

Interview with Nicole Saunders, commercial fisherman

Occupation: Commercial fisherman/waterman

Port Community: Weems, Virginia

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

Date and year: January 17, 2019

Location: Whitestone, Virginia

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

Transcriber: Sarah Schumann

[editor's note: This interview session was hosted by Lisa Rose at her seafood shop. At one point in the interview, Lisa says a few words.]

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: I'm Sarah Schumann. It's January 17, 2019. I'm in Whitestone, Virginia, and I'm sitting here with Nicole Saunders. Nicole, could you please state your occupation?

Nicole Saunders [NS]: I am a waterman on the Chesapeake Bay.

SS: Is that fulltime or part-time?

NS: I oyster from October to February. I have another job in the summertime, but I also crab a little with my dad in the summer and do charters. He's got a second boat for fishing charters and sunset cruises and all that. I'll mate for him when he's got stuff like that when I'm not busy.

SS: You have another job on land as well?

NS: Yes. I work at Southern States in Kilmarnock.

SS: What's that?

NS: It's a farm store. I run the greenhouse.

SS: What's the name of your vessel, if it has a name?

NS: We have two. We have the Miss Nicole and the Redeemer.

SS: And your dad is the owner?

NS: Yes.

SS: Ok. What's your homeport?

NS: Weems, Virginia.

SS: And your age?

NS: I am twenty.

SS: Twenty years old. And your educational background?

NS: I graduated from Lancaster High School with an advanced diploma. I went to college for a semester.

SS: Where was that?

NS: RCC.

SS: What's that?

NS: A local college. Rappahannock Community College.

SS: Alright, got it.

NS: Wasn't my thing. I came back to the water.

SS: How long have you been working on the water?

NS: I think this is my fourth year doing the oystering, but I've been on boats since before I could walk, on the Miss Nicole. We got the Redeemer last year.

SS: Is one of them for oystering and one of them for something else?

[01:52]

NS: The Miss Nicole was the oyster boat, until October. We bought the Redeemer last February or March, and that was a big restoration project. She was halfway rotten. He got her pretty cheap and put her back together. His charter business was growing, so he wanted to take the Miss Nicole and retire her while she was still in good shape. That's his pride and joy. He's had her forever. We retired her and made the Redeemer the oyster boat. She was already old and less to lose out of the two.

SS: Are the charters and sunset cruises also taking place on the Redeemer?

NS: They're on the Miss Nicole. The Redeemer is now the oyster boat. Oyster and crab.

SS: How many generations back does your family go on the water?

NS: My dad and his grandfather, but not his father. His father was in Vietnam and came back and was not all in the head, so it skipped a generation and came back. That's as far back as I know. It may be further. That's as far as I know.

SS: Tell me a little about your origins in fishing, how you got started.

NS: Let's see. I've been on a boat since before I could walk, of course. He [my father] was a waterman up until the late nineties, when we had the die-off along with the crabs—couldn't get any money for them—and it just wasn't profitable for him anymore, so he went back into construction. He worked for Home Depot for at least ten, fourteen, something-like-that years. When they started switching from instead of having individual contractors, they went into larger groups where they could get them cheaper and all, then he had to go back to something. He fell back on what he knew, which was the water. He rigged the Miss Nicole up for oystering, and eventually it got to the point of, "Hey, I want to go where Dad goes." So I went out, actually liked it, and ended up eventually getting my license and doing what I had to do to do it.

SS: Do you remember the first time you went out and participated?

NS: I don't remember exactly. I do remember he was working with his sister, and she's the one who helped me learn how to cull and how to clean them up right and how to do everything we're supposed to. He worked and she taught. With her, she was a good enough teacher, and it made me like it. I got to be with my dad all day. When you're young, getting to skip school to go oystering with Dad, that's fun!

SS: Do you have siblings?

NS: I have a brother.

[04:54]

SS: Is he also involved?

NS: He builds docks for Docks of the Bay. He's twenty-nine.

SS: Do you have your own license?

NS: I have a waterman's card and an oyster license.

SS: What was that process like, to get those licenses?

