

OH 509 Abigail Robson

Q: I will do that in a second. This is Jennifer Shea. And it is June 12th, 2023. I'm in Chestertown, speaking with Abby Robson, Abigail. And we're talking about the Her Helm project and her career in the water.

A: [00:00:23] Yeah.

Q: There we go. If you could -- So, would you begin by sort of telling us a little bit about who you are?

A: [00:00:33] Okay.

Q: Introduce yourself.

A: [00:00:35] Okay. I'm Abigail Robson, A-B-I-G-A-I-L R-O-B-S-O-N. My birthday?

Q: Yeah. When were you born?

A: [00:00:45] January 27th, 1985.

Q: So, why are you part of the Her Helm project?

A: [00:00:57] My mom kind of roped me into it [Laughs]. I'm not sure how she was connected with Kristin. But she was having this photography session with Kristin and had mentioned me. And they were both like, "Yes, yes, she should do it." And then, mom's session was happening, and mom was like, "Just come." And so, I just went and had a really quick meeting with Kristen as we were shooting and a little bit out of the -- how she normally does it. I --

she generally will have a, an interview with her subjects before she photographs them. And then -- so, she interviewed me after just because it happened to work out very well that everybody was in the same place at once. And so, then --

Q: So, why did your mom think -- why did Kristin think you would be a good subject for the Her Helm project?

A: [00:01:54] Because of my background and, I think, probably because -- I, I hate to say, admit that I have not looked through the gallery that much. I've looked at the people I know. [laughter] Be like, "Oh, they look great." You know? But I think it's likely that my background is very different from most of the other women who are in it because I sailed deep sea. I went to a service academy, a merchant, you know, the Merchant Marine Academy and sailed on tankers and, you know, was in a, a different sector of the maritime world than I think a lot of the ladies who are in the project were in. So, yeah.

Q: So, how did you end up going to the merchant marine academy?

A: [00:02:38] That's where my dad went. He graduated in 1973. And I grew up being, not going with him. But he took me to, you know, a few things here and there. And I spent a couple of days at his work with him. He was a tugboat

captain, ATV captain. And so, growing up, I had the, you know, fortunate enough opportunity to go with him a few times as a kid and really loved what he did. And I was like, "Yeah, I'm just going to go --" I didn't -- I guess it was following his footsteps. It didn't end up being following his footsteps. But sort of, yes. So, I was like, "I just want to go the same place he did. It's the best." In my view, it was the best place to go and be from. And so, yeah. I tailored my high school career to get there. [laughter] So, yeah.

Q: So, if you think back, what did you enjoy the most when you went out on the tug with him?

A: [00:03:37] I think it was the juxtaposition of completely being in nature while being on this really mechanized man-made feat of engineering that is anything borne on the water that, you know, these heavy machinery things. You know, it's just like this piece of metal is just carrying stuff around and all the guys are working hard. And I just -- The whole -- It's a, it's a unique thing to be working in that environment but being completely in nature and at the mercy of nature but also -- I don't know. I don't know how to describe it. [laughter] It's, it's just, it's a very interesting, you know, juxtaposition. So, I -- And I recognized that as a kid and loved it. So --

Q: That's interesting.

A: [00:04:33] Yeah.

Q: I was going to say who inspired you go to in the water.
But I think I --

A: [00:04:37] Dad. [laughter]

Q: Yeah.

A: [00:04:39] Yeah.

Q: So, what was the merchant academy like when you were there?
How many women were there?

A: [00:04:46] So, my class was, I think, 12 percent. So, I think we graduated 207. So, we had like 20-something people, 20, 30 women. I'm not sure what the stats are now. I know that my class had a higher percentage of women than the classes around it. Generally, it was about nine, 10 percent for the academy. It was very hard. [laughter]
It's a very hard place to be and to stay in and to succeed and like -- But that's what makes most Kings Pointers succeed afterwards is, because, you know, that's like -- we have to work really hard to stay there. We know that that's going to give us the great tools to succeed in anything else that we decide to do. So, yeah.

Q: So, what was your first job coming out of the academy?

A: [00:05:40] [laughter] My first job was the job I held for 10 plus years. It was -- So, I went to sea with OSG, which

is Overseas Shipholding Group. And they operated a lot of coastal tankers, you know, of the U.S. And they had a few foreign going ships. But I, I didn't really want to go foreign. Got a third mate's job out of school and just stayed with them until I decided to leave. So, yeah. I switched ships a few times. But that's natural.

Q: So, where did you go as the third mate?

