

OH 520 Judy Bixler

JENNIFER SHEA: So. This is Jennifer Shea, and I'm in Oxford with Captain Judy Bixler, and we are getting her ferry story for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Her Helm project. If... whatever...

JUDY BIXLER: [00:00:22] Hi, I'm Judy Bixler. I own the *Oxford-Bellevue Ferry*, the oldest privately owned ferry in America, and I was born in upstate New York. I grew up mostly in a little village called Hagaman, which was outside of Amsterdam, New York. I was actually born in Troy, New York. I was born in November of 1952, so I'm of the older generation now. [laughs] But I feel young, so that's the best part. We came to the ferry on... Actually, we were here on 9/11 to sign the paperwork to buy the *Oxford-Bellevue Ferry*.

JENNIFER SHEA: Really. Huh.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:00:57] But unfortunately, because of the day, it did not take place, so it was a couple weeks later that we finally got to sign the paperwork to buy the ferry. It's part of our "ferry tale," as we say. My husband Tom lived on Shelter Island, New York, for a while, and he worked with Captain Gib Clark, who owned... Who brought a ferry here from Shelter Island in 1974. So we knew about

the Oxford Ferry. And we lived in upstate New York, Canton, New York, where St. Lawrence University is, and we lived there for almost 20 years. We had car dealerships there, and we decided that we were going to retire early, because Tom was getting ulcers from having... [laughter] From dealing with the car dealership. I was the chief financial officer of that company... Actually, those two companies. We had two car dealerships. And we decided that we would retire, and he said that someday when he retired he wanted to own a ferry. So that's how we came to look for a ferry. We thought we bought a ferry in Vermont, but the gentleman sold it twice, so we literally ended up in the Vermont Supreme Court. And we won but we lost, because the gentleman actually traded, or actually changed hands with the other people, and so the court said that we needed to go back to court again to involve those folks, and we just looked at each other and said, you know what, this isn't meant to be. [laughter] It's a small town and you're going to throw somebody out and it's just not the right thing. So we started looking again. We were traveling, following the sun on our sailboat, up and down the East Coast, looking for somewhere to settle. There are very few privately owned ferries; most ferries are owned by the state or the country, as a lot of them are in Canada.

So we kept looking. We knew about this ferry; when we first stopped in, Dave Bittner, who was, he and his wife Val were running the ferry at that time, said that, nope, they had a list a mile long, and if, you know... we could get on the list, but he certainly thought he had lots of other folks. But at that point my husband reminded him that there might be a difference, because we had sold our car dealership, so we had money. [laughter] So a lot of people want something but don't necessarily have the wherewithal to be able to do it. So he said he would keep that in mind. And about three years later we were sitting in Shelter Island; I was getting, I was working on the ferries in order to get my time to get my license, and he called and asked if we were still interested, and we said absolutely, so we got together with them, and we now have been running the *Oxford-Bellevue Ferry* for 22 years. The ferry itself is 340 years old this year. It was founded in 1683. It has always been privately owned. And it doesn't have many new owners. Captain Bill Benson had the ferry for over 36 years, the Bittners had it for 27, and we've had it for 22. So it doesn't change hands a lot. There have been a number of women owners, although, which is really pretty interesting. Back in the 1700s, even. There was a lady called Judith Bennett who owned the ferry, and

she outlived three husbands and ran it in between husbands. So I tease my husband all the time that my name is Judy, so look out, [laughter] don't try to pull anything. I do own a majority of the stock, so we are a woman-owned business... not that it's ever come to any value to us at this point, but it could; if we ever needed money for something, it gives us an advantage in being able to get a grant, being a woman-owned business. So they refer to me as the Admiral, not just the captain, and I take care of the book work of the ferry. I do run the ferry; I am a true captain. I have a hundred-ton master's license, which I've had since 2001, and my husband has had his since 1970. So he's had his for a really long time. He likes to tell people that I didn't know which end of an oar to hold onto when he married me. I really don't think I was that bad, but I did not have a lot of boating experience, so being the fact that I'm the captain of a ferry now, it's unusual. Even my kids think it's kind of funny, because I didn't love running the ski boat when we lived on a lake, just because they were behind it and if something, if they fell or whatever, I just, as a mom, it was not my favorite thing to do. It wasn't the boating, it was more the idea of the kids falling and getting hurt. So that's kind of where it all began, and I really enjoy being on the ferry. It's an

interesting job. People often say to us, "Don't you get bored, going back and forth?" But no two trips are ever the same. I like to say I dance with the water men. We go back and forth all the time while they're catching their crabs or oystering or whatever in our area. There's the sailing school at the yacht club which is our neighbor. There's always different vessels going up and down the river, so it's very interesting. We have a lot of different wildlife: the osprey, there's eagles, there's rays. There's, you know, we watch the fish come in. We've had dolphins in the river a number of times, which is always fun to watch. So there's... really, and the people aboard are never the same. We have people visit us from all over the world, and it's very interesting to see who our customers are. We don't try to pry into anyone's business, but often they chat with us, and that's part of the allure, is that we like to visit with our customers. It's the eastern shore, so we take our time. We don't go rushing around, and if that's really what you want to do, it's probably not the right thing for you to come on our ferry, because we take our time. We like people to enjoy the visit. That's what being on the ferry is all about. It's an experience; it's not just a mode of transportation, although it does cut down a number of miles. If you take

