

OH Nancy Taylor Robson

SHEA: Go ahead.

ROBSON: [00:00:02] Okay. My name is Nancy Taylor Robson.

That's N-A-N-C-Y T-A-Y-L-O-R R-O-B-S-O-N, Robson, because many people get that wrong. They want to put an N in front of it or in the middle of it or an E or something. And I was born in Baltimore and my dad was a... Sort of a... [Laughs] He could do almost anything. He was a musician and a math guy and a lawyer, and he built boats, and I grew up with him building, like, small sailboats in the garage, and we would throw... I can remember him building a Penguin. It's when I learned that beautiful-looking stuff that was fiberglass... It looked like it was all satin and silk, and you could not sit on it and lie all over it while he was working because then at the middle of the night, you'd be just filled with it. And, you know, I was five when we were doing this. He would... He built a dinghy in our living room one winter because my mother was extremely tolerant, [laughter] so I sort of... I grew up thinking that, you know, there weren't as many kind of parameters in life as it would've been if I'd been in maybe, you know, suburbia where everyone had to adhere to certain rigid

rules. My dad was not a big... Neither one of my parents were big rigid rule people. So... And always... And I'd always had a lot of freedom from the time I was a little girl. It was... My mother always said to me, which I thought was amazing when I started raising children... She said, "I figured you were smart enough that if you said you thought you could really do something, you could do it." I thought... And then, you know, I can remember holding onto that thought when my nine-year-old said, "I can walk up to the store alone," which meant that she had to cross two very busy roads on her own. Of course, heart in throat, me. And she put her hand on me and said, "Mom, I can do this," and I thought, "[gasping] Follow her, Mom," who was dead by then. And she came back, brought milk back, decided she was cooking. "Okay." But that kind of freedom also gave me confidence to try things.

SHEA: So when did you start sailing or getting into boating?

ROBSON: [00:02:39] Well, I'll... When I grew up, there wasn't any choice. If your parents or your father in particular decided that you were sailing and boating, that's what you were doing. I mean, it was not like, "Oh dear, do you want to play soccer?" No, this is what you're doing. You're going to go learn how to sail a dinghy and have parents...

You know, the fathers in particular stand on the dock and scream at you if you were doing it wrong. That was all very fun. [Laughs] And so we learned how to sail and we learned how to swim because, you know, we didn't want to wear those big fat life jackets that would get caught on things. They didn't have those wonderful slim ones they do now. And my dad had built over the course of five Sundays, beginning when my mother was pregnant with me... I'm the elder of two... To build a 25-foot sloop in a barn, and I can remember at four years old helping him paint the inside of the thing when it was coming toward being done. And I also remember they had to saw out one whole side of the barn to get it out, to pull it out in order to launch the thing, which happened when I was five. So yeah, it was an amazing journey. So it was a very... By then, I had a brother, younger brother. It was a cramped boat for four people, and we sailed and sometimes had an engine and sometimes didn't. And I remember my father taking a piece of plywood that acted as a temporary bunk periodically over the top of the head when my brother was little and trying to paddle back across the Chesapeake Bay to Magothy from Love Point because there was no wind and no engine. [Laughs] Yeah, it was sort of like, "Well, you know you

have problems and you figure out how to solve them." And that's one thing about being on a boat, particularly being on a boat in the ocean. It's sort of like [laughs] there's no one coming to help. Figure out what you can do and figure out what you can use to solve whatever problem you've got in front of you. So that kind of sense of possibility, I think, it probably is, is helpful. You know, you don't expect people to sort things out for you. On the other hand, you don't think to ask anybody else for help, which can also be very helpful, [laughs] and you don't learn that. When I went to college, it never occurred to me that there was such a thing as, like, a year abroad that the college would actually sort of sort out for you and with you, and I had gone into college thinking, "I'm going to be a teacher." And instead, by the second year... The beginning of the second year I was there, you had an obligatory conversation with the counselor, and he said, "Oh, teacher. You know, there's so many of those, you'll never be able to get a job." And I thought, "Oh gosh, I've got to be able to support myself. This is not good." So I thought, "Well, maybe I'll swap." I swapped to history because I love history, and I thought, "I'll go to law school." But it was... I was just sort of at sixes

and sevens, and I had a friend who... Welsh, who was the cousin of a girl I'd gone to high school with, and she came over with her dad and said, "We have a room available in... You know, the house that we share flats in in London. Why don't you come on over and we can figure out jobs or something for you to do to earn enough money to stay there." So I did, and my parents were like, "Okay, you think you're going to be all right? Have you got money for a plane ticket? Have you got money to go over with?" I had 50 bucks. I had a plane ticket and 50 bucks. I said, "Yep." But I thought, "I'm willing to do almost anything." You know, I'd grown up working with my dad with tools and painting and scraping paint and racing sailboats and stuff and working for other people, you know, fixing things and whatever I could do to earn money. My mother wanted to have a couple of rooms with wallpaper, so I said, "I can probably figure out how to do that," so I did, and she would pay me that. That's how I earned, you know, not pin money. It was a little bit more than that. But I learned how to sew because I wanted certain things and, you know, my parents were very careful about money. Both Scots, so. [Laughter] So anyway, you know.

