



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: March 19, 2024

Name of Narrator: Eliezer Lopez

Name of Interviewer: Genesis Galan

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Background Information:

- **Name of person interviewed:** Eliezer “Eli” Lopez
- **Age:** 69
- **Gender:** Male
- **Occupation:** Retired fish-cutter; veteran, current, part-time maintenance at a restaurant called Turks Seafood
- **Ethnicity:** Puerto Rican

Interviewer: Genesis Galan

Translator: N/A

Observer(s): Emma York

Transcriber: Genesis Galan

Interview location: New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center, 38 Bethel Street, New Bedford, MA 02740

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Abstract:

Eliezer “Eli” Lopez is a retired fish-cutter who was born in Puerto Rico and moved to New Bedford as an infant. He dedicated over 40 years of his life to working in the fishing industry in New Bedford. In his interview, he mentions the different fish houses he worked for and the people he worked with. Eli also describes the culture of the time, his experience with alcohol and substance abuse, and shares his personal journey towards spirituality, highlighting challenges and lessons learned. He discusses the changes in the industry and emphasizes the need for more education and understanding of the industry's culture and history.

Index

[00:00-5:00] Genesis Galan introduced the project. Eliezer “Eli” Lopez provided consent to being recorded. Eli describes his career in the industry spanning over 40 years and shares his entry into the fishing industry as an apprentice fish cutter for Pilgrim Fish. Eli mentions his previous service to the country during peacetime in the Army. He shares that while working in the fish house, he rotated through various roles and learned all aspects of the job. Eli explains that the job and industry are not for everyone, but he enjoyed his work.

[5:00-10:00] Eli discusses wages and raises. He says that becoming more skilled, led to more earnings. The second fish house he worked for was Tichon, which he eventually left in pursuit of higher wages. Eli enjoyed running into old friends in the fish house and described the women he worked with. He also mentioned that drinking, partying, and smoking weed were part of the culture during that time. Despite this, he has maintained sobriety for 40 years.

[10:00-15:00] Eli describes the people he worked with and his transitions to different fish houses, including D Fillet and New Bedford Fillet, until his retirement. He’s now working part-time at Turks Seafood. He talks about the pay and incentives of working in the industry, even after retirement. He describes his current work, which includes driving the truck, picking up and dropping off orders, and doing yard work. He explains that he had a locker where he kept his essential items for the job, including boots, tools, and an apron. His attire consisted of shorts and a tank top in the summer, and pants in the winter, as the work was year-round.

[15:00-20:00] Eli describes his relationship to the captains and also that he had a side hustle on the dock. His go-to space was the Ritz Cafe. He was given several nicknames other than Eli. He talks more about the partying culture, mentioning that it was a daily occurrence. Eli shares that everyone was either drinking, smoking pot, or doing other drugs. He admits that 26 years of his life were spent using drugs and alcohol.

[20:00-25:00] Eli attends church regularly and occasionally attends AA and NA meetings. He describes his participation in the church and the significant role that the church plays in his life. He clarifies that faith and religion did not have a role in his life while he was in the industry. Eli’s serious commitment to church began after his drug and alcohol use and time in jail. Eli references the Jesus movement. Eli explains that he was born in Puerto Rico and raised in New Bedford from two months old onward. He describes himself as a bad boy and rebel who got kicked out of school. Connections and people he knew helped him get into the industry. He also explains the different parts of New Bedford he lived in, including the north and south.

[25:00-30:00] Eli elaborates on his school truancy and how he was exposed to the fishing industry through connections and by seeing the fish houses while skipping school and walking down the tracks nearby. Nobody else in his family was in the industry. He shares that his favorite memory in the industry was the annual Christmas

party. He didn't take much vacation time previously. Eli talks about his mother's habit of going back and forth between Puerto Rico and New Bedford and the death of a younger brother.

[30:00-35:00] He would bring his family fish and that was the extent of sharing the industry with them. Eli explains his daily routine during the time in the industry. Eli elaborates further on his side hustle at the docks and his addiction. He talks about his co-workers knowing about his addiction but leaving it alone so long as he did his work. Eli mentions the people he shared a bench with.

[35:00-40:00] Eli talks about the friend he worked with and respected most. This particular friend was someone he lived with and got high with, and later became his sponsor and helped him get clean. Eli discusses balancing other side jobs while working in the fish house. He talks about his "battle scars" from working as a cutter, explaining that learning how to cut was the hardest part of the job, but it became easy after that. Eli describes the various types of fish he worked with, sharing his favorite and least favorite. Eli did not eat seafood other than tuna out of a can, prior to working in the industry.

[40:00-45:00] Eli explains the challenges of the job, noting that he can no longer stand on his feet for long periods. He also discusses why he remained in the industry rather than exploring other options. He talks about the changes in the industry, including advanced technology and increased restrictions. Eli also discusses strikes, mostly regarding pay, and how the majority of workers in the fish houses being women influenced these outcomes.

[45:00-50:00] Eli explains that women outnumbered men in the fish houses, particularly in jobs like trimming and packing. He mentions other strikes at various fish houses where he worked. Eli describes the hierarchy of jobs and pay, the ratio of men to women, and discusses the different unions, including the one he was a part of.

[50:00-55:00] Eli talks more about unions and what led to their decline. He describes how others would portray him and mentions the different nicknames he was given, including "Harpooner," which referred to his drug use. He expresses what he would go back in life and do differently, given what he knows today.

