sixty-something on the verge of retirement, yeah, that's great. Keep your expenses down, no fuel, you know. In my opinion it just really favors draggers, because they're the ones who can go out, catch that big amount, and can tie the boat up and stay home. Like I said, it's great from an efficiency standpoint. But it doesn't really help somebody getting into the business. Just the expenses thing. I'm finally at the point where I own a lot of gear. I am still buying gear, but I have a lot of gear that's paid off and it's still making me money. Took a long time to get there, because it seems like when you're starting, you're just buying more traps and more traps and more traps in a never-ending cycle. I finally hit the point where I had a couple of slow seasons where I didn't pay out a ton of money in new traps. That's tough. Let me think. What other examples? The biggest one is just in licensing, because they have the license and you don't.

Some are expensive. Some are impossible to find. A lot of them are both. That makes it tough.

[41:22]

SS: You told me the story of getting the license that came with the lobster trap tags within the last few years. How did you get your main multipurpose?

KM: I've done three different transactions. I bought just a multipurpose off of a retiring quahogger, that had no lobster trap tags. Then a few years later, I bought one lot of trap tags off a fisherman who kept his multi. I think he actually kept a handful of trap tags, just to have a few. He sold me five hundred tags. Through the reduction and the conservation tax, that was down to like 230-something. I bought the lobster trap tags from what used to be a full license that was 880. It was down to 440. Then I lose ten percent of that on transfers. I got, like, right around four hundred. Yeah, three different fishermen I've bought licenses off of. I now have roughly 650 of the eight hundred max lobster pot tags you can have.

SS: Is your goal to build up all the way to eight hundred?

KM: Eventually. I'm scared they're going to close the transfer window. There's no sunset clause on it or anything. They made the transfers relatively easy. To buy a multi, that multi has to be active. But if a fisherman has an inactive multi with lobster tags, you can still transfer the lobster tags. There's no activity standard or anything. It wouldn't have mattered, I guess, because the guy I just recently bought from, he was bullraking. He was using the license. He just wasn't using the tags, which is why he wanted to keep the license and sell the tags. If I have a good year, though, I will definitely be looking. I want to fill it up. To me, that's the last part of growing my business. My dad also has his own multi, and as it's currently worded, each license is allowed conch pots. There's no prohibition on fishing those from the same boat, so we can fish six hundred conch pots in the same boat. We both have to be there. He cannot stay home and I can't go haul his traps. They even talked about changing that loophole. Anyway, he's close to no longer being able to come anymore. I'm looking at going to fishing a lot less conch pots, so I'm really trying to fill that in with lobster fishery, so I do want to grow to eight hundred. I'll be really happy if I can get my 650 in and fish them all year. It'll be quite the challenge, but I do eventually want to get there.

[44:03]

SS: Are there any dreams you have for the future?

KM: No. I want one more new boat down the line. My boat's practically brand new. It's like three or four years old. We've used it really hard. I'll put like two thousand hours on it a year. But I've learned, over the years, changes I would make. I don't even mean anytime soon. This boat's got to pay itself back quite a few times over, first. But in ten years, I'd like one more go at perfecting the design of the boat. I designed the whole thing with efficiency in mind. I can haul pots faster than almost anybody. It's pretty much how we figured out how to survive: just keep on grinding. I have a big boat. I fish like an offshore operation, kind of, in Narragansett Bay, which hasn't gained me the most friends. But it is what it is. It's what I had to do to grow and thrive in this industry.

SS: How big is your boat?

KM: Forty-five feet. Yeah, it's almost comical with conch pots and stuff. People ask me, "Oh, how many pots can it hold?" I go, "I don't know. I've never filled it!" Conch pots are small and I only had so many lobster pots, so I've never been inclined to fill the boat, like some guys will. You can probably put like two hundred lobster pots on there, but I don't need to do it, so why push it? The boat was built in Prince Edward Island. They have a pretty extensive inshore lobster fishery up there. What's nice is that for how big it is, I have a shallow draft. I still take that thing in five feet of water up in the bay. When I looked at boats, I was really looking at how much they drafted, because some of those forty-five-foot boats can be really big and deep. They'd be a lot better for, say, offshore lobstering, but I spend eighty-plus percent of my time in the bay, so that wasn't my priority, I guess.