the ferry you can get to St. Michael's area in about seven miles versus about 27 if you go in your car, and it's much more fun to go across the ferry. We like to visit with folks; we actually like to bring some of the younger children up to see what it's like in the wheelhouse. It's a true double-ended ferry, so I have two wheels, two rudders, two propellers, two engines. It's not what people think of as a two-engine boat, because they actually run opposite each other. So cut my boat in half and I'd have two boats. We don't want to do that, but [laughter] it's the way the boat is set up. So it's a different sort of a thing. It's 30 feet wide and 65 feet long, so it's not your average vessel. There's very little of it in the water. It's a true... we describe it as a mortar box: the more weight that's on it, the actually more stable it is. So it's really a fun job. We've had a number of young people over the years that work with us. We also have what we call our senior crew, who are retired folks who want something to do and have fun and love to be out on the water. We've had executives from Caterpillar and the Oxford lab, and we've actually had three pilots who flew airlines, so they'd go from 700 miles an hour to seven. So [laughter]. But they were great, because they understood the whole concept of the winds and the currents and all

that sort of thing, so they were great captains. We've met a number of wonderful people over the years, and as I said, this is our year to celebrate 340 years, because I don't think come 350 that Tom and I will still be captains.

[laughter] We actually are looking for a successor, and that's something that... it's a great experience looking for somebody who can fill your shoes. The biggest thing is that we want somebody who's going to treat the ferry and love the ferry the way we do and continue the heritage. As we've always said, it's not going to go away on our watch, and we don't want it to go away on the next person's watch. We don't plan to leave here, so it's important that we pass the ferry on to the right person, and I'm looking forward to that. We have a number of people who think it would be fun to invest in the ferry, but that's really not what it's about. It's a hands-on... It's a love. You know, you really have to have the right mechanical ability, the right sailing ability, the right ability to be able to work with tourists and be... we're an ambassador of tourism. That's another one of my hats. I'm chairman of the Talbot County tourism board, and I just dropped off of the state tourism board that, I was chairman of it for a number of years. My time... I turned out, as they say. [laughter] They would have liked me to stay, but you can't do that; you can only

be on the board for so many years, and then you have to kind of step aside.

JENNIFER SHEA: Which organization was that?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:09:29] It's the Maryland Tourism Development Board, so I was appointed by the governors and filled that position. It wasw...actually, it was really neat, because I got to travel all over the state. I learned a lot about the state, since I didn't grow up here. Unfortunately, part of my term was COVID, so that cut down on my traveling during that time. But I was here when we opened the Harriet Tubman Museum, we've done some work with Frederick Douglass, so I've learned a lot of the history as well as meeting the people from all over our state. And we really are a very diverse state. I mean, there's a little of everything. We have mountains, we have water, we have, you know, the metropolitan area's right outside of DC. Maryland is a small state, but it's amazing what's packed into it. So that's kind of my story.

JENNIFER SHEA: Oh, so many different nuances to the whole thing.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:10:20] There are.

JENNIFER SHEA: So let me just ask this question: When you're going around, what do you like to tell people about the ferry, its heritage?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:10:32] I think the fact that it's gone through so many stages. I mean, in the beginning it was sailing and sculling that brought the ferry across. They literally brought people from the inns on either side. The Robert Morris Inn was founded in 1710, so there were other inns and plantations, they... So they brought slaves back and forth. And actually, sculling was actually a really hard job. It took a really strong, probably a man at that point... I don't think a woman would have... Would have wanted to do it unless she were really, really strong, because it just took effort to get that boat across the river. And then as things went along, it went from... There's... Became a steam tug, and then it was another barge and tug. They brought a... They brought the barge if there were animals, before vehicles. So there's so much history to be able to tell. And the area itself was, we were the first port when you came into the bay before you got to Baltimore. So it was a thriving area here in Oxford. It's gotten very quiet; we say we're a step back in time now. We're Americana at its best, is the way we describe our little town. Everybody knows everybody. I go downtown to find out what I'm doing. But it's really a neat experience. We look out for each other, and I think that that's what... it's important to us to really talk

about what's gone on over the years. And the ferry does not change hands very often. There were only four owners in the 20th century. And we came in at the end of that. So it's really... it's a very special thing. When we bought the ferry, we were told that we were not really owning the ferry; it was an icon of the county, the crown jewel, and that we were the keepers of the ferry. That as far as the county was concerned, this was their ferry. And I think that that still goes... as a matter of fact, people consider it their ferry. Over the years it was used more for business, transportation of workers that were going back and forth, it brought school children across the river, because the students in Bellevue came to school in Oxford, which, there's no longer a school in Oxford; it's now our community center. And so there were many uses over the years. At one point, Captain Bill Benson ran the ferry every day except Christmas. When we came here, that was not the case; it's more of a seasonal business now, because we don't have that, we don't bring school children across, we don't have that sort of thing. And as far as I was concerned, I really didn't want to have to shovel the deck. So that was an important part to me, because we spent a lot of time in upstate New York, where it was very cold and very snowy. So it was, coming here was coming south, and

we just didn't want to have that sort of thing going on. And the town slows down during the winter season; there's little to be open. And we provide transportation, but we need to be able to provide transportation for something at the other end. So you can drive around; many people come on the ferry and say, "Well, we have to come back, where it's this island." It's like, no, it's not an island, we're a peninsula, and we connect two different peninsulas. So it's just, it's a... I can't really describe the feeling that you get by being a part of something that's that old, that has that much history, and that people just really love. I mean, I can't say that we've had more than a handful of customers that have left unhappy for one reason or another. Generally it's because we didn't get to park exactly where they wanted, because getting on the ferry with your car is a puzzle; we have to be able to put the bigger cars down the center, the smaller ones on the outside, that sort of thing. So occasionally someone won't be exactly happy that they didn't get the front row and the front seat there. But [laughter] we have bicycle groups that join us. We are always one of the top 25 bicycle routes in America, often in the top 10. So that's really another interesting part.

