

OH Annie Richards

SHEA: Let's try this. So could you please introduce yourself?

RICHARDS: [00:00:06] Sure. My name is Kelly Anne Richards, but I go by Annie; and that's Kelly Richards. I was born February 22, 1990.

SHEA: Wonderful.

RICHARDS: Yeah.

SHEA: So tell me about you; where did you grow up?

RICHARDS: [00:00:24] I grew up right here in Chestertown. I moved to the Eastern Shore when I was four years old and grew up here, went to school and high school here, went away to college and sailed abroad for several years after that, and then when my now husband and I became engaged, we moved back here. And so it's kind of amazing to have grown up here and to stay here. I think there's value in knowing a place for a very long time, and I feel lucky to be raising my kids here in Chestertown because it was a beautiful childhood for me, and I hope they have the same, and the Chester River plays a huge part in that. I grew up on the banks of the Chester just north of the Chester River bridge, and it was the backdrop to my childhood. You know, waterskiing, and sailing, and boating, and swimming, and it

was really a distinct part of my life. And the schools that I went to also interacted with the river, and I was able to participate in some pretty influential programs when I was in high school that took place on the Chester River through Echo Hill Outdoor School. So if you've seen, they have a skipjack and a buy boat here at the waterfront right next to the Sultana. And so as a high schooler, I went to Gunston which is a private high school on the Corsica River. And they have a requirement every spring for students to participate in a bay studies course. So for a week every spring, every class gets out on the water in some way. Sometimes it's residential, sometimes it could be... you know, a week of service, of trash pick-ups and things like that. It kind of depended on what your interests were. And I signed up for a week on the Chester on the skipjack *Elsworth*, and the buyboat *Annie D.* with Echo Hill Outdoor School which was a Chesapeake Heritage Initiative. And I had a really transformative experience when I was out on those boats because, you know, the river was certainly... well, it had been the backdrop to my life for so long, it was something I really took for granted as a resource. And we spent five days on these boats where we were sailing when the tide was right, and fishing when the tide was right, and, you know, eating all of our meals on

the deck of the boat, and exploring marshes along the river; and I was really seeing how productive a resource the Chester was and how incredible a space it was. And the fact that it was in my backdoor just made it so much more special to me. And I also, at that time, started really connecting and falling in love with sailing and the experience that a boat can provide to community members. So, you know, the experience that you can have together as a community when your space is only 50-feet long, and you're on this boat together for, you know, a prolonged amount of time... the friendships, the connections, the conversations that you have, and the shared comradery of that experience is really unlike anything that I've ever experienced, and I just really knew I wanted to chase that feeling. And so I applied to work for Echo Hill Outdoor School, and I became an intern there when I was 18. And, you know, pretty much right away after spending a summer on the skipjack and the buyboat, I knew that being a captain, working on boats, doing this type... providing this type of experience for folks on the water was something that I wanted to do. And so I went away to college in Rhode Island, went to Roger Williams University in Bristol. And my sophomore year, I signed up for a Seamester course that took me to South Africa. And so I worked for this... or

didn't work for, I was a student for a company called Seamester that provided semester-long experiences for college students. They had one boat that circumnavigated the Caribbean every semester, and that was for marine biology-focused majors, there was a lot of scuba diving that was happening. And then they had a 112-foot custom-built staysail schooner, steel-hulled, that circumnavigated the world every four years, and students could sign up for a three-month leg. And so you would take oceanography classes, leadership classes, and you would learn how to run the ship. You would be part of the crew, part of a watch team, and you would get the boat to where it needed to go. So I joined the ship, which was called *Argo*, in Cape Town, South Africa in January of... gosh, I don't even remember anymore... 2010, and I was 19. And I sailed with that boat across the Atlantic to Saint Helena, and then to Brazil, and then up into the Caribbean. We ended in Antigua in April of 2010. And through that process, I was able to get enough hours and miles to qualify for my... for my Royal Yacht Certificate which is like the British version of a captain's license. And then when I returned home, I went through the process of applying for my U.S. Coast Guard Merchant Mariner's license, so I was able to get my license when I was 20. So I have 100 Ton Inland Master's License

with a sail endorsement. And I started coming back every summer in between college, and running the buyboat and the skipjack for summer trips for Echo Hill Outdoor School where we would take students out for five days, Monday to Friday. They would swim, crab, fish, sail the boat, and basically have a very similar experience to the experience I had as a high schooler where you're connecting with that local resource. And there's no time crunch to be at a certain port or to make it to another part of the Chesapeake, you have so long to spend just on the Chester River that the things that you're able to witness because you have the time are pretty special to the students and to the folks who work there. So I am... I worked there for, I guess, three summers. And then when I graduated, I worked for them for one year, and then I accepted a job with a local family who I believe still lives in Oxford in Talbot County, and they were the Johnsons, and they owned a custom-built aluminum 60-foot ketch rigged catamaran named *Elcie*. And they ran a company called Elcie Expeditions where they and their two daughters... their goal was to circumnavigate the world and charter out the port hull to folks who wanted to have a very out of the box vacation experience. And so I was hired as the mate, cook, helper, babysitter... you know, you name it, I was just their kind

of third person, third adult. And I worked with them and sailed from... to the Tred Avon River down out of the Chesapeake Bay, through the Caribbean, and through the Panama Canal to Panama City. That was over the course of... well, it was from November to March. So about six months. And...

