Sarah Weeks: This is Sarah Weeks and I am doing an oral history interview with Monique Arsenault. It is January 10th, 2023, and we are at Falmouth Technology Park in the Observer Training Centre. This is for the Northeast Observer Project. Monique, tell me a bit about your family history.

Monique Arsenault: Okay, so both sides of my family come from Canada, which is kind of fun. So, I'm very French-Canadian. My mom's parents still live up there. I was just with them for Christmas. They came down to the States to have my mom and her sisters, and they just raised them. They worked in the mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Then once their kids were grown up and their kids had grandkids, me and my brother, they moved back to Canada to be with their brothers and sisters. They have a huge family and they still speak fluent French and everything. My mom and her sister speak fluent French. I don't know why it stopped with me. I'm sad about it. [laughter] I wish that they encouraged that when I was a kid. But yes, so very French-Canadian. Then my dad's side of the family came from Prince Edward Island. I don't know a lot about that, but my parents just recently did a whole genealogy thing and found out that they were from Prince Edward Island. My dad did. So, him and my mom made a trip up north to go and see the town that they originated from. They said it was a really awesome experience. So, yes, very French family.

SW: Did anyone work on the water?

MA: I'm not sure. I know that my maternal grandparents did not. My grandmother was a nurse for a little bit before working in the mill, and then my grandfather always worked in mills and shoe factories and stuff like that. Then I'm not sure about further back, any fishing history or anything like that. I would think so, though, in Prince Edward Island. Seems like a strong possibility. Strong fishing community up there. Yes.

SW: So, then you were born in Haverhill?

MA: Methuen.

SW: Yes. Okay.

MA: Yes. Methuen. I was just born there, then I grew up in Pelham, New Hampshire, which is right on the New Hampshire-Mass border. Spent my whole life there. My parents still live in the house that I grew up in.

SW: How did you get interested in observing?

MA: So, my first job out of school, when I got my bachelor's degree, was working at Normandeau Associates, and I worked at a microscope for forty hours a week. It was really interesting at first, and it was always interesting. But after a while, forty hours a week at a microscope started to get to me, and I really was itching to be just like in the field doing science. I just wanted to be outdoors as much as possible. So, then that eventually led me to observing. When I found out about it, it sounded like my absolute dream job.

SW: How come?

MA: I was always really interested in marine biology. I was originally a marine biology major in college, but then I panicked that it would have been too specific of a major if I couldn't find a job in that. So, I went broader with biomedical science. So, I regret that, too. I should have just stuck with it. [laughter] So, yeah, always really interested in marine biology. When I found fieldwork that was just on the water sampling fish, having the opportunity to see like marine life, marine mammals, and whatnot out there, it couldn't have sounded better to me.

SW: When did you apply and go to training and how did it work? How did you get involved?

MA: I left my position in the lab at Normandeau in August of 2016, and then I was working at a restaurant for a little bit and job hunting, and it ended up going pretty quickly, where I must have seen the job posting in September or October of 2018. Then I was in that December ASM [At-Sea-Monitoring] training. So, it was just a couple of months. Yes.

SW: How did you like the training?

MA: I loved the training. Yes, it was a lot of fun. I don't even know how to describe it.

SW: What parts did you like the most?

MA: I liked safety the most. Now I teach the safety, so that's fitting. But getting to learn that many species of fish in that short amount of time was really – when you hear about it before the training that you're going to learn how to identify, I think it's eighty or ninety something different species, it's a daunting task. Then when you come out of it and you actually can do it and you can recognize those things and apply it in the field, it's really satisfying. So, yeah, I like the species ID [identification] portion a lot.

SW: Did your degree set you up well for that? I know you did not do the marine biology degree, so you did the more broad degree. Did you feel prepared still?

MA: I did. Yes, I think more so though, with studying. If you make the effort for observer training, then you're golden. As long as you have that like mindset and are able to just put that effort through, then you can get yourself through the training pretty well. But I didn't have really a lot of species identification stuff. I took anatomy and physiology, but that was about the extent of it. Working at my first job and doing microscope work, I was identifying fish, larvae, and eggs, so that helped a lot.

