Interviewee G

Good afternoon. My name is Interviewer. I am in St. Thomas in Frenchtown. At the moment, I'm sitting here with Miss Interviewee Gomez, and she is somebody who's been intimately involved with the St. Thomas fisheries, both commercial and recreational, I would assume, over a large portion of her life. And today, we are lucky to have the opportunity to hear her story about her involvement in the fisheries here in St. Thomas, and also to teach us a little bit about some of the barriers that have existed in creating sustainable fisheries and creating partnerships. And so, hopefully from this, we can also learn that we can find solutions to these problems, and hopefully have a brighter future in fisheries management, fisheries science, and collaboration between local people and fishery management. Interviewee has since retired, but I'm going to let her tell you all about that. Interviewee, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself, and just feel free to tell me whatever it is that you'd like for us to know. And more importantly, it's really nice to see you again, and thank you.

You are welcome. I'll tell you how I got into the fisheries. As a young girl, I always liked animals. I always wanted to be a veterinarian. And when I was 14 years old, I got a summer job with the Utah Conservation Corps, and I was assigned to what, back then, because this was in the seventies, late seventies, the Fish and Wildlife Group.

And this was here on St. Thomas?

Here on St. Thomas. And what I did for a summer was I built artificial reefs out of tires and then dumped them right between Coki Point and Thatch Caye. There was a reef site there. The next summer, I was in 10th- 11th grade, I got another job at Fish and Wildlife. And this time I ended up spending the summer on Saba Island, which is on- right off the airport, on the west end of the island, living in a Quonset hut, banding migratory seabirds that came to nest on Saba Island. I eventually ended up getting my own Audubon shearwater, Zenaida Dove, and I tagged laughing gulls, banded on my own. So that kind of set-

You were tagging them for what purpose?

[00:02:58]

We were banding them. So that kind of set the ball in motion, and I realized I really like being in the water. I didn't necessarily want to get pigeonholed being a vet domesticated animals. And at that time, my brother was an avid sailor and he would take me sailing. So I said, "You know something, I got to do something that's water related." And I had a lot of friends that were Frenchies. They were fishing families. So I ended up spending a lot of time in the boat with them. And then my last summer at Fish and Wildlife in high school, I ended up working with this guy named Joe LaPlace, for the Mighty Cha Cha. And I loved working Monday through Friday, but then on the weekend, it just seemed like I couldn't get enough, so I would go with him to haul his fish traps on the north shore of the island. And we were hauling them by hand. And then at that time, the bio-statistical sampling, statistical sampling was program was just starting. So we would end up, or I would-

This was at DPNR?

DPNR. I would end up weighing and measuring his catch. And that was it. I fell in love. I said, "This is it. This is what I want to do."

Was that the first port sampling or?

Yes.

So all that basically, all began with you on Mighty Cha Cha's boat?

It began with Jim Bit. Because then he also had a grant back then that was called 88309, which was- he just collected all these length, weight measurements on Red hinds, thousands. At the same time, I learned to take otoliths out of White Grunt, Yellowtail snapper and something else. So I was collecting otolith, doing biostatistical sampling. Out in the boat, I went to work in T-shirt, short pants and flip flops. What else?

And this all at 17 years old?

This is all at 17. So I graduated high school at 17.

So you're doing a master's level biology at 17?

And I was in love. So, and that's what pretty much got me involved. Then the relationship with the fishermen was kind of like a twofold thing. I liked being in the ocean, but then these gentlemen and their families were my friends. We spent time at Water Island, our families just partying together. And I was like, "You know something? These guys really don't have anybody to advocate for them." Back then, it was just very different than it is now. That generation of fishermen pretty much didn't- they talk loud, but when it came time to defend their livelihood it- they just kind of- well, somebody else do it. So it was just a matter of like filling a void and a void that I like to fill. Because I definitely want people to hear what I have to say and–

[00:06:04]

You provided a voice?

Right. And then through period of time, I went back to Fish and Wildlife full time, and I ended up working with David Olson. He was a great mentor. I had another boss at that time, a lady named Mariana Gardy twine, who was great. I had all these great bosses. They were just great. I never had a bad boss until very later on. But in the beginning, it enough, it was good, where it just kind of developed that love, and it just never wavered. I worked for Fish and Wildlife for, I don't know, 12 years, 13 years. And then I decided I wanted to be a park ranger. So I applied to be a park ranger. I ended up going to law enforcement, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy. I became a law enforcement park ranger, but I didn't like that. I didn't like carrying a gun.