JENNIFER SHEA: I didn't know that. Huh.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:14:26] Yeah, there's a lot of really interesting things that go on with the ferry.

JENNIFER SHEA: One of the things that I'm always intrigued, every time I ride it, is all the history that you have there. Was that something that you added?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:14:39] We did work hard to get the Maryland... The Oxford Museum and the Maryland Humanities now has helped us get some placards that are aboard the ferry. So we are kind of a floating museum. There's pictures and information around the outside of the boat that tells a little bit about our history, shows some of the photographs. Of course, the original ones, there are no photographs of. There wasn't any such thing as photography at that point. So it's interesting to watch what happened. The ferry's been used in various different ways over the years. It was used by... they had fire trucks aboard and put out a boat fire one time. Another time they put two dump trucks on opposing each other, and they were full of oysters, and then they emptied them from both ends of the ferry in order to create oyster bars. So we've rescued dogs, we've rescued boats, we've rescued people that are broken down. Now, we don't always do the same thing all the time. And one of the reasons that we run the way we do, we say we shuttle back and forth, is

because we can actually make more trips. If we had exact timing, we'd actually make less trips. And we couldn't come back for you. Occasionally if someone pulls in and we've already started to pull away, if we're able to, we'll come back for you, if we don't have someone waiting for us on the other side. We couldn't do that if we had an exact schedule. So we make more trips because of that. And that always astonishes people, when we come back for them, as well. And people on deck enjoy visiting with each other. We've had foreign visitors who, international visitors from many different places, and they'll actually communicate in another language on the ferry with each other. So that's been interesting to watch on occasion. We've had movie stars, we've had... When Vice-President Cheney was in the area, he often came across on the ferry, so we had Secret Service. And we had all kinds of things going on. One trip we actually had Vice-President Cheney aboard and behind him in another car was Secretary Rumsfeld, and we had to leave him on the dock, because there wasn't enough space with all the secret security cars and everything to be able to get him on board. But his grandchildren jumped onto the boat and said, "See you, Gramps, we're going to go with Ken, Tom, and Judy." And they came back with us on another trip and they met him on the way back. So we've

had lots of different folks aboard, and we try to treat everyone the same... it's not important to us. We don't like to hound anybody and ask them for autographs and pester them, but it's fun.

JENNIFER SHEA: Has there ever been somebody you wanted to pester?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:17:10] There's been some interesting folks. We really have. I know we had Josh Charles, he was on *The Good Wife*. He commuted with us a lot. He rode his bike. He was on the boat many, many times, and people would often try to walk up to him, and he'd just smile, and sometimes he'd climb the ladder and come up and talk with us. You never know. We've had some other interesting experiences where we hired a young woman at fourteen, she was as shy as could be; she stayed with us all through her high school years, all her college years. She went on to get her captain's license when she turned 19, because it was something we encouraged her to do, we actually sponsored her to be able to do it. She then went on to law school, and she still works with us to this day. She really enjoys the ferry, so that's really neat. She works only occasionally now, because of course her law job keeps her very busy, but she's like a second child, or, well, fourth child, actually, to us. She calls us her second set of

parents. So we've had numerous young people work with us, and it's fun to see what's happened to them over the years. You know, when you think we've been here for 22 years, we've watched some kids grow up, and they have children of their own now, and they come back with their children to ride on the ferry. We love to hear people's stories about when they rode the ferry back many years ago. Back when Captain Bill had the ferry, it was a different scenario; they only had one engine, so kids would jump off. They actually, when the boat would leave they'd ride their bikes and land in the slip. It was a different world; you could do those kinds of things then. You can't do that now; we have propellers on both ends, so it's much more dangerous. We have a line on the ferry. We ask you to stay behind the gate for safety, and we don't want anyone to get hurt.

JENNIFER SHEA: So the... When you bought the ferry, what was the boat?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:18:59] It's the same boat we have now.

JENNIFER SHEA: It is now? Okay.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:19:00] Mm-hmm, yeah. The ferry is, she was built... It's the ferry *Talbot*. She was built in 1980 in Blunt, Rhode Island, and it's been in service quite a while now. But we just had it out of the water down for Coast Guard inspection this past year, and the steel is as good

as new. So the care that both captains, the Bittners and the Bixlers have taken care of her, she's in great shape.

JENNIFER SHEA: Benson, Bix...

JUDY BIXLER: [00:19:27] Benson, Bixler, and Bittner.

[laughter]

JENNIFER SHEA: I guess it has to be a B name.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:19:33] You never know. I don't think that's a criteria. I think the criteria is that someone is going to love the boat and carry on the heritage that we've done. That's really the most important thing for us, especially since we're going to live here. We don't want to hear, "Oh, why did you sell it to them?" So. [laughter]

JENNIFER SHEA: Well, it sounds as if you've enhanced the heritage. Have you changed the boat at all?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:19:56] Not really, no, other than adding the museum posters and things. We had it inspected when they changed the weight for the average American; we had to have a stability test, and we now... It was, I think, 145 then and it went to 165 or something like that.

[both speaking-unclear]

JUDY BIXLER: [00:20:13] We've literally tested to 225, so we won't...we won't have to test again. Because, as I said, the more weight she has on it, the more sturdy she is. And there's just... When we did it we had to move all the

weight to one side of the boat to prove that it wouldn't be able to tip over; there was all kinds of things. But it's a very sturdy boat. People do not get seasick on the ferry. You don't even a lot of times know that you're moving, or, you know, there's very few times that we rock, unless we end up in someone's cross-wakes, and then we generally know how to maneuver around them and not have the boat wiggling around very much. And it's just a really fun job. I'm proud of the fact that I'm a woman doing this job. In the beginning it was very interesting to watch people, when I would climb the ladder, and it's like, "Where's the captain?" And so, you know, that was interesting. "A woman? You're going to be a woman driving this boat?" And occasionally I'd have a female crew member as well, so then we're really a woman's boat. I remember Valerie Bittner was on board with me one day; Tom was getting off. I was coming on the boat, she was actually riding with us. And a gentleman said, "Well, where's the captain going? Who's going to run this boat?" And she put her arms up, and she said, "I'll have you know you have two women captains right here." [laughter] So it's...

JENNIFER SHEA: And how did he react?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:21:37] He just kind of shook his head, but when we got to the other side he said, "You know, you did

all right for a girl." [laughter] So it's usually an older gentleman that just isn't used to the fact. But I think in the 22 years that I've been here now, that's gone away a lot more. Occasionally someone will say... I think it's more of the women that come aboard get excited that it's a woman captain. They're thrilled at the fact that it's a woman captain. They're not sort of worrying that it's a woman captain. There was an article written by Bill Dial about the ferry, and he described it as, when I drive the ferry, it's like a butterfly approaching a flower, and when the guys drive it they kind of come ramming on in, so. [laughter] I tend to come a little slower; that's just my style. But I feel a lot more confident over the years in running the boat, so I don't have that feeling that I don't know which end of an oar to hold onto anymore. And I'm really thrilled to be part of this Her Helm project. I think the fact of the number of women that are captains and have some amazing jobs and have amazing careers, it's really, it's an honor to be part of that group. Obviously my job is different than most of them, but still, we're, it's exciting to be part of this group. I'm looking forward to the inaugural evening when we all get together and get to meet each other, because I think that will be, you know, pretty exciting.

JENNIFER SHEA: I agree.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:23:05] I do know some of them, just because of, you know, our job's on the water. Iris Clark [sic], who actually came from Shelter Island, the vessel that she runs came from Shelter Island, so there's that Shelter Island connection, the island, the ferries connection there. And...

JENNIFER SHEA: Which ferry did you work on at Shelter Island?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:23:27] Actually both.

JENNIFER SHEA: Both of them.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:23:28] Both the north and the south, mm-hmm.

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah. That's very interesting.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:23:32] So, and there it's an island. You literally have... There are no bridges. You have to take a ferry to get to the island.

[both speaking-unclear]

JUDY BIXLER: [00:23:39] So yes, I worked on both sides. And I was actually sitting in the office at the north ferry when Dave Bittner called and said, were we still interested? So that was kind of another fun thing. But there's lots of stories that we've, things we've done. We've had some real fun with the ferry. We had a ferry boat race back in 2007. We raced with the paddle wheelers from Suicide Bridge. We raised over \$40,000 for charity. It was a great day; we

had a lot of fun. We just had bad intel. They could go a lot faster than we could. We should have done a real ferry thing and not had to turn around, but we should have come backwards and they had to turn around. Then we would have won. [laughter] We didn't think of that ahead of time.

JENNIFER SHEA: Where was it?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:24:22] Right on the... Right on the river.

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:24:24] Right on the river. We got permission from the Coast Guard... I don't think they realized how crazy it was going to end up. We had visiting boats from everywhere; they were... Each vessel had a large number of folks aboard, and then there was luncheon aboard the two paddle wheelers, and then we had the... Those that were on the ferry had lunch at the yacht club, and then we had an auction of some artwork and some other fun things in the yacht club after, so we had a party there. And we raised a tremendous amount of money for charity by doing that, even after paying all the bills. So that was really, really fun.

JENNIFER SHEA: That's terrific.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:24:58] A lot of people have wanted us to do it again. You just... You never can do something like that again. It's never going to be the same. I remember

that morning we woke up in the... I was running the ferry because we had to keep going with our transportation, and it was rainy, and we just thought, oh, gosh. But it turned out to be fine, so.

JENNIFER SHEA: So what does it take to captain a ferry? What are some of the skills that you need to do that?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:25:27] Well, it's...