SHEA: So how did you end up a captain? How did you end up...

ROBSON: [00:07:27] Well, I want to clarify this because technically speaking I was not a captain, and at the time, I took exactly the same license from the US coastguard that the captain's license was. But I needed more time aboard than I had. So I passed the captain's license. I got time for all of that, and I was able to go on as a mate. But I just needed X number more days to become... Certified as a captain. I would just have to go in and show them the logbooks and say, "Okay, can you give me my captain's license?" And I didn't have that because I got pregnant. But I wanted to be really careful about exactly how that work, because people call me a captain, and it's convenient for when you're introducing someone, when you're talking about the book. But it's technically not accurate, so.

SHEA: So what's this book you just mentioned?

ROBSON: [00:08:30] I... When I was pregnant with our second, I had been writing occasionally for the *Christian Science Monitor*, essays and things, and people had been saying, "You really should write a book," and I really wasn't ready to. But then when I realized I was going to be... Somebody had to stay home and screw up the kids, and my

husband was, you know, a mariner full time, and so he was gone for three, four, five weeks at a crack. And I thought, "Well, I can do that. I can sit down and write all of that time," because by that time, I realized I was probably not ever going back to that. So it was, like, a complete portion of life that you could encapsulate in a book.

SHEA: So how did you end up working on a tug?

ROBSON: [00:09:16] Oh, I met this cute man. [Laughs] He was just very cute. Never would've occurred to me I'd be married to him, but I was in the end. And he said, "Well, I want to... I want you to..." He was... He'd graduated from Kings Point. He had begun the Sail Loft at Georgetown Yacht Basin on the Sassafras River, and the... A father of a classmate at Kings Point had just bought a tugboat and started a small tug business, which is something that probably wouldn't happen these days, but it was... You know, a days of pirates kind of thing, and had asked me, because Gary's license, when he graduated, enabled him to run as captain on that. He was hired on board, and he ran for a year, and by that time, we were talking about marriage, and he said, "I want to get married and I want to move on a tugboat and run around tug." And I thought,

"Oy." But he was very cute. [Laughs] And I was not unfamiliar with the water, and I'd been on it, and I was just re-reading the beginning of the... You know, the very first time I was on that board with him and Chris Burg [?], who was the guy who owned the boat and was a wonderful boat handler. And I thought, "Yeah, you know, I was sort of primed for it anyway. I love being on the water, particularly at night, moonlit. And, I mean, what more, you know?" So yeah, that's how it was, and I figured, "Well, I could probably do that. I don't know." But the thing that amused me so much was when I talked about it, everyone I knew said, "[Gasp] Oh, to go and live on a tugboat." And I thought, "Have you ever been on a tugboat? Because I have. They're, you know, like, dirty and smelly and metal and uncomfortable and hard work." And my mother who was anything but a mariner was like, "Oh, I've always thought that would be so romantic." And I thought, "Really?" [Laughs] I just couldn't imagine Mom, but you know. They were both, I think... My mother was a very strong prayer and my father's like, "Yeah, you can probably do this. It's fine." [Laughs] So on I went.

SHEA: So tell me about working on a tug. [Laughs] What's it like?

ROBSON: [00:11:50] This one was built in 1943 by the Defense... DPC... Defense... What is it? DPC. Is it corporation? Defense Progress Corporation. I've not got the name right, I know. And it was built for the war. It was 85 feet long, 25 feet wide. It held actually more people than we carried. We always had five people, crew. It was designed to carry half, again, as many people [?] and to go across the ocean, so it carried 22,000 gallons of fuel and only 2,000 gallons of water because who needs to do anything but drink coffee? You don't need to wash or any of those things. [Laughter] And it was contracted to do kind of whatever it was... It was a freelance deal for the tug itself and for the people that owned it. It was just Chris Burg and Jerry McCannon [?] who were in partnership at that time. And they... We hauled LASH [Lighter Aboard Ship] barges up and down the Chesapeake Bay. Norfolk [?], they would come in, LASHes... Lighter Aboard Ship... And it's a square box, basically, that you get picked up by a crane and put in a particularly designed ship to go overseas. So they can stow an amazing variety of things in there. I mean, at one point we had LASH barges that had brightly yellow and green painted railcars for Iran. We... There were TVs inside some of those