That was National Park Service?

That was a national- I was the first female born Virgin Islander to be a park ranger, a law enforcement ranger.

Here in the Virgin Islands?

Yes.

Wow. That's quite a status.

There was a man, but I was the first female ever. And then I'm living in my house at the Park Service House in Red Hook. And I got a knock on the door, and it was Jim Bit, and he was like, "Hey, I'm leaving to go teach at a university." and I think it was Jacksonville or something. And he goes, "The only person I could think to leave my grants to are you, so I need you to come back." And that was it. I went back. I left the park and went back, and 33 years later, I retired. I said the total period of time was 33 years, and I retired. So pretty much I went from a summer employee and worked myself all the way up through environmental specialist trainee 1, 2, 3, I became a fisheries coordinator, and then I became the director. So I retired as a director.

Director of the?

Fish and Wildlife.

Fish and Wildlife?

Yep.

Now, what's great about that is the 33 years is that they're basically 33 years here, right?

Yes.

So during that time, you've done Hugo, you've done Marilyn, you've done Maria, you've done Irma, how has that impacted the island and impacted the fisheries? What can you say about living in a place where natural disasters are a part of a summer almost? It's almost getting to that point where it's a part of almost every summer.

[00:09:04]

When Hugo hit, I was on the last plane off of the- out of this place. I was like, "I'm out. I got to go." Because I had never experienced a hurricane in my life, and I didn't think it would be as bad as it was. So I left and I came back 10 days later and was just horrified at what I saw.

I can't even believe they let you back.

10 days later?

Yeah.

Everybody was trying to get home. And I think that was so devastating to the fishery.

What was the plane ride back? Well, it must have been full of everybody coming back, going, just fear.

What are we going to find? And then, you know how you fly from the west, so you pretty much see the west end of the island, you could just hear people crying on the plane. Because you saw the houses just literally just obliterated. And the roof's gone, and the place looked like some sort of like nuclear disaster had hit it. It was just gray. It looked very ashy. And you could just hear people just screaming and crying on the plane. The plane landed and they opened the door to the top of the jet bridge, and you look and you're like, "Oh my God."

I bet that's a vision you don't forget?

No. And then Marilyn- Marilyn was here. I was here. But at that time, where I sat as far as like my job at Fish and Wildlife, I really didn't have a say. It was the higher ups that dealt with all of that. So I only heard it from like my friends. They were like, "Oh God. What are we going to do?" And at that point, I didn't really- I thought I couldn't do anything because I just wasn't at that level to really do anything. And I remember going to council meetings and they would talk about how the guys are just struggling. They would be just asking for help. "You guys got to help us get back on our feet." So when Irma and Maria hit, I was a director. And I knew there's no way, not under my watch, I wasn't going to do something for them. So what I did was- there were a couple things I did. I called Miguel, or Miguel Rolene called me, right here in Frenchtown, in the Benisek route, "You got to declare the fishery disaster." I said, "OK, well what does that intake- what does that entail?" He told me, and I said, "All right." Then I got a call from Roy Crabtree, and he's like, "Interviewee?" I said, "Yeah, I got the call from Miguel. I'm on it." And at that time, the commissioner of Planning and Natural Resources, where Fish and Wildlife sat under that umbrella, was a woman named Don Henry. And I don't think in my entire 30 something years, working for DPNR, have ever met a commissioner that was so pro fisherman. So I went to her and I said, ''Commissioner, this is what we need to do." She goes, "All right, Interviewee, get it started." And right around that time, I developed leptospirosis. I got leptospirosis.

[00:12:29]

What is that?

That's the virus you get from rat urine and feces, because Fish and Wildlife flooded, and we were walking around the building with no shoes on.

In your flip flops?

No shoes on. And then we had all these cuts and I got leptospirosis.

Oh, my Lord.

So I remember going to her. And you remember when Hurricane Sandy hit New Jersey?

Yeah.

There was a woman named Judith Rich that helped them get their disaster. That woman was here.

Serious?

Serious.

She was here on holiday or here because she knew that-?

She came. I don't know why she was here. When commissioner Henry, myself, got together, and she goes, "Interviewee, I know just who could help us get this done." And we had a meeting, I was actually on my way to the doctor, because I was so sick. And she said, "Interviewee, give me what you have and I got it." And Judith Rich, the same lady that helped the Sandy Hook people-

That's amazing.

