Interviewer: Well, I want to thank you for agreeing to do this. The purpose of this, a little bit, is laid out there. We're really concerned at NOAA with equity and environmental justice. We are concerned that we don't do a good enough job reaching all people, whether directly or indirectly, tied to the fisheries. One of the things my father, who is an anthropologist – fishery anthropologist – taught me – he said, "If you only talk to fishermen, you're never going to get the total story" because you're going to get the story of fishing. But there's stories of survival. There's stories of adaptation. There's family histories of learning and lessons and how knowledge is shared in the past. So, some people often think, "Well, why would he want to talk to me about this?" Well, for me, one of the groups I think are often overlooked in fisheries is the role of women, the role that women play, whether you be an actual fisher person, a fisherman yourself, or if you're in a fishing family, or, like yourself, here you are involved in a governmental position, which in some ways, impacts the very people that you grew up with, like [Bryan] Bryson who was just sitting here. So, decisions you're a part of, or you make. Basically, what I'd like to do is I would like to know about you. I'd like to know about your story, fishing professionally and educationally. I'd like to know who you are, and I’d like, if you would, to share some of your thoughts, some of your stories, some of your concerns, and maybe some of your ideas for solutions of how we can better collaborate and we can better work to make a stronger likelihood of having a sustainable fishery.

Interviewee Interviewee: That's a big question.

Interviewer: It is, isn't it?

BB: And a really fun one.

Interviewer: Sorry.

BB: No, this is great. It warms my heart so much.

Interviewer: Please start with your name.

BB: Interviewee Interviewee.

Interviewer: Interviewee Interviewee. B-E-R-R-Y?

BB: Yes, and that is a family name here and a family name associated with food production, so not just fishing but also farming. Man, where to start? I'm the eldest of four. My father was a fisherman like his father before him, like his father before him.

Interviewer: When you say he was a fisherman, he was a commercial fisherman?

BB: Commercial fishing. My father started out doing seine fishing and transitioned to trap fishing, which included lobster. He made his own fish pots. Some of my pictures of my early childhood involved my dad making traps in the yard. We would have stuffed animals and stuff in them or sometimes be in them ourselves before they were fully crimped. We weren't actually put in fish pots. [laughter] I think that's a good place to start. Growing up, my parents were super poor. If they were friends of mine now who were having kids, I'd be like, "You can't afford them." So, fishing wasn't just the way of earning money but also how we ate at home. I'm sure people would be like, "This is ridiculous." But for my siblings and I, we actually hated lobster for a long time. Anyone who's from a fishing family knows when you have shellfish, and they start getting a little weak and they start dying, you need to eat them very quickly, or they go bad. We would have to eat all the lobster that did that, and it was awful. We didn't get anything else for dinner. There wasn't an alternative.

Interviewer: Just lobster.

BB: It was just lobster. You get really tired of it really fast.

Interviewer: You realize how ridiculous that sounds?

BB: I know. We would be like, "Oh, not lobster again."

Interviewer: “Not lobster again.”

BB: And it would be a whole tail each and just caught that day. It was really awful, though. [laughter] I know. We grew up eating a ton of fish. We didn't eat red meat at home. My mom would [say], "For health reasons." But honestly, we couldn't afford it. Then we also did farming. Oftentimes, a plate of food at my house – we did not go out to eat; we could not afford that – would be veggies from the garden. We eat a lot of collard greens, beets, all sorts of stuff from here, then a grain, and fish or lobster. That was a family of six. Dad was a really hands-on dad. It was really wonderful. He would take us fishing. We would go out with him on Sundays, usually, or early in the week on summer holidays. He fished Thursdays [and] Fridays, depending on the weather, and then sold in the market that his dad sold at, that his grandfather sold at, that his great-grandfather sold at on Saturday mornings. And then he started bringing us. So, it was really fun. We got to go down to Market Square at three o’clock in the morning. He would sell bush, fruits, and vegetables from the garden or the farm. And then he would sell the fish, and the lobster, and the crab. We would handle the bush. It was really, really fun as a kid to have that as a chore to do. And then him and my mom would have epic fights about things like my dad accepting food stamps for payment because he was serving the community. He held that really close to heart. He would let people get fish on credit. Have you been to Market Square, St. Thomas?

Interviewer: I have.

BB: So, you know it's in a really important historical neighborhood. It's actually the first neighborhood where free Blacks were allowed to purchase property when we were Danish, but also a place where there is a fair amount of poverty. So, your average client there didn't have a ton of money. But that is where my dad, his family, our community serves our community by bringing food there. It was a really cool childhood.

Interviewer: Did you think it was a cool childhood while you were going through it?

BB: My forced child labor?

Interviewer: Or when you go back and look at it and you realize just how lucky some of the things were?

BB: As a teenager, I was an ungrateful teenager, so we're just going to ignore that entire part. [laughter]

Interviewer: I think most of us were.

BB: Yeah. But as a kid, we got to go out in the boat a lot. It was my dad's fishing boat. When people hear that, they're like, "Oh, you're lucky to have a boat." I'm like, "Well, it smelled like fish." We would have to scrub it before. It still smelled like fish. But a lot of it was really awesome. I got to see things that I don't see anymore, like giant schools of bait fish. Man, I've seen some with just sharks going through it and right offshore here, between Inner Brass and St. Thomas. I still eyeball schools of fish as an adult, but I don't get to see it on that level anymore.

Interviewer: Bait fish is something that I've heard now multiple times. It's something that I've heard over the last few years as a part of a decline and possibly a rationale for less of certain kinds of other species because the bait fish isn't around. Is there a justification or reason why the bait fish have declined in your mind?

BB: So, I didn't just grow up with Dad and his brothers and our further community as fishermen, but I'm the eldest of four. My little brothers are both fishermen now, commercial fishing. My brother also – is it still commercial fishing when you take tourists out?