[55:00-1:00:00] Eli discusses various ways fish houses tamper with fish, such as coloring or dyeing them. He shares his expectations for the future of the industry, including the replacement of jobs by advanced technology. He reiterates that it is difficult for someone to understand the industry if they have never been in it or witnessed what he has. Eli also discusses more methods of tampering with fish, such as swelling them using polyphosphates.

[1:00:00-End of Audio] He expands more about the coloring and swelling of seafood products and mentions a trustworthy restaurant to visit. Eli thanks the interview. Interviewers thank Eli. Closing.

Full Transcript

[00:00]

Genesis Galan: Today is March 19, 2024, and we are at the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. My name is Genesis Galan and I'm interviewing Eliezer Lopez, also known as Eli Lopez. This interview is a part of the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center's Casting a Wider Net Project. The audio recording and transcript from this interview will be become part of the center's archive and the N.O.A.A.'s voices archive and may be used to develop future programs, publications and exhibits. Eli, um, do you give us permission to record this interview so that they're, uh, do you give us

Eliezer Lopez: Yes. Yes.

GG: Okay.

[GG and EL laughs]

GG: All right, sorry. Uh, can you tell that I'm reading off a script? [laughs]. Alright, so would you mind introducing--uh, introducing yourself?

EL: I'm Eliezer Lopez. Okay. And I been a fish cutter for, uh, over 40 years. On the waterfront. I have worked numerous fish houses... and uh... I'm doing an interview with you today.

GG: [Laughs]. That's good. Could you tell me a little bit more about your first job in the industry?

EL: My first job in the industry? Wow... Brings me back many years, I had just got out of the service... Um..... I was hanging around, uh... Got a couple of numerous jobs. But then uh... I was hanging around with some friends that did work in the fish house and they asked me if I wanted to learn how to fillet fish. I said, yeah, sure, why not?... So I went down, uh... he was an old timer. Warren, Warren Houtman, uhh, I don't know if he's, you've heard of him, but uh, he's the one who taught me. He was a left-handed cutter... And I started at Pilgrim Fish.

GG: And can you clarify? You said that it-um, you had just gotten out of the service?

EL: Yeah.

GG: So, what service?

EL: Um. I was in the Army. Peacetime.

GG: Okay, and how long, how uh, how—

EL: I was a peacetime vet. So.

GG: Oh. Okay. And so um, and then can you clarify again, what was the, what was the the name of the first place that you worked?

EL: Uh. Pilgrim Fish.

GG: Pilgrim Fish, and was your first job as a cutter?

EL: Uhh, uhh, apprentice. [unclear] apprentice.

GG: Alright, and tell me what was the hardest part about that first job?

EL: Well, the hardest part is..... is learning how to sharpen your knife because [laughs] ... if you don't if you can't get your own edge and you're using somebody else's [unclear] then you're just depending on them. Aye! Sharpen my knife!... so you gotta, you gotta learn for yourself... and that's what they did, they told me, this is how you do it and they left me alone [laughs]... so that's uh, and I learned as I got along, yeah.

GG: Okay. And-

EL: I'm pretty good.

GG: What was your favorite part of that first job?

EL: Well, there's really no favorite parts, I, liked the job and I, and my, I liked, uh, you know, doing everything. You know? Because when they didn't need me on the bench, they would put me in the back probably helping the guys in the back, unload the boat... or I'd be helping the girls trim, and, the guys packing the boxes. You still used wooden boxes back then, so... I worked the floor around, and... Freezer, and they had me doing everything. [Laughs]. I learned all aspects about it. You know?

GG: That's good. Um, if you had not been a cutter, is there a different job that you would have wanted to do?

EL: Um, I, really... didn't uh, wasn't [laughs], you know, work was uh..... back then it was uh... I didn't wanna work [laughs]. I needed money but I don't want to work [laughs], eh, But uh, I, I got in and I did what, what I was supposed to do. And...I, wound up liking it, you know. Guys, young, young, saying that, eh, I don't like this job, I'm like, I love it!, you know, guys get them saying that they don't like this job. I love it.

[5:00]

GG: Can you tell me a little bit more? Why you loved it?

EL: Yeah, I was working every day, you know? Eh... I was getting up to uh, in wages, I was--they move you up every time you... I, you uh, you uhhh cut so much fish and there is---the better you get and then the more money you make. So but that's...

GG: Do you remember how much you started off making? And then how much--

EL: Uhh, I think it was, it was it was minimum wage at the time for apprentice, you know? But they try to keep you there as long as they could, you know? And then you tell them, hey, look, man, you know? [laughs] I gotta move on here.

GG: So do you, do you remember how much you made to start? And how much you--

EL: (mumbling) so long ago. Maybe six bucks an hour? I think it was?

GG: Then how long would you say it took you before you were? You got your first raise?

EL: Well, actually. They gave me a raise up to I think it was seven or eight bucks. And then uh... they didn't uh... you know, I thought I was worth more. So, I left there and I went to another place. Told them I was a cutter and, then they gave me cutter's wages.

GG: So, what was the second place that you went to?

EL: Uh, Tichon.

GG: Tichon?

EL: Yeah.

GG: And uh, you were a cutter there?

EL: Yeah.

GG: Did you go with your own knives? Did they provide you with a knife?

EL: No, no.

GG: At this point, you were—

EL: Yeah, we have our own tools. We buy our own stuff. They weren't buying it for us and--

GG: And how are things different in the second job than in the first one?

EL: I got more money and, you know, of course, I knew people in there, you know, older friends that I used to hang around with, I didn't even know that they in the fish house and yeahhh...

GG: Earlier, you had mentioned in your first job that there were men and there were a women and they had different roles, um, what were some of the conversations like on, in your day to day? While you were working?