SW: So, you came to training and that was December.

MA: Yes, 2018.

SW: How did you feel about going out to sea in December?

MA: Yes, it was tough. [laughter]I didn't really have anything to compare it to, but I was just

thrown into the winter. It was very cold.

SW: Winter in New England.

MA: I think I overdressed. I was sweating on deck on my first trip because I get cold really easily, so I didn't want to be cold out there. I was just layered up like you would not believe. I eventually figured out what worked for me. But yes, the weather too this time of year. It's not necessarily just the cold, but the rough seas – just being thrown into that.

SW: But you did not want to turn back?

MA: No, no.

SW: Kept going.

MA: Yes. Stuck it out. I knew there was –

SW: Tell us about your first trip. What was your first trip like?

MA: My first trip was a day trawler out of Point Judith, Rhode Island. I was living in New Hampshire at the time, so it was a long drive to get there in the middle of the night. I had no idea what I was doing. I remember the boat used these big five-hundred-pound barrels that they put skates in. Yes. In training, I felt like we learned all of these different sampling methods and everything, but we didn't talk about barrels. When I went on my first trip and they were throwing all of their skate into the barrels, I had no idea how to quantify it, and I was really overwhelmed. You're by yourself. So, I didn't know even how to, like, solve the issue that I had. I think I ended up in-reaching probably my debriefer/provider.

SW: Did we have in-reach (inaudible)

MA: Yeah. I've always had in-reach. Yes. So, that was nice.

SW: How did that work? Communicating with people while you are at sea back home?

MA: It was nice. It was tough because you're limited to the amount of messages that you could send. It was really nice to have to be able to just text my mom or my boyfriend and just like, be able to have some communication with them and feel connected to them even though I was offshore. But at the same time, it's really only a message or two back and forth before you're going off deck or whatever the reason. You're able to talk to them, but then I would find myself spending almost the rest of like that day just being like, "I want to say this, I want to say that" and just not being able to connect with loved ones as well as I wanted to.

SW: How did they feel about you being offshore on a small vessel in December in New England?

MA: [laughter] Yes, my boyfriend was also an observer, so that was very nice –

SW: Oh, I didn't know that.

MA: – where we had that connection. We went through training together, so we both really understood the job and had each other as a support system. I couldn't have asked for anything better. That worked out really well. My parents, I leaned on the side of not telling them as much. I would have worried my mom a lot if I told her how rough the seas actually were. I just didn't want to be worrying them. If I felt like I was safe and in control of the situation, I wasn't actually in imminent danger, then I didn't feel like there was a need to really discuss sometimes how hard it might have been. But my mom was definitely the most nervous person about me going out.

SW: How hard was it? I mean, what were some of the –?

MA: Observing?

SW: Yeah. Some of your challenges. What was your best trip?

MA: My best trip.

SW: And your worst trip?

MA: Okay. Best trip. I really liked the day gillnetters out of the Cape, knowing that I was leaving in the middle of the night, but I would be back by five, six o'clock at night. I just really liked having – I was able to get to a point where I was doing three or four day trips a week, so I was able to just like get into that groove and do that and get familiar with the boats and know what to expect on a trip. I kind of got into a groove with the Cape guys and that worked out really well. Scallop multi-days were also really nice. I did a ten-day scallop trip and that was up there with one of my favorite trips. It was in June or July, and the weather was just perfect, and the fishing was constant. We were able to get into, again, a nice groove where I knew, like when I could take some time to sleep and get some rest, and then when I should be working. The captain and crew were awesome. So, those stick out as like the highlights. The best trips.

SW: Were the highlights mostly because of the captain and crew –?

MA: Definitely. Yes. The captain.

SW: Tell us about some of your experiences.

MA: Just like guys going, being familiar with the observer program and being used to having observers on board and not giving them a hard time. They know that we got to be there. We're just doing our job but going the extra step to actually be welcoming and make us feel like we're not a burden in being there, and them knowing that we need all of the discards. So, just being able to set up a basket and have them toss discards into it if they feel like it. If they know that I need it eventually, they're getting it out of their way, and they're also helping me by like putting it somewhere where I'm going to need it eventually. So, just the little things, taking like that tiny

little extra step, we're mutually benefiting each other. So, yeah, I think captain and crews would be like the number one thing that would make or break a trip. If it's a rough crew, it's going to be a rough trip.

