

CBMM-George O'Donnell

Q: So tell us your name, birth date, and that we have permission to tape our interview today.

O'DONNELL: [00:00:08] Yes. My name's George O'Donnell, birth date February 22nd, 1957, and you certainly have my permission to take this.

Q: Thank you. What was your family like, George? What kind of family were you born into?

O'DONNELL: [00:00:20] My father was from Grasonville, and that's where we -- where I grew up. My mother was from Queenstown, and they both were from families of watermen. My grandfather on my mother's side, he was primarily a clammer.

Q: What was his name?

O'DONNELL: [00:00:34] Nathan Morris. They called him "Biscuit." That's a whole 'nother story, how he got that name. And he was...they were from Queenstown. And people didn't travel around a lot in those areas; my mom and dad met in the area, and they got married, and lived in Grasonville their entire life. The furthest my father ever got from Grasonville was Norfolk, and he had to get drafted to get that far away. He just said he wasn't much on traveling, because, he said, "Why would I want to" --

because I'd offer to send him on a trip, or something. And he said, "Well," he said, "Why would I want to do that?" He said, "You come home exhausted." He says, "That's not a vacation." So his vacation consisted of going across the creek from our house, soft crabbing for a week or so, after he had left the water later.

Q: What kind of work did he do on the wat-- did your dad -- and what was your dad's name?

O'DONNELL: [00:01:29] Conaway O'Donnell.

Q: Conaway O'Donnell? What kind of work did he do on the water?

O'DONNELL: [00:01:34] He was a trotliner, hand tonger, and he eeled. And that was primarily it. In their younger life, they actually -- there were so many soft crabs around, sometimes they actually soft crabbed, the brothers did. And he used to tell a story that they used to get 15 cents a dozen for soft crabs. And if you caught too many, they cut you to two dozen for a quarter. So he talked about that, and they sold crabs in barrels. And you're talking about the '40s, you know, the early '40s doing that, or maybe even late '30s. So it was eight of them, they all grew up in a house, they were all born in a house on my father's side of the family, in Grasonville on Main Street. And lived there their entire life. Dad never --

the biggest worry he ever had was when he left home, and he bought the building lot back on Winchester Creek, which was, as the crow flies, half a mile away, moving. Getting stuff moved a whole half a mile. There was no gypsy in my...in my father.

Q: Very settled.

O'DONNELL: [00:02:37] Very much so. Then later, of course, went to work with your grandfather, and then at the correctional -- in the correctional business. My father's health got bad in his forties, and he went into a -- became a correctional officer.

Q: In Church Hill?

O'DONNELL: [00:02:53] Yes.

Q: And that's where he was? What was your childhood like? And what are some of your earliest memories?

O'DONNELL: [00:02:59] I was an only child, and we grew up on Winchester Creek, so it was all about the water. My recreation was on the water down at the beach, they walked down the creek. When I got my first dip net, I thought so much of it, I kept it in the bedroom, and it was like a football to me, and, you know, and I used to -- I started, for money, on the water at six years old, soft crabbing around the creek. Every day I'd go soft crabbing, sometimes with dad, sometimes not. And we'd -- my mother

would take me down to the Narrows, like, Thomas', it was later Harold's, seafood business, behind Fisherman's Inn. And sold -- sold -- sold in there. And I was six years old when that started.

Q: Six years old?

O'DONNELL: [00:03:33] Yeah.

Q: That was your first time working on the water.

O'DONNELL: [00:03:36] That's the first thing I ever did to make a dollar, and did that. And then -- then later, when I turne...got to be 12, my father bought me a small Deadrise. That was my first work boat. It was 19 feet long, it had a six horsepower Kohler engine in it. And the way I came by it was, it was on display in the VFW parking lot of some watermen, we used to have Watermen's Appreciation Days there years ago. And the man couldn't get them to bring it back to him. So they ended up selling, I said, "We'll get it." Anyway, I got that boat, and started trotlining at 12. And they thought I was too young to go out on the river, so they just let me -- my parents let me crab in the creek. And then about 16, I, you know, got to the poss-- "Come on, man. You got -- the crabs are out there, now you've got to let me go."

So that's where it sits. It's always been about one adjustment and one step, another, that led into my years on the water.

Q: Did you have other mentors, other than your dad?

O'DONNELL: [00:04:41] Oh, my grandfather was a great man, on both sides. I didn't know either one that well, but knowing of them, you know, it's all about the water, all the conversations. And from the people that -- I grew up around Grasonville, I certainly admired John Soule, a traditional waterman. You know, later we can talk about the evolution and equipment, and the modernization of seafood harvesting which has come, wow, full circle, since...even since I've done it. And in those days, I mean, you didn't have fish finders, you didn't have radar. You had to do it with your senses, a sounding pole and a real feel for taking landmarks, and all this stuff. Now people can plow through ice, you go out in any kind of weather, bigger boats, self-bailing hulls -- all these things that have led to the evolution of where seafood harvesting has gotten today.

Q: So in those regards, what were the relationships like between the watermen when you were a kid? Did watermen get along? Were they independent-minded? Like, what were the

watermen like when you were a kid, those older guys? What was that community like?

O'DONNELL: [00:05:54] Yes, depending on what you were doing, trotlining's always, in those days particularly, it was a single person job. You know, you didn't -- today, some people have a color and different ones to go in. But then in wintertime, when you go tonging and oystering, that's a crew concept. Not just for safety purposes, but, you know, you could have two tongers in one color and a full crew, like that. So we -- we thought about that a lot when we were building the watermen's monument, that that scene that's depicted there is of one waterman on each side of the boat, rowing the boat, paddling the boat, both working together for one common cause -- moving ahead. And that's the crew concept that is generally with large crab pot rigs, fishing rigs, and all. But in fact, there were more jobs on the water done with multiple people on the boat, than all. But most of what my father did and I did in the warm months, was trotline by ourselves.

Q: Since you brought up the monument, it seems to me that the monument is representative of certain things about a waterman's life, as opposed to -- I mean, there's some specifics about, you know, what they're doing, but it's

always representative of the waterman's lot in life, it sounds like.

O'DONNELL: [00:07:25] Yeah, absolutely. The -- there had never been a statewide recognition for commercial fisherman until we founded the waterman's monument, and it was dedicated November 22nd, 2003, and it took us a number of years to raise the funds and all, before that. And it stands for several things; one, the Kent Narrows has evolved from a -- it's gone through a renaissance in itself. It went from a completely wholesale area where they're all packing houses, the dozen and a half to two dozen packing houses, down there, packing process, oysters, clams and all that, to a full retailer with little wholesale left. I mean, I shellfish the wholesale place. But the only thing down there was Fisherman's Inn, other than these places. It's evolved through time. But now it's all about, you know, lodging and the tours and business and all, and that's great. So it's come a long way. So we didn't want the contribution of the seafood industry lost in that. So this sits at the focal point of the Kent Narrows, the Kent Narrows Way on Route 18. Tilghman Hemsley, of course, you know, was the artist. And I was on the Kent Narrows Foundation when our job was looking at different parcels, figuring what would work

there. And I thought that would be a great spot, because it's unique. It's owned by State Highway Administration, who were kind enough to let us use it. It was a very unique opportunity to do that. So we brought a lot of people together to make that happen, and about seven years later, we got the rea -- General Assembly was our biggest partner. We had a bond bill from them as well. So a lot went into making that happen, and we're very proud of it. It speaks to -- and it's at the gateway of the Eastern Shore, you know, when you come across the Bay Bridge, that's -- that's what you -- you know, the Kent Narrows is essentially the beginning of the shore. So we thought it was a great place, for a lot of reasons. Kent Narrows, it's going to get so much exposure there, you know how many people go through the Narrows. And it was also -- I had a very good working relationship when I was in office with District Engineer Lindsay from the State Highway Administration. We even got signs over here, everybody liked to have one of those. He was good enough to get that through, thought it was important enough to direct, you know, people through the area, that that's a notable thing to visit.

Q: Well, and since you bring up Kent Narrows, how does the -- not the seafood industry, but the waterman industry

specifically, fit into the modern Kent Narrows? Like, you know, how -- obviously, as you say, it's changed so much over the decades. How do these guys still fit in the scope of an area like that that has changed so much?

O'DONNELL: [00:10:26] Watermen, in order to have evolved, and in order to prosper, have become better promoters of their own products. You see a lot of watermen have refrigerated body trucks, the Bay is bay-wide, you can work anywhere with a Maryland license anywhere in Maryland. My father's day, you couldn't work outside of Queen Anne's County. You know, it was county lines, and you couldn't -- you go across Wye River to the other side, you could get a ticket for not being in your county.

Q: For working in Talbot.

O'DONNELL: [00:10:53] So we've become very mobile, you know, with the advent of better trucks and better equipment. I mean, my father's first boat was a log canoe, they sailed to work. So, you know, now, they're collector's items, and you see the log canoe races. So we've evolved immensely in how this has happened.

Now, there are still watermen that pull to the wharf and unload at Harris Seafood, and some other places, and there are other people that market their stuff. There's the

advent of people like Mr. B's Seafood, and my cousin, Eddie's place, you know, where the watermen have gotten into cutting out sort of the middle man, and taken it out of the water, putting it on the table, where limits have gone down. A lot of times restrictions have cut back on limits to make sure that everything proceeds ahead, you know, and you have a future in the fisheries. You'd need to get a certain amount -- you know, it's all about the bottom line, so you can stay doing that. I tell people all the time, it's not a hobby. You know, there's 700,000 recreational fishing licenses in Maryland, but there's about five thousand watermen. So that put in context the fact that it's a tough job. It's not -- it's a graying industry. There's not a lot of young people coming in to get in it, disproportionally, the oldest -- the average age is probably 60, something like that, with watermen. So they have had to be better, you know, especially with the unbelievable expenses these days, of running -- it's a very expensive operation with fuel, and you know, the bait costs, and all that stuff, have just skyrocketed, particularly in recent years.

Q: The price of boats.

O'DONNELL: [00:12:23] Oh my goodness gracious, yeah. Well, that's like the first pickup truck I bought was \$3700,

brand new, it had a sticker in the window. I said, "I want the cheapest pickup truck you got that, heavy half-ton, three on the tree -- I think it took all my power to steer it, it didn't have power steering. Got the AM radio, just cheap-cheap. But I hauled stuff. Now, I saw a friend of mine the other day, he paid \$92,000 for a pickup truck. So of course, it's an Eastern Shore Cadillac, you know, it's kind -- it's got everything in the world in it.

But, yeah, so much has changed. And they've had become -- I think evolved into even better businessmen with more business mind about how they handle and dispense their product, and move it around. Some of them shift their own product up north, and all that. That didn't happen when I was on the water, that's all become a later thing.

Q: So it's a way for those watermen to stay in business. They have to adapt.

O'DONNELL: [00:13:37] Absolutely. They've become better business, better at everything. Better businessmen, you're working with limit controls and all that. You've got to find this, and some are seafood dealers themselves, they buy product from other people and package it, somebody that doesn't want to go through and do that themselves, they'll sell that for them. They distribute razor clam bait to

other states, and all that. It's really been broadened so much. It's gone from a small footprint to now a regional and multi-state, where some people ship things even out of the state, and across the country. Some of Harris' biggest oyster customers on the West Coast. So, you know, what comes through the Kent Narrows goes all -- has an impact throughout the country.

Q: That's interesting. I guess that in those regards, is it harder to be a waterman now than it was 30 years ago? Or is it kind of easier, in some ways?

O'DONNELL: [00:14:37] Some of the equipment has made the pulling and hauling part of it -- for instance, you have tong winders now.

Q: Okay.

O'DONNELL: [00:14:45] I have two shoulder operations, that was my tong winder, you know. So that certainly hasn't -- now I don't in any way, shape or form want to make this sound like an easy job, it's a lot of hard work. But you have that that helps. Auto dippers, you know. I wouldn't have gone crabbing if I had to be a crab potter auto dipper, because to me, it was fun dipping the crabs.

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: [00:15:03] That's what I -- I had no illusions thinking I was going to become rich, working on the water,

I just loved to do it, and grew up doing that, and that's what I knew to do. And we did that. So all these things have changed it so much, they've become better, better harvesters, better all the way around, really. You know, you can't really participate very well today in the seafood industry if you did it the way I did it -- or, back then, time would have left you behind.

Q: Interesting. So in those regards, we talked a little bit about your first boat. How many boats did you own in your career?

O'DONNELL: [00:15:48] Four.

Q: Tell us about them.

O'DONNELL: [00:15:52] That small boat, the 19-foot Deadrise that I got, just pulled it out of the parking lot -- I was telling them about that at the last story swap, you know? I said, "Right outside this door, sitting right there," and it was 250 bucks. So dad helped me get that. And then by the time I got out of high school, I bought a Jacksonville tuck stern, a very nice crabbing boat, down out of Tilghman. Actually, it was out of Oxford, but it sold to a person in Tilghman. And that was a boat, a crab and oyster... Then I needed a bigger boat, because I eventually graded up and went clamming as well, so I said, "Well, that boat's too small for a clamming" -- so I got

Night Moves. That was my biggest boat, it was a 42 foot by 13 box stern Deadrise.

Q: How old were you then?

O'DONNELL: [00:16:45] I was in my twenties, exactly which age I don't know, but I was in my twenties when I got that. And it had a diesel in it. And I could do anything with that. You could go anywhere and do whatever I needed, and I put stainless steel on it for going through ice and all. That was, I guess, my premiere work boat. And then a few years later, because a lot of the time I would tie my boat in Winchester Creek, where I lived, and the mouth shallowed so much there that I went and got a Virginia boat that had -- the wheel was, like, in a well on the back, a [unclear] boat. And that was my last boat. So I got that boat up on -- actually at Taylors Island, and that was the last boat I had while I was on water.

Q: When -- so you were oystering, crabbing and clamming?

O'DONNELL: [00:17:36] Yes.

Q: As an adult in your waterman's career.

O'DONNELL: [00:17:39] Yes.

Q: Who made the equipment that you use? Where did you get your clam gear and all that?

O'DONNELL: [00:17:43] And also eel, too.

Q: Oh, and eeling too?