A: [00:06:15] I, I shipped on the west coast for almost my entire career. My last work tour was in the Gulf of Mexico and -- but I was on the west coast and -- and, you know, up to Alaska for my entire career. Yeah.

Q: So, did you end up getting the captain's license or --

A: [00:06:35] So, I have an inland captain's license. I did not want to be -- I didn't -- So, going deep sea, there's a big jump between second mate and chief mate. I loved second mate. It -- Like I thrive in that supporting role as supporting the junior officers to be the best they can be and to move up and to support my captain and chief mate in their job so that their jobs are easier. I feel stress very acutely, and so, I did not want to take on the extra stress of jumping to the next role. And when I was in that decision making time, there was also a very large monetary outlay and, of schooling that I would have to do to upgrade. And I didn't want to do that because I didn't

want the job, didn't want the stress, and I didn't want to shell out 30 grand. You know? So --

Q: Thirty grand?

A: [00:07:31] It was -- yeah. It was a lot of schooling that you had to do to upgrade.

Q: Huh.

A: [00:07:37] So, I had a lot of arm-twisting from my company and from my senior officers. But I'm a pretty stubborn person. And I was happier not doing that. So --

Q: So, what does a second mate do? I mean, there's the third mate, the second mate, the chief mate, then the captain.

A: [00:07:54] Yeah.

Q: How would you define the role of a second mate?

A: [00:07:57] So, generally second mate's navigation officer. So, on tankers, especially the tankers that I was shipping on, not only are you the navigation officer in charge of all the bridge equipment and voyage planning and all that, making sure that the voyage plan is understood and followed and safe and all of that. But you're also doing all of the other stuff that any of the other officers are doing, watch standing, both in port and at sea. So, I'm cargo handling while we're in port, docking and undocking, connecting and disconnecting hoses, tank cleaning, doing, you know, all, all of the things that any other officer does. But I also

have the responsibility of voyage planning and maintaining the bridge equipment. Yeah.

Q: That's a lot. [laughter]

A: [00:08:47] Yeah, it was. It, it's not a small job. And, you know, even that, you know -- I was responsible for all that, responsible for between six and 10 crew members at any one time. If I'm, you know, on the bow docking and I have five guys with me, I'm responsible for them. Like all of that stuff is stress on stress and stress. And then, if you jump up to the next position, you have all of it. And I'm like, "Well, I'm, I'm good with this one third part," type of a -- [laughter] You know, it just -- So, yeah. It's -- it's not a small job.

Q: How big was your boat?

A: [00:09:26] It's been a long time.

Q: I'm just --

A: [00:09:30] So, length overall -- I think it was 608, 608 feet.

Q: Wow.

A: [00:09:33] So, it's 183 meters, whatever that -- And then, beam was 32 meters, which is -- I don't quite remember what that is. But we carried -- It was -- I think our max was like 350,000 barrels. So, yeah. There's a lot of ways to

say how big it was. But people generally respond to like length overall. [laughter]

Q: So, are there any particular challenges in figuring out the, you know, the route for that large --

A: [00:10:03] Yeah.

Q: A boat? I just think that's -- [laughter]

A: [00:10:08] There were several places we went. So, if were coming out of Valdez or something, fully loaded, down to our draft marks, there were several places where we had to time our passage very carefully because of tides. You couldn't get over, you know, this shoal at whatever place at that draft unless you go over between this and this time. [laughter] And so, finding all of that windows -- It was like -- yeah. There's -- And also, air draft. You know, there was some bridges we would go under that, if we were too light, we, we couldn't do it or we would have to wait for the max low tide and stuff like, you know, so, yeah. There's all of those hazards as well as weather hazards. You know, in the Gulf of Alaska in winter was not super fun.

Q: What's it like?

A: [00:10:53] It's rough. [laughter] It's very rough. Yeah. It's -- you don't get a lot of sleep. You have to make

sure that all your gear is properly stowed and -- yeah. It can be very rough.

Q: But you keep going? You never stop?

A: [00:11:11] We never actually stop. There was a time where we hove to and just stayed in one position. But we were like just working dead slow into the, into the sea because we just could not do anything else. But we never actually stop and any of that because, if you stop, then, no bueno. [laughter] You know, you have to maintain control and that could just mean maintaining position with, you know, a minimum bell and making sure you're not -- Because the direction that we would go, a lot of times, either we go directly into the sea, which you're pounding, and that's not good for the vessel. So, you want to take it at an angle and do one of these. So, either you're going the wrong way that way or you're going the wrong way that way. And you want to be going that way. Just, so, yeah. A lot of weather routing you have to figure out and ship stresses and all of that, which isn't solely my job. Like that is a conversation I have with the captain, and we're always watching the weather and discussing, "Oh, what does that look like? Maybe we should go up here." But also going around Alaska and Canada, there are exclusion zones they won't let tankers in. So, there's a long, big stretch of

water that we can't -- Like usually we can't go right if we're going north. We have to go left out farther into the Pacific because you can't get near Canada. So, yeah.