[46:01]

SS: You do go outside of the bay twenty percent of the time?

KM: Well, since I moved to Newport this year, I experimented out there all year. [It was] the first time I had ever fished out there. It really was pretty terrible, driving from Bristol to Newport every day, there and back. But I learned a lot. I fished everywhere from Beavertail over to Narragansett Beach and all the way out to the three-mile line, as far as I can go with my state licenses. I definitely learned a lot. I started fishing for Jonah crab. You get the occasional straggler, but by and large, they really don't push up the bay in any kind of quantity. A whole new fishery, I guess. I think my favorite fishery is always the next one. I'm so bored of conchs. I mean, that's my backbone. That is what keeps me in business. But to me, it's old news. It's all about lobstering right now. I love it because it's still new. I'm still learning. Not to be pretentious, but I'm pretty good at catching conchs. I know how to do that. That's the daily grind. When I get to the lobster pots, I'm all excited. It's something new. I've been getting better at it. Whereas other fisheries that I've been in for so long, I kind of know the patterns and the ebbs and the flows. It's exciting. Yeah, I don't really know what's next. I think I hit every fishery I can possibly hit in the state of Rhode Island, now that I added Jonah crab to the list. We get the sand crabs in the bay, but the Jonahs just don't go up there. But you get a mile past Beavertail and there's no more sand crabs, no more spider crabs, and all Jonah crabs. It's like, "Oh, it's a whole new world out here." It was cool. You see dolphins and other stuff that you won't see up in the bay. I enjoyed it. I still have three trawls I have to go rescue. The conditions are just so terrible out there, I might be a couple of weeks waiting to sneak out and grab them. Yeah, I do plan on fishing out there in the future, I guess, now that I got a little taste. I like spreading out. I cover a lot of ground. I spent the extra money to put a big engine in my lobster boat, because I don't like to go eight knots. I mean I can't. Literally, within consecutive days, I fish from the Fall River line, which is like all the way up the head of Mount Hope Bay, to the three-mile line. That's about the two furthest extents you can fish a Rhode Island multipurpose license. We covered some ground. I don't really go into Sakonnet River. But other than that, I cover the entire bay. I kind of enjoy that, sort of lapping the bay. You get to see the whole thing every day. I've just learned. I go on my lap, and catch a few sea bass here, and some lobsters there, and some conchs there. I enjoy that more. That's like a spring day, I guess, I just laid out there. October and November, all conchs, all day. That's my most profitable time, but it's the most boring time. I like the spring, when it's a little bit of everything. I like fishing for multispecies. I think it's actually given me a lot greater understanding. You'd be surprised what you learn about

another fishery when you're doing something completely different. But you do. Yeah, I noticed that a lot. I've noticed that mussels are important. I'll stumble into mussel beds in conch pots. The conchs are there to eat the mussels. I also learned that, at the right time of year, those mussel beds are full of scup. I'll find these mussel beds doing one fishery and then I go fish them in a different [fishery]. It kind of is all compounds.

[49:31]

SS: Yeah, that makes sense.

KM: I think it's made me a lot better fisherman, fishing for all these different species, because they're all very different. But if you're observant enough and you pay attention, you're always learning something.

SS: How much of your knowledge would you say was passed down to you from your dad versus stuff you've learned on your own by fishing?