SHEA: What was it like going through the Panama Canal?

RICHARDS: [00:08:01] It was incredible. It was a pretty regimented experience. You know, there's... you have to work with an agent, and they're going to let you know exactly how you're going to transit. You know, there's a lot of hurry up and wait where you'll get there, you'll find out what your slot is, your date for crossing the Canal, and you have to arrange all that first by going to Cartagena, Colombia to work that out. So you can't just show up and say, "I'm ready to go through the Canal." So there's a huge lead up time to getting your slot; folks that need to be part of the process whether that's, you know, country officials and things like that; and then once you... so you may arrive in Panama and then just wait for two weeks until your slot comes up, and then all of a sudden you have to go. And so you're lashed and rafted to boats that you don't know. You don't know what their skill set is especially because you're usually maybe three or

four recreational sailing yachts sandwiched in between huge tankers. And so these, you know, locks are enormous, and so you're catching lines as quickly as you can which are these huge, heavy monkey-vests that are being chucked down at you from, you know, pretty high heights. And you have to work very quickly, and you're pivoting as to what the pilot who's helping you through the canal is asking you to do, and you can... essentially, it's very rare to cross the entire Panama Canal in one day. Usually, you cross it in two days because halfway through you're in a huge lake called Gatun Lake, and there are moorings there that you tie up to overnight, and then the pilot comes back the next day and you get through the Gatun Lake, and then you go down the locks that you had just gone up to get to the lake. And so then you end up in Panama City. So it really takes... it's probably each lock system is a four or five hour experience, and then there's a lot of waiting in between. But, you know, it was an amazing experience, and just wild to be in the Atlantic one moment and then in the Pacific the other. And Panama's very different on the Pacific side than it is on the Atlantic both in landscape, socioeconomic situations, and so it was a pretty wild experience. And then I was kind of on the precipice of the Pacific Ocean, and then I ended my contract with them, and

I actually flew to the Bahamas to spend some time with my now husband who's also in the maritime world. So I... at the time, he was working on a boat called *Geronimo* which is a school ship for a private boarding school in Rhode Island. And students would spend semesters sailing the boat from Rhode Island down to the Bahamas, and they would do a research project that involved tagging and tracking sea turtles. And then they would fly home, and the boat would sit there over the winter in the Bahamas, and then a new group of students would fly down, tag sea turtles, and then return the ship back to Rhode Island. And so he was the first mate of that boat, and so I spent part of the winter there helping to do maintenance on *Geronimo*. And then I was hired by ActionQuest which is a parent company that owns Seamester which is the organization that I spent my study abroad session with. And so ActionQuest is a summer camp that operates in the British Virgin Islands, and so they charter a huge fleet of barefoot charter boats from Sunsail, The Moorings group, the Towee group. And students age... or kids age 12 to 18 come down, and they learn how to sail the boats, they learn how to scuba dive, and they circumnavigate the BVIs in 21 days, and it's a summer camp experience.

SHEA: Pretty nice. [laughs]

RICHARDS: [00:12:00] Yeah, it was a pretty nice summer camp experience, but, you know, it's a... so I was hired as a skipper to run one of their 50-foot Beneteaus on the sail-side. So there was some scuba diving happening on our side, but essentially it was myself, a scuba instructor, and an EMT as the camp counselors, and then we had 12 students... or 12 campers. And then, you know, 21 days, circumnavigated the VBIs, you get one day to clean the boat, one day off, you do it again. One day to clean the boat, one day off, do it again. So I spent a summer doing that, and by the end of it, they had offered me a job as crew on *Argo* which was the boat that I had been a student on. So I said, "I would really love to do that, but the thing is I have this boyfriend that I'd like to get back to." And they said, "Well, what does he do?" And I said, "Well, funny you should ask." And so they ended up hiring us both. And so while we were waiting for that contract to start, we lived in Maine for a while. So Forrest was working for Maine Maritime Academy as the first mate of schooner *Bowdoin*, and I worked on an oyster farm, and was also just a utility maintenance crew for Maine Maritime. So helping take care of the boats, assisting with sails when Forrest would go out on day sails, and, yeah, working for the oyster farm on the Bagaduce River which was a