[laughter]

Q: So, what were the routes the boat, your boat took?

A: [00:12:46] So, generally I worked between L.A., Long Beach, San Francisco. We went to Portland a few times. We would go to a place north of Seattle called Anacortes a lot, Anacortes and Cherry Point and Point Wells.

Q: Yeah.

A: [00:13:00] And we did Valdez and Cook Inlet. So, we'd go to Nikiski and Anchorage.

Q: Huh.

A: [00:13:05] There's also a brig on the other side of the Cook Inlet called Drift River, right across from Nikiski, that we would go to sometimes too. So --

Q: So, what area was your favorite?

A: [00:13:18] I have favorites for different things. I love Anacortes. I love to get off there because I could ride my bike into town along the old rail trail. My favorite donuts in the world are there, and I would go and get a box of donuts and put it in my backpack and take it home or go around and -- There was a point at the end, like It's actually -- I think it's a little park. But it's called

Cap Sante. It's right by, it's at the, like the tip of the town of Anacortes. And there's a lovely route up there to go walk and, you know, very, very easy access to go and like get all your things. I love -- There was easy like Walmart shopping, which I hate to say I did, in Long Beach as well as my favorite cider bar. So, I would love to go there and get a great burger. But for nature and views, like kind of can't beat Alaska, both Valdez and Cook Inlet. So --

Q: I have to get there some day myself. So, did you have any challenges being a woman on the boat?

A: [00:14:27] Yes. [laughter] Yes. There's always people that talk to you in a certain way. And you're just like, "Well, do you know you're doing that? I can't tell. I'm going to assume you don't, and I'm just going to keep going." And I -- There's, there are people that threatened me. And, you know, that's not super fun. [laughter] So --

Q: What would you do?

A: [00:14:53] That -- So, there was one instance that I, is, is top of mind. And it was my watchstanding AB [Able Seaman]. And he -- I was warned about him when I got on board, that he was difficult, he was lazy, he didn't really want to -- He thought he was an officer, but he wasn't. And he thought he knew what was going on, but he didn't.

And so, being in his forties or fifties or whatever he was and having these kids in their twenties be his boss was tough for him. And then, you have a woman who is in her twenties come and be your boss. Like that also was not very good for him. It was, it was a fine dance between letting certain things slide because it didn't matter that much and I didn't want to start something, but also addressing the things he was being, he was not doing correctly and not performing his duties and it got to the point where he physically threatened me at the manifold and kicked my boots and got in my face and called me a bitch. And I still am a little salty about how my captain dealt with this because I immediately told him. And he didn't fire the guy right away. He gave him the chance to quit, which meant that the guy could go get on another OSG ship, which means that I could sail with him again. I never did sail with him again. But he didn't have any repercussions, just losing that job. So, I'm still a little salty about how the captain handled that. But it was -- I -- We were ramping up to a trip to Hawaii. And I did not want to stay on the night watch with the guy alone because I was not comfortable. And I was figuring out how to deal with that when this happened, and he got off the ship. And I was like, "Oh, good. I don't have to figure out what to do

about that.” [laughter] Because I wasn’t sure what I was going to do about that.

Q: Yeah. That’s definitely challenging, especially when you’re in your twenties, to have to deal with.

A: [00:17:10] Yeah, yeah.

Q: But you stayed on the boat for 10 years.

A: Yeah.

Q: Why?

A: [00:17:15] I had financial goals. [laughter] Yeah. I wanted to pay the house off. I wanted to build up some savings so that I could come ashore and not feel pressured to do any particular thing, really find what I wanted to be doing. So, yeah. I -- Financial goals. I definitely wanted to leave a lot earlier. [laughter]

Q: Did you?

A: [00:17:40] Yeah.

Q: I was going to ask you what you enjoyed about doing that for 10 years.

A: [00:17:47] It made me feel powerful. I, I definitely, I was very good at it. I mean, and, you know, my expertise and my skill level and my efficiency made me feel very powerful because I just was a natural at -- at it. And yeah. So, that. [laughter] I liked -- I liked that about

it. You know? If something makes you feel powerful, it's good. The money didn't hurt. [laughter]

Q: Well, that sounds great. [laughter] Why do you think you were good at it?