KM: It's hard to say, because everything I've learned on my own, I've learned with him standing next to me on the boat. We've learned it together. It's pretty unique. Ever since I got out of college in 2012, we fished together. Never on separate boats, always together. There is a lot. I think bullraking is a cool place to start in fishing, because you learn bottom. Because, quite literally, with the bullrake, you scoop the bottom, you stick your hands in it, you see it. I mean, you know, but people who don't fish might be surprised by how quick bottom composition can change and how much difference that can make in your fishing. I can even tell, when you go walk through a salt pond. I'm walking, I'm like "This ain't, this isn't." It's real sloppy or something. Like, "There's not going to be quahogs here." You hit some harder, stiffer bottom. "Alright, maybe some littlenecks here." Whatever. What have you. I think quahogging is a cool background, because it teaches you different bottom types. I'm also a nerd and insanely curious about anything fishing-related, so I pay way more attention to all the finest little details. I'm always doing some kind of experiment with my pots. Whether it's hanging the bait bag a little different, or putting something different, I can't help it. It's just how I am, I guess. I've learned a lot on my own, but I really haven't. We've learned it together, I guess would be a better way to characterize it. But I think you have to start with a foundation. Without that, it would be really, really tough. I have a friend who I went to high school with, who's currently kind of growing from [a] small quahogger to he started conching a little bit. He has an Area 2 license with lobster pot tags. I encouraged him to put lobster pots in last year. He was so shocked he caught lobsters, because nobody thinks there's any lobsters around or what have you. He's doing that a little, so you can learn it on your own. But I feel like watching him, there's so many growing pains. Whereas when you have your dad there to guide you, he can stop me from doing stupid things. I tried to help my friend out a little, without telling them too much, obviously. But, having Dad over your shoulder really helps. I have a lot of experience. My family's been continually fishing in the bay since the fifties, pretty much. Dad took a couple years off during some of the bad years of quahogging, worked in land management and stuff. Eventually, we got sucked right back in. The conch or whelk fishery really is what drove my rise. Luckily, it's been sort of like a mini gold rush. The price has like tripled in the last ten or twelve years or so. It's really the basis for mine and most of the guys left in the bay. Our businesses are now based around that, and everything else is kind of supplemental. I've been trying to grow those supplementals, so conch is not so important and dominant. Not that it's not good. I just, I've

seen that cause failures of other lobstermen who went out of business because they didn't really adapt. Once the lobsters were gone, that was kind of it for them. Can't be like that anymore. Unfortunately, we're always a couple pen strokes away from a complete closure in a fishery. If you have a really couple of really bad recruitment years or something, it could just be gone. You kind of have to be ready for that.

[53:20]

SS: What if they ever did shut you down somehow? What do you think you would do? Or how would you feel?

KM: I don't know. I guess I'm prepared for them to shut the lobster fishery down, just because I know that's an option. It was on the table as recently as a year or two ago. It was a five-year closure. We were, as far as I know, pretty close to it. If the fishermen hadn't gathered some of their own data and really made a push, it might have even happened. I would be okay. If they close *all* the fisheries down, nobody's going to be okay. I don't really think there's an answer to that. But that's really why I'm growing my lobster side. If you look at when I haul traps, like my profit per trap or something, the conchs are always going to be better. We do pretty good at that. It's a pretty solid fishery for us. There's lots of recruitment. There's lots of babies. Our size limit went way up, and ever since then, even though we fished it really hard, there's just so much small stuff. I have never seen a gap in recruitment. They don't broadcast spawn. They lay an egg sack and the conch crawls out of it, which I think makes them much less susceptible to crashes in recruitment. It's not such a hit. Like quahogs, they broadcast spawn. For some reason, we haven't had a set take for quite a few years now in the bay. Quahogging's not looking great. But one year, you'll blink, and then there'll be millions of baby quahogs, because one percent survived instead of .001%. But conchs don't seem to have that variability, so I think that's really a solid backbone for us. You'll get the occasional lobsterman who tells you they felt the same thing back in the nineties, when they were catching more lobster than they knew what to do with. But that's another broadcast spawner. Your recruitment is literally at the whim of current. It can sweep all your babies to the south, and they're gone. I don't see conchs being that variable. I hope that can always be my backbone. If that fishery is okay, I can be okay, now that I'm the established guy, and I have traps and tools, and I don't have to spend all this money every year. That is the big tipping point, I think: when you've been in the industry for long enough that stuff's paid off. I'm getting very close to paying off my new boat, and I can't wait for that day that I do not owe money on it. That'll be huge, because my monthly payment is pretty staggering. I kind of lost myself there.

[55:43]

SS: How much would you estimate, for somebody who's starting off in fishing? Not necessarily at the scale that you gotten yourself to.