things. There were... Oh, I don't know, could've been coats, could've been anything. And you get a whole tow full of them. You get... You know, they'd stack together because they were boxes with pins on each end and you basically just wire them together and create a barge, or you can... If it gets really rough, you string them out a little bit with LASH straps so they don't spring, you know, completely free of the wires. That was always interesting. The... Oh, we did Atlantic Coast running up and down with... Oh gosh, well, the first time I did, I drove a friend we still see. He's Gary's B partner now. He was on the boat as the cook deckhand at the time, the *Progress*, and they were up in Hudson, New York in the Hudson River, and Bob wanted to get off to go to a concert and Gary said, "Why don't you come on and get on board? And you can work." And I thought, "Earning money is a good thing. I like that. Being with my husband, he's very cute. It's a good thing." And so I drove Bob's little Toyota up and met them in Hudson, and they were tucked into a little tiny creek there with a flat barge, and they were welding a nuclear turbine onto the flat barge. Oh, it's just a big, you know, machine, really. There's nothing going on. And so I traded places with Bob. He was like, "I've got some,

you know, pork chops thawing. See you." And he got in the car and went away. And I thought, "I don't have a clue." The oven, the stove and oven, was just a great big iron box with a diesel flame in it, so I learned how to cook on that with a big wide top. It was a little like a wood stove, but not nearly as nice, I don't think, although you didn't have to feed it. It was sort of an automatic feed. So I got on there and we took it down the Hudson River when we were all hooked up, and around Battery, and up through Hell Gate. You know, it's aptly named, terrifying. And then through... And we ended up going up. We were going to take it all the way up to Fall River, and we did, but it was in May, and we had a sleet storm, of course, because that's what happens in May in Massachusetts, apparently. And we ended up tied up next to a gasoline barge. Again, scary because too many sparks, you know, explosions, yay. Right south of... Or is it south or maybe west... Of Buzzards Bay... In Buzzard Bay through Cape Cod Canal. And then we eventually took it up to Fall River and pushed it into the shore, and they pulled it off, and we went back down the, you know, creek. And my husband who's always looking for food... He's a hunter... He said, "Oh look, there's somebody pulling traps. Let's see if we... He's

got seafood we can buy from him." So we stopped, and we... And he was pulling conch traps, and so we stopped and gave him the money he asked for, and he gave us a whole big bucket full of conchs, and we had to figure out how to undo them and cook them. Yeah, it was a lot of... A variety of stuff. We did a lot of Delaware River and Bay. Going around the bottom of the Delaware Bay is... It's like being in Mix Master [?]. It's just... I mean, and I get seasick, and so that was... You know, that was a trial. But...

SHEA: So what are some of the challenges that you faced on the tug?

ROBSON: [00:17:19] Well, at the time, I was the only... One of only two women that I ever saw when I was out there, and sometimes I was received well, and sometimes it was just plain scary. The guys on board for the most part were really... We were a team. You know, they knew that I really... I wasn't there just because I wanted to float through and maybe put a biscuit on the table. I did the work right alongside, and, I mean, we would drag these 85-pound LASH straps around, and I'd leap back and forth across some of these barges, and hawser work, everything. I mean, you do... You're the deckhand as well as the cook.

So for the most part, I was treated as a member of the team, and they were... You know, we were fine.

Occasionally you'd come across somebody else that was not that happy to be there. I can remember at one point, I was just with Gary. I was deckhand and he was on the wheel and everybody else was down, and we pushed a tow into just a slot in Norfolk, and the guy that came up to catch the lines is like... I'm standing there, getting ready to throw a line. "Please catch the line for me." He's sort of... He's staring at me like, you know, I... You... You don't... And finally, "You don't belong here," was what I was getting from him, all those vibes. And he said, "You really shouldn't... Your husband should keep you barefoot and pregnant." And I said, "You see the man up there? That's my husband. You tell him." "Oh." And so he caught... I said, "Just catch the line for me," so he did. But when I got my license, that was... There was a step that... I had worked with a couple of the guys that... On some of the... You know, I was sort of freelance, and there was one guy who actively tried to sabotage me. We were coming through the C&D [Chesapeake and Delaware] Canal and I was... I had gone through there a number of times, and he came up and was, you know, talking to me, and

suddenly, you know, the vessel's heading for the bank, and I've got... We've got a barge, and I... And I'm trying to get the thing back, and nothing... And then I realized he was leaning against... There are two electric tillers, little ones, on either... One on either side of the wheelhouse, and he was leaning against... He was holding the one. He had put his hand under there and he was holding it so that we would push it into the... He wasn't just leaning on it because we would've been going to the other side. We would've been going to the port side. We were heading west. And he had put his hand under his arm where he had a cup of coffee and was pulling on that tiller to head me into the starboard bank. And I realized it and just got him by the shirt and pulled him away. "Oh, oh," you know. But... And then he went down below and told the guys in the... Who had coffee in the galley, he said, "Oh, well, she went bonkers, and, you know, she ran it into the... You know, into the bank, and duh-duh-duh," all this kind of thing, and one of the other guys who knew me came up and said, "So tell me how it really happened." [Laughs] And once in a while, you know, there was one guy who was a different captain who... I worked for this small tug company that's no longer in business either. He was just

