

Sally Van de Water: Sean can sit right – we are not going to be sitting too long. Go sit over there in that chair. Bring that up. Well, good afternoon, everyone.

Multiple Speakers: Good afternoon, Sally.

Female Speaker: Hi, Sally.

SVDW: Hi, [inaudible].

MS: Hi.

SVDW: Well, I am very pleased to be back here for one final day. It is my favorite day. You will know why in just a few minutes. I am very pleased to be here and to introduce Mr. Phillips Cisrow, who is, as I mentioned last time, a champion oyster schucker. In fact, he is New Jersey's champion oyster schucker. He participated very recently in the national competition. That was the summer, I believe, or this fall?

Phillip Cisrow: Yes.

SVDW: This fall, yes, sir. He is a real well-regarded gentleman who has presented at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife at the Smithsonian Institution. He was there in 2004. He represents a longstanding family tradition of oyster shucking and knowledge about the oyster industry. Also, of course, what you do with the oysters after getting them out of the shell. So, if you are lucky, maybe he will share some recipes with you. But without much further ado, I would like to introduce Mr. Phillip.

[applause]

PC: Thank you. As Sally has said, my name is Phillip Cisrow. I'm a native of Port Norris. I've been shucking oysters for thirty-six years, okay? I'm one of the best oyster shuckers in Port Norris. I'm one of the best oyster shuckers in the state of New Jersey.

SVDW: In the world, I would say, as well.

PC: Yes, I am.

SVDW: [laughter]

PC: So, I'm here to demonstrate to you guys. If you have any questions after I demonstrate, feel free to ask me. First off, I want to show you what I use to open up these oysters with. This is one of the traditional oyster knives that they have been using for the past seventy-five, eighty years, maybe more. My dad is eighty-seven years of age, and this is what he was using when he was a boy shucking oysters when he first came here in 1939. [inaudible] my dad. Also, his father, exactly. (Mr. Milrow's?) father. His name was Mr. Paul Milrow, another great former schucker. A lot of the different techniques in shucking these oysters. A lot of different techniques in opening this oyster. Like I said, this is one of the traditional knives that they used,

his father and my father. Now, I started out using this knife myself for about maybe twenty years of my time of shucking. So, in the past, maybe since about the late [19]70s, early [19]80s, they came out with a new knife for having more comfortableness in the hand mainly. It's not a knife that you can use for speed. It has the wide blade on it. This is mainly your speed knife that everybody uses today in order to be in contests and mainly open oysters today. So, this is called the whetstone. This is what we sharpen our knives on. We usually whet this down to sharpen our knives on. This is the cracking iron. They use this to hit the oyster. They open up the mouth of the oyster, okay? This right here is a hammer, which a lot of people use just to knock the bill off the oyster and then stick the knife in. What I'm mainly saying about this hammer, I don't have the birth board here to show you how the guys was using and ladies was using this hammer to break – to use this hammer with. So, I won't demonstrate about how to use this hammer only by the way I know how. This is the birth board. This is where you give birth to the oyster. This is called a birth board. This is what you open your oyster up on. This metal thing here on the bottom here is where you crack your oyster at. You use this iron. You hit the oyster, and you have the oyster turned up on the side and you hit it on this...

SVDW: Demonstrate.

PC: Yes. See, you hit the oyster on the side and – yes. I'm going to call you guys, and that way, I can show you how to use this birth board and the oysters and how to open them. So, if you would like, everybody could gather around, okay, guys? I'll show you how to [inaudible]. Okay. What you want to do first, you want to make sure that you have all – listen up, guys. Listen up. You want to make sure that you have all your protective gear, how to open one without using the cracking iron, okay? All right. These, at the mouth is already open on this [inaudible]. They're fairly easy to get into. So, you got to make sure whatever size portion that you are shucking, you want to have the right size blade, you know what I mean? Because you can extend this blade. That's what I meant to tell them, the last step. You can extend this blade. The blade goes down in the handle about halfway down the handle. You can extend this blade for the size of the oyster. So, what you do with this right here, you go in and you have a dark side and light side. This is the said light side. We have the black side. We have a black side and the brown side. So, what you do, you put the brown side down, black side up, and you go in. See, how you're going to close up a little bit?

