Karen Bell: Can you do that? You can do that?

Michael Jepsen: [inaudible]

KB: Okay. You're not on.

MJ: No.

KB: [laughs]

MJ: All right.

KB: Still not on. Well, there's no light on. Okay. Now, there's a light on.

MJ: This is Michael Jepsen. I am here with – we already did this, didn't we?

KB: But you had no audio.

MJ: I had no audio.

KB: So, they'll never know who you are or what you're doing.

MJ: Anyway, this is Michael Jepsen. I am here with Karen Bell. This is part of the In Their Own Words program, funded by the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage and in part by the Florida Humanities Council. Karen, what I usually do with people to start out is to ask you about your early life in Cortez. What do you remember about this community as you were growing up? What was it like?

KB: I don't want to talk about that. [laughter] Okay, when I was little, I would spend Sundays out here because we lived in Bradenton with my mum, and Sundays were always a big day at grandma's house. She made dinner. It was always around 2:00, and tons of food and tons of people every Sunday.

MJ: Who were the people?

KB: My dad and his brothers and his sister and all of their children. Stop it. [laughter] Let me see who else. Just neighbors and relatives from all over the place, they'd always come there on Sundays.

MJ: So, it was a large family gathering.

KB: Yes.

MJ: What do you remember about the community and the fishing docks?

KB: I remember when I was, I don't know, I was under ten, where the big fish house is now.

Remember, it used to be just the little fish house? They were slowly bringing in fill, and they had net spreads out there. So, we would play on the nets. They extended out over the water. So, I remember that one. That was pretty cool. It was fun.

MJ: You were allowed out there?

KB: They were probably glad we were out there. [laughter]

MJ: Because I always heard they were very cautious about letting children on the docks.

KB: Well, we weren't actually over the water. It was the upland part. Where the fish house is today, the big fish house, they slowly were filling that in, because it was kind of actually like sand flats. They kept bringing in fill. We used to play on that.

MJ: Your dad was a fisherman.

KB: At that time, I think after I was born, he actually started remaining more in the fish house, running the fish house.

MJ: But prior to that he used to fish.

KB: Yes.

MJ: What kind of fishing did he do?

KB: They worked crews. He was actually one of the captains from a point of being really young. I think he started in his late teens. He ran the (*Jewel Lamb*?), was his boat, which we still have. I guess it was a (haul same?) boat, I think is what they did. I know they did stock netting and gill netting. I don't think on that particular boat though, but just fishing and bay fishing mainly, inshore.

MJ: You had other relatives that fished?

KB: My uncles, most of my uncles fished for a living or worked at the fish house.

MJ: Then your father started working in the fish house, the AP Bell fish…

KB: I think in the early [19]60s he started working in the fish house.

MJ: What do you remember about that, the fish house?

KB: I remember it was the original little fish house, the one today that's just the platform out back. It had the tiniest office. It was literally, I don't know, 10 by 10, something like that. The bookkeeper was in there. He was in there on the phone constantly. He was usually smoking because he smoked back then. There's a lot of activity at that little building.

MJ: When did they expand it to the larger fish house? When did they build the larger fish house?

KB: They built the ice machine in, I think, the [19]70s, the first ice machine. It was an ammonia machine. Then they built the main fish house in the, I believe, 1980. Then in [19]82, [19]83, they put the big ice plant in, the big, big ice plant.

MJ: What changed with the larger fish house? I mean, Cortez was a small gillnet boat fishery for a long time. Had that changed? Had the AP Bell changed to larger offshore boats by then? Or did that come after the larger fish house was built?

KB: Well, the larger boats started being built in the [19]70s. They built one about every other year. One of the fireboats is what they built. How the fish house changed was we got a freezer. I think it holds 2.5 to 3 million pounds. So, during mullet season, for example, when production would be really high, rather than having to move it all out at a lower price, they were able to freeze it and then sell it during times of the year when the product wasn't plentiful. So, therefore, they could get a better price. So, the [19]80s and [19]70s, I guess, late [19]70s, [19]80s were kind of the heyday of the Cortez mullet fishery. That's when the real market opened up. That's when Tony from Sigma started working with us, I think in 1985, and taught us what it was that they wanted in raw, how they wanted it packaged and shipped over to them. So, it was pretty interesting, especially for such a tiny little place.

MJ: What did that mean for AP Bell, and what did it mean for the fishermen of Cortez, that real market?

KB: Well, it certainly allowed for a lot of growth for the dock. Also, it was good for the fishermen because it helped them sustain themselves, for people who were used to getting – I don't know what the price was then – maybe a quarter a pound or something for mullet, maybe 10 cents. I'd have to go back and look at some of the ledgers. But it made it where they had a Christmas. I mean, at one point, everyone started relying on that raw season for their means of living throughout the rest of the year. Because fishing, being so seasonal, you have some seasons where you produce a lot and then some where you produce almost nothing. So, you had to learn to stretch your money.

MJ: Well, you did not live in the village.

KB: Telephone. [laughter] It's probably dad. I bet you. [inaudible] get it? Do you want me to get it?

MJ: Okay. I will just pause this.

KB: It's dad. [inaudible] Hey, dad.

MJ: But now it has just split it into two.

KB: Is that bad, or it doesn't matter?

MJ: No. Not really. Okay. You did not live in Cortez at first. When did you move to the community?

KB: Not until I got out of college.

MJ: What year was that?

KB: [19]86.

MJ: Why did you move to the village then?

KB: I missed it.

MJ: Really?

KB: Yes, I really did. Ilived on the east coast of Florida, was where I was at school at, at Boca Raton. That coast is nothing like this coast. This coast is really laid back and not nearly as developed. The people here are way friendlier in general than over there.

MJ: Did you start working at the fish house as soon as you got back?

KB: Yes.

MJ: Tell me about that. What was that like for you?

KB: It was really difficult because I think dad had – I think he was thinking, because I had gone to college, that I was going to come in there. I don't know what he thought I was going to do, but it made it difficult with some of the – his cousin was the main bookkeeper. Then her daughter-in-law was the other secretary. I think there was some resentment there because even though I had a degree in marketing, it's not the same as actually delving into a business and learning it. So, I really didn't know anything. Anyway, it caused a little bit of conflict. But it finally worked out. Over time, I learned what I was doing.

MJ: You have been doing that for how long now?

KB: Well, [19]86, so, nineteen years.

MJ: Nineteen years?

KB: Yes.

MJ: So, what was the business like then, when you started in [19]86 and up until in that band? Did business grow? Were you making a living? Was business doing well?

KB: The business did really well. I wouldn't say they were rolling in money, but they paid their

bills with no problems. We were able to maintain the boats and buy the gear and the equipment that the fishermen needed. We advanced things like that out. It wasn't really a problem. Our receivables were pretty good. We had some who would go bankrupt here and there. But all in all, it was a good time.

MJ: What was it like for the community of Cortez? Can you describe what community life was like back then?

KB: It's always been an interesting place to live because you always have something happening, whether the fishing is good or not good or what. But there always seems to be some type of issue that the people here are not necessarily fighting over, but disagreeing on, I guess you might say. So, I guess that goes for good times and bad times. But at that point, fishing was really good in the late [19]80s up until the mid-[19]90s. I think there was starting to be a big focus on the net ban. People were starting to hear rumblings of that idea being pushed forward. I think that was a big concern. We used to have meetings all the time, at least once a month, maybe organized fishermen of Florida or whichever group was looking at the issues.

MJ: Well, you were involved with organized fishing in Florida. You became involved later in another non-profit organization in Cortez. What made you do that?

KB: Well, I initially was involved in Organized Fishermen of Florida. That was primarily the legal issue, the net ban. Prior to the net ban, the redfish. I remember the redfish rally in Tallahassee. I don't remember what year that was, maybe [19]90. I've got buttons from it still, where we would go up there and try to lobby. I guess why I got involved in it is because when you come into a place like this, and it's so important that you want to keep it going, and then you see all these outside pressures, be it regulatory or development or whatever they are, I think you look for ways to try to, I guess, control that or minimize the impact that it will have on your place.

MJ: Well, you mentioned the redfish rally in Tally. Now that was one of the…

KB: I think it's 1988.

MJ: It was sort of the beginning of this push by recreational.

KB: Well, you know what's funny about that? I've got letters that they have at the dock from probably the [19]40s, where people would write to the dock and complain about the fishermen. There's one where this man says they're the rapist of the sea. So, this battle has been going on and on for decades, I guess, if not even longer. But it's just that it became more organized and more, I guess, political and a lot more money behind it to be rid of the commercial industry, is how I see it. I mean, rather than looking for a balance where, you value both your recreational and your commercial industry, it seems like there's this faction in the state that wants the commercial industry just gone. I really don't understand it because they're both important. They should be able to coexist. I still don't understand the mentality behind someone wanting to be rid of the people that feed the public, that provide seafood for the restaurant, and they do it efficiently, cost effectively. I don't understand it, except for I think sometimes they don't see

there are people behind that. I don't think they know what they're doing.

MJ: Well, tell me, what was the net ban? What was your impression of what was happening there?

KB: My impression is that some people that have a lot of money and a lot of political influence were able to basically buy their way onto the ballot of Florida, onto the Constitution, basically. Regulating your fisheries has no business being in your state constitution. It doesn't make any sense at all. The only way it happened is because they were organized. They had a lot of money. They twisted things in the media. I mean, that was a big part of how they did what they did. When you show a normal citizen a picture of a dolphin with a net wrapped around them, well, your first thought is, "Oh my gosh, this is horrible. We have to be rid of that." But a lot of those images were faked or – I don't know what the correct word is. But they were just shams. There are problems in the commercial fishery, but there are problems in the recreational fishery. People create problems in the environment, but you want to balance out. You don't just get rid of everyone for having a few problems.

MJ: How did you feel about the net ban, personally and emotionally? How did it make you feel?

KB: It was really difficult because I spent minimally a year going – even more than that, if you go back to Tallahassee. But I think the year before, first we tried getting the signatures on the ballot. So, we would go to where they were collecting signatures and try to have a little table. I mean, this was happening all over the state. We're such a small group of people, the fishing industry, that there weren't that many of us. But we would go around and try to educate people basically, which was almost impossible because there were so few of us. But I remember, I was pretty sure it was going to pass, that it was going to – they were going to vote yes on amendment three. But I remember, I think it really hit me the day of the vote. I grew up in northwest Bradenton. So, I took a polling station over there is where I sat that day and had little signs, vote no on amendment three. Well, the table to the side of me was (Zelda Chapman?) who, I probably shouldn't say names, but anyway, she lives in northwest Bradenton, and her family. I had known them for years. They were insurance people. They have a lot of money. But she sat there. She had the vote yes for amendment three table. I'm looking at her. She's beautiful. She has a lot of money. She's just really eloquent and all. But anyway – in her speech, she was a good speaker. But she said to me how awful she thought it was to have those boats in her backyard, because they live on the river, in this huge, beautiful home. I thought to myself – and anyway, I thought how horrible it was and how shallow she was. Whatever her attributes were, she was lacking in a lot of other areas. But the odd thing was, so many people went up and were supportive of – you could tell that that was – I could tell anyway, that particular day at the booth, that the public was leaning that way. I can remember I drove home that night. I cried as I drove home because I knew it was going to pass. It was depressing, just really depressing.

MJ: How was your business affected by the net ban?

KB: That's funny because we voted in November. I think it went into effect July 1st. Well, we started getting phone calls in maybe March. This is how stupid people are. It's not nice to say.

But I can remember this one lady calling and saying – after the vote, it wasn't implemented yet – how much better the fishing already was [laughter] in March. I was just going, "Okay." That's so funny.

MJ: But then did it have an immediate effect once it was implemented?

KB: Had an immediate effect, first of all, on the smaller fish companies, the ones who dealt primarily with inshore fish. Snead Island boat works, or not boat works, Snead Island, I think it was called Pillsbury Seafood, they were little. They did sheepshead and mullet primarily, in Vamo down south. All the little guys, the mum and pop people, they were the first ones to either go out of business or sell their fish houses. The larger ones were able to continue on because, for example, for us, we had the offshore boats that we had built in the [19]70s and [19]80s. So, we were able to supplement what we were doing with the grouper and the offshore species. So, we weren't as dependent. We had shrimp boats. We weren't as dependent on those inshore fish as the little operators were. So, they were the first to go. Today, I'll bet you, I can't count on my hands. There probably aren't ten left that are in this region of the small operators.

MJ: What about the community of Cortez? What change did you see here? How were fishing families affected in Cortez?

KB: Well, it's pretty resilient here. The weird thing about the fishing people is they can almost do anything. They just love to fish. That's why they do it. But most of the men, they're either great carpenters because lots of them have built their boats, or they've built their homes. They pretty much can do anything they set their minds to. So, for a while it seemed like it didn't really – not that it didn't impact here, but everyone kept going on just finding other means to support their families. Some of the families, I remember the men started working at Tropicana or the women in the glass factory. Let me see. I know Fulford's was one of the first ones to close. Again, it was a small fish house, all inshore fish, nothing else to supplement it. That was really difficult because the Fulford's, they're one of the old families. My dad's half Fulford. My grandma Belle was originally a Fulford. But what else happened? The Fulford's closed. Gulf to Bay closed.

MJ: Sigma closed.

KB: Sigma closed. Well, they moved to St. Pete. But again, they didn't have the offshore fleet either. So, it slowly took its toll. The saddest thing was when some of the older families started selling their houses, which, today the market values is so huge. But even back then, I don't remember what it was, but they might – I remember one, I think, got 100,000, which, not that that's not a lot of money, but you can't start a new life, I don't think, with 100,000. I don't know, maybe you can, depending upon where you go. But it was just so sad because they were getting offered more and more and more for these little cottages that families had lived in for multi-generations. Then they'd pack up and move out east or up north. I don't know where they moved.

MJ: So, it was not an immediate impact from the net ban.

KB: No. Even today, I think people are resistant to the idea that it's had – they don't like to acknowledge that it's affected them because they are doing different things. Stone crabbing started after that. A couple of them charter fish, if you want to call it commercial fishing. There's still a waterfront activity. I mean, everyone's still – they want to be on the water. It seems like they figured out a way to do that.

MJ: But there were some people that just got out of it.

KB: There were many people who just got out of it. I think we're down from, at one time, probably fifty inshore fishermen to maybe ten. One of the saddest things that happened was a lot of the younger guys who all they really knew was fishing – I mean, they can do some carpentry work too. But a lot of them, it seems like, have gotten involved in drugs. Not that that's an excuse to start doing drugs, but you just see their lives have, I don't know, not gone the direction you would think.

MJ: Yes. So, how is the community since the net ban? There has been some time since the law was passed. I want to talk a little bit about your involvement in the non-profit group here that you were involved in, and what they are doing for this community. That started after the net ban or just before.

KB: Well, are you talking about FISH?

MJ: Yes.

KB: Well, the fish, I wasn't involved in its creation. I think you and Wayne and, I guess, Mary, were the primary – not Mary? Okay. You and Wayne and…

MJ: Wayne and…

KB: She did the incorporation papers, though, didn't she? I get something in her name. I don't know. I can understand. I won't put that on tape. Anyway, FISH was formed in 1992. I don't think I got involved until later in the [19]90s, probably after the net ban, maybe [19]96, [19]97, I don't know. But I wish I had been involved earlier because I know – I think the Coast Guard thing would have turned out a lot differently if there had been some other people involved than the one in particular that I'm thinking of, that I think probably really incensed the Coast Guard.

MJ: Before I left the village, remember, I came to you. I said…

KB: What did I say?

MJ: I said –

KB: "Go to hell"?

MJ: – you have to take over FISH.

KB: [laughter] Did I say, "Leave me alone"?

MJ: But you did. Well, you were, I think.

KB: Well, I didn't take it over. I don't remember if I was or not. I'm in the background.

MJ: You were there. You kept it together, I think. I think you were doing…

KB: I don't know about that. It's a good group of people, though. But anyway, okay, so, what happened – I don't remember when we started negotiating with this – the main thing that FISH has done I think is look for ways to help Cortez stay the way it has always been, and educate people. I guess that's been a big part of the mission statement, too. But I think one of the most successful or the best thing we've done is the fish preserve. That's allowed us to do a lot of other things. The festival, of course, has been really important in making that all happen.

MJ: Tell me, what is the fish preserve?

KB: The village of Cortez is bordered on the eastern side by this 95-acre tract of land, basically, that includes some submerged lands, some mangrove, and 25 acres of upland that goes between Cortez Road and Sarasota Bay. Well, at one point, the county was trying to purchase that. I don't know if we asked them to do that or why they – but anyway, negotiations fell apart. So, we thought to ourselves – we were at a meeting at the firehouse. We were talking about it. We thought, "Let's just try to do that ourselves." We approached the owner, Mrs. Shuey. Actually, we didn't approach her. We approached her dear friend who is Gene Turner, out in Arcadia. He's a cattle rancher and orange grower. Anyway, he was really frustrated dealing with Manatee County. But after he talked to us, I guess he called Mrs. Shuey, his friend. They turned around and decided that they would sell it to us for 250,000. I think that's in, maybe [19]97, somewhere in there, because I believe we paid it off, three, five years – it took four years. But anyway, they agreed to sell it to us for 250,000. Initially, it was going to be 500,000. They would donate half to us. But then for some reason, she decided she didn't need the donation. I don't know, for tax reasons or something. She's extremely wealthy. But they decided just to sell it outright to us for 250. We gave her $1,000 down. Isn't that funny? [laughter] We did. That was in December of one year. I don't remember what it is. We then gave her 60,000, April 1st. That's basically proceeds, I think, mainly from the festivals that we had saved up over a couple of years. Then every year beyond that, on April 1st, we paid her 63,000, three more times, for a total of 250,000. So, why that was so very important is because today, that will never, ever be developed. I mean, that's always been our goal, to not have anyone be there. It's like a buffer to this little community. The mangroves will stay there. They'll protect the bay. They'll enhance the fishery. That, in turn, makes it so that the fishermen are able to do what they love to do. If you take care of what takes care of you, I guess you could say. But I think that was probably one of the most important things we could do. Some statistic, I don't remember exactly what it is, said that on the Sarasota Bay shoreline, there's less than 20 percent of mangrove forests left, which is really pathetic. It's really horrible, whatever the number is. So, that makes this even that much more important, that, here we are with 95 acres of undeveloped anything there.

MJ: I want to also ask you about, more recently, you have become more involved with the

management of fisheries. You were recently appointed to the Gulf Council. That was almost four years ago. Five years ago?

KB: No, it's actually five. I'm almost at the end of my second term. So, we're five and a half right now.

MJ: Just tell me a little bit about your decision to do that or to try to…

KB: My name had been submitted a couple of times to the governor's office by, I guess, groups I have worked for, Organized Fishermen and Southeastern Fisheries, when, I guess that because of working on the net ban issue primarily. I had never made it. The governor submits three names to the Secretary of Commerce. Well, my name was on the list a couple of times, usually second or third. I never got it. I don't even – whatever, six years ago, I was selected to be the commercial representative for Florida. What do I think about it?

MJ: Yes.

KB: I don't know if I can say. I've learned a lot about the process. I don't think I'm – I don't know if the word, it's not that I'm not strong enough for that job, but I don't have the killer instinct, maybe. I don't know what the right way to describe it is. But it's very political. The whole thing is so political. It's kind of sickening. To tell you the truth, it really bothers me, the whole process. I'm so glad that my seat is up this summer, that I don't have to do it anymore, that the people – I mean, there are many very kind people and empathetic people. Empathetic, that's not the right word. What's the right word? It isn't empathetic.

MJ: People have some empathy.

KB: Empathy. Well, anyway, there's some kind people. Then there are some that they're just out for whatever group they're supposedly representing. It's just difficult to deal with that sometimes.

MJ: Okay. What do you think is the future for fishing and for Cortez?

KB: The future for fishing, commercial or recreational?

MJ: Commercial.

KB: Commercial? I don't know. I'm trying to figure that out. I don't know if the few fish houses that are left, I don't know if they will be able to – how much longer they're going to stay in business, which I know people have been saying that for years. So, after a while, people become just numb to that. But I know Madeira Beach Seafood, they're very close to losing their lease. It seems like the property values have made it almost impossible or feasible to have a working waterfront. That's happening all over Florida. Apparently, the Fish and Wildlife Commission isn't concerned about it, from my perspective, looking at it. Of course, I don't have the best view of what it is that they do. But I don't know if they want everything imported. I don't know if that's what's going to happen to Florida and this country, that we're just going to be

reliant on other people's resources, which just kills me because it's so hypocritical to think it's okay to take what someone else produces. We'll just protect ours here so we can go fishing and have fun. That just drives me nuts. But it looks like that's what the State of Florida wants. I hope not. I talked to you earlier about trying to figure out ways to not let that happen. I think about it all the time. I really don't know if it's getting involved in politics, which I hate, or writing a book or making a video. [laughter] I don't know what the answer is, Mike. I don't know.

MJ: We will talk a little bit now about how that then relates to how the future of Cortez and what will Cortez look like in the future? It depends upon what happens on that waterfront, right?

KB: It does. That's what's so funny, because people like, I'll be late to a meeting or something, which I'm just perpetually late. But I always think that the fish houses – there's a number – still a few of them here – they are what makes this place what it is. Everyone's always saying, "We want to keep Cortez like it is." Well, if you kept these fish houses functional, then that's what's going to keep Cortez like it is. As soon as the fish houses are forced to sell or don't have enough fish to keep their doors open to pay the bills, that's when this village will change. It's already changing. There are new people coming in that like these houses. For some reason, it's almost trendy now to live out here. The cottages, everyone fixes them up really cute, where they used to be windblown and paint chipping off and all. Now they're like perfect little dollhouse-looking things, and it makes you sick. [laughter] You want to get throw some dirt on them or something.

MJ: Because it was not trendy…

KB: Well, it's not real.

MJ: It was not trendy to live in Cortez either, was it?

KB: No. Years ago, in fact, I had mentioned to you earlier, my mom thought that people out here were, I don't know, simple or something. But everyone has their views. But today it's amazing how much – I don't know if it's because it's by the water. They seem to like the simpler life. But then they'll come in. They'll say, "What are those crab traps doing there?" I'm like, "Well, you know what? They belong there. Maybe you don't." [laughter]

MJ: I do not have other questions. Is there anything that you think should be said? The title of this documentary is Perseverance and Resilience into Florida Fishing Communities. Do you see that here in fishing families? Do you think they have that perseverance and resilience to remain?

KB: I think they do have that, but I think it's getting harder and harder for them to keep that ability to keep on going. There's only so much that someone can be offered for their property before they think, "Why am I still here? I can't fish. I can barely pay my property taxes because they're going up." At some point, you can't blame someone for taking what they think is the best way out. That is one point I'd like to talk to you or tell you about. I remember that they always – when everyone always says at those meetings that we'll have, they always say, "We want to keep it the same. We want to keep it the same." Yet I know enough about the history of the different families here that those men or families who ran those fish houses, they weren't trying to keep it

the same. What they were doing is what made the most economic sense for them or what fed their families. I, today, wouldn't blame them for what they're having to deal with now, regulations and all the stuff that they have to deal with. Does it make sense to operate a business that isn't going to make very much money? Those guys, they would have packed up and, I don't know, headed to Cuba. Who knows what they would have done? But they were very practical. What we're doing right now isn't practical. So, it's ironic to say, "Let's keep it the same," when these properties really don't make sense being fish houses. Dad said that to you earlier. The property taxes at AP Bell are like 30,000 a year. So, that's when you get these studies that say the highest and best use. That makes you sick, though. To say condos are the highest and best use, it's awful. But I don't know. Maybe it's a more practical thing. I know there are practical people, that's for sure, everyone out here.

MJ: Well, I think people, some people, when they say they want to keep it the same, is what they want to keep it – my interpretation is we want to keep it a commercial fishing community.

KB: But yet I don't think a lot of them realize how important the fish houses are to the community, even the local people. I'm not talking about the fishing people because I think they know it. But the ones moving in here that say how much they love it, they're the same ones that will call if we have to blow ice on a boat at 11:00 p.m. and say, "We're sleeping. What are you doing?" I'm like, well, the fish had to be iced. So, I don't know. It's a difficult question. It's changing all the time. It changes every day.

MJ: Is there anything else that you think you would like to say that we have not talked about, about fishing?

KB: Send money to FISH to help me either write a book, get elected to some office, which would kill me, which I could get elected to office with almost no money.

MJ: Just eat more fish. [laughter]

KB: My platform would be to change the net ban or turn around the net ban or something like that. Think I'd win? [laughter]

MJ: [inaudible] when they see this video.

KB: Yes.

MJ: Remember this is out there if you run for office. [laughter]

KB: When I just said some people's names, and I said derogatory things. [laughter]

MJ: Anything else?

KB: No.

MJ: Okay.

[end of transcript]