Interviewer: Charter fishing?

BB: Yeah. He has two boats.

Interviewer: He does it for hire?

BB: Yeah. So, one he'll take out for a few hundred dollars that day and catch fish. And the other one, he has a traditional trap boat.

Interviewer: He fishes out of Frenchtown or Hull Bay?

BB: So he fishes out of Crown Bay with the fishing trap boat. Keeping a boat out of Hull Bay, that's where – we live on the north side. My dad fished out of Hull Bay. But the facilities of getting coolers and bait and stuff to a bigger boat are really difficult. He has a slip in a marina, which is a very bougie way of fishing, according to how we grew up. And then his other boat is out east, where it's more involved in the tourist industry here. My father passed away in 2017. So, I have Dad, and then I have my brother Chris and youngest brother Joey going from there. We have a few things that have happened.

Interviewer: 2017 was a hell of a year for you then.

BB: Yeah. People talk about weather that year, and I'm like –

Interviewer: It doesn't even –

BB: I’m like, “Okay, there was some wind. That's nice." Dad passed away after that, and it was really, really rough. Yeah, it was not fun. I miss him a lot. Actually, I just came back from a trip today. One of my favorite things to do when I travel is fish markets still. I was just talking to my siblings. I ate barnacles. They were delicious.

Interviewer: Really? This is in Spain?

BB: Yes.

Interviewer: And we thought the Japanese had the market cornered on strange things.

BB: God, no. They're delicious.

Interviewer: Really?

BB: I ended up with barnacle juice all over me. I was not graceful. It was pretty gross. I was laughing with my siblings about how my dad would have made fun of me for going all that way to eat something.

Interviewer: Right, to eat barnacles.

BB: He was like, "You could have just cleaned the boat." [laughter] But for the decline in our bait fish, one of the biggest things – so, when I'm thinking about bait fish and where we would see the core schools, so close to the land, where they have more protection from the bigger fish. We've seen a huge increase in our land use. We have entire sides of the hill that had nothing on them forty years ago. The runoff has just increased significantly. My dad, whenever it would rain, he would look down the hill and watch. And then he would cuss at whoever was doing construction up – but at this point – he would literally point fingers, call names at whoever was doing it. But now we have so much that you can't actually do that anymore. Now, when you see a big rain – we just had one a few weeks ago – it's mud all along the coast. I don't think those fish are made for that environment at all. So, I think that's a pretty decent starting point.

Interviewer: So, it's a sort of on-land, inshore impact. That's what's happening. It's things happening on land that are affecting nursery areas.

BB: Yeah, and then loss of habitat. The more marinas we have that are sitting in mangroves, the hotter it gets. But that's a little newer in seeing that problem.

Interviewer: Hotter in terms of water temperature?

BB: Water temperature, yeah.

Interviewer: So you feel like there's a rise in water temperature?

BB: Absolutely. The data also backs that up. I also scuba dive, and I usually need a wetsuit for most of the year. I don't right now. I'm still very much a baby when it comes to the cold.

Interviewer: You mentioned the connection between selling fish, consuming fish, helping the community. I wonder about how you guys survived post hurricane, post disasters. What did you find? A coming together? Is it only families helping their own families? Is it neighborhoods helping neighborhoods? Is it fishermen feeding the island because the resources aren't there?

BB: So, fishing is a hard one after a storm because your boat's been pulled out so you don't have any access to it. Your traps just got all mashed up. The water's all turned up anyway. The process of bringing food in is a little harder. Does it happen as quickly as it can? Sure. Is that hard? Yes.

Interviewer: Is there ever anything in fishing that's easy?

BB: [laughter] No.

Interviewer: No?

BB: No, not at all. That's something – and actually, because of that, because it's not easy – so my father had a really rough childhood, horrifically bad, but it also made him extremely resourceful. So, construction, fixing cars, fixing the winch on the boat, fixing the engine on the boat, patching the boat, patching a surfboard – he was very handy, which also comes in handy in storms. I have so many memories of my father jumping in so-and-so's truck, going to his cousin's house, whatever it is, for that kind of work. There was never a time where I felt like our fishermen were [saying], "There's nothing to do." Another thing that they jump in for is if there's an emergency. So, Northside St. Thomas is, I think, thirteen miles away by ocean from where our Coast Guard stays. So, if you have an emergency, good luck. I remember my dad getting calls for – “Someone's dog is catching balls off of a rock on Peterborough.” It was really rough, and the dog didn't make it back. “Can you go get the dog?" He went and got the dog. The dog wasn't alive, but he brought the dog back. But “We have a missing diver.” “We have somebody who's ran out of gas.” My dad also liked playing it really close, and sometimes, it was my dad who ran out of gas, and then my mom would be really stressed out. But whatever it was, that was also a really big part of – you have a missing dinghy, or so-and-so didn't come back from fishing or whatever. The community definitely got together to go out and solve those issues themselves. We still see that happen. But it's so much more disjointed now because our community has grown so much without the inclusion part. We had a situation a few years ago where somebody newer to the island went spearfishing out of Hull Bay, so in the middle of our community, and didn't come back. But nobody told the community what was going on. We wake up, and we're like, "Why has the Coast Guard been flying around for three hours?" Because it woke all of us up. It took us hours to find out what was going on. Finally, we got in contact. It took one of my cousins five minutes to find him.

Interviewer: Stop.

BB: Yeah. Well, because he knew that bay. We all grew up there. He was one of my – he almost killed me so many times as a child because we would be like, "Let's jump that wave. Let's go in between that rock." But because he knew that area so well, he was like, "He went out from there. He went out at this time. Okay. This is where he will be if he's still in the bay." Five minutes. The Coast Guard took – they had a cutter over from Puerto Rico. They had a chopper. It's that lack of using the resource that's there because it's not organized or whatever the necessity there is.