Helped us finish the letter that went to the governor. The governor immediately signed it and it was declared a disaster.

That's incredible.

So that just set the door open to do all the fishermen assessments toward the disaster relief. And then the other thing was, these guys here at the fish house, because there's no generator power, they went 40, I think 42 days without any power to the fish house. So what I did was I wrote to the Department of Interior Affairs and asked them to put a generator on the fish house. And they gave me $68,000. And I put a 40 k generator on the fish house. I bought them $5,000 worth of fuel, set an account, and then I also gave them a year's worth of maintenance. And now they have a generator. So they're never without power at the fish house.

How quickly did the fishermen after something that devastating, because when it's that devastating, you're not getting ships on bring any good food, you're not getting the grocery stores open because there's no power, how quickly did the fishermen get back to working

So remember Irma hit, and then two weeks later- 10 days later, Maria came. So while they were trying to deal with all the damages from Irma, they- we already knew Maria was on her way. So it was just a matter of buckling down. After Maria hit, as soon as they could, a lot of guys, either boats were stuck in this ball field, some of them had lost their boats. So what they started doing was coming together and borrowing each other's boat, and say, "Listen, take me and help me go look for my pot." So they really worked well together with the resources that they had, to go out and try and find their traps.

[00:15:30]

So is it more common to leave your traps in the water than it is to take them out?

We don't take them out.

Because of what, they're going to meshed up on?

No. When you take them out, remember they'll rust. All the rebar and all that stuff, it'll rust.

So it's better just to keep it in the water.

They just leave them in the water. You just leave them in the water. Some, they'll move them sometimes. If they can get to them, they'll move them. That is probably-

That's a big haul though, isn't it?

Yeah. And then you go back and you look for them, and if you can't find them, you drag for them, or they sometimes pay divers to go and look for them. I know at one point there was a marine debris removal grant that was here, and part of that was to look for fish traps. And if the fish traps were found, and they could- well they all are supposed to have an identifying marker on them. The diver would call them up and say, "Listen, I found your traps there." and give them the weight points. Or if they took them out of the water, they would just call and tell them, "Hey, I have your traps. Is it so and so?''

But the physical devastation and disruption that hurricanes and weather can create, explain to me how COVID was different.

COVID? So I retired in March of 2019, so I was not-

So you did right in the- you were right at the front of it. You got out right before.

I wasn't with the department when COVID hit. I know and I remember speaking to Julian about it and Julian told me, he says, "Sales are good during COVID." I remember asking him a couple times and he goes, "No, man, sales are good."

People want fresh fish?

Yeah, for various reasons. People wanted to sort of eat healthy because COVID was such a destructive virus. People wanted to eat as healthy as they could. And a lot of people- you couldn't get stuff as readily in the grocery store. People- for various reasons people didn't want to go to the grocery store, things were scarce in the grocery store as well, they wanted to eat healthier.

[00:18:01]

That's a really interesting point there. That's something I don't think I've heard from any of the interviews that I've ever done about the impact of COVID is that the consumption of fish was about a health conscious movement to combat the virus or to combat the illness that was plaguing the people. And I think that's something that a lot of people overlooked or may have not have thought about. Because how many tins of Vienna sausage are you going to eat before you don't feel good as a human being?

A lot of people are really- one- people were buying all kinds of vitamins, people that never took vitamins, gummies with zinc, elderberry. They would read something, they'd be like, "Yeah, I got to take that because that would really build up my immune system." A lot of people started to eat really- they became more health conscious as far as the things that they consumed. Because if they got COVID, they wanted their body to be in the best fighting chance that they could.

Strong. Did you have issues with respiratory, like a lack of hospital space and a lack of respirators here?

Yeah, COVID was, when it came to the medical part of it and the resources, the Virgin Islands did the best that it could, but the hospitals were already in bad shape from previous hurricanes, from Marilyn. They never really got it back to where they wanted it to be. They have money to build a new hospital and I don't understand why they haven't done so.

They still haven't done so?

No. So at that- at some point there were more people in the hospital, like anywhere, people were crying about, there's not enough respirators for the amount of people. And then they closed the Virgin Islands to tourism, but we couldn't survive without it, so it was very short-lived, and then the flood gates of hell opened, and then people had money from COVID relief in the United States. And they were like, "Well, I'm traveling to the Virgin Islands because I would never be able to make this trip if I didn't have this COVID money." So there was just this massive, massive amounts of people, tourists coming here.