KM: There's no starting at the scale I'm at, I guess. You got to grow. It's tough. It's like, what do you want to get into? I think I paid eleven thousand for my multi. I think they're still in that range, from like twelve to fifteen thousand for a bare multi with no endorsements. The gillnet endorsement makes them really valuable. I think they ask upwards of like forty thousand for those. Lobster pot tags are incredibly expensive. Actually, I don't even want to know what my license is worth, now that I've accumulated a good chunk of lobster tags. I



paid thirty dollars a tag for state waters tags, which isn't a lot if you compare it to the offshore numbers, because the Area 3, the far offshore guys, are going for like three hundred a tag or something insane. Fishing corporations are buying them up left and right. All the big fleets out of New Bedford. They just bought out the Edna Mae, which was a small owner-operator Area 3 boat out of Tiverton. They just bought the Timothy Michael, which was one of the Palumbo boats, over in Newport. They also bought the Excalibur, another family-owned and operated lobster boat. But I think, kind of like other families, the kids went and did their own thing and the dad was ready to get out, so he sold out. Area 3 operations are going for a couple of million each. Nobody's affording that. It's all corporations. I keep losing my train of thought.

[57:23]

SS: Well, one thing I wanted to ask you about—this is going in a different direction, but—you're involved in some of the cooperative research, aren't you?

KM: Yes.

SS: Want to talk about that?

KM: Yeah, so I think that's been great. I can just quickly weave back. I think part of what staved off that lobster closure I've mentioned a couple times was the cooperative research they did. At that point, science said all settlement happened near the beach—all the settlement of baby lobsters, from whatever the stage that floats to the stage that drops to the bottom—and there was no recruitment out in the canyons. Where, even when our lobsters crashed they didn't out there. Through cooperative research, those guys were able to show that they did have small juvenile lobsters out there. I think that went a long way, actually, in preventing them from shutting the fishery down, and going with some more conservative measures to boost the species. I've had a great experience with cooperative research. I work with Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation, CFRF, in Rhode Island. I'm in their black sea bass fleet. I measure around a hundred and fifty to two hundred black sea bass a month for them. We have a tablet. They built their own program. It's pretty easy. We do length, the sex, and whether we kept or discarded it. They actually prioritize the discards for sampling, because the scientists asked them to, basically, because that was where they had a big data gap, basically. It's cool. The Foundation, they have steering committees, which are made up of everybody from fishermen, to the scientists, to the people in the government who are working on these stock assessments and therefore the regulations that come out of the stock assessments. It guides the research so they can effectively spend their money and get data that scientists need. Fishermen, we cover a lot of the ocean. The science surveys can only cover little bits. They've really been able to fill in some of the data gaps, which I think is huge. Another thing, and I'm stealing this from my friend Norbert Stamps: it allows fishermen to own the data. We collected it. We sampled it. I know that that data is right. Where a lot of times, we can be skeptical of the suit-types who come out of an office and go on a fishing boat for one day and do science, without the expertise of fishermen. I just think it's huge to get our expertise into the science. Again, this is where my background comes in handy. I'm extra interested in this, because I didn't end up going to school, but I do enjoy science and learning about subjects like that. Like I said, my involvement has really made me want to learn how modeling works. I guess it's selfish at the end of the day, but I want to know, how can I show enough of these stupid sea bass, that they can model it, and say, "There are so many of these things here, that if you don't take more, they're going to

force other species out." I'll link that back to what I said earlier about fluke. It plays into the lobster fishery and stuff like that. Cooperative research is great. I spoke on a few panels, like I mentioned, up in Maine. I know CFRF now has boats all the way up. They have Maine boats. They have boats here. They have New Jersey boats in their lobster and crab fleet. It's pretty cool how they've expanded. I've also made quite a few good friends, and I consider those friends some of the best advocates for the fishing fleet that we have. It kind of astounds me, because they're not fishermen, but they seem to like it as much as I do. I don't meet many people like that, so I really appreciate that. They work really hard, and I really do think it has helped our cause in general. I hope the momentum keeps growing. It's kind of cool. I know there's other cooperative research, but Rhode Island has really been sort of a hub for that. I mean, Anna, who used to be the director at CFRF, is now the director of cooperative research for NOAA. That kind of all started in a little building down in South County, Rhode Island, which I think is pretty cool.

[61:22]

SS: Yeah. Yeah, it is.