SVDW: Yes.

PC: So, that's where you can tell this is black. So, you go in. You have your knife down at the bottom. You come from right to left since you have a heart down at the bottom of the shelf that you have to cut out. Got to [inaudible] the oyster out, have it nice clean. So, you'll come around from right to left. It's like, call it shuck the oyster, okay? That's what you're doing. You're shucking it. So, you hit it like that right there. Look him over, see how clean he is? All right? Okay. Now, you're going from left to right because this is your heart. Everybody, look. This right here, you have to cut that out nice and clean. You see guys? You have to cut that heart out, nice and clean in order for him to drink water. That's how he gets fat. That's how he makes his money. You listening, guys? Guys can't talk. You try to listen. Okay? You've got listen if you want to learn this. This is a crust. Now, what I'm going to do right now, I'm going to take this knife right here and I'm going to go from left to right. I'm going to go down up on neat. See

how this clean right there?

MS: Yes.

PC: Okay, everybody, see?

MS: Yes.

PC: All right. You come from right to the left and you cut the oyster out just like that. Okay? You got me? That's a medium sized oyster. So, what you're doing, you're grading the oyster. That's like moving from the second grade to the first grade. Or from the first grade to the second grade. Okay? So, what you're doing there, that's a second grade oyster there. So, this is first grade oyster and third grade oyster. Got me? All right. That's called grading. All right? Now, look again. I'm going to show you again how to do this. You take the cracking iron and you hit the oyster on the side. You always stay on this point right here. You never hit down there because [inaudible] your oysters [inaudible]. All right? What you do, you hit them on the side like that. Watch your eyes. Sorry. That what you do. Hit them on the side. Nice and hard. [laughter] Hit it like that. You got me? Hit it like that. Listen up.

Male Speaker: Look at it. It's a big [inaudible].

PC: Listen up. All right, guys, now, keep going. Now, remember what I showed you about the black side? Yes. All right. Now, keep going from right to left. Watch it. I'm going from left to right now and cut out their heart. What I'm going to do, I'm going to flip it over. The heart has to be cut clean. All right? Go up underneath there like that. Cut it out nice and clean. Put them in there like that. All right? Let me show you another one. All right. Listen, watch your eyes, guys. See that? Before there's speed, you have to have the technique of opening up this oyster first. All right? You can't stab yourself because when you stab yourself, it's going to hurt. So, you want to learn the technique.

MS: [laughter] So, you're saying [inaudible] cut the heart out.

PC: Excuse me?

MS: So, you're mostly saying that if you cut the heart then it'll die.

PC: Yes. If you cut the heart, it will bleed. That's exactly what it'll do. The oyster will die. You know what I mean? What it won't do, it won't die. It holds the water. See, what you want this oyster to do is hold water.

MS: That makes it fatter.

PC: That makes it fatter. Exactly. That makes it fatter. So, that when you get ready to go [laughter] to the man and give him the oysters, when you weigh them, they'll be weighing more. Got me? The main thing you don't want to do is cut your heart and be – you're going to cut [inaudible]. What you mainly want to try ninety percent of the time is having a nice, clean cut

oyster. You want to be as neat as you can to shuck these oysters. What you're going to be is muddy. You're going to be dirty. So, then you're going to be smelling of shucking. Excuse me, I'm demonstrating because see, I'm [inaudible] if you try, you might damage yourself. You know what I mean? Excuse me. All right. [inaudible] Good seeing you, man.

Male Speaker: Okay, put you them in here.

SVDW: Now, Mr. Cisrow, why are you putting them into three different buckets there?