NS: There's a moratorium on it now, where you can't just go to VMRC and apply for one and get it. They put a stop to it, because they're trying to get us off the water—a lot of us, anyway. They let a lot of licenses go a few years back that they shouldn't have let go, when they needed money, back when the economy collapsed and all. And now, once everything was said and done, they realized they had made a terrible mistake, because they'd let way more people out here than it could stand, than it could hold up.

SS: They issued too many licenses?

NS: Mm-hmm. They get paid for the fees and all every year, so they let them go. Then they realized, and they took a lot of them back. This was years ago. They said if you hadn't had them for a certain amount of years, you had to turn them back in or something along those lines. I didn't have my card back then. You just can't get them anymore. Now, you have to buy them from somebody that has worked their card for forty days that year. They have to have forty days on the card just to sell it. Otherwise, they're stuck with it. If you don't use it, you lose it. There's exemptions and this and that, along the lines. I got mine from a Tangierman. Well, first I had to buy my waterman's card. That's a completely different deal. You can't get those anymore either.

SS: What is a waterman's card?

[06:42]

NS: That registers you as a Virginia waterman, and you have to have that registration in order to get additional licenses—your crab license, your oyster license, your clam, gillnet, fishnet, all that stuff. I got that from somebody who was moving to North Carolina. It's non-transferable state to state, so it's no good to him. I paid fifteen hundred for that. You pay your fees and all. I got that. Then I waited, waited, waited, because I had to wait for it [the oyster license] to come up. When they come up, you have to snatch them and whoever you buy them from sets the price.

SS: How do you find out about what licenses are available?

NS: VMRC has a list on their site where watermen can go and post their licenses for sale where other watermen can see it. I don't remember if I saw this one there or on Facebook. It was actually already sold when I called the guy. It fell through. The guy ended up not being able to get the money for it, so they called me because I was second on the list. So they let me know, and I then I had to go over to Tangier. The old guy would not leave the island. I had to go up and have everything signed, to where he could transfer it, and then take it up to VMRC and get that straight. That cost me five thousand, and that's cheap for an oyster license.

SS: That's just for oyster?

NS: That's just for the oyster license. Then every year, you have your renewal fee of three fifty or three hundred—three, three fifty, whatever it is. And then you have your additional gear licenses. Each license is separate: hand tong, patent tong, hand scrape, and dredge. All of that. Each one costs a difference price.

SS: Your oyster license, what does it allow you to do?

[08:40]

NS: The gear license is what determines that.

SS: Oh, so that's a separate thing? There's your waterman card, your oyster license, and then also a gear license?

NS: Yes. The gear license goes onto the waterman's card, so say I've got my oyster license and I've got my user fee paid, meaning the license is active. Say I only bought my hand scrape. That means I can only go out hand scraping until I buy one of the additional gear licenses. So if I want to go patent tonging, I have to go up and buy a patent tong license. If I want to go dredging in Tangier, I have to go buy a dredge license. If I want to go shaft tonging in the James, I have to go buy a hand tong license.

SS: Ok. Those aren't limited? You can just get them from VMRC?

NS: If you have your oyster license, you can get them. You just have to pay for them. I just get mine all at once, so I already have them.

SS: You have all of them?

NS: All but hand tonging, because my dad is too old for that and I'm too weak.

SS: How do you guys catch them?

[09:36]

NS: Mainly we do hand scrape. You use it in the Rappahanock, the James, everywhere pretty much. The big dredge, you use in Tangier and Saxis, which we ended up not doing this year, because we could stay home and catch them, so there's no sense in running all the way across the bay to catch them and burning fuel and this and that. Right now, we're patent tonging in Deep Rock, in the bay. It just depends on what's open. We've never patent-tonged until this year. Today was our sixth day ever patent tonging. We're getting the hang of it. We're not the fastest, but we still get it. As long as you get your limit, it doesn't matter. That's all that matters to me.

SS: How come you made the decision to try this new gear?

NS: We didn't have a choice. In the James, the only options open right now are shaft tonging, which like I said, my dad is too old and I'm too weak. Nansemond River, you can hand scrape there, but I talked to a guy who's working all day for half a limit, so it's not worth it. I think Tangier's still open. But, like I said, that's a long run. For us, an old, slow boat, that's two hours each way in the morning. With dredging, you can only leave an hour before sunrise, so that puts you an hour late to the game, and from what I hear, they're getting hard to catch there, too. And patent tonging. Those are your options. James is out. Shaft tonging's out. Running across the bay is out. That just leaves patent tonging. Last year, I think it was around twelve boats that patent tonged. That's what it's been in the last two years. This year, there's almost thirty. So that shows you. And most of them have either never done it before or they haven't done it in forever, and they did it with their parents or their dad or their grandfather. It's just come back. It was outlawed for years and now they're coming back to it. They call it a less efficient means of catching. A lot of people can't do it, because, one, they've never done it, like us. Because of it being gone for so many years, a lot of the younger people, they've really never done it. They're just learning. And anybody that pulls with a stump rig cannot patent tong, because they don't have the mast and gaff. You have to pull with the gaff to tong, so that knocks out almost everyone from Tangier and Saxis and

just a lot of boats that are stump rigs, and it knocks out a lot of the smaller boats, because they just can't do it.

[12:31]

SS: What is a stump rig?

NS: Instead of having the mast and gaff in the boat, it's a winder in the middle of the boat on a huge platform. You have to be up in the air to patent tong. You have to pull straight up and down. They pull sideways. It's fine for dredging. They can dredge. We can patent tong. They can't. Now, in rough water, sometimes they have the advantage, because they don't have that big mast and gaffe swinging the boat side to side, and they pull with chain, so in deeper water, the dredge can dig deeper. But there's advantages and disadvantages. There's just little local areas too. Like a lot of the local people here, they pull with mast and gaff. You go to Tangier and Saxis, they all have stump rigs.

SS: That's just what their history was?

NS: Mm-hmm. I would imagine so. There's a few boats in Tangier that have a mast and gaff, but not very many, from what I've seen.

[13:33]

SS: Can you also explain hand scraping to me?

NS: It's a dredge, but smaller. It's a smaller dredge. They call the dredges the big four- or five-foot dredges. These are three-foot. They're smaller. It's just a size difference, but two different gears in where you can use them and where you can't.

SS: It's so interesting that you're catching one species, but with so many different gear types depending on where you are.

NS: It's all regulated by gear. That's all over my head. I wish they'd let me take my big dredge in Deep Rock! But I can't.

SS: Have you participated at all in management and meetings and getting involved in policy?

NS: No. I actually just got my license last year, so I'm still getting into it. I can do my job, but that's all I do.

Lisa Rose [LR]: In Virginia, they don't protect the watermen and there's no education. You have to rely on the folks that know, like our dads that have been doing this all along. I'm sorry.

NS: No one teaches you. If you find someone who can teach you, you're lucky. You get on a boat and you're expected to work and do your job, because if you can't, they'll find someone who can. I was young enough. I was still early teens. His sister, my aunt, saw me as a kid, so she worked with me. It wasn't the hooping and hollering, "Do this! Do it now! You need to do it now." It was, "Ok, this is a kid. Let's show you how it's done, step by step." It's simple

enough—culling—that you can catch on pretty easy. It's just that you have to get quick at it. The rules are simple enough. You just have to get an eye for it. You know, measuring them—they have to be three inches. At some point, you get an eye for it, where you don't have to go, "That's too small. That big enough." Every once in a while, you might go, "Um, that might be," but you get an eye for it. "This needs to come off. That's going to come off. That's going to have to die to come off, so just throw it in the basket."

SS: Is it just, "Is it legal or not?" or do you have size categories that you have to separate them into?

NS: No. They have to be three inches to keep them. Oysters grow in clusters, so a lot of times, you'll pull them in and you'll have a big massive chunk and you don't know what it is, so you take it and you slam it on the board and break it apart. You look at it and you go, "Alright, this is junk." And you get a few oysters in it. "This is three. This is three." Well, then you get down to this, and you got one good oyster and four little ones attached to it. You got to knock all those little ones off. Unless you got to kill it to get it off. But me killing it to get it off, and VMRC killing it to get it off, are two completely different things. They have time to sit there and tap at it all day. I give it two whacks and that's it. If it comes off, it comes off. If it doesn't, then it dies in the basket.

[17:00]

SS: You said your aunt viewed you as a kid, so she gave you an explanation of everything you had to do. Do you feel that if you were just starting out now, nobody would walk you through the steps like that?

NS: Well, since I work with my dad, I'd probably get a little bit more of a pass on it. But when you get your card, when you get your oyster license, you are expected to know what you're doing. I didn't have mine for two or three years. I just went out with him as a hand, and that gave me the practice. I went out with people, and the guys, they've known me since I was little. They still see me as younger than I am, and I'm a girl, so that's good and bad.

SS: In what way?

NS: It's good in that, if you're falling behind or something, they're not as hard on you. It's bad when, "Hey, I'm an adult. I don't need you to tell me what I'm doing. I know how to do this. Let me do my job." I've been doing it long enough where I can keep up with the guys now. I can outpace a lot, at least the older ones.

SS: What's it like working with your dad?

[18:17]

NS: Good and bad. Working with family is tricky, anyway, because they talk to you like they wouldn't talk to somebody else, a lot of times. They know how to get under your skin. If they want to make you mad, they will make you mad. But it's the same way: if I want to make him mad, I can make him mad. I know that when he gets low on morale—if we have a bad day or it's rough, if you've got a boat beside you that's got fourteen bushels and you've got nine—I know how to get his spirits up, or at least, if that's not working, I know how to make him

mad enough to the point where he wants to stay and get his limit so he doesn't look like a fool. So, it's good and bad. I don't live with him. If I lived with him, I'd probably get along with him worse. I'm only with him a few hours a day.

SS: Do you have former classmates or friends your age in the area who are also working as watermen?

[19:23]

NS: No. All my friends are either in college or doing other jobs. I don't know anybody my age. There's one guy, I think he's from Saxis, that's like twenty-one or twenty-two. He's from over there. I just know him because I've seen him over there. I don't know of anybody my age, not from around here anyway, that are out there. I know some guys in their late twenties that went to school with my brother, but none my age.

SS: Does that surprise you, that no one else your age is choosing this life?

NS: Not really. Like I said, it's a family thing, and that's the problem. Nobody wants to step up and fill daddy and granddaddy's shoes. Everybody wants to go off and do something else, because this is hard work and they can go do something else. I mean, there's nothing wrong with going to college and getting a high-paying job indoors and all, but there's got to be something. You're not given an option. You either learn it from your family or not at all.

LR: You can't get into this business if you're that young. I don't mean to interrupt, but if she didn't purchase a card from somebody—and right now, an oyster license is going for ten thousand dollars—that's a lot of money. Right now, an eighteen-year-old, a sixteen-year-old can't get into this business unless they do that, and that's a big deal.

NS: You can't just imagine, "Oh, I'm going to go oystering." You can be a hand. You can go work for less than a hundred dollars a day while everybody else on the boat is making more than double that. I did that. I worked for sixty bucks a day for ten years. It's disheartening. You're working just as hard as everybody else, and this guy's making two hundred and fifty dollars a day and the captain's making four hundred, and you're like, "Where's mine?" You're getting the scratch. You're working for a bushel a day. But the card is so expensive, and it's not just that. That's the going rate, but that's if you can find one. And if you find one, chances are there's ten other people looking for it. One pops up, and a lot of people, older people that are getting out of it, they're getting out of it because they can't do it anymore. If they don't get their forty days, they can't sell their card. They're stuck with it. It's something they're not going to use, and then they use it or lose it, and they sell the waterman's card, but what is it without the [oyster license]? When you buy a waterman's card from someone, if it doesn't come with the license, you can't add them. You can't just buy a waterman's card that comes with nothing. You have to purchase the license from someone to put onto the card. The card is just like your building block for everything else that goes on top.

SS: Yeah, you can't actually fish until you get the other stuff?

NS: Right.

[22:23]

SS: The actual number of licenses is going down because people can't transfer them?

NS: They're trying to bring them down. They're saying a lot of it has to do with overfishing, which yes and no. If you look at pictures from back in the seventies and all, you see boats side by side. The whole river's full of them. But there were more oysters back then. The major problem back then was there were no laws, there were no regulations, and they would just catch them, catch them, catch them. Nothing like that. That's when they discovered, oysters, when they spawn, they need something to attach to. The little spat needs something coarse to attach to grow. That's why they grow so well on other shells, why they grow in clusters like they do. You pick up an oyster, and you can have a dozen growing off of one shell. That's just how it is. But back then, all the oyster shells from the shucking houses, they went in driveways. They never went back. That got to the point where, "Uh-oh, all our oyster beds are gone." Well, they've got nothing to strike on anymore. There's dead shells. They don't strike on dead shells. That's another big issue with the fossil shells going on. They're trying to get it straight, but it's going to be a long process. A lot of things aren't being done right that should be done right. It's getting bad, to the point where, actually, a lot of the old guys are going down. Because they've seen it, and they've seen how much it's gone down. Like last year, we had a great year. This year, not so great. They'll tell you it was all the rainwater we had this year, because we had a lot of rain. We had more rain days than not this year, and that does affect them. They can't handle but so much fresh water. The salinity in the Rappahannock went down to almost zero this year. It was really bad, to the point where we didn't get the fish we usually get. The croakers stayed out in the bay. We had to run all the way to the Spike to catch croaker, and usually we can run out of Carter's Creek and catch two hundred in four hours like it's nothing, on bloodworms. Kids can catch them. We had to run all the way down there, and I get that. But there's also the problem of fossil shells being planted. They say their research says that fossil shells, they strike just as well on that. Their science is very flawed. I don't know where that's coming from. If you go out, up this river or anywhere you go, and you drag the bottom, anywhere that has fossil shells in it, there's no life. Everything is dead. It kills everything it touches.

SS: What do you mean by fossil shells?

[25:23]

NS: They dig them out in the James and in the bay and all. They're old, dead, black shells. They are trash.

SS: They're oyster shells?

NS: Yes. They're just garbage shells. You pick them up, and they're black and blue colored. They're just dead. Everything has an expiration date, and that is well past its. When you plant them, you can plant them on top of good oysters, and all they do is smother everything under them and they all die. Wherever you plant them, if you drag that bottom, everything is dead. There's never any strike, never any little ones. This is the second time that we've seen places that we've dragged that have fossil shells, and I just hope that they look at the harvest data. Temples Bay is a good example this year. If they look at what we did three years ago in Temples Bay versus what we did this year in Temples Bay, they will see a huge decrease in what was caught, and it's because everything is dead. They say, "Rainwater.

Rainwater.” But everything in deep water was dead—where the fossil shells were. A lot of what was in shallow water was alive. You would think the salinity would impact the shallower water more than the deeper water. Then if you look up Morattico Bar, that’s the freshest area that we worked this year. It’s a naturally fresh place. You would think that that would have gotten really fresh, to the point where oysters couldn’t even live. But no fossil shells, and everything was alive.

SS: So this is an attempt to restore the oyster population that’s backfired?

NS: By killing it. That’s one of the things they’re doing very wrong, to tell them that they think they’re stupid. “Our science says they strike just as good on this as they do on half shells.” Wrong. Go out anywhere they’ve planted fossil shells. Parrot’s Island is another one. Drag around—every time. And even if you get any, they are big ones that we left three years ago that somehow are clinging to life, and there’s not much life to them. They’re poor and watery. It’s the fossil shells. They smother them, because nothing strikes, so all they do is bury the oysters deep in mud. It’s not good. I’d rather plant rocks, or nothing. We did so good, the area we worked last year, they hadn’t planted anything, nothing at all. It was the best year we had in years. That was Area 6 and 7 in the Rappahanock. We caught more oysters there than we caught anywhere. They planted absolutely nothing. They just left it be, and it grew. They plant fossil shells, and they all die. Magic, isn’t it? They say, “Well, we have to plant something.” “Well, you should be planting the shells that are coming out of the shucking houses.” But those are all going to private industry, on the private beds—their shells for their growth—not back where they belong. And all of our seed goes to Maryland, for the most part, from the James River. They have every bit of our seed out there, instead of putting it back where it belongs in Virginia. I think they’re trying to decrease the amount that goes to Maryland, but it’s still crazy. These areas that they’ve completely destroyed, that’s where the seed should be going—all these areas that they’ve destroyed with fossil shells, that’s where the seed should be going, to grow them back up. Fossil shells are fine if you use them as a base layer and then put stuff on top of them. They’re still not going to strike on it, but you can plant seed on top of it, because it’s already growing. But you can’t bury stuff in that. It just kills it. It just buries it in the mud. It just dies.

SS: So, that’s not working.

[29:36]

NS: No. That’s not working at all.

SS: Ok. What are some of your favorite memories of being a waterman—something that really stands out as a high point for you?

NS: Last year, we got our limit in forty-five minutes. We had sixteen bushels in forty-five minutes.

SS: Wow. What gear type were you using?

NS: Hand scrape. Area 7. We cleaned house. We went straight to it and it came up, the board piled right over, clear big single oysters. Right in the basket, every single one of them.

With the board piled right up, almost no shells went back overboard. Everything was alive. Last year was awesome.

SS: Last year was really good?

NS: For the most part. But see, there were no fossil shells where we worked last year. That's another thing. They can look at last year versus this year. They're going to blame the freshwater, no doubt. But if we hadn't had all this rain, they wouldn't have had anything to blame it on, except their fossil shells.

SS: It's amazing to me that you've only had your license for a year—a year, you said, or two?

NS: Not even. I bought my license in June of last year.

SS: Ok. And even within the short amount of time that you've been a full-fledged waterman yourself, you've seen these drastic changes.

NS: I've been out there, I think this is my fourth year. I've seen in three years what's happened. Because this area that we're back to is the first areas I worked with him. I remember going to Temple Bay and Parrot's three years ago, and I remember what was there and it wasn't there this year.

SS: When you think about where things are going from here, what do you think things will be like for you?

[31:29]

NS: I don't know. I know some changes need to be made. If they have their way, they're trying to get rid of all of us. They want us off. If you kill the oysters, you can say there's not enough oysters to catch, you can shut the whole industry down if you want to. Part of it is that they may be intentionally doing this.

SS: Who is "they"?

NS: The VMRC. All their research and all. They don't believe the watermen that actually see it everyday. They believe their science and that's all they believe. They don't want to hear from us. They don't want to hear what we have to say. We're just dumb. We're just uneducated. We just go out and try to kill the bay. You know, we want to kill our jobs! That's exactly what we want to do! I don't know. I hope they make some changes, so that we can keep at this. I hope we get some younger people in, but it's going to be hard. You got to get the license from somebody. And you got to learn. What's the sense in investing in a license, if you don't have no idea what you're doing, no one's going to take you? You're better off to bite the bullet, work for somebody for a year—no card—make almost nothing, learn something. But even then, you have to have the initiative to do it, and you have to have somebody who is going to take you. A lot of people won't take somebody without a card. It's hard.

[32:27]

SS: Do you see others who have tried and who haven't been able to make it?

NS: No, not around here.

SS: They're not even trying, really?

NS: No. Maybe they're smarter than me and no one's trying. I don't know [laughter]. I don't know. It's a mess. I hope we can keep doing what we have to do, but I don't know. It just looks like everybody's trying to go more and more to private industry and aquaculture and oyster farming and all. That's great and all, but they don't reproduce. You throw them in a cage and they grow, and that's it. Then you throw more in a cage and they grow. It's nothing compared to the natural growth, out in the rivers, where they just do what they have to do. They grow and they spawn and they reproduce. They just go wild, if they let them, if you're not killing them. It was sustainable. I think they're trying to help, but they're hindering in their efforts. "Let's pretend to fix this problem." They get their money to do all their research, and their research is always wrong.

SS: It sounds like you have a fair amount of uncertainty about the future.

[34:31]

NS: Yeah. It is what it is, right? [laughter] Got to adapt.

SS: Are you planning to stay in this industry?

NS: Oh yeah. I got a lot of money in this investment [laughter].

SS: What do you think it will take for you to keep going as things change?

NS: I don't know. Something's got to change. I hope that they'll do something that brings the oysters back, whether it's them finding the flaws in their guides or planting seeds or adding the sanctuaries to rotation, because everything is closed for usually three years between each time you can work it. Everything's a sanctuary when you can't touch it. All they're doing is living and dying there. They're just like these. If they claim the freshwater is killing these, well it should kill the ones right beside it on the sanctuary, so what's the point? Just let them live and die and do nothing? Beds need to be rotated anyway. I don't know. They're going to have to do some changes here shortly or we're going to be in big trouble.

SS: If one of your friends, somebody your age, came and approached you and said they were interested in doing what you do for a living, what would you think and what would you tell them?

NS: I'd tell them they might want to look for a different job [laughter].

SS: Really?

NS: Until they really figure out what's happening, I wouldn't encourage anybody to get into it. I mean, if they want to, go for it. If you can find a card, then buy it. If you can get on a boat, then go for it. All for it. Go ahead. But I would not openly encourage them, "Hey, you

need to buy this. You need to get out here. We're making tons of money. We're going to have job security for years." No. I wouldn't tell them all that. I would tell them, "You can try it. Go ahead. But don't blame me if you fall on your butt and go broke."

SS: You wouldn't want to feel responsible for their failure, if that happened?

[36:48]

NS: No. "You want to come cull on my boat, that's fine, for fifty dollars a day, sixty bucks. If you can get a card and you can get somebody to take you, go ahead." But no, I'm not going to tell anybody, "Hey, you need to become a waterman. It's great!"

SS: Tell me a bit about the chartering and the heritage tours that you and your dad do.

NS: He does charters mainly through the Tides Inn, a few of the campgrounds around here, and then some privately. He just started crabbing again last year. It sucks because we had so much rain last year, and nobody wants to go fishing with rain. Not the customers. We don't care. We put on an oilskin coat and go out and go, but his clientele is not that way.

SS: They're paying for it.

NS: Yeah, they're paying a lot of money to not get wet. The boat is covered, but still, it's a miserable day. They want to go out when it's nice and sunny. Sunset cruises, they don't want to go if the sun's not out. What's the point? He's been doing that for a long time, when he wasn't crabbing, and he does a little bit of construction to supplement that. He did pretty good, up until this year with all the rain. But he does pretty good. He does the fishing charters and sunset cruises, and he'll do steamed crab cruises, where he'll take a tablecloth, throw it on the engine box, and he'll take a bushel of crabs and sit there and pick crabs and watch the sun go down.

SS: That sounds really fun.

NS: He does all sorts of fun stuff.

SS: And you do that with him sometimes?

NS: Mm-hmm. I do a lot of sunset cruises with him, because my work closes at five thirty in the summertime. Sunset doesn't start until like seven o'clock, so I can do those. And if I'm off, I can do fishing charters with him. I like those better, because it's more hands-on. I like what I do better. He does the Oyster Academy. He takes people out, shows them how we catch oysters, explains a little bit about what's going on with the industry—the fossil shells and all—trying to get the word out, to spread what's going on.

SS: How do people respond to that knowledge?

NS: We get some from the Tides Inn. We get a lot of people who have connections. And when you get to the people who have connections, word spreads fast. So we try to get those people onto the boat as much as we can, so that we can tell them, they can tell this person,

they can tell this person, so that, maybe they don't want to hear it from the waterman, but maybe they'll listen to somebody a little more educated.

SS: Sounds like a good strategy to try to influence.

NS: And it helps with the supplemental income too, in the summertime. He does that October through January, but he only does it on set days. He has a permit from VMRC that says, "These are the days you can go." They frame the time. You can't take anything home, yada, yada, yada. That way, they can't arrest us for being in a closed area. Because usually, we have a permit for Drummond Ground in Temples Bay. Drummond Ground is closed right now, which is usually where we go because it's closer to the creek. VMRC blows up. "Oh, you're not supposed to be here." "Well, here's my permit. It says I can be, as long as I'm not taking." I like oystering better, of course, just because I don't have to deal with people.

[40:46]

SS: [laughter] In summer, you're working at a greenhouse, you said?

NS: For the most part.

SS: What draws you about that?

NS: I got that job when I was in high school, when I could first get a job, and I was there and there and there. My boss stepped down, and she went to be a teacher, so they were like, "Oh, you've been here the longest, so it's your job now." It's a little more pay. It's worth it to stay.

SS: So you like doing both?

NS: And right now, they're good enough to me, where when I'm oystering, I have responsibilities there, but this time of year, we're slow anyway, because there's no plants to plant this time of year. So I go on the boat, and whenever I get in, whatever time it may be, I just go there when I'm done and do whatever paperwork I have to get done to get ready for spring, and go home at five thirty. I just stay there until closing, after coming in at two o'clock. They're good enough about not firing me after coming in at two o'clock in the afternoon and staying until five thirty [laughter]. That's enough to get paperwork and all done.

SS: Do you think you'll continue with both the greenhouse and the oystering for the foreseeable future? Is that your plan?

NS: For now. If the other job gets in the way of this one at some point, I'd put that job aside before I quit this one. I've got a lot more invested in this.

SS: In the oystering?

NS: Yes. If they finally said, "Hey, we're closing it down," I wouldn't stay there. It would have to be a big pay raise for that. I'd have to find something else.

SS: Where do you see yourself going from here, with the oystering? Would you get a boat of your own? Get into other fisheries?

[42:17]

NS: My dad will eventually retire, and then I'll go from there. I'll take over the boat or maybe I'll buy another one. He's got two in one business, and I'll buy the one boat from him or he'll let me use it for profit or whatever. But I'm going to stay with it. I'll ride it out until they call it quits—as long as I can, anyway. I'm not jumping ship just yet.

SS: Besides the fact that you have a lot of money invested, why else are you so committed to it?

NS: I love it. I've loved it from the first day I stepped on and Loretta showed me how to cull. I was like, "Oh, this is fun! Let's see how fast I can get." I got good enough, and I just love it. I love being on the water. I've always loved that. Even when little, growing up, we always went out. We went fishing every Sunday. We swam off the boat. We went out and looked at the dolphins. We took the dogs out. My whole life has been on that boat. I'm twenty years old. I've spent fifty percent of my life on it. I go down to the dock almost every day to check on the boat. If I'm not checking on the boat, I'm taking the dog down for a swim.

SS: What do you think it takes to be a successful young fisherman around here?

NS: It takes a lot of heart. You got to want to do it. If you don't want to be there, there's no sense in being there. If you're not completely committed to your job, like even if you go out on a day you don't feel good, you automatically suck at it. It's something you have to want to do. It can't be, "Oh, I have to do this to make money. I hate this." No, it has to be, "This is what I love. This is what I'm going to do." Because this time of year—we go in the wintertime—it's nasty. It's January. It blows almost every day. You get wind chills in the teens. Last year, we got a whole lot of negatives. The whole bay froze over last year for two weeks. So, you got to have the heart. And some of it's you got to have some courage. You can't get scared every time a wave comes over the stern. You got to want to be there, and you can't be afraid of it. Now, there's times when you should be afraid: "Ok, this is too much, let's go home." Or you're smart enough to say, "I'm not going out today. It's blowing twenty-five with five-foot swells and my boat's thirty-eight foot with low sides. There's not point in doing it." Mainly, it's the heart.

SS: So you know right away if you're cut out for it, based on whether or not you've got that heart?

NS: You've got to want it. You've got to want it. I worked two years, almost two and a half, without getting a card, just looking, looking, looking. I never gave up on it, though. I could have said, "Oh, never mind, I'll just go find another job." I stayed on the boat. I worked for peanuts, until I could get what I needed to get to get the right pay.

SS: Because you knew from early on that's what you wanted?

NS: Mm-hmm. Once you find that drive, you just got to stick with it.

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

NS: Not really. I just hope that we can stay doing what we're doing for a long time. That's all I want. I just want them to fix—it's not just them and it's not just us. We need to come together and fix it. We need to right what's wrong and get it back to the way it was, somehow. Maybe not like it was when Columbus was here, but at least to a point where it's sustainable, for everybody, where they're not worried about us killing it and we're not worried about them taking it away from us. Just get it to where everybody's happy. A healthy medium.

SS: Alright. Well, thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me. I'm just going to go ahead and turn this off.

[end of interview]

[46:38]