



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: April 2024

Name of Narrator: Debra Soares

Name of Interviewer: Colleen Pina-Garron

Soares, Debra. Interview by Colleen Pina-Garron. This oral history was produced in 2024 as part of the *Casting a Wider Net Oral History Project* conducted by New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. April 2024.

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Background Information:

- **Name of person interviewed:** Debra Soares about her mother Mary F. Soares
- **Age:** late 60s
- **Gender:** Female
- **Occupation:** Accountant, Mother was a fish processor
- **Ethnicity:** Cape Verdean

Interviewer: Colleen Pina-Garron

Translator: N/A

Observer(s): Paula Robinson Deare

Transcriber: Colleen Pina-Garron

Interview location: 11 Mapleview Terrace, New Bedford, MA

Date of interview: April 2024

Language(s) the interview was conducted in: English

Key Words: Bay Village, New Bedford, extended family, single mother, fish house, sacrifice, cold, responsibilities, no complaints, work day, arthritis, playing the numbers, generosity, smoking

Abstract:

This is a loving portrait of a single mother who worked extremely hard to provide for her children. In this interview, Debra Soares describes her mother's resilient, hardworking nature in the face of long, cold hours working as a fish processor. She extolls the importance of extended kinship networks, the power of being raised by a village, and the sacrifices that the women in her mother's generation and the first-generation immigrants from Cape Verde made working in the fish houses. She describes how their sacrifices paved the way for their children to pursue education, so they did not have to make the same kind of sacrifices that their parents did.

Notes: Debra describes how the women in her neighborhood "played the numbers." The Numbers was an underground lottery invented in Harlem, NY forty years before legal state lotteries were invented. Players picked three numbers between 000 and 999, hoping their choices would the match numbers that were drawn daily from public sources like the New York Stock Exchange or Federal Reserve's end of day credit balance. Michigan State University history professor LaShawn Harris explains how "Numbers gambling enabled many African Americans to supplement low wages and [attain] economic security" at a time when they were barred from other forms of wealth building.

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[00:00-05:00] Debra describes growing up in Bay Village with a single mom. She explains how the fish houses were one of the few places hiring Cape Verdean women like her mom, so most of the women in her family worked there. She explains how the whole village would care for and keep her company when her mom was at work, often working long days.

[05:00-10:00] Debra describes her mother's work in the fish houses, the cold temperatures she endured, and the way those working conditions may have contributed to her mother's arthritis later in life. She describes the sacrifices her mother made and emphasizes that, despite the hard work, she never complained about it. She names the women she knew who worked in the fish houses and the way the smell of fish would linger on her mother's clothes after work.

[10:00-15:00] Debra describes the clothes her mother wore to work, her weekday and weekend routines, and how her mother's hours were dependent on which boats came in and what they brought with them. She explains how the women would work at different fish houses on the wharf depending on where there was work that day.

[15:00-20:00] Debra describes the smell of the fish houses, the way they worked together in an assembly line, and defines what "wet fish" is. She again touches on how the cold working conditions may have contributed to her mother's arthritis. She also explains how her mother had open heart surgery later in life. She describes how the women would play the numbers when they came home for lunch.

[20:00-25:00] Debra describes shopping with her mom whenever she won the numbers, her mom's giving spirit, and her mom's favorite brand of cigarettes. She describes her mother as someone who was small in stature, but had a strong willed, family-oriented personality. Debra describes living with extended family and how her sister learned Kriolu.

[25:00-30:00] Debra explains that she never knew/felt like she grew up poor and it wasn't until she returned to New Bedford as an adult that she realized Bay Village was a housing development because she always had food to eat and people looking out for her. She describes her pride in knowing that New Bedford was the #1 fishing port and seeing New Bedford fish on the menu in big cities like Boston. She explains that although her mother could have chose to work in another industry, she chose to work in the fishing industry and never complained about it. Debra describes how briefly working in a fish house as an accountant helped her understand just how hard her mother's job was.

[30:00-35:00] Debra describes how her mother's sacrifices allowed her to pursue her education. Although her mom was only formally educated through the 8th grade, Debra was able to attend college.

End of Audio

Full Transcript

[00:00]

Colleen Pina-Garron: This audio recording and transcript is going to be a part of the Center's archive and could be used to develop other programs, exhibits, publications. Just for the record, do you give us permission to do this?