JENNIFER SHEA: I was... I was fortunate enough to go out with you and watch, but I just sort of... It's wonderful watching you, but what do you think it takes?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:25:36] I think you... I mean, you have to understand currents and tides, and you have to be aware. You have to have good perception, and you can't... You have to... Because you're not only just driving the ferry, you also have to pay attention to what's happening on deck. You have to pay attention to your crew and what they're doing. You have to pay attention to the other boats and things on the river. I mean, we've come upon logs that are floating down the river, you know, so you have... it's just not just basically driving across the river. It takes a certain amount of skill because of the fact that we are this two-engined vessel that we're actually running one vessel in forward and one idling in reverse going across the river. So it's a concept that takes a lot of getting

used to; it's not a typical boat in that regard. You also have to remember that you're 65 feet long. So I know one time when my husband and I were riding on a tandem bike, he kind of made the corner, and I was like, whoa, I don't want to [laughter] have to hit that telephone pole. You have to make a wide curve. So you have to think about that as well, and make sure that when you're coming around you're not coming around with something behind you, you know, that's going to get in your way. We go out with the log canoes, which is always a great adventure, and many times we'll get in amongst them. And we try to give them the best way that we can; we try to stand still. Many years ago, I'll never forget, we had the little Optis sailing behind us, we had the canoes in front of us and around us, we had two other classes on either side, and all of a sudden there we were. We couldn't back up to help anybody, we couldn't go forward to help anybody. We just kind of had to stop and hold on and everybody had to adjust and go where they were going. So sometimes Tom likes to say it's seven or eight minutes of great fun running across the river and a few minutes of sheer terror as you come in and have to stop [laughter] at the dock. And make sure that people are paying attention, because we don't normally bump into things, but certain currents and things, there's not

much you can do about it. So we have a slip that's set up to be able to bump into it; that's what ferries do. But we try to glide in as best we can, so.

JENNIFER SHEA: But I do like that, it's seven minutes of gliding and two minutes of terror. And I've heard that from a lot of people, by the way, that one of the biggest challenges for being a captain is docking.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:28:00] It is. Oh, it really is. You know, you just... But you can't let your guard down. You can't think that that's the only time you can pay attention. You know, you really have to be paying attention all the time. And I think that's something that people tend to forget; we find many captains on the river who forget that.

[laughter] Especially those that are... The gallery watching the canoe races can be more trouble than the canoes. I love to watch the canoes, they're phenomenal, but it's really the gallery that's traveling along behind them that's paying attention to what's going on just with the one boat they're paying attention to, versus all of the boats that are around them. We do something fun: we take our crew and friends out on the Fourth of July to watch the fireworks. We actually take it out on the river, and we get under the fireworks kind of and we watch it from there. It's a phenomenal thing. We do it in honor of a good

friend who had lymphoma who couldn't watch the fireworks anymore, and we took... The first year we took him out and we brought his car on the boat, and we took him out so that he could see the fireworks. And it's become a tradition that we've done every year since, so that's kind of a special event we do. But it's not something that we sell to anybody else. It's a true thank-you to our crews and some of our friends to be able to go out with us. So, and we do other fun things. We're typically a nine-car ferry, although not nine Suburbans, because we can't sort them out with the, it's not set up for nine really wide, big cars. But we had 18 Mini Coopers aboard. What was a challenge, though, was a few years ago, I guess a bunch of years ago now, when there were a number of Mini Coopers in Oxford, they got talking about... Back when Captain Bill had the ferry, it was a three... He had extended it to a three-car ferry, and he was able to get five Volkswagen Bugs aboard. So the talk was, how many Mini Coopers could we get on board? So there was all this conversation, and so of course we decided, well, why not? We'll give it a try. So one Sunday morning before we opened up we had many of the Mini Coopers in town, and they'd invited friends, so we had a bunch of them all lined up ready to get on. The fire truck came down with a ladder so they could take pictures

from above, and it was really a big event in Oxford. And so it ended up that we were able to get four lanes of traffic instead of three, so we had four lanes of Mini Coopers, and the last two we actually backed in on an angle so that we could get the 16... There were 16 aboard, and we got it so we could get the 18. And ironically, there was a gentleman, a family who'd come in from the Carolinas somewhere. They were in a Mini Cooper and they had stopped at the store and they were going to come down for our nine o'clock opening. But Chris at the store said to them, "Oh, hurry up, you've got to get to the ferry, you're going to miss it. Hurry, hurry." So they came racing down, they didn't know what was going on, and they were the 19th. We had to keep them on the ramp. [laughter] But we took a picture with them on the ramp. So we've done really fun things like that. We've had tall ships in town and we've entertained them. We have...Reverend Cross from the Holy Trinity Church blesses the ferry every year, and that's like a party. Everybody in Oxford kind of gathers, it's kind of the beginning of the season. We do it the night before we open, and we generally open around Oxford Day, which is a big event in town... Again, another step back in time. An old-fashioned parade and, you know, family

weekend kind of a thing. So there's lots of adventures that have gone on on the ferry.

JENNIFER SHEA: How did you become interested in boating? How did you... What was... How did you learn, who inspired you?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:31:38] It really... Because of the ferry. With Tom saying that someday when he retired, that's what he wanted to do. We lived on... We had a summer home on a lake in the Adirondacks, and I ran the ski boat and we had paddle boats and little small sailboats and things like that, and so I got involved because of my husband, really. I was a redhead growing up, so I hid from the sun. It was back before there were real sunscreens that could protect you from anything, so, I mean, we went on a sailboat for her honeymoon. Which was great, except that when I would go in the water, I had to wear long pants and a long-sleeved shirt, because I would get fried when we were snorkeling. So he's... He was a captain for the America's Cup races back in 1974, which was the year we got married; we were going to get married that summer. We put it off until the fall so that Tom could be a captain aboard *Yachting Magazine's* boat.