EL: Oh geez [laughs]. Get to hear some of them women, they swear worse than the truck drivers [laughs]. Them women were tough back then. I'll tell ya, especially working with them.

GG: Yeah? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

EL: Well, that's [laughs], aghhh, yeah, they, they did their work they were you know... and they helped me and they showed me and... and uh, but we also had fun too, you know..... go out drinking, partying and... at the time,

GG: Were there any spots that were the go to spots for you and your friends to go to after like a long shift

EL: oh we used to go... well, I used to get picked up in the morning and the first place that we'd hit was a, one of the bars [laughs]. One of the bars, we go and the guy be in there cleaning up and he'd open the back door for us before we started working, you know, pop a couple of shots and beers... smoke a couple of bones, you know, on the way to work and through the day you know break time go back to the bar, comeback... you know, we got so used to it that, we could close our eyes and cut fish, ya know?

GG: That's good--

[EL laughs]

GG: You mentioned the word bones, um, so, for future researchers—

EL: Marijuana

[GG and EL both laugh]

GG: That's good. Umm, and so uh, what was it like when you would all go out? You know what were some of your favorite memories?

EL: Uhh, they weren't--some were good, some were bad and I, I look back at it now where I've been clean and sober over, over thirt-about forty years. So... there was some good times and some bad times. You know? But...

[10:00]

GG: Yeah... and so who were you closest with during those beginning years in the fishing industry?

EL: Agh... It's, some characters boy, [laughs] tough guys. you know like I remember one of the truck drivers, a couple of the truck drivers, uh... I was uh, with them two guys, put them together, they get into a fight, forget it. They clean house [laughs] just them two alone, aye you need no help. But uh, yeah! I mean that was that was back in the days, you know? That's the way it was, you know?

GG: And so, um, how long did you stay working there, more or less?

EL: Well, I I did a... I think I did a couple of years there, I went to Tichons, I did a couple more years... uhh...I left there and I went over to uh... gee, I don't know if it was (mumbling). I think I went to D fillet first... and uh, started cutting there... and then I left there and I went next door to New Bedford Filet, and then I stood there for quite a few years, until uhh Mark Bergeron wound up... wound up owning it and I worked for him for a few years... up until I retired uh... about uh, when was that? You know, 66, 69--about 3, 3-4 years ago... (unclear) when I retired, umm a friend of mine was working for Richie Turks Seafood and, he had retired. He wasn't going to cut anymore but, so he came down to fish house... and he come and got me, he asked me if I wanted to work gave me all the incentives, told me what the incentives were and I said yeah sure. You know? So I was making good money. He offered me good money, 20 bucks an hour. I was only getting, like, uh, I think it was 16-17 an hour when I left Bergies.... So he wound up giving me 20 bucks an hour... and I been with him ever since uh, I'm still there now I'm not cutting anymore, once in a while if he needs me to cut, I'll cut, but other than that I just, drive the truck, pick up pick up the fishing needs from like NWD, uh from Boston, they come in from Boston, they drop it off at NWD, I go pick it up and uh, different pick-ups in the city, like getting quahogs and clams and in one place and then frozen stuff like, you know the frozen shrimp and all that. So I do all that and pick up around the grounds you know, make sure everything's, make sure everything's in order, just to keep me busy, you know. And uh, and that's uh--

GG: So going back to some of your experience as a cutter, could you describe maybe what you wore to the job?

EL: What I wore to the job? Well, we had our own locker so we could put up boots and tools and apron. But I always wore, you know... it wasn't, if it was warm enough, I'd wear shorts you know, as usual. Uh, tank top, uh, wintertime, pants and all that, you know. Along with the boots, you know?

GG: Now, you mentioned winter so did you work all four seasons? Were there some seasons that—

EL: Yeah! All, all year-round. You know.

GG: And were any seasons more tougher than other seasons?

[15:00]

EL: Uh... sometimes, yeah, not much though. You know in terms of boats coming in and going out cause when I was at Bergies, he, I got to know some of the captains because if I wasn't... helping in the fi--cutting in the filet room, I'd be out back, unloading the boat you know, because that's, Bergie was my boy, you know? He says, alright, go over there and help them guys out. So that's what I did, you know? I got to know some of the Captains, and then when they come in, if I was cutting, they'd... aye, I got some I got some fish for you to cut so I can bring home. Okay, no problem, I'll take care of it, so they'd give me some of the fish, plus I use to hustle on the dock, you know? On break time, I'd go pick up the fish that they dropped and then at the end of the day I'd cut it all up and I'd go sell it.

GG: Could you tell me a little bit more about the relationship with um, between you and the captains?

EL: Well, it... wasn't much because I, you know... they would come in and then, some of them, I didn't even know when they'd come in. I guess cause the other guy, go see Eli, you know, he'll take care of it for you. So they'd come in the filet rooms, say, aye... I said, no problem. [Laughs]

GG: Um, so you just mentioned Eli, is that the nickname that you went by?

EL: Yes.

GG: And who gave you that nickname?

EL: Umm, that... yeah, that that's... myself actually. You know, I gave myself that nickname. But to go back a little bit, one of the one of the girls in the fish house use to go to the bar, where we hung out at, so, which was the Ritz Cafe, I don't know if you've ever heard of it but, yeah, it was a, pretty mean bar. [Laughs]. Oh, yeah.

GG: So now going to that, to the Ritz Cafe?

EL: Yeah, she, we were talking, young, drinking. She says, you know what? She says, you're a hard guy to figure out I'm gonna call you kid. I said, okay, kid it is. [Laughs]

GG: Did anyone else pick up on that and start calling you kid?