Interviewer: That's the perfect –

BB: It's so frustrating.

Interviewer: That's the perfect analogy to this equity and environmental justice issue that we're working with, which is NOAA's concern with improving our service to those who have been overlooked or underserved or have been marginalized by the process. The key is we went out and found and identified from people the barriers that existed. Some of it being language, like with folks in Puerto Rico. They don't get the documentation – they get it in English, and they don't truly understand it. We found out all of these barriers. And then we went back, and we asked, "Okay. Now, what would the solutions be? How can we improve?" And that's what you just brought up there. Talk about this disjuncture that exists in communication. When if they would have just simply come to somebody in the village, the village would have been able to say, "Go get so-and-so because he knows the bay. They'll find them like that."

BB: When it came to hurricanes, people would call my house. I remember answering the phone and having to deal with somebody going, "Is David there?" "Okay. Good afternoon to you, too." But they want to know what the storm is doing. They would tell me. They were like, "Well, I don't move my boat until he moves his boat." Even growing up in a house like that, I still can't tell you what's going to happen. I actually use your data. Thank you, NOAA. But we did have those resources. It is really frustrating to constantly be in a place where that's ignored.

Interviewer: That's one of the things that I'd love to hear from you, how being involved in this your whole life, multi-generations, and you've got younger brothers that are doing it, your father who recently passed away did it all his life – how can we make their lives better by –? What can we do to improve, to make sure that their voice is heard in the management process? How can we get information to opportunities to be involved in a workshop? How can we make sure that we're doing a better job, not only including them in the process but utilizing their knowledge as a part of that process? How can we better serve –? Our job is to serve you. How can we better serve you?

BB: I actually think DPNR [Department of Planning and Natural Resources] has a few really great examples of working with fishermen to find certain species’ breeding areas to know where to shut down fishing so that that species can breed and not have fishermen making lots of money but also interrupting the process. I think a lot of our fishermen do understand that. One technique that is traditionally used in our fish traps is using the Tyre Palm, which is their only native palm tree, to tie your pots closed for the trapdoor. Why? First of all, it's free. It's readily available. And it decomposes. When you lose a trap –

Interviewer: It's not going to [inaudible] fish.

BB: Exactly. That's something my father had been doing. That wasn't a regulation that had to come from DPNR or NOAA. There are those areas where it intersects quite beautifully already.

Interviewer: Is that a practice that's still used today?

BB: I am not sure. My brother does not use it. I think he uses twine, so similar but more commercially readily available. I am not sure about other trap fishermen. I usually don't get all up in their traps and inspect them. I should just for fun. But I think there are places where those values match. It’s hard to find. The Virgin Islands – I mean, I know this is a problem in a lot of coastal areas, but we have a huge influx of people who are not of the community, who can afford more than people from here can. Our education is garbage. Sorry, I can't be nicer about it. That puts your average fisherman, who grows up in this environment – and my father didn't graduate from high school. His reading comprehension wasn't great. We would have arguments about news articles. He'd read something. I'd be like, “Dad, that's not what that said.” [laughter] But when dealing with that, when you have a document that is regulation, that is more complex, it's really hard to bridge that gap. I think the effort for conversation, rather than a really nice website, which it is really nice, and really great documents that are clear, is really needed.

Interviewer: That's one of the things that we've heard, and we are already implementing training to be compliant with a certain level of writing, saying, yes, when you write for your journal articles and whatever, you can use your jargon. But when we're trying to convey the message, we need to bring it to a point that it's digestible for everybody. That's very difficult for academics and scientists to do because they've been trained away from this, to speak this way, and now they've got to go back. But we've actually implemented that in our communications divisions and things like that so that we can make sure that the message comes out so that somebody like your father would be able to consume the information and be able to respond in kind and feel like it's not somebody speaking over. You know what I mean? It's somebody that really wants to work and hopes you understand the message.

BB: Yeah, I think that's really important. My dad was unusual; he was super politically active. He ran for Senate once. Again, much to my mother's dismay. He did pretty well based on not spending any money on it and the last name.

Interviewer: You say the last name as a good thing or as a bad thing?

BB: For politics, it's brilliant. It's a great thing. We had a really well-loved, really well-respected – Lorraine Interviewee was a senator for a long time here. So, based on her legacy, the last name is pretty good politically.

Interviewer: Let me just ask you this: was that who Catherine Bryan worked for?

BB: Yes.

Interviewer: That was like twenty years ago.

BB: Yes.

Interviewer: Because that's when I first came to St. Thomas. I was here and helped them set up the Fishermen Fun Day with the North Side/South Side softball game. You probably were like ten years old. You were probably running around barefoot.

BB: Actually, twenty years ago, I wasn't on island. I was away at college. So not quite that young. [laughter] That's really great, though.

Interviewer: Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

BB: Yeah, Catherine's a gem.

Interviewer: We spent two days working to set that thing up, and we did it because Jimmy and Julian were such tough nuts to crack.

BB: He's a sweetheart.

Interviewer: Yeah, but we spent two days working so that we could gain their favor to show that we were committed. I think people need to understand that sometimes you got to show that you're willing to put a little elbow grease into it in order to make relationships stronger.

BB: Yeah, I think that is something important, especially in an environment like this. It’s an ongoing joke, right? I'm not going to learn your name until you've been here for three years. But we do see that. I think people forget that for people from here who are staying here, we're surrounded by a bunch of people that we love and care about, who have been there before. We know their siblings, we know their parents, and they're going to be here in twenty years, hopefully. But when you have people who are just moving through, it's like, okay, and then there's going to be another one of you and another one of you.

Interviewer: Is there that feeling?

BB: Oh, that I'll learn your name when you've been here for three years is not a joke.

Interviewer: Really?