lovely experience. And I figured, "Hey, I've sailed a skipjack, I could probably work on an oyster farm." And so in the winter, December of 2013, Forrest and I flew out to join Argo in Thailand. And so the semester that we worked for them, we took the boat with 23 students from Thailand out to the Maldives, and we visited, you know, all different parts of Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia; Singapore on the way out and on the way back including Borneo. And then when the semester ended, we were back in Thailand because the boat had been built there. Usually... that was a very atypical trip. Usually, Argo leaves from Thailand and goes to South Africa, and then those students get off and you continue on. But we began and ended in Thailand because the boat had originally been built there on the Bangkok River, and it had been seven years since its last extensive yard period, and it was in need of some love. So we... the students disembarked, we took the boat up the Bangkok River to the marina where it had been commissioned; they were very full so we actually ended up hauling the boat out at the Thai Royal Navy base. And so we would commute... we had an apartment in Bangkok, and for four months, we participated in a major refit of the boat, and we worked alongside the yard crew that was running the project. And every day we would take a train from Bangkok

to the outskirts of the city, and then get in a boat to go across the river and do a very long day's labor in hot Thailand which, for the record, is no hotter than the Eastern Shore. [laughter] So, you know, we were in the middle of the monsoon season, and everyone thought for sure that we, as Americans, would never have experienced heat like this. And I said, "No. This is the same as a summer on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. [laughs]" So... but, yeah, so we...

SHEA: I was actually going to ask you what it's like to be on a boat there compared to...

RICHARDS: Here.

SHEA: Yep.

RICHARDS: [00:15:48] Well, there are incredible things that I loved about sailing in Southeast Asia and in the Indian Ocean in terms of the people that we met, the life... the sea life, and, you know, the animals, and the... you know, just the landscape was unbelievable, the food was unbelievable, the people were unbelievable. I mean just really was phenomenal. And the experience of sailing the boat in the Indian Ocean, and especially overnight when we were doing long passages... I think the longest passage we did was 21 days from the Maldives to Jakarta... the idea of navigation lights, you know the proper lights that you're

displaying at night, that didn't exist for most of the fishing boats that were out there. There might just be a series of Christmas lights wrapped around the mast of the boat. So in the middle of the night, you're sailing and navigating through this fishing fleet, and you have no idea what direction they're moving in, you can only use your radar to tell how close or far they are from you. And when there's so many boats out in that mix with these Christmas lights, you can't even tell how many boats there are. And so there were some pretty stressful night sails that happened. It's also not uncommon for fisherman to be opportunistic and to track a boat that they feel they may be able to, you know, board. And so there were a couple of instances where we grew very concerned that... you know, we passed by a series of fishing boats, and then one just kind of cut off from the fleet and followed us for several miles, and we would change course, and they would change course. And, luckily, it never amounted to anything, but that... in the two times that that's ever happened to me, once as a student when we were off the coast of Africa and once in the Indian Ocean as a crew member, you know, the solution was to bring all of the students up on deck, have all of the women put hoods up over their hair, just show a full force of exactly how many crew members are on the

boat, and that's all it ever amounted to. But it's just kind of that question in your mind of... you know, in the middle of the ocean, why is there a boat following you for apparently no reason? And so we had a couple of, you know, pretty sleepless nights, pretty stressful nights sailing in the Indian, and I don't know that I need to repeat that every day. [laughs] But, overall, I mean it was a life-changing experience, and, you know, I absolutely recommend it to anyone. Yeah.

SHEA: Did you find being a female captain in that position at all challenging, or...

RICHARDS: [00:18:34] So I was not the captain of that boat, so I was crew, so I as a mate. I was third mate on that boat. And it was not challenging because as a school ship, you know, it was just not uncommon for, you know, women to be in leadership roles in that scenario. It was a very progressive organization I was working with, and it was just very common for students who participated on the boat to kind of follow suit and go up a ladder of... you know, they're obviously interested in that life anyways because they were students there, so it was very common for... like me, someone who had been a student, to come back as crew later. And so, you know, I think that there was a pretty general split between men and women on that boat. Here in

the Chesapeake, it's actually a lot more unusual that... I found in my day to day. You know, things like as captain of the *Elsworth*, bringing it into a marina, and letting the gas attendant know what I needed, and them looking over at the 18 year old male intern to get confirmation that that was in fact what the boat needed; or, you know, addressing the wrong person thinking they were the captain because, you know, they were the man on board. That's something that I ran into quite a bit especially when I was... I was a young female captain. You know, I had my license when I was 20, and so for those first several years there was definitely shock value in, you know, waterman that I was speaking with on the river, or marina managers, and things like that. But, you know, I think that a lot has changed since I was 20, and that's not so unusual anymore, and so that's been great to see.

SHEA: Was there anybody who inspired you to try to build this life on the boats and the water?