EL: Yeah! Everybody was doing that. And then I, another fish cutter of mine, he was working for coastal fisheries. And we used to hang out together. And then, at the time, it was the CB radios and that, so he gave me gave me a CB handle, the freaking-rican. And so I stuck with that one. You know?

GG: That one's perfect. So freaking-Rican, just in case.

[GG and EL both laugh]

GG: So, could you tell me a little bit more about that? Is your family background...

EL: No, he was a friend of mine. He worked in another fish house, but we used to like party seven days a week. And you know, come home two, three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning, change up go to work. Do the same thing every day. Boom, boom, boom. Go out, party on the weekend. He uh, cause he you used to shoot archery, so... we would uh, on the weekends, Friday nights uh... we'd go to packie, you'd load up, this, that, and the other. Go for the weekend... Just drink all all weekend long. Come back. Start all over again. It was like a 24 hour, 7 thing, but.

GG: How would you describe the overall culture of the fishing industry? Is it very much like that, with drinking or would you say that that was more--

EL: Yeah! Well... then, it was, I mean, because just about everybody drank (mumble) or they smoked pots or they did other drugs, which I wound up doing too. I'm no angel [laughs]. But uh, yeah... 26 years of my life was drugs and alcohol and... yeah, so.

[20:00]

GG: Do you want to talk a little bit more about that?

EL: Well uh... sure, why not? Yeah.

GG: Whatever you're comfortable with, I didn't get to say that at the beginning.

EL: No, it's okay. I'm comfortable with it. I don't mind putting my story out there. Because everybody knows me now anyway, you know, they know I... They know I don't drink or anything anymore. You know, smoke cigarettes and that's all gone out of my life, you know? Now, I'm more in church! Go to AAA meetings, NA meetings once in a while. I'm more so, I do more church than anything. I sing in my choir. I'm a board member and... yeah, so.

GG: So, talking about church, did you go to church at all, while you were in the industry?

EL: Uhh, no!

GG: Did faith play a part?

EL: No.

GG: So it was afterwards?

EL: Well, when I was, just a kid, I mean, we were brought, I was brought up in the church. But uh, wound up going astray and doing my own thing. And then, I came back, and it was the Jesus movement and you know, I started going again. And then I left that. And then... one time, you know, once again, I had returned back to the church, and then... after all my alcohol and drug use and going to jail, and, is when I rededicated my life to God and I... and that's been it since then. So, about 40 years now.

GG: Yeah, that's a major accomplishment. Would you say--do you think that... church or having gotten to go--if you would--Would have been going to church before it would have made a difference?--

EL: Yeah.

GG: While you were in the industry?

EL: Yeah.

GG: Were there challenging times in the industry for you?

EL: Uhhh, what do you mean by challenges?

GG: I guess--

EL: Is uh, you know

GG: I'm curious, so you mentioned the culture of going out and drinking, um, would you attribute that to the fishing industry, or like, just like the work eth--like you know, like the work culture there or would you say that overall that was just the culture of that time?

EL: Yeah. That was the culture at the time.

GG: Yeah.

EL: Yeah.

GG: That's good. And then you did talk a little bit about your childhood. I do want to hear a little bit more about that. Were you, were you raised here in New Bedford?--

EL: Yeah

GG: Were--Okay. Born here?

EL: I was a bad boy

[GG and EL both laughs].

GG: Tell me a little bit more about your childhood.

EL: Well, I came over from Puerto Rico when I was what, two months old, three months old. So, basically brought up in New Bedford... um... yeaaa. That's, you know. Bad boy, I was a rebel. got thrown out of school. I got in a fight with the cafeteria because I cut in

line. And they caught me and I fought them off. They tried to pull me out of line. I says, I'm already to the register [laughs], you know, pulling me out now? [laughs]. So,

GG: Would you say that anything about your childhood, whether it be your upbringing, or your personality? Any of it prepared you for working in the fishing industry?

EL: Uh, no, not really.

GG: No?

EL: No.

GG: No. And so--

EL: Just the people I knew. People I got to know in that and that's... that's what happened.

GG: So, going back, so you said that you were raised in New Bedford, what parts of New Bedford Did you live in?

EL: Well, when I was uh, I used to live in the North end. You know, I was just a baby, down on Hicks street. Uh... Then we moved down South. We lived on South Water Street. That's when South Water Street was South Water Street. Um, moved from there, over to Blackmer Street, uh, and we moved across the street--No we went back up North, to Adams and Myrtle. Was there til about 12 years old, 11 years old. Then we moved down, across the street from Common Park. Which used to be the uh. We used to sharpen the saw blades and all that. And we used to live upstairs in that, two floors, like, about ten rooms [laughing].

[25:00]

GG: So, you've definitely had your fair share of living—

EL: Yeah.

GG: Throughout the community. What would you say your exposure to the fishing industry, the whaling industry, any of it was like, before you actually got into the industry?

EL: I used to cut school. You know, skip school and that's where we'd go. We'd go down the tracks. Just lots of tracks by the fish houses and uh... yeah, and I knew some guys that that were lumpers, his father was a lumper, we used to hang out together. So yeah... It's crazy.

GG: So you're connected to the fishing industry solely by friends? Did you ever have any family or any—

EL: No, Ahh, no! I was-- me? I was the only one.

GG: You were the only one?

EL: That's it.

GG: And so, going back a little bit to the fishing industry, are there, um, you know, what was your most memorable moment working in the fishing industry?