KM: Yeah, they've done some good stuff. I'm not in the lobster fleet, but the lobster fleet has data loggers that monitor the bottom. They put it in a trap, and it monitors bottom temperature. I'd really like to see. That'd be really cool. I mean, more data is good. I know they do an oceanographic survey or whatever. I think they use dragnets, and they put sensors down on the gear, and they just get temperature and current data or whatever. They're trying to characterize the water out on the continental shelf. I've heard some of the dragger captains talk about how much it's helped them dial in their fishing, because they figured out, "Oh, squid like this temperature." If you're a degree off, there might be nothing there. The sensor tells you you're off, you save yourself a lot of time. Pull up the net and go somewhere else, or what have you. There's dual benefits, beyond just improving the science. You're also learning and getting more data for yourself. Not for nothing, they pay me to do it, too. I get a six-hundred-dollar stipend. I think it's a six-hundred-dollar stipend, if I do a hundred and fifty fish. I catch a sea bass this big, and I'm like "Oh, four bucks!" Log it in my tablet and throw it overboard. You throw the fish over to swim for another day, and you still get paid for it. I mean, it's not insignificant. It adds up at the end of the year. I would do it for free, but it's in their budget. It's cool. I mean, hey, anything you can do helps out at the end of the year. I usually save it [for] when I'm having a really slow and crappy day. I'll be like, "Get that tablet out. We're going to start logging these things." It makes me feel a little better. I've had nothing but great experiences with cooperative research. I hope to encourage that in any way that I can. They're going strong. It makes me happy that they got awarded some of the wind farm surveys. It makes me trust it a little more. If the wind farm did their own survey, I think you know what most fishermen are going to say. "Take that survey and throw it over the side of the boat." At least I have people out there, that I can actually call friends, that I trust. I know they're doing their best at whatever kind of survey they are doing. And they're knowledgeable. They've all had a lot of experience in and out of the fishing industry in different ways. A lot of ex-observers and stuff like that, which I think is cool. They have actual experience. They're not scientists coming out of an office who don't know anything about a boat or fishing or anything like that.

[63:56]

SS: Throughout most of this interview, you've been fairly upbeat about things. Are there any things that stress you out about fishing or the future?

KM: I'm pretty upbeat. I love fishing. Luckily, with my background, I happened to be good at it. I've always been able to make it work, one way or the other. Just the whole being self-employed thing is stressful. Health insurance is impossible. I mentioned I'm having a baby. Chelsea does not want to go back to work, so we're going to attempt. That means I'm buying health insurance for myself on the marketplace, which just for me is expensive. I can't imagine what it's going to be when I add more people. I guess it's just the perils of being self-employed, but it's a risk I'm willing to take. It's the only thing I want to do. I'm pretty optimistic, though. I've always been able to just go out there and work hard and make it work. I've been in it long enough now, that I feel like I'm pretty resilient. The fact that I have a boat that's almost paid off and I have a lot of traps that I own, that are just ready to work. When you're a new fisherman, I feel like everything's on the line so much more. You're more at risk of, say, going out of business if it's a really bad season or something. Luckily, I've established myself enough, where I have a bit of a foothold, where I don't think I'm going to get knocked out of the fishery by a bad year or a bad season or a certain fishery closure or something like that. I love fishing. That's why I do it, so I'm always optimistic about it. I get really sick of the meetings, sometimes. But I know that that's part of it, and if I want it to be a future or even a possibility for my children, that I have to be there. I try to just suck it up and do my thing. It's worked out. But it is a lot sometimes. It's really hard to make the living I do, without going offshore. There is definitely money in big commercial offshore fishing. Say I wanted to get into it, I probably built the credit where I could go get a loan and go do that. But I just don't want to. I don't want to go offshore for days at a time. It is hard in our inshore fisheries. At the end of the day, the state gets the quota and it has to get split up. The big offshore operations have to be there. I'm at the meeting and I always want to say, "Give that quota in the summer. Forget the winter quota." But you have to think about it. If there's no winter fluke quota, where does your infrastructure go? Where do your buyers go? Where do your customers go? You need a year-round fishery. The small guy needs the big guy. And I guess they might need us, because in August, they don't catch scup out there, because all the scup are in three to six feet of water in Narragansett Bay, on the beach. You can throw a hook on any bit of shoreline. For some reason, that time of year, the scup move right up on the beach. You need a year-round supply. It's always give and take. You always want the quota at the time when you have the fish, but you also have to realize that you're part of a bigger industry. If you don't have a steady supply of fish, that market's going to go elsewhere, or foreign, or all those problems we have. It's a balance, I guess. It'll be interesting to see. I mean, the aging of the fleet is undeniable. I look around. I don't know who's going to be left fishing besides me in ten years. I know some guys are in their seventies, and they're fishing on lobster boats, alone, stacking their own pots. I think one of the guys has a hip replacement. Like, what? It amazes me. I mean, I'm thirty-one, and I don't know if I could handle that. But that's what you got to do to make a living, I guess.