PC: I'm putting them in three different buckets – that's just like I was telling you far as grading, you have your first-grade oysters, second grade oysters, third grade oysters. Bigger, big, small, medium, large. Now, [inaudible] I'm going to use the [inaudible]. But I'm just grading them because these [inaudible] and these [inaudible] large. So, if we can [inaudible]. Yes.

MS: Have you ever [inaudible]?

PC: Yes.

MS: Does it hurt?

PC: Yes. [laughter] That point right there hits that palm of the head. [laughter] It makes you throw the knife down.

MS: He going to cry.

MS: Also run.

PC: Yes, you might run. [laughter] Yes, you might run, but it's going to hurt. So, you're going to slam your knife down. You're going to get mad, start kicking, turn over the oysters. You'll be flipping over this right here, which is the work board. You might do a whole lot of things. But after you watch and learn to not to stab yourself, this is real good to learn how to do. Because you never know what job you might have to fall back on. This might be a fallback job. If you say you're going to become a teacher and it doesn't work out for you, you have something to fall back on, which is opening oysters. You might love the open oysters. You know what I mean? Because everybody doesn't like teaching. So, I'm going to show you again the fatness of this. I'm going to show you real nice and slow how to open this oyster up. The first thing is slowness. All right. Cracking iron. If you don't want to hold the knife in your hand when you first begin, you always can set the knife down and just crack the oyster. Pick up your knife, stick it in. But you're going down at the bottom of the oyster. Listen, guys. What you're doing is going...

SVDW: You guys listening? Listen up.

PC: Guys are listening.

SVDW: Mr. Cisrow is here as a treat to you. I expect you to...

PC: All right. Now listen. You've got to come from right to left. That's the bottom heart you have to cut out. All right. That's the bottom heart. Now, what you're doing now, you're going to come from left to right on the bottom heart. Come around like that [inaudible] like that, okay? Let me show you another one.

MS: How old was your dad?

PC: My daddy is eighty-seven. I just left him around the [inaudible] market street just a while ago, right here cooking. He's eighty-seven and he still knows how to do this right now.

SVDW: He is the one that taught you. Is that not right?

PC: He's the one that taught me.

SVDW: Your brother and sisters.

PC: Yes.

MS: How old are you?

PC: Excuse me?

MS: How old are you?

PC: I'm fifty-two.

Female Speaker: Your sisters is [inaudible]?

PC: Yes. All three of my sisters, yes, they do. Just three of my brothers. One of my brothers don't know how to open them. He worked in the oyster house with us, but he doesn't know how to open oysters.

FS: Really? [laughter]

MS: Are you the best one out of all?

PC: Yes.

SVDW: He is the sitting champion in New Jersey.

MS: [inaudible]

PC: No, I have one older brother.

MS: [inaudible]?

PC: Yes, I taught (Shema?). Shema know how to open oysters. Yes, because this [inaudible], see if you learn how to open these oysters, you can be in the amateur. The amateur of course, is the shucking contest, which will be out at Bay Day. That's the reason why I want you guys to learn how to do this.

MS: [inaudible]

PC: Yes.

SVDW: June 9th and 10th, this year's [inaudible].

PC: June 9th and 10th [inaudible].

SVDW: The second weekend [inaudible].

PC: If you learn how to open these oysters, you'll be in the contest.

MS: I'll be in the contest.

SVDW: Second weekend, Junior. Make sure you tell your daddy. [laughter]

PC: [inaudible] for the first weekend.

SVDW: Yes, it is the second what day? 9th and 10th. It is the second weekend in June. June 9th and 10th.

MS: I won't be there. We're going [inaudible].

PC: Oh really?

MS: June or [inaudible]?

SVDW: June.

MS: Oh, I won't be there.

PC: All right. I'll show you a different way of opening this oyster, okay? I'm going to open up this oyster. I'm going to leave this oyster in the bottom. Remember I used to have the oyster in the top shell? I'm going to try to leave it in the bottom. So, what you do, you go to the top and [inaudible] one up. Yes, that's one up. I'll show you again. Okay?

SVDW: Well, again, as we discussed, you are using a different technique [inaudible] to leave in the top?

PC: I'm using a different technique. So, I'm used to leaving it in the top. I'm just trying to show you another way even if I use the bigger knife.

SVDW: Oh, it is this little fellow right here. Why do we not tell this little fellow right here?
This little fellow right there.

PC: Oh, that is a crack. See? Now, a couple of my friends, while he be shucking oysters, when he come up, they just take it and poppy it right in their mouth.

MS: Do you do that?

MS: I'll do that.

PC: No. I tried it one time.

MS: What's it tastes like?

MS: Nasty.

PC: No. Wasn't no nasty taste on them. No. Not really. It didn't have hardly no taste on [inaudible].

FS: Isn't it [inaudible]?

SVDW: Right. [laughter]

PC: This is not. But a lot of my friends that open oysters, yes, he comes out of the [inaudible].
You know what I mean?

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: Something like that because we have pictures of you holding [inaudible].

[talking simultaneously]

MS: Have you ever cut yourself while shucking oysters?

MS: He's [inaudible].

PC: Yes.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: Now, how many of you know what a bushel is?

PC: Listen up, guys. Sally is asking a question.

SVDW: A bushel of oysters. How many oysters are a in bushels do you think, Heather?

FS: 300,000 or three thousand.

SVDW: A bushel, a bushel basket.

PC: In bushes, a bushel basket.

SVDW: That is the best thing. It is like the size of a laundry basket. A bushel basket.

FS: Thirty. Fifty?

SVDW: Three hundred. Well, it is like – yes. It is two hundred.

MS: [inaudible]

PC: Yes.

SVDW: Now, you guys know what a jug of milk is, right?

FS: Yes.

SVDW: Well, Mr. Cisrow was telling me earlier that it takes a bushel of oysters – a full bushel basket oysters to get one gallon of shucked oysters.

PC: Yes.

SVDW: Now, how many gallons of oysters do you think he could shuck in a day. Just think. Now, how long has it taken him to do – we did some of these in an earlier class. But he has done just this much in the last couple hours. Anybody has any idea or a guess.

FS: Three hundred.

SVDW: Three hundred oysters or three hundred gallons.

FS: Eight hundred gallons.

SVDW: Eight hundred gallons. What do you think, sir? Is that humanly possible? [laughter] In one day? In one day?

MS: It's not humanly possible.

PC: One day, [inaudible] many, we could do as a group, as the oyster group.

SVDW: Right. If all us were shuckers, we can maybe do three hundred.

PC: Yes. If we all of us were shuckers, say, if there's about fifty of us, we could do about three

hundred.

MS: Two hundred?

PC: Two hundred what? Gallons? I could shuck between fifteen to twenty gallons a day. That's if oysters [inaudible].

SVDW: That is about as most that is possible to do in a day. You cannot really do more than twenty, twenty-five gallons a day.

MS: How fast can you shuck?

PC: How fast?

MS: Yes.

PC: I can do twenty-five in two minutes.

SVDW: Two and a half minutes, was it not?

PC: 2:28.

SVDW: That is right. Excuse me. 2:28.

MS: Can you show us?

PC: Yes. I'll show you some speed.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: [inaudible] step backward. [inaudible] Because remember too, guys, he is not just trying to get the oyster open. He is trying to cut that oyster out whole, not cut that heart. He wants to cut it out whole so the oyster is not mangled because oyster companies do not want oysters that are all mangled up. They want oysters that are whole and perfect. Sometimes the shells, if they are real thin, they can get stuck to the oyster no matter how well you shuck them.

PC: You always want to make sure the heart is clean. Does anybody have any questions?

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: How can you tell what grade they are? How can you tell?

