

Sara Weeks: This is Sara Weeks. I am conducting an interview with Kevin Anderson, on January 11th at Falmouth Technology Park, in support of the Northeast Observer Project. Welcome, Kevin.

Kevin Anderson: Thank you.

SW: Tell me about your family history. I know you live in Orleans, Massachusetts now. But tell me where you came from.

KA: My father's side were originally Dutch fishermen. We don't have a whole lot of information on his side. But they ended up moving to Iowa and completely changing what they were doing and became farmers. My grandfather then was in the Air Force during the Korean War, where he was involved with the first mid-air jet refueling across Hawaii all the way to Japan. He was then a mechanic stationed in Okinawa, and then also was a bomb flipping instructor for atomic bombs. So, it was at that time, one of the only techniques for fighter jets to safely jettison a bomb without being killed by the bomb.

SW: How did they land in Iowa?

KA: I have no idea, to be honest.

SW: Interesting. Tell me more about how your grandparents influenced you.

KA: So, my grandfather on my mother's side was in the Navy. His wife, my grandmother, was always super into the ocean. She's pretty much what got me into the ocean.

SW: How?

KA: We would take vacations down to Sanibel Island in Florida pretty much every year, growing up, all the way from when I was a baby to currently. She passed away when I was a kindergartner. But in first grade, I decided I was going to be a marine biologist because of her and just stuck with it ever since first grade.

SW: Did you go to college for marine biology?

KA: Yes, at URI.

SW: Tell us about that.

KA: I went to community college for two years before that and then went to URI for the last two years. So, at that point, I was kind of in the mindset of just getting everything done and getting right into the workforce. I wanted to work. I didn't really want to hang around in college too long. Just wanted to get a scuba certificate and my diploma and start working.

SW: Then how did you get involved with the observer program?

KA: I started out working down in Alabama for the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, doing fisheries independent surveys for, it was mostly red snapper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack. I like the New England area better. Everybody I know is from New England. So, I was kind of just out there by myself. So, I ended up moving back. There were also some family health issues going on that I needed to be present for. So, I moved back to New York. Then once all that was resolved, I ended up applying to Fathom and started observing in 2020, was trained in February right before COVID. So, I took one trip and then sat around till August.

SW: So, tell me about transitioning from New York to Greater New England.

KA: It wasn't too big of a stretch. My family has a house in Orleans. That's the one I'm currently living in. So, I've been out to it lots of times when I was younger, so I'm kind of – I knew the area a bit. But at that point, it'd kind of been a while. I think I only went, the last time before this, I was in high school, was the last time I came out to the Cape or the New England area before college, so...

SW: Okay. So, did you want to work in New England fisheries at that point?

KA: Yes, I absolutely did.

SW: Okay. So, tell us about training in February 2022. How did it go? What did you think about it?

KA: I love training.

SW: 2020, sorry.

KA: Yes. Definitely loved training. Looking back at it now and then helping our new observers, there's a lot going on in two weeks. So, you've got to be a very organized person to stay on top of everything.

SW: What did you like about it most?

KA: I'm not saying this because I'm a safety trainer, but I feel like the safety training was one of the most important things that was part of it. Just because we were drilled into our heads, if this happens, then this is the next steps to take. I want to make sure people know that too, because there's been a few circumstances where it could have progressed to that on a trip that I was on. It never did. But you had that in the back of your mind of, okay, I'm going to do X, Y, Z next. We'll be okay as long as we do that. But everything was fixed and fine.

SW: So, training prepared you.

KA: Yes.

SW: In what other ways did it prepare you?

KA: Definitely, dealing with the captains and crews.

SW: How so?

KA: Just the different types of personalities and opinions that they're going to have. Just knowing, going on board, they may not like having you there. But to me, it really wasn't that big of a deal. Like, even if they disagreed with me or didn't want me to be there, I'm the type of person that just shakes that off. I'm there to do a job. If you don't like me, that's fine. I'm not going to take it to heart at the end of the day.

SW: So, do you consider that one of the more challenging parts of observing?

KA: It definitely can be. Yes. I think. Just not wanting to be accepted on board could be part of it. That could be tough for a lot of people that are maybe super social and enjoy camaraderie. I've always kind of been okay being alone for a little bit. But also at the same time, I enjoy – the trips are so much more fun when the guys are cracking jokes with you. You're able to talk to them rather than they just ignore you.

SW: Tell us about some of your best trips.

