

OH 516 Sarah Lawrence

JENNIFER SHEA: ... you to just introduce yourself. This is Jennifer Shea and I'm on *Slow Jam*, the houseboat of Captain Sarah Lawrence in Queenstown, or... Grasonville ... Grasonville, Maryland. And we are going to hear her story for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Her Helm Oral History Project. And it is September 5th, 2023.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:00:32] [laughs] I love my son. He's...

JENNIFER SHEA: Could we begin by you introducing yourself?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:00:39] Sure. Good morning. My name is Sarah Lawrence, and I'm excited to be here. I'm born on July 11th, 1986. I'm 37 years old, and I've grown up on the water and on boats. And it started back in 1989 when my parents opened a marine towing and salvage business out of Neavitt, Maryland named Tow Jamm Marine. In 1991, they joined with BoatUS, so the boats went from a dark green color to the bright red TowBoatUS color, and we've been TowBoatUS ever since. So I kind of grew up working on the towboats with my dad. My mom was the head dispatcher, so getting to work between those two. Waiting on the dock at the end of the day when my dad would come in. I always loved the smell of the two-stroke engines. It's one of my memories, you know, when you would be backing into the

slip. We lived on the water in Neavitts ... we'd always bring the towboats back. So we'd grow up... In the wintertime, we would go cruising down the Intercoastal to the Bahamas. And we would spend our time in the Exumas and different chains of the Bahamas. We had various boats, primarily being a *Najad 34* sailboat. So we'd do the intercoastal, hop across the Gulf Stream, spend the winters there. And the great thing about the towing business was we ... they would shut it down for the winter because it slowed down so much. There wasn't a lot of, you know, people needing tows or boats sinking then. So in... When I turned 12, I loved kayaking and canoeing. So at the age of 12, I opened Sarah's Canoe and Kayak Rentals out of Neavitt. [laughs] So I saved up and I bought ... I don't know. I think I had three double kayaks, like three or four single kayaks, and a canoe or two, and I would do half-day and full-day kayaking rentals. And then I would do guided tours until I was about 16 years old. And then throughout this time, I was sailing at the Miles River Yacht Club doing junior sailing. Grew up sailing there and then ended up coaching for years. Went to Gunston, sailed at Gunston. And then I went to St. Mary's College of Maryland in southern Maryland where I studied History and Human Studies, and I ended up sailing on the D1 varsity

sailing team there. We sailed *FJs* and *420s*, and I graduated there in 2008 where I drove my little old Volvo across the country to Alameda, California with my best friend at the time and still a great old friend of mine, Eastman Lewis who grew up in Sherwood [laughs]. And his dad is Mark Lewis. I don't know if you know him.

JENNIFER SHEA: I do, yeah. Yeah.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:03:37] And we drove my old Volvo out there, and we both worked the summer Encinal Yacht Club coaching sailing. I sold my Volvo in California, bought a one-way ticket to the Bahamas, and went down there. And I started running their junior sailing program. So in the Abacos, there's one great island, Great Abaco. It's 110 miles long. And then there's the Sea of Abaco, and there's these little keys ... there are little small islands, they call them keys ... that dot the entire, you know, Sea of Abaco between the Atlantic and Great Abaco. So there's lots of places to sail and tuck in harbors and ports. So I was coaching the kids between Great Guana Cay, Mon Amour, and Hope Town. And then ... am I ... am I going too fast?

JENNIFER SHEA: No. [laughter]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:04:29] Okay.

JENNIFER SHEA: It's great, Sarah. [laughs]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:04:31] I'm just trying to think of like,
"This is weird, saying my life history."

JENNIFER SHEA: It's just such... It's a history of the water,
though. This is really interesting.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:04:04] Yeah, yeah. So in 2000 and wait,
when was it? I think it was 2009. Yeah. I went to
Chapman's School of Seamanship in Stuart, Port St. Lucie,
and I got a 100-ton U.S. Coast Guard near coastal master's
license.

JENNIFER SHEA: Why did you decide to do that?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:05:05] [sighs] I just... I didn't know
what else to do. [laughs] I just... I was teaching
boating. It felt like the natural next step. And my dad
who was a live-aboard cruiser ... my parents have split ...
he had actually let his captain's license lapse. So we
ended up doing... So he had to redo his. So we ended up
doing the course together which was kind of neat because
that was kind of the last big, you know, thing that we did.
He passed away in 2010. And so I got my captain's license.
And just before that, I knew... He was living aboard a 41-
foot Morgan Out Island.

JENNIFER SHEA: Where?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:05:50] In the Bahamas. Between the
Bahamas and the Chesapeake, and I knew I wanted to live

aboard, as well. So we actually flew down to the Caribbean and I bought a boat in Saint Martin. And it was a 36-foot Fontaine Pajot. It's called a Louisiane. So don't think of a fancy catamaran, think of a Hobie on steroids. Okay?

JENNIFER SHEA: [laughs]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:06:17] It's got a big... It's got the big rudders, and the big tillers, and there's no wheel. It had like a little 20 horsepower Tohatsu that we ... like a little kicker that you put down, and it was very fast. And so they didn't make a ton of them, but it was a good starter boat because there wasn't a lot of maintenance. You know, there wasn't a lot of inboards and there was no generator. [laughs] It was just a little, small engine, a small galley. So he lived aboard his Morgan and I lived aboard my catamaran which was named *Chow Chow*. His boat was *Coyote*, mine was *Chow Chow*, and we were going to sail around the Caribbean and do all kinds of cool stuff. He ended up getting sick and passing in July of 2010, so from liver cancer. And then I ended up with a lot of boats. So I had the Morgan, he also had a 21-foot Whaler, a 20-foot Whaler with twin 115 Yhamas. And then I had my catamaran and all these dinghies and his big RV and I was like ... I just turned 24. So I came into a lot of boats so I kind of, you know, wanted to start selling things to get rid of

them. And during that time, I had taken the Morgan to Florida to try to get that ready. And I had left the catamaran, *Chow Chow*, the 36-foot one, on a mooring ball in Hope Town knowing that it was hurricane season. So this is now ... I did that in early July. Everything was stripped. Anyways, a very minor ... I think Cat 1 or Cat 2 storm came through, and another boat came off its mooring and [slaps] hit mine, and both of our boats went up onto the limestone shore of Hope Town Harbor and basically it had a huge hole in the port hull. So you could swim through the hole. And at that time, I had it listed in Cruising World magazine for sale. And about a week after the storm, you know, I got a call from my friend, "Head's up your boat's up on the rocks," which is not the call you want to be getting.

