



**Jody Houck**  
**Cypress Point Oyster Company**  
**Spring Creek, FL**  
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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson  
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski  
Length: Fifty eight minutes  
Project: Saltwater South: Forgotten Coast

[00:00:02.23]

**Annemarie A.:** Today is Monday, May . . . I think it's May 17.

[00:00:10.09]

**Jody H.:** It is.

[00:00:12.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. Monday, May 17, 2021. This is Annemarie Anderson, recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am in Spring Creek, Florida, in Wakulla County. I am with Ms. Jody. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself? Tell us your name and tell us what you do.

[00:00:26.23]

**Jody H.:** Sure! My name is Jody Houck. I'm an oyster farmer. I started an oyster farm three years ago with my husband, and we have now grown to ourselves and three additional employees. We are moving into Spring Creek permanently and we've gone from borrowing someone else's lease—Deborah Keller, I'm very grateful she gave us a shot, she let us intern with her—and then we finally found our own water and here we are, working on the water for two years. Now, we're processors and we can work on the land. It's really cool.

[00:00:58.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, before we kind of talk about your experiences here, I'd like to talk about maybe your early life. Could you tell me where—well first, if you're okay with it, give me your date of birth, please?

[00:01:11.16]

**Jody H.:** Yes! It was August 1, 1961. Cleveland, Ohio, St. Luke's Hospital. I was the first of two children. I really loved living in Bedford, Ohio. It's where all my cousins were, my grandma and grandpa. And at the age of six, my mom and dad decided get the heck out of cold weather, and we moved to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. So, I've been a fish ever since.

[00:01:42.04]

**Annemarie A.:** That's beautiful. Well, tell me a little bit about your relationship, maybe, with nature growing up in Ft. Lauderdale.

[00:01:46.16]

**Jody H.:** Sure. So, as a little kid, my dad was a master diver. I think when I was eight, he made a dive tank out of a pony keg, a pony extinguisher, a fire extinguisher, and he taught my little brother and I who—I'm three years older—how to dive. He had a commercial lobster license. So, every weekend, sometimes even during the week, we would get in the boat and drive out to the reef. It's only twenty feet of water. And we'd go down and hand-pick lobster and fill the boat with white gold, as we called it at the time. It helped augment my dad's income. At about sixth grade, we moved to Merritt Island, which was a pretty big deal, because that's about the time when you start noticing boys. All of my

friends were in Ft. Lauderdale. But I made some instant, fast friends. The next year, my parents—my wish at the time was to have a horse. At Christmas, my dad shows up and there's this big, beautiful painted horse in the back of the truck. So, we rode all around Merritt Island. It was all orange groves then, very few houses. We would even swim in the Indian River. Dad built us a little boat with a little bit of a window in it, so we could ride around and waterski and, again, I've been mostly a fish. Between the ocean and the Indian River, it was an incredibly beautiful place to grow up.

[00:03:12.16]

**Annemarie A.:** That sounds like it. What were your parents' names?

[00:03:14.06]

**Jody H.:** My dad was Dallas, and he's not with us any longer. Sorry.

[00:03:23.15]

**Annemarie A.:** It's okay. We can take a break.

[00:03:29.22]

**Jody H.:** He was a great . . . we didn't have any money, but we always had fun. [Laughter]

[Pause in interview]

[00:03:33.12]

**Jody H.:** We would leave for vacation and, literally, he'd have enough money for gas and maybe a couple bags of Lays potato chips and a coke or two. [Laughter] We would drive twenty-four hours back to Ohio to go see my grandparents for every holiday we could, so he was just a hoot. My mom is Judy, and she is still in Cocoa Beach. I try to visit. Well, now that COVID's over, I try to visit about every six to eight weeks or get her up here.

[00:04:01.00]

**Annemarie A.:** That's nice.

[00:04:02.20]

**Jody H.:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:04:04.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. What did your father do for a living besides lobster?

[00:04:09.09]

**Jody H.:** Lobster? [Laughter] That was his part-time job. But he worked for Florida Power & Light. He was a lineman initially. Then he became a project manager planning out where new lines would go, service for homes, service for commercial businesses. He had an early retirement, and he started driving big tractor trailers, because he liked having a lot of freedom. My dad didn't really like authority. So, I think he was much happier when he finally worked for himself. Then he got sick and we got, he had a bad heart attack, and we were lucky enough to have another ten years, but he was not . . . he lived with various

family members after that. So, really cute story: my little grandson was watching a Christmas movie this past Christmas. I don't know the name of the movie, but Kurt Russell is Santa Claus, and part of the movie is a little boy whose father passed away says to Santa Claus, "I'd like to see my dad." In a dream, he sees him. Lachlan said to his mommy, "Well, maybe I can see Papa again." So, that was really touching.

[00:05:27.12]

**Annemarie A.:** That's so sweet.

[00:05:27.19]

**Jody H.:** Yeah, that was this Christmas. The cool thing is, my grandchildren got to know my dad, and that's pretty special.

[00:05:37.18]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, for sure. So. That is very special. What was your horse's name?

[00:05:42.27]

**Jody H.:** My horse's name was Sundance.

[00:05:45.14]

**Annemarie A.:** That's so nice.

[00:05:45.29]

**Jody H.:** Yeah! He was a big, beautiful paint. He was terribly bad-tempered, but I loved him and it didn't matter.

[00:05:56.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. It sounds idyllic to be able to be raised that way.

[00:06:02.15]

**Jody H.:** Yes! Yes.

[00:06:05.09]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, tell me a little bit about maybe some of the things that you did growing up there besides . . . riding around.

[00:06:16.09]

**Jody H.:** Oh! The beach, surfing, chasing lifeguards. [Laughter] I was a cheerleader in junior high. High school, I left high school my senior year and went to the community college. I knew I was going to have to pay my way through school, so it seemed like a really good idea to get started. And I was kind of bored in high school that last year. I'd done all of my required courses, and I could have taken seven hours of swimming or underwater basket weaving. It seemed like a good use of my time. In hindsight, I rushed through my A.A. degree and then transferred to Florida State, and then I rushed through my college years. It's like, "Huh! I could have had a lot more fun if I wasn't in such a big hurry." Graduated from FSU, and met my first husband here in a class. He used to sit in the way

back, and I used to sit in the front, and next thing you know, this guy is sitting next to me. He was kind of real full of himself. I went home one day and said, "Mom, this jerk is sitting next to me in college in this class." And I married him. [Laughter] We had two children, Nicholas and Cynthia, and then the marriage didn't work out. I married a second time, and Ron and I are still pretty good friends. He comes and spends Christmas with us. He's in Maryland, where—we all moved to Virginia. He moved to Maryland, but it's an hour away. So, had two more children, Alex and Angelica. They're twins and they're going to be thirty this year, which is hard for me to believe. They were the center of my universe for a very long time, my kids were. Then I started having grandkids! We lived in Virginia. My professional career was largely in Virginia. Once Cynthia had the first grandchild, we decided to come and buy a little house here so we could spend a lot of time with our grandkids like my grandparents spent with me.

[00:08:17.15]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:08:19.18]

**Jody H.:** That's maybe part of the reason why we're here oystering, is because the grandkids are here.

[00:08:26.18]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah.

[00:08:28.00]

**Jody H.:** Well, tell me a little bit about your educational background, because I feel like it just—  
talking to you the other day, it kind of feeds into what you're doing now. What did you  
study?

[00:08:36.20]

**Jody H.:** So, at Florida State, I got a double bachelor of science degree, believe it or not. I had  
government, but I had a lot of science credits, and English. I went back to school and  
said, "How can I graduate the fastest?" That was how. So, one semester later, and I was  
graduating. Then, after the twins came, I started a master's program at FIT, Florida  
Institute of Technology. I was working for Harris Corporation as an engineer and worked  
on some really cool government programs. A lot of overhead satellite programs. And  
learned how to write software while I was there. [Wind Noise] And prior to that, I  
actually taught school. At my first degree, before I went back to graduate school, I taught  
junior high and high school. Honestly, that was the best job in the world, because if you  
could teach a child something like how to do fractions or percentages and they're having  
a really hard time—I taught summer school, the kids that were just having a really hard  
time. You had to think about, how is this person going to learn? So, you'd try pennies or  
you'd try an apple. All sorts of things. And when the lightbulb came on and that child  
actually learned something that they thought they couldn't learn, it was the most  
rewarding job ever. It didn't make any money, but it was very, very rewarding.

[00:10:05.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Where did you teach school?

[00:10:07.01]

**Jody H.:** So, I taught at Central Junior High. I taught at Eau Gallie High School and I taught at . . . DeLaura Junior High. So, they were all in Brevard County. That's where I still lived, in the Merritt Island, Cocoa Beach area.

[00:10:22.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Nice. Well, maybe, is there anything else you'd like to add about your life prior to oystering?

[00:10:29.14]

**Jody H.:** I lived a full life prior to oystering. I feel like I have at least a second or third life going right now. So, yeah, I must be a cat and I've certainly not lost all nine lives yet, because I changed careers a number of different times. Somehow, we managed to get early retirement, and here we are. Although people think this isn't retirement—I get laughed at all the time. I think I'm working harder, now, physically than I ever did. But it's like the chapter's not over, but the next chapter starts, if that makes any sense.

[00:11:04.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, that makes perfect sense.

[00:11:07.23]

**Jody H.:** Yeah.

[00:11:09.01]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, tell me a little bit about—tell me about moving to Wakulla County or Gadsden County.

[00:11:16.15]

**Jody H.:** So, Cynthia was pregnant with Lachlan. Cynthia is our second child, our oldest daughter, and Angelica was still at Penn State, our youngest daughter, the youngest twin. We decided that we wanted to make sure that we had the same relationship with our grandchildren that both Dewey and I had with each of our grandparents. So, we decided we would buy a little, tiny fish camp house. It's really one bedroom. We kind of made a closet into a second bedroom. And we would have a place where we could come and spend long weekends. At that point, we hadn't talked about moving back to Florida; we were still both busy. I think Dewey had just gotten promoted to . . . oh, the Chief Data Officer at Boeing Defense. I just moved to working for Veritas as a director of all the government sales and programs. We were just going to have a place to visit and a place that we could bring the kids without their parents and spoil them rotten—ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; seven baths a day; whatever they want to do, we would do it. It's a cute, cute, cute little fish cabin, but it's teeny tiny. At some point, we decided we actually liked being closer to the grandkids than being thirteen hours away, and we looked at each other and said, "What the heck! Let's make it full time." [Phone rings] So, we did, and here we are. I told Dewey that, if he was going to retire, he couldn't just sit

around and smoke cigarettes and drink beer, that I'd get bored, and our neighbor, Wayne Covington, had heard about the WEI Oyster Program, and we decided to go take the program as an audit. They have two programs: one, you can spend seventeen thousand dollars and they tell you what gear to buy and you farm on their lease. We didn't want anybody telling us what to do, but we wanted to go see what the program was like. I'm really grateful for it. It wasn't the program that was so beneficial, it was the people that they brought in. Like, oh, Bill Walton from Auburn. He's not our Sea Grant person, but he comes to classes and introduced us to Oyster South. Colleen Dwyer, in the program, introduced us to Oyster Mom, and Keller let us come volunteer on our lease, which was huge. So, we had some idea of what we were getting into before we actually did it full-time. We met Julie Davis. She was a Sea Grant person from the Carolinas, and I think now she works for . . . I can't remember the name of the oyster company. Silver Lady . . . anyway, in the Carolinas. We met the gentleman from Maryland, Matt, who was a PhD student. He was defending his dissertation. He helped us build a real business plan. We used his Excel spreadsheet that he had created, and let us get an idea as to, "Hey, if we do this and make this investment and it's not insignificant, can we eventually make our money back? Can we leave it better than we found it? Can we afford to do it?" So, I'm really grateful for all the people that WEI led to, because it helped us get exactly where we are today. It helped us grow a network of the local farmers. It led to our relationship with Cainnon, who is our co-farmer. It was just an incredible experience. It also turns out that the aquaculture that I wanted to do for twenty years wasn't really environmentally friendly. The idea was, you grow fish in a pond in a closed building so they don't get sick and they're protected and you capture all the effluent and you pump the effluent into a

hydroponic system and it feeds the lettuce and whatever other vegetables you're growing. Well, academically, it sounds great, and I know that they're still working on refining the process, but practically, the plants don't really like fish poop. So, at the end of the month, you end up cleaning out these filters and you still have a lot of fish poop that you have to put somewhere. It's very caustic and it's a high pollutant and you're not allowed to make fertilizer for obvious reasons. So, after looking at several buildings and evaluating it further, we were walking away from that idea, and the oysters let us do something I've wanted to do for twenty years. So, here we are! Farming oysters in Oyster Bay.

[00:15:57.00]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, talk to me a little bit about, you talked to me about the WEI and some of those folks who . . . some of those folks who taught you, but talk to me about your first practical experience of being in the water and doing this work.

[00:16:14.11]

**Jody H.:** It was November. It was thirty-two degrees. And it was right before Thanksgiving. Colleen had given us Deborah Keller's name. We called and said, "We want to come work with you. We'll volunteer; you don't have to pay us." We showed up at eight o'clock in the morning and there was ice on her boat, and we did have our big muck boots and she didn't warn me about clothing. Go to Goodwill, just buy used clothes because oysters are dirty and they ruin your clothes. You never get the smell out, you never get the dirt out. They're clean; they're washed in hot water, but she's right. You never get the smell out, you never get the dirt out. We went out on her boat, and I think we pulled her first

cage. I looked at Dewey and he looked at me and we said, "Oh, no, we don't want cages." [Laughter] She goes out there sometimes by herself. She's incredible. And she'll work her cages by herself, which is incredible. We pulled the first cage, we got the first bags out. We sorted out our oysters; we were looking for market-ready, she was ready to sell some. It was . . . it was just, like, overwhelming, but it was fun. At the end of the day, we came back in. She was in her wet suit. I helped her pull it off. Her husband, Jack, was there. He made margaritas. We had chips and salsa and it couldn't have been a better time, and I ripped the seat of my pants out. [Laughter] Pulling up that first cage. So, that was our first practical experience on the water. I have a picture of that day somewhere with a big smile on my face. My hair is—it was long then, and I swear, the *Back to the Future* mad scientist, it felt like my hair was everything. It was on the water; here we are. It's November. By the time we got off the water, we were peeling off layers and layers and layers of clothes, because it can be freezing in the morning and seventy degrees by the afternoon. We both looked at each other and we said, "Yeah, we can do this." Then we finished the class and put in orders for oysters and, next thing you know, we're putting in lines on Keller's lease and we're growing oysters.

[00:18:32.04]

**Annemarie A.:** What year was that?

[00:18:34.17]

**Jody H.:** I think that was 2017. Pretty sure, because I don't think we got oysters until 2018.

[00:18:38.24]

**Annemarie A.:** Gotcha.

[00:18:41.10]

**Jody H.:** So, that's when we worked with her. Yeah, November 2017.

[00:18:44.18]

**Annemarie A.:** How many oysters did you start growing in the beginning?

[00:18:47.18]

**Jody H.:** So, we originally were going to go small. We were going to go with fifty thousand.

Another person that helped us was Denita from Outlaw Oysters. We go to meet with her and Blake at her house and talk about their gear because we thought we wanted to use what are lovingly called Frankenstein bags because they created them. I happen to love them, except you have to put them together. I didn't realize that at the time. We went and bought our gear; it shows up, and it's all in pieces. I looked at Dewey, he looked at me, and it was like, "Oh, they don't come assembled! Oh! Oh." So, that was a time factor we didn't plan on, but we figured it out. Denita said, "You know, if you're going to grow fifty thousand, it's not any much more work to grow a hundred thousand. And Jody, you have to assume that there's going to be a mortality rate." She explained to us that one year, the first year, they had a ten percent mortality rate. The next year, they had a fifty percent. There were a few big storms, and storms can just open your bags, they can blow your oysters away, or they can kill them because it's so rough out there, like a washing

machine. I don't think oysters like washing machines. So, okay! We'll get a hundred.

Then she said, "You know what? You know? I would start with a hundred and fifty if you're going to go. That's not very many oysters." We're, "Okay! We'll buy the gear and we'll grow a hundred and fifty." Well, we ended up ordering for a hundred and fifty.

Well, I think we ended up ordering two hundred thousand spat, seed. Curtis Hemmel, down in the Tampa area who— God bless him— he tries really hard to make sure there's lots of seed available, we managed to get three different spawns from him. By the third spawn, we ended up with thirty-five thousand more than seed than we really wanted.

That's okay! We put them in nursery bags, we figure, "We'll figure it out." That particular seed, we had a storm come through. Nemo, or I can't remember its name, but that storm actually, we lost all of it. So, we gave it back to Neptune, and we ended up with, I think, a hundred and fifty thousand, and I think we managed to grow out maybe eighty-five. We did lose a few bags and there were some storms where the clips failed or a clip would rip out of a side of a bag, actually rip, which is amazing if you think about the force. The oysters would eventually wash out of the bag. So, you go out and get a bag and go, "Huh! This one's empty!" Or with the babies that got away, that Neptune took back, the ocean was so fierce that it created sort of an accordion force. The bag would spread out and the oyster seed would wash out, and in would come grass. So, when we pulled those bags, it was like, "Who stole our oysters? And they stole our oysters and stuffed the bag with grass?" No, it's Neptune, not a human being. Yeah, so, we've experienced everything but Michael. The fortune thing is, Michael came the year before we got started, so I'm grateful that we did not live through that in the water. Because we already had a tree fall on the house in Quincy, and we had our own Michael disaster. Yeah.

[00:22:11.29]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, yeah. I hope that it wasn't too terrible for you.

[00:22:20.18]

**Jody H.:** It's patched, but it's still not fixed. [Laughter] It doesn't leak, but it's still not fixed.

Finding somebody to actually do the work right now is, like, virtually impossible, and it's not something we can do.

[00:22:30.26]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah.

[00:22:32.16]

**Jody H.:** So, it was an adventure.

[00:22:35.22]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure. Maybe we could talk a little bit about how you found this place.

[00:22:43.03]

**Jody H.:** Yeah. So, that's a really fun story. So, we were lucky enough to eat at Leo's restaurant, Spring Creek, before Michael, because Michael, it's the first hurricane that actually got into the restaurant and actually moved furniture. It was four feet high in the kitchen, so it basically ruined all the equipment. One of the problems with Michael was the high storm

surge, but also, it did damage to trees and the roof. I think Leo and Ben were really quick—and Clay, his sons—were really quick to get the rooms basically swept out, all the mud and all the sand. They got the restaurant swept out, but they realized that it was a do-over. So, we knew the restaurant was closed, and we'd seen that on the Facebook page, and we were really kind of sad about that, because it was very special. It's an institution down here. And, it was one of the few places to get a really good meal, and by that, I mean fresh-caught seafood, because Leo would go catch it all and then cook it up in the restaurant. That's pretty rare. So, we'd been oystering out of our home in Quincy. We would drive with the boat and tumbler to a boat ramp down off of . . . Oyster Bay. We would put our boat in, we would have lunch with us, and we would go out and work our oysters. At the end of six or eight or ten hours or whenever we were finally toast, come back in, load the boat up, drive it home full of the dirty bags. We realized that we really needed a place to work on the water. So, I was up with my son. My son had some personal challenges. I'd gone to Virginia. Dewey was driving around trying to help us and be back and forth with the boat, with the bags, with the tumbler. It was a logistics adventure.

[00:25:00.21]

**Annemarie A.:** I can imagine.

[00:24:58.17]

**Jody H.:** Yeah. Every day, five days a week, sometimes seven days a week. He drove around and pulled into the marina, and the time, it looked like Estuary Oyster Company, which

has been renting space here, owned it. Dewey talked to Matt, who was one of our employees, and Matt said, "No, this is part of Leo's property." Dewey rented the slip, so that's how we started. Two months later, we said, "Hey, we got a slip. Now we can build a processing facility!" So, we negotiated a place with Leo. We were going to put it down here on the waterfront, but the Florida Department of Agriculture said you can't have two processors on the same footprint. So, we built the processing room up at the restaurant. Then, we said, "Gosh, we're still tumbling on the boat," which means you've got to fit oysters and baskets and so, by the time you're there, you just hardly have any room on the boat. Then we thought, "Hmm, we're processors. We could tumble!" So, we moved the tumbler off the boat and would drag all the oysters up to the back of the restaurant and tumble them. Then we got the bright idea, "Well, we can tumble down here!" So, we called the Florida Department of Agriculture. They came down, they walked through, said, "Yes. If you do this, this, and this, you can tumble down here." So, we just kind of evolved over the last eighteen months, but it was my husband who was driving around trying to solve our logistics problem and we got lucky. Then Leo said, "Well, I'm going to sell the place." "Okay." "You want to buy it?" "Yep." And next month, we will have that partnership underway.

[00:26:45.22]

**Annemarie A.:** That's so exciting.

[00:26:48.04]

**Jody H.:** It is very exciting. We have a lot to say grace over here.

[00:26:50.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. I was wondering if, maybe, I'd like to get to being on the boat and doing the physical labor of oystering, but before that, could you maybe describe your experience of the restaurant, eating at the restaurant? What it was like inside, what kind of food you ate?

[00:27:08.20]

**Jody H.:** Yeah! So, I remember very well showing up. We didn't live in Florida yet full-time. We were still going back and forth to Virginia. We were out driving around, and we found Spring Creek kind of by accident. We had gone and driven around Shell Point. I don't even know if we had bought a house yet, but maybe we had. Anyway, we pull in, and there's a couple of people in there. Leo's there, Ben's there. We sat down at a table by the window. The restaurant itself has a big fireplace, it's coquina rock, I think, or limestone, a natural resource here. A lot of pine and a lot of cypress inside, so it was very warm, is how I would describe it. We sat down, and we had never had crab claws the way they serve crab claws in Florida. So, I looked at Dewey and he looked at me—we do that a lot—well, we have to have these cocktail claws, although they weren't called that, they were called something else. So, sure enough, here they come, and they were blackened and they were delicious. Then I had to have a piece of tomato pie because, I mean, tomato pie, you can't pass that up. Then I had to have the scallops and I had them blackened and they were delicious. I don't eat a lot of fried food—I know everybody in Florida really likes fried food—but I walked out of there, and I had to be rolled cause I

ate so much food. I don't remember what Dewey had, but I remember what I had. It was delicious. And it was really special, because you knew you were getting a very well-done meal by people who didn't cut any corners, you know? The shrimp was Gulf shrimp. The scallops were real Bay scallops, not cut out of a ray or anything. So, it was pretty special.

[00:29:02.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, it sounds like it.

[00:29:05.10]

**Jody H.:** Yeah.

[00:29:06.19]

**Annemarie A.:** I was wondering, what year specifically did you all start oystering here?

[00:29:13.15]

**Jody H.:** We started here last March or April because hired Matt around April. By May, we were processing; we had built the processing room and got it certified. By September, we were processing down here on the dock. Everything we've sort of evolved it to try and improve efficiencies. So, we're still trying to figure out how to grow beautifully clean, delicious oysters smarter, not harder. There's still a ways to go.

[00:29:53.10]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, I bet. What is it like? What were the challenges of kind of starting up in 2020, the year of pandemic?

[00:30:02.07]

**Jody H.:** [Laughter] So, it's funny. We had sold oysters before the pandemic, November, December. Deborah also has done a great job and purchases oysters from a lot of farmers. I don't know where she gets her energy, God bless her. She sells at at least one farmer's market a week, sometimes two. She sells to local restaurants. And she was who we sold the majority of our oysters to from the first crop, October, November, December, and then the new year started. We were selling oysters to Deborah even as COVID started, but she realized that things like the farmer's market weren't going to happen and we're all hunkered down in isolation. Restaurants are closing. Who buys oysters? Restaurants. We were really lucky. Another person that I'm really grateful for is when Deborah was trying to spread it around, and that was great, Jeff Tilley over at Oyster Boss agreed to buy oysters. He would buy a couple thousand, and again, he would spread it around from different farmers. So, our retail prices—wholesale—went from fifty-five cents to forty cents. What it did is, it allowed us to sell oysters before they died, because a dead oyster, you can't get any money for. And it allowed us to pay for the gas and the boat. And it kept us afloat. We were still investing a lot more money in the business than we'd planned, but yeah, the nine months were pretty hard. We also started selling oysters, and we would put signs up at Crow's Corner and at Ingram's Marina at the lake, Lake Talquin, at the Whippoorwill. And around the holidays like Easter and Super Bowl, we'd get a couple thousand orders a week. And we sold them for fifty cents apiece, so still

very, very cheap, but it allowed us to sell our product and keep us going. Then, when the restaurants started opening, the world changed and here we are. We have at least one truck a week, sometimes two, and our oysters are going to Kimball House in Atlanta, Seabear in Athens, a Chattanooga restaurant put some on our website. They're going fast and far, and that's really exciting. We are creating some really great relationships with some chefs and getting a lot of great feedback.

[00:32:37.19]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:32:37.19]

**Jody H.:** Yeah.

[00:32:40.19]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, how did you get—I keep saying we're going to get there, but I have some questions about community, because it seems that especially here in Oyster Bay, you build community with other farmers and other folks who have been here like Leo, who have been here a long time. Could you talk a little bit about building that community of farmers or of people who live here in Spring Creek?

[00:33:11.27]

**Jody H.:** Yeah, I can. So, this business is a five-year-old—aquaculture in Florida is about five years old. That said, Leo and his sons tried growing oysters from seed, I want to say back

in the late [19]80s, early [19]90s. He'll give you the exact dates. They proved it could be done, and they should get credit with proving the viability of oysters as an aquaculture product in this area. I say it that way because every body of water is different. So, we have Oyster Bay here, which you've been on with us. And it's just the right level of salinity and just the right amount of freshwater, because we have a natural spring right out here, and it's probably the biggest spring in Florida. Divers went and surveyed it, and that's something else Leo will tell you with specificity. I just have heard the stories. We . . . this business got off to a really rough start five years ago. The W.E.I. had talked to a lot of farmers of Australia, and they said, "You need a co-op." So, a co-op was established. It wasn't a not-for-profit co-op, it was a true business, and it was kind of like a dot com. It was like, "Well, if we build it, they'll come." And that's not exactly what happened. Commitments were made and confusion happened. [Dog howls] We came after that fact, and we've been trying to kind of, like, start our own community, if you will, here. Leo's allowed us to do that. When we showed up at Spring Creek, there were already five other farmers that were farming oysters here. We've gotten very close to a couple of them, and hopefully, we're sharing methodologies and techniques. Ben Wiggin's farms were SEAPA gear. He and his buddy, John, are out in Skipper Bay, and it's a very different process than the gear we use. Cainnon, who we have started really co-farming with, farms in floating bags. They're different than ours because they're pillow bags, but you treat them largely the same way. So, S. and M., the young kids from Florida State, they were here. They just moved over, their dad bought them this little place on the water. They're going to start their own processing shop, but I taught them how to use our tumbler and how to get their farm organized and how to grow prettier oysters that

command more money. So, we still come back and forth and share with each other what's working, what's not. We toured their facility and I asked them where they're going to put their cooler and reminded them that you want it to be accessible and that you want it to be accessible for the truck that's going to come pick up the oysters. So, we are working on establishing a community here. It's one farmer at a time, I think.

[00:36:13.22]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, that's great.

[00:36:12.11]

**Jody H.:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:36:15.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, I was wondering, maybe we could talk . . . we could get onto the **latter**. I was wondering if, I've been here, I've spent time on Oyster Bay with you last week, and I wonder if maybe you could describe it for people who will maybe never see it.

[00:36:34.11]

**Jody H.:** I can try. So, we have a floating farm. How you build a floating farm is, you go and put anchors into the ocean floor and then, on the oceans, you tie either chain or rope, eight to ten feet depending on the depth of your water. Then, you string what's called stormline. You put a buoy on it and you string stormline from one anchor floating in the water to the next. Then, you build your bags and they have what are called stormclips, and you clip

your bags onto that line. They're just out there floating in the water. They're not . . . they're low-profile, so we're lucky in that we're in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. There aren't a whole lot of homes that can actually see the leases, and so there's not a concern about, "Oh, you're in my backyard or you've got all this gear." All farmers here in Florida have floating gear. Some of them have big cages. Some of them have pillow bags. There's a variety of options. But ours is all—they look like big, square black bags that are just attached to this line and float. You put your lines in so you can drive your boat in between it. So, if you're really good, you can actually work two lines at once. If you're . . . over fifty, you probably only want to work one line at once, because you still are sitting in your Carolina skiff. Most of us use skiffs. You hook up to your line, your stormline, and you unclip one bag at a time. And as you unclip that bag, you bring it into the boat. Then we do something very different. My husband and I are retired engineers, and we wanted to build a data model. We wanted to be able to actually measure how the oysters are—what their weight was when they went into the water, what their weight was when they came out. We count the dead. So, we have an idea, based on weight, how many oysters we have in each of our floating cages. This way, if we have a major event like a Michael, we will know exactly how many oysters got washed off the farm or got beat to death in the washing machine. And we will know exactly, if there was a die-off, what were the conditions? Was the salinity over thirty parts per thousand? Was the water temperature over ninety? All those things that could be stressors on oysters, we wanted to be able to actually have the data to be able to respond to people who are asking the questions, like Bill Walton or Leslie Sturmer. They're with SeaGrant. When something happens, they help us try and understand what's going on. So, we go pull a bag. We dump

it into a fish basket. We weigh the fish basket. We dump it into the tumbler, and the oysters run in a big circle through an oyster tumbler. Our first tumbler could fit in our boat. Garrett [Kreuger], a local oyster farmer who now is building tumblers—amazing, he's making a living just building tumblers, he's sending them all over the world now. I think we have tumbler number four, and we credit that with helping us learn how to grow really pretty, high-quality oysters. It helps us get a nice shape, and they turn into like a cup. That's what you want; that's what restaurants want. So, when you're done tumbling, you get your clean bags. You take a fish scoop and you load a little bit of oysters in the bag. Overcrowding is a big stressor on oysters. It'll change the shape of them in the bag as they grow. And it's rinse and repeat. Then you bend over and hang that bag on the line and go grab the next one. That's kind of how it works.

[00:40:21.04]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:40:23.16]

**Jody H.:** Yeah! And if you forget a bag and it sits in the water for a month or two, it goes from ten pounds to seventy pounds. Yeah!

[00:40:30.23]

**Annemarie A.:** That's—

[00:40:34.28]

**Jody H.:** Yeah, that's an oops!

[00:40:34.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That sounds very heavy. [Laughter]

[00:40:38.17]

**Jody H.:** It's so heavy that, instead of floating on top of the water, they're floating six inches under the water. So, that's how you know you missed one. You look down your line, and there's fifty or sixty of these bags in a line. All of a sudden, a third of the line you don't see anything. I know I put bags there! And as you get closer, you realize that they're under the water and you now have—

[00:41:01.29]

**Annemarie A.:** Full-grown ones.

[00:41:01.14]

**Jody H.:** Yeah. Yes!

[00:41:04.09]

**Annemarie A.:** Oh, mercy.

[00:41:06.02]

**Jody H.:** Yes! Oh, mercy is right.

[00:41:09.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, walk me through, maybe, the life cycle of an oyster from . . .

[00:41:10.29]

**Jody H.:** Nursery?

[00:41:14.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Yes, all the way to your market, ready for you.

[00:41:18.28]

**Jody H.:** So, that was another fun thing we got to do at the WEI. They arranged a field trip. We went down to Cedar Key and, I want to say it was the Southern Cross—and whatever I say will be wrong—but I think it was the Southern Cross. He actually showed us spawning of clams. The oysters weren't spawning that day. And we watched the female clams and male clams, and we got to watch what happens. We buy oysters from Florida hatcheries. There's so such thing as a true, Florida tetraploid, but we do buy Florida brood stock from Curtis from Apalachicola. We have been waiting for Donnie McMahan up in Pensacola to have a good harvest, I mean, a good spawn. When we get them, they can be as small as three millimeters or as large as nine to twelve millimeters. It just depends on what the nursery's willing to sell. I get a call twenty-four hours before I have to pick them up, get in the car, I call around to see if anybody else wants seed. If their order's ready. I drive to Tampa if it's Curtis, south of Tampa. I have my coolers, I have my frozen jugs of