[67:52]

SS: Do you have any thoughts about the graying of the fleet, how that trend could be reversed?

KM: I'm in love with my two licenses idea. That's my number one idea that I would like to push. I grew up fishing with my dad and I had my own license. I always wanted to be like,

"Why can't I fish while he's fishing?" Yeah, I just think continued work towards making it possible to enter the fisheries. The conversation has been ongoing. It's tough, because it's so variable, state by state. Every state's different. Rhode Island's kind of cool, where you can get a multi. I mean, don't get me wrong. Over ten thousand dollars is a lot of money. But if you compare it to other fishing licenses in other states, that's quite a license to be able to get at that level. Most individual fisheries in Mass go for more than that, and that's to get into one single fishery. For example, sea bass, there's different licenses for rod and reel and pot sea bass in Mass. They're both over twenty grand or something. I do really like the Rhode Island multi-purpose. It gives people a little bit of flexibility. A lot of the quahoggers have them from getting them years back, and that's what let them go into the whelk fishery this past fall, when quahogging was really tough. We did get a little bit of a price hit, but compared to every other price dive, with Corona[virus], the whelk price was okay. We lost a little bit of price, but it didn't go down by half or anything. A lot of species went down way past half. That's the best thing that we have going. That, and the lottery. Like I said, I've had deckhands work for me. They do their time, they get paid on the books, they get tax documents, and it helps you get a license for just the renewal fee. It's a couple hundred bucks for the finfish. That's why I really think the next step is letting him fish that license with me on my boat, so he can make an extra couple hundred bucks a day. Now, instead of making enough money to get by, he's maybe making enough to save some money and eventually come into the fishery in his own right. I guess at the end of the day, what it really all comes down to, there's only so many, so much quota, and so many fishermen to catch it. Until these operations are going away and not catching quota that, say, somebody else is going to catch, it's really hard to have more people enter it. Because you're just cutting that pie smaller and smaller and smaller. I don't think you'll ever see fleet size grow. It's good. The way that Rhode Island protects the small boats by having small limits in the summer, when if you had a big limit, the quotas would get caught nearly instantly in the summer. They still let the big offshore guys get their big aggregate limits in the winter so they can stay in business. Like I said, it's a balance. I mean, if you really wanted to promote new entrants, you go off pro-smaller-operation regulations, say. Put all the sea bass quota in the summer; you could make a living on that. But it's not that simple. You're not going to take it all away from the guys who've had it for years. That's why I say it's a balance. I'd like to see some changes made that make entering easier. I'm always thinking, going to meetings. That's kind of what I miss about the meetings. Talking to people before and after. That's where you make ideas. Actually, I'm pretty sure it was after a meeting, when I asked Jason McNamee, who's now—he's not even the head of Marine Fisheries anymore; he got a promotion. But I think I asked him about that scup pot limit. I just went, "Why is it so low?" He looked at me. He goes, "Oh, that's a good question." Then I was like, "All right, let's bring it up at the next meeting." It's almost that before-and-after meeting, I guess, is what I really miss from the in-person stuff. Rhode Island DEM, within their abilities to make changes, they seem to be willing to make changes. It's just hard to fight the fight. I see a lot of well-intentioned people who, they want to, but they don't have the time to make it a fulltime job, like I do, and understand that whole process. Like I said, they're making the suggestion at the wrong meeting. It's not the meeting for suggestions. It's the meeting for comments. It's all very political and yada, yada. But you got to play the game, I guess, if you're going to ever get anything done. We'll see. The pilot on that aggregate program is ending. I'll be the unpopular one saying that I'm not in favor of it, and pushing my two licenses idea. But I'm not going to hold my breath. I would think they're probably going to put it through. I didn't like it at first, because they put a tracker on your boat, which I know is inevitable. I know they're going to