JENNIFER SHEA: [laughs]

SARAH LAWRENCE: Because I hadn't renewed my insurance because I was 24 and I was like, "I'm not going to need that. I don't need to..." [laughs] So it had... That was a good lesson to learn. But I got a call from a guy about a week later, and he said, "Is your catamaran still for sale?" I said, "Well, it is, but at discount now [laughs] because there's a huge hole in the side of it." He said, "It's totally fine." He bought the boat for what I wanted. I mean, it was kind of ... looking back, I can't believe

it. He flew down with his wife who was from Costa Rica. They stayed at a little lodge there in Hope Town. And at low tide, he went back and he glassed the boat up. And he ended up sailing it, you know, trying to make his way back to Florida. So then, I got rid of the catamaran, and I sold the Whaler, and so it just left me with the Morgan which I felt like would be a better live-aboard cruiser because it was a bit bigger and more comfortable. It was a catch rig. So that was in Florida, and I decided to refit it so that it would be ready to cruise the Caribbean. So we... With my friend Brad who was ... he was a live-aboard on his big catamaran then. He was an older gentleman, and he spent his time between India and the Bahamas. He was in Florida, and so he helped me build a hard top and we went full solar with water, a catchment system on the hard top. So when it would rain, I would let the rain rinse the salt off and then I would pop my hoses in to fill my tanks so that I wouldn't have to go because water was 25 to 35 cents a gallon not to mention you have to like go into the dock. And then we ... I had my rigging checked. Mack Sails came. They pulled it, they put new, you know, stays in certain places. So my rigging was good. And then I sailed that fall which was 2011, maybe? 2012, 2011, and sailed through the Caribbean. Sometimes with friends, sometimes solo. So

I made my way through the Bahamas, and then down to Turks and Caicos, Dominican Republic. In the Dominican Republic, it was beautiful. I sailed into Luperón and got to explore that island which is right, you know, borders ... Luperón borders with Haiti. Sailed around to the east side of Dominican Republic. My boat got broken into I think by the police in the DR. It was an interesting experience. I ended up sailing to Puerto Rico after that. The little islands, Vieques, off of there, and then down to the Virgin Islands where I got a job aboard *Kekoa*, a big sailing catamaran. Because when they stole, they took my computer, my jewelry, money, they took a lot of things. I was like, "I need to get a job. I need to make a little money." So I worked down there for a couple months. But then hurricane season was coming again and I kind of reached a point where I was missing my friends back in the Bahamas. So I sailed back up to the Abacos and lived aboard the *Morgan* and began working for Cruise Abaco which is a sailing treader company. Can you press pause?

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah.

[recording paused]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:11:56] Are we good?

JENNIFER SHEA: Wait, I got to get this.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:11:58] Okay.

JENNIFER SHEA: We're going to...

[recording paused]

JENNIFER SHEA: Okay. Go ahead.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:11:59] Okay. So I had sailed... I had sailed down to the Virgin Islands, worked, and it was absolutely beautiful. I worked on a Stiletto 26 and also a big sailing cat. And then I missed the Bahamas, so I ended up sailing back to the Abacos and resuming my job with Cruise Abaco which was a captain by day, bareboat by night charter company run by great friends of ours, Mark and Patti. I kind of started with them when they just began. So we started... They started with their ... it wasn't a Tartan, but it was a double-ended ... I can't remember. Their boat's name was Lockadoon. They sold that, and then they started getting into catamarans. So they had two catamarans and I was their first captain. So it was Mark and Patti the owners, I was the captain, and they had a guy from the islands named Shorty. He was an awesome Haitian kid. And between the four of us, we kind of started working in this charter company and they began growing it. And it ultimately... He grew it to over 20 boats of all brand-new Fontaine Pajots, Lagoons. And it became a place where people could come and have a captain during the day, and at the end of the day, we would leave and anchor them

or put them on a mooring ball. And so I had a 15-foot Boston Whaler at the time, so I would just tow it behind the sailboats or the, you know, the power troller or whatever it was. And I'd bob home that night, go back to my boat, and then go back the next morning. So that's really where I began fine-tuning my bigger boat-handling skills, and docking, and realizing that I really loved teaching people. You know, I've been teaching children for so long on the water how to sail, but I began realizing I really liked working with, you know, adults and boats with more systems. So I did that for many years. I was in the Bahamas about nine years. And then I ended up meeting who is now my husband, Adam. He's from Fort Lauderdale but he'd been in the Bahamas for 15 years also as a captain working with families. Basically, they called him Captain Adventure. I mean, he was the kind of person who knew the history. And you would go out and you would have so much fun and learn so much and dive and snorkel. So when we first started getting together, he would come pick me up on his boat and I'd be anchored out. And I'd have my dog Shiva with me who was a little rescue Potcake from the Bahamas. And he'd be like, "What do you want to do today?" So we'd go out and he'd take me on the reef. And I'd say, "You know what? I'm in the mood for hogfish." So he'd go