BB: Yeah. Look at it from my point of view, right? Okay. I could spend this weekend doing Frenchie things, which it’s – are you here this weekend?

Interviewer: I am.

BB: So you know it's Bastille Day.

Interviewer: I'm staying longer just because I was invited to come down to the tournament.

BB: Oh, good. Excellent. Oh, God, I'm watching the fish wins –

Interviewer: So much fun.

BB: It’s super fun. I really enjoy watching fish come in, watching them get cleaned. A lot of my childhood was that. So, I could do that, which I will be. Or I could spend it with somebody who just moved here, and they want to go to Red Hook and go drinking, or they want to go on a boat trip to BVI [British Virgin Islands], and then they'll be gone in six months. And it's like, yeah, okay, what am I going to get out of that? It is hard to – and then we do find people that we’re like, “You're really awesome.” And then you leave, and we're like, “Cool. So now we miss you.” It is really hard because that goes both ways. When you do come into this community, and you are trying, and you do want to make a difference, and you want to help, not lord over, it can be really hard to get that buy-in from us as well. But it's understandable why it's there.

Interviewer: For sure.

BB: One thing that comes up a lot in discussions, and it's really frustrating for me, is – so, we have an undereducated population, and that's a broad statement across the board. We have a world where you do need education to operate, not just fishing just across the board. We have people who are just constantly at this disadvantage. And we have a system where – so I grew up without basic medical care because we didn't have access to health insurance. I didn't have a household that we could afford it. So, even as an adult, my last major dental work was all because I didn't have great dental work as a kid because my parents couldn't afford it. We ask people to continue the legacy of being fishermen. But I look at what my little brother does for work and how long his days are, and I'm like, yeah, I'll pick up your kids from school. Sure, I'll go grocery shopping for you. Without his community, I don't know how he's supposed to do it. And then I also look at it, and he's my little brother, and I'm like, how much longer can you do this? Because you know it's physically taxing. Yeah, it's a lot more fun than a desk job. How much longer can he make that money going through storms and other setbacks? I think his boat's out of the water right now. How is that sustainable for humans? Not even talking about the environment because that's a whole other ball of wax. That's my concern is: how do we continue to ask our young people to uphold the traditions of food, which is so important, and we're at what? Ninety-nine percent of our food is imported. But then we're also asking them to exist in kind of a subpar – it's hard. People are like, “Oh, it looks so ideal, blah, blah, blah.” And I'm like, “Mm-hmm.” So I know you haven't had to worry about being hungry at home. I didn't have snacks I could eat. I'd have to go and grab literally a cucumber from the garden because my parents couldn't afford to keep snacks around.

Interviewer: You must love the mango tree.

BB: Yeah, I still do. [laughter] Hold on. To be fair, I was always fed. So were my siblings. My father, his teeth – he had a half-moon shape when you looked closely. That was because he ate so much underripe fruit growing up because he was hungry because his family did not provide enough food. And when you look at that impact of – when you read about it – I have a degree in psychology. When you read about it in childhood trauma, how do we work with people like that and then also not continue to ask them to put themselves in those positions?

Interviewer: I think that is fascinating. I think that that is an aspect that I have not ever considered.

BB: Yeah, most people don't.

Interviewer: I think it's a matter of mental health and psychological well-being. What are you asking people to do and who to be? Where's the success? What's the definition of success in that? Is it just being able to make sure that there's food on the table every day? Is that [inaudible] success? Because, like what you say, what happens when you hit that age when you must retire?

BB: So, my father actually killed himself.

Interviewer: Oh, I'm sorry.

BB: But also what you said, what I said about how he grew up and how it's hard, that is the recipe of how to create a vulnerable adult. We have a Caribbean community where, especially men but women, too, don't seek help. And then also, how can you afford it?

Interviewer: Right. Where’s your insurance?

BB: Yeah.

Interviewer: Are there social mechanisms within your networks that offer support in terms of – there's always old auntie you could go and talk to and sit on her porch? Or is it just frowned upon to show weakness?

BB: So, I think that you have – I mean, look, this community shows support in the most beautiful, incredible ways. The other day, I went to the bakery that my dad used to go to, Weekes & Weekes, downtown. It's a bit of an institution. I only needed two loaves of butter bread. They gave me three. It's that kind of constant love, support, help that we get from each other all of the time. And it is beautiful and enriching, and it makes me feel warm and fuzzy all of the time. Is that the same as – you know?

Interviewer: Professional, clinical assistance?

BB: No. [laughter] Do I think a lot of people who aren't from communities like this miss that, and that's part of why life is really hard? Yeah. But I think you need both. I've done a lot of therapy, by the way. [laughter] So, this is why I can talk about it with some – a lot. But when you look at somebody like my dad, he's getting older. He can't do fishing the same way. He had just suffered a divorce from my mom. So, that's also really hard and really hard for men to deal with. Sorry, you guys.

Interviewer: I got divorced, and it was a year before I even figured out what end was up.

BB: They're hard, but men statistically don't do them well at all. Then, you also had the two category-five hurricanes back-to-back. Yeah, everything really sucked.

Interviewer: Yeah, I was going to ask, and I don't want to impose, but I was thinking after the hurricanes –

BB: Yes. It was beginning of November.

Interviewer: It’s like, how do I recover from all of this? That's the one thing I can't – I experienced it in North Carolina and Florida. We get our things.

BB: But you guys get trucks coming in of supplies, and you can see them.

Interviewer: Right. We know that they're coming down the road with gas and this and that. I don't understand the feeling of helplessness that I feel like you guys must – when I saw the pictures of St. Thomas after Irma and Maria, I literally cried.

BB: Yeah, I didn't. I did a shot of tequila and started cleaning stuff up.

Interviewer: There you go. You see what I mean? That's what I mean. I can't fathom your strength.