have a tracker on every fishing boat. But there's just something about it that doesn't feel right. Actually, at first, [when] they proposed it, the aggregate was five times the daily limit, not seven. I work six days a week, at least. I'll actually come out better at the end of the week, so I didn't even bother signing up for it. Then, right at the last minute before they started it, they bumped it up to seven times the limit for the aggregate. It's like, "Aw, maybe I should have signed up." But that's all right. I don't need it. I work every day. That's what's nice about being in the bay. I'm in a big, big boat in the bay. I can work almost every day, which is nice, and relatively comfortably. That helps. But yeah, hopefully in the future. I mean, they'll have to do something eventually. It's good for me. I don't want to see it, though. Because then I'm going to have no buyer. That's what I don't get. A lot of people in this industry like to be selfish and they would rather just have it all for themselves. I'm, "Where do you think you're going to buy anything or sell anything? No one's going to stay open just for you." I don't know. Moving to Newport, if we didn't have that state pier, I might have been boat-homeless. Thank God that Rhode Island DEM bought that pier down in Newport and preserved it for commercial fishing, because without that, I don't know where I would have went. I was in a private marina. They got bought out by a multi-billion-dollar corporation that owns like five hundred marinas around the world. They did a huge expansion, where they put in a second travel lift to lift hundred-foot-plus foot yachts, and that basically made my slip disappear. Without getting kicked out, I got kicked out, in more words. If it wasn't for Newport, I don't know where it would have went. Bristol is full. They don't have a slip for me at this time, until they do that expansion. I know the state—again, Corona[virus] messed everything up—the state was in talks to buy more property in Tiverton, under the Sakonnet River Bridge. I don't think they have specific plans yet, but it was a derelict property. I think they were going to get it really cheap. It's on the water. There's no docks currently, but they were going to put money in, to turn it into something the commercial fishing community could use. I think programs like that are big. I would hope they keep going that way, because preserving infrastructure is going to be huge. I mean, can you imagine what the state pier in Newport would be worth to a developer? I mean, fishermen will be gone in the blink of an eye, if it wasn't protected like that. Even the town I come from, right now there's not a slip for me, but in the town bylaws, X percentage of slips are guaranteed to the town's commercial fishermen, so when they do that expansion, I will be first on the list to get a slip. I won't get crowded out by recreational boaters or anything. Without those community and state protections for the industry, it probably would be going away even faster. There is some hope. And like I said, it seems like we can always work towards changes. The newest representative on the Marine Fisheries Council in one of the two commercial fishing seats is Katie Eagan, who is relatively young, especially for a representative, because it tends to be the older fishermen. I don't think she's fishing currently, but she's working towards a captain's license on tug boats. She's still in the marine industry anyway. Having her on the Council has been cool, because it's somebody younger. She understands what we're going through. I just think it's good representation in general. There's definitely hope for the future. Like I said, my wife's been working on the boat and she gets paid. We're going to see how that license priority thing goes. Hopefully, she can pick up a license this year. Then, maybe I'll go buy a second boat, just so we can, for the heck of it, go out and get our second tautog limit or whatever.

[76:42]

SS: You said she's not planning on going back to work after the baby is born?

KM: No. We're going to try. That's what we both want. That's the only thing that makes me nervous. I tend not to be too nervous. I take it as it comes. We'll see. Hopefully I can make it work out. It's been pretty good to me. But thinking about getting into this industry is sort of daunting, because I do recognize all the help I had along the way. It's a pretty unique circumstance.

SS: Well, wonderful. This has been really nice, to learn more about you and your perspective on all these things. You're so well informed about it all: the ecosystem, the management, the science.

KM: I try to be.

SS: I've learned a lot just listening to you.

