

**Interview with Stephanie Hryzan, commercial fisherman**

**Occupation:** commercial fisherman

**Port Community:** Point Judith, RI

**Interviewer:** Sarah Schumann

**Date and year:** November 23, 2020

**Location:** Jamestown, Rhode Island

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

**Transcriber:** Sarah Schumann

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann. I'm in Jamestown, Rhode Island. Today is November 23. I'm not sure. I need to check on this. Yes, 23rd. Could you please state your name for the recording?

Stephanie Hryzan [SH]: Stephanie Hryzan

SS: That's how you pronounce that? "Her-zhan"?

SH: I thought yours was "Shu-min".

SS: It can be. Anything goes. Stephanie, what is your occupation?

SH: Commercial fisherman, or deckhand on a commercial fishing trawler.

SS: Thank you. Is that a fulltime or a part-time occupation for you?

SH: It's a lifestyle. Fulltime.

SS: Okay. What's your homeport, Stephanie?

SH: Point Judith, Rhode Island.

SS: Great. Is there a particular vessel that you work on full time?

SH: The Atlantic Queen.

SS: Great. Two more questions. What is your age?

SH: Thirty-five.

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

SH: Bachelor's degree in sociology.

SS: Okay, thanks. Now, it's up to you to begin wherever you'd like. The objective is just to sort of reflect and share your story as a young fisherman. You can start at the beginning or wherever, whatever pops into your head as being the most important place to start.

[01:25]

SH: Well, my father was a quahogger, my whole life. Back in, like, the late eighties, early nineties, he was a maintenance guy down at the old Coop in Point Judith. I've always been on the water and liked fishing. He dragged in Wickford in the mid-nineties, on a smaller, like a day dragger. I remember going out with him and his captain's daughter once, when we were like eight, and I thought it was so cool to see that big pile of fish. But I fell into it. I had no intention of getting in the fishing industry. I don't know. Life takes you to different jobs, and one thing leads to another, and I ended up observing for NOAA, on commercial scallop boats for sixteen months. Then, after I stopped doing that, I did the apprenticeship program that Chris Brown and Fred Mattera had, where they took like a dozen people between eighteen and thirty-five, and taught them a few weeks about commercial fishing. I ended up on one boat for sixteen months, the Cody. After that, I was on the Lena Pearl most of last year. This year, I'm on the Atlantic Queen. It's not uncommon for people to change around boats. This is a good boat. The owner and the captain are really good to me, and I get to learn a lot.

[03:03]

SS: Cool. Your dad was a fisherman and did maintenance at the coop, and you said you got to go out with him once in a while as a kid.

SH: I just remember once, when I was eight. It was so cool. Seeing the big pile of fish on deck is like heaven, because I always like fish.

SS: What did you think, as a younger-than-you-are-now woman, when you were thinking about planning your career? You said you didn't intend to be a fisherman. You sort of fell into it?

SH: Yeah.

SS: Did you have other plans?

SH: When I was a little kid, I wanted to be an artist. But I always loved the ocean and loved animals and whatnot. I attempted to go to college for marine biology, but then quickly realized it was like a lot of memorization, and book stuff and labs and microscopes, and that is not what I was into. I really liked the animal aspect and the diving and snorkeling and being hands on and stuff. I changed majors a couple times. After I graduated college—I got out in three and a half years, I just crammed my course load to get out as soon as I could—I interned with sea turtles in Clearwater, at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, for like six

months after I graduated. That was really cool. I didn't care about the turtles. I wanted the dolphin internship. But I wasn't a marine bio major, so obviously those people got first dibs. But it was so much cooler, because turtles are way more awesome. I got to deal with more different animals, got to help administer medical treatment and daily feedings, and that just furthered my love of the ocean and marine animals and whatnot. It's kind of funny. Now I look back. We had meal prep every day, and everything was in frozen flats: the squid, the capelin, the krill. Now I know how all that's obtained, not so much around here except for the freezer boats in Quonset, but it's all commercial fishing. It's pretty neat. Next.

SS: It sounds like it was through observing that you wound up working on the water?