down, spear a big hogfish, then we'd go swim for conch, make conch salad. So that's how it started, and then we ended up getting married and having our son Burke in the... And a year later, he was actually born in Maryland, but we brought him back to the Bahamas. At that point, we had moved off of the boat into a little house right on the water on the island. And he was working for a gentleman as their private captain, and we also worked for another family who had a house in the Bahamas and a house in Portland. So we began captaining for them. They had a 36-foot Hinckley that we would run back and forth ... a little picnic boat. And then, they got a 48-foot Sabre. So we picked that up from Stuart for them, brought it over. And we would basically just take them out around the islands and take them free diving, and they had kids. And in the summertime, we would run the boat up to Portland, Maine. And that was always fun because we could stop at all the different, you know, Charleston and Savannah and Boston and all the wonderful places. And eat our way through the Eastern Seaboard, and we did that for a couple summers. But when our son turned one, we realized that we needed to get back and be closer to family. So we spent one year in Florida where Adam got a job working as a marine insurance person. It wasn't a good fit for him. Skyscrapers and

ties were not a good change from board shorts that we were used to. So in Florida, we had our daughter, Vera. And I got a call from my mom who runs, you know, Tow Jamm Marine and she basically said that she would love to have us come help her. So we moved up to Maryland in 2018 and we ended up buying a house in Queenstown where we got into the business. Adam became the Captain for Kent Narrows and at the time, there was two towboats. So we had the old World Cat which is still there ... it's still a great boat run by Trevor Hammond out of Grace Creek down in Bozman. And we had an old Seahawk. And we saw that the business was successful because of her strong styles in communication, so she would spend a lot of time speaking with the customers and she was always on the VHF [Very High Frequency] so people knew her. We worked well with all the local agencies, but we realized that we needed to update the fleet. So we ended up ultimately adding three new boats. Adam refit these two boats next to us here. This is a 26-foot Zodiac and then also an Angler. And we also just got a 23-foot Everglades. We wanted continuity between all of the same electronics. We wanted, you know, a similar engine so we're also now all Suzuki and Yamaha. And we felt like a great way to connect with our community ... there's kind of two prongs, but one of them is to

promote boating safety and show people how they can be safer and have more fun on the water. And then the other one is also teaching people about how they can just be maybe a little bit more environmentally friendly, boaters, how they can get involved with the bay health. So we did that by connecting with ShoreRivers and trying to teach people about, you know, don't anchor in seabeds, don't dump your holding tanks overboard. And so that's been a really fun way to connect with locals.

JENNIFER SHEA: So before... I want to learn more about Tow Jamm, because I'm one of those boats that had to call desperate one day [laughs] so we're going to get to that. But before we leave those 10 years in the Bahamas, I'm sort of intrigued with looking back at it. Sort of two things: how did ... who inspired you to be ... to live on the water, be part of the water like that?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:19:06] I think my dad. Definitely, because he was an avid explorer. So he was always on an adventure whether he had an RV or a different boat. I mean, we grew up on the Najad but then he got a Troller. And then he ended up getting a 45-foot Apache catamaran which is a British catamaran that he sailed up and down. And that was kind of the one I grew up in through middle school and high school. We lived over at Piney Narrows in

Chester. And then that boat caught on fire in the Bahamas and ended up getting pulled out and turned into a reef. We don't really know how it san... or how it caught on fire ... it's a bit of a mystery. We have some ideas. That's when he bought the Morgan 41 which was his final boat and the one I ended up sailing on for quite a while. But I would definitely contribute it to my dad. And also, sailing in college really taught me the fine-tune boat handling skills of smaller boats. And I do believe that dinghy sailors ... being a trailed dinghy sailor helps you become better on bigger boats.

JENNIFER SHEA: Why?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:20:27] I think you just have to be very sensitive to wind shifts and, you know, every little adjustment that you make whether it be with your boom vang or, you know, your leash tension. Whatever it is, it makes a difference in how the boat sails. And so taking that to the bigger boats where it is not as sensitive but is also important. Just feeling the weather shifting and I had an amazing coach named Adam Werblow. And he's still the head coach on the team there. He really invigorated us and he really got us... You know, we would sail in the winter and I always thought ... I mean, we would be chipping ice out of these boats and you're freezing. The only time we would

never sail is if Adam would say, "Pull the sail ... put the main up. Put the jib up." If we could see the reflection of the SMC and the sail number in the water and there wasn't a ripple, if it was completely flat, we wouldn't have to go out and sail. Which would maybe happen like once in college. Once, maybe twice. I mean, it was never too windy to go sailing. So we'd sail two to three hours after school, and then regattas all weekend. So that was just like a culture, and I got to sail with people that were way better than me. And that was... Sailing at the yacht club, I mean, I just, it's ... I don't ... I hope my kids end up liking sailing as much as I do or at least feeling the magic in it. Because it gives you autonomy even when you're young and you can't drive. I tell my kids, I was like, "You know, you can take the Opti out, and you can be your own captain. And you can go where you want to go." Within reason. But also kayaking and canoeing is just the same, so...

JENNIFER SHEA: Freedom. That's interesting. So for you, sailing is connected with freedom.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:22:15] Yeah, yeah. You get to change your view if you go to a new anchorage. And you get to meet people and just experience different styles of living. And cruisers are some of the most helpful people. You

know, you could pull into an anchorage, and if you needed a part for your boat, or if you needed to borrow a can of something, you know, everybody kind of pulls together. Especially if, you know, you're trying to get your dinghy patched and you need somebody to help. You know, it's an amazing community. Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: So how did you get the confidence to single-hand these boats all over the Caribbean?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:23:06] I guess I watched ... I grew up doing it, so I really didn't know much else. But I think I was also just dumb ...

