



**Cainnon Gregg**  
**Pelican Oyster Company**  
**Spring Creek, Florida**

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Date: May 24, 2021  
Location: Former Spring Creek Restaurant  
Boat Slip, Spring Creek, FL  
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson  
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski  
Length: One hour and twenty minutes  
Project: Saltwater South- Forgotten Coast

[00:00:00.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Today is Thursday, May 26, I believe. I am in Spring Creek, Florida, with Cainnon Gregg. Cainnon, would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us your name and tell us what you do.

[00:00:04.20]

**Cainnon G.:** My name's Cainnon Gregg. I own and operate Pelican Oyster Company, an oyster farm here in the Gulf of Mexico in the Panhandle of Florida.

[00:00:28.16]

**Annemarie A.:** Great. Let's start. Could you, for the record, give us your date of birth, please?

[00:00:33.19]

**Cainnon G.:** Yes. I was born March 5, 1986 in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

[00:00:38.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. Tell me a little bit about growing up. Where'd you grow up?

[00:00:42.22]

**Cainnon G.:** My parents are both in the military, so we travelled a bunch, but mostly grew up in Jacksonville, Florida and East Tennessee. So, right on the foothills of the Smokies. But the majority of high school and middle school was in Jacksonville, Florida at the beach.

[00:01:08.17]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. What was it like growing up in Jacksonville?

[00:01:10.03]

**Cainnon G.:** Jacksonville's cool. I don't want to live there now, but growing up there was cool.

There was a lot of art and music and living at the beach, getting to go—my high school had surf class, so I didn't have to go to gym, I just got to surf every day. I went to a . . . I went to kind of an arts school, a private arts school, so I didn't—my high school career wasn't like your traditional. I didn't have to do English or math or anything like that. All I did was ceramics and technical theater and musical theater and mostly, they let me do as much sculpture and ceramics as I wanted as long as I was in the acting program, because that's how the school made its money. So, yeah, growing up in Jacksonville was awesome. A really cool town.

[00:02:12.03]

**Annemarie A.:** How long have you been interested in art? When did that interest first start?

[00:02:17.29]

**Cainnon G.:** Probably in middle school. I got put in the advanced ceramics class in sixth grade, and stuck with ceramics throughout the rest of school. Still dabble in ceramics whenever I have the chance, but yeah, I've just always really enjoyed making things and creating things.

[00:02:47.02]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, that sounds good. Well, tell me a little bit about . . . I know you were involved in the music and arts scene in your kind of—both high school and young adult life. Could you talk a little bit about that?

[00:03:08.26]

**Cannon G.:** Yeah. So, I grew up in church and, because I grew up in church, a lot of music. We had a church band and stuff like that, so I was part of the church band. I did the sound board and stuff for church services, which got me really interested in singing and drumming and so, in high school, I was always in a band. Right after high school, I got to be in a little more of a serious band. We got signed to Vagrant Records and got to do a tour of the South with some other cool bands. While we were on tour, I met—I saw somebody that I had met at a previous job. I was trying to become an artist for Urban Outfitters, but they had already hired an artist in Jacksonville, so they hired me as a temporary associate. I just helped open the store in Jacksonville and I met a bunch of people while I was there. Then, when I was on tour, I happened to run into the manager of the Urban Outfitters in Charleston, South Carolina. She was like, “Do you still want to be an artist?” I was like, “Well, yeah, but I’m on tour right now.” She was like, “Well, when you get back from tour, why don’t you apply?” So, the next day, she called me. She was like, “Hey, I still have your resume, I still have your everything. I’m going to go ahead and apply for you.” As soon as I got back from tour, I moved to Charleston, South Carolina and started what became my career as an artist for Urban Outfitters. I stayed with them for ten years, just doing design build visuals. I got to travel the country with