KM: I know a lot of random stuff. That academic brain has helped me. I have a good memory. I was always good in school. It goes a long way, even though I didn't go into exactly the path I was on. It's really helped me along the way. I studied abroad for a semester in Australia. You could pretty much take all joke classes that you barely had to show up to. But I took one of their high-level marine bio classes, just out of personal interest. It was actually really hard. For lab, we would walk to the nearest beach, strap on a mask and snorkel, and count fish species. Or put fingernail paint on limpets—their version of deckers—and we did transects, then went back. They don't look like they moved, but obviously, over time, they moved. You recount them and you get a population. It was awesome. I loved it.

[78:31]

SS: That sounds fun, painting deckers.

KM: Yeah. I mean, I love it. I remember being on my dad's boat. As a kid, my dad only bullraked, never did any fixed gear. I remember this insatiable desire to know what was at the bottom of every buoy. I so badly wanted to know what that buoy was marking and what was in it. I grew up on the Kicky, which is a small tributary of the bay. I had minnow traps and eel traps and all that. Now I'm just an overgrown kid fishing my minnow traps everywhere. And if I want to know what's there, I just put my own trap down and then go back and check it. I think love of the game is the number one priority. Because it is hard, so if you don't have that—. I was putting in like ninety- to a hundred-hour weeks this summer at one point. I stopped and figured it out. I went, "Wow." I think I was like, "Oh, I worked like seventy hours this week," and then I actually figured it out. It was closer to a hundred. It was like, "Wow." But I love what I do. That's where it's hard. Like I said, a lot of the regulations do favor more of a part-time industry. The way our sea bass season is open, closed, open, closed—it's nuts. On a very big, stepped-back perspective, there's so many of those damn things. The fact that you can't keep a few of them every day is crazy. That could be a backbone that helps people get in the industry. Even though fifty pounds is a joke and they all complain that they want a higher daily limit, I kind of like it. Two hundred bucks. "Okay, my fuel's paid for. Now I can go catch something else and make some money or what have you." It's kind of easy. They're everywhere. Anybody can catch those things.

[80:19]

SS: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

KM: I don't know.

SS: Anything that we haven't touched on that you think is important to understanding your experience?

KM: I just think it's important to preserve commercial fishing as a way of life, as a community thing. It's sort of hypocritical, because I've made myself the big fish in the small pond, but I love the small fishery. That big offshore fishery, that's like corporate fishing. I don't know. They still go through the same things, and I definitely appreciate the ones that are owner-operated. But you got some of these fleets now, they're going to own Area 3 lobster and crabbing. There's still a few [owner-operator boats] in Point Judith, but a lot of those guys have sold out. The guy who captains the boat is not the guy who owns the permit and the boat. I don't know. I like owner-operator fisheries.

[81:12]

SS: Why?

KM: Because that's what makes a fishing community, I guess. That big fleet isn't the one going to the local hardware store to fix their boat. I spend all kinds of money and I support all kinds of businesses. I spend money in all kinds of places, too. It's not all the same stuff. It's an expensive industry and I do support a lot of accessory businesses. You can't find diesel mechanics anymore. Trying to find people to work on boats and stuff is tough. That's really our biggest challenge, is as the fleet just contracts and contracts, you lose infrastructure. I guess that would be my biggest fear, more than anything. I'm not afraid that I won't be able to catch enough fish or shellfish to make a living. There's always something out there. I don't care what anybody says. None of the water is dead. It's changing, but there's always some species of something thriving and something else that's not thriving. It's kind of how it works. The loss of infrastructure is probably our biggest threat, I would say. Like I said, we had an outpouring of community support this year, with the whole Corona[virus] thing and stuff. That was really cool. We're going to grow that next year and keep on going. I guess that would be my next goal. I really want lobster tanks, so I don't have to keep my lobsters under my boat. I'd love to have a building with some tanks where I could store stuff. Then again, everything's costly. Everything in due time. I'll try to be patient.

SS: Yeah. Still got a long career ahead of you.

KM: Yeah, there's a long way to go, so one step at a time.

SS: Well, great. Thanks, Ken.

KM: No problem. I'm glad we were able to make it work.

SS: Yeah. Let me shut off this recording first, and then I'll go over the next steps with you.

[83:14]

[end of interview]