very big on what would be called sexual harassment now, probably, just verbally. He never actually touched me, but that was... You know, okay, fine, you're going to be icky. Poor wife. I'm sorry for your wife. You're just icky. But he could put a barge, you know, here, there, and now, and you could get there safely and all that kind of thing. It was just... It was... He thought he was being cute and suggestive, I think. He was just icky. But he knew what he was doing on the boat, so that was the main thing. As long as he wasn't going to jeopardize me personally and the tow, okay. Yeah.

SHEA: So what does it take to be a captain of a tug?

ROBSON: [00:21:46] Well, at the time, it took... Well, it's an interesting question because when Gary graduated from Kings Point, his third mate's unlimited all-oceans license allowed him to be captain on a tugboat. But he had never really run a tug, not really. He'd been on sailboats. He had... And when he was 15, he was the guy who used to bring the 65-foot schooner in through all these little channels and things alone. So he was very familiar. He sort of has boats in his body. You know, he's got it in his bones, so he was fine. Some of those guys that get out of there really don't have boat handling experience. What

it took me to do was being onboard actually working... Not just cooking, but actually working, and learning how to, you know, talk to people on the radio and, you know, learning the charts and all that kind of stuff, and then having the time and having the captains that I had worked for document time, hand that over to the coastguard along with taking a long test that was navigation and rules of the road and several other things. And then they, you know, hand you the license. [Laughs] You may have to wrest it from their fingers, or you did then, a little bit, although it was always interesting to me to see what man was, "Oh no, she earned it, she's fine. Give it to her." And who was reluctant. And I always thought the ones who were, "No, no, she's earned it," were self-confident, and the ones who weren't were somehow afraid that, you know, they wouldn't measure up if they were stood side-by-side. So I've had some very... I've had many more good experiences in men in that position and in those places than I've had bad, and for that I've been very grateful. There've been a couple of times where I thought, "Oh, you know, probably not the best thing to be here." But Clarkey, who was very much old school, he was the engineer on tug... On *Progress* for quite some time. He... Well,

he was old enough to be my dad and no stranger to strong drink, but was sober on board and a really good engineer and a hard-working guy. He really didn't think I belonged there, but he was willing to believe... You know, he could see that I worked and trusted that. But at one point when we were doing LASH barges, and it's grueling work because a lot of times it's 48 hours at a crack and you get almost no rest, and there was one other tug that had some people on it, and I'd say in those days, there were an awful lot sort of pirate kinds of guys. And sometimes the guys would come on board, and they'd... You know, it would take them a day or two to sober up. Some of them were running away from the law and, you know, when you need a hand, they would hire them. "Yeah, you're able-bodied and willing to do the work? Fine, I'll pay you." But there was another company that we were doing work with at that time for LASH barges with another small tug and a crew, and he said, "Nancy, stay with me. You and I are going to work on this together the whole time. I don't want you to be alone with this guy." I went, "Okay, thank you." And I just trusted that and I did, and we did the work we needed to do, and we just arranged to be wherever we had to be, but the two of us were a team, putting it all together, so.

SHEA: What's it like to steer a tug?

ROBSON: [00:25:46] Well, a light tug, meaning no barge, is one thing. And the big wheel... This one has a big wheel, or did. I'm not sure it's even alive anymore. Interesting, fun, you know. Different from a sailboat, obviously. For one thing, I was mostly on sailboats with tillers, so the helm is opposite to what the steering wheel does. And then with a barge, depending on how the barge is configured, how big it is, how much... You know, how deep it runs, if you've got it hooked up... Right snug up to your nose or if you're towing, it's... You know, each one of those things is... Has a different set of calculations to make. You can't... For example, if you're pulling a tow, you don't want... And you've got, you know, 150 feet of line out there, hawser, you don't want to suddenly stop and back up because you're liable to end up with hawser in your wheel... In your prop. You just... Each one of those, you know, it's boat stuff. You know, it's all boat stuff. It's dangerous work. It's interesting. I was just reading the beginning of this again and thinking how many of these people that I mention in here are gone now, but it's been... You know, that was 40 years ago.

SHEA: When were you on the tug?

ROBSON: [00:27:24] We were married in '75 and I worked
from '75 to '82.

SHEA: Seven years, yeah.