RICHARDS: [00:20:26] I'd always had the interest in boats, and my family had had, you know, interest in boats for sure, so that helped. And I always loved being by the water and the ocean, that's just always been me. You know, I would definitely say Echo Hill Outdoor School was kind of that spark of inspiration for me. Andrew McCown, who to this

day runs the program for Echo Hill Outdoor School, he's the associate director of the Outdoor School... he was a hugely inspiring figure for me, and really taught me how to run boats, and how to handle, you know, safety with students on board, and how to operate not just a vessel in general, but these historic boats that have, you know, very specific differences than a lot of modern boats. For instance, the skipjack *Elsworth* is a true skipjack; it doesn't have a motor inboard, the motor exists on a push boat behind which, you know, the difference between a boat... sailing out with a push boat is like driving a 50-passenger van with a canoe trailer on the back as opposed to a Toyota Corolla, so you have to think about it a lot differently, you know, when you're running astern, or going forward, and things like that. There's a lot more to consider. So he really taught me how to do that. And I, you know, from there just continued to say yes to things that were inspiring to me, I would say. And so that's... you know, I didn't necessarily have a plan to do any of this long-term. You know, whether that's sailing, sail training, or Chesapeake Bay advocacy work, education and ecology. I mean I've kind of stayed in that realm, and there was no plan going into high school or college that that's what I really wanted to do. I just knew I wanted to say yes to

experiences that kept getting me that feeling of fulfillment, and that's just what it all added up to. And so, yeah, so after our experience with Seamester, Forrest and I moved back to Chestertown, and I worked for Echo Hill Outdoor School full-time for another six years. And then I had children which was a wonderful experience, and it made it more difficult for me to pursue residential programs where I was out for many days at a time and things like that. And so I started finding myself being pulled more toward just nonprofit development and administration. And so I worked as the director of development for Echo Hill for a short amount of time, and then the pandemic happened, and I kind of stepped away from that job and life to spend time with my family. And then I heard that the Riverkeeper position was available. So ShoreRivers is, of course, a fabulous organization that operates across the mid-and upper-Eastern Shore of Maryland. They operate four different Riverkeeper positions that protect the Sassafras, Chester, the Miles and Wye rivers, and the Choptank River. And Tim Trumbower, who had been the Chester Riverkeeper for a long time, had decided to pursue opportunities in Maine and move there with his family. And, you know, I had kind of been on a path at home with my children, and kind of trying to regroup and decide what my next step was going to

be, and I just became kind of overwhelmed with this opportunity and possibility that I could join this team. And, luckily, ShoreRivers wanted that, too. And so I've been the Chester Riverkeeper with ShoreRivers now since 2021... January of 2021. And it's been a phenomenal experience because ShoreRivers... whose mission is to protect and restore Eastern Shore waterways through science-based advocacy, education, and restoration... have really been successful through a platform of engaging with stakeholders in the watershed about what they love and cherish about the Chester, and finding ways to make common ground where we can improve its future, its ecology, its water quality together. And so I have found myself kind of switching from at Echo Hill Outdoor School where my job was to introduce students to these Chesapeake Bay stakeholders so that they could learn how dynamic a situation we have here as we work toward restoring the Chesapeake Bay... I'm now working with those same stakeholders as an advocate, putting together plans to... you know, whether that's putting a restoration project in the ground, whether that's advocating in Annapolis for laws that will improve water quality here on the Eastern Shore, whether that's working with a local church to, you know, connect them with bacteria data from our swimmable shore rivers program, or

to implement a river from the yard of native plants that can help improve storm water runoff that's coming off of their building. And so I'm kind of all over the place in our watershed working with these stakeholders and sharing my experience and my perspective of why the Chester River is so special, and how they can help us cherish that river, and protect it, and restore it.

SHEA: So why is it so special? [laughs] Why is the Chester so special?

RICHARDS: So...

SHEA: I love the Chester, I just sort of wondered why...

RICHARDS: [00:25:58] Yeah. Well, I'm sure it's special to everyone for different reasons. For me, something that is something that I've always valued about it because of the rural character that we have in Queen Anne's County along the shore, when you drive a boat up the Chester River, if you paddle up the Chester River, you can see miles of shoreline that haven't changed in 200 years, and... because there's so little riverfront development compared to many of the tributaries on the western shore of Maryland, some even on the eastern shore of Maryland. I mean if I can drive my boat, you know, up from the southern bay and come into the mouth of the Chester, as soon as you get past Kent Narrows, there's... on both sides: Kent and Queen Anne's...

just miles where you don't see a house on the shoreline at all. It's beachfront, it's forested lands, and it's... the fact that it hasn't changed in several hundred years is amazing, and you're also looking at a hundred year view because all of those lands are in easements. So it's a very quiet river, it's a very natural river, and, you know, I think that part of what makes it so dear to me, you know, is because I have so many memories that can be accessed any time I drive by a beach where I played with my son, or I went trout lining in Langford Creek, or anything. There's just a whole suite of, you know, lifetime experiences that I've had on this river that, you know, can surface any time I'm out there. And I think that's a very common experience that a lot of folks who have grown up on the Chester, grown up on the Chesapeake have that on their tributary, you know, that they grew up on, and it's very dear to them for that reason. So yeah.

SHEA: So are there any new victories or accomplishments that you've been able to implement here on the Chester?

