

Ela Keegan: So, this is Ela Keegan from College of the Atlantic at the National Working Waterfront Symposium in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Today is May 17th. It is 8:30 a.m. So, could you please state and spell your name?

Michael Wills: Sure. My name is Michael Wills, W-I-L-L-S. I am from Traverse City, Michigan. I am the chair of the Discovery Center Great Lakes which is a consortium of nonprofits, water-related.

EK: So, what makes your working waterfront important in your community?

MW: We have just acquired the only deep-water port, a former coal dock. Our campus consists of five different nonprofits who do important work in water. So, we have the Great Lakes Children's Museum, the Watershed Center Grand Traverse, the Maritime Heritage Alliance – we're all about maritime history and wooden boats, et cetera – Traverse Area Community Sailing, teaching organization, and Inland Seas, which is a school ship program that kids out on the water on a tall ship to do scientific experiments and get them to connect with the water so that they'll become better stewards.

EK: What age are those students?

MW: Those are usually middle school students. They come from all over the Great Lakes area, bust up from their schools and then go out on the boats.

EK: Do you think that that is one of the main reasons that the community values the waterfront?

MW: No. Our waterfront is pretty pristine, beautiful. The town is located right on the water on Grand Traverse Bay which is a Bay of Lake Michigan. Basically, our whole economy is based on water and tourism and agriculture. So, water is central to our lifestyle.

EK: Do you have any personal experiences with the water that you...

MW: [laughter] Well, yes. I guess that's why I am who I am, is because of water. So, as a young child, I was got into swimming lessons and then swim teams and then dive teams and then swimming instruction and water safety instruction. I was a swimming instructor at a Boy Scout camp for years. I went to the University of Michigan to teach architecture and found that they had a scuba diving program. So, I enrolled in that because, as I was growing up, our family would vacation in Traverse City. I'd spend all my days snorkeling and always wanted to stay down longer. So, I took diving and then became a diving instructor and then graduated from college and moved directly to Traverse City to open a dive shop with a degree in Architecture. So, from there, that grew into the boat business. I actually operated two marinas with a large staff and boat dealership and all that sort of thing, service and sales and ship store. I am an avid sailor, trout fisherman, fly fisherman. So, water runs in my veins [laughter]. In fact, my current career is actually real estate development. All of that has been centered on water too. So, I moved from the boat business, eventually into real estate development with a stint as a mechanical contractor. So, in that career, water ran through pipes instead. But it still involved water. So, my current vocation is, as I said, real estate development. I've done three waterfront

– riverfront developments in downtown Traverse City. So, we try to make those as environmentally green as we possibly can. Our new project has green roofs in it. So, water's been my passion all my life.

EK: Could you develop more on the developments that you have made on the waterfront?

MW: [affirmative] One is a very large development. It was called River's Edge. It was in a defunct iron factory property. So, it was contaminated Brownfield project. It's a large mixed-use project right on the river that has restaurants and retail and residential. Hagerty Insurance or the world's largest classic car insurer's headquartered there now. They came in early with eighty employees, and now have over 800. So, that's pretty cool. Then there's another phase across the street from that with seventy-six residential townhomes right along the river. That's called Midtown Center. The current project is uptown with fifteen townhomes, all right downtown Traverse City. So, they're very important projects in that River's Edge. There was a project that connected downtown to old town. There was a kind of a war zone in between for twenty years. So, we filled that gap and connected those two pieces. We're putting residential units downtown in the city core, which is a sustainable goal for everyone. So, we're pretty proud of what we've done and had a big impact on our community, economically and otherwise, visually as well. But the other part of it is, is that I also, in the marina business, purchased a large marina, which is now Harbor West. That was almost forty years ago. It was kind of a mudhole and not much to look at. We brought that to a much higher level of function and feeling, aesthetic, kind of minimized that. Then we have a restaurant and a building with offices and whatnot in there too. So, we did that. But I guess the key point here is that the other marina was at the Traverse City coal dock. They used to have a coal fire powerplant downtown. This coal dock was about 3 miles away from the downtown area in a different township and actually in a different county, which is where my dive shop had been and where my home was. So, my children were born and grew up there. We operated another small marina there in the shadows of the coal pile. So, we dubbed it Black Mountain Yacht Club and with T-shirts and membership cards and all that sort of thing. They had a logo. Traverse City stopped burning coal and tore down the power plant in 2003. My business partner and I divvied up our holdings. He ended up with the property across the street from the coal dock where my original home was, and businesses were. He had the wherewithal and the philanthropic interest to donate that property to our local Rotary club for the purpose of these water-related nonprofits. So, I orchestrated that and helped Rotary to acquire the coal dock, which occurred two years ago. So, now we have this big pier that we're turning into a public access piece that's still a working waterfront. We'll have the largest fleet of tall ships in the Great Lakes. We currently do. It's a fishing pier. It's a port of call for cruise ships. There'll be a fishing fleet eventually. It's a picnic space, passive recreation space for the public. There'll be a tour boat and water taxi to the island, which is a county park, and to downtown. There'll be sailing charters, sailing bareboat charters, probably boat rentals at some point. Traverse Area Community Sailing, which I don't know if I mentioned, is another organization I started twenty-four years ago, is a community sailing program. It has a fleet of over seventy boats, but those are all small, based on an inland lake right in the middle of downtown Traverse City. It's basically a bulge in that river that I've developed on. So, we have a boating center on Boardman Lake. We teach about 450 kids a year to sail in a variety of different-sized boats. That program also has an adaptive sailing program for handicapped folks, as well as adult programs, and women's programs. What the vision for that organization is, is ultimately have