ROBSON: [00:27:35] Well, six, actually, thinking about it.

Let's see. I stopped working '82, yeah. I say six because I think... You know, because it was off and on. After I got my license, it was off and on. I was... It was interesting because when I got my license and then Gary immediately went to work for a larger company because there were benefits there where we didn't have them before. And I... You know, a guy called at one point who owned a small tug and barge company up in Philadelphia and said, "Is your husband there? I would like to have... I need a mate for this job." And I said, "Well, I've got a license." And he said, "Well, I really want a man." And of course, well, you know, I mean, you can understand it, and I said, "Okay, I can do the job, you know, and I've got a license." And he said, "No offense." And I actually didn't take any, but he said, "The last woman we had work on board slept with all of the crewmembers, which upsets things a lot." And I said, "Totally understand that, but I'm married to one person all the time, so that's not going to be an issue." And he said, "Well, I believe you, and I understand, but

I'm going to keep looking." And I said, "Tell you what, if you can't find anybody and you want to give me a shot, I'm here. Call." And he never did, but another guy, the brother of Chris Burg who owned *Progress*, got hold of me and said, "Nance, I... You know, you want to come down and work for me?" "Sure." So a bunch of... You know, Eastern shore guys, real nice fellows, most of them, and the first thing he hired me for was a job. He said... I said, you know, "I've not done an awful lot of this," and he said, "Look, you're going to be better than the last guy." He said, "The last guy ran us aground and, you know, it took me an awful lot of money to get us off again." I said, "Oh, okay, I think I'll have that part." So it was... I really enjoyed working for Denny. It was a very... And I told him finally... I was running as mate on one of this tugs up in... They were doing pieces, things out of Port Deposit, and some of the stuff out of gravel, out of Havre de Grace. They had a gravel pit there they were loading onto barges. And I said... You know, I didn't show, but I was pregnant with my first child, and the... [Laughs] The captain said, "Nancy, you're pregnant, aren't you?" I went, "Yeah." And he said, "You're not allowed to deck now. I don't want you to deck because I don't want you to

lose that baby." "All right." Because the lines are heavy. It's heavy work. I said, "Okay." He said, "But you need to tell Denny." I said, "Okay." And so when he called in, he said, "Come with me." We went to the office, and he called in, and he said, "Your turn," and he handed me the phone. And I said, "Denny, I'm pregnant, and I can't deck now." I said, "Just so you know." And he said, "Nancy, that's okay. I've got a lot of fat men who can't deck either. You're fine." I went, "Okay." [Laughs] So.

SHEA: Do you have a favorite memory from those six years on the tug?

ROBSON: [00:31:11] Gosh, a favorite one?

SHEA: I'm sure there are a lot, but I'm just wondering if there's one that, when I ask that question, comes to [laughs] your mind.

ROBSON: [00:31:19] Well, you know, it's funny you say it because I was thinking about it this morning. When I was pregnant, I was the mate on Denny's boat. We were tied up overnight with gorgeous... Out in Havre de Grace, and it was a beautiful starry half-moonlit night, and, you know, we were just... We were waiting, and so we were just tied and everything was basically shut down, and I was just lying out on the fantail and just looking at the stars and

thinking how lucky I was just to be alive and to be able to look at all of that. And this young mate who was... I mean, this young deckhand who was not thrilled to be away from his girlfriend, I think, he came out and he just looked at me. He said, "You just really like it here, don't you?" I said, "Yeah, I really do." And I really did. I really enjoyed the challenge and the beauty and nature and the amazing things that human beings can do and, you know, it's always exhilarating when you think you're going to get injured and you don't, so.

SHEA: What do you miss?

ROBSON: [00:32:31] Youth. [Laughs] I miss... I knew I was not indestructible, but I miss that sense of confidence in my physical ability to do things that now I have to stop and think about, you know, "Pace yourself," and, "How much heavy lifting do you do?" And all that kind of thing. I would not jump from one barge to another anymore, you know. I mean, even then, it was like... Gary at one point said to me, "Honey, I don't care if you end up in a heap on the second one. Just make sure you end up on it." And I thought, "Oh, there's love for you." [Laughs] But I think that. Wonderful memories. I wouldn't go back again. Do you know what else, though, I was thinking about this