Debra Soares: Yes, I do.

GPG: Okay. Talk to me about yourself. Tell me a little about your family, your neighborhood, where you grew up.

DS: I grew up in Bay Village, single mom, with a lot of other family members that lived in the village. Actually, some of whom were there ever since the Bay Village was built in the early 1940s. And it was a community of people, family members, as well as others that were very village-like. They helped bring up everybody that was there. So, no matter who it was, you respected your elders. If you was out there playing in the yard and doing something that you wasn't supposed to be doing, like kicking the ball and hitting somebody's window, you know, they would scold you, you know, and it was a community thing. I really appreciate being brought up in the Bay Village because it taught me a lot to respect elders. It taught me a lot about family, what it means to have, not just your immediate family, but extended family, to know everyone. I do come from a very big family. The Martins, my family name was the Martins, which came from Maiden Lane, which was another area of New Bedford. Very popular and big family, like I said. My mother was a single parent, as I said before, and she had to survive. The only thing that was really going on that women could work at, was basically the fish houses. Also, my other family members, my aunts, my mother's sisters, my mother's aunts, they all worked in the fish house as well. It was interesting growing up at that time, cause all I remember was my mother would leave the house, I want to say it was around 6:30 a.m. to be there for seven o'clock in the morning, and sometimes they had to be there for six o'clock in the morning. So my mother would prepare my breakfast, ya know, before I go to school. I'd get myself ready and everything, and then she would go off to work. Sometimes I would go over to my aunt's house and wait for my cousin so we'd all go to school together, or my uncle Morris or, you know, whoever was in a, in the neighborhood. Cuz I did not want to be in the house by myself. I hated that. She would be off to work and she'd be gone all day. I'd go to school, come home, I think at the time it was like 3:30 we used to get out of school, and I'd go to my aunt's, one of my aunt's houses that was living in the village, of course, until my mother got home and sometimes she would come home around six o'clock, sometimes seven o'clock. So, it was late, ya know, and during the wintertime it was hard because it was dark and cold. But, I'd be at my aunt's house, have dinner with them, or my mother sometimes would prepare dinner for a few days and then I'd go home. But I'd go right back out or go next door over Kathy and Laverne's house, or whoever, whoever. The doors were always open. Food was always on the table. You know, it was a, it was a custom, ya know. "Come on, come on, you gotta come in, you gotta sit down, you got eat something," so that was never a problem. I never felt poor. Always had food, always had love, stories. Lot of those old folks' stories of things, just them enjoying life, the best way they knew how. So yeah, that was my upbringing until going to school and coming home and just playing in the yard, playpen, we didn't call it a yard, we called

it a playpen. A lot of kids, everybody went to the same school, so everybody knew each other, from not just from the Bay Village, but from Acushnet Ave, Purchase Street, Pleasant Street, all the way up to County, wherever.

[5:00]

DS: But, yeah, so most of my time was there in the village, and my mother's time was mostly working. She worked in the fish house, so I want to say for about 30 something years, between 30 and 35 years. She retired at the age of 65. However, while she was there, she used to do everything from cutting, well, I think they called it scaling the fish, cutting, of course, cutting the fish scaling the fish, weighing the fish, you name it. Worked in ice cold temperatures, a lot of ice. She did have arthritis at, you know, at the time, and of course, in her elder years, it got worse, but it was very hard work. Very, very hard work for the women. Their pay, I don't remember her pay. I don't ever remember seeing her paycheck, but it was a little bit of money. It wasn't much at all, but they made it work. They made it work, and she did, for being a single parent, and I have to [emotional pause] take my hat off, give me a minute...for all the sacrifice that they did, all of them. It was a lot of sacrificing, and looking back at that, I appreciate it, and it has made me a person of who I am today. So, with that being said, I have to take my hat off to all of them, and that's why I'm here, to represent them for what they did, because no one ever asked who were they, or what did they do, what their life was like. I don't ever recall hearing anybody ask that one simple question, but they did it without complaining. Oh, my God, I've never heard her complain. My aunts, too, same thing. I've never heard them complain. They just do what they had to do, and had families to raise at the same time, so it wasn't easy, so yeah, that's my time.

CPG: That was amazing. How many women do you know personally that worked in that industry?

DS: My Aunt Helen, Helen Andrade, my Aunt Margaret Fortes, her nickname was "Chickie". Everybody had nicknames. My cousin "Penny", her name was Emanuela Pires. My Aunt Rosie, Rosie Fernandez. She worked in a fish house, however, she was not going to work in doing what the other, you know, doing the packing and things like that. She worked in the office. Who else was there? Oh my god. Oh, my aunt, "Mummy," her name was Geraldine Gomes. My Aunt Beverly, she worked there for a moment. I can't think of anybody else right now.

CPG: That's okay. I knew your mother. She was an amazing woman. I remember her walking home sometimes with the black fish boots, but talk about your mom a little bit.

DS: Yeah, when they came out from the fish house, they smelled like the fish. It was not pleasant. However, they wore it like nothing. You know, if they had to make a stop after work, stop in the store, they'd go with their fish clothes.

[10:00]

DS: Scales all over them. The boots were like what we call right now rain boots, is what they wore. I was talking to my cousin. This was interesting. He said about Geraldine "Mummy" that she would wear her boots with no socks. Yes, with no socks

and I was shocked. I was like, wow. I don't know how she, maybe because of sweat. I don't know, I gotta ask him a little more about that.

But my mother wore socks. They were thick, I think they were called fisherman socks. They were very, very, very thick. And with her boots, with her sweatshirt, her pants, they would have these plastic aprons when, of course, that was there at the job.

When she'd come home, she'd go and take her, at the time it was, baths. We didn't have showers. She would take her bath every evening and get ready for the next day. It was just a constant routine every single day until the weekend.

CPG: Tell me about what she did outside of her job on the weekends.

DS: They had a ball. First of all, Saturday mornings were like this, because I was the only child, I had to clean up the whole house. Could not leave the house on Saturdays without everything being clean, including when it was seasonal change. You had to wash the windows, change the curtains, iron everything, wash the stairs, wax the floors, clean the bathroom, change the bed clothes. While I was doing that, she was doing her thing. She would go and get her hair done, go downtown, go to the market, buy her stuff, go down to Cove Mills, go to, I forget the name of the market in New Bedford downtown there, but she would just run her chores. After that, they would either go, "they" meaning the community, the aunts, the uncles, would go to either the cafe to have a drink, Crystal Cafe, Bomb Shelter, Band Club, United Social, YA, wherever. Then on Saturday, by, I'd say around dinner time, me and my mother would always go downtown. We'd go to Kowloon's Chinese and get our Chinese food. Sometimes we'd eat it there, sometimes we'd bring it home and that was it for the evening. Come Sunday, now she's getting ready for the week. She's doing all her cooking early in the morning, she cooked breakfast every single Saturday and Sunday. We always had a big breakfast, always had family members to come over for breakfast and make, you know, Kriolu food, as well as the regular bacon and eggs and things like that. Then, she would get dinner ready, by twelve, one o'clock. And then she'd get ready for the week, get her clothes ready, her laundry, everything, and she was off.

CPG: I have a picture of your mom's port security card and it describes her job as a fish wrapper. She had more jobs than just that.

DS: Yeah, they did whatever they had to do to fulfill the day. I guess whatever came in on the boats is what they would have to do. The hours were never set hours. So, it was like from six o'clock in the morning until six, seven o'clock in the evening, sometimes nine o'clock. It really depends on what they needed to get off that boat and get processed. And they would do whatever they needed to do, whether it was packing, scaling, whatever it was that the foremen needed, they were there to do it. If there were no boats coming in that day to that particular fish house, then they would hop to another fish house and see if they needed work. And of course, the hole, we used to call it the wharf, the hole, it's now called the pier front. The whole pier front was full of fish houses here in New Bedford. There was nothing but fish boats coming in and going out, coming in and going out. So, they would try to fulfill their whole week to work, and basically they did, they did. Sometimes they would work on Saturdays too, half a day.

15:00

CPG: What was your mother's role when she worked with wet fish? Can you explain that process?

DS: I'm not too sure about that. I just remember as a little girl going down to the fish houses and holding my breath, for one, because it was powerful. When I used to see her, she used to be taking, getting the fish from these big containers and putting them on belt, like a conveyor belt, and it would go to the next person, the next person would scale it, the next person would cut. So, it was like an assembly line. That's all I remember seeing her. . .