A: [00:18:28] I honestly think there's most things that if I decide I'm going to do it, I am good at them. I think I'm very lucky in that I can, I can do a lot of things. I don't -- I think I thrive in structure. As long as I know exactly what to expect, then I can adhere to those rules. You know, it's a very highly regulated industry. And as long as we know what the rules are, like it's easy to follow rules. I think that diagrams and schematics and how liquids behave -- I think like physics, not like particle physics or anything, I mean, but actual physical, like this is how a thing works, I think I grasp that fairly well, which helps in that job because you have to understand how the oil is moving, you know, temperatures and pressures and it just -- yeah. All -- You can look at a system and understand how things are going to move and I think I'm, I think my brain works well in that way. So, I think that's part of the reason why I was good at it.

Q: Have you sailed? Are you a sailor?

A: [00:19:53] I did. Yeah. I was actually -- Yeah, I sailed competitively. I sailed competitively as a kid and then through high school and partially at the academy.

Q: So, I was going to say -- How would you contrast, compare skippering a boat when you're sailing to captaining, being in charge, or even as second mate being in charge, a, a, a large container ship?

A: [00:20:31] Tanker. But --

Q: Tanker.

A: [00:20:36] I think I'm not afraid to make decisions. And that's important in both, in both pursuits. I feel like my brain works fairly quickly to assess situations and take things into account and make decisions. I feel like I'm fairly calm under pressure and able to make decisions under pressure. [laughter] And both of those -- Like, you know, when you're, when you're racing, you have to take into account, like look across the water to see where a puff is coming from, see where other boats are, what tack you're on, and all the, like taking all of these things into your mind and make a decision and just do it. Same with, you know, shipping. It's like, you know, "Oh my goodness. I, I hear a weird sound from this hose," and like, "I feel a rumble and something's wrong. And they're telling me nothing is wrong. But I know something is wrong.

Everybody move away right now and like don't question.

Just move." It's like, I -- Yeah. And a lot of different aspects of, you know, I just feel like I do it well.

Q: That's very interesting. I know nothing about tanker ships. [laughter] So, I've got this image in my head. And seeing you doing this is really quite interesting for me. Did you ever go away from the Pacific?

A: [00:22:04] Well, I shipped around the world when I was a cadet. So, when we're at Kings Point -- So, the United States Merchant Marine Academy, it's one of, it is a merchant, it is a maritime academy, like there are state schools. But it is a federal service academy like the Naval Academy, Coast Guard, Air Force. So, there's five service academies, and Kings Point's one of them. And as part of our schooling, in order to get our license, we have to have 360 days of sea time. And Kings Point's answer to that is to send us on commercial vessels. So, I went on six different commercial ships as a cadet, and I sailed the north Atlantic in northern Europe. I sailed through the Med and across to the Middle East. I did the Gulf of Mexico and down to the Caribbean. Yeah. I think that's all I did. Yeah. So, I did some like other parts of the world as a cadet. But in my profession, like licensed career, I was west coast only. My last work tour was in

the Gulf of Mexico in the summer, which was terrible.

[laughter]

Q: Why was it terrible?

A: [00:23:12] It was so hot. It was, it was so hot, and we had Harvey.

Q: Oh.

A: [00:23:17] So, I was, we were anchored outside -- Where were we? Was it Houston or -- I think it was Port Arthur, which is just north of Houston.

Q: Yeah.

A: [00:23:26] We were anchored outside Port Arthur during Harvey. And we were supposed to go in and then, you know -
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Q: So, what did you do?

A: [00:23:35] We waited a little while. [laughter] So, we waited at anchor. We actually did take a lap around the traffic separation scheme because the wind -- We were sitting at anchor and the wind wasn't awesome. So, we decided to move and just be under way for a little bit. And then, we went back to anchor. We waited. And the, the terminal we were supposed to go into had no power and all like, there was just -- We had a lot of changing orders because everybody was scrambling to figure out what to do and get power back. And we think we had a load on. I

can't remember. I, I feel like we had a load and we had to figure out where to take it. So, yeah. Because we were on the spot market at that point. And so, somebody owned, somebody else owned the oil that we had on board and we're trying to figure out where to tell us to go with it. And I was trying to go home. So, yeah.

Q: So, what kind of market did you mention? A spot?