BB: I also think you get this level of – because we did Marilyn, we did Hugo. I think you get this level of, “Cool, we're all alive. Great. We can work from here.” I think there is, for a lot of us who've gone through them –

Interviewer: Is that because of how tight your community is?

BB: I think that's a huge part of it, yeah, because we all go and look for each other after a storm.

Interviewer: I like that.

BB: It's really nice. Then we all work together. I stayed at a friend's house because the house I was renting didn't board up. I stayed at a friend's house, and then all of us went and cleaned the road. I don't do chainsaws; I'm too much of a chicken, but I can drag stuff around. When it comes to times like that, whether it is hauling up your boat before a big ground sea, which isn't an emergency, you all pitch in and help, and that has been the best part of the community. Yeah, as a woman, I haven't stopped on the side of the road here and not had somebody ask me if I need help without knowing who I am. If you, as a woman here, try to stop and change your own tire, a gentleman will certainly pull up. His car might be more raga than yours, but he will absolutely help, and it's beautiful because I lived in the States long enough to know that doesn't happen.

Interviewer: Is it regardless of ethnicity? Regardless of class?

BB: Yeah, regardless.

Interviewer: I mean, the dynamic here is about [inaudible] instead of I'm all for myself.

BB: Yeah. I remember one time I had this horrible car that was falling apart at all times, and my muffler kept on just falling down. So, I'm going up – actually, right around the corner here. I'm going up a road, and my muffler fell down. I was like, “Okay, I have to wait for it to pull down enough to find something I can tie up.” I tied it up with a sock once. Was it safe? No. Did it work to get me home? Yes. My dad tied up that stupid muffler several times as well. But I remember I stopped, and it was a Haitian gentleman who stopped and helped me out. People who are from other Caribbean islands don't necessarily look at me and know I'm from here. I look and sound very American to them. So, yeah, I'll say that, regardless of ethnicity or class, that help is definitely there.

Interviewer: Do you feel that there's a –? St. Thomas is such an interesting place in the Caribbean because it's so very white.

BB: Yes. [laughter]

Interviewer: Is there a different –? I'm from Barbados, where it's 95% people of African ancestry. Is there racial tension on the island?

BB: Yeah. I would not have said that when I was a child. But the stats have changed quite a lot. If you look at census data, it's dropped. The percentage of Black African descent people in the Virgin Islands has gone down.

Interviewer: Really? Why?

BB: So, things are really hard. People leave for education, going to school. My parents sent me to All Saints, which is a private school. I'm very familiar with being the poorest person in a room. But I had food, clothing, could do my homework. But I had two classmates go to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. Yeah, both of val [valedictorian] and sal [salutatorian] from my high school class. There were only like thirty-five of us. I think two or three of them are doctors. I am an underachiever in all measures.

Interviewer: You work for the government of the VI.

BB: Joyfully, by the way. I actually moved over to government just a few months ago. I was in non-profit work.

Interviewer: What was your non-profit?

BB: The Virgin Islands Olympic Committee.

Interviewer: Really?

BB: Which is really, really cool.

Interviewer: Fantastic.

BB: Yeah. My favorite part is we would write, essentially, grants, not as complicated as your grants, but like baby grants, bring money in from off island, which is my favorite thing to do, and then sometimes we're buying kids their first plane ticket off island so they can go play baseball.

Interviewer: That's so fantastic.

BB: Isn't that fun?

Interviewer: Yeah.

BB: So, I'm excited about being in government, although spending money is way harder.

Interviewer: It is way harder.

BB: I'm like, “We need this.” Okay, seventy pieces of paper.

Interviewer: There's a bit of a bureaucracy that goes with it.

BB: A little bit, yes.

Interviewer: That's one of the things we also wanted to do is to figure out how to help people that were in non-profits or people that were doing things. Because it's not just the social side of things and the socioeconomic side of things, it's also the fisheries side of things, where they do surveys and all these kinds of things in the ocean and stuff like that, which is to involve local fishermen in the process, have them engaged in the process, make sure they're paid for their time, and make sure that they're compensated so that it feels like their data for their fisheries. So, when somebody says, we need to do this, there's a greater sense of buy-in because they're like, “Yeah, we were there, we collected – this is what we know.”

BB: I bet if you speak to (most?) fishermen like Bryson, they could say, “Yeah, the yellowtail my dad used to bring in was like so, and now we're happy with so.” But it's hard to turn that into a regulation and [have] it feel good, especially when you're looking at the other side of things, which is my kids need braces. My parents did not pay for my college education.

Interviewer: Speaking of that, I wanted to go to your side of your upbringing. You mentioned you went to All Saints private school.

BB: So from seventh grade. So, public school at Sibilly until sixth grade. My dad went there when he was a kid, so that was cute. And then All Saints at seventh grade.

Interviewer: And then you graduated from high school?

BB: We’re told to go to college, and I got a ton of student loans. It was really fun.

Interviewer: And you went off island or on island?

BB: I went off island. So, there is a perception, and I don't think it's always incorrect, that the education you get away is better. I think for some things that's accurate. I don't think it's always accurate. I went off island. That was the college prep high school thing to do. I think that message is still there quite a bit from what I'm seeing, but I'm not in the school system, so I could be wrong.

Interviewer: Do you feel like there's a brain drain?

BB: Absolutely.

Interviewer: That once they get off island and they get into the States or Canada or wherever, England, wherever they decide to go, they're less likely to want to return back to –?

BB: So, want to return or can afford it?

Interviewer: There's another point, too.

BB: Want to return or have the jobs they want to do available to them?

Interviewer: Correct.

BB: Several of those classmates I referenced, none of their jobs exist here. What is our job market here? It's government. There are a few EDCs, and then it's tourism. I don't know about you, but customer service does not inspire me.

Interviewer: Not your –?