SW: Did you have some of those as well?

MA: I really lucked out. I didn't have too many bad captain or crew experiences, and the ones in my mind that are "bad" it was just like the fishing was bad. So, they were already in a negative mood because of that. Then I just happened to be there. So, they would just see me, think observer, and I would just be in the way. So, not snapping but just responding quickly or with a tone or something like that. From other stories I've heard, I wouldn't consider that really that bad. So, I think I lucked out as it goes for crews.

SW: What would make them have a bad trip?

MA: Like fishing. Just fishing effort. They're just getting discards upon discards. They're not catching actually what they're looking for. The scallop guys, sometimes a dredge coming up in the bag, just being nearly empty after it was in the water for like, five or six hours. So, then they're just frustrated trying to figure out where to go for the next tow. They obviously have to make money. It's their livelihood. I totally understand those situations. I would try to just –

SW: I was going to say, how do you –?

MA: – be as out of the way as possible. Yeah. Once you're able to take a couple trips and you know what's normal, what's not normal, when you start to see that fishing-wise, it's not going well for them, just like having that – what's the word? Just being able to recognize that they're not having a great time, and I'm already a burden being here. So, I'm just going to be a chameleon and just stay out of the way. [laughter]

SW: How many trips did it usually take you to figure that out?

MA: That's a good question. I would say maybe after five or six months is when I finally felt fully comfortable having a good mix of day trips, multi-days, different gear types. Eventually, it felt like almost everything had been thrown at me, save for any vessel emergencies. So, at that point, observing-wise and just doing the job, I felt comfortable with anything.

SW: Did you have any emergencies?

MA: Not really. We never called the Coast Guard or anything like that. I had one scallop trip where the drum that the reel is in was ripped out of the deck when they were hauling the dredge back. So, the A-frame on the vessel snapped. Luckily, the crew guy was just right place, right time. The cable didn't hit him or anything. But the whole vessel integrity was just shot after that. It was super loud. That was kind of a scary situation.

SW: Did the captain and crew help you to manage that situation or how did it go for you?

MA: So, I actually gave them like a heads up about it. Because when we were doing other hauls, the drum was being lifted off of the steel plate that's on the deck. I pointed it out to the captain and asked if that was normal, and he said, "Yes, we've tried like welding or bolting it down better, but it just kind of does that." So, I was like, all right. So, for me, it was something to keep an eye on. Then, yeah, a couple hauls later it snapped and pulled up. At least, because I pointed it out to them, it felt like they weren't shocked or surprised by it. I don't know if I –

SW: Were you all on deck at the time?

MA: No, no. I was in the wheelhouse with the captain. So, it was just the one other crew guy that was on deck. It could have been a lot worse if he got hit by everything flying all over the place. The captain and I were in the wheelhouse, so we were safe. They did a good job of making me feel safe, and they didn't really panic or anything when that happened. They were just like, "All right. I guess the trip's over. We got to go in." But they could have reacted differently and I would have probably felt more nervous.

SW: How experienced do you think a captain has to be to feel that way?

MA: Oh, I'm not sure. I guess it depends on how often they're fishing, if they grew up fishing with, like, their dad or something. But I think most of the guys that observers go out with have been doing it for at least ten years. There was maybe one younger crew that I was with, where all the guys were in their twenties, so together they couldn't have had like that much experience compared to some of the other older guys. I think for the most part, a lot of the captains do have ten, fifteen years under their belt and do have that experience and wherewithal to just have a cool head when things like that happen, which is awesome.

SW: How about weather? How was the weather in most –? We talked about December, but how did the weather affect you?

MA: I was really seasick for a really long time. [laughter] It took me a long time to get seasickness under control.

SW: How long?

