

Natalie Springuel: My name is Natalie Springuel. I am from Maine Sea Grant. This is Ela Keegan from College of the Atlantic. We are at the National Working Waterfronts & Waterway Symposium. It is May 16th, 2018. Why do we not start with having you state your name, and then if you do not mind spelling it, and then we will segue to you for the same thing and I will jump in.

Dwight Marshall: Dwight Marshall, also known as Duke, D-W-I-G-H-T, M-A-R-S-H-A-L-L, D-U-K-E.

NS: You?

Mark Nelson: Mark Nelson, M-A-R-K, N-E-L-S-O-N.

NS: Thanks. So, you guys are from Smith Island in Maryland. Why do you not tell us a little bit about Smith Island? Why you are here at the symposium related to Smith Island.

DM: We heard there was good food. [laughter]

MN: [laughter]

DM: Were asked by Nick Battista to show up and working with island communities and their waterways and how it affects us and all the things that are going on in this wonderful world of ours, from environments, to tourism, to an aging population, and all the aspects of living on an island.

MN: Smith Island's been there since 1608. Has a strong, rich heritage. Very independent-minded people that live there. But we're living in a time of change. Obviously, the transition from the older history of who we are, to going to a new history of what we want to become, is a difficult transition. Coming here, we thought maybe we'd get some ideas on how to smooth that transition over.

NS: How many people live on Smith Island? What is the general demographic?

DM: Roughly 242 full-time and about five hundred part-time.

NS: So, let us jump in to those transitions. What is happening that is challenging in terms of...

MN: Ultimately, what the bigger challenge – not the bigger – one of the challenges is retention of population and the transition from one generation to the next of the culture. The culture being the working on the water. Right now, there's a self-fulfilling prophecy back in the day when fathers were telling their sons to leave the island to go get a better job, is self-fulfilling. Now, we are living that fulfillment of that prophecy because we don't have the younger generation to take over for the new captains and that type of thing. So, trying to attract the attention of folks to come to the island, that way you can retain its population and retain its culture.

NS: You said that it has been dependent on working on the water. What has been the history of

the working on the water?

DM: Mainly crabs and oysters with some fish thrown in the mix. But the bulk of it is crabbing in the summer months, the Maryland blue crabs, soft-shell crabs, and the hard crab. Then in the winter months, oysters.

NS: What is happening that that is declining?

MN: It's not so much that it's declining. It's more that the type of work is very labor intensive. Duke mentioned that earlier. Again, you can go find an easier job and make more money. So, it's not hard to figure out what young folks want to do.

NS: This is really interesting. So, it is not necessarily a fisheries decline equation that is causing change?

DM: No. The state of Maryland would probably say that. There are issues. We certainly have challenges with regulations and things of that nature. But our situation is more so an aging population. Just to use my dad as an example, if he fished three hundred crab pots a day, because he's seventy-two now and he's still working the water, he may be only fishing a hundred crab pots a day. So, the catch is getting smaller. Then as my dad, he's 72 years old, still working the water, some of them will work. We've got a couple in there that's almost 80 and they're still working the water. But also, health issues might stop them from working as well. Then the younger generations are not there picking up the slack for the most part.

MN: The backfill, that's right.

DM: The backfill, yes.

NS: So, really just changes in everyday living and the culture.

MN: It is. The state of Maryland, we beat up on it and it's because everybody likes to beat up on states. But by and large they've tried to manage it as best they can. The oyster population through disease that was generally in the environment by itself not manmade, it really took an impact on the oysters back, ten, fifteen years ago. Well, through good management on their part, that aspect of it's come back. So, there's been a good partnership to some degree. You get frustrated with them sometimes. But they – they being the state – from a regulatory perspective can make it very complicated to make a living. The bigger part of our world is crabbing. Oystering is there, but crabbing by and large is the bigger part. It starts out the crab has to be, for a peeler crab, 3 inches. Well, by middle of the summer it has to be 3.5 inches, 4 inches. So, you got to keep that in mind and it just ultimately can regulate you right off the water. The barrier to entry in the business is very high. Again, it goes back to just complicated. It used to be where generations would transfer – if I grew up and my father was a waterman, he'd give me his boat. So, it was that. So, that cycle's no longer there. So, you have to go out and start new.