RICHARDS: [00:27:55] Well, you know, ShoreRivers has, you know, been working here a very long time. You know, ShoreRivers is a merged organization, so historically there has been a grassroots organization advocating and working for the Chester for a very long time. It was Chester River

Association before it was ShoreRivers, and they went as far back as 1987, I believe. So in... you know, there's been a lot of victories across that time. One recent victory of note is that, you know, we were able to have the Chester River designated by the Department of Natural Resources as a no-discharge zone. So that means that, you know, any boat even if it's treated effluent that's coming off of the boat, it cannot discharge that because while bacteria is a concern and we don't want, you know, sewage being discharged into the river for that reason, even treated sewage has nitrogen and phosphorous contaminants in it, and that's one of the largest pollutant sources that we're working to reduce and mitigate from entering waterways. And so, you know, that was a big classification to win. It was the first river here on the Eastern Shore that was able to get that designation. You know, I would say there's a lot of everyday victories that are adding up to, you know, a huge amount of change. Something that we really have valued and pride... we have pride in our work about is our relationship with farmers in the area. You know, agriculture makes up more than 65 percent of land use on the Eastern Shore, and so all land use has impacts on our waterways, and farmers are then, of course, the dominant land use that we find ourselves working with often. But

the good news is that when you invest in soil quality and soil health, you're actually benefitting water quality because farmers spend a lot of time adding amendments and working their land so that they can have the best crop yield possible, and they want all that time, energy, and amendment to stay put with their plants, and we also want that. And so we have found common restoration projects to work on, you know, best-management practices, grass buffers, wetlands, all types of programs like that that can help keep soil and amendments on farmland and out of our rivers which has been... you know, we have over 260 projects in the ground across all four of our watersheds. And the Chester, the nitrogen and phosphorous reductions that are happening... ShoreRivers region-wide, 40 percent of the nitrogen reductions region-wide are happening here on the Chester with the restoration projects that we've put in the ground, and 60 percent of phosphorous reductions just in the Chester. And that is a testament to the willing partners that we have here in our watershed. It's also a huge testament to our restoration department. So as the Riverkeeper, I am the voice for the river, I am an advocate for the river, it's my job to bring folks to the table and make sure that they care, but the incredible designs and projects that have been put in the ground to

help reduce runoff of nitrogen, phosphorous, and sediments,
I mean the credit goes to the restoration team 100 percent.
That number of 260 is because of their excellent work.
Yeah.

SHEA: So what's the biggest challenge you face in doing
this?

RICHARDS: [00:31:21] Trust can be a big challenge. So you need
to know when you're not the right voice for a special... a
specific conversation. So, you know, we have incredible
relationships with farmers, with watermen, with, you know,
municipalities; but not all of them. So sometimes it's
knowing that they're going to respond better to the word
and voice of another farmer, or the word and voice of
another town planner or waterman; you know, it may not be
me. It may be getting to know me through that process with
someone else that they trust ShoreRivers and understand
that, overall, we're actually working toward the same thing
because, you know, we really do find that every stakeholder
who's here, one of the main connections they have to this
place is the river. And so we can always find commonality,
and we take this really strategic friends first approach.
You don't have to make a choice between industry and
environment to work with ShoreRivers and to find solutions
for the waterway. And so just kind of getting over that

first hurdle, you know, of trust can often be the biggest issue. So I would say that's the biggest challenge.

SHEA: I wondered how the waterman respond to the work you're doing because sometimes... [laughs]

RICHARDS: [00:32:40] It always depends. Yes. It completely depends. And something that Shore... you know, we're not afraid to take a hard stance. We really value that friends first approach, but, you know, we are not pro-development, we're not pro-farming, we're not pro-fishing, we are pro-river. And so when a developer has an interesting concept that's going to introduce more green infrastructure, and reduce stormwater runoff, and put buffers that protect the river, we want to lift that proposition up and support it how we can. You know, if we have a farmer who wants to implement best-management practices, we want to work with them, we want to lift them up. And the same with waterman. But on the flip side of that coin, if you have a developer, a municipal structure, you know, a farmer who's not interested in engaging in practices that benefit the river, then we want to first try to help them see where they could be doing that; and if not, we'll take the action that we need to that's appropriate to protect the river. So, yeah, it's definitely a mixed reaction across our different sectors. Yeah.

SHEA: I was going to ask if you had noticed changes in the bay since your childhood here, but...

RICHARDS: [00:33:54] For sure. You know... and I would say that in my lifetime, a lot of the changes that I notice are influx. So there are times in my life when I remember, you know, there being submerged aquatic grasses growing along the shoreline where I grew up. And I can also, you know, name long stretches of years where there weren't any. And then a few short years ago they came back, and now they're gone again. You know, water clarity has come and gone in different regions of the river. And so, you know, what the long-term trends of those are in my lifetime, I don't know that I can say that when I was a little child it was substantially better or worse than it is now, but we've certainly had significant years of improvement and decline. And, you know, here at ShoreRivers we're working to make sure that while those fluxes happen all over the bay, that we are trending in an upward fashion. And, yeah, so... and our water quality data is telling us that, and so it's a slow and steady race. And, you know, there are lots of Riverkeepers that like to joke that they'll be working themselves out of a job, but this is long work, and...but it's worthy work, and I'm excited to be able to continue to tell my story, my connection to the river, and hope that

that... in encouraging folks to share theirs, we can be inspired to make differences for the river together.