JENNIFER SHEA: Which boat was that?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:32:30] *Tanagra*, that was her name. It was not the cup, the boats itself, it was a press boat. And Bill Robinson and his wife became good friends. He actually literally wore Tom's jacket and topsiders to start the Bermuda race one year because his were so ratty. [laughter] He took Tom's. So we had... But we've had connections with boating and yachting for a long time, but as far as my being a captain, it really was the ferry, so that's why I consider it my ferry tale.

JENNIFER SHEA: I think it's wonderful. Do you have other boats?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:33:06] We do. We lived on a sailboat for four years before we actually bought the ferry, when we were looking to find something to do. So we sold that when we came here, because we just don't have enough time to really use a boat that often. I mean, our time is spent on the ferry during boating season here. So we have a small whaler that we use with two other gentlemen, and we own it together; it's kind of like this fun boat to be able to do things with. We had numerous other boats: a Parker, a Shamrock. Now we have a little bass boat that we just bought that, it's a Downeast, Maine sort of little vessel that we can creek crawl and just go out and have fun with, and we're looking forward to doing some of that. We had an old... we had an early 1960s Chris-Craft, a wooden boat on

our lake up at the north, in the Adirondacks. We restored with a couple of other folks another boat called *Driftwood* that was a bigger, a boat that we used to use for just going out and creek-crawling and having fun, cocktail cruises. So we've had a number of boats over the years. But as far as really considering being a captain, I never thought of myself as the captain. I was at the helm, but I did not really think of myself as a captain of a vessel until I really started running the ferry, and then, you know, that's when I felt like I became a captain, so.

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah. So, so what does it take to become a captain? Hmm.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:34:38] It's... There's a lot of work to it. You have to... There's an exam you have to pass with the Coast Guard. You have to know the rules of the road, you have to know lighting, you have to know charts, you have to be able to work with a chart to know how to navigate, you have... There's fire, there's, you know, fire prevention. There's all... There's many, many facets to it. *Chapman's* you have to basically know from cover to cover, in essence. I took a course with certified Coast Guard people that helped me to be able to sort all that out; Tom worked with me in order to learn a lot of things. But at the time that I was studying all of that, I had just, we had lived on our

sailboats. So you really learn the rules of the road by doing. And we followed the sun, we went up and down the East Coast and into the Bahamas and that sort of thing on our sailboat. So...

JENNIFER SHEA: What kind of boat did you have?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:35:32] We had a Nauticat sailboat. It basically was a vessel that was built for the North Seas. She was 38 feet long, and we lived aboard that. And we followed the sun; we spent the summers in either... we were on Shelter Island, we were in Nantucket, we kind of did that sort of a route, and then we would go south, and we actually had a "boatel" where we had a slip in Jupiter, Florida for a period of time, but then we would sail around from there. We went up and down the Intercoastal numerous times. Took my mother-in-law, who was in her eighties as we were taking her back and forth, so that was kind of fun, having her as a passenger. And she'd... My husband had grown up... They had a boat, a 50-foot Elco that they lived aboard as a summer house. So he'd been boating since he was a young...

JENNIFER SHEA: Where was that?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:36:29] Shelter Island, Long Island, you know, Mystic, they spent time in Mystic. And we looked at a vessel, a sailboat in Mystic to buy, but we really wanted a

ferry. And so it worked out, that we were able to have the ferry.

JENNIFER SHEA: So why did he want a ferry so much?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:36:46] He was a ferryboat captain on Shelter Island from the time he was 18.

JENNIFER SHEA: Oh, okay, got it.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:36:49] And it was, as he said, it was a great thing, he got to see all the women coming on the ferry. Girls, at that point, coming on the ferry. [laughter] And it was pretty prestigious to be a captain at that young age. I mean, he was 18 years old and in college, and that was what he did for the summers. He made more money in the summer than most kids, you know, even thought about making. And then he would come home in January, because at St. Lawrence, we had a 4-1-4 program, and January was a time that we had off, basically. You could study, doing something else. Actually, that was what... That was the course that he took that freshman year, was to get his captain's license. So he literally studied for his captain's license our freshman year in college. So it's... That's really what brought the whole idea of the ferry into the picture.

JENNIFER SHEA: It is a real ferry story.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:37:38] It is. It is.

JENNIFER SHEA: It's just wonderful. So what's next on your boating agenda?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:37:44] I think we're just going to kind of enjoy, you know, life, when we don't have the ferry. I have three children. I have two twin boys that live in New Jersey, and they each have two children, so I have four grandchildren. My daughter is currently in Ireland; she is a pharmacist. She's working with Walgreens on a special project over there, so she'll be there for another year. So I'm hoping to be able to spend some time traveling with her in Europe. She's been going all kinds of places so far. We spent last Christmas there for about a month when the ferry was shut down, so we're looking forward to going back and spending some time with her. We've been on cruises, you know, like, some of the smaller biking-type vessels, and gone places. We did the Danube one year with the whole family, which was really fun, except it was Christmastime so it was very cold. And I'm not sure exactly. We bought this little boat to be able to just have fun. That's our plan right now. There's always friends and family who have boats that you can go out in various places. This little boat that we have now, we can trailer, so we may take it up to some of the lakes in the Adirondacks and just do some more fun poking around in

those; we haven't had that much opportunity to do it in the last 20 years, so those areas have changed, and that's... We have a hunting lodge up there, still.