morning? It was interesting that after I got off and I was home alone with these children a lot and they were really young, and I thought, "I need to, you know, do something to keep my mind going, and also earn some money," and I called *National Fisherman*, who, you know, said, "No, no, but you can work for *Workboat Magazine*, so I did. I started writing for *Workboat Magazine* and doing various things for them, which was interesting and fun. I'd cover oil spills and go on the latest, newest whatever. It was fun. But I also thought, "Well, there are not that many women who are doing this, and I want to..." I had joined an organization that I don't think is still... I'm not a member, obviously, and I don't think it's still alive. It was out of the West Coast and it was started by a woman named Anne Moznas, who was a long liner salmon fisherman, and it was the... What was it? Not Water Women. It was Women Mariners, I think is what the thing was called, Women of the Maritime. There were enough women there. It was all very, you know, handprinted, Xerox kind of newsletter, that sort of thing, but there were enough women I thought, you know, "People need to know about this," and I thought I was going to go ahead and maybe write about some of these women. And I interviewed a bunch of them. I've still got

some of the interviews somewhere in the files. I did not end up getting a contract for it unfortunately. I applied to several different publishing houses and none of them seemed to be interested. But one gal named Irene Eamond was from, I think, from Minnesota, and she was 65 when she started working. I think she was, like, Swedish extraction, maybe, and used to hard farm work and stuff, and she moved down to New Orleans, and she said, "You know, I wanted to earn a living and I was trying to figure out how to do it and I, you know, looked at these guys, and they said they were working hard, and it looked to me like they were hardly working." And she said, "I can do that." So she did. Sixty-five years old, she went on and she started decking and then she got a license.

SHEA: That's impressive.

ROBSON: [00:35:23] Isn't that amazing?

SHEA: That's...

ROBSON: [00:35:24] Yeah.

SHEA: That's incredible

ROBSON: [00:35:25] Yeah.

SHEA: So when you published the book...

ROBSON: [00:35:29] Yes.

SHEA: ...did you get a lot of inquiries about being a woman on a boat, about... Did it...

ROBSON: [00:35:36] The first... It was published in 1985 as hardcover by a traditional publisher and I had a bunch of different places that, you know, I would go. I had photographs and stuff, so I went ahead and turned them into a slideshow, and I went around and talked to various people about it in an effort to flog the book, of course. And a lot of people, you know, talked... They sent me... The publisher sent me up to Boston at one point for, like, the Tugboat Jamboree, and I had... You know, I had a little space and a booth and that kind of thing, and one guy... It was interesting... Came to me, and he goes, "You're not so special." And I went, "Okay." And he said, "You know, a lot of women do what you do." And this was when I was thinking, "I'm going to write about some of these women." I said, "What are their names? I'd like to get in touch with them. Can you help me?" And he goes, "You're just not so special." And I thought, "Oh, here we are again, somebody who's..." You know, I said, "You've never worked on a tugboat, have you?" And he turned around, turned on his heel, and left, and I found out later that he was, like, an aficionado. He would follow the tugs kind of and

was really interested in them, but he didn't have any real experience about it, so he didn't like it that I did. And I went, "Okay."

SHEA: So I just wondered if any young women had asked you for advice. [Laughter]

ROBSON: [00:37:06] Interestingly, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, when Abby was still working on the... Our daughter was still working deep-sea, asked if we would come down and both of us do a presentation with a couple of other women who had had experience on the water in one way or another, and somebody asked me that. They said, "What would you give... What advice would you give a young woman now?" And I turned to my daughter and I said, "What advice did I give you?" She said, "You told me not to do it." [Laughs] So, you know, I said, "Keep your eyes open and know what you're getting into." I said, "It's...it's hard, hard work. You could earn a good living because they paid me the same as the men in that job," which was not always happening at that time nor now. So I think it does happen. I think it does happen in, in that realm that, here's what the pay is. This is what you get. I don't care whether you're male or female.

SHEA: That's great.

ROBSON: [00:38:11] I believe that's true. I mean, I know I was getting paid the same amount as the guy who had held my position before, because I asked. I mean, I asked him, not the employer. [Laughs] Yeah.

SHEA: So do you still go out on boats? Are you...

ROBSON: [00:38:25] Rarely these days. We sometimes... We used to race, but neither one of us is, you know, interested in having broken bones anymore, and we're not as... We do... The last time I raced was not... Let's see, when was it? Because they did the Robson Memorial Race down in Oxford and this last year, I said, "You know what? I think I can watch." And so I went on board with a whole bunch of cousins and friends and stuff on Laba, Woody Laba's boat. Do you know Woody?

SHEA: Mm-mm.

ROBSON: [00:39:03] He has restored this... And beautifully restored this big buy-boat and takes people out, so we chartered that, a whole bunch of us, and went out and watched the race.

SHEA: What kind of race is it? What boats?

ROBSON: [00:39:19] It's... Well, it's... Normally they usually do two or three... Two classes. It's all sailboats. It's all, you know, sloops mostly and stuff,

and my brother-in-law usually scrounges up a boat, and if Gary... You know, Gary, he usually helms because he was a racing sailor. He was... He sort of missed the Olympics by not much. So he's... He... When we first met...