O'DONNELL: [00:17:46] Well, interesting, my first clam rig, I bought *The Elevator* from Glenn White, my friend right down the road here. And Medford Thomas, Jr., "Plugsie," I was his best customer for years in his welding shop, and that was an experience worth having, really. And we got to be good friends. And he developed my clam rig and took care of all of my equipment. And he was a clammer, as you know, the Thomas family were among the founders of using the escalator dredge when it was founded in back of Wye, about 1947, that's when that started. And see, he was great. He helped me put that together. My eel pots, we made those ourselves, you know? So it's, like, there was usually a lady in the community who would sew the funnels for you, or something, if I couldn't talk mom into it. And we made her eel pots. The tongs, Kirby Bryan, muscles, Larry Day Forney, all those guys. Gene Travers, you know, there was an art to that back when they used a lot of Georgia pine, was the perfect weight for those. And they did that. And of course, all those guys also made the tong heads.

Q: Disappearing skills, right?

O'DONNELL: [00:18:52] Oh, it's just the -- you can call them "shade tree mechanics," or call them whatever you want. I call them highly skilled artisans. Melvin Clark, I know

you know Melvin very, very well. And Melvin was, you know, I'd get all my dip nets and rollers, and all the stuff for crabbing from him. Melvin was brilliant with wood, any kind of wood, where he'd make all these crab boxes and stuff. And they're right down -- all the right -- in the heart of it. Bobby Aaron, you know, culling hammers, and all that.

Q: Is that why peo-- why watermen now have to be so skilled at so many different things --

O'DONNELL: [00:19:36] Absolutely.

Q: -- because those guys are gone?

O'DONNELL: [00:19:38] Yeah. Two reasons; one, there's very few people that do it, and you can't wait. If you broke down, you know, you can't be waiting a week for the man, because you're not going to make any money, so you became a mechanic on at least the equipment you had. And the cost of the modern -- like I say, the cost of business has gone up exponentially, so you save yourself a lot of money by being able to do it yourself. So yeah, watermen don't hire out nearly as much stuff to get done as they did before.

The main thing, they still have to go to a marina or a railway, and that has been because of the amount of business with recreational boats and yachts, and so forth.

Some places, watermen can't go, and they can't fit them in, or they can't afford to do that. So there's certain places they go to seek that. But yes, that whole support system for watermen has really dissolved, particular here, they've died off. I mean, I think Bobby Aaron was 90, I believe, or something like that. All those guys have died off. Medford Thomas down there, his place was -- now it's the Hilton is where Medford Thomas' place was. You can almost go down the line and say, "Well, he used to do this here," and, "He used to do that there," and Plugsie's place has been sold. I don't know who has it.

But just the whole culture of it's changed. So a lot of the stuff, you've got the real estate values going up. There's no mystery why Dorchester County is where -- that's our largest land county in the State of Maryland, of course half of two thirds of it is wetlands. But that's the heart of crab processing, where they pick crabs, because land is less expensive. Again, getting back to the business, you've got to find a way to stay in the black at the end of the day. And that's when some of those businesses are -- there was, I think, 26 crab processing places in Dorchester County when I was on the water, and now there's less than half of that.

Q: And the same thing with Kent Narrows having changed that in those regards, you know, Jack Corsey said to me one time, it used to be 14 packing houses and one restaurant, now it's 14 restaurants and one packing house.

O'DONNELL: [00:21:51] That's a good way to look at it, yeah. The only one you have now, Jason Ruth, Harris' is the largest shellfish processor in the state, and we're fortunate to have him right here. A lot of people get him mixed up with Harris Crab House, that's, of course, a separate business. But the packing facility where he processes year around -- and he's the only one, I think, in the state that shucks oysters year round as well. He gets aquacultural products as the public fishery goes out March 31st, over the summer. So we're very fortunate to have him keeping it -- he grew up in that business, and the Harrises kind of retired, and he leases that from them, so it's -- we're very fortunate to have -- people like that, that's nucleus of the outlet for your product. I mean, he buys product from all over the bay and sends trucks down. Quite frankly, I don't know what we'd do without him.

Q: That says a lot about that organization and that operation that they have down there. I want to move back to you a little bit. What do you remember as your best career days

ever out on the water, as far as catch, or, you know, what were your best days?

O'DONNELL: [00:23:02] Well, I've seen a diver pick up about 90 bushel before in a day, and that's a lot of hand movement, you know, different place-- you know, different places years ago. And I've seen when they opened the Choptank up, and we were tonging down there by the bridge, Bill Legge and I were partners, and we were going down Bill's boat, and we rung the shaft, in other words, we broke down just before we got to the marina. So it's going to open tomorrow, I mean, you know.

So anyway, his...Nip Legge was buyboat oystering, they had his boat there. So we absconded with his boat. I mean, he said, "Take my boat, man, do the oystering." And we didn't know how to judge it. We caught about 100 bushel in three and a half hours. I mean, it was just amazing.

Q: Diving?

O'DONNELL: [00:23:39] No, that was tonging.

Q: That was tonging, tonging.

O'DONNELL: Yeah, that dive story was the best on that.

Q: Uh-huh.

O'DONNELL: [00:23:46] And it...I never -- I was president of the Maryland Divers Association for a number of years, when

we were going through the iterations of trying to develop a new gear technique. And it's worked out well, and people were still doing it to this day. Not as prominently as they did, there was less people doing it. It's a very demanding job, when you're underwater 40 hours a week, that's...there's no gift down there. And Chesapeake Bay is not the Bahamas, I tried to tell my friends in the legislature. Some of them say, "Eh, it's like taking a lid off of a box. Don't you think you guys are going to catch all the stuff?" I said, "I don't know what box you're talking about, but Chesapeake Bay is a gloomy, muddy, when it's raining, and when you deal with all that, when you" -- they say, "Well, you can see." I say, "Well, my contention is, you must see. If you can't see, for instance, if you blindfolded somebody, you couldn't pick up enough to pay for your gas. You've got to be selective, and you pick up the bigger oysters, and all that." So that was, I think, a good aspect of the oyster industry. Each one has its own -- people gravitate to different things, some people with tong. Some people will -- you know, and you have power dredging now, didn't have that. The only things that power dredged were Skipjacks, when I was on the water. That's been allowed again, Maryland does a good job of regulating these things.

Q: How's the power dredge work?

O'DONNELL: [00:25:15] Power dredge is a dredge, you have a boom on your boat, and you tow it with the boat. Now it's under power, and it has a -- it's hydraulically wound up, and it has a dump bag on it, when you swing it in, and you dump it on the culling board like this. So in other words, you're not putting any physical effort into hand tongs, or picking the oysters up off the bottom, the dredge does that for you. So you're essentially a culler. You -- it's just keeping the dredge on the oysters and all that, as you move about.

Q: So it makes a way also for all the watermen to stay in the business?

O'DONNELL: [00:25:47] Yes, no doubt.

Q: So they don't have to do all that physical work?

O'DONNELL: [00:25:52] That's been said many times. That's a good point for that. And there's very few places up here, most of that is done down the bay and different, and opening area --

Q: Deeper water?

O'DONNELL: [00:26:05] And open area -- not so much deeper, because it's actually shallower down there. But more open water. I mean, we have essentially a duck pond on this section of the bay, compared to Tangier Sound and Crisfield

and all, when you get down to the Potomac, it's a whole different game when the bay is 12, 16 miles wide; it's 4 miles wide here, so, you know.