JENNIFER SHEA: [laughs]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:23:13] ... and young and probably didn't like think about like what could've gone bad. You know? Like you... Like I was in my early 20s. So I wasn't really worried about [laughs] things happening until I began gaining more experience is when I started realizing in retrospect the dangers that could've happened. And so as I opened my boating school, Chesapeake Boating Academy in 2021, I looked back at my younger self. So my boating school, you know, we do hands-on boating courses. And I use a lot of my former experience. For example, in my Intro to Boating class, I will teach people how to properly anchor a boat with scope ratio and how to set the hook, how

to back down on it. And I just told my class the other day, I said, "You know, guys, I had sailed my Morgan down to the Exumas and was so excited. I saw people playing volleyball on the beach, I just dropped the anchor. I didn't back down it, I just, you know, cleated it off, hopped in my dinghy, went to the beach bar, bought a Kalik beer, sat on the beach. And I was sitting there and I was like, 'Whose boat is dragging down the anchorage? They did not...'" And it was my boat. And looking back, you know, there were so many things that I got lucky. I got lucky that I, you know, I didn't wear a life jacket nearly enough, I didn't clip into my harness nearly enough. I should have had a PLB when I was doing these things, like a personal locator beacon. I had an EPIRB [Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon], but something that would've attached to me like a wireless engine cut-off switch that I now have on the boat. So if I were to fall overboard... You know, if I was doing a sail change or something at nighttime during a night shift. If I were to fall overboard, my boat was on autopilot. I mean, that would've been the end. So looking back now, I think I got quite lucky, and I don't know how my mom was able. I mean, she ...

JENNIFER SHEA: [laughs] That's what I was thinking, actually.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:25:12] I think about how I would be if my own kids were doing what I were doing, and I probably would be having a heart attack. But I think she knew that I was ... I knew how to sail, I knew how to get around. I had this really old little Garmin GPS, so I had tons of paper charts that I would be referencing as I was going south or north. Yeah. And it was just ... it was a good time. I feel like I lived my life in kind of like in reverse. Like I feel like I graduated college and I kind of went into like my retirement/sunset years because I had so much fun. I cruised the Caribbean, you know? And just met amazing people, and lived in the Bahamas. I didn't have a car ... you know, it was my 15-foot Whaler with and old 45 Honda on the back. And I would take this thing out of the cuts and we'd go spearfishing and cook up some amazing meals. So I lived kind of outside of the harbor. My friend Brad, you know, who was in his 70s at the time and a couple other people. And our friend Marina, she would go and collect curbs, like these little like prehistoric-looking snails off the rocks, and she would make curb stew. And Rod would make some sort of Indian dish with lamb and I would whip up whatever I had a bring a bottle of wine. And we would just get together and it was just like the best of times. And then when Adam and I

moved up to Maryland, I never thought I would be back up here on the bay because I grew up here. And it took me a while to find the beauty again because ...

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah. Explain that. That's a very ...

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:26:52] [laughs] The winters are just tough ... I think, you know, the greys and the browns in the winters. But as I'm older and I've got kids and a family now, there's really nowhere else I'd rather be. It feels like a safe, beautiful place and the bay is similar to the Abacos in that you can always tuck in somewhere. You can find a new town to sail to whether the wind is, you know, if it's windy in one direction. There's always somewhere to kind of ... to go and explore, and that's what we do with our family. You know, we go to different towns, we boat around. Yeah. And I love it, and I'm learning to love winter because it's a time for us to slow down.

JENNIFER SHEA: And we're on *Slow Jam*, so that's good. [laughs]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:17:39] Yeah, so that works. [laughter]

JENNIFER SHEA: So it... You know, before we move onto *Tow Jamm*, etc., did you ever experience any challenges being a woman captain sailing around the Caribbean? Or being a professional captain?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:27:59] Yeah, I did. I mean, people definitely just had anxiety as you would approach a dock

that you were going to hit the dock or they would be either in awe or in shock. I mean, if you're bringing in a larger boat or a smaller boat. So I think it took a while for people to get used to it. And then also, I got into kind of a scary experience where I met a guy in the Bahamas and he ended up coming aboard to help me sail around. And he ended up being not a good person, and it almost became a dangerous situation. So because he was stronger than me. And so at that point, I kind of realized I had to outsmart him to get him off of the boat. So that was a scary time. That was down in the Virgin Islands, and I ended up getting him off the boat. So I think that's another time where you feel a little bit vulnerable being a woman, maybe, especially alone on a boat. I used to... When I was by myself, I would ... and I was in maybe Saint Thomas or anchorages that weren't as safe as some of the others ... I would get a fish string with bells. And then on the inside of that, I put like little fish hooks [laughs]. So I figured if any bad guy was going to come, I would ring the bell and it would wake me up and then the fish hook would stick in which is, looking back, really bad home defense. [laughs] But I don't know. I mean, I was like, you know, 23, 24. And I think that you have to work a lot harder to prove yourself as a female in this industry. I think it's

a male-drive industry. And when we speak, we have to sometimes speak multiple times and maybe a little bit louder. Which is frustrating because women do a lot of the behind-the-scenes work and I think sometimes, the men get the credit. Even today, I find that sometimes when we're working with certain companies, it gets received better, you know, with the ... when Adam, my husband, presents it to them than others. And I think we've come a long ways, but I think there's still a ways to go. I think that we need a lot more representation in the industry. I'm seeing in my boating school, a lot of women are coming out. And they're saying whether they're younger or older, they say, "I want to ... I'm tired of watching my partner drive the boat. What if something happens? What if I want to go out with my friends?" We're starting to see a lot more people being empowered and wanting to do that, which is really encouraging. But I've watched my mom grow up and do it, and I think you just have to ... it makes you a little bit ... it makes you find your voice a little louder. And I think it makes you ... you just have to work harder. I think you just have to work a lot harder which I don't mind. And then you realize who your allies are, and you just move forward. Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: Interesting. Okay, I have one last question about the Caribbean and I'm ready to go with you. So it's a wonderful 10 ... it's almost a [laughs] sort of post-graduate experience. Are there any lessons learned from those 10 years that you might want to pass along to anybody who is contemplating the same? I mean, it was a very brave thing to do compared to [laughs] so many other adventures.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:31:29] Yeah. I think posting up and getting to know people long enough to learn lessons from them. So obviously, I learned so much from my dad and his style of cruising and how to be, you know, a safe boater. He would always get on me about turning my anchor light on earlier and, you know, those sort of things. But Mark and Patti who I worked for in Cruise Abaco, that's really where I also learned how to run a business. So I got to see the insides of how they were growing and scaling their business, and what made that successful. It was the human touch. You know, as soon as soon as you start to automate things and you depersonalize it, that's where I think businesses begin to suffer. And they never lost that touch. So that people in the Bahamas are ... you know, they surf, they boat, they love each other. So from that, I would just say the sense of community. If you donated money and your community, you saw immediately the effects

of it. The people there are wonderful. Yeah. I'll have to come back to that one if I have time. Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: Okay, we will. I just... Thinking about that. Okay, Tow Jamm. So you learned how to run a business. Tell me about Tow Jamm. What does it do and what's your role in it?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:33:00] Yeah. So Tow Jamm Marine is 24/7 marine towing and salvage that assists boaters on the Chesapeake. So it's similar to AAA for the water. If you run out of fuel, go aground, need a battery jump, need a tow from one place to another, if you're taking on water in the bay, you would call the ... you would call, you know, Tow Jamm Marine or TowBoatUS. So we're part of the TowBoatUS network, so there's over 600 TowBoatUS boats around the country. So once you're a member of BoatUS, you know, it doesn't matter where you are, you have coverage. Which is why the membership is so beneficial, because you could be in California or Florida or Maine.

JENNIFER SHEA: [laughs]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:33:44] And you'll still get somebody that will come out and help you. So I tell people part of being a safe and responsible boater is not to rely on a good sam or other people to come out and risk, you know, their boat or themselves. Because people can get into

trouble, especially if they're ungrounding and they're... You know, all of our gear is meant to do what it's supposed to do. So if you're using a cleat that it's not a backing cleat or it's the wrong line, you can roll the boat or rip cleats out and people can get really hurt. So it's basically marine towing and salvage and it's 24/7 so when they call, we go. We can never really be... The captains can never really be more than 15 minutes from the tow boats when they're on call, so ...

JENNIFER SHEA: How many captains do you have?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:34:31] We have two full-time captains and about six or seven part-time captains and a couple divers. So when we... For example, there was a boat that sank, you know, around the corner in the narrows the other day. Our diver ... we called him up. We came, we boomed it off for pollution mitigation, put the diver in, we bagged it up. And we dewatered the vessel and got it towed around to the boat ramp where it was ultimately put on the trailer and pulled out of the water. When we came up here to Tow Jamm, it was ... it's a great, successful business, but we saw ways that we could maybe make it grow and become more successful. We recognize that we wanted to have a team. So we wanted people... We want to pay our people well and we really want that family environment. So a lot

of people have kids, they ... we go to each other's birthday parties, we have like, you know... At our Spring Captain's Meeting, we went out shooting ... we went out clay shooting. And we'll get together and we learn from each other, and there's a lot of respect. So if an issue arises, for example, Trevor did a tow the other day and he had to tow it from the stern and bow cleat because it was kind of ... it was by Foxy's kind of right in the corner. So you couldn't do a standard, you know, put bow lines on the bow cleats or bow line. So he's like, "No, this is a new way of doing something, but this happened." So there's always that back and forth that I really like learning from, and yeah. It's exciting or it's really boring.

[laughs]

JENNIFER SHEA: So what do you do?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:36:09] So for this, I am pretty much doing marketing. You know, occasionally I'll go out on the tow boats and do smaller jobs. But I've got little kids and I'm also a mom so I can't really get stuck out on the boat. You could get a tow across the bay and then immediately have another one and be out for 12 hours. So I pretty much do marketing. I do some dispatch, so I'll do boat shows, I run also our website and social media. And I

go around and I work with the marinas and yeah, all the different boat places.

JENNIFER SHEA: Uh-huh. Is your mom still involved?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:36:49] She is. So she's still the owner and she still lives down in Neavitt. So if you drive into Neavitt and you see a huge radio tower ...

JENNIFER SHEA: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: [00:36:57] ... that is her. She is well-known on the radio. We listen up on the VHF 16 24/7 as well as 24/7 on the phones. And she's still doing it and she still loves it. So we own the tow boats ... most of the tow boats and she owns the business, and that works really well.

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah. That's great.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:37:17] She watches our kids a lot, too, and she loves gardening. So, you know, we get to give her time off so she can do some of the other things that she wants to do because it is draining being 24/7. You just kind of marry the business. I say that my husband is married to me and he's married to the tow boats.

JENNIFER SHEA: How does he feel about that?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:37:39] You know, we're trying to... One of the reasons that we built ... he built the houseboat... It's not only for our family to be closer to him when he's

working a lot, but so that we can begin incentivizing and getting more part-time captains. So maybe if people don't live so close, we could get people that could come stay on the boat for a couple days. And then they're right next to the tow boats, so it offers them ...

JENNIFER SHEA: Nice idea. That's great.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:38:05] Yeah. Yeah, and it's also a mobile platform. So if we are running a big salvage, we could pull the boat out and it could be a place where the divers could come in and warm up if it was the winter or if we need to bring in extra gear. Yeah. So we just... It's only been in the water about a month or so, so we're just starting to get her going.

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah, and this houseboat is just wonderful. So what are the biggest kinds of problems you have to help with usually on the Chesapeake given, you know, the Chesapeake doesn't have the rocks that [laughs] some other areas have.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:38:40] Yeah. So we do a lot of your standard tows. An interesting one that we did was we heard a Mayday call come across channel 16 a couple summers ago, and it was a 52-foot Sabre. Like a motor cruiser, and he had just taken on I think 500 gallons of diesel in Tilghman. He was crossing the Bay and he was sinking, and

within about 30 minutes, the whole boat was down. So we immediately responded. We arrived on scene with Coast Guard, and the boat was almost fully submerged but it had an air bubble in the bowel. Yeah, he ended up throwing a support shaft out. It sheared, and so there was a big hole ...

JENNIFER SHEA: Oh. I was just going to ask how that happened. Yeah.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:39:29] And the water came in quickly. The guy was very calm. So that was... That sort of thing is quick response, having the gear, and the personnel that are trained to know how to get the boat out of a shipping channel with ships coming down. So we kind of pulled it into shallower water where we got people in. It's also trying to... A lot of people have no idea where they are. So you may get a call and they may say, "I am on my 25-foot, you know, center console and I'm out on the bay and I'm by a dock with a white house and it's got a white garage. So can you guys come get me? I need a tow back to, you know, Annapolis," or wherever they're going. People have no idea how to read coordinates. They don't know how to get their position or their fix, so it's educating people on these sort of things. It's also telling people, you know, if they break down, let's get our

life jackets put on, let's anchor. A lot of people have no idea how to anchor. They have no idea that if, you know, a 5:1-scope ratio. So if you're in, you know, five feet of water, you should let out five feet of anchor rope for every foot of water that you're in, or 7:1 if it's nighttime or 9:1 if the storm is coming. So a lot of times, if people ... they might anchor but they've just drop their anchor straight down. And then the wind picks up and now, they're getting dragged close to the rocks. And they've got the kids and the family on board, or maybe a big storm is coming. So a lot of it is keeping people calm, and trying to educate them over the phone how to stay safe until our captains can get there. It's one of those things where you can really turn someone's bad day into a good day, and I think that's the best part of the business. Is getting to get out there, someone's pretty bummed because they thought they were going to have a great day on the water. But you know, we always like to say that attitude is the difference between adventure and ordeal. So when you show up with a positive attitude, you can really change the people's experience on the water on the boat. Keep them calm, offer them cold waters, we always have snacks and stuff if anybody needs anything, and constantly update them. So, you know, as soon as they

break down, our base station is in touch with them.

Fifteen minutes later, the captain calls them. Within every 15 to 30 minutes, there's captain is texting or calling with an updated ETA [estimated time of arrival]. And then once we're there, we let them know how long it's going to take, what they can expect, and I think that just puts everybody at ease. So we really see it all. You know, we've been in situations where a guy was going into diabetic shock and, you know, medical services were ... you know, emergency medical services were called. A sailboat that got stuck under the Kent Narrows Drawbridge, a catch, and it was ... the current was flooding, and it was pushing under there pretty quickly. So you just have to think on your toes, and you have to calculate and mitigate the risk as best you can to keep yourself and the other boats safe especially when it's blowing. You know, the guys go out a lot at nighttime in small craft advisory and it's December or January. You know, we stay open year-round now. So we've added something called siren marine to all of our boats. And it's basically, you know, it allows us to see exactly where the boats are, when they leave the dock, how fast they're going, their coordinates, are the engines running? Are the bilges pumping? Is our high-water bilge alarm...? And that helps us know that when the guys are

out, we can check that and see where all the boats are in relation to each other. So we can get more accurate ETAs but we can make sure that everyone is safe. The captains all wear life jackets. Everybody's got a PLB, a personal locator beacon in them, engine cutoff switches on. So I just tell... You know, the captains know and we tell people layering safety can really be a good thing. And I think educating people in the bay about that. Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: Well, that takes me, then, to my next question.

I'm looking right now at the Chesapeake Boating Academy on the boat next to us.

SARAH LAWRENCE: Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: How did you come up with that idea? What is it doing? What's your vision?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:43:51] Yeah, sure. [laughs] Okay. I'd always taught sailing and especially at Cruise Abaco, I taught bigger boats. I was an ASA, an American Sailing Association instructor, and a US Sailing instructor. When I moved back up here to work in the family business, TowBoatUS, The BoatUS Foundation contacted me. BoatUS Foundation is the nonprofit branch of BoatUS, so they do boating safety and clean water initiatives. They asked me to get trained as a National Safe Boating Council instructor, and work for them doing these three-hour hands-

on courses that they do at The Annapolis Boat Show and around the country different places. So I started getting back into teaching boating again, I guess it was 2018, 2019, and I...I loved it, you know. So it's really focused on 26-foot powerboats and below. Up to four students ... so it's an instructor, captain, and up to four students ... and I did a couple days at The Annapolis Powerboat Show with a group of women back-to-back, "Women Making Wave." And I felt so just energized after spending a day with like super-smart, high-power, awesome women teaching them how to boat, learning from each other, that I realized I wanted to get back into it. You know, the towing is awesome, but my passion really is getting to teach people on the water. So we decided in 2020 that we wanted to get a training boat, and we wanted to open our own boating school. So we decided to name it Chesapeake Boating Academy, and we opened in May of 2021 ... 2022. And so we're in our second year now of 2023. And we teach Intro to Boating, Docking, Open Water and Advanced Open Water. And those are all three-hour modules. And then I also got trained as a US powerboating instructor, so I can do 8-hour and 16-hour NASBLA [National Association of State Boating Law Administrators], Coast Guard-approved courses. I am meeting the most dynamic people; It's my favorite thing to

do. I love the fact that my kids are getting to watch me on the boat and teaching people. And since we've been doing this, you know, our goal is to reach as many people as possible, so yeah. We've got a couple different captains, another woman who works with me. I do a majority of it, but I'm very particular, so we've got a great team. And we do... You know, we meet at the dock, and then we do ... we get fitted for life jackets. We do our safety pre-departure briefing where we go over the charts, rules of the road, navigation, all of the safety gear, and then we get underway. So I will demonstrate a maneuver ... for example, in our precision docking course. That's really a basis on getting familiar with close-quarters maneuvering. So we'll do 180-pivot turns clockwise and counter clockwise. That's the basis of good docking. And then we get into docking approaches ... port and starboard side approaches to the dock. We add on a spring line, so we'll practice springing onto the dock, springing off of the dock, which is a big-boat move that totally works well on smaller boats. And then we'll get into backing into a slip, so using that 180-pivot turn to pivot in front of the slip, back it in, pull out, how you tie with bow lines, stern lines, springs, fender placement. And that's probably my favorite class to teach because people come in