[Laughs] When we first met, he had a 470 and raced it, and we were dating, and he said, "You can crew for me down at Oxford." So I had run away. You know, I had a Windmill my dad and I had built, and I used to run around to the races and trail that around and race in that, and I said, "Sure, sure, I can do that." And we're... He said, "Let's go out and practice," because, you know, I wasn't used to a hiking... You know, hiking, and... I don't mean hiking. I mean, you know, trapeze. And [laughs] we're going down the river and it's a pretty decent breeze, and he starts yelling, and I said, "Turn this boat around. I can go race with somebody else that doesn't scream at me like this." [Laughs] So he did and he got somebody else to crew with him, and I went out on an old boyfriend's big boat, and we had a grand time.

SHEA: Well done.

ROBSON: [00:40:36] Yeah. [Laughter] He was cute, actually. It... We were on my dad's... My dad had a Triton Yawl that... For my 16th birthday, my present from my father

was, "You can take the boat out by yourself anytime you want unless I want it." And so we took... When he and I... Gary and I were dating, we took out another friend, another couple, and it was a squall coming up. Neither one of them knew how to sail. He starts screaming at me about, you know, this, that, and the other, and I'm at the helm, and I am doing what... You know, what's he suggesting, but he's not noticing because he's, you know, and finally when we got everything all battened down and whatnot, he came down, and I said, "Don't you ever talk to me like that." And he threw his arms around me and goes, "I knew you were the girl for me." [Laughter]

SHEA: That's great.

ROBSON: [00:41:26] Yeah, yeah. We've hung in.

SHEA: Sailing on the Chesapeake all these years, or boating on it, or tugging on it, have you noticed changes?

ROBSON: [00:41:35] Lots more people. Yeah. It's... Yeah, different eras, very different eras, don't you think? I mean, when I was a kid, I remember the Skipjack... In the Skipjack races, they were just lots out there, and yeah, and the log canoes... Actually, the log canoes seem to me to have come back up. A lot more people are sort of restoring them and whatnot. So there's that. I just think

that there are a lot more powerboats out, for one thing, which is amazing to me because I think how expensive the fuel is and how much it costs you for a weekend. And sailing is so wonderful. I mean, having been on boats that only propel by, [roaring], you know, and you think about losing your hearing on these things and it being on the interim and stuff, and going out on a sailboat on a beautiful day or a beautiful evening and hearing nothing but, [whooshing]. You know, I mean, why would you not want that?

SHEA: I don't know. [Laughter] That's... It's wonderful.

ROBSON: [00:42:49] Yeah. Yeah, no, I taught... We belonged to a boat club in the Magothy River when I was... My dad did, and women were not allowed at that time, but we were allowed to teach sailing, and we were allowed to clean things, and that kind of stuff. So... But... So I taught sailing down there. We had a grand old time. You know, a bunch of us the same age would go out, and then we'd stay on our parents' boats and misbehave, and... That was a lot of fun. You start drinking early. [Laughter]

SHEA: Since you've boated here and you've done the whole New England run and all the different rivers on the tug, is

there anything about the Chesapeake that you find different, distinctive, special?

ROBSON: [00:43:40] You know, it's sort of a... I think it's an ethos because it seems to me... It may have also to do with how much shoreline, how many tributaries we have, and how reliant so many human beings have been over millennia here on the bounty that the Chesapeake has provided and the transportation, but I think there is an enormous appreciation for what that Chesapeake means to every life here in this region and what it can mean, in terms of an example for how we treat the rest of the world, so in that respect, yeah. But you can get attached to places, you know? I mean, I used to be able to, when I was a kid and when I was in my teens and very early... Well, Gary and I married fairly early in our twenties. But I can remember sailing with some friends. We got after work one night and took my dad's boat, and it was a moonlit night, and everyone was, you know, drunk down below. But I knew how to get down to Annapolis basically almost with my eyes closed, and that sense of, "Oh yeah, here comes that buoy I'm expecting. Oh yep, this is the part of the Bay Bridge I'm going through. Yeah, yeah, don't run aground on

Greenbury Point, you know." It... You just... It's a coming home, kind of thing, isn't it?

SHEA: Yep. You're still involved with the water through your writing. Are you still writing for...