MA: Maybe a month and a half. Two months of just every trip I took. I was getting sick no matter what. I tried Dramamine, Bonine, the patches, the little pressure point thing. I tried everything and no combination of anything worked. So, that was really hard. I had to end up going to my doctor and being like, this is what I do for a living. I can't be getting sick on every single trip that I take. So, I got a prescription medication and then from there on, I was good. I didn't get sick again. So, that was great that I got that under control. But I wish I had just gone to my doctor sooner because I got seasick really easily. There was a time on a trip in January where the weather was unreal. I was in my bunk room and – in my bunk, in the bunk room, and I was being lifted up out of my bunk and almost hitting the bunk above me because the waves were so rough. So, then I just had to get up and go in the wheelhouse because I wasn't going to get sleep anyways at that point. Weather, where I was just literally being tossed around in the bunk room or in the wheelhouse, having to hang on or I would be thrown across the wheelhouse

sick for twenty-four consecutive hours, where the only thing I could do was take a sip of water, and then that exact sip of water would come back up. Yeah. Weather was rough for me until I was able to get the seasickness under control.

SW: Yet you stayed. That was not your last trip.

MA: Still stuck it out. Yeah. I think that was my second trip ever. I knew when I went into it in December with my training, I just kept having the mindset that there were warmer months and nicer weather ahead, so I had to stick it out through that. I knew that I couldn't just quit because I was in the bad weather, and I had to see it through and get to a summer. The summer was great. It was awesome. Just really nice, flat, calm, warm, warm weather. Wearing a t-shirt on deck. So, had the good and the bad.

SW: Where did you usually go out of? Did you travel a lot?

MA: I did. So, I lived in New Hampshire. When I went through training, the idea was for me to primarily take trips out of New Hampshire and Maine, but my provider had lost that fleet. We no longer covered that sector while I was in training. So, then once I got out, I was still living in New Hampshire. But every single trip that I took was out of the Cape or Rhode Island. So, I was driving a minimum two and a half hours for every single trip. Day trips were super rough in that sense. Luckily, my boyfriend lived in Rhode Island, so I was able to cut the drive a little bit and stay with him. But yes, I was always traveling at least two and a half hours for all of my trips.

SW: You mentioned sectors. Tell us about groundfish sectors and your thoughts on the sector system.

MA: Yes, I think it's a really nice way to be able to get almost a variety of trips. There's a group. It almost feels like each sector has their own unique personality. So, depending on the owner, how vessels run themselves within a sector tends to be a little bit different for each one. So, it's cool to be able to become familiar with which boats are almost sister boats in a way, and how they run together versus how other boats run. I think it's a neat way to break it up.

SW: How did the fishermen generally feel about the sectors or providers and observers involved with the groundfish monitoring?

MA: I'm not sure how they feel more so about the sectors being broken up. But I know as a coordinator I get, when I'm setting up trips now for my observers that I'm just calling a captain to say, hey, we have you selected. Sometimes, I won't say a lot of times, but sometimes the phone call will turn into a conversation where they're just like, why am I having coverage again? I just had an observer on the last trip, and we moved to a hundred percent coverage this year. So, they should have an observer on all of their trips. Why do they have to do the safety checklist on every single trip? Why are they getting data on all of the discards? Why are they weighing fish that don't matter when we're trying to focus on cod or hake or whatever it may be? So, there's definitely some gripes that they tend to have with the program. I just try to just answer their questions as best as possible and just let them know that, yes, observers have a job to do. I tell

them that I was a former observer, so I get both sides of it. I can see what they're saying. But also, I know what it's like to be out there and have that job to do. So, yeah, it's a world to maneuver in.

SW: Do you feel like their questions are getting better or are they more confused than ever?

MA: I don't think they're more confused. No, I think when I started coordinating, there were more questions than there are now. I think it's almost cyclical, where when the new stock assessments will come out is when they have their most questions, and they'll be like, "Why is this happening? When it was different last year, and you had observers on all of my trips, so they should know that that's not true. This is what's actually happening out there." So, it seems like when new data is released, is when maybe the questions are coming, if like quotas are being changed or things like that. I don't think it's really increased – since hundred percent coverage, it's gotten a little bit better with the questions – Why am I constantly being covered? – and stuff like that.

SW: How long did you observe for?

MA: December 2018 right up until COVID. So, March of 2020. So, a year and three months.

