

Interview with Maria and Daniel on January 20th, 2009 in Davis, North Carolina. Maria and Daniel are store owners; Daniel is also a general contractor.

Q.1. Connection to Down East

Elizabeth

You said you just moved to Down East?

Maria

Well, we had a place at Harkers Island for four years. We were in Wilmington for 17 years in building and things there, and just got an opportunity to buy a place at Harkers Island to get away from the crowds and all the development stuff that was going on in Wilmington and fell in love with it and got involved with the church here in Davis, right behind the store. And I just fell in love with this area and just kind felt that we were being called here for a purpose. Daniel decided one night we were gonna move here from Wilmington, so that's what we did, and we've been here since last December. We've been here a year now full-time.

Elizabeth

So did it start off as a summer home?

Maria

Yeah. Well, or a weekend-type. We're from off.

Elizabeth

All right. So what is it about Down East specifically that keeps you staying here?

Maria

It's a lot more laid back than Wilmington. We don't have the headaches of traffic. That's the wonderful thing. *(Laughter)* There is a big family cohesiveness down here that I don't see in a lot of areas.

Daniel

The people. Normally, you're dealing with genuine, real people.

Q.2. Connection to Down East natural environment

Elizabeth

Are there things you particularly like/value about the environment here?

Daniel

I mean, look around. When y'all came through the marshes – have you all been to Atlantic? Y'all been to Cape Lookout? All you gotta do is go to Cape Lookout. There was a gentleman in here three or four months ago, he said, "You know, the Lord works all over the world, but he lives at Cape Lookout."

Elizabeth

So are there any particular places, aside from maybe the church and the store, that are important to you?

Daniel

The whole area.

Maria

Especially the waters. I mean, we both like to fish, and I'm a big sheller. When you live down here and you see people trash – you know, I just can't stand trash blowing, 'cause I know what it can do to the animals. You know, when you're out on the boat or down to Atlantic and watch some of your peers come in and bring dolphins that swallowed a big plastic bag. You know, you don't realize those little things and how important it is to keep these waters and shores – and the roads; they don't realize what you throw out on the road's gonna blow and get into the water.

Daniel

It's gonna end up in the sound eventually. Everything ends up in the water. And I'm not a tree hugger and I'm not an environmentalist, but this is a very fragile area and it can only take so much contamination, so to speak. It can only take so much.

Q.3. Professional perspective on Down East

Elizabeth

What have you learned/observed about Down East from having opened a store here?

Maria

It's just different in a small community. The people can't wait to come and be here, are supportive of you, where in other areas it may be you're picking up tourists. Here, our focus was our locals. You know, the tourists come, that's wonderful; that's kind of our gravy, so to speak. But we've really focused the store on the tourist being secondary and trying to fit in and being a part of the community, not come in and try to take it over and make it different. And I

think that's why we're so successful, because of our local support. It has been truly wonderful to watch how God has blessed this place.

Daniel

We have some of the best people that worked for us. They're all local people.

Maria

You know, a lot of people like to just come in and talk to you, and you like – and that's the fun part that I didn't know about sales. That's kind of secondary. You create the relationship with the people in your community and you prove that you're not just here for the money; you're willing to give back, you're very interested in 'em, like we are. You know, we come and go to church here. We did that before we even bought the store.

Q.4. Community and environmental change

Elizabeth

During the time that you have lived Down East, have you seen the area change? If so, what are the main changes that you have seen?

Daniel

The economy has stopped the changes down here. There was a lot of proposed development in 2005, four years ago. There was a lot of – people were coming down here and trying to develop different areas, and the economy has stopped most of that. There was a group down here called Down East Tomorrow that was very vocal and followed a lot of the new subdivisions or communities or whatever, but, basically, the economy took care of that. Now that will probably come back if the building comes back and property values come back up. They'll probably have to fight that battle again, but we won't get into all that.

But this is a very fragile area. In 2005 I probably would have been on the other side. Being down here and being in the area and talking to commercial fishermen and meeting commercial fishermen and just people from the area – this area is so fragile that it can't stand a lot of –

Maria

Development.

Daniel

The only way you could have it would be water and sewer, and you're not gonna get that. I mean, it costs too much to get water and sewer down here, and I don't think anybody wants it. If you took a vote from North River east, I don't think anybody would vote for water and sewer.

Most people are – they like it like it is, and as long as you use septic tanks and wells, there can only be so much.

And the rules on that change all the time and they get harder and harder and more stringent. In the new rules, most every house you see down here – I say most – if there wasn't a septic tank on that lot there never would be one, because it won't, what they call 'perk.' It won't work. Not that it won't work. It's that in the new rules you gotta have an area for the house, for the well, and then you gotta have 100 percent repair: you gotta have another area to do another system in case this one fails, and there's just not that many lots down here that will accommodate that. And that's not all bad.

Maria

The thing I see, as far as change since we've been down here – and, again, so much of this is it change – it's so much of the economy. You've seen people losing their jobs; you're seeing things close that you hate to see. I think you see a lot of the younger people leaving, and that's predominately probably because of jobs.

But I'm amazed that the people – now being in the store, we'll see people coming back in their retirement age and saying, "Well, we went away, but we're coming home now." They eventually come back, and there is just a draw here of the community that is special.

Elizabeth

A lot of people associate, I think, Down East with the fisheries as well. Have you noticed any change in the local fisheries?

Daniel

You count the fish houses. There's no fish houses left. There's one here. The last one's closed on Harkers Island, that I know of. I think there's one at Atlantic. The industry, like the building industry, is about gone, and whether that's from overfishing, pollution, I can't tell you. But these guys that I know that commercial fish, that do it for a living – you can think we make 80 and 90 hours a week here at the store – I don't know how many hours they make, and they're hard hours.

I think the biggest thing is the imports. The imports is killing 'em. All these foreign countries now are growing shrimp and they're bringing 'em in.

Q.5. Vision for the future of Down East

Elizabeth

So what is your vision for the future of Down East? What direction do you think it's gonna take, or is it – do you think they're pretty much gonna stay the same?

Daniel

I just don't see room for a lot of growth, so to speak, as far as commercial growth, because the area's so fragile it can only stand so much.

Change is gonna happen whether we want it to or not. There's gonna be some change, but I think it can kind of be controlled through – you know, you have regulations and things. And as builders sometimes we don't like those changes and we don't like regulations, but they're put there for a reason.

Q.6. Barriers to and opportunities for achieving your vision

Elizabeth

What do you see as the opportunities for or obstacles to achieving your vision?

Daniel

The one thing about Down East which is unusual to North Carolina or to about any town or area, county, there's no zoning down here. There's nothing that says you can't have – I mean, if you wanna have an art studio or a – basically, any kind of business you want you can put in your house as long as it doesn't take a lot of septic. So the area is unique because of that because most places are zoned what you can put in, what you can't put in, but when you come over the North River Bridge you can do anything you want to.

Elizabeth

If that changed and the government started to put regulatory measures or zoning measures on there, do you think people would support that?

Daniel

Not down here, no. I think that's been voted on in the area not long ago – vote yes for zoning or no for zoning – and I think it got beat to death, really. So, nobody down here wants to be told what they can do with their property. They don't wanna be told what they can do with their septic tank. They don't wanna be told anything that they can do. They're independent people and rightfully so.