EL: Eh.....I guess, you know, around Christmas time, you know, that's, they have a big feast. You know? Food, drink, you know, after work, you get your stuff and [whistles] and that's when we started. Christmas party.

GG: Now, you mentioned that so your ethnic background to clarify is Puerto Rican, then?

EL: Yeah.

GG: Does any of the food whether it be cutting fish or any of the other seafood? Does any of that remind you of your ethnic background?

EL: Uh, no, not really, because I didn't really start going back. I didn't really start vacationing until... Let's see. It was uh, after a year clean, something like that. Or a couple of years clean. My buddy's, I'm his God, I'm godfather to his daughter. So... she was born... his son had also took a road trip up to Florida to go see his brother. That was the first vacation I ever took [laughs]. So then after that I started going to Puerto Rico, you know? Take a couple of weeks, get my... get my vacation pay from... from Bergie. Go for a couple of weeks in Puerto Rico. See my mom. Now it's now that I work for Turks, I can spend a month there now [laughs].

GG: Mhm, that's good. And so you said two or three months old when you came to New Bedford

EL: Yeah.

GG: What caused your family to come to New Bedford specifically?

EL: My mother went back and forth to Puerto Rico to have us. That was her thing. Get pregnant, go to Puerto Rico and have the baby, come back when she was able to. Boom! And that's... except for my youngest brother, which Jesse, he passed away. He was born here in New Bedford, so,

GG: Sorry to hear that.

EL: He was the only one. Yeah.

GG: So your mom was going between New Bedford and Puerto Rico.

EL: Yeah.

GG: And so when you finally came to live here, what was the changing factor instead of being raised in Puerto Rico?

EL: Um, well I never knew

GG: You never knew.

EL: Right. Puerto Rico, I mean I wouldn't know what it was like... over there, but, I know, I know its warm. Other than that... That's uh,

[30:00]

GG: So, as far as the fishing industry goes, that's where you worked but you didn't--did you share that, really, with any of your family? Some of your experiences or anything like that?

EL: Uh, no. Not really. I'd bring them home fish, ya know? Bigger fish and what-not. Ya know. Uh... Hey! Get me some fish! Yeah, yeah, yeah, alright [laughs].

GG: Now, if you could like describe like the aroma or the smell or you know what was that like for you and your family? Did they ever uh, shoo you away for the smell of fish?

EL: No! No, they didn't.

GG: No? They welcomed it? [laughs].

EL: I'd beat them up. [Laughs]. I was the tough guy.

GG: Um, so yeah, I guess going back to you being a cutter, could you describe like from beginning like the beginning of your day to the end of your day what you know a normal day would have looked like for you?

EL: Normal eight hour day?

GG: Yeah.

EL: Okay, let's see. It was nothing normal about it [laughs]. The routine was, stop at the bar in the morning. On the way to work, a couple of bones. Break time, around 9 o'clock. 9:15. Go back to the bar... come back, then uh, lunchtime. Go back to the bar. Go back. Then break time in the afternoon. Back to the bar. Finish the day. Then go back to the bar [laughs].

GG: A lot of bar [laughs].

EL: Yeah, a lot of bar! [laughs].

GG: So, what would you say was the turning point that led for you to get sober?

EL: Uhh, friend of mine, when I was caught up in my addiction, because that was my hustling, on the, on the, on the, on the docks, was to make enough money to pay for my drugs. You know, alcohol and so on. A friend of mine he was, he had straightened up a little bit and he told me, hey! He says, you want to get straight? I says, yeah, I guess so. He says, you gotta go to detox. Dry detox, and I white knuckled it and I wound up using again. It was about two, three times, I... And then the last time was just before they were gonna put me in jail for dealing... I straightened out. I haven't looked back since.

GG: That's good. That's major. Yeah.

EL: Yeah, the light went on [laughs]. Lightbulb went on!

GG: That's good. Um, and so also, I was curious about your family and your friends and stuff like that. Were they aware of what was--your friend mentioned about getting sober

EL: Yeah,

GG: So, he was aware of, would you say that your co-workers were aware of what was going on?

EL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they knew.

GG: They knew. Yeah. Yeah.

EL: Hey, so long as I did my work, they didn't--they left me alone.

GG: Mhm, and—

EL: I was functional [laughs].

GG: As long as you were functioning, right! Now, in the fishing industry, as a cutter, how many other cutters were there around you? At a time?

EL: Well uh... we had, we had a bench of 12.

GG: A bench of 12. Would you say that you got pretty close with your bench or did...

EL: I, I knew about--let's see, Let's see, one, one guy, he passed, he uh, which was the cut right in front of me because I had the end bench because I was a left-handed cutter. So I'd look up the whole bench [laughs]. So I'm on the end, and the guy in front of me, was an old-timer... but he, he passed away. And then I had Ani, I had Larry, I had uh, all the old guys, Bobby Barboza, I had, yeah... I knew quite a few guys and my buddy, Auggy Felix. Uh, geez a whole bunch of us.

[35:00]

GG: If you had to think back to those moments, is there someone that you respect the most that you worked with?

EL: Yeah! I actually, you know, my buddy Auggy.

GG: Auggy?

EL: Yeah... Yeah, he's uh, he was my sponsor. He uh... He's the one that helped me out, ya know. Plus, we had lived together, [laughs], we got high together. Ya know? It was one of those things, ya know?

GG: Mhm, now Auggy was also in the fishing industry?

EL: Yes. He was.

GG: And he was a cutter as well?

EL: Very, very good fish cutter, yes.... His brothers were all fish cutters too. Julio, Jon... Tony, once in a while, but he did mostly drywall... but uh, I've done a lot of other jobs besides that, you know, I've painted houses... and other things.

