Interview with Margaret from Davis, North Carolina. Margaret works at a museum.

Q.1.: Connection to Down East

Nancy: How long has your family lived Down East?

Margaret: We have lived Down East since about 1735 in Davis. Both of my parents are Davis’s from Davis. I am Davis. So basically I am a Davis Shoreman from way, way back. This is where my roots are. This is to me the most beautiful place on earth. I have experienced other places, and they were incomparable to Down East, Core Sound. We have our own sort of language and values systems and just the beauty of the area that I think is not found in a whole lot of other places.

Nancy: What do you like about living here?

Margaret: Every day you can get up and look at Core Sound. That’s probably the top of the list. I can drive across the bridge and see the lighthouse blinking. That gives me a lot of hope. And if I go up to a store anywhere pretty much here I can listen to other people that sound like I do. And think about where they came from and you know they are definitely a part of why this place is special. You can drive around every day and look at the architecture of the place and the coastal shotgun type of architecture that were set up a certain way to take advantage of the winds and what not. You know, to help them out when you didn’t have the amenities that we do now. Those certain things, those are things you see every day. But number one is you get out of bed, and say “good lord, what did I do to deserve all of this?”

Q.2.: Connection to Down East natural environment

Nancy: Tell me about your connection to the natural environment Down East.

Margaret: I do love to go clamming and stuff but I never have the chance anymore I am sorry to say. The last time I went fishing was with NCCAT- the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching has a outpost or one of their centers was in Ocracoke. So I was there last year doing the commercial fishing seminar for Carteret Catch. But I got to go fishing. We set gill nets and crab pots. And we caught some Spanish mackerel, some pretty blue fish, a shark one day. And they were like “oh my God we have never seen sharks here.” But they did on that day. Caught some crabs and what happens is the teachers all pull the nets. The fishermen set the nets and the teachers pull the nets and clear them and all of that and then we get to the dock, they learn how to clean the fish and then we cook ‘em supper. So it’s like from the water to the table.

Nancy: Are there people in your family that commercially fish?

Margaret: My husband has, I have, my son has. My father did when he was young but he is a mechanical engineer so he didn’t fish for a career. His father did. His father was also a carpenter and a freight boat captain and hunter and all of that. My dad still hunts and fishes and all that he just doesn’t do it for a living. I was fishing mostly for shrimp but also for fin fish, gill net fish, and I have clammed – mechanical harvest of clams. I love the fishing business actually, and I continue to advocate for the fishing business now. So, I remain connected to that industry.

Nancy: What kind of future is there for the fishing industry in DE?

Margaret: Well I think there are always going to be people fishing for a living as long as rules allow us to do it. And we can find markets to sell fish. We probably have more fisheries available to us than just about anywhere with certain exceptions but we have access to many different fisheries. On shore, off-shore, inshore, shellfish, finfish, all sorts of things that we can do to make money out of. It’s going to depend on the public a little bit if that’s something they want, North Carolinians are going to have to decide that this is what we want. I think a lot of fishing, almost all fishing now is sustainable. There are people that don’t understand the regulations involved in seafood. There are a lot of misunderstanding out there but even though its contracting now and fish houses and different things are contracted, I still have hope that yes there will be fishing going on in the future, definitely.

Nancy: What would help people stay in the industry?

Margaret: Well I am the president of a group called Carteret Catch that is a group that came together with a lot of different types of people that all have the same vision of seeing the industry continue. So this is sort of an educational effort and a marketing effort to a degree to try to get the message of local seafood out there to the public. But these efforts are sprouting up now up and down the coast. Dare, Brunswick, over in Ocracoke and Hyde County. We also have an offshoot over in Queensland Australia. There are some of us out there that are looking for ways to try to help the industry and I am not just talking about the commercial fishermen. But we are concerned with from the water to the table- the consumers of seafood that are left out of the equation. That includes the fishermen, the wholesalers, the retailers, the restaurants and the consumer. So, I think that’s an effort that’s worthwhile and I think it is going to help somehow if the fishermen could have more interaction with the public. We helped sponsor a seafood cooking tent at the NC Seafood Fest.

We have to be sustainable as any fisherman knows. It’s frustrating because fishermen are perceived as people that are the cowboys that go out there and catch everything. And that’s a total fabrication, and the fishermen just get frustrated because they are out there to make a living. They are bringing food to the table of everybody who lives in the country. Because it’s everybody’s fish. It’s not mine or yours or anybody else’s. It’s a public trust resource.

Q.3.: Professional perspective on Down East

Nancy: Do you thinking working at the museum has given you a particular perspective on Down East?

Margaret: I think it has. I have thought more about living here. I have taken less for granted. I have learned to value what people do here more. But, yeah I have definitely gained a lot more depth in my perception of why I do value this place. There are a lot of things you can do here that you can’t anywhere else, especially coastal places. We have people who built aircraft before there were other similar devices flown. We’ve had people who have built telephones from scratch. I mean these people are very innovative and you know, of course we still have a commercial fishing industry which a lot of other places have lost and have ceased to value the way they should. We still have that and that’s still something a lot of other coastal places don’t have. I think about the value of those things.

Q.4.: Community and environmental change

Nancy: What kind of changes have you seen Down East- in Davis or in general?

Margaret: I’d say that Davis is pretty flexible; there has been no person that has come in like they have come in the Island or in Sea Level and said we are going to build a development here. That may have a bearing on things. Davis, size-wise, there’s not a lot of land available for that sort of thing anyway. And people who come generally buy older houses and don’t tear them down.

We have some people that moved in who I guess were developers from Wilmington, but they found Davis. They had done some things on Harkers Island, but they found and love Davis and they took an old store, Johnny’s store and made it into Davis Shore Provision and they have porches. The integrity of the store was kept. If you walk in there and if you grew up there like I did, and you walk in there, it’s still Johnny’s store. They have a sign that says Johnny’s store. They put porches that wrap all the way around. They have singing there on Saturday nights.

That’s not the case in some of these other communities. We who live here know about flooding and some of the places that they propose to put these developments, these multi-unit places, are not suitable for it. Particularly Sea Level where they were projecting to put down there. Which I know during Hurricane Isabel, probably had 4 foot water at least on it. There is no infrastructure down here for such things. There are no ladder trucks down here. If you build over x amount of stories, there are no ladder trucks.

There’s no zoning down here and the people down here don’t want to be told what to do because that’s how we’ve grown up—especially if you’ve been involved in the fishing business and you have all types of people telling you what to do. I think there’s a lot of resentment towards that. But, I also know that people have to have a place to live and I do know that we want the population to not become a retirement population. I think a healthy population involves all ages to sustain the basic population. And I want that population to be comprised of Down East people like me in addition to other people that may be more well off. I am sure you weren’t unfamiliar with the movement that sort of perpetuated this project in a way. I am talking about the Down East moratorium and the things that happened around that, which was very eye opening and a good thing to happen.

Nancy: Can you talk a little bit about how that process got started?

Margaret: Basically, there were concerned people because of a marina that had been proposed here on the island. They wanted to dredge the shellfish bottom to put in this marina. And the law says that you’re not supposed to do that. It’s a naturally occurring shellfish bed and you are not supposed to dredge. But money talks and that’s it. And so a friend of mine became involved in that thing and she got involved with the Coastal Federation at that time and that project was stopped because the Carteret County land use plan that said you will not dredge the valued shellfish bottom. And that’s what sort of awakened some of us to it. After that we became aware of the fact there was a big development plan for Sea Level-actually it said Sea Level but it was in Stacy. They wanted to cut in a marina there and put a clubhouse and all of that. There’s also the whole storm water thing. Which… storm water across the state more and more and more is causing a lot of shellfish closures. And it’s always the prime shellfish waters that get closed, because shellfish occur next to the shore. There’s a reason why Core Sound is one of the highest producing water bodies in North Carolina is because there’s isn’t that much development. And so you know, I just, for those reasons gravitated toward the people who wound up forming the core of that movement which of course widened out to whole big span of people. The same thing happened with Down East Tomorrow and maybe to an even greater extent. I was not at the forefront of that by no means but I tried to do what I could.

Q.5.: Vision for the future of Down East

Nancy: Do you have a vision for the future of Down East if you could have it the way you wanted?

Margaret: I wouldn’t want it to change too much. We need growth, but it doesn’t need to happen in the marsh. It doesn’t need to happen where it’s going to affect water quality. The homes here on the island that have for sale signs on them should be used first. And I think that they should retain the character of what they are so they look like something when you get here.

I think that if I had my way about it, the commercial industry would have protection in place where we could not get kicked out of the harbors, the county harbors which are really what we’ve got now that we need to hold on to. There have been movements afoot for years that are trying to get fishermen out of county harbors. And I would like to see county harbors stay.

I’d like to see the Scenic Byway come to fruition so that others could experience the good things about Down East and the people that are here. Because I think that’s how we are going to decide what we want instead of laying back and letting decisions happen to you. I think that some rules will have to be in place to let that happen, and the only thing that has saved us has been the bottoming out of the housing market. We would get weekly updates on what was being submitted to the planning committee; it would make your jaw drop open. Now all of these small ones that they were sticking here and there, one or two in Gloucester, these little places that they just stick in there with just 6 or 8 houses. There’s nobody in them. No housing going up there. Which I find a little bit amusing.

If I had my way, I would make sure that our young people would have a place if they wanted to come back here and live. And it wouldn’t be all of those 3 story houses that they are putting up around here. And so I would have ‘em a decent place to live and a good school where they could raise children.