with so much angst about approaching a dock. Because docking is one of those things where, you know, we give you the skill step ... the skill set. You know, I say it's kind of like a recipe. I'm going to give you my recipe, and then you've got to go back and practice and perfect it. And so if you have those, you can always take it on and apply it to any boat that you're on. The thing with docking is, you know, one day, the wind may be pushing you off the dock, so you might need to come in and approach it a little bit closer. The next day, it may be pushing you onto the dock. So you may need to do those same steps, but set them up a little bit sooner and then allow the wind to do, you know, the final work for you. Which is why I think docking is so fun because it's always a little different. You always get to... You have your steps, but then you get to take in what the current and the tide and the wind is doing. You get to think about the prop on your engine. Is it a right-hand prop? Does that mean ... which it probably is. That means my boat is probably going to back to port a little bit better. Do I have a right-hand or a left-hand prop and it's going to back to starboard better? I just think it's a really fun challenge, and I like to give people the confidence that they leave and they're like, "I can do this." You know, half of, I think, boating and

docking is having the skills and the practice, and then half of it is just giving yourself a pep talk. "I've got this. I can do this," you know? And going and knowing that it's okay to make mistakes. No one is a perfect boater, and I'm still learning every day. And I still sometimes will come into the dock and say, "You know what?" Even if I have my students aboard, I say, "Guys, I didn't come in quite far enough. I'm going to back out." Knowing when it's time to back out of a situation. So, not forcing a bad...bad hand, putting your ego aside. I think that's an important for students to see that, you know, we're all ultimately students and we're all learning. But we can help each other get better.

JENNIFER SHEA: I'm ready to sign up, Sarah.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:49:40] [laughs] Let's do it.

JENNIFER SHEA: I'm thinking about the pivot. What's the secret of a good pivot do you think?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:49:46] Yeah. So with a single-engine boat such as this one right here, it's three steps. So if we want to pivot clockwise, so we get our bow to go to the right. You put your wheel hard to port, okay? Your engine's in neutral, get your wheel hard to port, and you put it into reverse for three to five seconds. You'll start to see your bow shift, okay? And you come back to

neutral. While you're in neutral, spin your wheel hard to starboard, put it in forward for three to five seconds. So these to start to get this boat turning, and then back to neutral, and it's those three steps over and over.

JENNIFER SHEA: Okay. This is great. [laughs] What's the... Do you have an idea of what you want to do with the Academy? Is this something you want to grow? Do you like it the way it is? What are you thinking?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:50:32] I want to grow it. I definitely do, because I think that there's a need. I want to make sure that I'm growing it with a really good team. I don't want to grow faster than my team because although I think we would have the demand for it, I think the only reason we're truly, really successful is because we do a great job. [phone ringing] And so as I'm adding more really good captains, I think it's time for us to, you know, start thinking about maybe offering courses in different areas to reach more people. We can teach people as young as 12. So I think the sooner we start to show people the bay and how to operate a boat and they realize it's a whole 'nother avenue to explore. Whether it be... You know, there's a huge void in the marine industry. People are trying to find captains. The Coast Guard is trying to find and recruit people. We're trying to find and recruit people

all the time. So there are so many benefits of learning how to boat and getting into this especially ... even as a Coast Guard auxiliary. And I think that allows people to be outside, to have fun, and to engage with other people. And be in nature, yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: I'm ready, I'm ready. Okay. I'm so excited about this class ... I've been looking for one like that. Before I move onto my last questions, what are the most challenging waters in the Chesapeake? I was just thinking about that. I think Kent Narrows is a little bit...

[laughs]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:52:24] The Kent Narrows really can be if the current... It can run four to six knots. The current can be quite strong. So the problem is almost when you're out with a lot of boaters and no one's paying attention. People need to get off their phones, obviously. Adam was towing a boat the other day with a current. He had a big, 50-foot sailboat behind him and he was trying to go under both of the Kent Narrows Bridge and then the Six Bridge. And he'd done some security calls on the radio and a little, small and a little, small fishing boat with a bunch of kids crossed right in front of him. And at that point, they're ... we really can't stop the boat. And luckily, they got out of the way just in time. But I think [laughs]

that can be dangerous when there are so many people around that don't know what they're doing. So we need to educate these people. People need to wear life jackets, they need to have a VHF radio. That is huge. There are so many places where there's no cell phone service in the bay... that a cell phone's fine until it gets wet or until you're in a place with no service. A VHF is a safety item. Every boat needs to have a VHF whether it be a handheld that you get at West Marine. People need to check the weather and the tides so they don't put themselves into a bad situation. We're not trying to make money or financial gains off of people's getting stuck. We will tell people, "There are storms coming. Get off the water." This is... You've got your family. Get them off the water, go back, pull your boat up onto the trailer, and I think that this is something that needs ... that people need to realize. That marine forecasts can change hour by hour. If you check the tides for St. Michaels, they're different than Annapolis. So being aware of shoals and sandbars. We partnered, actually, with a family ... and this is something that's really important to us. We partnered with a father. His name is Dave Ash, and him and his wife and daughter created a nonprofit named Inspired by Hannah. Their daughter Hannah Ash, September 5th of 2020 ... so

today's the third year ... she was out with her boyfriend and two friends on their 17-foot open bowrider Sea Ray kind of boat. They'd gone out of the Centerville Landing boat ramp to Conquest Beach. They came back in the same exact way except for it was a full-moon tide so the tides were a lot lower that day. The boat hit a sandbar and she flew forward and went under. And she was taken to Johns Hopkins and she didn't make it. So this is a tragedy that ... you know, she was 23, she had really just started her life, she had just moved to Kent Island, she got a job at The Easton Club, and she was amazing. So our goal is to get people thinking about the weather, about the tide. So check the tide before you ride. Know when you go out where the shoals are. There's a huge one right out here. We pull boats off of it all the time and it can be very dangerous if you're going fast and you come to an immediate stop. Having your boating safety checklist. So you know, they started these little pamphlets you can take on your boat with you. We then realized that we should put up large metal boating resources signs at boat ramps. So in Queen Anne's County, we now have five boat ramps that have these big signs. There's a light and there ... they have a QR code where you can go and you can get free resources. So it brings you to ... directly to the free NOAA [National