ROBSON: [00:45:27] Some. The pandemic has been interesting, and I think I'm in an interesting transition... And by interesting, I mean challenging, and that word is often used instead of problematic. [Laughter] But I... When... I wrote for *The Baltimore Sun* for years. I mean, my mother was a gardener, and I figured out how to try and travel on my writing. I got in touch with *Yachting* early on when the kids were little and I wanted to travel, but I couldn't figure out how we could do that and, like, still pay for the house and think about saving for the kids', you know, education. And so I got in touch with them. I had written for *Chesapeake Bay Magazine*, and I got in touch with a guy up in *Yachting* who was one of the editors, and I said, "This is what my background is and here are my credits, and I write for the *Christian Science Monitor* and have done personal essays and stuff for them." And I said, you know, "I could... I notice that you haven't done anything about the Chesapeake Bay," and he goes, "Oh, no. Well, what would you like to do?" And I said, "I'd like to do

Portsmouth, England," and he goes, "Okay." Because I wanted to take a trip with a friend of mine. I had lived over there before I was married for a year and I had a really good friend who was Welsh who was, you know, obviously living there. And I thought, you know, "I want to do that." So I was able to do that for a while. And, you know, I could do travel pieces for them. But my mom was a gardener and I liked gardening also and grew food and whatnot in our backyard, and so when I was... They've... At the end of *The Baltimore Sun*, there was... You know, I wrote for them for years, garden pieces and real estate and whatever I could get hold of, and they said, "Thank you. We don't have any more room for freelancers anymore. We..." You know, *Tribune* bought them, and things all went to pieces. So I thought, "Okay." Well, I went and got a master gardener certification, which I thought was fascinating. So I started doing things for *The Master Gardener*, and one of my editors at *The Sun* papers got to be among other things the editor at the *Maryland Hort Report*, so he would call me periodically. And then I got... You know, and I did some work for *House Beautiful* and whoever I can... You know, if I wanted to meet somebody... For example, I love Russell Baker and his work, and *Southern*

Living had gotten in touch with me and asked if I wanted to do some profiles about people in the area, and I said, "Yes, I want to do Russell Baker." And so I got in touch with Russell Baker and he goes, "No photographers," and I went, "Okay," thinking, "This is never going to fly if I can't get a photographer up there." But I thought, "I'll do it." So I went out. By that time, the book... This book had been published, and... *Woman in the Wheelhouse*, and I took a copy with me. He said, "Okay, come on over." So I went over the Leesburg where he lived and met him on one of the hottest days of the year, and he said... I had known... You know, I had read his memoirs and stuff, and I knew a lot about him, and he said, "You don't really need to have an interview with me, do you?" I said, "No, I wanted to meet you." And he said, "So why are you here?" And I said, "I wanted color. I needed a real quote out of your mouth instead of out of somebody else's, you know, even if it's yours in printed book." And he goes, "Okay." He said... He had originally said, "Only an hour." And I said, "Well, my hour's up." And he goes, "Oh, well, come on back here and walk around with me." So I walked around the backyard. He said, "Do you want to see my library?" "Yes, I do." And so we went into this fabulous, big room

that his son had built, library, and I started looking, and he said, "Oh, I've got this and this and this and this." And finally the end of the thing, I said... Thanked him, and he said, "You can send a photographer." So I actually got... You know, the thing was printed, I got paid, all that kind of stuff. But it's just... I... You sort of make it up as you go along, don't you? Life? I mean, whatever looks like there's an opening here, and I got Bay-Wise certification after, you know, Maryland Master Gardeners because I wanted to know more about how to do better, and then maybe encourage other people to do better with my writing. And, you know, I still do Bay-Wise certifications for people's yards and gardens with the people that I call the benevolent coven. We all come and go like, "Oh, look at this. Isn't this great? Oh, you might want to think about that." I don't know. You just... You try and figure out where you are in your life and what you can possibly do and what might be worthwhile, interesting, and fun, maybe help people.

SHEA: It's a wonderful legacy. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the conversation that we haven't... About you, your life on boats?

ROBSON: [00:50:30] No.

SHEA: Legacy? Advice for the future?

ROBSON: [00:50:34] Oh, have fun. My father's advice to me...

They were not big advice givers, either one of them. They were too busy living. But he said, "Always look... Make sure you can look yourself in the mirror the next day. Always have a good time. Do something worthwhile. Help people." So it opens a door on an awful lot of stuff and possibilities. It's just a matter of sort of pulling yourself up by your socks and thinking, "Oh, you can't do this anymore? Oh, too bad. What can you do now?"

SHEA: Your daughter clearly's doing that, since she...

ROBSON: [00:51:13] Yes.

SHEA: ...just left the tug.

ROBSON: [00:51:15] Yeah.

SHEA: Can't wait to hear what she has to say.

ROBSON: [00:51:17] Yeah, she was 10 years deep-sea.

Terrifying for a mother because I... One of Gary's classmates said, "Nancy, you know too much about how she can get hurt." And she was on a vessel and they hauled jet fuel and gasoline, and some of the stories she's got... When you talk to her, if she doesn't mention it, ask her about, "Please come to the window. Chief mate, please come to the window." It's an amazing story, I think, and it has

to do with a team getting in mental sync about things, so
yeah. And now she does cakes. [Laughter]

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