NS: So, for that father who passes on the knowledge to the next generation, the people who live on Smith Island for whatever amount of time, what do they value about it? What do people care

about Smith Island? What do they value about it? Why is it important for folks to want to maintain that culture?

DM: Well, my dad always says this, it's the independence. Going out on the water, making his own living, just enjoys being – it's that part of the nature and the sea and just harvesting the product. He doesn't plant any seeds for that. So, it's the knowledge and the working part of it that's the attraction for my dad. I think for myself growing up in it, it's just the way it was. It's something you grow up into and either you like it or you don't, and I love it.

MN: That's true. My father-in-law, he went to high school for a half a day. He said, "I'm not going to do this. I'm going to be a waterman." So, he went back home on the noon boat and bought a boat that next week, and he's been on the water ever since. That's just the way it was back then. Obviously, times have changed and we transitioned into more of an educated society versus a hardworking society. I don't mean that to be a bad thing, it's just the nature of what's going on.

NS: So, is Smith Island a pretty unique place compared to the rest of Chesapeake Bay?

MN: Yes.

NS: What makes it unique?

MN: Its isolation. It's 12 miles from the port to the island. So, you have to go by boat. You don't take your car when you go there and you're there.

NS: But there are no cars on the island.

MN: Well, there are a few cars but mostly golf carts and bikes. You don't drive your car over there, no.

NS: That is pretty unique.

MN: That in itself is the major uniqueness to it, plus just the history.

DM: We're the only island in the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. We have a sister island south of us about 6 miles of Tangier Island, Virginia, and that's a true island as well. But we are the only true island in the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.

NS: So, not accessible by bridge?

DM: No bridge.

NS: Or a causeway?

MN: It would be a long ride. It's literally 12 miles to Point Lookout, which is the northern point or shore of Potomac, and 12 miles from Port Crisfield. It's out there.

NS: So, what are the emerging challenges? How are you guys handling the challenges?

MN: Organization.

NS: So, one of which you have already identified is demographic change.

DM: Right. So, we created a plan with the help of the state and as a vision plan and we've been working on that. We're trying to figure out what Smith Island is going to look like in the future. Is it going to continue to be a working waterman's community? Or is it going to be a playground for kayakers and things of that – we don't know. That's the fear of the unknown. But trying to understand and move in that direction. Then what are the demographics of the island going to be? Is it going to be an influx of young people moving back in because they want to get off the grid, so to speak? Or is it going to be middle-aged people like Mark and myself, who have worked on the mainland and we're now in our retirement years and coming back or whatever. We don't know. I guess that's the fear of the unknown, but that's also one of the challenges we're faced with.

MN: Back when Hurricane Sandy came through, that actually was in essence the genesis of why we're here today. The state came in after the hurricane came through and said, "We want to buy you all out. We want to move you off." I'm a Johnny-come-lately to the group, but Duke and Eddie Somers, our president of Smith Island United, said, "Oh, no, no. We've lived here since 1608 and we're going to be here for another four hundred years." So, they got Smith Island United started up and educated, to be honest, because one of the most vocal persons who wanted to buy us out became a very big advocate for us. Once we educated her on what we are and who we are and our history, she turned 180 degrees and has been a big advocate.

NS: She initially wanted to go with the relocation?

DM: I'm not sure it was that she wanted to, but that was her task, yes.

MN: Her task, yes.

DM: That's what she was given by the state.

MN: To be fair, that's right.

DM: Go in and buy them out and let's move them to the mainland.

MN: Because she was too easy to convince otherwise. She was probably friendly to us in the first place.

NS: Did the state want to relocate you because of the impacts of Sandy and the potential future impacts? But I am thinking also services and support.

MN: Well, we get a limit the service from them. But go ahead, Duke, you can speak on it.

DM: I was just going to say I think that their assumption was that we had been destroyed by Sandy and we really didn't. I've used this kind of jokingly, the storm cleaned up a lot of problems that needed to be cleaned up anyway.

MN: [laughter]

DM: Old shanties that needed to be tore down, that just wiped them all out, cleaned them out. There was a little bit of damage. But our neighboring harbor, the mainland where we go into, the port is Crisfield and they were destroyed by Sandy. They're still under recovery right now. So, I think the assumption was we were too and that we're all in the same county, Somerset County. I think they thought it would be just this is perfect. The storms come in, it's destroyed the area, let's go in, let's get a price. Let's buy them out, close it down.

MN: Move them all.

DM: Move them to the mainland. We've solved that problem. When we pushed back, I think they realized that we were not going to – can't kick us out of there.

MN: I think ultimately, they looked and said prior to that we didn't have a group that they could go talk to. There was no organization that could represent the island. It just was a group of people from here to there, but nobody focused like the Smith Island United.

DM: What we discovered in the process when Smith Island United was in the first stages of developing the plan, Somerset County which we belong to had taken us out of their master plan. Somewhere ten or fifteen years ago, or longer, they had taken us out of their master plan. So, there was no you pull the plan off of the shelf and say, "What do we do with Smith Island if there's a hurricane or there's something going on or whatever?" They had written us off and nobody had told us. So, what it did was it put us back into the master plan. It also put us into a position that if there is a hurricane, here is the proper procedures to get in and get things done, whatever needs to be done right away, which was a big game changer for us as well. We didn't know that. I'm not going to blame the county completely for that, but somewhere along the line it just got misplaced somewhere. I think the state realized that wasn't a good thing because they also brag about us being one of the jewels of the state of Maryland, of the Chesapeake Bay.

MN: Because of uniqueness of the island.

DM: But yet every chance they get, it's like they push us away. This plan, as on the turn, has changed. They've really stepped up to the plate, as Mark was saying. They've worked with us on the strategy. Also, they've put their money where their mouth is. Roughly \$20-some million has been spent in the last five years on living shorelines, new jetty systems, which is a new entrance way into the island, dredging, just a lot of initiatives that probably we would not have had unless we had created Smith Island United.

MN: Oh, absolutely. Because again, they want to work with somebody.

NS: You guys created Smith Island United because you were in a crisis situation, right?

MN: Absolutely.

NS: You were going to be relocated. So, the crisis sort of forced you.

MN: Exactly.

DM: We had to have a voice, and our voice could not just be us. It had to be a recognized voice, meaning incorporated or an 501(c)(3). That became the voice of Smith Island, Smith Island United.

MN: Not to be too overly dramatic and we have to give credit where credit's due. Duke was involved in it. Eddie Somers, who's our president, he's the man of the hour in the context that his – as Duke talked a minute ago, the relationships with local and county officials had deteriorated over time just because of not renewing acquaintances, if you will. Where Eddie works with the county officials on a daily basis because he's a captain of one of the boats and the coastguard there. So, his relationship was able to really get us into places, and then recognition as well. Duke too, Duke knows a lot of the folks too, that allows it to instantly have a personal connection versus just an abstract business connection. So, that's been huge.

NS: Are you guys a town?

MN: We're not incorporated.

NS: You are not incorporated then.

MN: No.

NS: There is not a municipality.

MN: No.

NS: So, there was no representation or there is not an elected official or a mayor or?

MN: Exactly. That's correct. Except for Duke.

NS: [laughter]

MN: [laughter] I'm just joking.

DM: No. [laughter]

NS: So, through the process of community organizing is sort of what I am hearing.

DM: Pretty much.

NS: How has that been in the community in terms of people's engagement?

DM: We struggle. Overall, I would say 80 percent of it's been good. There's 20 percent that's not been so good. When you're telling people to organize that don't want to organize and don't want to be told what to do.

MN: Just leave me alone.

DM: Just leave me alone, let me do my own thing. But yet, they recognize that it's not going away and that we do need a collective voice. For the most part, I would say everybody's behind it. We still have naysayers, but I think that's everywhere.

MN: It's the eighty-twenty rule. Yes, it will. But, again, it goes back to that fiercely-independent streak. The fear of somebody coming in and changing what they do and how they go about their daily living, some people just are very averse to it. Again, to Duke and Eddie's credit, trust. Those people, while they don't necessarily come on board, they do tend to quiet down over time.

NS: You have been hit with Hurricane Sandy, are storms, flooding, erosion, are these things that you think you are observing?

MN: Have been for generations. Again, the living shorelines have helped us. Again, the western and northern part of our island faces the Chesapeake Bay and is wide open to northern winds during wintertime. So, those living shorelines have helped mitigate wave energy. Everybody talks about all these other things, but erosion to us is the number one issue. Because one of the benefits of being 2.5 feet above sea level is water just runs across, there's nothing to build it up to. On land, it backs up. With us, it just washes across to us. Like [laughter] Duke was alluding to a minute ago, Sandy just washed across. So, we really didn't get the damage that the mainland got.

DM: We have a large marsh infrastructure around the island. So, if you know anything about a marsh, the wave action breaks in that marsh on those marsh reeds. So, the only thing that we really get concerned about is tidal surge. The storms, not so much. The homes for the most part are built strong and we're going to get some damage just as any place would. The erosion problem that we have has taken away those marshes. Some of the winters have been very cold, so we would have these ice flows that would come in and literally take out chunks of land and all and take it back out when it would melt or recede. So, those are just natural things. But the living shorelines and the jetties and all will prevent a lot of that from happening. The other thing the living shoreline does is it not only stops the erosion, but the way they're built, they start building it back up, which is a nice thing. The other part of it is the last major storm that we had that did a major damage to the island was Hurricane Hazel, which was, I believe 1953.

MN: Prior to our time.

DM: Yes. That was tidal surge and it really got into people's homes and things of that nature.

But it destroyed most of the Chesapeake Bay. The last ten hurricanes are better. That's been damaged like Annapolis and St. Mary's and Cambridge and Crisfield, we really don't have any damage from that. Again, I think it attributes to we're so flat. We're only at 2.5 feet above sea level. We're flat and we're very well protected. That buffer of the marshland and all just it breaks that wave action. Again, we're going to have high tides, we're used to that. But it just goes back out eventually.

MN: Then drainage is another issue.

DM: Yes, and that was one of our initiatives, was drainage.

MN: Because there used to be a very good drainage system through the island, digging ditches and things. But now through regulation, you're limited on what you can do. So, those ditches over time continue to fill back in because of sediment and everything else. So, we've had a drainage study and now we're into the next phase of what we're going to be able to do.

NS: So, just looking at our time here, so just to wind it down. But you have been here at the Working Waterfront Symposium for a couple days now. What would be either something that you may have learned here that you feel like is worth thinking about more in terms of how it might apply to you guys? Or conversely, what is something that you are realizing, "Hey, we have a particular knowledge that we can share with other people?" So, that give and take that is supposed to be a preference, what do [inaudible]?

DM: So, I'll be honest with you. I told Eddie, our president, I said, "Eddie, I think this is a waste of my time to go to this. We're going into Michigan. We're going about the Great Lakes, what's that got to do with us?" et cetera. Hadn't really fully studied what was going to go on. He said, "Well, Nick Battista says we need to be there. He thinks that we're going to learn some things." It honestly was a game changer. Literally met someone who's in our backyard 20 miles from where I live. I think he's going to be a big help with the island in our missions. His name is Ed. He actually just told me outside, he had called the state of Maryland's Sea Grant and put us on their radar as well. The other thing I've taken away from it is if you close your eyes and you listen to other people talking, you can insert Smith Island into either one of those –

MN: Conversations.

DM: – and we're all literally the same, have the same issues, the same problems. They may be a little larger, they may be a little smaller or whatever. But we all are literally having the same issues. So, if we can solve that equation, we're solving a lot.

MN: Yes, I agree. I think the relationships you take away, meeting some folks with similar issues. I think we can contribute to them on how we deal with issues. I think the vision plan was a huge thing to a lot of people. They go, "We really hadn't done that." We've thought about things but there's no formal vision plan because we have a forty-page vision plan with these goals and things. That gives us a roadmap on how we want to approach things. So, I think that was a good contribution to the conference in itself because people go, "Oh gosh, I didn't realize that we needed to go to that formal process." That I think has been a big plus. I think, again, we

had dinner with all the folks from Maine last night in their islands. We hit it off well. I think a relationship and communication and collaboration going forward would be a big plus.

DM: In their presentation this morning, there was a lady from Bear Island. Is that where it was?

MN: Which one?

DM: The one that's – God, I can't think of her. She was the first presenter.

MN: Beaver Island.

DM: From Beaver Island. After it was over, she said, "I want to get a copy of your strategic plan and the vision plan." I told her, I said, "Well, we've emailed it. We'll get it to you." But if anything else, we helped them as well. I think she was excited to see that plan. She's in one of those phases to get there. Hopefully, it'll help her as well.

NS: Thanks so much you guys.

DM: Thank you.

NS: Appreciate your story.

DM: Pretty painless.

MN: Yes, it was.

[end of transcript]