A: [00:24:38] Spot market. So, that's when a ship does not have an oil company that has bought its time. So, for 10 plus years, I was under time charter with a company called Tesoro. And they just basically -- They didn't own the ship. The ship was owned and operated by my company, OSG. But Tesoro bought the ship's time for three or six years. I think it was six years. And then, they reupped the contract. And so, they just told us where to go. And they just had the use of the ship because they paid for us for that amount of time. But then, once we went off of that charter, then we were just a free agent, and every single job was different. And so, it was like, "Oh, we're going to go take a hundred thousand barrels of whatever from there to there. And then, when you're done, go to anchor and wait for orders." And they would -- There was a division of the company that was constantly looking for more work for these ships that were on spot market. So --

Q: That's interesting.

A: [00:25:31] Yeah, I didn't like that. [laughter] I didn't like that at all because I was like, "You have to -- Can you be there in three hours?" "I don't know. Let me see." I didn't like that. I like to plan.

Q: Interesting. I heard that you did the Suez Canal.

A: [00:25:52] Yes. Twice?

Q: Twice?

A: [00:25:57] Once? Once? I did it, I did it at least once. I feel like it did it twice. When did I -- So, when I joined -- Oh gosh. My memory is shot. I took the Boston. So, my first ship was the Puget -- the overseas Puget Sound. I was on it for like a year and a half-ish. And then, I asked to transfer to a new ship because they were building new ships and I wanted to go on a new one. And I met it somewhere in Texas, and we had to take it around to the west coast to be on Tesoro charter. So, I definitely took that one through the Suez Canal when I was younger. I can't remember -- Oh no. I did -- Wait. Oh, yes. So, the Puget Sound I took to shipyard in Balboa, which is on the Pacific side of the Suez Canal.

Q: Oh, so the Panama Canal.

A: [00:27:02] Oh, Suez -- Oh, Panama. Yeah, you're right. Suez, I did, yes, as a cadet. [laughter] Gosh.

Q: So, what's it like to go through the Panama Canal? I've seen pictures and I just -- I find them daunting.

A: [00:27:17] It's interesting. I mean, the locks and the mules and all that -- It's interesting. It's, it's okay.
[laughter]

Q: It's not particularly challenging?

A: [00:27:33] Well, I feel for the captain in that instance because that is the only place in the world where the captain no longer has control of his own vessel. So, everywhere else you go, and you get a pilot. The pilot is legally an advisor, and the captain has ultimate control over the ship. So, if he thinks the pilot is going to do something that's going to endanger the ship, he can take control and we have to follow what he says and not the pilot. But when the Panama Canal pilot gets on in Panama, he takes complete command, control, authority over the ship by law. And the captain sits back and goes, "She's yours." And I feel for him in that position because that's tough. You know? Like to, like, okay. Good job. Go, go. Yeah. Suez though -- Yes, I did the Suez Canal as -- as a cadet.

Q: So, how is that different?

A: [00:28:30] There's no locks in the Suez Canal. It's all very sandy. Actually, they ran us up onto the beach at one point to wait for the northbound convoy to go by. And

then, we got pulled off the sand and kept going and, which can't -- As a cadet, that didn't really hit me. But, as an officer, I'm like, "You intentionally grounded." You know? [laughter] Yeah. It's cool. You know, you go by. There's a great big sword in the middle of the desert. It's like, "Oh, there's the big sword." And keep going -- Yeah.

Q: Some 10 years here. How did you know the time would come to stop? What prompted you to stop? Maybe that's a better way to --

A: [00:29:20] I had very specific financial goals. And when I reached those, I was like, "I need to quit at that time because if I don't quit when I reach these goals that I've been like going for for 10 years, I will be so tempted by the money that I'll stay." And I don't know how long that would, I would let myself stay. And I want to really like live life at home. [laughter] So, I met those goals, and I knew when it was coming because like I, I budget. I plan. And I knew when that was going to happen. So, I was prepared for leaving.

Q: Do you miss it, miss life on the boat?

A: [00:30:04] I miss very, a few aspects of it. Generally, no. Mostly, no. Ninety-five percent no. [laughter] It's hard. It's hard to be away. It's stressful. It's amazing how I -- You know, being on vacation, you're totally away

from work. You don't really worry about it. But, just as a person, like I take on so much. And even if I'm not there, if I feel some kind of ownership over that, which I felt ownership over every ship that I served on, I'm like, "What's happening? Oh, what, what -- Is everything okay? Like did you do something? What's different? Tell me now so I know when I get back in two months." And I could never fully switch off. Not having that is -- It's a lot lighter and -- Just the -- It is just such a stressful job. I would -- Let alone the dreams I would have at work, but I would be dreaming about work here. I would just constantly have ship, like work stress dreams. And it just would -- It never left me. And was just -- I still have them, granted very rarely. But every once in a while, I'll still have a ship dream, and I'm just like, "Really? Still? Okay." Yeah.

Q: So, what did you do when you came home?

A: [00:31:39] I, I had been hired by the college before I left and I -- They knew I had --

Q: Washington College?

A: [00:31:47] Washington College. So, they, so, they have a licensed research vessel that's 46 feet. It's just small. And mainly it's used for classes. They do river trawls. They do some side scan sonar of the river bottom. It's

just, you know, various things. It's really sort of spotty. But they had asked me if I would be interested in taking over their captain position. And I was. They really wanted to build the programming to have more participants, to have more outside programming coming in besides just college classes. And I was very interested in doing that. And so, I was hired by them in the spring of 2017. They knew I was going back for another work tour. So, I left that summer, came back to that job. And I really did like try to build the programming. I spent, I've dedicated a full year to that job, which was super duper part time. I mean, it was very, very spotty. And I tried to build the program. I, I, I tried to come up with educational programs and entertainment programs and community outreach programs. But I just don't -- I'm not -- That is not my background, and I needed support from people who had that background. And I just didn't have that because everybody else was super busy doing all of their other stuff. And after really trying to make that become more and not succeeding, I was like, "Well, maybe it's time to have another part time job as well to supplement this thing." And some mutual friends at the local bakery reached out to me and were like, "Hey, we heard you're part time at the college and that you're a

good baker and you want to come work." And I said, "Sure."
So, I did.

Q: So, you started baking?

A: [00:33:52] Yeah.

Q: And now what are you doing?

A: [00:33:57] [laughter] So, now I am a cake artist. I run
Cakes by Abby, which is a custom cake studio, home bakery.
And I make custom cakes for weddings and celebrations and,
of all kinds. And I love it.

Q: And what's so special about your cakes?

A: [00:34:17] Not only are they delicious and even my mom, who
does not like cake, loves my cakes, but they're really one-
of-a-kind pieces of art. You know? It's like I use
buttercream like paint kind of. And I love to experiment
with other mediums. You know, I'm constantly learning new
techniques and trying to figure out how to bring texture in
and, yeah. I just think they're really pretty. [laughter]
And I don't think that there are, I feel like they're
unique here. So --

Q: I think you're right.

A: [00:34:57] Thanks.

Q: I'm sorry this audiotape can't see them. They're quite
extraordinary.

A: [00:35:03] Thank you.

Q: So, do you miss life in the water now that you're having life in the kitchen, or do you still go out on the water?

A: [00:35:11] I don't much. Very, very rarely and usually it's just like someone's going out. "You want to go with me?" "Yes, yes. I'll, I'll go anywhere you want to take me." "Do you want to drive?" "Nah." [laughter] Yeah. I don't, I don't go out on the water very much. I still have my license. I'm considering just letting it expired because I don't have the desire to be called on to do that because every job, I've had running boats is just very stressful for me. It's just one of those things. I just feel the responsibility so acutely. And it's hard. And like my body just does not like it. [laughter] You know? Like I can deal with it. But I don't want to. So -- And yeah. Like intellectually, I'm great at it. Stress response wise, not so great. And I just -- For quality of life, I'm just like, "No, let's maybe let that go."

Q: That's probably why you're so good at it.

A: [00:36:09] Yes, yes, yes.

Q: So, I'm going to ask this before we leave the tankers. If you were going to give somebody, your 16-year-old self, any advice about shaping a career that would take you offshore the way you were, what would you tell them?

A: [00:36:30] So, am I speaking to someone who wants to do it?

Q: Yeah. Or just any advice you'd want to pass on about that career you had.

A: [00:36:49] I -- Absorb everything you can. Learn everything you can. The more you know -- It doesn't matter if it's your job or not. Like just -- The more you know, the better you're going to be. And it's like -- That -- It's not my job. Don't ever say that. [laughter] You know? And never, never ask someone to do something that you haven't done yourself. If you're going to be in a leadership position, you need to know how to do everything and do everything before you tell someone else to do it, so you know exactly what you're telling someone to do. But that's kind of true everywhere.

Q: That's true.

A: [00:37:28] Yeah.

Q: How does your family feel about you following in this tradition of being a captain on a commercial --

A: [00:37:41] I think dad was very proud. Mom was worried but eventually was like, "Yeah, she's okay." She always worried. I mean, you can't blame her. But, yeah, I think she always worried.

Q: So, what's it like being back here on the Chester?

A: [00:37:57] It feels a little small. [laughter] But it's nice in a way. I do miss the scale of what I did before.

And I, I mean, it's been a while. But even though it was travel for work, it was still travel. And I feel a little bit like, "Wow, I've been here a while." I haven't actually like gone like away for a while, which is fine. I'm not like -- I'm itching a little bit. But I do miss those snatched moments. You know, it's like you're going -- You're on a plane. Like you leave your house at three in the morning to catch a 5:30 A.M. flight to go back to work and you're crossing the -- And it's like you fly into Seattle and then you have to get a rental car and then you go out -- But you're on your way and you're like -- There's a particular smell in that area. And you're like, "Oh, yeah. It smells nice here." And then, you look across and you're like, "Ooh, Mount Baker looks nice today. Oh, I miss that sight." You know, like those snatched moments of just appreciating each place for its individuality -- I do miss that. Even though it would be very nice to just go someplace and dedicate the whole trip to those snatched moments, be like, "Oh, it's all lovely. I don't have to work at all." That would be nice too. So, I could choose that.

Q: So, what's next. You clearly plan things. So, you're doing, creating this wonderful business right now. What are the dreams?

A: [00:39:41] I, I would love to build my business to the point where I, it, it has enough work that I need to build a commercial kitchen or rent a commercial kitchen somewhere. I would love to have my business be the premier artistic cake studio in the area. Like I want people to be like, "I want a Cake by Abby for my wedding or my anniversary." Like I want that reputation. I want people to recognize what I'm making and, you know, seek it out for their events. I lately have been having a little bit of a daydream of like, you know, a lovely little studio somewhere downtown Chestertown where people can actually walk to it. [laughter] And I have beautiful cakes set up and a consultation space and just, you know, nothing extravagant but larger and that really demands the patronage of some people who are really seeking out that special, special thing for their event. So, yeah. So, that's what I want.

Q: From what I have learned about you this morning, I think you'll get there.

A: [00:41:05] Hopefully.

Q: So, maybe this is a little farfetched. But it would seem that there's a disjunction between being a second mate on a big tanker in the Pacific and designing these beautiful cakes. Can you see any parallels for you and the two?

A: [00:41:32] Following strict processes.

Q: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah.

A: [00:41:41] I mean, baking is a precision thing and you have to follow rules and, you know, cleanliness and sanitation, you know, making sure that you're very detail oriented in all of your steps, not only in prep and, and cleanliness, but also in the finished product of sitting down and realizing a design and not stepping away until it is complete and not shying away from taking the time and consideration to find all of the little details that are going to make it complete. So, yeah. I think those.

Q: That's very interesting. So, do you ever think that you would like to get back into boating on the Chester on your own, or do you think that you're --

A: [00:42:33] I would love to have like a little runabout or something. Not like a run -- But like, just a little whaler or something that's mine that I can just take out and just be on the water. I would love that. I don't want to have the expense and the hassle of taking care of it right now, and I don't have a place to put it. But just something to be able to be out on the water any time I want would be lovely. I don't have a desire to make that a job anymore.

Q: Just part of your pleasure.

A: [00:43:07] Yeah. But I also really love being a guest on somebody's boat and having them take care of it and be like, "Where are we going? Great. Have a drink?"

Q: I, I, I hear you. I hear you. [laughter] Is there anything that you particularly -- You came home to Chestertown. What brought you back to this particular area? Why to the Chesapeake and the Chester?

A: [00:43:37] I mean, it is a lovely area. My family is here, and that was the biggest thing. I, if I didn't have family ties here, I would probably live like, you know, in the Seattle area or like Maine or something. But it is a beautiful place. It is well positioned to be a very, a slow, a slower pace of life with space to breathe but easy access to big metropolitan areas that are stocked full of things, you know, culture and whatever, all of that stuff. So, that's, that's a very appealing aspect of this area. And it is a great community. You know, like you can't walk out of your house without seeing somebody that you know. Like I take the dog out and we're sitting on the front porch and three people honk at me as I'm sitting there. It's like, "Okay, great. I have to not look like trash all the time." But it's nice to know that like if I've needed something, there's people that I know that would be like, "Okay, yeah, I'll come." So, yeah. That. [laughter]

Q: So, just a couple more questions. What do you think people should know about you and your career? I know you started saying you didn't want to talk about yourself. But -- So, what do you think we should know about you?