KA: One of my favorite cruises, it was a winter trip. It was just extremely rough seas. We were probably in 15, 20-foot seas. It got so bad that we just sailed off the Cape for a day and never fished. But then once it calmed down a bit, we went back out. It was still like 15-foot seas. The crew were cutting fish. They're playing the *Pirates of the Caribbean* theme song the entire time. Then we caught a basking shark. It's flying around all over the place on deck. Then at the very end of the trip, we ended up catching a shipping container. We couldn't get the net back because it was too heavy. We were going to blow the winches.

SW: So, what did they do?

KA: They cut the net with a blowtorch.

SW: Difficult situations. Tell us about some of your more challenging situations, whether it is safety or weather or...

KA: Probably just some crew interactions, especially when you can't speak their language. That's definitely a huge barrier in both parties, once they get upset. But you get frustrated that you can't communicate to the other person how you want your point to come across. You don't want to come off as offensive or anything like that either. I'm assuming they're somewhat trying to do the same thing, but yes.

SW: How about the weather? Was that a big challenge for you in your career?

KA: A little bit at first. Once you get your sea legs, it's not too bad. But there were a couple trips where, going out, it was so rough that everybody on the boat was sick.

SW: Did you get seasick as well?

KA: On a few trips, yes. It was more or less when we were following a big storm out to the fishing grounds. With the net on the bottom, it definitely helps smooth the ride out. But not having that out when you're just transiting and steaming out, definitely feel it when you're sliding around in your bunk, hitting your head on the bunk above you.

SW: How long did you observe for?

KA: I think on paper it was two years, but we had that gap, March to August.

SW: Tell me about the differences between observing in the summertime and observing in the winter. You started in the winter.

KA: Yes. Winter is definitely brutal. Summer is very laid back. Everybody's in a better mood because they're catching fish for the most part. It's just a totally different vibe.

SW: How so?

KA: Summer definitely feels – everybody's friendly. Everybody, in the winter, is kind of mad and annoyed because they're not making much money because they don't catch a lot of fish usually. The weather's bad. Things break a lot more in the winter just because of how rough it is. So, they get annoyed that they have to constantly fix things on the boat.

SW: These are all ground fish trips?

KA: Yes.

SW: At-sea monitor for ground fish trips. Tell me about some of the changes you have seen in the industry over those two years of time or even since then.

KA: I think when I started, they were just starting. I believe a mass retention was starting near the end of my first year, electronic monitoring. Then some of the other regular audit, electronic monitoring was ramping up at that point, too. So, I did observe on a few mass retention trips, which were very nice. It seemed like...

SW: How so? So, maybe you can explain that a bit.

KA: So, a lot of the people on those boats are super friendly, it seems. Not sure if that's because they know they're on camera or if it's just a great crew. I know one of them was just a great crew to begin with. I had been out with them before they had the cameras. So, so was just business as usual to them. But it also makes your job easier because they're keeping all the discard groundfish. They're not going to throw it over anyways. So, you can just grab their basket of undersized cod, weigh it, and then give it right back to them. So, they're pretty much picking that out anyways. So, it makes getting those weights really easy.

SW: Do they have a lot of observers on board anyway? They are experienced or not?

Experienced with observers.

KA: So, they do. They were all previously regular ASM boats. But these with the mass retention, they had a lower pick rate for observers because they had the camera system on board.

SW: What types of trips did you do as an observer?

KA: All trawl and gillnet. Those were the only two gears I ever encountered.

SW: Which do you like more, observing on a trawl boat or a gillnet?

KA: Gillnet.

SW: How come?

KA: It's a far cleaner catch, for the most part, in terms of discarded fish. But there are more incidental takes in individual animals, usually larger sharks. So, you do have to be on your toes for the incidental takes to be coming up. But they're usually shorter trips, fewer hauls, and much easier to do the data with. You can usually get extremely accurate data because you're usually getting the weight on every single discarded fish. So, makes it easy for everybody all around.

SW: Which ports did you tend to go out of?

KA: Chatham and New Bedford were my main two ports, and occasionally Provincetown.

SW: Were there any challenges associated with any of those ports?

KA: New Bedford, only when they would be tied up three or four out after a storm. Everybody lands at the same time. If you don't get there early, you're tied up onto somebody else. So, getting all your gear across can be tricky, especially if nobody is there to help you, pretty much.

SW: So, you mean jumping over multiple boats, carrying all of your equipment?

KA: Yes, exactly.

SW: That is challenging. How about the safety on some of the vessels? Have you felt safe? I know you are a safety instructor now. How did this job influence you into becoming a safety instructor?

KA: Yes. I would say almost entirely, I've never felt unsafe. It was just more or less weather conditions that I felt safe being on the boat, but I knew, okay, it's not safe for me to be out on deck right now because I could be a liability to the crew and myself. So, I'll just take this haul off and watch totes of fish fly around back and forth on the back deck instead.

SW: Did you have a lot of trips like that?

KA: Those were more in the winter. That was really just trawlers. Gillnetters, there was never a problem like that.

SW: How far offshore have you been?

KA: I've been all the way to the U.S.-Canada management area a couple of times on the two boats.

SW: How was that?

KA: It's a long steam out. It's about two days. So, you have two days to just hang out in your bunk, watch TV, take lots of naps, and then out there, it's...

SW: Yes, the fishing is different than inshore.

KA: Yes, it tends to be more haddock-rich. Or at least, anecdotally, that's what it seems to be.

SW: Did you notice a behavior change in the captains when you went offshore?

KA: Not really. It was kind of the same as at the dock.

SW: Same fishing behavior?

KA: Oh, yes. Yes, pretty much.

SW: Did they like being offshore more than being inshore fishing?

KA: Yes, they tend to get, at least the crew tended to get excited when they heard they were going to go to Georges bank. I guess, tends to be better catch there depending on the time of year.

SW: Then what have you seen as far as catch rates and changes that you have observed on your own through the past couple of years?

KA: It's kind of all a blur. Everything's all mixed together. I couldn't really tell over those two years. It just seemed like whatever area we were in yielded a different variety.

SW: Do you feel as though observers make a good contribution to fisheries science? What was your contribution? What do you think?

KA: Yes, I feel like I made a difference to them.

SW: How so?

KA: Just being friendly and occasionally helping out on the boat, just cleaning the galley while they're out on deck or heat up a meal for them while they're cutting fish, things like that.

SW: How did that go when you were on board?

KA: They wanted me on the boat again. I would get requested for the following trip. That's usually when I would start to have my best trips, were with the same crew that knew that I was going to work hard right next to them.

SW: What are some things you think you have in common with some of the fishermen or captains or crews?

KA: We all want the same thing, which is pretty much a stable fish stock to be able to keep fishing for years. Don't want to deplete it because there goes your livelihood for both of us.

SW: What would a captain say about you if I were to call a captain today and ask?

KA: Hopefully, he'd like to have me on board again. [laughter]

SW: Do you think that most of the captains would say that –

KA: Yes, I think so.

SW: – about your performance?

KA: Yes. At least the ones that remembered me. [laughter]

SW: What advice do you think you could give an observer that was training nowadays in order to be successful?

KA: Definitely be able to be flexible and know all your different catch estimation techniques, because it may change on the fly due to the different conditions on deck. Depending on how they're sorting the fish, you may not be able to sample the original way you thought. Always have a backup for your backup for sampling. I learned that on my first two trips.

SW: How?

KA: I wanted to do all actual weights my first trip. Then I was out on deck for like six hours straight trying to do that. The crew were like, "What are you doing? The other observers don't do that." Then I learned like, oh, yes, there's other ways I can quantify this.

SW: So, how did you change your behavior?

KA: Definitely studied up on the different catch estimation and then tried to utilize which was the best for more or less the size of the pile and the different species. If it was only a few different types, you could probably do basket count or tallies or something like that, rather than volume-to-volume. But if you had a gigantic mixed bag, then usually volume-to-volume was the easiest.

SW: Did the captains usually help you, or the crew? Or did the captains really just leave you on your own to do your work?

KA: If I hadn't been with them before, they would usually leave me on my own to do my own thing. But then once they got to know me throughout the trip or if I was returning to the same boat, they would be more willing to offer me stuff that they would have just discarded off the side of the boat. "Oh, do you want this cod? Do you want this haddock? It's too small for us." They'd toss those to me instead of just throwing them out to scupper.

SW: Okay. Tell us a little bit more about your best day out at sea that you can remember.

KA: Oh, it was a gillnet trip. It was really clean catch. We had humpbacks breaching all around us. Then at one point, they had to do some maintenance on the hauler. Then we were surrounded by all sorts of blue sharks. So, the one crew who was dressing the fish was throwing white hake heads to the sharks and feeding them in front of us. That was pretty cool.

SW: Tell us your scariest story, [laughter] or most challenging.

KA: Definitely just having a language barrier can be tough, especially when you're trying to tell a crew what you need from them.

SW: How did you get by?

KA: More or less, just working really fast and efficiently. There were sometimes where you had to use volume-to-volume when you really didn't want to, but that was the best option at the time. So, that was more or less how I did it.

SW: Looking back, are there any recommendations you could give observers in that situation?

KA: I was trying to learn a different language for a little bit. But that's definitely kind of going above and beyond what your duties are. But it definitely wouldn't hurt and would help. But I definitely wouldn't push that on anybody. But definitely knowing how to confidently sample using every single technique that you have available to you would be the biggest one, I would say.

SW: So, in the end, after observing, tell us about your career moves since then.

KA: Yes. So, one of the safety trainers for our company and also one of the coordinators for observers for the company as well. So, set up trips for them and contact the captain on their behalf and give them all the info for them.

SW: Do you spend a lot of time on the phone with the captains –

KA: Oh, yes.



SW: – setting up trips? Tell us about that.

KA: Yes, it's nice because some of them remember you having been on their boat. So, it kind of makes the discussion easier. The majority of them, I've never met them or been on their boat. But most of them are all super laid-back guys, really easy to talk to.

SW: Do you ever hear complaints about observers?

KA: Occasionally, but a lot of the times, it's just little things. Like, they just tell the next observer to do this differently. It's not like I would never have that observer on board again.

SW: Okay. So, do you kind of support the observers in that way too? Do you kind of reach out to them and explain what you are hearing?

KA: Yes. Just, "Hey, the captain mentioned this. Just next time, don't do that or do this differently. The captain asked you to just please do this differently." It's almost never regarding catch sampling or anything along those lines.

SW: So, how did your experience help you in that realm? Do you have a good understanding when a captain tries to explain to you what they did not like the observer doing?

KA: Yes, it's usually just really straightforward stuff, like just don't wear your oilers in the wheelhouse, things along those lines. So, we just relay that to the next person. "Hey, take all your gear off before you go up to get coordinates," or something along those lines.

SW: Why did you stop observing and become a trainer?

KA: I felt like my skills would be more helpful towards other people than just going out on boats alone by myself.

SW: How so?

KA: I knew I could provide good data. But I feel like if I can train people to be ready for situations and also support our staff for pretty much – I've seen a lot of different funky sampling techniques that you may have to do and different things that happen on deck. So, I feel like I can help a lot of our staff that way.

SW: Then in safety training as well?

KA: Yes. Yes, definitely making sure it's just like when I went through training that it's ingrained in your head and second nature. I can't put on a survival suit slowly. I have to do it fast. Otherwise, I forget steps if I just try and take my time. If I do it fast, I can get it on right. It's kind of funny.

SW: That is funny. Do you think that your contributions were more in the realm of when you collected data as an observer, or as a safety trainer, preparing observers to go to sea? Or both?

KA: I hope both. I feel both anyways. I feel like my contribution will be bigger as a safety trainer, just because it's people's lives at risk. It's one of the most dangerous jobs in the U.S. So, definitely want everybody to be safe on all their trips.

SW: Do you feel that it is going well, it is effective, the training?

KA: Yes, definitely.

SW: Do you hear from the fishermen much about trained observers, safety-wise?

KA: Not yet. But...

SW: I wonder if sometimes, if they feel safer knowing the extent of the training that we offer.

KA: Yes, I know on some boats that I've actually observed on, their station bill occasionally includes the observer. So, it's nice to see that and that they actually include us on that station bill.

SW: That is nice.

KA: Yes.

SW: Wrapping up, Kevin, are there any other stories or any insights that you want to share to observers that might be listening to this?

KA: Trying to think of stories and insights.

SW: Maybe just safety-related too. What is the most important thing that you feel that you train them on in safety training?

KA: Definitely don't be afraid to reach out to anybody if something funky is going on. Some people are worried that if they do that, they'll be punished. There's absolutely no way you would be punished for anything along those lines. If you think something is unsafe, please let your provider and everybody know. Then just keep everybody in the loop with what's going on the boat, even if it's just like the engine died, and they're working on it. Things like that are a bigger deal than you think.

SW: Yes. Good advice. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate your time.

KA: Yes. Thank you.

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