GG: When you went into the fishing industry, did your friends or your family, that were not in the industry, did they have any kind of reaction to you getting involved in that?

EL: in...?

GG: In the fishing industry.

EL: Uh, no. Not really.

GG: No?

EL: No. I just, that ain't for me! [laughs] I'm gonna cut my fingers off! I said, well's that's how you become a cutter!"

[GG laughs].

EL: You don't cut yourself, you ain't a cutter.

GG: Did you ever injure yourself?

EL: [Laughs]. Yeah! See how many battle scars, I got... over here, I got over here, I got this one here. Oh geez. No more, no more scars [laughs].

GG: Would you say that--what was the hardest part of your job? Was it learning how to cut or?

EL: Yeah! That was the hardest part. Once, once you got the feel of the, you know, the the fish itself, and what to do with it, your knife would, ya know, [make swishing sounds] it was easy [laughs].

GG: What were the different kinds of fish that your?

EL: Oh. Cod fish, haddock... uh, lemon sole. I had yellow tail, sanddabs, seadabs, red fish, uhh... whiting, uh... back in the day, we used to cut the uh conger eels, which are the yellow, yellow and uh... we'd cut all kinds of stuff. Swordfish, tuna.

GG: What were some of your favorite fish to work with and some of your least favorite?

EL: My least favorite was the grey salt.

GG: Can you tell me why?

EL: It's just a strip of meat [laughs], and it's all boney [laughs]. But it's good eating fish, I'll tell ya, but, that, I always had a hard time with that one. Ya know, catch the bones, and now I gotta trim it.

GG: Did you have a favorite?

EL: A favorite?

GG: fish. To filet. Cut

EL: Uh, every other fish.

GG: Every one but that one!

[EL and GG both laugh]

GG: Um, before you enter--got into the fishing industry, did you cook with seafood pretty often?

EL: Uh no! I, I don't think I, the only seafood I ate was tuna out of the can [laughs].

GG: And has that changed for you now? Do you eat a lot of seafood? Do you eat a lot of fish?

EL: Uh, no. I don't eat, I'll eat, you know... I'll eat, I'll eat all of the flatfish, groundfish, but I won't eat salmon, or tuna, or sword. I just don't like the taste. Lobster, crab, I don't like the taste of that. I'll eat shrimp. I'll eat scallops... but... clams, if it's in a clam cake. I'll eat it, but...

[40:00]

GG: Um, so... is there anything that you're thinking about from the fishing industry that you know.... What would you say that you missed the most? Because now, you're like, since you've retired, your jobs a little bit different or you're doing more of the truck duties, and picking up and dropping off, um, what would you say that you miss the most of cutting? If you miss anything at all.

EL: [Unknown]. I miss the cutting but I can't stand long on my feet, that's one of the reasons why I stopped, otherwise I'd still be doing it.

GG: And, you had said too, over 40 years in the fishing industry,

EL: yeah,

GG: What kept you in that industry rather than exploring some other kind of job or career?

EL: It's the only thing I really know how to do. Other than, I was a good painter. House painter. I was a boat painter. I used to take the boats when they'd come in, yeah.

GG: Would you say anything else attributed to that, staying in the industry?

EL: Uh, the pay.... you know, because now, it would be paying \$15 an hour minimum wage? I wish they were paying that when I was [laughs] back in the day.

GG: Now, would you say that it's fairly easy to get into the fishing industry? Is it a little bit harder?

EL: Well, right now... they're not using too many cutters. They are using mostly machines. Yeah, so. If you got hand cutters, that's just for like fresh orders. Bergies got some cutters there for the fresh... you know the haddock, and yellow tails... but uh, all the other stuff..

GG: So, you're saying that in a lot of places machinery has replaced—

EL: Yes

GG: your traditional job a cutter?

EL: Right. They still have some I mean, but... that's....

GG: What would you say are some other changes that you've noticed in the fishing industry, from when you started to like where it is now?

EL: All the restrictions. Too many restrictions.....

GG: Can you describe some of the restrictions?

EL: Uh, you can only fish so many days. You gotta tie up. And then another batch goes out. And they do their days and--it's like crazy... before the other fleet would go out and come back... that's why we were the number one port in the world... fishing industry... and now we're like number two, three...

GG: Would you say anything else has attributed? So you--restrictions and is there anything else that has changed our place as number one to number two? And you know, from your perspective?

EL: Well, we got people in the government, don't know nothing about the fishing industry. And they tryna tell the fishing industry what to do. It's like... that's one of the big mistakes there, because government wants to get in everything. They want to run your life!

GG: What would you tell the government about the fishing industry?

EL: [Laughs] Tell them, keep your nose out of it.

GG: [Laughs] Is there anything else that you would tell them?

EL: Not in a [unknown] words.

GG: Um, yeah, that's helpful. And so, I'm curious too, um, throughout the years, did you see any strikes going on? Did you see any--

EL: Yeah, during the years, I, I striked when I was working for Aiello, uhhh, and then when I was working at New Bedford Filet, we had another strike. That was just for more pay. But the girls are the ones that always messed us up [Laughs].

GG: Can you describe that a little bit?

EL: Girls always messed up. Because they, they got a few--couple, a maybe \$1 or so raise, and they say yeah, yeah, we'll agree too...you know, when it came to vote, the ladies had the most vote, cos it was more ladies than there was male cutters [laughs]. Yeah.

[45:00]

GG: Um! I just want to clarify that! Did you say that there were more ladies?

EL: Yeah! There were more girls. Like the trimmers, the packers... you know, they, they're the ones in abundance. So they outnumbered the fish cutters. Every fish house... you got ten girls. Got maybe... five, six cutters.

GG: You're outnumbered?

EL: Yeah, yeah, you're outnumbered, so it made it worse--so we'd have to settle for that \$1.25 raise... where we could have got more, if we'd had held up.

GG: And did you say--when you were first mentioning the different strikes, was the first one for ILOA?

EL: No. Aiello.

GG: I-L-O?

EL: Aiello. A-I-E-L-L-O.

GG: Oh...could you tell me a little bit more about that one?

EL: Aiello Seafood. That's right down on the... right down on the on the wharf there, where uh the Wharf Tavern? [Hesitates]. Is it the Wharf Tavern there? That does all the sushi. The big restaurant there.

GG: Oh, the Black Whale?

Emma York: Oh! Pier 3!

GG: The Black Whale?

EL: No, no, not Black Whale. On the, on the, that's Pier 3.

EY: Oh! Merrill's on the Waterfront.

EL: Merrill's. Yeah.

EY: The other. Pier 1.

EL: That used to be uh, that first build--first fish building, it's green, I still think it is. That's Aiello's. And then we had a, the one after that was uh, I used to cut for them too on a Saturday. Go in, cut fish for them.

GG: Now was that strike also because of pay? Or was there something else going on?

EL: Uh, no! It was the same thing. It was always the contract ran out, so, now we want to renegotiate the contract, and we wanted more money.

GG: And when you, you're thinking about the pay scale, where does fish cutters? Are they kind of on the on the lower end, are they somewhere in the middle?

EL: No. They're on the top end. And then you have your... the girls which is skinners, packers, trimmers, and then you have your floor guys.... you know, they do to fish but... we were always outnumbered.

GG: So did that--I'm sorry. Did the floor--you said the girls were usually willing to settle for a lower raise than you would have liked to—

EL: Well, yeah,

GG: Would the floor--

EL: Yeah, if they'd held up a little bit longer, we could have got what we wanted, and they would have had more, as well.

EY: Were the floor guys, that you mentioned, you were saying they had the lowest pay scale, kind of in comparison?

EL: Uhhh, they... uh, no, they would be, I think middle?

EY: Middle?

EL: Yeah, cuz I think some of them were local 59. And some of them were local 6. So.

EY: And were you part of a union or not really?

EL: The local six, yeah. Until--uh, the local six, they broke up and.

EY: How did you get involved with local six? No

EL: The local 6, was the fish cutters, and uh, packers, and trimmers, and uh, they did the negotiating and the contracts.

EY: Did you have to opt in? Or was it like as soon as you got the job? You're automatically in?

EL: No. You--They ask you if you want to join the union.

EY: What made you say yeah?

EL: I thought it was a good thing at the time, but, I have no use for unions now.

EY: Hmm.

GG: Hm! Yeah, that's helpful.

EY: What changed... your perception?

EL: They wouldn't do nothing for you [laughs]. They wouldn't do nothing for ya.

GG: What were some of the things that the union was advertising to defend or to fight for? Or?

EL: Well, we had a shop steward, which brought the grievances and what not, to the union and then when the next time, contract came around, we want this, this, and this, and um... they get--and they'd say, no, we can give you this, this, and this. No, we don't want it, so we'd go on strike.

[50:00]

GG: So, could you describe what some of those other grievances would have been at that time?

EL: Eh, not really. I think it was just mostly like pay raise, you know, a pay raise every year, you know... to meet to meet the the economy, you know, so you keep up with the economy, the way it was going. You know.

GG: Mhm, so kind of transitioning a little bit--I don't know. Do you have any other questions?

EY: I have just one more question. So, local 6, was your union, you said it broke apart.

EL: Well they, they, they uh... they're not running anymore. Unless... they're still doing, I think they had um [unknown] or two, which was a...I don't know if you remember [unknown] or... which is they did uh, they did the breading and freezing and all that for different stores and that, different companies like Gordon and stuff like that. Frozen fish.

EY: So did you---I mean, you've been in industry so long. did you witness that local 6 fall apart or lose lose power?

EL: They--people, I think they didn't want to, didn't want the union anymore. Because they weren't really accomplishing for our needs.

EY: Why do you think that was? Why couldn't they deliver?

EL: Because they always sided with the... with the the other side. Which negotiating with the boss.

EY: You mean they always sided with the boss?

EL: Yeah! We can only give them this, da-da-da, you know.. but it's all about the money... I want some money too

[GG, EL, and EY all laugh]

EY: Thank you.

GG: Um, Eli, how would you say that other people in the industry would describe you?

EL: You know, wow man!

[GG and EL both laugh]

EL: I don't know. I never thought about it, but.... the ones that know me now.... will tell you I'm a good guy, you know.... back then, I don't know.

[GG and EL both laugh]

GG: What would you say you would most be re—

EL: I had all kinds of names!

GG: Yeah? Do you want to disclose any of the names?

EL: Oh we--I told you a couple of them. Kid, and freaking Rican, and harpooner.

GG: Harpooner? I like that! Well maybe. Harpoon the beer or is it Harpoon—

EL: No. Harpooner was drug use.

GG: Ohh, no. Never mind.

EL: [Unknown] use. That's what they, you know, here comes the harpooner!

GG: Um, looking back at all of it—

EL: I didn't hide it! I didn't,

GG: Yeah, yeah. I think that's good, that you're kind of just open about it all now. Uh, looking back at your whole career in the fishing industry, what would you do exactly the same and what would you do differently?

EL: Well, I'd do it all different [laughs].

GG: Why is that?

EL: I'd do it all different--huh?

GG: Why is that? What parts of it?

EL: Because of what I know today, you know? and I didn't know nothing back then. I thought I knew something but I didn't know nothing [inhales/exhales deeply] but uh, yeah, I would do a complete. Complete. Circle [laughs].

GG: Complete circle? What would you say that you know now, that you did not know before?

EL: That I didn't know before well... there's not really much cos it hasn't really changed that much, I mean they're still doing their shenanigans, you know but uh [laughs].

GG: Who's they?

EL: Different different fish houses

[55:00]

GG: Okay. Okay. Do you want to say what some of those shenanigans are?

EL: [Laughs] taking green fish and making it white

GG: [Laughs] Mmm. Okay, that, you know—

EL: And selling it fresh.

GG: Mmm, anything else that we should know about?

[GG, EL, and EY all laugh]

GG: For those of us who eat fish.

EL: Mm, well if you're gonna eat fish, go to Turks and eat fish.

GG: That's good. Um. So, you know, again kind of just towards wrapping up, what advice would you give to someone that's coming into the into the industry today?

EL: If they're coming into the industry... it's tough [unknown]... Be prepared. You know, to do some hard work. I've had, I've had muscl--, I've seen muscle guys... come to Bergies', unload a boat, and take off the minute they could [laughs]. Outa here. [makes a sound]. Couldn't take it. Too hard for them...

GG: Um... So.... bef--I guess one of, I guess I have two last questions. But, how do you think that the fishing industry will be different in the future?

EL: Uhhh.

GG: What changes do you suspect will come?

EL: I think maybe... they're just gonna cut out with the... with the... personnel. Just go automated. Automation.

GG: Do you think all jobs are threatened by that? Or just some in particular?

EL: Uh, I think uh, most of them...

GG: Um, and then... Is there anything else that you would like to share, that maybe we didn't talk about, anything you want to bring up?

EL: [Huge sigh]. Uh, no.

GG: Is there anything on your mind?

EL: No, I'm good. No? Um, Emma, do you have any thoughts? Any questions?

EY: Umm, you had some really good questions. I'm looking at your list. Um.... I'm stuck between two that you have. 24 and 27. Do you have one that you're especially interested in

GG: Let's see. Mmm.

EY: Or we could ask you which one you think is a better question.

EL: Okay.

EY: Alright, so which question do you want to answer? Any unspoken rules in the industry, or misconceptions that people have about the industry? Does one of those questions speak to you?

EL: Well, they, they have--misconceptions, of what I just told you. Because they don't really know... what's going on in there. If you've never worked there and seen... things I've seen [laughs]. That's... yeah.

EY: Am I hearing that, when people listen back to your story, they might not understand all the layers behind the actions.

EL: Right. Exactly.

EY: Is there anything too close, that you might want to tell a listener, so they can better understand your story?

EL: Yup.....I'd like to see it, grow more but... I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon.

GG: Grow more in what ways?

EL: Uh, in more fish coming in the port, uh... to keep uh, business going. I mean, so they don't have to use other things... Like I mentioned about earlier, you know, uh, using Purigen. And the uh, poly poly-phosphorus, to swell the fish, and then--because that's all sucks it up. And then if you put it to cook, starts a splatter [laughs] and then by the time you're done cooking it's like, where to go?

[1:00:00]

GG: I know I said I had my last question, but just based on that, and maybe this is like our wrap up. But who is responsible? Who created these? Like, I don't know, I'm just curious who's creating the, like chemicals or whatever it is for the different color and the different blowing it up. Swelling it. That's new information to me.

EL: They use that on scallops, uh, mostly. If it's the smaller scallop, they'll soak them in the poly phosphorus, and they use a little bit of Purigen, to keep them white. Which you can always tell. The fresh scallop from the soaked scallop.

EY: How can you tell?

EL: The milk. Fresh scallop, it'll be milky.

EY: Can you see it? Or you have to touch it to know?

EL: No, no. It'll be milky. I mean, pick it up and if you got in the container, you'll see the white, milkieness of the scallop. But Purigen is like a... I mean not the Purigen, the poly phosphorus, when it's soaked up, you can see it, that's its puffed up. And it's almost like a translucent.

GG: Well I eat scallops and I'll be looking for milk.

[GG, EL, and EY all laugh]

EL: I mean, if you go to Turks he doesn't use none of that stuff, I mean, cause,

GG: There you go. This is the advertisement for Turks. That's good to know though. That is, that's helpful. Um, so yeah, I guess if there--is there anything at all that you would like to say in closing?

EL: No, I thank you for letting me share my story and uh, you know...

GG: Thank you for sharing your story!

[EL laughs]

GG: Yeah. I definitely have learned a lot about even just the industry and the culture and what it was like at that time.

EL: I hope so [laughs]

GG: Yeah. So it's been very helpful. And I know that other people listening are also going to feel that way too. Yeah, I'm sure there's different parts of your story that they'll be able to resonate with. So thank you for sharing your story.

EL: You're welcome.

EY: Thank you. Um, I know over the the audio you've shared consent, but I think have we not actually, we haven't signed.

EL: We haven't signed. No!

GG: It's because I never gave you a pen when I gave you the consent form.

EL: Yeah, I knowww.

EY: She's got the fancy pen!

GG: Sorry about that.

EY: And if there's anything,

EL: I, okay,--

EY: Yes, that's you, you can put your real name. We'll save the nickname for the audio recording...