Q: So with any technology, with any mode of catching seafood, there's probably positives and negatives to that approach, right?

O'DONNELL: [00:26:39] Mm-hmm.

Q: So diving -- Keith Nash drowned, diving back in the day. Did those kind of things impact -- did people kind of back off when those kind of things happened? Or did, like, a drowning death -- I don't want to minimize it, but --

O'DONNELL: [00:26:54] Right, right.

Q: -- they just saw it as the risk of doing the job?

O'DONNELL: [00:26:57] Yeah, I think it made people increasingly aware of how dangerous this business is. When you go out on a boat, I think even in the summer, you go out on a boat in the summer and you're sliding up Chester -- of course, now, a lot of the hours, you can't go as early. We could crab 24 hours a day when I was doing it, now you can't go out until just before sunup. And you could strike something in your boat, or a piling could be floating around. I shudder when -- I mean, we all have been a little reckless at times, or overconfident, and I shudder to think of the way I used to zoom up and down

Chester River at night. Sometimes I had my spotlight on, sometimes I wouldn't. So by the grace of God, it's the only reason any of us are still here. I mean, when you're breaking ice in a boat, of course our rule with that when we're going out on the water, we never go out alone. We'd have two or three other boats. And there's been some very sad stories of folks that were alone. When she goes down, you don't have -- when the water temperature's 27 degrees, I can tell you, because that's how cold it was when I fell -- I only fell overboard one time.

Q: How did that happen?

O'DONNELL: [00:28:19] That happened in winter of '77, the worst winter of my life, to date. We were in the Kent Narrows the first time they had opened it, because bacteria was very low because it was so cold. And I slipped on the washboard and fell over. I was working with Nornie Darone and Bill Legge, and I went all the way underwater, and I could still see my hat floating on the surface above my head. And when I came to the top of it, Nornie says, "Give me your hand!" I was never so glad to have a hand reached to me in my life, because the problem was, it was so cold, your lungs contract. I had a hard time getting my breath. Then I got in the cabin and I drank everybody's coffee and

everything, I turned the heater way up and all that, they didn't take me home for two or three more hours.

It was so cold, we tied up next to the wharf at Pine and Narrows, and our truck was right there. And by the time I got out of the car, and out of the boat with my wet clothes on, there was ice forming on -- I mean, it had warmed up to 10 degrees, it was 6 degrees that Monday. First day we worked -- first day we worked in six weeks. We went out New Year's Eve and a cold front came through and froze up this bay from Crisfield to the Conowingo Dam. And we didn't go out, work again until the 17th of February, when they opened the Kent Narrows Channel, and the 19th, I fell ov-- it was 6 degrees that day, and 6 boats bothered to work, we were just so tired of sitting around. And by the third day, that was Wednesday, it warmed up to 10 degrees. Well, you couldn't buy salt -- it would be easier to buy gold than salt; everything -- you know, we were buying salt rounds in the grocery store and sprinkling them on our gloves, because like I said, we didn't have winders then. And, you know, everything would slip out of your hands, short tongs that we were using there. It was just brutal, man. It's just hard to explain.

Q: You know, that's interesting, because one of the things that people love to hear about seems to be weather stories. Were you ever caught out in bad weather, do you have any really scary times out there?

O'DONNELL: [00:30:13] Yeah, absolutely. We wouldn't go out in the harshest weather, but sometimes you get out, you go out and it gets wor-- you know, you try to predict it and listen to weather forecasts on the box, and all that. But I've seen where we went over by Tilghman Creek one day, mouth of Miles River, and I knew the wind was going to come out of the Northwest. And then it broke out, we didn't quite have 50 bushel, we had 44, but I said, "This is enough." Whitecaps were coming off the calm shore. So I couldn't -- you know, you could only imagine what it was going to be when you got to the mouth of the Wye River. And that was when I had my biggest boat.

The troughs in the seas, even in the mouth of the Miles River, were so big, because they blew, like, 60, 65, were so deep. The boat would go down to the tr-- you couldn't see land, and they come out like -- you felt like the Ty-D-Bol man out there, so I saw that in at least -- I don't remember a specific number, but I would say at some of my functions, on a half dozen times in my life, I encountered

green seas, which is an extremely large sea. And I said -- you don't have time to appoint a focus group to tell you what to do, so hopefully you make the right decision so you can go home, because you could swamp the boat -- and it's particularly bad in the winter, because if you have a problem in the winter, you know, honey...what are you going to do --

Q: Yeah

O'DONNELL: [00:31:55] Before anybody could possibly get there, the exposure would have taken you away.

Q: Ever seen anything strange or unexplainable, or weird out there?

O'DONNELL: [00:32:09] I made up a story that was pretty weird, one time, just to show people --

Q: Let's hear that.

O'DONNELL: [00:32:13] Yeah, oh, you're gonna like this. Remember when all the stuff was going around by Chessie? Yeah. Well, I was trying to convince people on the radio, I was, like, I said, "My God, man," I said, "My God, man, I just saw Chessie. He came up right beside the Bay. His eyes were as big as ashtrays! I never" -- just all pure nonsense, you know? And by the time I get in, the *Bay Times* called me, wanted to do a story! I said, "Man" -- I said, just how -- I guess that's why the *National*

Enquirer's so popular, people just, you know, they hear that stuff. But somebody said they saw it someplace -- I said, "I'm gonna show you how gullible people are." I got on the radio, tell them, said that somebody said on this -- "What did it look like? What color was it?" You know, it starts -- oh, my God. But that was just the joke.

But as far as saying -- you always see things that, you know, snakes swimming in the water offshore, and things like that, when you crabbed in Wye River. Show your spotlight on shores, a bunch of eyes looking back at you, and some eerie things. You pull down to a landing at night when a blue herring would take up and make that -- it was, like, conk -- got, "Rahh, rahh, rahh" and scare you out of your -- because you already feel, you know, you're going out to Reed's Creek landing where there's nobody within miles, and you just think, you know, stuff goes through your head, you know. So some of those things you used to get out here -- I jumped, and I hollered some special words at him for scaring the hell out of me. [Laughter] But that was -- man, I remember those kinds of things. Every once in a while a duck would be down in your boat when you're paddling, I crabbed all -- the reason I named my boat *Night Moves*, I made the money in the dark to pay for it, not only

did I like Bob Seger, but that was that. There'd be a duck in the boat, and he'd get up and fly, was afraid -- when you're loading your stuff and your boat, the cabin crew, because the thing would fly -- scare you to death!

Q: [Both speaking-unclear].

O'DONNELL: [00:34:06] I'm telling you, scare you out of your wits.

Q: Did you ever find anything interesting? Artifacts? Stuff like that?

O'DONNELL: [00:34:17] Yeah. Nothing like my friend, Billy Baxter, who has a -- I mean, Billy could, well, Billy's no longer with us, but he could -- we always had at the Watermen's Festival, tables full of stuff. He actually had those detectors and stuff, and he knows more about where the Kent Fort was down there, the trading posts and all, which is down -- he'll say it's out in this deep water now, it's all eroded. I found a few diving, was my experience. I clammed for about 10 years, and we found some things.

Q: Sure.

O'DONNELL: [00:34:43] You know, some artifacts with that. But we had a couple nice clay jugs we found diving in Wye River, and a couple of other pieces of glass work, and older things like old bottles and stuff, was the main thing we found. Never found anything of any great value. I

never went after shark's teeth, and those kinds of things. And I didn't clam in places that...where Billy just loved doing it so much. He'd go to that place, he could catch more clams someplace else, because he just --

Q: He was looking for that.

O'DONNELL: He was a trea-- he really was. He was a treasure seeker, you know? And he had a fabulous collection of stuff that he used to bring up there, and he'd tell you a story about where he caught this, and where he found that one, and all that, just so neat, you know?

Q: Did he -- did the fen-- where did that collection end up, any idea?

O'DONNELL: [00:35:38] I'm assuming, you know, Dave -- I was just in a meeting with David, you know, David or Danny, I'm sure, have that.

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: [00:35:45] But that would be -- and let -- I don't know if I heard they donated to something, but we could certainly find that out.

Q: Sure. Absolutely. I remember looking at that collection a couple of times, it was quite amazing.

O'DONNELL: [00:35:54] Oh, man, it -- and just like with his metal -- he had, like, a hat full, he used to keep all the rings and stuff and a hat, when they went to Bay Ridge

Beach and places like that, that hadn't been -- hadn't been -- hadn't had people seek with those kinds of equipment before. Man, it was -- it was fat city there. They did really well, finding a lot of stuff.

Q: That's awesome, man! When you think back over all the years that you were involved with this industry, who stands out to you as being not necessarily mentors, because we talked about that, but role models? Who were, like, the best watermen out there when you were really active. Like, who did you look up to as a waterman?

O'DONNELL: [00:36:45] Well, I tell you, I mentioned John Soule.

Q: Uh-huh.

O'DONNELL: [00:36:51] And you obviously know Mr. John, and again, he's another one that's no longer with us -- he was just such an honest man that lived to -- and did that his entire life, and helped several families along, and did it with the most primitive level -- I mean, it would -- look, you would see nobody working that way today, you know? He was a very strong man, and worked very hard his whole life. Honest, you never heard anything about him, a lot of times we're very competitive on the water, and we get in each other's way every once in a while. But we try to prevent from cutting each other's lines enough, and somebody that's

coming out as it's planned, if you -- once in a while, I'd just go ahead and cut it, you know? And they say if I was in a good mood, I tell them, "Look, man, you've got this thing across my line, and I'm going crab my other line. And when I come back, if it's still there, I'm going to make spaghetti out of it," you know what spaghetti is, right? It's going to be more than one piece. So then usually, people would go -- a couple of times, we had little encounters, but nothing -- nothing major. I never had anybody try to get on my boat, or anything like that.

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: Because the law says you can't, you know, crab within 100 feet of somebody else's operation, trotline. I believe it's 100 feet. So yeah, so...

Q: He was one that you looked up to?

O'DONNELL: [00:38:17] Yeah, he was -- he was -- you know, what he was able to do and what he did it with was pretty amazing.

Q: Did you mentor anybody? Was there anybody that you took on and taught the business?

O'DONNELL: [00:38:29] I had -- I mostly shared my experience with people, with part of Bill and I sort of learned from each other.

Q: Contemporaries.

O'DONNELL: [00:38:35] Yeah, Bill and I were partners for a number of years, Bill Legge, and my Uncle Richard, and different ones. But as far as to have, like, an apprentice, I never really got into that.

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: [00:38:46] And that's why when you see talk in the legislature about phasing out -- Mr. Franchot, he went down to the -- Peter Franchot and I, and I've said it before, so I don't mind saying it again -- wanted to phase out -- went to the *Star Democrat*, prominent Eastern Shore paper, more commercial licenses are held in Talbot County than any other county in the state, followed closely by Dorchester, and made a statement if he became governor, he would phase out the public shell fishery. That's what he said. And that means not only shellfish, he didn't say oysters, shellfish, that means clams, too -- I don't know what the wisdom is in that, we were doing it 170 years, and we just had the best oyster season the last 37 years, so I don't what he -- he'd have to explain that to me.

Q: You mean as far as harvest?

O'DONNELL: [00:39:37] Yeah, phase out the public fishery.

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: [00:39:39] In other words, you need to get a lease, you need to go to Aquaculture. That's who this is...

Q: So the last year was the best year for oysters in 38, 30-something years?

O'DONNELL: Thirty-seven year high.

Q: The amount of oysters caught, you mean?

O'DONNELL: [00:39:53] Yeah, over 600,000 bushel, in the public fishery.

Q: So that's a -- that's a -- that portends positivity, right? Like, that...

O'DONNELL: [00:40:02] I think. And we were on an upward trend, so that's obviously, I think, when the conditions are appropriate, that's -- good things happen.

Q: And we can control some of those things, but can't control other parts of that.

O'DONNELL: [00:40:18] No, the good Lord holds the key to success, you know. You've got to have the water quality, you know, most of this is down the Bay, from the Choptank down the major -- the major oyster producing area in the Bay the last several years has been Tangier Sound. And we don't get recruitment up here, because the water is fresher; you've got about 12 parts per thousand of solidity for oysters to propagate. Chester River, not so much. A

little bit the Eastern Bay, when you get to the Choptank down, yeah. That's where it's working now.

Now, but before I left the water, or about the time I left, and probably one of the reasons I left, there wasn't enough oysters down the mouth of the Bay in that most prominent area I just mentioned. MSX and Dermo are diseases, have ravaged the oyster fishery. In 1982, the Chesapeake Bay produced two and a half million bushels of oysters, Eastern Bay produced a million of that by itself. And I oystered that year. I started oystering about '76. So amaz-- I mean, we've seen the rise and fall, and most of the oyster problems with oyster production have been caused by diseases. I mean, when you pull up a cage and 90 percent of it's dead, nobody ever -- you know, it's the big argument, did they over-harvest, and all this stuff? I took folks out from Senator [Barbara] Mikulski's office, like, I said, "In a couple of minutes, he's going to have a cageful, and you're going to see what the problem is. And we dumped it right down here at Bugsby's, and we dumped it, and 90 percent of the oysters were dead. And that was in the '80s.

Q: Wow.

O'DONNELL: [00:42:00] And since then, we've come a long way.

Q: And so that brings me to something I hadn't really thought about, but you, you know, you're plugged in in a way that a lot of watermen aren't, you know, through the government and your connections. There seems to be a move toward -- or at least the idea of making the Chesapeake Bay a national park, right? There's some talk of that. What do you think of that?

O'DONNELL: [00:42:29] Yeah, I think that, well, one, it's going to happen, and it's over off Anne Arundel, is based on underst-- that's not really the work that I do with the state.

Q: [Unclear]

O'DONNELL: [00:42:37] But it's a concept that, again, it's to allow -- we saw, during COVID, the demand for outdoor recreation. I mean, we had to put limits on our parks, and even here at Terrapin, and places like that, because they were getting over-populated, and again, the density of people -- because people couldn't do anything inside, they'd go outside. So that partly gave -- they talked about this for a while, and there had been other national recreational areas around. And, of course, they did Mallows Bay down in Charles County, which is a bunch of -- it's like a boat graveyard, where all boats from the former war sit there, and it's kind of an eerie looking thing.

But it's been made into a sanctuary, because they couldn't really work around all that, anyway, so they've done that.

But I don't really know the exact status of the -- but it seems to be moving in that direction, and we'll have to see. The concerns that a seafood harvester would have is that, okay, if the federal government is coming here, does the State of Maryland still regulate? Is it going to affect my ability to fish this area, and oyster, and do all those things? And we're told it isn't, the state's still going to manage that from a, you know, a restriction point of view.

Q: So that's -- that's a thing that has to be managed.

O'DONNELL: [00:44:00] Absolutely.

Q: And there are a lot of diverse opinions and reactions to that kind of stuff. And everybody has to be placated a little bit, I would imagine.

O'DONNELL: [00:44:13] Yeah, you know, there's 20 -- well, going back, when I was in first grade, there were 16,000 residents in 1963 in Queen Anne's County, it took us 50 years to triple, and people, "Ah, the growth into" -- I said, "Yeah, but our neighbors to the West have 12 times that population, 600,000, and they're not one of the big" -- and I'm not saying we should be like them, I'm just

saying that's a fact, they hold up the West side of the Bay Bridge. So bottom line is, there's a lot of pressure we're putting on all of our resources, from all of our land use activity, stuff that runs in the water. My goodness gracious, all they -- I'll just say that the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] was sued and lost, because they hadn't held Pennsylvania accountable enough that over -- that is the largest watershed on the East Coast is the Susquehanna Watershed; 28,000 farms drain into the Susquehanna River, 25,000 miles of feeder streams and runs -- it's enormous. It goes -- there's only nine miles to the Susquehanna in Maryland, but it goes 570 miles clear up to Cooperstown, New York, and the bulk of it's in Pennsylvania. And it is just that, you've got the wastewater issues in Baltimore, those plants, that are desperately making it up where...

Q: Are those kind of things harder on the bay than residential?

O'DONNELL: [00:45:44] Well, I don't know -- factoring it in, it's hard to say.

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: [00:45:49] We've made -- in the Bay program, and it's been well-advertised, we're behind on our 2025 Bay restoration goals. We're not on track to meet that. We'll

see what happens. It's -- where -- one person that I worked with in a previous life. So, you know, everybody loves the Chesapeake Bay. Our objective needs to be not to love it to death, because, you know, more and more and more and more, everything we do to it or take out of it, it all takes a toll. So regulation -- regulating things in the future is going to be paramount to keeping all these things going. So from a management standpoint, there's a gonna be constant, ongoing work to make sure that we don't take too much, and we don't, you know, in controlling of pollutants. And we got climate change now, that's changing crab seasons two or three weeks -- the prediction is, in 25 years, we'll have a year-round crab season in Maryland. The divers already tell us crabs move throughout, now their metabolism's slower, it won't take bait. But they're moving across the bottom in January and February.

Q: So because of your experiences both in the field, on the water, and otherwise, you seem to have a pretty well-rounded view of it all. You can see kind of all sides of all the arguments, right? Like...

O'DONNELL: [00:47:22] Yeah, I like to think that my current job with the state, I like to think closes the loop in my life. I started on as a harvester, now I'm on the management side of things. And trying to bring the best

information that we can get from the field in to inform the managers to make everything better for everybody, that's what I try to do, and expose what I think are the worst problems, whether it's the pollution from up in the Northern part of the bay, and things like that. There's been a lot said about that. And it's -- the bay didn't get in the condition it's in overnight, and it certainly won't be fixed overnight, either. So we have to have policies in place that move us in the right direction, and stay right on top of that all the time.

The management the state has of -- we've got beacons out there that send signals, that tells us the water quality -- we know how much water flows through the Conowingo Dam. I mean, there could -- I wouldn't -- I'm not aware of another water system anything like the size of the Chesapeake Bay that has this much attention paid to it from a management stand-- because it's a treasure. It truly is, the second largest estuary in the world, and the largest one in this country. So it's amazing. I mean, we've heard the Japanese say, "If I had the Chesapeake Bay, we could feed the world." That might be so, but if you saw that picture from the National Geographic, we wouldn't tolerate that here, because I didn't even know how they got to all those

contraptions to fish them. Obviously, we didn't eliminate any recreational fishing, or fisher-- and it's everybody's Chesapeake Bay.

The State of Maryland owned and managed the waters of the state, we know who lives here, so...

Q: And historically, overfishing in other places led to fisheries here. My understanding is, like, overfishing of clams in New England brought clammers down to here, as...

O'DONNELL: Yeah. That's why licensing has to be very carefully done; you can't hold a shellfish license out of the State of Maryland [unclear], I think you can crab, but you can't do shellfish, because there's -- you've got to manage it. How much do you take without taking too much? And you don't want that -- the bad news, and have to dig yourself out of that hole. So it's constant limited entry. You cannot go to one of our service centers and buy a commercial crab license, or a commercial any kind of license, unless, you know, blue catfish. But there's limits on it, because you just can't have the goldrush, or, well, it's a good season, so I think I'll go buy a license and jump in there and exploit it. I mean, we watch those things like a hawk, you know.

Q: That's awesome. I'm going to talk a little bit about the rest of your trajectory, and then we'll wrap up with some general questions about the industry.

O'DONNELL: [00:50:05] Sure.

Q: So you served as County Commissioner.

O'DONNELL: [00:50:11] Yeah.

Q: How many terms?

O'DONNELL: [00:50:13] Two terms.

Q: What year was your first?

O'DONNELL: [00:50:15] Ninety-four to oh-two were the two terms.

Q: Were you still working on the water at that point?

O'DONNELL: [00:50:20] No, I ran in 1990, and I fell a little short to our friend, Mr. Schulz, he got me that time. But that was just when I was transitioning off. I think I was with the food service. I had gotten into the food service business; a friend of mine called me that I met there, and then the Masons. And he was a CEO of a food distribution business, and said, "George, why don't you come work for me?" I said, "I don't know anything about food." He looked at me and said, "Well, it looks like you know how to eat." I said, "Bingo! I think you're right about that." So I went to work with him. He was just a wonderful guy.

I've never applied for a job in my life. The phone rings, and they said -- even the job I got now.

Q: So what inspired you to run? For County Commissioner?

O'DONNELL: [00:51:22] I wanted to see services improved in the county. I'm not going to criticize anybody before I was here, I just think that there was an accumulation of needs the county had. On our watch, we built Kent Island High School, the 9-1-1 -- we never had a 9-1-1 center. We had a basement full of Vietnam era equipment, filled with dead spots and all, that didn't make anybody safer. So we built a 9-1-1 center, other counties piggybacked on that. Matapeake Elementary, the Cross Island Trail, quadrupled acres of the park system. It was looking at the county in toto and trying to figure out the overall improvement. We passed the first -- hard to believe -- first capital budget the county had ever had, fiscal '95.

I said, "Well, how did you pay for capital projects?"

"Well, they sort of scraped things together when something" -- well, that's not planning. And we said we've got to put a plan in place, and we did. Those projects are serving the county well. Sometimes people ask me, "What's your favorite thing?" I say, "Well, certainly from recreation standpoint, you have to build schools and all that stuff,

but when you can do a project that's purely for the pleasure of your residents, like the Cross Island Trail, that was a gem. From that st--

Q: You're proud of that?

O'DONNELL: [00:52:58] Oh, very proud of that. Then beyond that, a very complicated project was the 9-1-1 center. And if it wasn't for Senator Mikulski, she saved us on that, we were having a hard time getting the frequency. Well, if we don't have a frequency, we've got a storage building, you know? So she -- she was amazing in every respect to the bay, Poplar Island -- hands down, the best person that we dealt with on the federal level. She was...

Q: Sounds like she really cared.

O'DONNELL: [00:53:24] Oh, she'd call and actually want to meet with us, you know. She said, "George, can you get a few people together down Fisherman's Inn, come down, we'll talk issues." And all them, we'd go over to Harris', see what's going on there. She come to commissioners' meetings and all -- amazing.

Q: As opposed to you having to beg someone to be engaged?

O'DONNELL: Yeah. You didn't have to call her, she called you.

Q: That's interesting.

O'DONNELL: She was truly a public servant of the highest --
I don't care what party somebody...

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: [00:53:41] She was excellent, and everybody knows
it.

Q: That's awesome.

O'DONNELL: The Poplar Island Project would not be there, if
it wasn't for her. That was a nationally-rated project,
these dollars were being competed with from here to the
West Coast.

Q: Explain for the camera what that project is, that Poplar
Island Project.

O'DONNELL: [00:53:57] The Poplar Islands, several -- a
series of islands, were eroding away. And the -- it was
looked at as an ar-- and it was messing up the inland
channel, and everything else, by the sandbars just shifting
around. So it was looked at, that we were running out of
capacity for dredge material at Hart Miller Island. So it
was looked at as a place to have dredge material placed.
And that way, could rehabilitate the island, and at the
same time you're creating habitat. You know, black ducks,
and everything else. They even have tours down there now.
It's like -- don't quote me -- but maybe a thousand acres,
it's very large.

In 1957, my friend, Russell Dyes told me he walked from one end of that island to the other, and since then, some of the clammers are clamming in four feet of water where the island was being interrupted. So it saved the island, created habitat and also enabled our shipping industry to move here. Doing the same thing now down there, just starting with a barren island, and the James Island project, because there's so many submerged, you see Jay Fleming's great pictures of one house falling into the Bay, is replete with those things. So it's great, it meets that need, and puts that in place. And that's what we -- one of the things when I was in office that I'm very proud to have fought so hard about was the dumping; they wanted to dump all of the dredge material at site 104 out here. And we were successful in stopping that. Just -- dumping? No. Resuspending heavy metal, you know, it just makes no sense.

Q: Right.

O'DONNELL: [00:55:37] Way we'll do it, I said, I understand -- I said, "We'll accept dredge material here in Queen Anne's County." We had Congresswoman [Helen Delich] Bentley, and all we -- we had one out on Parsons Island, the whole Southwest spit of Parsons Island. There's hundreds of acres out there, there's water so steep, where

it's losing to this day about two thirds of an acre a year. And the folks that owned it said, "We want to contribute to it," of course, we never got it done. We just couldn't get the funding in place. But that would have been a similar -- Bodkin -- 0.9 acres is Bodkin, and Bodkin was probably 75 acres in its heyday. So all these things that these huge show areas around them, just lend themselves to being cordoned off. So I'm happy to see those kind of programs move here, because it makes the Bay a better place.

Q: That's awesome. And your current position, what is your title?

O'DONNELL: [00:56:44] I'm the customer relations manager for the Department of Natural Resources Fishing and Boating Service.

Q: And how long have you been doing that?

O'DONNELL: [00:56:53] Eight years.

Q: Eight years.

O'DONNELL: [00:56:56] Yes.

Q: And that job is to -- what is the job? What is your -- what are your duties?

O'DONNELL: [00:57:01] my job is largely communicating, particularly with the commercial fisheries, to make sure we get people on the commissions to inform us, to get their

messages back and forth, to help inform the process, we have the best regulations and all. And I go to -- I was at a meeting at Saint Michaels this morning for that, and go around and do a lot of that. But that's a communi-- I'm in the Communication Division there, and one of my colleagues does the recreational side. And of course, anybody can call us, but where I sort of gravitated to, and it's worked out, because they never had that position before I went there. And it's really helped identify, and better communication all the way around, you know.

Q: So you're kind of a liaison between --

O'DONNELL: [00:57:47] That's exactly what I am. Yeah.

Q: -- between the government and the...

O'DONNELL: [00:57:47] Yeah. I am absolutely a liaison. In fact, I didn't like the way "liaison" sounded, so I told them change my -- that's the first thing I was called, was a "liaison." But that's exactly what it is.

Q: How do you think the larger community sees watermen and the seafood industry.

O'DONNELL: [00:58:02] They see 'em real good when they want some crabs and ocean -- [laughs] I think that watermen have done a better job of representing -- so I just left the meeting this morning of the watermen's group, and they do a lot of public relations stuff. Years ago, we started Queen

Anne's County Waterman's Festival. And a lot of watermen, "Eh, oh, uh, oh..." I said, "You owe it to the public to entertain them a day or two a year, you're crabbing in front of -- they're out in front of their piers sometimes, your clam rig's too loud," and all that -- and to have a relationship with people, so you can hear what they're saying.

And those kinds of things, we're doing better now than ever have before. I think the opinions is better now than it has been previous to this, because of their public output. And they say watermen's -- Queen Anne's County Watermen's -- I was just down on the boat with [unclear] -- they've come up with \$25,000 of their own money they raised through the Christmas Tree Project at the Kent Narrows and other things, to help rehabilitate the oyster bars. So they're doing a lot of things, but, you know, I was one of the first strong advocates for a surcharge on oyster license. Now some people -- this was years ago. And then some people were saying, "Oh, we pay enough money for that." I say, "Dude, if you can't take one day's work a year and put it -- I mean, I'm just telling you" -- you know what happened after that? I went to see Senator Mikulski, she got us a million doll-- she said, "George, it's no problem

getting help for people who are practicing self-help." So they're doing a lot more about practicing self-help, and I think the imagery is the best it's ever been, today.

Q: Oh, that's awesome, man.

O'DONNELL: [00:59:52] Yeah.

Q: What don't people understand about the job? What doesn't the general public understand?

O'DONNELL: Well, it's very difficult to understand anything about the job, because our traditional industries are agriculture and commercial fishing. When you go to see the state seal, it's got a plowman representing farming and all that stuff, a fisherman on the other side. I can drive down the road and see, you know, Buddy Thomas, a prominent farmer, well, he's planting his corn today, or [unclear], right? He's planting his corn today. Or it's the fellow - he's cutting his corn. All you know about a waterman is, he goes out in a boat in the dark, and he comes in, he's got something alive. And he can't see it the whole time there, because it's down on the bottom someplace, how do you know where to go? There's not one institution in this country that teaches you how to be a waterman. You can go and get horticultural and different kinds of agricultural training -- no watermen.

So it's very mysterious, by its nature. It's very mysterious. You see -- know they're out there someplace, and what are they doing out here? I can't tell you how many calls I get -- "This man's in front of my house, and he's got this thing sticking up on the -- what is that?" I say, "I don't know, maybe it's -- does it have a sail on it?" I started to say, "If it's a sailboat," but, you know it's... And most people, I think, have a soft spot for, where there are some rough spots sometimes if somebody's working close to somebody's house, or their engine's loud, and radios and stuff like that. But I don't even get many complaints about that anymore. I think watermen are trying to do -- trying to be good citizens.

Q: That's awesome, man. And we talked a little bit about it, but what do you see is the future of the industry?

O'DONNELL: [01:01:41] I think we're always going to have a seafood industry. I think it's going to -- we'd have no way to predict to what degree, perhaps it would be, you get bigger or you get out. You have a tendencies to do anything at any time to make it work, as things are intermittently dependable. So I think that -- and again, as it has evolved now, watermen could be better. We've got watermen who've made many backyard operations and things,

where they shuck some and do a variety of different things to bring added value to their product.

I mean, you can go to the store, and if you see four oysters in there with some recipe on them or something for \$9 -- well, four oysters off your boat's, you know, it's a buck. You know, \$1.20, or something. So value-added stuff. Jim Perdue told me one time, he said, "If I just sold each piece of chicken, we'd probably have been out of business years ago. But when I get that thing that you stick in the microwave, the kid comes home hungry with six chicken nuggets in it" -- that's what's floating their boat. The value-added products. Seafood marketing office is linking us to more foreign markets. We've got a 90 percent deficit. We're importing 90 percent more seafood than we exported. So, you know, a lot to be said. Now, seafood tends to be on the expensive side, and we're the richest country in the world, that's part of it. But there's, again, it's a big world, and it's growing.

I think there was a study done in 1970, said the planet is unsustainable with the amount of people on it now. I don't know how many times we've increased since then. So we've got to be smarter in the future, and every -- on the

management side, on the harvesting side. You don't see people doing -- people laughed years ago when I tried to make a point, to get that used, or a holding tank down to the -- "Oh, watermen won't use that thing." I said, "Well, it'll be easy enough to find out. If you go down there six months after you put it in there's dust on the bottom, you'd be right, wouldn't you?" I can't tell you how many dozen times that thing has been held. So people aren't irresponsible like they may have been at one time, with waste products and stuff like that. I mean, people, anymore, they don't tolerate that kind of stuff, you know.

Q: And the watermen were more aware --

O'DONNELL: [01:04:13] Everybody likes that --

Q: -- more conscientious of that stuff than ever before.

O'DONNELL: [01:04:17] Absolutely.

Q: What have you learned about life by working on the water?

O'DONNELL: [01:04:24] I learned how great God is. I just left church and came down here, and how fortunate I've been to be in this area. I tease my friends, I lived down here at Queen's Landing, and they said, "Well, where are you from, George?" I said, "Five creeks down." I said, "I'm from Winchester Creek, and the next there's Jackson's Creek, then you've got Muddy Creek, you've got Piney Creek, you've got Macum's Creek, and you got" -- so it took me 66

years to travel five miles. So not a lot of gypsy
[unclear], but I do like to go to Belize in the winter. I
like it down there, it's mighty warm. You can listen to
somebody like Josh sing down there and everything, it's so
nice. 80 degrees down -- you get on the plane and it's 30,
you get off at 80.

Q: That's your getaway?

O'DONNELL: [01:05:05] That's the way -- I've been there six
times. That's where, you know, the Lord lets me live, next
January I'll be there again. But it's just the awesomeness
of -- the Chesapeake Bay has never ceased to amaze me.
People have written it off, counted it out, da da da -- and
guess what? We just had the best oyster season in 37
years. So we're doing some things right, and I'm proud of
it.

Q: You feel dedicated to the Bay?

O'DONNELL: [01:05:33] Oh, I'm proud to be a part of it. I'm
a spoke in the wheel. To try to give back to all that it's
been, anything I got in this world came out of that --
that's where it came from, you know?

Q: Is there anything that I didn't ask you, or that's been on
your mind about this interview, that you'd like to mention
or bring up that we haven't talked about?

O'DONNELL: [01:05:53] Boy, that's the best question you asked! [Laughter] I say, yeah, we've covered a lot, you know, the evolution of the equipment and all those things. I don't think so. I just thank you for hearing from me, and hopefully somebody will have a better idea of the overall culture when they see this, because it is generally mysterious, for that reason, when you think about it. Well, you know, I can see what the farmer's doing, and visualize -- well, the waterman, he's out eight or ten miles out there someplace, and goes in the dark, sometimes comes in the dark. And you can't see where he's working, and...

Q: They're very independent. They keep things close to the chest?

O'DONNELL: [01:06:37] Yeah. They're fiercely independent folks, you know, because the other thing, when you're a waterman, you wake up every morning with nothing all over again. Hopefully you still have a strong back so you can go out and do it again, but you don't have no healthcare, you know, any of that stuff comes out of your pocket. You don't have the benefit package like I have now. You've got -- so your gross might look good, but everything comes out of your pocket. And it's not a job for everybody, these are very ambitious, hard-working people that

generally have done it multi-generationally, you know, it's been handed down and all that. Because like I said, there's no place to go -- the way you learn to be a waterman is, your daddy taught you, or you went to work as a kid with somebody else, like an apprentice, because there's nowhere you can go and take a training course, like to be a brick layer or a carpenter, or something like that. So it's very unique. It's almost a world all its own.

Q: And it's funny, too, just sitting here listening to you talk about it, it's an industry that's stayed the same for generations, but in modern times has changed immensely.

O'DONNELL: [01:07:47] Yes. Technology, I mean, technology and the advent of hydraulics have just revolutionized it. And then you have to look at the effect of that. If the effort increases, the efficiencies, well, it's the same size bay as it was ten thousand years ago, you can't -- how much harder can you squeeze it? You know, you've got to put guidelines in place to allow for -- in that overall job to allow for these things to go on for future generations, and for recreational -- you know, it's everybody's Chesapeake Bay. But commercial people, the distinction is, they're the only ones that can sell the product to the places we all go to eat and do that. Recreational, you can take it home and eat it, give it to your next door

neighbor, whatever you want -- but you can't sell it. And so when you take the commercial aspect away, the question would be come, if something happens to that, what's going to supply the -- if you get on a plane in California, sitting next to somebody you've never seen before, and they find out you're from here, first thing, they say, "Man, I got some of them crabs out there that -- I mean, it's all -- this is the identity of the place.

Q: Yeah.

O'DONNELL: [01:09:01] This is why people come here. And no doubt, it's -- I hope it's always that way. And with the amount of attention, there is -- my hope is, with the amount of attention that we have on all of these issues, our fingers are on the pulse of all this stuff, that it -- while it might be a slow recovery, I think it's going to be a recovery, because people just -- who doesn't want to see the Chesapeake Bay alive and vibrant?

Q: George, thank you very much for joining us, man.

O'DONNELL: [01:09:27] That's fine.

Q: That's a really cool project.

O'DONNELL: [01:09:28] That's fine, I enjoy it, yeah.

Q: I appreciate you taking the time.

END OF AUDIO FILE