some bigger boats on the bigger bay. So, they'll be based there. We also have a high school sailing team that competes around the Great Lakes, in Lasers and 420s. They'll have a presence at the Discovery Pier with their race boats. So, we've just completed plans for upgrading and renovating and expanding the marina and the pier. So, we're in fundraising mode for that. Then across the street, all of these five organizations that I mentioned are existing in sort of adaptive reuse of some of the old boat shop buildings from our prior business. But they're all in their own silos. We're having a difficult time getting collaborative activities and events or even getting them to walk out of their own building to talk to each other. We need to make space for some others who want to join us. So, we're in a planning phase for that as well. So, part of that vision is to open it up to other water-related nonprofits, but also governmental agencies, other organizations, institutions, and even universities. Well, there'll be some research facilities, a library of the Great Lakes with visual arts, performing arts, history, literature, data collection, and all that sort of thing. Then I would say a large public space called the Visitor Centers where all of the various organizations who produce data or whatever they're involved in can be put on display in interactive exhibits, much like a museum, so that we can teach people about water. So, if they connect to it, love it, they'll protect it.

EK: Wow. That sounds amazing. So, you had mentioned that you are fundraising at the moment and that you find it difficult to get people in communication with each other. How do you think that the NWWN has either supported you thus far, or can support you in the future?

MW: Well, the connections made here are big because a lot of what we're in the process of doing now is identifying partners who either would like to have a presence there or can contribute to our effort in some way with exhibits materials, whatever, or funding sources. So, that's been huge. Then to see some of the other examples that are going on around the country is also inspiring. So, that adds to our – since we're in the initial planning stages, that's good. So, yes, very helpful to be here.

EK: Is there anyone that you have met here at the conference that you feel like you have learned something substantial from?

MW: Yes, lots [laughter]. It's hard to name one. So, I've been collecting business cards and adding them into my database and making sure that we've captured some notes on people we've talked to and what they do and how they might contribute or play a role in what we're trying to achieve.

EK: Well, that is all of the questions I had for you, but is there anything else that you would like to add to your story or to...

MW: Well, I would, actually. This is pretty unique and that is that the Rotary Club of Traverse City – Rotary clubs everywhere, they're a service club. They're all over the world. But most of them operate at a fairly low level, I mean – but our Rotary club is the richest Rotary club in the world. Seventy-five years ago, they bought a couple pieces of property around our area for a Boy Scout camp and a Girl Scout camp, and struck oil. So, from that oil, they've granted over \$55 million to our community over the years. They have \$50 million in the bank presently. So, our Rotary club is really behind everything that we're trying to do at the Discovery Center and

pier. My partner donated the initial piece of property, but then they stepped up and spent \$1 million to buy the pier from the city of Traverse City. They're continuing to invest in this whole concept. As a real estate developer and the guy [laughter] with the ideas, I'm spending a good deal of my time as a volunteer to pull all this together and make it happen as well. But they have the commitment, I've got the vision. So, that's pretty neat.

EK: That is an amazing collaboration.

MW: Yes.

EK: Thank you. Do you have any other questions or...

Corina Gribble: I am good.

EK: Thank you so much for your time.

MW: You're welcome.

CG: Thank you so much.

[end of transcript]