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] marine weather for the day for that area, tides for that day for that area, free charts of that area, free boating safety education. All kinds of things so that people have the information before they depart. So we pitched this idea about the signs when we were at the BoatUS Conference, so now these signs are starting to go around the country. So now they're out in California, they're in Virginia, they're up in Michigan, and they're going to be opened up at different boat ramps. And our goal is hopefully ... yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: [both speaking-unclear]

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:56:44] Is that people will notice these big, bright signs, they'll see a picture of Hannah's face, they'll see a picture of the chart, and they'll come over and they'll be curious. And they'll say, "Oh," they'll scan it, and then they can save all this information to their phone. And people are... We're able to track and see that people actually are using them. So the data is showing that we can see where people are coming from and which resources that they're interested in getting. You know, we also got all new signs on the Maryland fishing rig. So, you know, as rockfish season changes or crabbing, people are able to open up and see what's in season and what's not. I just think the more info you give to people

and the more you educate them, the better and the safer that they're going to be. So we work with Inspired by Hannah and we've become friends with the family. [phone sound] Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: That's great. Just two last questions. I could sit here and listen to you all day. What advice do you like to give future female captains? I keep thinking I'd love for you to talk to my eight-year-old granddaughter, so what advice do you have for future female captains?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:58:03] Allow yourself to have a lot of experiences, know when to say no, and people will respect you. You know, know if the weather ... if you're not comfortable on the boat or the weather is not good, even if you got a bunch of people waiting for you to go out, know that, you know, at the end of the day, it's going to fall back on you. Surround yourself by good people that support you, and you'll figure out who supports you and who doesn't support you. And listen a lot. And so when I sail on this J80, I'm...I'm the weakest sailor, I would say. Everyone is, you know, as far as the racing goes on that type, they're really good. And I think just putting yourself in rooms where you're not the smartest person, where you can take in a lot from other people especially in a hands-on environment will make you better. And know when to speak

up. Yeah. Know when to listen, put yourself in a good experience, and then know when to speak up. Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA So what's next in your boating life here? Do you have anything in the future? A dream?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:59:16] Yeah. Well, getting more outreach in the school I think is a big thing for us right now.

JENNIFER SHEA: I love it.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [00:59:26] Keeping the towing business and then just raising happy kids [laughs] that hopefully will like boating one day. We'll see. Yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: It's a legacy to pass on. So I guess... is there anything you want the future to know about you or your legacy? You're still so young, it's hard ... it's funny to ask this. But when people think of Captain Sarah Lawrence, what do you want them to think about?

SARAH LAWRENCE: [01:00:01] I think people... I want them to know that when they go in the water, there's many things you can do to be safe. But ultimately, you can't forget to have fun. Sometimes, I think people get too stressed out with boating. Like ultimately, you're boating because you want to enjoy yourself. Don't let boating become not fun. So learn how to be a safe, conscientious boater, but don't forget why you're out here. Yeah. And take your family

and your friends. Yeah. I don't know. [laughs] That's probably not a...

JENNIFER SHEA: I think it's wonderful. [laughs] So is there anything else we haven't ... you'd like to say at this moment that we haven't covered? I think we've ranged from childhood til now. I'm inspired.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [01:00:51] I feel grateful for my parents for raising me on boats and for getting to watch my mom grow her business and still be involved in it. You know, BoatUS is owned by Geico so we're dealing with, you know, big corporate. Standing your grounds, I think, is very important. You know, not allowing yourself to roll over. Knowing when it's worth picking a fight and knowing when it's not worth picking a fight. It comes on ... pick your battles, even with kids, you know? Are you going to... Do you care if they're wearing different socks? I don't really. I pick my battles these days. Let's... I think that's across life. But most importantly, you have to know in your heart morally that you're doing the right thing, okay? So, you know, people can see through somebody who ... a business or something that's not real or not, you know, that's being fake. You have to truly believe in what you're doing, and you have to truly want to be doing it and love doing it. And that whole saying, "If you do what you

love, you'll never work a day in your life," is ... I don't think that's true. We've worked so hard. We... There's a lot of times where we miss kid stuff because we're just working and you know, my husband misses things. But we also get a lot of time in the winter to hang out with our family. So I just think doing the best you can do, being the best person, being helpful, and raising good people. I don't know. That's where we're at.

JENNIFER SHEA: What was it like growing up on the Chesapeake? Or growing up in Neavitt? I... She says looking outside your boat window at the big sky.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [01:02:42] Yeah. [laughs] So it was great. So my parents used to let me take the towboat out when I was like young [laughs]. I mean, I don't know. I was maybe 10 and they'd be like, "Oh, go take the new World Cat out or the whatever." You know, I would just think, "All right," and go kayaking or canoeing. I had a Hobie 16, I'd sail it with my friends in the neighborhood. We found an abandoned duck blind and we turned it into a fort, me and my girlfriend. We rode bikes, we put our rollerblades on. When it got windy, we'd pull our umbrellas out. I just think it was... You know, we would sail. We would spend our days sailing over to Leeds Creek and capsizing our way there and back and playing greasy... We'd grease up

watermelons and then throw them in the water and you know.

When we were the coach, just have all the kids try to scoop them up. It's got to be fun, and I just think being outside. Like getting muddy, getting dirty, going fishing, getting crabs, and yeah.

JENNIFER SHEA: That's great. That's great. Thank you very much.

SARAH LAWRENCE: [01:03:44] Thank you so much. I really ...

END OF AUDIO FILE