SHEA: That's great.

RICHARDS: Yeah.

SHEA: That's great. So your captain's license.

RICHARDS: Yes.

SHEA: So are you using your captain's license at all these days?

RICHARDS: [00:35:34] At ShoreRivers, no, unfortunately. You don't need a captain's license to operate a 24-foot Whaler [laughter] that's collecting water quality samples which is a big part of my job. So while I'm not taking passengers out anymore... other than I do take community members out with me so that they can see what I do, learn more about ShoreRivers. I am out on the river every week April through October. We monitor 12 water quality stations... actually 14. We just added two new ones this year, so I monitor 14 water quality stations between Crumpton and Rock Hall. And we test for nitrogen, phosphorus, dissolved oxygen, temperature, salinity, and clarity. And so all of that water quality data helps us generate a yearly report card that helps us track the health of the river overall, track trends over time, and then share those results with the community. We also monitor for bacteria through the

month of May through September so that folks who are recreating in the waterways in the summer have an idea of the bacteria counts in their favorite recreation spots so that they can make informed decisions about recreating in the water.

SHEA: Whether to get in or not.

RICHARDS: [00:36:44] Yeah. And so, yes, I would love to say that I'm using my license more than I am, but, unfortunately, you know, I still have two young children, and so using my license for kind of overnight excursions, or charter work, or anything like that which... you know, I loved the travel that my license provided to me in my early 20s, and, you know, of course I get that itch now and again where it'd be great to get out there and so some blue water sailing, and do a few boat deliveries, or something like that, but... and I know I'll come back to that, you know. But, you know, I'm in a season of life right now that I'm just more focused on making sure my children are out on the water, and building that same relationship with the Chester, and boating, and the waterway that I did. And, you know, it's my... it's a skill that I can carry with me for, you know, my whole life which is just one of those amazing, you know, lucky, you know, things for me that, you know, I'll always have it, I'll always work on keeping it

in date, updated. You know, you renew your license every five years, and so I always do what I need to do to make sure that I can keep my license current because I'd love to be able to say yes to opportunities that come up whether that's, you know, doing a trip or two in the summer with Echo Hill, or, you know, doing boat deliveries on the East Coast in the winter. So, you know, I want to make sure that I have that option and that opportunity when it's right for me. But right now, my Whaler on the river is where I'm happy to be at.

SHEA: Do you have any advice for young women who are interested in sailing, boating, and might want to become captains?

RICHARDS: [00:38:40] Absolutely. I think the biggest... the best thing that I did for myself when I was young, and I think I touched on this before, is I just said yes to any opportunity that excited me. Don't get wrapped up in... I speak to so many high school and college folks, male or female, that are so concerned with how this will all track, how it will all mount up: "I majored in this, so I need to get an internship in this, and I have to know where I'm going, and I need to stay five steps ahead." And, you know, for me, you know, I followed my interests, but if an opportunity came up that didn't fall right in line with

where I thought I was meant to be going, but I knew that it would be interesting and fulfilling, you know, I said yes. And that took me off course, but in a really good way. And so I just followed those opportunities, and when you're young, that's the perfect time to do that. Just say yes to opportunities that are going to give you more expertise, more skill sets even if they are not what you think in your mind are going to help you get to that eventual career that you have in your mind. You know, if you are... and so if you're... the goal is to, you know, become a captain, to be in the maritime world, you know, just say yes. Go to areas of the country that you haven't sailed, get out of your comfort zone, and don't just take jobs that are in an area that you know exclusively even if that's where you want to be later. Take on jobs, and internships, and things that allow you to experience... maybe you want to be a captain, but, you know, there's a lot of value in learning to be the engineer on the boat, or the rigger, or the... you know, so just make sure that you say yes to opportunities that are interesting and help build a skill set, and you'll figure out what you liked and what you didn't like about that organization or that position. And I think following your passion is just as important as following a strategic plan. And so that's my advice to any young folks that are

wondering what they should be doing right out of college. And, you know... and I know so many folks that ended up falling into a maritime career because to them what they were passionate about was traveling and experiencing new cultures. And a job in the maritime industry is such a wonderful way to work and have that travel life, have that sense of adventure, to see new places, new countries, experience new cultures, but be employed, [laughs] and to be building a skill set, a real skill set. And so there's so many ways in which you can do that. You can do that through school ships, you can do that through merchant mariner, you know, tracks, but I think that that's been just as much of a driver for folks that I see in the maritime industry as loving to sail. You know, it might be a mode of travel, a mode of exploration of the world that can be really fulfilling.

SHEA: What do you want them to know about you as a female captain?