JENNIFER SHEA: Where?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:39:06] In a town called South Coulton. It's south of... kind of between Lake Placid and Potsdam and Canton, where we lived. So, you know, we have friends that still live in that area, and we'll go up and spend some time there. Tom goes up every year to go hunting with, and it's become a tradition. My dad went, his uncle, my boys go, and now our grandsons go, so it's a special place, and we use it as a family in the off-season. It's just, they have a rule, no women in camp during the hunting season, and I think that that was more set up so that some of the younger guys didn't bring home whatever. [laughter] So that's kind of been the tradition, and we've had that since 1984, so.

JENNIFER SHEA: Wow.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:39:49] You know, we tend to do things, stick with them for a long time. We don't tend to change things all the time.

JENNIFER SHEA: Well, you've had boating experience, because... From the upstate New York, which, I know Ontario and the Finger Lakes for sailing. And then down here and then up

and down the East Coast. What do you think makes the Chesapeake special as a place to sail boats?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:40:14] A lot of it is just the... I think the allure comes from the lifestyle. It's laid back. People are not generally in a rush. I think there's so much to offer, between the crabs, the oysters, the rockfish, the... Just being able... Talbot County has 700 miles of shoreline in our little county. So you cannot possibly see all of that by land. So being able to go up in all these little creeks and see what's going on and observe the wildlife and... I just think that it's, there's something very special about the Chesapeake. It's brackish water, so we have the advantage of all kinds of things. And I think that the small towns all along have, they all have their own character, which I think is also very interesting. There's something special about each little town, and that's why we like to say, in Talbot County, I mean, we have Oxford and Easton and St. Michael's and Trappe and Wye Mills and... There's so many... Each one has its own little particular...

JENNIFER SHEA: Old Claiborne.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:41:27] Claiborne yeah... Bozman, Neavitt, there's many little towns, but it's just, there's so many interesting aspects to each little town. And I don't feel

you can get a real feel for our little community, our county, unless you go to all those places. And I think that that's true of the whole Chesapeake by its... All along, there... Each one is different. You've got Chestertown, you've got the western shore. There's... And we're also three states. You know, it's just, there's so much here that... And there's so much history. I took a course in storytelling, which has also really been fun for me, through the tourism and the Parks Service, and so I am a certified storyteller.

JENNIFER SHEA: Oh.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:42:13] Certified Chesapeake storyteller. So we learned a lot about the history of the Chesapeake. So it goes all the way back to Captain, you know, John Smith and even before. We studied some of the Indigenous people and what they did. And there's the naval history. The history of the various wars that went on, you know, in the area. There's just, there's so many things. You know, we've got the Naval Academy. We have... The Chesapeake has so many possibilities of things to do and see that... And the boating history is incredible. It really is. I mean, all the way back to the dugout canoes and the ships that came from Europe, and we have a customs house right here in Oxford where they used to collect the stamps,

because that was the first port coming into Oxford. And there's just... you know, it... Oxford was a booming community at times. I mean, the ships were here, the international commerce that went on in our little community... And now we have 700 folks who live here, and of those, probably only about 300 are full-time. So I often say we have more boats in town than people. But the Chesapeake is a really special place, and until you really experience it, I don't think you can put it into words. And I don't think words do it justice. It's... It's an experience.

JENNIFER SHEA: So what advice do you have to pass along to other young women who are contemplating becoming captain of a boat?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:43:53] Don't be afraid. We are a minority, but it's becoming more acceptable to see women on the water in various jobs. We have a young woman that's here who's a bay pilot up in the Delaware Bay. You know, there's so many possibilities. The ferry is a small one. There aren't very many ferries that are privately owned. But I think that you just... If you have a love of the water and have the ability to get a license, it's well worth it. Even if you don't have a license, just being able to be on the water. Take a course in women learning to sail. You

know, there's so many opportunities around here between various communities of what they have to offer. And even if it's just going on to kayak, paddleboarding, you know, get out on the water, enjoy it, and most of all, don't let the fact that you're a woman hold you back. My whole life I've done things that... Science and math were my forte, so I did things that most women didn't get involved in. I was in the computer industry when there were very few women doing that sort of thing, and then I was running a car dealership. So I've always sort of taken the path less traveled to figure out where it'll take me. I don't like to take a path that brings me back to where I started. I don't mind going back and visiting or doing whatever, but I don't want to end up in the same... Just in a circle. I feel like there's just so much out there in our world that it's important to have faith in yourself and give it a try. You're not going to succeed at everything, but we learn from our failures. I think that's another really important lesson: don't be afraid, try it. I just... I was on the ferry when there was a waterspout one time, you know, in the area. So people were like, "Can't we go now?" It's like, "No, we're going to stay right here, and when that waterspout goes on by we'll go across the river." It's not something that you want to have happen, but the storms come

into the Chesapeake in a hurry. Luckily it didn't come super close to us, but it did come up Island Creek, so it was close enough. So you just never know what's going to be happening on the water. You have to keep your wits about you. I think that's the most important thing. You cannot allow yourself to panic. You really need to stop and think and be in charge. You know, and you have to make sure that people pay attention to you, so that the safety of being on the water is there. You can't be a wilted flower. You have to be that sturdy sunflower that stands right out there and is noticed. I guess that's my best advice, is that... Just never feel that you can't do something. I mean, I remember growing up, my mom always said, "There's no such word as 'can't.'" You know, you can do it if you try. You may not do it perfectly, but that's okay. I really think that's an important lesson for anybody, male or female. Give it a try. Don't be afraid to not succeed. You may not succeed the first time; you may have to try, try again, as they say. But I do think that there are so many possibilities that are open to us. I don't like to see people get stuck in a rut and just not do anything else. I'm looking forward to retirement. I'll probably be busier than I am now...

