

Sara Weeks: This is Sara Weeks conducting an interview with Hannah Cinnemantaro, an oral history interview in support of the Northeast Observer Project. It is January 27th, 2023. We are at Falmouth Technology Park. Hannah, tell me about growing up.

Hannah Cinnemantaro: Growing up, I grew up in Massachusetts, in Ipswich. I have two younger sisters, my mom, and dad. We always had pets in the house. Always grew up right by the ocean, so not surprising I ended up here. Both...

SW: Tell me about your parents.

HC: Yes. My mom has worked on a whale watch since she was pregnant with me. So, I grew up on the ocean, on the summertime, going out with them. My dad also works on another whale watch boat, and he is in the marine industry with the oil riggers. He helps offload the oil from offshore vessels. So, they both have very much marine backgrounds. When I was in college, I did an internship on one of the whale watchers out of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where I collected quantitative and qualitative data on the humpbacks, on Stellwagen Bank. Yes.

SW: How about your family history? Where are your parents from?

HC: My mom's from upstate New York. She moved to Gloucester on a whim after seeing a documentary about whales [laughter] where she met my dad who grew up in Gloucester. His parents were from – well, they were both from the United States. But my family originally is from Sicily and Portuguese on my dad's side. My great-grandfather owned a trawl supply company in Gloucester. But my dad's generation had nothing to do with fishing. They're all hunters, and they all think I was crazy for becoming an observer.

SW: Why do you think they have nothing to do with fishing?

HC: My grandfather hated it. It was just not the job for him.

SW: Did he try it?

HC: He went out on a couple trips, but just never stuck with it. Absolutely despised being out there. [laughter]

SW: Tell us more about your mother moving to Gloucester on a whim. That is so interesting.

HC: Yes. So, she saw a documentary about whales and found the address of the producer and moved to Gloucester. Knocked on his door and asked for a job. That's how she...

SW: Did she get one?

HC: Yes. That's how she ended up in Gloucester, working on a whale watch boat. Then she became a science teacher. So, she was still working on the whale watch in the summertime. Now, she's fully retired from teaching and is leading one of the whale watch boats in Gloucester as the full-time naturalist.

SW: What was that like growing up with a mom who was very into whales?

HC: I mean, it's probably why I love the ocean probably. We were always on whale watch boats in the summertime. So, it was just kind of a normal thing for us. Every trip, there was like something exciting to see. It never gets old.

SW: That gave you some at-sea experience.

HC: It gave me summertime at-sea experience. I never experienced being on the ocean in the wintertime until I was an observer, and that wrecked me. [laughter] I was very seasick. I wasn't really a seasick person on the whale watch boats, but the Atlantic Ocean in the wintertime is a different story. [laughter]

SW: When did you get interested in observing?

HC: Well, I was a marine biology and environmental science major at the University of New England. I knew I didn't want to go right into grad school because I didn't really have a clear focus of what I wanted to do after undergrad. So, I was trying to find a job collecting data on fishing vessels. I thought that would be the coolest job out there. I had no idea what observing was. I stumbled upon a provider at a college fair actually, and I had an interview that day. So, that's how I came to become an observer.

SW: How did the interview go?

HC: They were just really looking for people that were eager to do field work. It was basically everything I dreamed of. I just didn't know there was a name for the job. [laughter] They asked me a lot of questions about if I'd be able to be disconnected from at-home life. So, offshore vessels, you're not going to have service. I think they described it as like taking a backpacking trip. So, everything was very much up my alley. Yes, taking data, field work in general.

SW: When did you get hired and come to training?

HC: I graduated in 2020. [laughter] So, I was supposed to start training right after graduation. But because COVID was at its height then, it was delayed for months and months and months. So, I didn't start until August of 2020. Then I actually graduated from training in October just because they had to span it out so much. That's when I started deploying on vessels.

SW: Tell me about that training. Was it a hybrid or in-person? Tell us about that.

HC: It was the program's first hybrid class. So, kudos to the training team because we had no idea how much effort they had to put into creating that. But we had a couple of weeks online where we learned the material and then one week in person where we got the hands-on of the labs, the fish labs, the catch estimation labs. Then we were sent off to go on vessels ourselves. We did not get training or shadow trips. Our class had to learn really hard and really fast.

SW: Where did you deploy out of?

HC: My home port was Gloucester, Massachusetts. But throughout my observer career, I took trips from Maine to North Carolina.

SW: Tell us about your first deployment.

HC: My first deployment was on a day trawl out of Gloucester. It was early in the morning, probably like 2:00 a.m. An experienced observer met me down at the dock to just calm my nerves and be someone there for me that day. [laughter] As the captain was passing my gear onto the boat, he tipped my basket and dropped my depth stick, which is a very important piece of gear to perform volume-to-volume. But it's okay. I got all actual weights that day.

SW: How did you feel at that moment?

HC: [laughter] I was so scared. The observer on the dock was just saying, "It would be okay just to get all actuals," and it was okay.

SW: What was challenging about that first trip?

HC: Probably just sorting all of the fish. Everything looks a little bit different in training because the fish are frozen and rethawed and frozen. In real life, they just look so much different. So, getting into the groove of trying to perform all the job duties as an observer. It's not just sorting and counting fish. It's recording weather information, recording haul times. It's thinking of five different things at the same time. I remember the captain being like, "We're about to enter the harbor. You need to get all of this stuff off." I missed certain questions on that trip because I was tunnel vision and ran out of time, which is a common thing for everyone to experience when they first start out.

SW: How about the weather?

HC: I didn't get sick on my first trip, but I did start observing fall to winter. I got so sick on the day boats. I was the person that once I started puking, it would be twelve hours. Just straight vomiting until I had nothing left and I was dry heaving. I would be out there, and I would be like, "That's it. I'm putting my two weeks when I hit land. There's nothing worse than this feeling right now." [laughter] Every time I would hit land, and I'd be like, "Oh, it wasn't that bad." Land has this very delusional effect on you of, you feel so great once hitting land that you forget how terrible you felt. Actually, I was so sick, I did actually apply for a different job. I got hired or I was given an offer to work in the HAZMAT industry. I would be making more money, but I declined the offer because I really loved the work I was doing.

SW: What did you love about it?

HC: I think just being able to experience the ocean and taking links and (order lifts?). It was really a fun thing for me to do out there. Once I started doing multiday trips, I wasn't as sick. I got into a routine of taking the medication, the pill, plus the patch, which helped me. I still did

have some seasick days, but I eventually got my sea legs. So, that was better.

SW: Tell us about some of your trips, even multiday, first multiday, or challenges with the weather on some of your other trips.

HC: I was extremely scared to take my first multiday trip. Sorry.

SW: Because of the time that you would be away from home? Take your time. No problem.

HC: Sorry. [crying]

SW: It is okay.

HC: I don't like talking about this.

SW: You had a difficult experience?

HC: No. I picked up an observer off a vessel. Then the next trip, that whole boat sank and lost everyone. I think my friend was supposed to be on that boat.

SW: Your friend, the observer?

HC: A different friend. I think he was supposed to go on that boat but ended up quitting right before.

SW: I am so sorry.

HC: So, I was really scared.

SW: How did you manage it then? Or why did you manage it?

HC: I don't know. I don't know. Also, because of COVID, we had to get tested before every trip to make sure we didn't have COVID, and we were getting compensated to wait for the next trip. So, it was expected, if we got a trip to take it, or we wouldn't get paid for those days we were waiting. So, it came to the point where my provider was like, "When you were hired, you were expected to take multi-days." But I was still really scared about that. But then my first multiday ended up being in a blizzard. But it was a really great trip because the crew and the captain were just great guys. It was a blast. It helped me get over that fear because even though the conditions were not ideal, it was still a great trip. I'm asking the captain at the end of the day, like – we have to ask how many years they have experience as captain. We're steaming in from this blizzard, and he's like, "Oh, I've only been fishing for four years, and this is my second trip as captain." [laughter] I'm like, "What are the odds?" But after I got over that hump, I really preferred multi-days because I was able to get into a better groove of sampling. I got to know the captain and crew better. You just have nicer experiences because they warm up to you. I feel like on day trips, they warm up to you just as the end of the day is approaching, unless you redeploy on that boat again. So, yes. So, after that...

SW: How do you connect with them when you are at sea?

HC: They love to talk. They love to talk. I always say, "Every boat has one talker." They will literally tell you their whole life story. I've had crew members tell me everything about them, show me every photo in their phone. Just because they're usually with the same people all the time, so they [laughter] don't have news stories to share. So, they really like talking to observers when they'll listen.

SW: Do you like to listen to them?

HC: I do. I do. Sometimes, it's too much information. But other times, it breaks up the time. The ones that do love to talk are typically more of the goofball ones, I find, more of the ones that are more comedic. So, it's nice to have a laugh out there. But some of my fishing trips, I've never laughed so hard in my life on. By the end, I feel like, after a very long trip, sometimes I feel like I know those people better than I know some of the other people in my life just because you were with them 24/7. You have no other distractions. You don't have the news – sometimes with satellite – but you don't have the news. You don't have social media. You don't have an influx of information coming at you. It's just the people with you for days and days.

SW: How did you work through the blizzard?

HC: It was a very short trip. So, we ended up coming in because of weather. But, yes, I actually didn't get sick on that boat. [laughter] Yes. The bigger boats, I felt, were able to roll with the waves better. So, I didn't get sick as often on those trips.

SW: Tell us about your favorite type of vessel to go on.

HC: Ooh, favorite gear type?

SW: Yes.

HC: I was trained in pot trap gear. So, I really enjoyed the fish pot trips mostly just because they're not covered as much. I found on those trips, the captain and crew were really interested in what I was doing. They would ask me questions. We would play games of like how much fish were in the basket. They would try to estimate. They were also recording down the information because they wanted it themselves. Those were feel-good trips as well because typically, everything that comes up in the pot is alive still and then goes back over alive too. So, it was just a different type of day than seeing a lot of undersized bycatch also die.

SW: Which I am sure you have seen a lot of.

HC: Yes. [laughter]

SW: Tell us about your least favorite types of trips, gear or trip type.

HC: My least favorite gear would probably be lobster trips just because it's a lot of work associated with it. Not that a lot of work is a bad thing. But for the time that you have, it's very stressful. Because they require you to take a measurement of every lobster coming up, sex it, stage the eggs on it, stage the v-notch, stage, annotate the carapace hardness of it for every lobster. So, those were just stressful for time management. They actually issue us DVR recorders because it's so fast-paced, you can't even write down your notes. I also took some scallop trips. I didn't enjoy those as much because it was very much the same. It was monotonous to me. Although it was a nice break of getting into a routine. It was just pretty much scallops and skates and not much else visually appealing in the pile to break it up. So, very long scallop trips felt longer because it was just the same thing over and over and over again. But each trip has its highs and lows.

SW: How do the captains feel about having you on board?

HC: I feel like it's totally dependent on the captain. I didn't have any issues with any captains. There was a trip where a captain tested me from the start. I think he was trying to feel out how I would be as an observer. I was told to get to the boat at 10:00 a.m., although they would be leaving at noon that day. I had reached the boat at 10:04 a.m., and he was already calling me as I was getting my stuff on the boat [laughter] with one of the crew members. I had answered, and I said, "Oh, I'm getting my stuff on the boat." He is like, "Okay. Hurry up. We're leaving." So, I had to go park my car. I was running back from the parking lot. He was calling me again as I was getting on the boat. I got on this rinky-dink of a boat. The wheelhouse was just scattered with a bunch of parts and everything. He printed me off a list of observer rules. I had seen these on some of the other boats in Point Judith. I said, "Oh, I've seen these rules before. I'll follow them. We shouldn't have an issue." He looked at me. He's like, "I was the one that wrote these rules, and we'll see about that." [laughter] I was like, oh, boy, this is going to be a long trip." But I took the printed off rules and took it to my bunk. By haul three, he was already fine with me. I think he just had some bad goes with a couple other observers that didn't have self-awareness. When they're setting out gear, when they're hauling it back, I wasn't in their way. He appreciated that. By the end of the trip, he was showing me really cool pictures of fish he had gotten, and we had no issues. So, sometimes, it always starts off rocky because I feel like everyone's trying to feel each other out. But usually, by the end of the trip, we're all pals, typically.

SW: How do you communicate well with the fishermen, or what is your method?

HC: I ask the questions I need to. It's mostly reading the room. If they don't want to talk, I don't create small talk. I don't need to have small talk. Some people really need to fill the dead air with conversation. I'm just not one of those people. If they want to talk, I can listen. But if they don't, I'm perfectly capable of sitting in silence. I feel like half of this job is just reading the room, reading if it's a good time to ask the questions you need to.

SW: If it is not a good time, how do you manage the situation?

HC: I just come back later. I guess my approach is, I have certain questions I need to ask every trip. I'm going to obtain those questions and just treat it as it's part of the job. But if it's just not

a great day to ask those questions, I just come back at a better time.

SW: If you had to give advice to new observers, what would be the few things that you might say?

HC: To new observers, I would say, first and foremost, this is unlike any other job. The first couple of months is going to be extremely uncomfortable. You're going to feel like you have no idea what you're doing every day you get on a boat. Then all of a sudden – it probably happened to me three months in – all of a sudden, it will all click. You'll be on deck. You're going to have plan A, plan B, and plan C. You'll feel totally comfortable enacting any one of those plans because you've seen it before. You've done it before.

SW: So, you feel like that takes, maybe, on average, or for you, it took about three months.

HC: Yes. I would say so, just because there's so many aspects to this job that are happening at the same time. It's not a linear job. Different...

SW: Can you explain that a bit more?

HC: [laughter] Yes. So, I've had newer observers ask me for a flow chart or a progression of the day. I can speak to, okay, arriving at dock, steaming out, the gear, the hauls, but everything is happening at different points. It depends on gear type too. For a trawl, the gear's all coming on board. All the catch is being dumped into a checker pen at once. It's keeping your head on a swivel. So, you're performing your job duties, but the crew is also collecting kept catch, which is also information you need. So, it's finding that balance of when to finish the work in front of me, when to step away and get information on the kept catch, when to step away and get water temperature, wind direction. Also, oops, I need to remember to go ask the captain a couple of questions that I forgot earlier. Okay, the haul's ended. I need to go ask the captain more questions now as to why he was discarding fish. Just things like that. It's not a job where you can say, "Okay. At this time, this is the information you need for every aspect of it."

SW: What other advice would you give them?

HC: Always take seasickness medicine [laughter] even if you don't think you're going to get sick. I can't stress that enough. Because there's no way it's going to be effective if you're throwing up on a vessel. It's not going to stay down. Other advice, use your resources. Training provides so many resources. At times, it may feel overwhelming, but the answer is in there somewhere. So, as long as you know that, you'll be able to figure out how to do the job.

SW: What would a captain say about you as an observer?

HC: I've had a couple captains say I work really hard. [laughter] I've been offered a couple jobs to work. I try to never be the first person off deck. I always try to collect the best data I could, even if it meant being out on deck for hours. I had no problem being out on deck for hours, sorting a bunch of baskets. I love taking links and (order lifts?). So, I would do a bunch of that. I'm, yes, probably a hard worker.

SW: How would you explain your contributions to fisheries management in the position of an observer?

HC: By providing high-quality data. I tried my best to go above and beyond when I could, collect more than a 20 percent subsample because I had the time and ability to do so in certain circumstances. When things went askew, I always tried to provide comments for my debriefer to explain the situation. Then keeping up on my species verification programs, submitting pictures so that TDQ knew that I could identify fish so that sector managers were confident in the data I was collecting regarding the undersized fish that were being caught on trips.

SW: Did you consider yourself good at the job?

HC: I did after a while. I mean, not in the beginning. No one's good in the beginning. But after a while, I got certified in a bunch of different gear types, which I feel like, for me, kept me engaged because I was going out on a bunch of different gear types which required different sampling techniques and different questions and different paperwork. So, I was always going back and reviewing. So, it never became boring to me.

SW: How long did you observe for?

HC: About two years.

SW: Tell us about your job now.

HC: Now, I'm a trainer at Tech Park for the Observer program.

SW: Do you think that the fishermen understand the importance of the data?

HC: I think some do. I think some don't. I think some don't have a lot of confidence in the program.

SW: Do you know why?

HC: Probably experiences with certain observers they had, probably with vessels that are day boats. They're in nicer ports. So, they get a lot of new people. They see them misidentifying fish, probably lead to their confidence in not being as accurate in the data. Yes. I had a lot of captains tell me, "The data doesn't matter anyways."

SW: So, how would you respond to that?

HC: Well, I always [laughter] resorted on the comment that, it was my job. So, either way, it was providing me a paycheck. Whether or not other people's data was accurate, I was doing the best I could to provide accurate data. At that point, I wasn't in-house. So, I didn't really have a clear perspective of everything that goes beyond the scenes of data processing. So, I couldn't really speak to that. But I was like, it's just providing me a paycheck. This is what I'm here to



do. So, I'm going to do that job.

SW: How do you think this job has influenced your life?

HC: I always tell new observers or prospective observers that this job will make you the most confident version of yourself that you'll ever experience. It provides you with hard and soft skills that employers are seeking for. It makes you a more well-rounded person. It's really hard to describe. Because a lot of people just think you're taking data, but you're taking data on a moving platform, hundreds of miles offshore, with very minimal contact from your family and loved ones. You're essentially doing a job alone, but you're working with coworkers, AKA, industry members that don't want to work with you. But you also have to work with them to collect information that you need for your data. So, yes, it is a very independent job. But you have to be a team player to be able to work with people that don't always want to work with you. Then also, just the data side of it. The math that goes into extrapolating weights. I mean, it's all provided for you, but to do that effectively and to understand, I need 20 percent. This means I need to take this large of a sub-sample. So, data collection-wise, absolutely. Then just the skills you need to function with other people. It's a very difficult job. Yes.

SW: Best part of the job.

HC: Seeing things that most of the human population will never see or experience, like seeing deep sea creatures come up and getting to hold them. Hold them in your hands that no one else will see or ever touch before other than observers and fishermen.

SW: Worst part of the job.

HC: Worst part of the job is probably bad weather. Then being stuck on a boat with a crew that doesn't want you there, that makes it the worst. I think the weather aspect and the crew dynamics are the two things that are either going to make or break a trip for an observer.

SW: I think that is it. Thank you.

HC: Yes.

SW: That was a wonderful discussion.

[end of transcript]