CPG: What is wet fish? I know what that is, because you explained it to me, but to someone who doesn't know, what working with wet fish is?

DS: Well, when they come off the boat, it's on ice. It was on ice. It was either in water, but it was water and ice. The guys (lumpers) would bring it in, and then they (the women) would take it from those big containers and start to do what they needed to do. But it was fresh. It was always fresh fish, we always had fresh fish here in New Bedford, the best.

CPG: How do you think your mother's job may have contributed to some of the arthritis and other injuries that she had?

DS: Well, I think because of the cold that they worked in every single day, every single day of the year, whether it was summer or winter, I think that had a profound reason for her having arthritis, because she had it in her hands. Mainly in her hands, and of course, sometimes in her back, because they would have to also pick up those containers with the fish in it, and put it up, up top, so they can scale it and do whatever need, you know, they were doing to process it. So yeah, she had arthritis, and then when she retired, the year she retired, she had open heart surgery.

She had to have a triple bypass. She wasn't really taking care of herself, but didn't know that at the time, because, you know, when you're working, working, working, and you've got to support your family, you don't think of yourself. You're thinking of your family and taking care of your family.

So, I guess when she retired, her body just crashed, and kind of like everything came about on her. She retired when she was 65.

CPG: Did she like her job?

DS: I never really, you know, I never really heard of her complain about it. I heard of her talking about stories, because they would be, I guess, telling jokes to each other, saying things, you know, to make each other laugh, but I never really heard her complain. As a matter of fact, sometimes they used to come home for lunch, right, and they used to go over my Aunt Rosie's house, and my Aunt Rosie would have their coffee and things. They'd have their lunch pail, the metal lunch pail with the little buckles or whatever you call it, and they'd have their lunch with their sandwiches, sandwich, soup, and a thermos, was called a thermos.

They'd have that, their sandwich, their soup, and sometimes a salad, and they'd have their lunch, smoking their cigarettes in the house, that time it was allowed. They would sit there. It was mostly the sisters, because it was sisters and aunts that was there, and they'd have their lunch, they'd talk, and then, it's funny, because now that I'm thinking about it, I remember seeing fish scales in their hair, or they'd have to wear the net, but I remember seeing the fish scales in their hair and all over, but yeah, they would come at least three times a week, four times a week to go and sit and play numbers. A penny, put a penny on 123, put five cents on 208, yeah, so they would go, that's what their reason was, to go and play the numbers. They would try to win money. Win something else.

CPG: Like my own mother who played the numbers, the Nubrinhas, sometimes she won. What happened when she won?

DS: She'd take me shopping.

20:00

DS: I'd go, I was like, okay, let's do this. Yeah, we'd go shopping. My mother always had, I always had what I needed. I didn't go without clothes. I used to share a lot of my things, my toys, my clothes, because there was other people that didn't have, you know, as what I had, and I was always a giving person, so that's what I used to do. She would never say, "no, don't give such and such anything," she was a giving person as well.

CPG: I have a picture of "Miss Gee" with the governor in her workplace. Do you remember that day? Do you remember when it happened?

DS: No, I don't. I remember her talking about it, but I don't remember much about what she was saying.

CPG: Was it a source of pride for her? Was it something that she expected to happen?

DS: I don't know if she expected that or if it was something that they were prepped to say, this is who was coming. It might have been. I'm not sure about that.

CPG: I also have a picture, you gave me a very famous picture that kind of describes your mother to me, all in one part, and it's her working her job, but she's got a cigarette dangling at the end of her mouth.

DS: Kent cigarettes. She used to smoke Kent's.

CPG: She's diminutive. She was not a tall woman. Describe something to me about her, about how tough, I mean, you had to be to do these jobs, for one thing.

DS: My mother was small. She was not a big person. She was always small, very, very thin. I want to say she was like a hundred pounds soaking wet. She might have gained weight as she got older, but she was always a small framed person, about five-

four, maybe, five-three, five-four, about 112 pounds. But, still strong, strong-minded, strong-willed, and just handled what she had to handle, just do what she had to do.

CPG: I loved what you said about how important it is to get your mother's story told. And I, I noticed that you, you were kind of emotional about that. You made me cry. What do you have to say to wrap this all up about Miss Gee, and what she meant to your family? I mean you've already said a lot. It's amazing. The term single mother, for example, wasn't something that we really talked about because we all had mothers in the village. She was an amazing person, and I would like you to talk about her just a little more, maybe in relation to some of the stuff you said earlier but also what she meant to you as a mom.

DS: Again, like I said, I have to take my hat off to her. I have a lot of respect for her and the others that, that did what they had to do and never complained about it. Overall, she was definitely a good person, dedicated, finished everything that she started, you know, had morals. She did have morals. She was tough. The whole family was tough. But she was a family person as well because her upbringing was at the time, everybody lived together. Whether it was the grandparents, the grandfather, their children, their grandchildren, everyone was brought up in the same house. Everybody was speaking Kriolu, ya know. Like my older sister, she had to learn to speak English. So, it was always family oriented.

25:00

DS: Family took care of family, and like I said, everybody, you always, whenever you went to the house, you, there was food on it, always food on the table. So I never knew that later on in life, as I was older and moved back to New Bedford, they would say, oh, you know, the villages, the Bay Village was, it's a project. It was for poor folks. I never felt that. As a matter of fact, there used to be people that came from all over the world, the country, and places that I visited, they knew about New Bedford, and they knew about the people in New Bedford. They knew about the fishing industry. I remember when I lived in Boston, I went to this restaurant on Boylston, and they had a menu, of course, and it had New Bedford haddock. And I was like, wow, okay. The wharf got around. But it was a big fishing port. It was the biggest port in New England, besides Gloucester, but New Bedford was the biggest so it was popular. Like I said, I have a lot of respect for all of them that did everything that they had to do. They all still had illnesses, my aunts as well, arthritis, all of them. They paid the price.

CPG: And there was a certain amount of pride that went along with the job that they did.

DS: It did.

CPG: I just want to ask you, if you have one thing to walk away from this interview with, that you want people to know about the job that your mother did, the way that she approached it as something she had to do to provide. What do you want people to walk away with if I said, "Did you know Mary "Gee" Soares?" Then you could describe her in kind of a nutshell.

DS: Describe her, well, I don't want to repeat myself, however, I just have to say something like there were maybe other jobs that she could have done. However, she chose to work in the fishing industry. Like I said before, she never complained about it.

CPG: Is this a job that you or I would have done?

DS: No, absolutely not. But I'm going to tell you this. When I moved back to New Bedford from Boston, I was looking for a job and I happened to get one because I worked in accounting. So, I went through the temp agency and they gave me a job at the fish house. [Laughter] I think it was Tichon, towards the south end of New Bedford. I worked in the office. And it was scallops. And when I walked in there, I was like, oh my God. Being on the inside, seeing things on the inside, opposed from seeing it from the outside in. That was a tough job. Tough job, to say the least.

CPG: You're speaking of your mother's job or that was the fish.

DS: Yes. Seeing it from the inside. Yes. I didn't have to touch the fish, the scallops or anything like that. Mine was just, you know, paper and pen. But seeing how, what they were doing on the floor and how wet they would get. That's the other thing, not just it being cold in the fish house. Because you ain't got no heat running. They were wet as well, along with the cold. So, a few times she would have to like bring extra clothing to change into because they would be wet. It was rough.

CPG: But she was a very proud woman and she brought up a very strong and proud young lady and I think that this is going to be amazing.

DS: And I appreciate everything that you all are doing to bring this to the forefront because it's important to our community, our people, and to represent them in the right way of what they sacrificed for us to get where we're at, because my mother was not educated. My mother, at the time, she was only, went to, I believe it was the eighth grade. So, to see me graduate high school and go to college, as well as you, was what they looked at as they sacrificed for us to get ahead so that we would not have to endure the pain, sacrificing, hard work for a little bit of money. We would not have to go through that. And it was a success.

CPG: Absolutely. Do you have anything else you want to tell me that we may not have covered?

DS: No, it was just a great sacrifice, that's all I know.

CPG: Sometimes you don't see things until you leave and come back. I want to thank you. I think this is going to be amazing. And I hope you feel the same way.

DS: I do. You don't know. I'm heartfelt of everything.

Paula Robinson Deare: It was beautiful.