BB: No. I can only do so many times of asking me what currency I use and that I speak English well for an islander, but no, I can't. I've worked a few of those jobs. They're awful.

Interviewer: So, what did you study?

BB: So I did a four-year degree in psych, and I worked in a mental institution for teenagers, which was super fun. I was a shift supervisor. We had twelve beds.

Interviewer: Where were you?

BB: Washington State.

Interviewer: Wow, talk about the other side of the world.

BB: Yeah. My mom used to say you could move to the moon; it was closer. There was a boy involved in the decision. Also, the way they managed their fishery was fascinating to me. Having to get a fishing license was absolutely foreign.

Interviewer: You mean for recreational fishing?

BB: Yeah. I had my –

Interviewer: Did you live near the rivers, or were you on the ocean?

BB: I was in Tacoma, so on the sound. My ex-husband, his parents lived in Ocean Shores, so fishing community and tourist community. So, really similar in a lot of ways. But that was actually – it was very, very interesting. I always got my permits before getting stuff, I promise, even though it was something I was not used to. Then I came back home. I could not do that work here. The money is not quite livable, and then also the community is too small for it. I worked with some pretty (scary?) people, and working with them was great. I didn't want them to know where I lived. It's really hard to live here without that. So, I started doing non-profit work, and during that, I got a degree from the International Olympic Committee in sports non-profit work. So, a master's in that, which was really cool.

Interviewer: That's really cool.

BB: I focused on –

Interviewer: Where did you do that at?

BB: It was a program where we traveled. They brought the teachers to you, but it was through the Catholic University of Louvain, which is based in Belgium. I focused on non-profit and profit partnerships. So, in small communities, having similar values of making things go a little further since we're so limited in the non-profit world. Non-profit, I'm sure you see this all the time, is one of those worlds where people think if you care, that's enough, and it's not. You're missing the values. You're missing the ethics. You're missing the understanding of how these things actually work and then also how they affect people. So, you can care all you want, but if you're putting forth bad policy or not being equitable in distribution – after Hurricane Maria, we saw people doing lots of good things. Great. We had old people in an old folks home without resources. They were all in a room about this big because the rest of the building had been destroyed. We were waiting for evacuation. They weren't included with the hospital because they were a different facility. I brought NPR [National Public Radio] to them. NPRS was on STX when Irma hit and came over th STT after. I helped them out with transportation. So, I know a lot about the system because I was there. We had people who would private plane in and evacuate dogs. Dogs. And it was really rough. Is your heart in the right place? Do you care? Yes.

Interviewer: Is there a prioritization that should take place?

BB: And are you taking care of our community, or are you taking care of what you care about? So, the non-profit world is frustrating that way. But also, it's why my work in government is so much fun to me because –

Interviewer: And now you're here in government working in DPNR. Your responsibility is –?

BB: We're working on the Territorial Parks Division, which is a brand new division within the Virgin Islands. We have the national park, we have sports parks, but we don't have a city park system. We get to work on that, from land acquisition, which is really sensitive in a place with not a lot of land, to how that can impact land and food, to how people who can't walk can access stuff, to beach access, which is a special pet project of mine. I've been kicked off of a lot of beaches incorrectly, by the way. So, it's really fun to be able to bring all of that together. And then what you guys are looking at – how do we make sure we're not disenfranchising people? A huge thing that has happened with people buying waterfront property and blocking access. You thought that trail was just this little goat trail, and what it was was somebody actually doing subsidiary fishing to get food to their family. We have a lot of guys who would fish around the rocks, and we've seen entire parts of our coast completely cut off because you want a gated community. Cute, but now where are those guys getting the food for their families? Or even having a healthy place for recreation because we know recreation is good for your mental health and community well-being.

Interviewer: So, is there a lot of shore-based fishing in St. Thomas?

BB: There was a lot more, and we keep on seeing gates go up. A lot of them allow walking through still, but if you're a fisherman and you're carrying your bait, your beer, your fishing gear, an extra mile and a half right to get out there and then continue to sit in the sun and then have to carry your fish back, it becomes prohibitive and then actually – how able-bodied does somebody have to be to do that? We've seen miles of coastline within the last ten years become inaccessible for that.

Interviewer: Interesting. That's also a part of equity and environmental justice, too, isn't it? Limiting access, displacement, and these kinds of things for folks who don't have the capacity to have lawyers or take time off work to make the argument or feel that they have the power or the right to participate in the process. I think that's one of the things with these executive orders that we have to make sure that when we talk about things like coastal zone development and the [inaudible] fish habitat, these kinds of things, that we need to have all the players at the table so that we can get all the perspectives.

BB: I think the federal government has a really hard job there. But I also will acknowledge that I am super privileged and that my plate is no longer dependent on the fishery for it to be full. I have the other extreme privilege of – I don't have kids. I have more free time than a lot of other people do, and I have a bit of education behind that to understand, explore –

Interviewer: Are you a recreational fisherman?

BB: I wouldn't say that, although I have asked my brothers to take me fishing for my birthday.

Interviewer: There you go.

BB: So, I still really enjoy the process. I tend to look at the fish more than go catch them.

Interviewer: You like to dive and see them?

BB: Yeah, I do. For example, the Sixpack law, when it came to boats – are you familiar?

Interviewer: The charter boats?

BB: Yeah. We had a huge charter industry. You might have remembered it at the Ramada.

Interviewer: I remember back when you guys had the Boy Scout tournament, and you had all of that that was going on.

BB: Well, no, the moorings boats. We had all of them stationed at the Ramada, where Yacht Haven Grande is now, for ages, and that was a big part of our tourism economy. The Sixpack law came into effect. It made it harder for their business model for their charter boats, and they moved to BVI. And then I know the fishermen complain, and I'm sure you've heard this from them, but they're like – you'll be like, “A mahi here has to be this big.” And they're like, “But next door and over there, they get to catch mahi this big.” Those decisions can be really hard for us, but then really fit the greater United States really well. It's hard. How do you create a fishing regulation that works for Hawaii and works for the Caribbean as well?

Interviewer: Right. That's one of the reasons why we fought so hard for island wide designation because it wasn't just about Hawaii with the US Virgin Islands. It was the difference between St. Thomas and St. Croix.

BB: Which is huge.

Interviewer: Which is huge. That was part of the argument that the data that we collected, and it was Julian and Dave Olson who told me. They said, “Listen, you have to understand. St. Croix may vote on something, but they don't care because they don't care if something negatively impacts us.” We're up here saying, “Hey, no, no, we depend on this clean snapper fishery, or we need this deep-water fishery or whatever it is. And they're not engaged in it as much. Whereas they may have more idea about conch and we're not for – we don't catch a lot of conch, so we don't get – we went through this discussion about making each – St. Thomas, St. John is considered one, and then St. Croix is another, and Puerto Rico is another.

BB: Puerto Rico is big, too.

Interviewer: It’s big. But that was part of the work that we were doing in 2003, 2004 when I first came here, and it was –

BB: I was definitely off-island at the time.

Interviewer: Trust me, it wasn't easy to get people to talk.

BB: It's hard.

Interviewer: But luckily, I had Jimmy, who I was able to convince, but it took a few drinks to convince him.

BB: I was going to ask how many Heinekens.

Interviewer: Right. And then Julian was a little bit tougher nut to crack, but Dave Olson, because I think he came from that world of fish management, sort of saw the need for it but was very protective of St. Thomas and the people. Listening to your stories today, I understand why, and I think it's really cool. It reminds me of a lot of things in Barbados, but it's a small island society where everybody knows everything. We know by the license plate when we're driving in Barbados, we know who's in that car, and we always – the beep-beep. It's to that point. It used to be back in the day when my parents were in Barbados in the late 60s and early 70s when there weren't a lot of cars; they used to announce parties by the license plate. They'd put it in the paper – [inaudible] 349 is having a thing on Friday night. And then anybody who knew who [inaudible] 349 was, they would be like, “We're going to be there.” That was like an invitation.

BB: Sounds like an awful party to have to figure out what you need for.

Interviewer: I really appreciate you sharing your time. I hear a lot of pain. I hear a lot of emotion in you. I hear a lot of love and I think it's fantastic that you shared that with me today. I ask you this question with great trepidation, but what's the future?

BB: Oh, man.

Interviewer: Is it looking bright? Are there things that we can do to make things better?

BB: If you could stop that entire global warming thing, that'd be real cool.

Interviewer: [laughter] Let me snap on to that and get that done. Do the fishermen here believe in global warming? Do they believe in climate change?

BB: I think some do. I'm not going to say all. The fishermen are not a monolith, just like every community. But this is a conversation around my family dinner table, whether or not we attach it during that conversation to global warming. But when we talk about – where do you get bait fish right now? Where are they? They're not here. They're not here.

Interviewer: Do you guys import frozen?

BB: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is that how you're fishing?

BB: So, Ballyhoo and stuff are frozen, and you bring those in.

Interviewer: So, people aren't able to go out and cast net on their way out on a trip?

BB: It used to be that way, and my freezer growing up, again, much to my mother's dismay, would have a bag of fry. My dad used cow skin for fish traps. So, that's a very –

Interviewer: That makes sense. That's a very common –

BB: Very smelly. Oh my God. [laughter] I'll never forget the smell of a trap coming a week after having cow skin in it, and the fish didn't eat it.

Interviewer: Or the worst is when the fish were in it for too long and they're all decayed.

BB: I've never seen a trap come up like that.

Interviewer: Never?

BB: Hold on. Also, remember, I'm a girl, and so we didn't get to go fishing as much as boys did. Also, my dad used Tyre. I don't know if the fish ever got to the point of all deading because of the Tyre. I'm sure it happened, but they would go away.

Interviewer: The trap would open up.

BB: Yeah. That sounds awful. The cow skin, man, that lives – core memory there. [laughter] Sorry. Yeah, we talk about that, or the fact that my brother, if he wanted to go get health insurance – actually, my sister is a caterer.

Interviewer: Is a –?

BB: Caterer. She works for herself. She has her own business. She does not have a government or an entity to provide insurance, so she went and got a quote. Our lieutenant governor's office worked very hard on finally getting private policies available for solo humans. We didn't have any from 2010 until last year. We're not an attractive market.

Interviewer: Were you guys not able to get Obamacare and stuff like that?

BB: We opted out of Obamacare in favor of increasing our Medicaid and Medicare. When you look at our poverty levels, which are higher than Mississippi for children, which is the highest in the US, you can understand why. Because it serves more people, but it still left a lot of people out of being able to have access to anything, which is really awful. My sister went to go get a quote recently, and she's younger than I am, in great health, not diabetic, no preexisting conditions. She doesn't have a bum knee. It was $2,300 a month.

Interviewer: Come on. For a single person?

BB: For her, yes. For a woman in her mid-thirties to get health insurance. So, it's not affordable. I don't know what my brother would cost. I would charge a lot to insure him based on his job.

Interviewer: Occupation, right.

BB: But my brother doesn't have insurance. What do we look at as a family?

Interviewer: Bush tea.

BB: Right. [laughter] But some things are a little bit bigger than bush tea.

Interviewer: That's true.

BB: So then, what do we look at as a family? He has two kids who depend on him. It's an enormous and very big issue.

Interviewer: It also explains in great detail why guys get so emotional about things that impact their fishery in a way that they think is unfair or negative.

BB: Yeah. You're like, “Why are you guys throwing a fit about three inches of mahi?”

Interviewer: Right. When I'm trying to get braces on my kids' teeth.

BB: Or just send them to school, which is the decision my family did. We didn't get braces. We got sent to a private school, gratefully. But as an adult who now pays for some of those medical bills, I'm not so happy.

Interviewer: Right. Well, you're glad you work for the government, at least.

BB: Dental's not [inaudible] for anything, but yeah.

Interviewer: No, it's not in the state for us either.

BB: No, I know.

Interviewer: I'm lucky. I have a friend who's a dentist who just goes –

BB: Oh, nice.

Interviewer: – “Oh, just pay me the daily visit” – the doctor fifty-bucks thing, and then he goes in and takes care of it for me.

Interviewer: Somebody should have told me I should have had dentist friends. I'm kidding.

BB: You need to have a dentist. You need to have a friend in every sort of – a judge, a cop, a doctor, a dentist.

Interviewer: I have it pretty decent, but not a dentist. I'll work on that. [laughter]

Interviewer: You got to just start hanging around places where dentists are. I don't know where that is.

BB: It sounds awful. I'm not doing it. [laughter]

Interviewer: The future?

BB: I don't know. Another thing we've spoken about a lot is how many young people do we know who are picking it up. My brother is – this is terrible. I'm terrible at birthdays. I'm terrible at ages. I don't know how old anybody is, which they all make fun of me for, but Chris should be – I don't know – thirty-eight, thirty-nine something. What does he do when he doesn't fish anymore? When the environment can no longer sustain a profitable amount of fish?

Interviewer: Is that going to happen?

BB: I don't know. I read the NOAA reports. Aren't you terrified?

Interviewer: I hope –

BB: What keeps you up at night?

Interviewer: Everything. That's why I'm up at 4:00 AM. No, I hope. I love the word sustainability because I love the concept of conservation with appropriate use and livelihoods. But a livelihood has to be something that you can actually make a living at.

BB: And makes sense.

Interviewer: And makes sense. My brother's very lucky. He has a lot of energy. He has not one but two businesses. He has an awesome business partner for the trap industry. He's able to, at this time, balance all of them and keep running around. He bought at a good time in the market, so he has a place to live. If he was trying to buy now – that's hilarious for most of us. What does the future look like? We see less and less young people picking up fishing, which is beautiful. I would've loved if my father's generation – if those men and a few women had more options in what they did for careers. I think that is really, really, really beautiful. However, for the sake of food security, for the sake of tradition, for the sake of our community, for the sake of our culture, it's scary. I don't know what the answer is there. I do think whatever that answer is comes from exactly what you guys are trying to do.

Interviewer: I appreciate that.

BB: Not just as a Virgin Islander and a Frenchy and a fisherman's daughter and a fisherman's older sister, but also with my professional work and work in non-profit and community. I don't know if even that will work because the issues, I think, are bigger than a lot of what humans can do, but I think looking at problems like most fishermen don't have access to healthcare – just even that. Does NOAA want to form an insurance group?

Interviewer: It's a great question, isn't it? Do me a favor. Tell me your favorite fishing story.

BB: Oh, man.

Interviewer: Tell me your favorite one –

BB: Just one?

Interviewer: – favorite one from when you were a kid, from when you were older, from a family member. What is your favorite fishing story or memory?

BB: I don't have just one. I don't have just one.

Interviewer: Give me a couple, then.

BB: My dad liked taking us out fishing. He was a really, really great hands-on dad. He would take all of his kids out fishing, which, in retrospect, he was nuts. He would have us go trolling. All of us got seasick, by the way.

Interviewer: No way.

BB: So, he would have puking children, [laughter] and this is what he would do on his day off. But it was teaching, and sharing, and parenting. It would be going out early in the morning before it was light out, not waking my mom. We'd go and catch usually a kingfish. We'd go trolling, and then he would come home and cook it for us. So, a good fried fish breakfast.

Interviewer: Nice.

BB: And we caught it that morning.

Interviewer: Was it a sense of pride? Sense of enjoyment?

BB: All of it. All of it.

Interviewer: Was it about being with your dad?

BB: That too, and also possibly us being hungry and not seasick. [laughter] He used to bring us night fishing, too, which is really fun. The stars offshore here when I was a kid were incredible. I cannot find that anymore. St. Thomas always was light pollution, and now it is –  I had friends in BVI who used to call it Vegas. It's a lot of light pollution. So, going night fishing was always really fun. It was calm, so we would all be less seasick, but I fell asleep on the casting net, the fry net. I was taking a nap, and I kid you not, my brother threw a shark on me that he had just caught.

Interviewer: No, he didn't.

BB: I woke up to a wiggling shark on top. He still thinks that it was funny and I needed to get up. I kid you not. He's told me this story this year. Then, on the ride home, my sister puked on my feet. [laughter]

Interviewer: [laughter] That's a hell of an evening.

BB: I will never forget how that felt. It was terrible. Was it perfect? No. Was it chaos and dangerous? Yeah. But it was also – I'll never forget what those skies look like. Catching the fish, getting bored on a boat, trying not to get seasick on a boat – I'm still pretty good at that – and my siblings. My sister loves teasing me about that.

Interviewer: That's so funny. I can't thank you enough for sharing part of your life with us.

BB: Thank you for asking.

Interviewer: The nice thing is it's not just me that gets to hear this story. This is going to be something put up on the Voices of the Fisheries, which is a NOAA website. It will be something that people will be able to learn about what it's like to be a St. Thomian young lady who's grown up, been educated, come back, and still connected in many ways socially, culturally, spiritually to the people of this island and the resources. It’s really cool.

BB: Thank you. It's a huge privilege. I don't forget that.

Interviewer: Appreciate that. Thanks. Let me just turn this off so we can speak more freely.

--------------------------------------------END OF INTERVIEW---------------------------------------------

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