Wow. Did you guys have COVID facilities? Did they have to test and do all of that when they came through?

No. At one point, there was a portal. You'd have to go and get a COVID test, I think 24 or 48 hours before you traveled. And you'd have to upload it into the portal and then they would send you back this approval, and then you'd have to walk with it. So they had the National Guard at the airport. You'd have to pull out your paper. So they did that.

Showing that you are clean?

[00:21:00]

Correct.

Mia Mottley, boy, she was real strict in Barbados.

Yeah. The lady in Barbados.

I love her.

I love her.

I love her.

I love her.

You heard what she said in the UN, her UN address when she addressed them? You never heard that?

What?

About climate change and everything. She gave the opening address.

Yeah. I saw that. Mia Mottley is–

She's such a ballsy lady.

Yeah, Mia Mottley. I was looking at a video online, and one of the first places she visited in Barbados was a fish house.

True.

I was like- she said, I got this person taking care of this part of the island. I got this person dealing with that, and I'm down here checking my fishermen.

That's it. She's a smart lady. Does anybody look at the examples of fishermen feeding the island after disasters, or after COVID or during COVID and say, look, we need to revere this part of our culture?

Now you're trying to piss me off.

I'm trying to get to you.

Do you know how many times I keep telling these people like the government, no matter- the fishermen and the farmers are two groups of people that you should literally have on a pedestal. You should be doing a lot more for them. And I remember this guy at the Department of Agriculture too. He said, for what? I said, if we ever get hit with a disaster where the shipping lanes aren't open–

Correct.

Shipping lanes aren't open or something's–I don't know, some plague breaks out down here and people can't come here, whatever. Who do you think are gonna feed the people of the Virgin Islands, whether they're born here, from another place, living here, tourists that happen to get trapped here, who do you think are gonna feed them? The fishermen and the farmers. So when you talk about food security, those two groups of people got to be front and center to the top of the chain. It's just, you're very blindsided when it comes to the fishermen. I'm like, no, if you really stop and think–

They thought you were being an advocate, but what you were being was a proper scientist and a proper manager. Because right now, food security is one of the most discussed topics about the importance of fisheries and having sustainable fisheries as a mechanism for making sure that people are fed.

I think the problem here, one of the biggest parts of the problem is the disconnect between the government. And I don't know if that's because you have people that are sitting in key positions that don't understand, don't give a shit. I don't know. The disconnect between those key positions in the government and like the fishermen or the farmers. I think that's a problem. Nobody really sits down.

[00:24:13]

Perhaps it's a combination of the two. One is that, for example, the way things were done 20 years ago and the way that we're doing them now. Very different. And it's much more concerned about local populations and local knowledge and making sure that people are included in the process. Not to say that other people didn't think about those things back then, but it's not receiving the same attention as it's receiving now. The other thing is too, is Jimmy, and Dave, and Julian were not very easy people to work with way back when. And now the collaboration that we have makes things much better, largely due to your 33 years of service and being a bridge and the things of just sort of the- I think it's from both sides, the shift, and I hope it continues. I hope that that continues because I think there's opportunities that people can take advantage of the good [INAUDIBLE] kind of comment. There's other things that are out there that people simply aren't aware of, that if they knew it, they could do it.

I remember Julian came to me a couple years ago and he said, Interviewee, I'd really like to revive the St. Thomas Fishermen's Association. I had just retired. And David was sort of the backbone of that organization. And when David left the island it kind of fell to the wayside and it just happened to be like the perfect storm. The feds were coming up with a lot more potential management. And the government sort of was absent from the table. And he said, Interviewee, we have to do something. Not necessarily to fight, maybe that's not the right word to use, but we have to be able to have a voice.

And to be involved.

And if they're willing to come to the table, listen to us, and take our input, then we need to be able to come together as a unified group. So I said, OK, Julian, you got me. Little did I know. It took me six, eight months to literally bring life back to that association. I had to literally start all over.

Really, that's not an easy thing to do.