A: [00:45:19] I guess -- Well, I'll preface this with saying I had a reputation when I was shipping amongst young license -- Like in their union halls they knew me as the bitch. And I was okay with that because the people that knew me, they knew that it was because things had to be done right, and I wasn't going to take it any other way. I -- The reason that I'm fine with that and was fine that is because I care so deeply about everything that I do. If I'm going to do it, if I make a commitment and I -- Like part of it is pride and like worry about reputation. Part of it is just integrity. But everything that I do I care so much about it has to be the best that I can possibly do or I'm not going to be happy. I'm going to be so worried about what everyone else thinks about me. So, that carried through in my shipping career. It carries through in everything that I've taken on since. And yeah. Just that I'm an extremely caring person about anything that I take on. So --

Q: Great. I'm in -- I'm completely in awe of your ability to go out in the Pacific and do that. [laughter] I'm really

impressed. Is there anything else in your water career, your return here that you'd like to talk about, and we haven't hit in this conversation? Any favorite memory for being out of the water for those 10 years that would be worth sharing?

A: [00:47:29] I don't know. This -- I don't know. I, I don't know. I'm sorry. [laughter]

Q: No. There isn't a right or wrong answer.

A: [00:47:58] Okay.

Q: Just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything you'd like to talk about that we haven't managed to hit.

A: [00:48:08] I don't think so. There's just, there are so many facets of that life before that every -- It's so all encompassing of everything you're doing and the environment and the people and all the like -- And it's just, it's hard to say one thing. Yeah. Because it's, it, it was half my life. You know, I was like half time there and half time here and very much defined who I was at that time. So, a lot to it.

Q: So, if you think back at it, is there one thing that you think about the most?

A: [00:49:02] Gosh, I don't think so. Sorry. [laughter]

Q: Okay. No, no. There's no --

A: [00:49:07] There's -- I was like thinking -- I was like, "Oh, I remember that. Oh, I think about that. Oh, I think about that. Oh, I think about that." So, no. There's like a bunch.

Q: Start with the -- Where there many women on the tankers with you when you were out there?

A: [00:49:20] I did have some females come through. There was another third mate who I knew from Kings Point who was, who shipped with me. And there were some unlicensed females who came through. But more often than not, I was the only one. Didn't really bother me that much. Like I was kind of used to that. But, yeah, definitely not, not a lot. And there's, there were like 20 to 22 people, generally 21 people on board. So, what's that? Five percent? Yeah. Five to 10 percent is generally what it was, kind of like at the academy. Yeah.

Q: So, have they stayed?

A: [00:50:05] No. So, the other, the other mate that I -- Oh, we did have some female cadets come through. But no. They other third mate -- She left after not too long. I can't remember how long. It was a few years. She didn't stick out too long. The unlicensed -- I didn't keep track of -- They would come and go. We didn't really have many that would filter into some of the permanent positions. I don't

think there -- Yeah. The cadets like -- I didn't really keep track of most of them. One of the cadets I did know. She did ship for a little bit but then did not make it. So, yeah.

Q: So, at the -- As you go up through the ranks, most of the captains and first mates tend to be men?

A: [00:51:04] I don't think we had -- I'm trying to think if we had any female -- We had no female captains at the company I was at. I'm trying to think if we had any female chief mates. I don't think we did. I mean, there are -- There are. There's, you know, multiple companies. But they're few and far between. And it's definitely -- It is a singular life. You know, it's like -- I don't know of any of those ladies who have families. The ladies who have families -- Some of them will come ashore and do like -- There are some female pilots in various areas. And they are able to have families because they are in that one area. Like their schedule might be pretty wonky. But they, you know, they're able to just be in that one area, not like be away for four months. So, yeah. It's a, it's a tough thing. The schedule is tough.

Q: So, did many people -- I mean, looking at all the different 22 members of the boat -- Last for a long time, or do they too disappear after 10 years?

A: [00:52:26] It really depends. I don't think people are honest as I am that they're, like they have a certain time frame and like a goal that they're going for. I think if they have that, they're being tight lipped about it. I didn't hear that from many people. But some people just get in it and either they have a family that now they have a lifestyle they need to uphold so they keep going or they get married, and their wife is like, "No, you need to come ashore. And we're going to have a family. You're going to work like somewhere here." And so, they leave because they thought they were going to be forever and they were like, "Actually, my wife said no." [laughter] There's a lot of, you know -- Probably half the people are lifers. You know, a lot of the, yeah. I'd say half.

Q: [00:53:32] Well, thank you.

A: [00:53:33] Yeah.

Q: Thank you very very much.

A: [00:53:35] You're welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE