

Sara Weeks: It is November 1st, 2022. This is an oral history interview with Tori Pilger from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center fishery monitoring Operations Branch. Tell me how you came to become an observer.

Tori Pilger: Well, right after college I graduated as a marine biologist and then moved out of my parents' house into Texas where I was mostly just spending time with some of my friends that I moved in with, finding odd jobs here and there, while I was also applying to almost any program that I possibly could that could get my foot in the door with marine biology. That's when I contacted East West Technical Services, one of the companies here that is part of the Observer program. They took a shot on me, [laughter] somebody from the Midwest, to come move out here into New Bedford to get this job.

SW: When did you train?

TP: 2018.

SW: Tell me about your training.

TP: Oh, boy, it was really intense [laughter]. Honestly, from the job post that I had read, compared to the training class, it seemed almost wildly different. I knew that I would be going out to sea and experiencing what it's like to be out there with the fisherman and such. But going through training really put into perspective exactly what it was I was going to be doing, mentally and physically, emotionally, and all the different kind of sampling requirements that was really drilled into our head, how important the data collection part of it was in order to get it completely accurate because of how important this data was. It was pretty intense, especially when the coast guard came by, telling us about the safety aspect out at sea and all of the different scenarios we could run into, how we were the firefighters out there, how we were the EMT's and the first responders, what to do in all sorts of scenarios and situations. So, training scared me, to be honest with you. After I actually started getting some real-life experience out there, I was able to really get my foot in and exactly feel a bit more comfortable with everything.

SW: Tell us about some of your experiences.

TP: Sure. Yes. I was chronically seasick out at sea, which was no fun. So, I chose to mainly do the single day trips on the day boats,, on these scalloping day boats. So, my experience was probably a little bit different than other observers out there, that I would probably only be out there for like twelve to forty-eight hours-ish before coming into shore. Honestly, it was one of the best jobs I think I've ever had [laughter]. I really did like it a lot, except for the seasickness issue.

SW: What did you like about it?

TP: It was an experience unlike any other job that you could probably ever have. There's no way to explain to somebody else what exactly you do for a living, because they just won't ever get it. Being able to go out to sea at any hour of the day and night, go so far away from shore, from land that you don't even see it anymore, completely calm days out at sea and just watching

the fishermen do their work was actually, honestly, pretty incredible. A lot of people don't get to see that side of the industry and getting to meet all the different fishermen, get to see what their perspective is on the industry as a whole, but also their philosophy about life was really, really interesting. Some of my more favorite moments was the really calm days when you got to see the sunrise or the sunset, also some really interesting weather phenomenon such as really thick fog to the point where you can't even see a foot away from the side of the boat. One of my favorite experiences that I have never been able to recreate, it was my second trip that I'd ever gone out. It was still a training trip, completely calm waters, no moon, and it was dense fog. It was in the middle of the night. The vertical migration of all of the different bioluminescent sea jellies came up to the surface of the ocean. You could just peer over the side of the boat. You would see the waves and the rocking motion of the boat disturbing them enough for them to start flashing that blue bioluminescent glow. It was absolutely amazing to watch. This is just something that I don't think I'll ever be able to see again, but it's one of the experiences I had as an observer.

SW: What about some of your challenges?

TP: Oh, sea sickness, of course [laughter].

SW: How bad?

TP: I never got over it in the three years that I was an observer, which is kind of the main reason why I quit being an observer. I was just kind of getting sick and tired of being sick and tired all the time. But I got around it by just sucking it up and carrying around a bucket full of water around wherever I worked. So, I would just have an easy purge bucket, [laughter] I guess, as I worked. It didn't seem to bother the fishermen very much. It was just like a contingency plan that I carried around with me. Every fifteen, twenty minutes or so, just use it, and then I would go right back to work. That was one of the bigger challenges. Another one was the difficulty in the sleep schedule. One was not knowing exactly when you would go out to sea all the time. So, you would have to be constantly prepared and rested while on shore because you might get called out with barely six hour-notice sometimes. Then you would work – at least for me, since I did the day boats – you could work for a solid twenty-four hours straight before coming back into shore, having to drive wherever it is back home, and then crashing for a day. [laughter]

SW: How did your family feel about you being in this job?