water. I have cardboard over those, and I fit as many sleeves of oysters—and they come in a sock—in the coolers as I can. You don't close the coolers; you don't want them to get too cold, but you also don't want them to get too hot. And five and a half hours, six hours later, here I am, dropping off oysters. We go unload our bags, we get them in our boat, and we get them in the water the very same day. So, our very first time we had oysters, Denita was pregnant with Beau. We picked up her oysters and our oysters, and Blake was gone. I think he was out buying their pleasure boat. So, she's very pregnant and we bring back her oysters and she said, she hoped us understand how many we should put in the bag. We'd never had babies before. And she said, "Could you guys help me with mine?" So, that community, here to help. Somebody gets stuck, the Spring Creek Navy comes to the rescue. She helped us put our oysters in, and we helped her get hers in. So, they get in the bags and they float, and you leave them alone for about six weeks. Then, you go back out, and they don't all grow the same. Some get bigger, some stay about the same, some die. But you go through and you start tumbling your oysters to sort them out, because you don't want bigger oysters with smaller oysters. So, originally, our oysters float in four-millimeter bags. They're very tiny. Sometimes, they're in two-millimeter bags if they're really, really tiny. They stay in those bags for anywhere from six weeks to three months. Some of them will graduate up to a nine-millimeter and then they'll graduate up to a fourteen and then they'll graduate to an eighteen. They're just bigger versions of the bags; bigger holes. The bigger the holes are, the more water, the more food. And they tend to grow faster when you get them into the bigger bags. You wait about six months and you touch them every month, and in about six months, you've got a certain number of oysters that are ready to sell. Then, twelve months later, the ones that didn't grow very fast are

ready to sell. So. The idea behind farm-raised triploids is, you want to sell them before they spend two summers, because the summers are a big stressor; the heat, the salinity. Even things like normal husbandry tumbling can be a little more stressful on them as they get older.

[00:45:04.14]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes a lot of sense.

[00:45:07.10]

**Jody H.:** Yes, and every time you're touching them, it's more labor. So, the idea is, get them ready and sell them when they're ready to sell; don't hang onto them.

[00:45:14.15]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. How did you kind of develop those connections with selling and marketing?

[00:45:22.04]

**Jody H.:** So, I sold . . . I sold or ran sales teams at the end of my career and had been rather successful, writing proposals for big government programs, and then selling hardware and software—high-end I.T. hardware and software, big systems, millions and millions of dollars' worth. So, we had experience in that area. Oyster South was a really big place for us to additionally network and meet people and farmers and restauranteurs and, what I'll call purveyors, the wholesalers, through that foundation. I have to credit Bryan

Rackley who is at the Kimball House. We told him about Spring Creek and what we wanted to do and that we were going to bring the food truck back up and we were going to renovate some of the rooms so people could come for the weekend. And let people come out and tour the farm; let them paddleboard around in Spring Creek, let them see the manatees. That kind of fish, maybe they want to go crabbing, maybe they want to go scalloping when the scallops are in season. We happened to be at the very last Oyster South that was in-person in February of 2020. We managed to ship him some of this year's crop right around, I want to say, June. Bryan coached us on how to approach the purveyors and how he could actually order our oysters. He gave me a phone number; I called the purveyor. The purveyor said, "If Bryan wants your oysters, we will buy them," and that's where our first wholesale purveyor relationship came into being, because the chef, Bryan at Kimball House, spoke to Evans. And Evans is highly regarded. They really care about the quality of their seafood. Started ordering, I think the first order was a thousand oysters, and some weeks we're up to six thousand. So, that's pretty impressive. Similar story, another chef had actually come to Spring Creek. He was visiting with a friend of his. What's the likelihood that somebody from Decatur is going to be staying at a house in Spring Creek? Noah walked over. Matt, one of our co-farmers, was here. We put two and two together; we were expecting him to show up on Monday, here he is on a Saturday. They go fishing, they visit, they give him oysters. Next thing you know, he says, "Can I have a bunch of oysters? My favorite purveyor is Farmers & Fishermen. Call them." So, we called them and now they're ordering a couple thousand oysters every week. Those are going to Atlanta and other places, Athens, I think. Maybe St. Simon, not positive, but that's the purveyor route. Then my husband, who was a chief technology and

never sold anything in his life, has started cold-calling chefs. He has chefs now in Wilmington that want the oysters—we can't figure out how to get them there cost-effectively—D.C. who want the oysters. He found a local restaurant that is ordering four to five hundred every week, and he's not become our Head of Sales and Marketing. [Laughter] And he loves it. This is the guy that said, "I can't sell anything to anybody." He can sell oysters. I think they sell themselves, but we're going to let him think he sells the oysters.

[00:49:06.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Hey. When you believe in your whole heart in something . . .

[00:49:11.20]

**Jody H.:** When you're passionate, your passion shows. Yes, yes.

[00:49:14.20]

**Annemarie A.:** That's so great. Well, I'm wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about—I'm kind of done, I'm close to being done because I know you have to go to Tallahassee—but I was wondering about maybe some challenges or surprises. Either pleasant or not pleasant that you've learned about this process or about yourself doing this work?