PC: I can tell, yes, because all of these are mainly mediums. We don't have too many small ones in here. We used to have some half this size and some go larger. But these were handpicked out and they are all about the same.

SVDW: The other answer is that he can tell because he has been doing this for thirty-six years.
[laughter]

PC: Yes. For thirty years, I know what to put in the first bucket, the small one. I know what to put in the second bucket is a medium. It all depends on how it looks to you. Get grade or small. A lot of people grade them into smaller than what I put. Yes, so.

MS: [inaudible] crabs in here.

PC: We need to learn.

MS: There's some crabs in here.

MS: Yes, you do.

MS: He's trying to do it within two and a half minutes.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: He cannot get through quite all the oysters here. One more class to go.

PC: I'll do one more. I'll show you, okay?

SVDW: You want to show them how you eat them too? [laughter]

MS: Yes.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: No, we will just let Mr. Cisrow eat them.

MS: Can you do that big one please?

SVDW: Because we do not have enough for everybody to have one, so we will have to [inaudible].

[talking simultaneously]

PC: Don't forget, always, when you crack this open, okay? You can't crack it like this. You have to crack it on the side. You have to be [inaudible] and the main thing, you have to make sure you have the proper wear when you have this. You got to have heavy gloves on. Then if you want, put some eye protection on. Have some safety glasses on. The shells will get in your eyes. So, I have to meet the doctor and have him to take the shells out of my eyes. It's very dangerous.

SVDW: No wonder you still have vision too.

PC: Exactly.

SVDW: You are very lucky.

PC: Yes.

SVDW: You will notice he also has a very long apron on that is waterproof. That is a very key part. You guys have seen the show, *Dirty Jobs*?

MS: Yes.

SVDW: This is a dirty job. [laughter] In fact, Mike Rowe has been to oyster shucking places. He went to [inaudible].

[talking simultaneously]

PC: That's the second time that we're doing it.

[talking simultaneously]

PC: All right. Look at how it opened up, guys, okay? [inaudible] If you want to be in amateur [inaudible] for Bay Day, you're going to have to learn how to open these oysters or you can't be in. They're not going to have nobody mess the oysters there [inaudible] down these knives and mess around [inaudible]. So, you're going to have to learn how to open up to be in the amateur thing down there this year. What you do? The oyster, cracking iron, hit it on the iron. Hit to the side like that and go into the oyster. Okay. I [inaudible] in there. Come around like that. You open up like that. Now, [inaudible] eat it?

[talking simultaneously].

PC: All right. To eat it, you've got to cut the heart out, so it'll be free. All right. Let's go [inaudible] cut the heart.

SVDW: Attached on both sides of the shelf.

PC: Attached. Exactly.

MS: You going to eat that?

PC: I'm going to eat this.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: This is called oyster [inaudible].

MS: Me and my dad, when we go order clams or oysters, [inaudible].

[taking simultaneously].

MS: What's it tastes like?

PC: Like chicken.

[laughter]

[talking simultaneously]

PC: Listen up, guys. I have a next class. I can't open more oysters. The next class [inaudible].

[talking simultaneously]

PC: Heather's dad works in oysters too. Always [inaudible].

[talking simultaneously]

PC: Listen up, guys. Listen up. Anybody have any more questions to ask about the oysters? Okay. Ladies first.

FS: How old were you when you started?

PC: I was fifteen.

FS: Really? When you started the oystering contest?

PC: My first contest, I was twenty-nine.

MS: Did you win?

PC: Yes.

FS: Did you win any money doing this?

PC: Yes. [inaudible]

FS: Yes.

PC: [inaudible]

SVDW: We get cash prizes.

PC: Cash prizes [inaudible].

MS: How much money have you won?

SVDW: [inaudible]

PC: Two [inaudible].

[talking simultaneously]

PC: Big ones. I'm going to open up one more because I have to save some for the next class.