RICHARDS: [00:42:07] Gosh. I think that... I don't know. I guess what I can... what I can say is that I've been... I've sailed many places. My passport is full of stamps from different countries all over the world. I've sailed in three different oceans, I've crossed one of them, but the pull home, the pull back to my home river was very

real. And everywhere I went, I could see that every community that I visited was shaped by the waterway that they lived near. It was the backbone to the culture, the economy, the folklore, and the way of life. And so that gave me a huge appreciation to bring home with me and to see how the Chester River provides that for these communities. And I... for me, the Chester River is just, you know, a very central part of who I am and how I see the world now. And, you know, I think that when you learn how to sail a boat, when you learn how to navigate any waterway, you're... there's probably... I think that when I was younger, there was this pressure to get it the right the first time because I was young, because I was a female. And I think that... don't ever be afraid to stop asking questions, don't ever be afraid to share that you're still learning and that you want someone else's perspective or advice on how something could or should be done because the more questions you ask, the more experiences you take on from other folks in the industry, the stronger captain you'll be, the stronger mariner you'll be. And so I would definitely have that be advice to young females is just don't stop asking questions. Don't be afraid of seeming inexperienced. Just get out there and make sure that you

have all the information that you need to feel confident and make the right decisions, the safe decisions. Yeah.

SHEA: What's the most exciting place you've sailed?

RICHARDS: Oh. The most exciting... I do know that.

SHEA: There's no right answer. [laughs]

RICHARDS: Yes, I know.

SHEA: I was just wondering because I began to imagine being on a body of water in a different place, and learning... so I'm wondering where that might be, what it felt like.

[laughs]

RICHARDS: [00:45:12] Well, I will say that my favorite place to sail is slap dang in the middle of the ocean. It is the coolest feeling when there is... you've been sailing for days, and you have days to go, and you're not going to see anything. It's just you, and your crew, and your students or whoever it is that's on the boat, and you are your own world. That's all that exists. And that kind of gets back to that community-building that first kind of drew me to ships is the tight... there's no kind of mask you can put on, or, you know, place for you to hide. You are going to be 100 percent your authentic self in that situation because you're all there on this stretch of 100 feet together in the middle of the ocean. But, also, kind of all the unnecessary weight of land life and the things that

you have to do... just none of that is important or a weight on you anymore, and so the clarity of thought that you can have, the time that you can spend contemplating what's really important, all of that comes so easily in the middle of the ocean. [laughs] And, you know, to watch an entire 24-hour cycle on the ocean is just kind of this incredible thing to watch the sunrise and sunset, to see dolphins swimming in the wake of the bow, to see bioluminescence floating up across the ocean, like all of these things that... there are so many humans on this earth that will never see that because it's such a rare thing to be crossing the ocean in such a small ship. And it's just kind of like you're learning these secrets of nature, and the world, and the ocean that just you get to see and remember forever. And that's my... those are my favorite memories of sailing, blue water sailing. And... but to answer your question of where is the most exciting place I ever sailed... we sailed to the southern end of Borneo which is an island that is split between Malaysia and Indonesia, so we were on the Indonesian side. And we went up a very small river called the Kumai River to a very tiny town, and there was basically just two industries there. There were huge towers, wooden towers, that, you know, loomed up in the sky that were just terraces for birds

to... a very specific type of bird to build nests on because bird's nest soup was a delicacy in that part of Asia. And so that was one of the, you know, biggest producers... you know, that town was one of the biggest producers... the town was called Kumai... for the ingredients for such soup. And the other thing that brought folks to the area was that there was a very large and very well-run orangutan sanctuary there. And so what we were able to provide the students was a 48-hour trip into the jungle, into this orangutan sanctuary. And the way that you access that is by riverboat. So we had a few crew that stayed behind on Argo to watch over it while it was anchored in the river, but then we chartered a riverboat that was, you know, shaped and colored like a banana, and just this really dramatic rake to it, and just a very quintessential Southeast Asian boat design, had two decks on it. And we slept on the boat, meals were provided to us, we slept on mats under mosquito nets, and we were able to journey up these small creeks and tributaries that fed into the Kumai River that bring you back into this, you know, orangutan sanctuary that was in the center of this jungle. I mean you were coming through these, you know, inlets of water... I mean there's snakes, and toucans, and alligators, and all kinds of things that you're just

getting able... you're able to see firsthand in this very untouched experience. And then we were able to... you know, the boat would dock, and you would walk down a series of platforms... or boardwalks to viewing platforms. And park rangers would set out bananas and coconut milk and, you know, they would call into the woods, and you would just be standing around kind of feeling like, "Well, where are they?" And then someone would brush past your shoulder, and you'd say, "Oh, excuse me," but it was actually just an orangutan walking on its... you know, legs. It just seemed like a human [laughs] just walking by you to go get their food. So it was incredible. So we just spent two days walking around this incredibly untouched place and getting to know these orangutans and see them in their natural habitat. And it's such a remote place in the world. Unless... you know, you'd have to be very, very affluent to fly there and arrange a vacation to get there. And so for... and the river, the Kumai River, through which we arrived, is incredibly affected by the tide. So it's very difficult to get in and out of the river, and so it's probably one of the most difficult places to get to in the Indian Ocean. And to have that experience and that memory, it's just such a rare experience that me and those students... you know, not many people would be able to say

they were... that they did that. So that's pretty incredible.