No. So David and I have always had a very good relationship. So I reached out to David Olson and he helped me because he had a lot of the old files to kind of helped me. I would call him up and be like, Dave, what do I do? And he'd be like, well, Interviewee, you could do this and this. So David Olson was very, very helpful. And he was excited to hear that we were getting it up and running. And ever since we've revived it, when we go to a meeting, whether it's Julian or me, Julian and Daryl, whoever, the government not being vocal, interested, I don't know what to call it. They sort of gravitate to the fishermen's association and go, OK, well what do you guys think? And that has made every painstaking moment getting that association up and running worth it because now they respect the input. You're not coming to the table, sword blazing like they did in 2005 with Jimmy, Dave, and Julian. And they listen and they literally have been extremely receptive to the input that we have. Miguel is great. Miguel Rolon, I have-

[00:28:02]

He's a special guy, isn't he?

Tremendous, amount of respect for that man. So he's been great and helping us negotiate.

How many years has he done this for? My Lord.

30 some. So he's been great helping us navigate those tricky waters of state, fed, the organization, that kind of thing.

He's very much aware of the process and the pragmatics of it all, but at the same point in time, understands the local perspective. And that's very rare in upper level management. And that's what I think is the difference today, especially that I see in my region. As I see people like Annie [INAUDIBLE], people like Clay Porch and John Walter that understand the need for the collaboration and the local involvement. I got to tell you, it's such a wonderful place to work in comparison to where it was when I first started.

I'll tell you my biggest frustration and my biggest gripe is the lack of interest from the department, from the government here, from the local government. Just the lack of- it's very, very frustrating.

I imagine it's frustrating to them too. Weren't there times when you were frustrated?

No.

You felt like you couldn't get things done? Or did you always feel like there was a way to get something done?

When I became the-

Of course, you were a bit pushy though.

I'm a ballsy bitch you know.

I know you. That's why you and me have got the same haircut.

No, no. They're just not there. They don't care. It's not like the government is voicing their desires and no one is listening. That's not even the case. When you have a fisherman advisory committee, Brent, that's supposed to meet once a month and their sole purpose- in the VI code states that group meets. And it's made up of recreational, commercial, the educational representation from an educational institution. It's just the perfect–

Blend.

Blend of people. And they're there to advise the commissioner on matters. But if you don't listen to my advice, well, first let's back up even more. You can never get a quorum to even meet. So therefore you can't provide the commissioner with any advice. That is a problem. And the reason why it can't happen is because the government has put people on the committee that just shouldn't be there. And I'm not saying that because I have my issues with the government. Seriously, but there are people on there that just shouldn't be there. They're not knowledgeable.

[00:31:09]

So how do you solve that problem?

Well, first of all, the person that picks the people to go on the committee is the commissioner. He needs to put his differences aside. And you really need to pick people that are involved or a good representative for whatever sector they're gonna represent. You need to fill a committee with people that will show up, knowledgeable, and represent the people that they're there to represent. That's a problem. So that's when I tell you the government just ain't there. That's one of the examples I'm talking about. I have serious problems with the government. Serious. And for me, maybe I ask too much just because I am just so passionate about it, but I don't think so.

I don't think so.

We could have a whole conversation about the people in charge. I ain't trying to bash people, but that's my biggest gripe. Just a lack of interest from the people that are responsible for the commercial fishermen.

I think you hit on it, when you talk about island wide stability, food security, key issues like that, when you talk about disaster recovery whether the protonation is a natural disaster or a health crisis, I think that you highlight one of the key components of recovery lies within the agricultural and the fishery sector.

Well, if you go in the VI code, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources covers a fishermen in one part of the code- I think it's title 12. And then when you go to title seven, that's the Department of Agriculture. So the Department of Agriculture is responsible for providing the goods and services to the fishermen and farmers under the Fishermen and Farmers Consumers Act of 1977. And then when you go over to title 12, chapter 9A, DPNR is responsible for the fishermen for their regulatory, their registration, their data collection, etc. So you have two groups of people that are the top and probably the most–the top of the food chain or top of the food security that we still talk about all the time being divided in two parts of the VI code under two different agencies. So when I found that out, I went to the Senate and I had the senator at the time, Senator Sarahuw, called in the newly-elected commissioner of agriculture. And I sat him down and I showed him what I had discovered in the code, and he looked at me and he said, the fishermen are more than I can handle. I don't want any part of that right now. I said, but you're responsible for providing their goods and services, so you have to take care of them. You are responsible for taking care of them to make sure that you can assist them. I'm not telling you you have to give them anything for free, but to make sure that they have all the things that they need in order to carry out their livelihood. DPNR, they're responsible for making sure they check all the regulatory boxes. By default, over the years, you have sort of allowed DPNR—