[talking simultaneously]

MS: Is that from the ocean?

PC: No. That isn't from the ocean. That's just from the [inaudible].

MS: Algae.

PC: I have [inaudible].

[talking simultaneously]

PC: [inaudible] from them now. See, this is the mouth, okay?

FS: Is it funny? [inaudible].

MS: No.

[talking simultaneously]

MS: That's like a number four.

PC: Well, these are number four.

MS: I knew it. Especially, how do they get them big ones in out California? How do they get them?

SVDW: Well, they [inaudible] species.

PC: They come in with the small ones. All small ones don't come in all small. They come in all different sizes.

SVDW: Anyone hunt deer?

MS: I do.

SVDW: Do you know how the older the buck is, the more horns he has. The more [inaudible]. Oysters are the same way. Just like as people get bigger as they grow, oysters get bigger as they grow.

PC: Yes.

SVDW: So, this oyster is an older oyster than this one. You can see this one is bigger. So, you can see that the oysters – to be a market size, an oyster that is ready to sell [inaudible]. Oysters that are going to be sold have to be three inches in length.

MS: So, then big ones are just like a bunch of them put together?

SVDW: No. It is one oyster. It is just [inaudible].

MS: But it has the same size like [inaudible].

SVDW: [inaudible]

PC: [inaudible] same size of oyster inside.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: Guys, as the inside gets bigger, the shell gets bigger. Yes, [inaudible].

MS: Do you get any [inaudible] amateur site [inaudible]?

SVDW: No. You get prizes [inaudible]. Professionals get money and you get prizes. Do you need to go or are you good?

Female Speaker: Like 2:03.

SVDW: Any more questions?

MS: That's it?

SVDW: Any more questions, guys?

PC: Any more questions, guys?

MS: This one's bleeding.

PC: Listen up, guys. Any more questions? Anybody?

MS: No.

PC: Okay.

SVDW: Just one more question.

MS: Are you a pro oyster or something?

PC: Yes, I am.

SVDW: He sure is. He is state champion in the state of New Jersey. He is the champion.

FS: Do you do anything else on your spare time?

PC: On my spare time?

MS: Eat your daddy's cooking.

PC: Yes.

[laughter]

MS: He's a good cook.

PC: I just turned to be a three star eight in shooting a nine ball pool.

SVDW: Oh, yes?

PC: Yes. Yes, I shoot for a league. [inaudible] pool. So, I'm pretty good at that. So, that's what I do in my spare time.

[talking simultaneously]

FS: You shoot pools?

PC: Yes.

FS: I never knew that.

PC: Yes. I shoot for the APA league and Tag league. Do you know Butch down here to the [inaudible] store where they have the laws and laws?

MS: Yes.

PC: He's our boss of the league. It's statewide.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: Girls, please stop listen.

FS: How was your birthday?

PC: Beautiful.

FS: I remember I saw you when you were going.

MS: What is that?

SVDW: Get out of here.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: Excuse me guys.

MS: Did your mum [inaudible] do this?

PC: Yes, she did.

MS: Can I keep this?

PC: My mom is [inaudible] Whittington.

MS: You're [inaudible] nephew, aren't you?

PC: Yes. Yes, I am.

SVDW: There you go. You are cousins.

[talking simultaneously]

FS: Cool You're famous. [laughter]

MS: How do you shuck so fast?

PC: Well, it took me a long time to get there. [inaudible]. It took me a long time to get [inaudible]. Once you learn it, the speed automatically [inaudible]. But you have to learn [inaudible].

FS: Did you win your first contest?

PC: Did I win my first contest? No. I came in second place on my first contest.

SVDW: That is not bad though.

PC: Yes.

[talking simultaneously]

SVDW: Let us give Mr. Cisrow a round of applause.

[applause]

PC: Thank you. Thank you. Nice having you guys. Okay? [inaudible]

SVDW: Thank you, guys.

[end of transcript]