SHEA: Interested to see what your next adventure is now.

RICHARDS: Yeah. [laughs]

SHEA: Well, I have one other... I have two other questions.

RICHARDS: Sure.

SHEA: And then I know you have other things to do, but this is too much fun for me. I could listen to your stories forever.

RICHARDS: Absolutely.

SHEA: What should people who don't have the privilege of living near the Chesapeake know about it and the people who work and play on it?

RICHARDS: [00:51:24] Well, I think that everyone should know that the Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in America. It's the third largest estuary on planet earth. And estuaries are essential for replenishing fish populations of our oceans, and so it is an essential biological service that is being provided to species across the Atlantic and the world. And for that reason alone, is deserving of protection. What it also provides beyond being a nursery for juvenile fish, and crabs, and oysters, and all of these important things, is an incredible abundant space for folks to make their living, for folks to spend their, you know,

days of leisure. And just like all of those other waterways that I spent time exploring, the Chesapeake has a very specific culture. There is art, there is poetry, there are songs that have all come out of this living resource because of the jobs of folks that have lived here, the way that they spent their days. And there's... you know, there's... the Chesapeake in itself is special to me because I have connection, but the idea of the culture of the Chesapeake should be important to everyone because it shows you yes, there is rich culture here, but find any topography, any body of water anywhere in the world, and there is a rich history happening there because of that resource. And there's so much to learn, and explore, and... about every culture that has a connection to water. And it really can open up just millions of opportunities for folks who are inspired by hearing people's stories, by learning, you know, about different art forms that come out of this resource. You know, it's not just the Chester or the Chesapeake that provides that. You know, go to the Great Lakes, go to, you know, Puget Sound, go to the Congo River, and those stories and connections exist there, too. And it's just one of, you know, many incredible water systems that, you know, have helped humans evolve; and, you know, it provides food, and food for their soul.

SHEA: Do you have a favorite Chesapeake tradition?

RICHARDS: [00:54:09] I don't know that I have a favorite

Chesapeake tradition other than, you know, I... the poetry that has come out of life as a waterman, life as an eastern shoreman, life as a farmer, the kind of... the local color poetry that has kind of come from this area, it speaks to me especially. And, you know, when you read something that was clearly written by someone who spent a lot of time here, a lot of time in the marshes, a lot of time in the farm fields, a lot of time early morning on the river, that's... I feel a very specific and special connection and pull towards those stories. And as untouched and as rural as the Chester River is in comparison to a lot of the Chesapeake, it's certainly evolving with time. There are parts of our culture and history that are evolving into, you know, other ways. And so I think it's very important that that idea of taking art from this place and producing art from this place, I hope that that doesn't fade. And I think it was something that was done a lot more in the 1800s and 1900s, and I think that it's just as important for us here in present time to continue to, you know, make those personal and artistic connections to the waterway, and make sure that that's capturing this time and the way that we're interacting with the waterway now. And so, you

know, I think that is happening, but I hope that everyone works towards sustaining that, and... you know, because it will say something very specific about us when we're not here anymore, and I think that's important.

SHEA: That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the conversation that we haven't covered about your experience on the water or...

RICHARDS: [00:56:30] Gosh. I guess I would just add that... you know, I love... the thing that brought me to boating, I love everything about boats. I think they're beautiful, I think they're romantic, I think they're lots of fun to drive through the water, and to maneuver, and to sail; all of those things, yes. But I think one of the most rewarding things is a day spent outside working with the elements and working with nature to help you accomplish what you need to accomplish that day. There is... that's the biggest fulfillment that I could get out of a day. And, you know... so I love my job. I spend a lot more time inside than I used to, but, you know, a day spent outside in the elements on a resource, that's the... that's the best it can get. And I just feel most life myself, I feel like the most productive human I can be, and I hope that everyone even if they don't want to be a mariner, or a captain, or in an industry that requires those things, I

always hope that folks try to seek out more opportunities in their lives... whether it's recreational, professional... where they can be outside more because there's, you know, honesty, there's fulfillment, there's art, and... in that. And, you know, it's the best thing you can do for your health and well-being. Yeah.

SHEA: Thank you.

RICHARDS: You're welcome.

SHEA: So how did you become involved with the Her Helm project?

RICHARDS: [00:58:15] Nancy Robson. Either she or Abby, her daughter, recommended that Kristen reach out to me. And so Kristen reached out, and, you know, we had a couple of phenomenal conversations which were really great. And, yeah, I love what she's doing, and it's been wonderful... you know, here in Chestertown, it's easy to feel... other than Kate, it's easy to feel like there's not that many female captains in the industry, but through this work that she's doing, she's really showcasing how many of us there are in the Chesapeake and that's been really exciting to see. Yeah.

SHEA: The variety.

RICHARDS: Yes, across so many different...

END OF AUDIO