[05:27]

SH: Yeah. Even that was an accident. I was in industrial sales. I sold cars for six years after college. Your loans go into repayment, you need a job. You find one. Then I ended up in industrial sales, because someone I sold the car to was the CEO of a company and he hired me where he was. Then some of my customers—I had Rhode Island and Southeast Mass. I ended up down in New Bedford and Point Judith. There's processing plants and stuff and boats that all use the products we were using. One of my customers down in Point Judith, I ended up dating his son, who worked on a freezer boat in Quonset. Then I was part of a layoff. I didn't have a job for a while, so I just dug clams all winter. Then I was looking for jobs and learned about observing. I got a job as an observer, while dating a fisherman, which you're really not supposed to do, but what are they going to do about it? I was on scallopers, and he was dragging, anyway. Did that for like sixteen months. When I stopped doing that, I caught that program and ended up commercial fishing, which he didn't like. But, you know. That's how I ended up dragging. I'd never been on one before. Scallopers are completely different. Yeah, just one thing leads to another. But you see a lot more cool stuff dragging.

SS: Than scalloping?

SH: Yeah. But, at the same time, scalloping, you don't kill any mammals or catch turtles or anything, either. I don't know. It's cool. I like it because I get to see cool stuff. I bring critters to the little aquarium in North Kingstown. It pays better than anything I've done on land. I pretty much go fishing out on the ocean to pay for vacations to be under the ocean. Yeah, I'm a salty girl.

[07:29]

SS: You mentioned the apprenticeship program. I'm curious to learn a little bit more. You're the first person I've talked to who's actually been through that program. I'm curious to hear more about how that might have prepared you for a fishing career. What role did that program play in your career trajectory?

SH: It would have been hard to get on a boat, otherwise. Especially not knowing anything about dragging. The year I did it, it was like a beta test. The following summers, they kind of zoomed right in on the commercial aspect, not just learning about regulations and all the other stuff that they taught us about. I kind of had a leg up, because I was the only one that had been on commercial boats at sea for long trips at a time. I already knew the species and knew about being on boats and safety. A lot of it was redundant, but it helped me get on a

boat. That's for sure. I didn't do it by getting a job through my boyfriend or anything, you know.

SS: In what ways do you think the apprenticeship program helped you get on the boat?

[08:37]

SH: Because if you're not a kid, it's a weird industry. How are you going to get into it, if you don't know somebody? Or know somebody well? Because nobody wants a stranger on a boat. "Oh, I have a friend that wants to go fishing. He's never been, but says he doesn't get seasick." That's not really a big sell. Because one of the things is, you have to know somebody. Well, I didn't. I mean, I did technically know somebody, but I didn't have any—especially as a girl. I'm not saying I've ever felt different being a female in fishing, but it wouldn't have been easy to get into otherwise. It helped me get on a boat, and that's the hard part. You can prove yourself after, but first you need to get on a boat.

SS: Yeah, get someone to take you. You've been on three boats? All draggers?

SH: I've been on more. I've done transit trips. I did like three or four transits on the Heather Lynn. I worked on the Lena Pearl. I've worked in Superior Trawl. I helped building nets all spring of last year and then for like a month or so this year, in between boats. I got to learn how to help build nets, so I can learn how to mend. I might not be strong on a boat, but at least I get to mend. You have to make yourself useful, which I don't think any other people that I did the program with—this isn't a knock on them, but I think I'm the only one that can fully mend. It's kind of a big thing to have. You got to find some way to make yourself valuable.

[10:10]

SS: The boats you're on, what kind of boats are they, in terms of size and crew size and length of trips and all that?

SH: They've all been between—most of them; I did a couple little day boats here and there--between sixty-five and eighty-foot trawlers. Offshore, mostly. Mostly offshore. I like trip fishing better anyway. I'd rather be out for a few days at a time and not have to think of anything else, and come in and be in for a couple days. Instead of waking up at two or three in the morning, every day, get home, shower, go to bed, and do it again. I think that's more exhausting.

SS: That's interesting.

SH: Yeah. I prefer trip fishing. But not long trips. I'd never want to be out for like a week and a half, two weeks at a time. I did that observing. It gets old fast.

[11:03]

SS: Yeah, I can imagine. How big are the crew sizes on the vessels you work on?

SH: On a lot of boats, they're three- or four-handed. The one I'm on right now is three-handed. We don't really need a fourth person, and especially with Covid prices now, a fourth person cuts into the share. With lack of demand, you don't need to be filling up the boat as hard and splitting the money. Just three. The captain and two on deck.

SS: For the most part, have there been other younger fishermen on the boats you've been on? Or do you tend to be one of the younger ones?

SH: You'd think. But no, there's a lot of guys in like their twenties. One of the first boats I worked on, the captain's son worked on there. He was in his mid-twenties. Hard worker. It's been a variety of guys in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties. I did get to work with Tori. I don't know if you know her. She used to observe. I got to work with her on deck, like three days. It was cool, working with another chick. I mean, I've worked with Jen Fish before. But I mean, another younger cool girl that's worked with jerks, and knew exactly what I've gone through working with other jerks, and she had. It was totally cool working with another girl that was an observer, but is still like a cool fishy chick on deck. Yeah, some younger people, but a little mix of everything in general.

SS: This interview is for a project called the Graying of the Fleet, and the underlying premise of these interviews is to understand whether there is a lack of younger people coming into the fishing industry, and whether it's harder for younger people to make it in this industry. Do you have an opinion on that?

[13:02]

SH: I don't know. It is harder to make it these days, I think. Especially if you want to own a boat. I wouldn't even know how you begin to have the money to be able to pay for one, unless you got one handed down to you. [editor's note: SH greets her landlady, who entered the room] Hi, my friend is asking some fishing questions.

SS: Doing a little interview.

SH: I don't know. I mean, a lot of blue-collar industries, it's the older generation that's still doing it. Probably farming is the same, too. I don't know. I don't have an opinion of it. It is what it is. Eventually, it's going to have to be young people doing it, because there won't be anybody else around. I don't know. I think there's enough young people, just a lot of them aren't clean. Yeah, that's the problem, especially with the younger ones. Or a lack of motivation. I don't know. I can only worry about me. Not in like a selfish way, but I can't worry about every other boat's crew.

[14:25]

SS: Yeah. You mentioned earlier that one of the things you really like is catching cool creatures that you take to your local aquarium. Can you tell me more about your favorite parts of fishing? The things you love about it?

SH: Well, in the summer, there's nowhere I'd rather be than out on the water, when it's crammed beach traffic on land and it's hot as hell. I love going offshore. You always have the dolphins by the boat. Not many people get to go to sleep, and you can hear the dolphins

whistling in your bunk. It's neat. We see a lot of cool fish, tropical stuff, just weird deep-sea stuff that you know nobody else is going to see. I've saved a turtle a couple of times, because observing, they teach you, if you catch a turtle and it's unresponsive, to prop its butt up twenty or thirty degrees or whatever it is, and give them at least an hour, because they can come back to life. Two times, that has worked. As much as it kind of sucks to catch one in the first place, to know that you got to save it and put it over—

SS: Yeah, that's incredible. Cool.

SH: Observing definitely helped with that too, because I don't think a lot of fishermen know to do that. Yeah, no, I love all the critters. Yeah, if I didn't like fish, it would be stupid. "I'm puking. I'm cold. I'm exhausted. And I hate fish." It doesn't work. There's plenty of other things you could do that you hate for money that don't involve being at sea for a week at a time, if you don't like it. You got to like something about it. Everybody I'm sure has their own thing.

SS: And what about things you don't like about it? Is there anything?

[16:30]

SH: Winter. Seasickness. Sometimes, having limited control over the schedule. This boat, he doesn't fish as hard as some, but he still fishes hard. You still make enough money, but we don't do turn-and-burns, going out the same day we come in. Nothing like that. So, can't complain. And it affords the vacations I like to take.

SS: Which are mostly diving, in warmer waters?

SH: I'll be in Cozumel on the sixth.

[17:04]

[side conversation with a friend]

[17:45]

SS: Does your dad still fish? Or is it just you in the family now?

SH: No, my dad, he digs clams. He used to bullrake, but he's too broken for that now. He's sixty-five. He'll dig clams when there's good low tide, just for pocket cash, fifty bucks here and there. He's semi-retired at this point, but still gets to go out on the boat sometimes. We went fluke fishing in Quonset this summer. That's about it.

SS: What are his feelings about you being a commercial fisherman, or your parents in general?

SH: My dad? He thinks it's cool. He always asks when I'm going out, when I'm coming in, what I caught, did I see anything cool. I'm sure a lot of guys would be like, "I'm so worried." My dad, he gets it. Well, I got it from him: the love of being on the water and fishing from the water.

[19:06]

SS: Where do you see yourself going in the future? What do you think the future will look like for you? Short term, long term?

SH: I don't know. Chris Brown asked me if I wanted to run his little boat, teach me next year. But I don't know. I'm not a big fan of day fishing. But I don't see myself not doing it anytime soon. Just because things are crazy right now. What else am I going to make the same kind of money doing, that I don't hate? Being stuck behind a computer in an office all day? Done that before. But I don't know if I want to be a captain. But everybody that is a captain is like, "If you're going to stay in this, you're going to want to be at the pointy end of the boat. Learn how to run a boat. Then you don't have to be on deck, freezing and getting soaked, picking fish." But I don't know. I fell into this. Who knows? I say I don't want to run a boat, but I don't know what I'll fall into. This side of ten years ago, I probably would have given different answers about where I thought my life would go, and making plans, and what direction. Just kind of going with the flow. I don't have to make a decision. Whatever happens will happen. But, if I end up running one, okay, cool. If I don't, then I'm sure I'll be doing something else for a different reason. But I don't know at the moment, to give you an answer. For the foreseeable future, I will be staying in fishing.

[20:42]

SS: That's a great vote of confidence, for Chris to make that offer to you to run his boat.

SH: I talked to him on the phone earlier today. "Did you go down and look at the boat yet?" I'm like, "I promise, I'll look tomorrow." He's telling me all these repairs and renovations he's done. I don't know. Trevor fished his boat last year, in the summer. I hear he's kind of a slave driver, too. And summertime, I'd actually rather be in more, go on dive trips and stuff. I don't know. I'll figure it out. My captain said he'll teach me how to set and haul. I'm deathly afraid of learning to drive a boat. Smashing into the dock, breaking things, pissing people off. Because if you're a guy, alright, there are like a hundred of you down there. But there's only one girl.

SS: Oh, yeah. You'll make all of us look bad.

SH: Female drivers already have a reputation.

SS: [laughter] Yeah, I can understand that. Other than the fishing part of it and the observing, have you been involved in any research or management or any fishery associations, that kind of thing?

[22:16]

SH: I don't know. Just the observing. I was also a V-notcher in my summers in college, for the North Cape Lobster Restoration Program. That's how I met Elizabeth, years ago. We did some wind farm stuff this summer. But I know that has nothing to do with that. Other than that, no, but I've seen the science side and the fishing side. All the time, when the fishermen complain about observers, I can't relate to it, because I know it's bullshit. I was one. I know they work hard. Yeah, sometimes you have one that's sick or a little lazy. But, for the most

part, they're just doing their job. Yeah, we don't know where that data goes to, but they obviously want it.

SS: If you have anything else you want to talk about, speak up. Otherwise, I'll just see if there's anything else in my list. Is there anything that you've been surprised by about fishing, that you didn't anticipate? Or things that you've learned, the more time you spent in this industry?

SH: Well, it's unique. There's no HR department. You have to get along with the people you're working with, or jump ship. So that's different, because half the people that are doing this couldn't work a normal job, where you had to behave. That's different, working with different kinds of people. Some cool, some educated, some crazy, some scary. Getting along with crew is probably one of the harder parts, I think. If you get along well with everybody, the rest of it comes easy. And learning all the gear. I ask a lot of questions. There's a lot to it. Fishermen have to know a lot, and deal with computers, and National Marine Fisheries, and paperwork. I give them a lot more credit than I would have thought it required. There are rules they have to abide by. People think you can just leave the dock and go fishing and catch whatever. I'm like, "No, you have to submit on the computer, first, your intentions, and then have the proper net on for what you're going for. Then you have limits. Sometimes we kill more than we keep."

SS: You mentioned that there's a real diversity of different types of people in this industry. Is there a sort of a particular type of person that is drawn to fishing, that wants to do this, or that makes a good fisherman?

[25:26]

SH: People that like working outside and not in the office, and have the potential to still make good money, but might not necessarily have any post-high-school schooling. A lot of them have some kind of blue-collar skill, mechanically or can weld or can fabricate. But a lot of them just go into it from family. I don't know how many people, aside from maybe the son of a fisherman, being like "I want to grow up to be a fisherman." I think a lot of people just fall into it.

[26:06]

[side conversation with landlady]

[26:56]

SH: I wish I knew about vocational schools when I was in high school, because I'm not doing anything with my college degree. It's something that should be pushed as an option, though. I definitely think that for younger people. Nobody knows about it. They don't know they can get into it.

SS: Have you been approached by people from outside the industry, who are like, "This is what I want to do. Give me some advice." Or what advice would you give someone like that, if they asked?



SH: I'm realistic about it, but usually, it's guys that are like, "Oh, if there's part time work, you know, I like being out on the water, if you want to take me." Not a lot of people that are grown up and already have jobs are inquiring as to getting into something like that. And then, it's hard, schedule-wise. If you have kids, and you need a proper schedule, it's not going to work. You got to be realistic about it. You have to have a strong spouse at home to take care of things, or you need to be single and have no life at home. But there's different types of fishing for different schedules, too. Look at the Second Wind. That guy is a Jehovah's Witness, so he doesn't work weekends. There's something for everyone. You can always dig clams, or dive for clams. You don't need a tide for that.

[28:35]

SS: Any high points or low points in your career so far as a fisherman?

SH: On the first boat I worked on, I worked with a really big jerk. But nobody's been that bad since, so it's kind of been nice. But he also rode my ass more and was more detail oriented about shit, so I did pick up some of his good habits.

SS: Was he just like that to everyone?

SH: Yeah. I call him [name redacted]. That's his nickname. And it's so funny, he sent me a friend request on Facebook today. I took a screenshot and sent it like, "Ha-ha, no," to all my friends who know that he's a jerk.

[29:35]

[side conversation with landlady]

[29:42]

SH: Fishermen aren't mature, most of them. Well, maybe your captain.

SS: Have you faced any challenges that you've had to overcome?

SH: I usually say my biggest weakness is my lack of strength, physically. But I've worked with other guys that are old and broken. I had to do the fish hold this summer, a few trips. It's hard work, but you always get the job done. I think seasickness and dealing with the freezing cold are the hardest parts for me.

SS: How often do you get seasick?

SH: Pretty much all winter, on the ride out, usually. That's what gets me. When you're already out there, if it builds up, you're kind of already used to it. Yeah. Weather.

SS: That's no fun, especially day after day.

SH: Yeah. Well, yeah, it's usually the ride out, though. Sometimes it's kind of crappy, but that's any job. When you're out there, and it's beautiful, flat calm, and sunny, and everybody else is at their desk job, you're like, "This is alright." But mostly, I'm there for the critters. Not

many people are that enthusiastic about it. I wouldn't do it for the money, if I didn't like something else about it. For some people, it's just a paycheck.

SS: What kind of critters are you taking to the aquarium?

SH: A few days ago, he wanted some baby dogfish for his petting tank, so I saved like a dozen of those. He's like, "I only need like four." I have an aerated cooler. Yeah, just any kind of weird stuff or stuff that he's looking for.

[31:42]

SS: That's just a hobby?

SH: Yeah. I have my collector's permit. We got boarded by the Coast Guard the other day. Just in case, I'm like, "I have this". They'll see a tote with an aerator in it and fish. Or at the dock, I had the cooler with some baby lobsters in it, for one of his tanks. That would be a big no-no otherwise. Not that I like killing stuff. Because, I think it's something like thirty percent of stuff that goes to aquariums ends up dying. But it gives other people the opportunity to see stuff. Because unless you buy it, or you're diving and you use those guns to suck up a fish, how else are they going to see them? I have an opportunity to help with something that I can. I get all excited: "Look at this fish!" I'll have to email NOAA to get an ID on it, some of the weird deep-sea stuff that we get.

SS: That is fairly unique, that that is your motivational factor in fishing. I have not met anyone else who says that, "Yes, the reason I love fishing is because of all the critters and the wildlife I can ID." I love that unique aspect.

SH: In the last three months, I took four seagulls to the wildlife place, that I've caught on deck, with broken wings and broken feet and stuff. I love to dive. I'm an avid diver. I see it all underwater, so I know how cool it is. I know that whatever we get on the boat is like a thousand times cooler below the surface.

SS: Do you dive around here regularly, too?

[33:27]

SH: Not as much. I'm a warm weather girl. I mean, I have a dry suit. A lot of people are diving right now at Fort Wetherhill at nighttime, because the squid take such cool photographs and you see a lot of tropicals up here this time of year. But yeah, if I'm cold, I want to be on a ski mountain, not underwater. But, it's alright. I'll be warm in Cozumel, two weeks from now, diving for a week.

SS: One more question. As a graduate of the apprenticeship program, do you have any reflections on how that type of program could be replicated or improved? Do you feel like that's a real value to young people in the industry?

[34:19]

SH: I mean, it's so hit or miss, because they did it the last few summers too, but the numbers from my class percentage that are still fishing is much different. But it was different people interviewing then. So, I think it's weeding out the type of person that it's a good fit for. And that's kind of hard to do sometimes, until they're actually out on the boat and know if they can make it or not. Some people you'd think wouldn't, it ends up being a perfect fit. This kid that did the program, he's Isabelle my sister's age. He's already running a scallop boat. He's like twenty-one years old. I knew from the day I met them—he's from Jamestown too—that he's made for fishing. I'm like, "You're going to be a captain." He knew it too. He's just made to be a fisherman, to be out the water.

SS: How would you describe a person who's made to be a fisherman? What traits does that kind of person have, that make them so well suited?

[35:16]

SH: You just got to love being on the water, and kind of having a free spirit and a good work ethic. That's kind of a big part of it. You need that. I don't know. Me and that other guy both love to fish-fish, like rod and reel. That probably helps. And to love being out on a boat. This was a good fit for him, because he did the program the day after he turned eighteen. He knew he wasn't the college type. Ha-ha, joke's on everybody else. He's making like a buck-fifty, two hundred a year, running a scallop boat. He just bought like a seventy-thousand-dollar Ford truck. The hard part is you need to meet the good examples, I think, because there's a lot of derelicts in fishing, and there's a lot of good smart people. You got to be around the right ones, to kind of help build you up, as well. I think that's important.

SS: If you get started in fishing, and you're around the wrong kind of person, then you —

[36:23]

SH: Then you hate it. Boat-wise, I've been fortunate to be on all good boats. Well maintained, good owners. But that's not the case for a lot of them. Yeah, try to surround yourself with better people that have been doing it a while and are smart and sober, hopefully. Good reputation. Reputation's what it's all about. We all know what boats down there have good and bad reputations. Associate yourself with the right people and try to learn from them. Because that's the only thing that you can't really pass down in a book. Once these guys are gone, their brains go with them.

SS: Yeah, you said that you ask a lot of questions.

SH: I do. But not in an annoying manner. But I like to know, "How do you know how many fathoms to set out, depending on how much ground cable you have on?" Just technical stuff. I've always been like a "Why is this? Why is that?" person, but it's just because I like to know how things work. Some people just don't care. They'll be deckhand for life. Some people want to be captain in two years. It's a little bit of everything.

[37:49]

SS: Any final thoughts before we wrap up?

SH: I don't know. To answer your question, I do think that's a good program. I just think it's kind of hard to weed out who'd be good for it, because the numbers weren't as good—the rates, the last couple summers, of the people that are still fishing.

SS: They're not as good?

SH: Yeah, when they had it.

SS: Your year was the best?

SH: Yeah, there's like half of us still fishing. One went out to Alaska. One's in Connecticut. And there's still like three of us in Point Judith.

SS: Cool.

SH: No, I think it's good. I wouldn't have gotten into it, otherwise. I'd seen the application for it before I stopped observing, and didn't think anything of it. But then I'm like, "Yeah. All right. I'm a human." And sure enough, as soon as I turned the application, I had a phone call. Three years and three months later, four months later, here I am. You make good money. You see cool stuff. And you definitely make friends for life. You've probably heard a lot of different stuff in different interviews on why people have gotten into it.

SS: Yeah. I can share some of that with you after I turn this off. Okay, well, unless there's anything else. Any final statements?

SH: Not that I know of.

SS: All right. Well, thank you, Stephanie.

[39:39]

[end of interview]