SW: Do you consider yourself –? Were you a good observer, and why do you think you were a good observer?

MA: I think so. [laughter]

SW: You were.

MA: Thanks. [laughter] I like to think I was a good observer. I wish on more trips I had gone above and beyond and done all the things and gotten link frequencies on every species that I encountered and always submitted my species verification photos when I encountered something instead of saying, "Oh, I'll see that fish like on my next trip." I could have definitely, data-wise, gone more above and beyond. But when it comes to the personable side of being an observer and being able to reflect back the personality that the captain or crew almost wants to see, if it's a chattier captain and crew, they're going to want a chattier observer so that they don't think that you're quiet or you don't like them or like things like that. Or if they're a more reserved crew or captain who just wants to be in the wheelhouse by himself, being able to like, recognize that and just stay out of his way and just ask them the questions that I got to ask and let him do his thing, and I'll do my thing. So, I think I was able to get along with crews really well. So, in that sense, I think I was a good observer.

SW: Do you see that in the observers that you work with now? Is that a skill that they also have?

MA: Yes. Definitely it's a great skill to have to be a great observer. There's strong personalities all around. Some people are – if they're a type A, captain's a type A, then sometimes it doesn't mesh well. But yeah, for the most part we're hearing. I love when a captain calls me after a trip

and they're like, “So-and-so was an incredible observer. They can come back on my boat any time.” That's always a good call to get.

SW: Tell me about your contributions. What do you feel your contributions are to New England fisheries?

MA: Oh my goodness. It's a big question. [laughter] Wow. I like to think that as an observer, the data that I did get was able to be used in a meaningful way. That, along with wanting to be in the field and being out in the outdoors, doing marine biology, being able to contribute in that way, doing meaningful scientific research or data collection in a sense, was another huge part for me for doing the job. I hope that the data that I was able to get on my trips was meaningful, and that it was able to be used to help figure out what the next couple of years should look like for certain fisheries. Yeah. I hope I helped. [laughter]

SW: I am sure you did. How did being an observer really – did it change you? Did it influence you in your personality, in your next job, and the future, and in any way?

MA: Yeah, I think –

SW: It led you to your next job?

MA: It did. Yes. I am now a coordinator/safety trainer, so I'm very grateful for that. I think still being a people person. My first job, when I was just at the microscope forty hours a week, there wasn't a lot of – I worked in a lab/office setting and there wasn't a lot of communication, really, or it was just put your nose down, do what you got to do. So, I was definitely thrown into a very different world. Definitely, I gained like being able to communicate with people better. Now I continue that with my coordinating position and safety training. I never thought that I would be a trainer or educator in any way. So, I had public speaking issues for a while when I was growing up. So, being able to now stand in front of a class of twenty-plus new observers and make sure that they're able to be safe offshore and communicate that effectively, I think being an observer helped in a major way.

SW: What advice would you give a new observer today to be successful?

MA: Don't be too hard on yourself. You have a lot of stuff that you're expected to remember and do on every trip, and it's impossible to commit all of those things to memory. We have our resources and things that you can look through and figure out, like how you're supposed to do the job and submit your data in the correct way. But if you try to do everything absolutely perfectly, you're going to lose your mind. If you forget to do one little thing here or there, or if you didn't have a great trip or just one small thing happens, but you feel like you did a bad job on that trip, it's not the end of the world. There will be more trips. Not stressing yourself out and just beating yourself up because you weren't able to do as well of a job as you had hoped on a trip.

SW: What would a captain say about you after having you as an observer on a ten-day trip?

MA: My provider told me that they got the call saying that they would have me back. [laughter]

I think I did pretty well.

SW: That's the greatest honor, right?

MA: It really is. I'll always remember that. My provider called me right away and she played it off that I had done a bad job. She was like, "What did you do? The captain just called me." I was like, "Oh my God, no. I thought we got along so well." She was like, "No, no, you did great. They loved you." So, yes, I'll always remember that. It was a great feeling. I'll have that forever.

SW: Good. Yes. Well, thank you so much. It was great to have you interviewed and great to hear your experiences.

MA: Thank you. Appreciate it.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/2/2025