JENNIFER SHEA: I believe it.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:47:35] Just because there are so many things that I can do. I mean, I volunteer now at so many organizations and things that, you know, it's...

JENNIFER SHEA: Do you think there's anything special you're going to try to do?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:47:46] I don't think there's anything in particular right now. I really want to be able to spend time with my family. Tom and I will be celebrating our 50th anniversary next year, so...

JENNIFER SHEA: Congratulations.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:47:56] That's one of the... That's one of the fun things. I say we've gotten to the point now where we can speak for each other; it's kind of scary.

[laughter] We think alike. But that's important to us.

I'd like to travel, just to explore some other parts of the world. It's actually been fun, when I have done some traveling and have gotten aboard a ferry, and, you know, when you talk to the other ferry captains, it's, they're intrigued by the fact that, you know, I have my license. And I often get a look from the others that are on those ferries, like, "How did she get up there?" Because they'll invite you into the pilot house. And so it's its own little club, in a way, but it's always intriguing to have that happen. It's interesting to visit ferries and go on

ferries in other parts of the country, and the world.

They're all so different.

JENNIFER SHEA: They're all so different.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:48:44] All so different.

JENNIFER SHEA: Yeah.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:48:45] We had a captain who has now gone on to being a pilot in the Puget Sound. He was here for a while, he was a... He has his, I don't know, unlimited Master's, young man and loved being on the ferry when he wasn't off on a ship somewhere, and then he had a family and has decided that he really wanted to stay closer to home, so they ended up relocating to Puget Sound. But they lived in Oxford, and he loved to be on the ferry. There's something... There's an allure to being on something like the Talbot, the *Oxford-Bellevue Ferry*, just because of the history, the atmosphere, the place that we live, and it's... I can't describe this area enough as being just so special. You know, we've traveled many, many places, but I have to say, it's always good to come back to the eastern shore. It really is. So...

JENNIFER SHEA: Well, I only have two more questions, because you're such a good storyteller. You keep answering my questions before I even ask them. You made it so easy.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:49:53] Well, that's good. [laughter]

JENNIFER SHEA: But I guess I wanted to say... Just sort of this legacy question, which is, you know, what do you want future generations to think about you? What... You're Captain Judy of the Oxford ferry, the Bellevue ferry?

JUDY BIXLER: [00:50:13] I think, I mean, I hope that I have the reputation of being friendly, helpful. I try to be as optimistic as possible, and I hope that that comes across. I think... I mean, I have a special place in my heart for children. I love to be with little people. You know, my husband laughs at me because I get on the floor and play with my grandchildren. It's just... I don't know. I hope that I have been remembered as being a good person and being able to wear many hats and do many things. And, you know, the ferry is an important part of what I've done, but more important is the person that I am, not because of the ferry but just because of what I try to do. I feel that being helpful, looking out for others... I guess it's a fault of mine that I put myself at the back and I try to look after others first, but I think it's done wonderful things for me over the years, and I don't regret that. My parents always taught me that, that, you know, you help when you can. And they were very unassuming. They never tooted their own horn, and I try not to do that. Even in telling my ferry tale, I'm not trying to say that it's all

about me; I don't feel it is. I just think that everybody has a place, and I like to treat everyone equally. I think that's another really important aspect. And I think I've done that, and I want to continue to do that. That's important to me. I don't feel I'm any better than somebody who has a very menial job somewhere. That job is not really menial. It's considered that per bid, but that job is important. Every single person has something that's good about them and something they've done, and I think that's the most important part. [phone rings]

JENNIFER SHEA: We talked about mentor, so go ahead.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:52:22] When it comes to the ferry, I think my mentor was my husband. You know, he had his license for so much longer than I did. He taught me how to run this ferry. He taught me many things about boating. But growing up, I think my parents really influenced my life more than anyone. I had some fabulous teachers growing up, but my parents just, they always saw the bright side in someone. They always tried to teach us, there's no such word as "can't." That you have to be strong and be your own person; you don't have to be anybody else. You don't need to follow anybody else. They taught me to be a leader, and I think that's, you know... And my husband did that with the boating. He taught me to get out there, not

to be afraid of it, because I really didn't have experience. And when you get behind the wheel of a 30-foot-wide vessel and 65 feet long, it's an awesome experience. [laughter] And an awesome responsibility. But I think I've worked hard to try to make sure that I was fulfilling all of the things that I needed to do. So I'm proud to be a lady on the water. I'm proud to be in Her Helm. I'm proud to be a mom, a grandmom, and a wife.

JENNIFER SHEA: Thank you very, very, very, very much.

JUDY BIXLER: [00:53:41] You're welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE