

**Interview with Brendan Damm, commercial fisherman**

**Occupation:** commercial fisherman

**Port Community:** Montauk, NY

**Interviewer:** Sarah Schumann

**Date and year:** February 17, 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]: All right. My name is Sarah Schumann. Today is February 17, 2021. I'm doing an interview with Brendan Damm. We're on a Zoom call over the internet. Brendan, would you state your occupation for the recording?

Brendan Damm [BD]: I am a commercial fisherman out of Montauk, New York.

SS: Thank you. Is that a fulltime or part-time fishing job?

BD: Full time. Twelve months of the year.

SS: Okay. What's your vessel name? Or what vessel do you work on?

BD: I work on the Lady K from early spring through Christmas. Then I hop on a few other boats during the winter, just fill-ins whenever they need a guy.

SS: Alright. The final question is: what is your educational background?

BD: I graduated from Plattsburgh University 2016. College educated.

SS: Okay. And what's your age?

BD: Twenty-eight.

SS: Twenty-eight. Thanks. Okay. That's all I wanted to ask you for those quick questions about the basic stats. Where would you like to start to tell your story as a commercial fisherman?

[01:17]

BD: Way back, I used to fill in with my dad. He was a—he's still a—lobstermen. I absolutely hated it, got seasick, and would rather go hang out at the beach with my friends. I would help him when he needed help, but it was like he really had to drag me out of the house and he definitely needed help that day. Didn't do it for a whole bunch of years, through high school and college. Then, one summer, I came home from college, and the guy he was supposed to have working with him ended up not being able to do it, so he actually needed help. I reluctantly said yes, and the rest is history. I actually really enjoyed it. Made some good money for the months I was home from school. After that, I was fishing every summer I came home, for about two or three months, would go back to school, finished my education, and when I graduated in May of '16, I came home two days after graduation and signed on and have been pretty much fishing ever since. We fish for monks and skates during the fall [editor's note: BD may have meant to say "spring"], usually from the end of April through the beginning of July. Then we will switch the boat over and go lobstering and fish potting through the summer. We'll lobster through December. We will gillnet for striped bass sometime, usually around end of September, October. The first couple of winters after graduating, I didn't do anything. Here and there, maybe fill in, but never full time. Then the last two years, once we wrap up in December, I go straight to the bigger offshore boats, I guess you could say, and I'll go dragging or tilefishing for January, February, March, a little bit of April. Then I'll help my dad get the boat situated again and we start up, back monkfishing and skating, and then the process continues for the next year.

SS: The Lady K is your dad's boat?

BD: Yes, it is. He has two boats, the Lady K and the Jolly Roger, that he has somebody else run.

[03:52]

SS: It's interesting how you at first had no interest in it for a long time, and then all of a sudden a light switch flipped.

BD: Yeah. They always said that seasickness was in my head. I kind of believe it, because I really didn't want to be there. I would much rather be at the beach, or honestly doing anything else back then. Then, the first year I started, I still got a little seasick. Then, kind of when I realized I actually did enjoy it, almost like a light switch flipped, and I just haven't been seasick ever since. I don't know. Maybe because, now, I want to be. I don't know, but it stopped, and here I am. Bunch of years down the road and still doing it.

SS: That feeling of enjoyment that you get from fishing, could you describe that a little? What are the aspects of fishing that you find so enjoyable?

BD: Just that it's different every single day. We leave the dock and we have no idea what the day is going to bring. We could catch everything we need. We could catch nothing. That kind of keeps you coming back, even after a bad day. You can go to sleep and the next day could be totally, completely different. Whereas, I talk to a bunch of my friends that have desk jobs or corporate jobs, whatever you want to call them. They go in, and it's the same thing every day. They check into their desk, they grab some coffee, they talk to some people, and they do it five days a week. They can't wait for Friday when they can have the weekend to do whatever they want. They're like, "You actually like it?" I'm like, "Yeah. Every day, I never

know what to expect. The weather could be bad. It could be beautiful." Not knowing what that day is going to bring when you pull out the jetties is pretty cool.

[05:50]

SS: Have you ever done anything other than fishing?

BD: I did a little bit of construction in college, one summer. It was absolutely horrible and I couldn't wait to be done. Then, throughout my childhood, I waited tables, bussed tables, did the whole restaurant thing, which was, honestly, similar to fishing, in that you never know what that day was going to bring. But I've never had a desk job or anything like that.

SS: Could you see yourself doing anything other than fishing? Or is fishing it for you?

BD: I think, if I was to do anything other than fishing, it would still have to be, like, maybe open up like a restaurant or something along those lines. But I don't think I could ever wear a suit and tie and drive to the city or live in the city. Yeah, I don't think so. I think it would have to be somewhere near the coast and have some type of blue collar. I don't mind working with my hands. I mean, I'm still young, so talk to me in twenty-five years, and I might be saying something different. But I think I would have to kind of make my own schedule. Like not be Monday to Friday, nine to five. I don't think I could do that.

SS: Yeah. Have that flexibility?

BD: Yeah.

SS: That element of surprise.

BD: Mm-hmm.

[07:24]

SS: What else? What else comes to mind? What haven't you told me yet?

BD: Ah, I don't know. I mean, I guess the whole, what you called it, the graying of the fleet. I think the dock area, the docks everywhere, it might be intimidating. If you really had no idea, if you've never fished, it's not in your family, it's not in anything, it would be a little intimidating to go down there and ask for a job. I think I read somewhere that they said there's less and less boats every year, so the boats that are still going are almost reluctant to take a new guy that has no idea what's going on. Because time is money. You want to go out and get your fish and come in and make some money. If you have to bring a guy out and train him, that slows you down. I know they're working on a few things now, I think with the government, trying to train people on the dock, so that they can send them out and at least you have some type of idea of what's going on [unintelligible] for the guys on the boat. You do one thing wrong, it could life and death for somebody else. The getting into fishing, even if you're a deckhand. Back in the day, it was way easier for people to work your way up as a deckhand and then buy your own boat, buy your own permits. You could do it and still make ends meet. Where now, some of these permits are selling for seven, eight, nine million, just for the permit. Now you got to pay that, buy a boat, and hope you can make those payments,

as well as trying to own a home and support a family. I think it's just gotten kind of out of hand, in a way, for the permits worth having. Back in the day, I think they were free, twenty-five years ago. You just signed a piece of paper, checked the box, got the permit, and you were good to go. Where now, the funds you have to come up with, just to even start, is I think kind of putting a hamstring on the next generation. If you don't have a father or an uncle or somebody that can pass it down, you're really, I don't think, buying in.

[10:02]

SS: Where do you see yourself going in the future? Are you thinking about boat ownership as a pathway? Or have you not thought about it yet?

BD: Yes, I would like to run my own boat. Again, I don't know if I would ever be able to buy my own. I think, at this point, I would just take over what my dad has created. Let him maybe retire, and take over his. I don't think I would want to fork over the money. I don't even have the money. But I don't think I would want to fork that much over. You buy it, and then, they could shut it down, or there could be no fish, or a lot of fish go overseas. With that whole craziness over in China the last few years, the prices on some fish dropped dramatically. You put up half a million dollars and then that happens. It's kind of tough to justify buying it. But I mean, the guys that are situated and are in it now, obviously, it's not too bad. Their boats are paid off, or almost paid off, and they own the permits. I can see myself going that route. I don't know if I would buy a vessel in the next couple of years. Maybe down the road, if everything gets better. But at the moment, no buying. But I'll take over the family business.

SS: Do you see other young people your age or a little younger or older getting into fishing or even having their own boats? Or are there other deckhands even?

BD: Montauk actually has a pretty young fishing group. I was counting before. I think there's almost thirty of us, probably, under the age of thirty-five.

[12:01]

SS: Really, wow.

BD: I see most of them probably going the same route as me, maybe taking over a boat for somebody, or letting an older guy relax and run the boat for him. I don't really see any of them going out and purchasing at the moment. But there are a few boats out here where the captains and owners are getting older. Maybe work with them for a year or two, and then take that over. But I don't think anybody is buying in the next, say, five years. Maybe a couple years down the road, things turn around, and maybe the prices on things come down a bit. But at the moment, prices are just so high. It's kind of tough, especially where we live in Montauk, to try to buy a house, start a family, and then go out and buy a boat and permits. It would be pretty tough.

SS: Is that because the cost of living is just generally high in Montauk?

BD: The cost of living is astronomically high in Montauk.

[13:12]

SS: I've actually never been to Montauk. It's one of the few places, fishing ports, I've never set foot in. What's it like?

BD: Well, it was awesome, a few years ago, before all the city people found Montauk and just started rushing out here and buying everything up. Growing up, it was unbelievable. It was still a fishing town. People would come out to surf cast in the fall. [Unintelligible] a bunch of boats. It's slowly starting to go more towards the city people. Hedge funders are buying up everything. If you haven't purchased already or have family to purchase from, it's almost impossible to buy a home out here. We have two-bedroom, one-bath houses selling for \$950,000. The few young-generation fishermen, you kind of have to choose between buying a home or buying a boat, at the moment. We'll see how that goes. I mean, there are people doing it. There are a few kids that have purchased boats and are making it work. But again, their fathers and grandfathers fished and were able to help them out in the short term. But if they didn't have that knowledge? I don't think anybody that doesn't have fishing in their family is really diving into the industry.

[14:22]

SS: You said there are about thirty people under thirty-five who are fishing. Are they all generally from fishing families in Montauk?

BD: Yes. Yeah. Every single one, I think. Yes. Their father fished, grandfathers, uncles, the whole nine yards.

SS: How big is the fishing port, generally? About how many boats? How many is thirty people relative to the overall the size of the port?

BD: I'd say there's maybe fifty commercial boats. We have—one, two, three—we have like ten large draggers, and then the rest are smaller day boats. A couple of lobster boats. Yeah, that's pretty much it. It's not a huge port. It was very big back in the day. Some guys have moved and taken their boat to Connecticut or Rhode Island and places that it's just easier to access pretty much everything: mechanics, all the gear stores, everything. Rhode Island and New Bedford seem to be the hubs of commercial fishing, up this way anyway. It's cheaper over there. I know two people that, in the last year, have left to move and get jobs over in Connecticut on boats. Because they were renting out here and it was just so much money. They went over there, bought a house, live ten minutes from the boat, and life is simpler.

[16:51]

SS: Do you have a place of your own? Where do you live, if you don't mind me asking?

BD: I live with my parents at the moment. My girlfriend and I are working on purchasing a house from my grandma. Again, the only way to really do it is through family.

SS: Yeah, that sounds really tough.

BD: It's definitely not easy. I mean, it's great for the people that own homes and the prices have skyrocketed. But, if you're trying to purchase, it's not ideal.

SS: Are you fishing in federal waters? It sounds like federal waters, at least in part. Do you do state waters as well?

BD: When we go fish potting, we'll start in state waters. But everything is pretty much federal. Monk and skates, and then all my winter fishing is all offshore. The state waters, back in the day, they had great lobstering and everything. That's all kind of moved offshore. Now with lobstering, we have to pick and choose what area we fish in. You can't fish in state and federal on the same boat. Once we finish monkfishing, then by that time, the lobsters are moving offshore anyway, so we just stick to the federal waters.

[18:26]

SS: You mentioned something about a program that is working on training young fishermen at the dock, so that the captain doesn't have to spend so much time with that. What is that program?

BD: I don't know exactly. I saw it a week ago. I think it started in Gloucester. Now they're working in New Bedford and Point Judith, and it just kind of goes over the basics of how a boat works, and how to kind of troubleshoot some of the problems you might encounter, and how the whole deck works, so when they get out there, they're not completely brand new and going to hurt themselves or somebody else. It takes a lot of strain off the captain, who's not only worried about catching fish and making sure everybody gets home safe. He can put the guy out there and be like, "Alright, he shouldn't hurt himself." I think it's a great idea. I know they've interviewed a few captains. They said, "If we trained them on land and sent them out, would you be willing to take them?" And they said, "Yes." Finding crew is not getting any easier. I know a few ports have had issues with drug addicts and alcoholics and whatnot. You take them out and they look fine on land, and then you get them out there, and they kind of fall apart. Now you're down a crew member, as it is, so if you could find somebody that might be new, has enough training to get the job done, and isn't a drug addict, I can't see it being a bad thing.

[20:17]

SS: On the Lady K and the other boats that you work on in the winter, how big are the crew sizes on those boats?

BD: On the Lady K, it's just my dad and I. Sometimes one other guy when we're monk fishing. Then the boat I'm on in the winter, the crew varies between three guys and a captain and four or five guys and a captain, depending on how fishing is and what we're catching.

SS: Are you generally one of the younger ones on those boats, or is it all different ages?

BD: A few boats I've worked on, actually, it's mostly the young kids that I mentioned. I'd say, the boat I'm on right now, the average age on deck is probably around twenty-eight. There are a few boats that they have some older deckhands. Say, the average age would be like maybe thirty-eight. Out here, I would say most of the deckhands on the winter boats are that young generation I was talking about.

SS: Does Montauk have a higher proportion of younger fishermen than other ports? Have you spent time in other ports?

BD: I guess I would say yes. I want to say, probably because it is one of the smaller ports. We don't have a ton of boats going out and trip fishing all winter. I think we have, what'd I say? Eight boats, maybe, that are trip fishing. Most of the young guys, even like me, I day fish all spring and summer. Then we don't fish in the winter, so I hop on these boats. I guess, yeah, we have younger crews, only because we're so small. Point Judith has way more boats, as well as New Bedford. They probably have a similar amount of young kids, but because they have so many more boats, it's kind of outdone with the older guys, because they need bodies to fill the crew.

[22:41]

SS: Yeah. Yeah, that's interesting. What else is on your mind? What haven't we talked about?

BD: I don't know. I think a lot of even fishing families that might have a son or a daughter that wants to get into it might be steered away, just from their fathers or mothers or uncles or whoever fishes being like, "There's an easier way to make a living." Nobody knows what's going to happen in the future—regulations and whatnot. If they have the opportunity to get a different job, I think a lot of parents might be steering their kids that way. Where ten, fifteen years ago, they might have said, "Absolutely. Come on the boat and do this." Most of the older generation, they started fishing without regulations. When they started, twenty-five, thirty, forty years ago, it was pretty much wide open. You could get a boat, go fishing. Everything you caught you brought in. They were making really good money with no government oversight. Now the government is slowly coming in, and there's more and more regulations and more and more paperwork to fill out, and all these other things. I think the older generation, they're in it now. There's really nothing else. If you're fifty years old, you're not going to stop fishing and go start a new job, so they kind of deal with it. But I don't think they would necessarily steer their children towards this route. You know, if it happens, it happens, but I think a lot of people sort of push their kids in a different direction, hoping they don't fish. I was the first person in my immediate family to go to college, kind of hoping that I wouldn't fish. But I came back to it, and now, both my parents couldn't be happier. But they certainly didn't force it down my throat. They let me go do my thing. If I came back, I came back, and if not, I didn't. But there was never the like, "Oh, my God, you should definitely fish. This is great." He wouldn't change it, and he loves what he does, but the constant oversight, and every day regulations change, and trying to keep up with it, you almost need a law degree sometimes to figure out what you can keep. If you have this, you can't keep that. It does get crazy. If I had children today, I certainly wouldn't push it. I would let them make their own choice, but I would definitely send them a different direction first, hoping that stuck, instead of fishing.

[26:23]

SS: That's because of the regulations?

BD: The regulations, and just nobody knows what the future is going to bring. It seems to be the mom-and-pop operations are kind of going away. I think, if everybody has their way, I'd say, in maybe twenty years, it'll just be a couple of big corporations that own the ocean and have a few boats. Yeah, they'll have crew, but no more going down to the docks to see grandpa or dad or whoever on the little boat. It'll just be a few large-scale boats, catching all the fish.

SS: Do you think that that's a worse experience or worse career for someone, to go work on a corporate boat, rather than a mom-and-pop?

BD: No, I mean, it seems to work out in Alaska and a few other places. It's pretty much big corporations. I don't know about the pay, but like benefits, maybe they'll offer health insurance or whatever they decide to do. But I think you'll lose the coastal fishing community feeling of it. You know, going down to the docks and seeing everybody, and seeing the old timers working on their boats and everything. You'll just have a couple big docks in New Bedford or Point Judith. You'll lose all the small coastal towns and the mom-and-pop shops and everything. Which we're kind of losing now, but it still has a little bit of the feeling. Maine has a lot of it. You drive through, and grandma and grandpa own the convenience store in town, and the kids and everything are running down the docks. I don't think it's worse off. I think you just lose the tight-knit community. They'll just be like any other job.

[28:49]

SS: Now, what was your degree in?

BD: Business.

SS: Were you planning on using that for fishing? Or have you used it? Has it actually come in handy?

BD: Ah, not really. When I went to school, I really went to play sports. I had no idea what I was going to do, kind of just winged it for a year or two, and then picked business because it interested me. I haven't used it necessarily for fishing. Business is pretty basic. Either you have it or you don't. I definitely don't regret going to college. I enjoyed it a lot. But I wouldn't say really anything I learned translates into real world experience. We read books and wrote papers, but I wouldn't say it translates. I don't know. Business, you just kind of do it. Even fishing, none of these guys in town went to college, or probably really even made it through high school, and they run a small business every day. I think I just kind of wing it every day. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't. If it doesn't work, just remember that didn't work and try something new the next day. You know?

[30:39]

SS: Yeah. You mentioned you have a girlfriend?

BD: Yes.

SS: Is she involved in fishing at all?

BD: She is not. No. Just listening to me complain when I get in from a trip, and sending me back out for the next trip. No, she's very supportive of what I do. It's certainly not ideal. You kind of need a special woman. Especially in the wintertime, I'm gone sometimes twelve, fourteen days at a clip, with no cell phone service and very little communication. She understands and definitely supports me. All of our friends fish, so she kind of grew up knowing what it's like. But it definitely doesn't get any easier leaving. She's kind of on her own for two weeks. You know? But it's afforded us a good life, this far. She still hates it, but she's very supportive. I don't think the trip fishing, I don't know if she would enjoy, year-



round. When we're day fishing, we're home every night, so we get to see each other. But the wintertime, there is no day fishing, so she knows if we're going to make it work out here, that's something I have to do. For now, at least. Hopefully, one day, I won't have to do the winter fishing. Just when we end in December, that's it for a couple months. But at this point in our lives, we need the money. So out I go.

[32:54]

SS: What do you predict the future will hold for you?

BD: In terms of fishing?

SS: Yeah. Where do you think you'll be in, say, ten years?

BD: Ten years. Hopefully situated out here. Hopefully all our craziness over in China and Asia has calmed down. Hopefully COVID-19 is behind us and the fish prices bounce back. Probably running one of my dad's boats, monkfishing and lobstering. [Unintelligible] take a few months off, work on some gear, maybe vacation a little, and start up again in the spring when the weather's nicer, and it's not freezing cold. That would be the ideal situation.

SS: You've mentioned some uncertainty a few times: regulatory tariffs, other stuff, and just not having a feeling of being able to bank on the future.

BD: Mm-hmm.

SS: So that's the ideal picture.

[34:26]

BD: That's the ideal picture. There are less and less boats every year. I think most of the fish, we have done a pretty good job of regulating to the point now, where a lot of stocks are bouncing back. In a perfect world, they raise the quotas enough to make a better living in the future. Sea bass, I guess they did their regulations a few years ago. That stock seems to be bouncing back. I guess their thing now is bluefish. That's a pretty cyclical fish. That comes and goes. Hopefully that comes back. Just regulation, but enough of a limit to make a decent living. Everybody now, you can chip away. Gone are the days where you just do one fishery. Everybody now pretty much has to bounce around. You fish for a few different species throughout the year, which nobody's complaining about. But maybe, like sea bass in New York is fifty pounds. [If it] went to a hundred or a hundred and fifty pounds, you could actually make a nice day's pay fishing on that. We make it work now. You catch that and some other things. But maybe down the road, that limit gets increased. Maybe. Yeah, just the uncertainty. I mean, the regulations, that's kind of just year to year, depending on whatever science or information they get. But the overseas uncertainty would be nice to go away. I guess, hopefully, we're working in the right direction. The tariffs, that kind of coincided with COVID-19, which was a disaster for everybody, not just fishing. If we could push past that, and hopefully, by the summer, at least the fall, the COVID stuff is behind us, and maybe more stuff starts going overseas. Not that you want to bank on China buying all of our products, because they are pretty crazy on all their stuff. But if we could get that market back, while still focusing on the U.S. markets and building them up. Which I think they're trying to do with monkfish and scup and skates, species that are readily available, and the limits are high

enough that we could feed tons of people if we had the right marketing. They're not the beautiful fish like sea bass and fluke that everybody knows. Maybe working with the USDA or one of those government organizations to try to push American seafood first, instead of bringing in all this frozen fish from China and Europe and all over there. We have the boats. We have the manpower to feed America. But we still bring all this fish in. It just seems pointless to me. Why would you ship it overseas? The whole climate change and greenhouse gases. Why would you put it on a boat or a plane, when we can bring it to the dock? It goes on one truck, maybe one more truck to get there. It just seems kind of asinine to me, when we have it right here. Why are we shipping it in? I think that maybe that's the future. We push American-caught seafood. It's fresh. We fish under the strictest regulations in the world. It's sustainable. Yet nobody in America really eats [it]. You go to the local grocery store, even here in Montauk. We don't have any local fish. It's all product of China, product of Thailand, product of Indonesia. Why? Montauk's the biggest fishing port in New York, and our local grocery store isn't even selling local fish. I think that paints into my perfect ten-year outlook, where America supports the American fishermen, and we figure out a way to get sea scallops and local fluke, sea bass, scup—get these fish to the American people. I think it would be difficult at first, because people, especially if you don't live near the coast, they don't know any better. They eat farmed salmon and they eat tilapia and they eat these fish that are there. It may be cheaper, but definitely not as good for you. It would take a few years, I think, of marketing and branding. I know the Maine lobster guys are pretty good with pushing their product. They have some type of marketing collaborative that they push Maine lobsters pretty heavy in the Northeast states, Vermont and whatnot. I think if we were able to do something like that, and all kind of come together and say, look, even if we had to pay into it, in the beginning, I think the long-term outlook would be great. We wouldn't have to rely on China. We wouldn't have to rely on overseas. We could push our product as being better for the environment. Why would we put everything on a plane and then ship it back here, when we can just send it to Illinois or Kentucky or these states that can't get fresh fish, and kind of get them on a better protein source?

[41:27]

SS: Who do you sell your catch to, in Montauk?

BD: We send it all to the city. It goes to the new Fulton Fish Market. Our monkfish go to New Bedford. We don't have a processing plant in New York. It just goes up to the processor up there.

SS: You just load it on the truck when you get in, and it goes either to the city or New Bedford?

BD: Yup.

SS: You mentioned the Maine lobster collaborative or whatever it's called. Are there programs in place in New York that are trying to help market the local catch?

BD: There is one woman. Long Island Commercial Fishing Association. She's working on getting us a processing plant somewhere on Long Island. Like I said, there are species, like dogfish and skates, that if we had processing, would actually make sense to go and catch them. Like for us, skates and dogfish, you're working on pretty much no money. Maybe twenty-five cents, fifty cents, and by the time you ship the product up to New Bedford or the

processing plants, it's not even worth your time. If we had something like that here, we could utilize those species that right now, it really doesn't make sense to, and actually have something else to catch in those weird periods when there's not a whole lot going on. Maine was kind of on the forefront of marketing their catch. They really only have lobster, so it was kind of easy for them to all get on board. They're catching one thing and we're going to market it and do that. Where down here, it would be a little more difficult, just because there are so many other species: scup, sea bass, fluke, squid, everything. It would be a little more difficult, but I still think it could be done. I think it would be a little difficult trying to get all the older fishermen on board. If you say "union" and start throwing words like that around, it's still kind of like the Wild West in a way. They don't want a union. They just want to go catch fish and be on their own. I think that would be difficult. But I think if it meant more money in everybody's pocket, they would be willing to get on board, more so than if not.

SS: It sounds like there's a generational difference in attitude? The older fishermen are less interested in banding together?

BD: Yeah, absolutely.

SS: Do you feel like the younger fishermen are more interested in banding together?

[44:40]

BD: Uh, yes, I think so. When the older fishermen started fishing, it really was the Wild West. There was no regulation, so when you went out and caught something, you could bring it in. If you went out and you happened to run into the high-dollar fish, you weren't calling everybody and telling them where you caught it. You were getting in and hoping to get back out and get them again. Where now, everything is so regulated. When you leave, you pretty much know exactly what you're going to target, which is all the younger generation has ever known, with regulations and trip limits and everything. So now, you don't have to be secretive, because when you leave, everybody pretty much knows, "That boat's going to catch squid. This one's going to catch fluke." I think the younger generation would be more willing to band together if it meant prolonging the industry. We would band together before we let it go to nothing, these days, because all we've known, like I said, is regulation. If we can actually maybe tilt the regulation in our favor, let's do it. Where when the older guys started, there was no regulation, and all they've seen was regulation knock out their friends and family members because they couldn't make it. They kind of have a bad taste in their mouth, just because they've never seen a regulation really help them. Everything gets taken, taken, taken. Nobody's ever really seen anything given back. They would be reluctant to add anymore government oversight, I guess you would say.

SS: Have you personally been involved in management, going to meetings, being in associations?

[46:57]

BD: I wouldn't say actively. I've been to a few this past year. Trying to figure it out a little bit. But I haven't dove headfirst into it, no. The few fisheries we do really don't have a whole lot of meetings and whatever. Monkfishing and skates, they kind of just tell us what the limits are going to be. There's no arguing about it. I've sat in with the one woman on a few meetings, just trying to see how they work and whatnot. But 2020 wasn't the best year for

meetings. Zoom meetings was where it was at. They're interesting, I guess, to say the least. There's always one party that's not happy at the end of them. We'll see how it goes down the road. I don't know if I'm super pumped to jump in on them. I guess if need be, I would. But at the moment, I'm going to try to stand back a little bit.

[48:39]

SS: Is there anything that could ever cause you to decide to leave fishing?

BD: I think if it just didn't make sense financially. Because it is a lot of work, and the hours are certainly not your typical nine-to-five. The work never seems to get less. There's always more work. I think if it got to the point where you were doing eighteen-hour days and really making nothing, I think I would, more so for my family, maybe go a different route. With fishing, even if the prices are bad, you can always try to make up with it. Maybe catch something else, or don't take a day off that week and fish seven days a week. There always seems to be a way. Even during COVID, the prices were low, but we put a year together. I think if it got to the point where, even if you worked twenty-four hours a day, it didn't justify financially, I would probably call it quits. But it hasn't happened yet.

SS: How would that make you feel, if you had to leave fishing?

[50:18]

BD: It would definitely suck. The freedom and the being outdoors and all of that. I really don't know if I would be able to find that anywhere else. It would be almost a culture shock, having to go and figure out what to do with my life. It depends when it would happen, too. If it would happen now, it would suck, but transitioning wouldn't be horrible. I'm still young. But if it happened to my dad, who's done it for probably forty years, forty-five years, I think that would be a devastating blow. Fishing doesn't really translate over into anything else. They have skills that are specifically for fishing. It's not like you can go get a job at a bank or doing something else.

SS: Do you have siblings?

BD: I do. I have a younger sister and a younger brother.

SS: Are they into fishing?

[51:37]

BD: My sister is not. My brother works on a charter boat. He's got a little bit of the fishing in him. He doesn't really like the commercial fishing, yet. Hopefully it doesn't come, and he just sticks with something else.

SS: Why do you say that?

BD: Well, he's a few years younger than me. Like I said, the future, nobody knows what's going to happen. He's ten years younger than me, so if fishing ended for me in, say, fifteen or twenty years, okay, I had a good run. Where he'd still be young enough that, again, what does

it translate into? If you're only twenty-eight or so, thirty, you're young enough to switch, but you've done it for so long. I don't know, I wouldn't want to see that happen to him. But we'll see. Who knows? He could get the bug and be right out there next to us.

SS: You mentioned COVID a minute ago, that you guys were able to put a year together. Did you do anything different this year to adapt, or did you just have to fish twice as hard?

[53:03]

BD: Pretty much just fished twice as hard. In the spring, they didn't even want monkfish. That was a little nerve-wracking. April, my dad called the market, and they were like, "Wait a month. We'll see what happens in May." Then May came around and he was like, "Yeah, we'll take some." They ended up taking everything through the whole season, but the prices were terrible. Then towards summer, just being a tourist town, some of the restaurants—we were selling our fish to Gosman's. We were selling to some of the restaurants. The prices weren't horrible. Then the lobsters, the prices were actually pretty good all fall. That kind of made up for the crappy monk price in the spring. Yeah, we kind of just doubled down when summer came. Whatever we could catch, we caught and made it work. It was nice. It wasn't a record-breaking year. But from April, when it was looking like, "Oh my God, they won't want anything," it turned out to be okay.

SS: That's good.

DB: Yeah.

SS: Well, we've been jumping around a lot. Is there anything that we haven't discussed yet that you think is important to understand your experience as a young fisherman?

[54:39]

BD: I don't think so. I'd say we covered pretty much all of the bumps in the road of being a commercial fisherman. I think it's a great occupation if you really want to do it. If you think, "Oh, I'll just hop on a boat and make some money and half-ass it," I think you're in for a rude awakening. Everybody's seen the crewmembers who, it's like, "Oh, we're going to make really good money this trip." You go out and you don't catch anything and the weather sucks, and they're like, "Oh, this sucks." I think you kind of have to be in it for the long haul. Not even long haul, but you can't just look at it like, "I'm going to make some quick money and leave," because that never happens. Like I said, everybody out here, my friends, their fathers and uncles and grandfathers fished, and we've all had a great life. I think if you put your head to it and dive in headfirst and do it, you can make something of yourself. But it's certainly not a get-rich-quick scheme. Especially in the winter, the weather is horrible and a lot happens out there that nobody sees. They're calling for no wind, and then it blows fifty. If you don't want to be there, it would be a miserable experience. I think, for anybody that wants to do it, you just dive in and find a boat. There's people out there pretty much willing to hire anybody, especially now with the drugs and everything running rampant. If you have a clear head and good head on your shoulders, you can find a job, even if you start on a small boat and work your way up and get on a bigger boat and fish year-round. You can absolutely make it work. And who knows, maybe even work your way up to the captain's chair if you find a willing boat owner. I think it's kind of just figuring out how to get clear-minded people to the docks. It's not bad out here. There's the occasional junkie. But I know other ports, it's absolutely a

disaster trying to find anybody that has a clue or isn't going to OD on the boat offshore. It's dangerous as it is, and then you get these loose cannons. You're a hundred miles offshore, and they're going into withdrawals. It's not an ideal situation. I think if we can, maybe with that training program, get some young kids to enjoy fishing and want to do it, I think the fishing community would greatly benefit. I don't know. We'll see. The druggies seem to be ruling at the moment.

[58:40]

SS: Sort of like you were talking about with the seafood, just raising public awareness about the fishing industry, and that there are opportunities? Because it sounds like there are opportunities for people who want to do it.

BD: Absolutely. I think raising the awareness of the opportunities for people who want to work, and raising the awareness of the American people, that it is a sustainable food source. We're not just out there pillaging the oceans. We are the most strictly regulated—one of the most strictly regulated industries in America—and probably the most strict regulations in the world, when it comes to fishing. We fish on quotas, everything. I think there was kind of a bad picture painted over the last year, years. “Oh, you just want to go catch everything and kill it all, and make as much money as you can.” That couldn't be further from the truth. We follow these regulations. We listen to what NOAA, National Marine Fisheries, has to say about fish stocks and what's doing what. I think if we can paint that picture, almost like the farmers in the Midwest, that we are just mostly mom-and-pop operations just looking to make a living, that would greatly benefit the U.S. fishing industry. They show pictures of gillnets and trawlers and everything from over in China, where they pretty much just run rampant. There's no regulation. They pretty much just catch everything. That's not here. There's mesh sizes you have to use, and all kinds of regulations on how you can fish, where you can fish. Then somebody posts, “Oh, look at this trawler killing everything.” Well, that's not a U.S. trawler. That's over in China or wherever they're fishing. That's not us. Our fish stocks are probably some of the healthiest in the world. When something is overfished, they put it on a list. They study it. They make different nets to try to stay away from codfish on Georges Bank. There is tons of science and whatever you want to call it going on here. Even the fish that are overfished, we're working on getting them back. Nobody wants to be the person to catch the last fish, because then we don't have a job tomorrow. I think if we can figure out a way to repaint that picture, that we're not just a bunch of cowboys running around trying to catch every last fish, that would also benefit the whole industry.

SS: Use the regulations as a selling point to reassure the public about sustainability, and make the industry more visible?

[62:02]

BD: Yeah. Again, we'll see if that happens. But I think that would be a step in the right direction. Just because, even going to school, “Oh, you're a fisherman. You just want to kill every fish. Oh my God, the fishing industry's horrible.” I would sit them down and be like, “Listen. I'm in the industry. I know how it works. Nobody wants to go out and absolutely kill everything. Especially the family operations.” Why would my dad want to kill the last fish, when he knows this is the industry I've chosen? You want to pass it down from generation, which is how it was for most of the last, say, hundred years. Your grandfather fished. Your father fished. Then he passed it down to you. A lot of knowledge and information, it's

generational. My dad taught me what his dad taught him, and so on and so forth. Nobody wants to just destroy the ocean. That's where we make our living. In a perfect world, maybe my kids will want to fish, if we're still going. I don't want to ruin it for them. People don't see it that way, just from what they see in news articles and whatever. But those are very misleading, in my opinion.

SS: You actually had people tell you that they had this negative impression of fishermen, knowing that you were a fisherman?

[63:51]

BD: They would tell me that before they knew I was in the industry.

SS: Oh, I see. That's awkward.

BD: It couldn't be further from the truth.

SS: At least it's a good teachable moment for you to educate people.

BD: Absolutely.

SS: Well, anything else before we wrap it up?

BD: I think I hit more than I thought I would hit.

SS: Yeah.

BD: I don't think I have anything else off the top of my head.

SS: Okay. In that case, I'll just shut off the recorder, and then I'll talk to you about next steps. Just give me a second. Thank you.

[end of interview]

[64:37]