[00:49:40.23]

**Jody H.:** So . . . one of the things, and I'm not blaming anybody, but certainly it was presented and the WEI that this was kind of part-time work. So, I have five grandkids now, they

call me Honey. And one of the reasons I live here is so that I can spend time with my five grandkids. At least the older two really like it down here, and they want to come with me and come to the farm all the time. The farm is fun when we're not working. It's not as fun when we're working. So, they come to the oyster farm and we play. So, it's certainly consumed more of my own personal time than I had planned on. That's one thing. And I think part of that is how it's presented, and maybe—hopefully—it's not being presented that way anymore. The other thing is, it's really a wonderful place to be out on the Gulf and near the Gulf as an office. I worked in government buildings and in big, industry buildings that had no windows because of the kind of work that we did. To be able to be one with nature, we see bottlenose dolphins, we see turtles, we see sharks. We catch fish. I probably don't ever have to go to the grocery store except to make the crew lunches because there's just—every natural resource is here. Blue crabs, we're allowed to take blue crabs off our lease because they eat oysters, and so they're a threat to our crabs. Stone crabs, which are such a wonderful delicacy, are right here on our sandbars. So, I mean, it's met and it's exceeded—one of my objectives was to be one with nature. It's a lot of physical work, a lot of physical work, and in a sense, we've kind of accomplished what we wanted to. We've kind of developed a model—

[Pause in interview]

[00:52:02.25]

**Annemarie A.:** Just one more question.

[00:52:05.14]

**Jody H.:** Yep!

[00:52:07.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay, so, this is the last big question I have for you, and that's what do you hope to see for Cypress Creek Oysters and maybe just the future of oyster aquaculture in Florida?

[00:52:19.25]

**Jody H.:** So, what I would love to see is that Florida, as a state, steps up and embraces aquaculture and helps farmers make it more affordable. It's really expensive. To buy just the gear to grow fifty thousand oysters is almost six thousand dollars. That doesn't include the boat, that doesn't include the tumbler, that doesn't include the seed. That's just the baskets and the line and the anchors, so, that's expensive. Then you have to buy seed every year. Florida does allow us to sell our products tax-free, so we don't get charged any taxes, that's great. But I would love for Florida to step up and understand that they could be the leading nation in wonderful saltwater oysters that are as good, or better, than anybody else's oysters. We don't have to take them—there's enough demand for oysters. We can all succeed. But here, you can grow an oyster ready for sale in six months. Nowhere else in the world can you do that. The state could really help make this industry viable and robust. The other thing I'd like to say is, I'd like this to be an industry where you pay people a fair, living wage. We are working at becoming an employee-owned company so that every one of—I'll call them my partners that work with me and for me—they care about every oyster because they get something out of every oyster. So, when

one is mis-formed or misshaped, we might sell it as a second, or we might throw it away, because it might not be worth touching again, but we don't really throw it away. We give it to the fish. You know? There's black drum, there's sheepshead, they all eat oysters. So, there's nothing wasted in this business if you do it right. I'd like to see all the farmers in Wakulla be able to, if they want to, to grow fine, beautiful oysters that they can sell to restaurants and to purveyors. And make sure the farmer gets a reasonable return on their efforts. If they want to grow seconds, they can grow seconds and be happy with it. But I think this is a very unique place. This is a very unique industry. It's environmentally friendly because oysters clean the water for you. And it's . . . and it's really, really hard work in the heat of summer, so you have to be ready for that. It would be nice if somebody patted you on the back once in a while.

[00:55:00.07]

**Annemarie A.:** I believe that, man. Well, is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to add? Is there anything that we've not discussed?

[00:55:12.23]

**Jody H.:** I don't . . . I don't think so. You know, I think one of the sad things—one of the hardships is, a lot of people, if you saw the leases, a lot of people that started farming when this became viable five years ago, they're not farming anymore. A significant number of those people—there's a little alligator behind us, swimming towards us—a significant number of those people didn't really clean up their leases when they left. I think that's part of the sad part. Everybody that comes out, it's hard. And I understand it's

hard. And it's expensive. And paying people the wages we pay, it's really, every oyster is expensive to grow, but we touch every oyster every month. We don't cull our oysters because we get all the spat off of it that's wild harvest and other things that attach to it before they become big. We are intentionally selling, I'll call them crafted oysters, but I'd like the state to make sure that whatever doesn't get cleaned up, the state gets it cleaned up. It's unsightly. I'd like to motivate people with the reality of, yes, it's hard work, but you can make a living. I'd like to get some of the students that are here in Wakulla County. If there's a way to engage the high school and get kids to understand that they could become divers and help set up leases, they could become farmers, they could farm on my farm and they could stay in Wakulla County. They don't have to leave to make a living and to take advantage of this natural environment. I don't know how to get that message out, because unfortunately, not all the messaging and all the lessons from the first five years were constructive. That's true with anything, but I think it's maybe more true here. I think everybody—hey, we're in Panacea. Everybody had a panacea that they were going to go farm oysters and put a hundred thousand oysters in the water and sell a hundred thousand oysters and make a dollar each and they would only do it on Saturdays. That's completely opposite of what it really takes, and if you sign up, it's commitment, because they're animals. You're growing animals. I'd like to see us overcome the events of the last five years and move into the next phase and be very constructive and positive and demonstrate it can be done. And get to a point where everybody's comfortable sharing and not finger-pointing, if that makes sense.

[00:58:02.19]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes perfect sense.

[00:58:05.17]

**Jody H.:** So, that's probably what I'd say in summary. We're doing it here! We're living the dream! See, there he is. [Points out alligator] He's out of the water now. I think his name is Stan. I think they named him Stan.

[00:58:16.04]

**Annemarie A.:** I love it. It's gorgeous here.

[00:58:19.09]

**Jody H.:** Yeah, it's pretty special. It's pretty special.

[00:58:21.02]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, thank you so much.

[00:58:21.02]

**Jody H.:** You're welcome! Thank you!

[*End of interview*]