TP: Well, my situation is probably a little bit different because all of my family is back in the Midwest. I'm the only one who's out here. So, they only ever get to hear the stories that I tell them. They don't get to see me right after a trip. So, my family, my mother and father were very, very supportive of me pursuing my degree in marine biology, even though we were Midwesterners and have nothing [laughter] to do with the ocean. But I always would kind of censor some of the things I would let them know about, especially my mother who is a little bit a worrier. Initially, I would send her those inReach messages to her, saying, "Hey, Mom, check out this link. This is where I am in the middle of the ocean." She would be so happy to see that. I would tell her some of the more funny stories that I had. But some of the weirder ones, I would probably not let her know about [laughter]. I would always tell her about all the whales I got to

see and all the different species of dolphins that were out there, and any sort of funny little thing that happened while I was out there, like the time I caught my PFD on an exposed piece of tubing out there. It blew up around my neck. [laughter] So, I was just wearing a written flated PFD the entire time. [laughter]

SW: What drew you to marine biology, being from the Midwest?

TP: Oh, yes, that's something a lot of people ask. Honestly, the only thing I could think of is that I've always been very interested in science as a kid, just always hunger for knowledge. So, my favorite classes – I was terrible at math, but amazing at science, straight A's. I guess I wanted to be a marine biologist because it seemed to be one of the most accessible fields that you could be physically working in and not just like stuck in a lab or behind a desk or something. So, I can be out there in the field working. Also, it was a field that I would never be bored in because it's always constantly shifting and constantly changing. There's so much left to explore that I knew that regardless of what aspect of marine biology I got into, there's always going to be new discoveries made.

SW: How do you feel about your contributions during your three years?

TP: I felt really good. It felt like my dream job. I was out working, hands-on. I was collecting the data that I knew would be used in a program that was using it as I was sending it in. It felt pretty amazing. Occasionally, I would feel a little sad that I wasn't anymore hands on than that. I wasn't able to work with the data that I collected. I just collected it and gave it to somebody else. So, that part made me a little sad. But now that I've moved on from being an observer, I now am more hands-on with the data that other observers gather. So, I'm now seeing that aspect of it.

SW: So, tell me how you decided to move from the field into the office. Did you move directly from the field to the office, or did you have a different job in between?

TP: After I quit being an observer, mostly due to seasickness, I was offered a position as a dockside monitor, which is very similar to being an observer except instead of going out to sea where I get seasick, I got to stay on shore and basically collect the same data at the fish houses. That I did work for a couple of months before my employer called me up and asked if I wanted a different position in-house. Because one of their other employees had quit and they thought that my experience would be well-suited for the position. Being from a scalloping background, they thought I'd be perfect as being an assistant.

SW: So, tell us about your job working at the science center.

TP: Sure. Yes. Most of my job comprises of taking care of the calling system that the fishermen use to declare their trips that are going out to sea. I only work with the scout side of that, along with Connor Buckley, who is – he works alongside me. He kind of more takes care of the coding and program aspect of this position. Whereas I am more focused on the brand-new observers. So, part of my position is also helping support the training staff with the new observers that are getting trained into the scalloping observer program. I also will call them up

on occasions, talk to them, see how they're doing, see how they feel about the program, especially with the brand-new observers. See if they have any questions about different sampling protocols or how I would handle this certain social situation out at sea or things of that nature, that I kind of work alongside others in the program. Also trying to figure out how we can bring more observers together in a sort of social community aspect because being an observer is a very isolating job, unfortunately. We get calls from whomever our bosses are, to take a trip on a boat. Then we go to that boat. We do our work, come back on shore, give them the data, and just go home. We don't really have any social aspect with the people who are in-house or with our bosses, aside from them assigning us trips, or with other observers. We just never really get to see anybody else. But some of my hope is to bring observers at least together with other observers so that they can communicate their experiences with each other to make themselves feel less alone out there.

SW: How do you think that will help overall in the data collection process?

TP: With the data collection specifically?

SW: Yes, or overall.

TP: Overall, like I explained before that it's an isolating job and that I felt like nobody except for another observer could really explain what the job is to anybody, be it your own family or friends, or even your roommate or somebody who you go home to, whom, you can talk to them immediately right after the trip. They just have no real context of what it is that you do for a living. So, being able to talk to another observer and being able to relate to them exactly all the different crazy scenarios that you get into out there. It is comforting knowing that somebody knows exactly what it is, what's happening, and can relate to you. I feel like it'll definitely help with observer retention, which is kind of what I'm really hoping to achieve from this position.

SW: Great. Which do you like better, being in the office now or being at sea?

TP: Not considering the seasickness, being at sea [laughter]. It's the seasickness that really got me. But taking away the seasickness factor, I love being in the office, but I do love being hands-on. But this job does also allow for that when I am helping to train the brand-new observers. I just got certified in MSIT's Safety Training. So, now I can certify other people in marine safety training. I can go out to the ports and visit them, talk to some of the captains if I want to. I do get back out there sometimes, but not as often, of course, as an observer.

SW: Great.

[end of transcript]