them, just building things and designing things and . . . then, I became what they called a display mentor, teaching other people how to do that job. I was the display mentor for the South, so I got to teach a bunch of young kids how to make stuff and how to kind of mimic the aesthetic of Urban Outfitters. That took me to Atlanta and I got another promotion and came back down to Florida. My wife and I were ready to kind of start a family, and so we decided we wanted to be a little bit away from our parents, and they happened to be opening up what, at the time, was called a concept store in Tallahassee. Took over that, still doing the traveling thing. Then, kind of out of nowhere, they laid off a majority of the artists, and I was one of the artists that got laid off. That was kind of when I had been dabbling in oysters and curious about oysters, and I was like, “You know what? Maybe this is kind of a sign from God. I have an opportunity to change careers or change what I’m doing altogether.” It’s kind of like what, losing all hope is freedom? There was nothing for me where I was at anymore, unless I wanted to start doing construction. I just had a skillset that . . . was so specific. There was just nothing it was applicable to locally. So, I got a job. I got to stay with Urban Outfitters for two more years. I became a manager. I’d been there so long that they kind of helped me find something I could do. I helped the company develop a customer service program and, during that time, I would get my work done the first hour or two of my shift, and I would spend the rest of the day just working on my business plan and figuring out how to start oyster farming and how to market it. Where am I going to sell this stuff? Just every day, that was all I was focused on for about two years, just working on . . . yeah, how are we going to do this? How are we going to make this work? Then, as soon as it started working, I quit. I hated the job. I wasn’t getting to make anything anymore; I was

managing a bunch of kids that were in college that didn't really need to make money and didn't really care about learning how to work or do anything, really. I got so depressed at this job. So, the second that I had the chance to quit, as soon as the farm started making money, I quit. But then, about two months later, Hurricane Michael hit and just totally wrecked everything that I'd been working for. So, I got a construction job. Just anything people would let me do, I would—honestly, it seemed like I was just digging holes every day. [Laughter] For fences or for plumbing or whatever. Yeah, just did a bunch of random jobs to kind of, while I was rebuilding the farm and while I was waiting, waiting for oyster seed to be available again, and then right when everything was kind of about to start popping off again, when the oysters were finally ready again, I had planted. I rebuilt everything. About a month into selling oysters again, the country went into lockdown and all my customers closed. [Laughter] For who knows how long, at the time? We had no idea. Which was pretty hard, because the oysters were ready to go and they don't stop growing. So, it's kind of a volume game. You don't want to sit on an oyster, you want to sell an oyster as soon as it's ready, because you're just buying risk. You know? You're holding them into storm season, into hotter climates. Anyways. Yeah, sorry, long answer. [Laughter]

[00:09:50.14]

**Annemarie A.:** No, it was a great answer. I have so many questions from it. A couple clarifying questions: what year did you start with Urban Outfitters?

[00:09:58.02]

**Cainnon G.:** I started with Urban Outfitters in 2007. I graduated high school in 2005. Right out of high school, I started an apprenticeship with a faux finisher. So, we worked in Italian plasters, like lime plasters and we did a lot of . . . gilding. So, we'd do twenty-four—or not twenty-four, fourteen karat gold gilded ceilings. Just a lot of interesting finishes. So, anyways, yeah. That's kind of what led me into trying the Urban Outfitters thing, I just realized how much I loved doing these huge projects. Yeah, so, 2007 is when I started Urban Outfitters. I guess I stopped being an artist for Urban Outfitters in 2017. It was actually the exact week of my ten-year anniversary. [Laughter] So, I did that for exactly ten years.

[00:11:08.27]

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

[00:11:15.09]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah.

[00:11:17.25]

**Annemarie A.:** Tell me a little bit about Charleston. I mean, I'm sure there's not too much difference between Jacksonville and Charleston as far as you're in the same kind of region, on the Atlantic Coast, so I'm sure there was familiarity there. But what was that like, moving there?

[00:11:32.29]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah. So, it was kind of crazy. Jacksonville is like a place that people don't leave.

So, everybody I grew up with, for the most part, is still there. There is a few of us that got out, and it's definitely all the weirdos or the people who are exceptional. I have one friend who is a, he's like a mathematics professor at Texas Tech. Or whatever, doesn't matter. It's interesting to see how many people that I went to school with just never left Jacksonville. I only say that to say: I was going down a bad road in Jacksonville. I was just . . . doing crazy stuff with my friends and, a few months after I left Jacksonville, actually, one of my best friends got arrested for grand theft. There's no way that I would not have been right there with them when it happened. So, I kind of knew I needed to get out of town, which is part of why when they asked me, "Hey, would you want to do this in Charleston?" I was kind of like, "Yeah." It was an opportunity out. So, I kind of lied and told them that I had carpentry experience and that I knew what I was doing. Right before I moved to Charleston, I spent a week with my grandfather, who framed houses. And he just taught me how to use all the tools and how to talk like I knew what I was doing. I took a Greyhound from Knoxville, Tennessee to Charleston. It was like an eighteen-hour ride and I just had a sea bag with a week's worth of clothing and a bicycle and I moved into a hostel. I lived at that hostel for a couple months while I was looking for a place to live, which was so awesome, living there. I had a new roommate every single day. They normally didn't let people stay that long, but I kind of just talked them into it. My situation was odd; it wasn't like . . . it's not like I was trying to live there forever. They knew what I was doing. So, anyways, I just helped out around that hostel. I ended up moving one building over from the hostel. The hostel was—it's called NotSo Hostel and it was in an old Charleston townhouse with, like, ten rooms and a library and

all this stuff. So, had a different roommate every day; ended up moving next door. That was the first time I'd ever left home. It was actually kind of hard to leave home because my dad was in a wheelchair at the time. He had just gotten in a motorcycle accident. But I was just like, "You know what? I can't pass this up." It ended up being the right move, like I said. I stayed there for ten years and I was able to buy my wife a house and buy her—do all the things that people consider milestones early in life. It afforded me all those things and helped me get my wife through college. Because I went to Charleston, I met my wife. So, yeah, but Charleston was amazing. It was so cool to be, what? Twenty-one, twenty-two, living alone in Charleston. I didn't know a soul, but I made a bunch of friends right off the bat. You know, got really into the bike scene and bicycles, so we just rode fixed-gear bikes. So, I'd literally work every day and basically race my friends every night and drink beers. My apartment was the library in an old townhouse. They split a townhouse into, like, three or four apartments. So, my room was just a library with a kitchen on the side of the library. I just had a sea bag full of clothes, and that's what I slept on. [Laughter] And I had my bike. Then, slowly, I just found stuff on the side of the road. Like, I had no money. It was so awesome. I remember the first time I brought a girl over and she came in and was like, "This is all your stuff?" It's literally just like a pile of clothes that was flattened onto the ground. We left very quickly. She didn't want to be there. [Laughter] Eventually, I got this telephone booth for some reason, like a British telephone booth that an art gallery was getting rid of, so I had nothing in a—an apartment with literally nothing in it, and this stupid British telephone booth. [Laughter] Which became where I'd put all my clothes. Then, maybe two months into living in this spot, we're coming home—kind of drunk—and there's a brand-new Ikea futon laying on the

street. Me and my friend Michael, we pick it up, and kind of look at it, smell it. Looks brand-new. College kids throw new stuff away all the time, like somebody's just there for a semester or the summer or whatever. I remember we were walking home and I lived on Crack Street. It was actually Kracke, but everybody called it Crack Street, because it was a pretty bad street. I remember, I'd get onto my stoop and I had this bed and there's a dude sleeping on my stoop. I said, "Hey, man, you can't sleep here." He's like, "Well, where am I supposed to sleep?" I was like, "I don't know." He was like, "Let me sleep on that bed." I was like, "I just got this bed. I'm sleeping on this bed." [Laughter] He was like, "Man, no one will let me sleep anymore." I'm just like, "You just gotta go dude." I just remember I felt so bad. I was like, "Should I have left this bed on the porch for this dude?" Anyways, sorry. Random story. [Laughter]

[00:17:39.04]

**Annemarie A.:** That's pretty good. Oh, man. Well, what was the name of the person who you interned with for the finish, the stucco, I mean, the plaster finishes?

[00:17:50.02]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah. His name was James Felix and he actually owns a hostel in uptown New York now.

[00:18:00.16]

**Annemarie A.:** Fascinating.

[00:18:02.15]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah, he was a cool guy. Went to church with him and he just needed help. He knew that I was creative and that I wasn't in school anymore, and so I just got hooked up with a dude from church. I became a project manager for him, basically. So, he would just go focus on getting the gigs and then I would just manage them and get them done. He let me hire a couple of friends to help me. It was a really cool job to have between—I think I actually worked for him for three or four years. Yeah, he was an awesome guy. We mostly worked on the beach south of Jacksonville, Ponte Vedra and Vilano on A1A. So, I was just always getting to work in these beautiful mansions doing plaster and listening to nineties alternative radio. I'd bring camping gear, basically, and just eat on the beach every day and swim and surf. Yeah, it was really cool. I'd always start work really early so I'd get off at, like, two o'clock. Yeah, it was a pretty cool job. It was a lot of fun to just get to be creative. There were definitely some parameters I had to stick with, but I got really good at doing, like, Italian finishes and plasters and I'm actually kind of going full-circle. I've been getting a little more into Italian finishes again. I'm doing a bunch of plasters in homes around Tallahassee, once again, just kind of bridging the gap between—because restaurants aren't all open yet. So, I'm not selling the amount of oysters I should be, so it's been a really cool income to just get a gig or two a month doing a plaster job. I keep getting gigs with these weed companies that need their stores built out because they didn't close and they're doing great right now. [Laughter] Yeah, just doing little things to kind of bridge the gap and make sure I keep the cash coming in, because bills didn't stop during the quarantine, even though the sales stopped.

[00:20:31.08]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, for sure. Well, tell me a little bit about—we were talking, the other day, about your . . . I guess, lack of a better term, the way you kind of operate and the way that you like to do art. Could you talk a little bit about that philosophy?

[00:20:49.05]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah. You mean art and oysters, or—?

[00:20:54.01]

**Annemarie A.:** I want to get there, but if you'd start with just, like, I asked you what kind of art that you made.

[00:20:58.12]

**Cainnon G.:** Okay, yeah.

[00:21:02.21]

**Annemarie A.:** If that makes sense.

[00:21:05.20]

**Cainnon G.:** So, yeah. I'm really interested in ancient cultures, and I'm really interested in information that we lose. So, lost art. So, something like Italian finishes, for instance, I really was doing some architectural plaster and I had to buy a book that was made in the early 1900s just to a recipe of—yeah, you need lime putty, and you need . . . I'm trying to

remember what they called it at the time, but basically like a plaster of paris or Aquaphor, so basically, a casting plaster. This stuff isn't on the internet. You can't find . . . I mean, I'm finding recipes that it's lime putty, marble dust, and rabbit glue. You know? So, I'm really interested in lost arts. I really love . . . I call my style techno-primitive because I really like modern design, but I really like using old tools. So, everything I, as far as woodworking goes right now, if it's art, I try to not use—if it's art, sculptural, not like if I was building you a cabinet, but art and sculptural, I call it techno-primitive because I really like modern design but I like to use old tools, no power tools. The shop is quiet. I'm sharpening blades and I'm just using a lot of pre-World War tools and Japanese tools. I just love seeing, how can I do a modern application with an ancient technique? So, that's kind of my art style now, is I'm trying to get into doing more plasters again. So, I've been making these kind of scalloped columns that kind of look like a modern version of a Greco-Roman column, but they are with modern color palates and they have modern angles or the softness of the scallop is a little more modern. Maybe it's a nice peach or dark black. But once again, all my hand and a lot of carving. That's just what interests me. I'm not really interested in using precision machine tools, at least not for sculpture.

[00:24:00.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Makes a lot of sense. How do those ideas influence your work as an oyster farmer?

[00:24:09.03]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah. So, I think my kind of philosophy, and when I was in high school and college, I got really into photography, black and white photography, and going into the darkroom and stuff. My teacher would always say that God makes the best light. I kind of have the same philosophy with oysters. God, or Mother Nature, or whatever you want to call it, has been making oysters since time began, really. Like oysters, they've been around. There's no issue with the ocean creating these things. So, what do I need to do? Well, I can play with nature in a way and kind of make them—help nature make them the way I want them to, work with it. So, now, I kind of view the ocean as my canvas, in a way, and these oysters and kind of each their own piece of art, and I'm collaborating with the ocean to make each shell unique. So, I like to call them almost-wild, and all I'm doing is kind of amping up maybe the things that nature isn't giving them as much of. So, I'm tending to them; I'm doing what we call husbandry. I'm taking care of them. I'm making sure that they don't get too much dirt on them, they don't get too crowded and stuff. So, maybe taking a little more care than nature naturally would, but I really enjoy seeing the oddity of whatever, whatever they become is what they become. Whatever they look like is how God intended them to. I just enjoy the uniqueness of all the different oysters. So, a lot of aquaculture oysters are very cultured in that they're taken care of a lot and they're touched a lot, and I try to touch them a lot, but I try to have a very light touch and not influence what they're going to look like too much. So, this year was 2021, but I started this in 2017. This year is probably the best I've ever done at that, and the oysters all look unique and they have really cool ridges and unique-looking shells and they're not all uniform. The size, the things I am trying to maintain, I'm trying to have very similar sizes. I'm trying to keep biofoul off, I'm trying to keep barnacles off and what we call

mermaid fingernails or shimmer, shimmer clams. I don't know what they actually are, but basically just keep everything off the shell so it's just an oyster, but it's a clean oyster.

So, I kind of give myself some rules. My rules are: yeah, they need to be somewhat consistent in size. I don't really care about the shape. I do care about the amount of biofouling on them. Those are the things I'm really focusing on; I'm focusing a lot less on, I'm not shaking the cage every day the way some farmers would, and I'm not desiccating as much as maybe some other farmers would, because I'm not trying to get the fattest meat in the oyster and I'm not trying to get—I don't know. There's just a lot of things that we can't control. I think that those are the things that interest me the most. We use the term “merroir”, and merroir is kind of taking a term from the wine industry, which is terroir, and terroir is the taste of the earth. So, wherever these grapes are grown or that climate is, it's mostly about the dirt, but I think it's kind of about everything. At least, for merroir, it is. So, my partner farmers, their farms are in eyesight of mine. Their oysters taste totally different because maybe the ground isn't muddy where they are.

Maybe it's a little sandy or my particular site gets a lot of seagrass, so chefs always say that they taste kind of like seagrass. I think that that's just so awesome, so I kind of let go of all those uncontrollable things and just take care of the few things that I can control, and I feel like I don't have to control very much, because once again, God makes the best oyster—or nature makes the best oyster. Right now, something kind of cool is happening. The manatee grass is coming up from the ocean floor. I don't know what makes it do this, but for whatever reason, there's just huge paddies of this grass that just float in the bay.

What'll happen, my farm . . . I guess I'll describe what it looks like real quick for the listener.

[00:29:23.25]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah.

[00:29:25.06]

**Cainnon G.:** My farm looks like . . . it's basically a line, and attached to this line are pillow-sized hard, mesh bags. The mesh bags have floats on them so these pillow bags float on the surface. So, the oysters are just a few inches underwater. Now, because of that, every wave that comes by, every wake from a boat, shakes these oysters and they ride the waves. Because of where we are, I like to call them florlders because they just ride those waves and they get tossed and everything. So, I say all that because now we have this manatee grass that's coming in. Because these things are on the surface, they become grass-catchers, right? So, they're catching all this grass. The water is getting kind of warm. It's probably . . . high seventies, low eighties right now. As that grass kind of decays in the saltwater, it's creating almost like a vegetable stock in the ocean. My particular oysters, right now, taste like what the Japanese call dashi. Dashi is a soup base that's made with seaweed. They use a couple different seaweeds, they soak it, and it's basically like your standard soup base for ramen or not really pho, but you know what I'm saying. So, anyways, this flavoring of the oysters only happens twice a year: it happens when the sea grass comes in, and then it happens whenever they do the forest fires. So, when they do the forest fires, the bay fills with charcoal. All that charcoal rests on top of the bags, and whenever you eat those oyster that week, every single oyster tastes like hardwood charcoal. In a good way. It tastes like it just came off a grill or

something, which is just so cool. Why would I control that? Like I love that. So, now, I'm paying a little more attention. Okay, whenever it's pollen season or whatever, there's yellow coats on—so now I'm trying to, okay, can I taste that in these oysters? Is there enough to change the flavor? I haven't noticed it yet, but that doesn't mean it couldn't happen in the future. But I think that . . . what was I going to tell you? What was I talking about, the flavor of the oysters . . .

[00:32:20.11]

**Annemarie A.:** You were talking about your lease.

[00:32:21.20]

**Cainnon G.:** The lease.

[00:32:21.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Manatee grass?

[00:32:23.24]

**Cainnon G.:** Manatee grass. I don't know. Oh, well, I lost my train of thought. Yeah, I've been telling my chefs about this, and the chefs are really excited. It's cool to have kind of that buy-in from the chefs, like that they are excited about the uniqueness of the water. I guess where I was maybe trying to go is that like, that's something beautiful that what if I—I don't know how I could stop that. I guess I could be keeping the bags cleaner and keep that charcoal or keep that grass off of them, but why would I want to do that when I can

sell that story? I can tell that to a chef, and then that chef's going to tell all of his servers, and they're going to tell—like, “Hey, down in Panacea right now, there's manatee grass everywhere. You can taste it in these oysters.” I guess what I was actually going to tell you is that the reason that they taste like that is, everybody knows, oysters filter fifty gallons of water a day, whatever. But it's more than that. When you open up an oyster, in the gills of the oyster, sometimes you'll see black or brown or green in those gills. The gills work just like fish gills. The water runs over them and they're just catching stuff. So, those oysters are actually catching little bits of that grass or they're catching little bits of that charcoal, so it's actually in the oyster. Oysters mostly eat, what? Like phytoplankton. They pull the nitrogen out of the water, and phosphorus. They pull a lot of interesting things out of there. So, it's . . . I just think it's so cool that they pull that out, too. I guess that's where I was going with it. It's really cool to see those black gills or to see, sometimes they get those red gills. I don't know what is giving them the red gill, but I want to find out, because I think it's cool to tell the chef. It's a cool story, but also, it helps you sell a ton of oysters. I mean, our culture right now just loves a story. If you have a story behind anything, it's going to help you market it. I think that's something that separates the Salty Bird oyster, is we really work with the chefs to give them the story. They know exactly what's going on with these oysters, and people are excited about them. We just started selling oysters again yesterday officially. I've been selling small batches whenever I have some, but yesterday was the first large harvest, and they were sold out immediately. Chefs were already texting me, like, “Hey, they won't sell me any. They're out. What's going on here?” That's an awesome problem to have. Like, they need more oysters. Which is kind of one of the reasons that we don't really feel like

we're in competition with a lot of the other farmers, is the demand is just so outrageous. We couldn't satisfy it. I mean, we're not going to be able to satisfy it for years. Hopefully, it stays. Hopefully, that demand stays high. I'll never be able to fulfill the demand that I have for mine, especially if I'm able to keep building it as I go.

[00:35:47.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's a lovely answer. I was wondering, so you said that you started getting interested in oysters. Tell me a little bit about what interested you about an oyster.

[00:36:00.27]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah. So, well, when I moved to Charleston and I met my wife, I was, for the first time in my life, making a little bit of money. Yeah, I had met somebody who I loved and we lived together. We started . . . I guess really dating, and I feel like at my age group or everybody we grew up with, we never really went on dates, it was like just hanging out with people. I was in Charleston, and it's a culinary town. It was then, it still is now. So, I started going to nicer restaurants. All these restaurants always had oysters on the menu. I grew up in Jacksonville, but I never really ate oysters. I think that . . . I used to think it was maybe because my family wasn't affluent at all that maybe we weren't eating oysters, and my parents didn't cook a lot, a lot. I don't know. But for whatever reason, oysters were never, they were just never around me. Started getting into oysters in Charleston, moved to Atlanta, and I made a bunch of stirring sticks—this is going to sound crazy if you don't know what I'm talking about, but I made a bunch of stirring sticks for a siphon coffee maker. This coffee shop in Decatur, it was this just really

interesting coffee shop. They had every way of making coffee, they had a machine for it. So, they had these giant siphons that were three-foot-tall, and you pour the coffee and the water in the top and they were stirring them with Home Depot paint stirrers. I remember I was watching them one day and I was like, “Man, everything about this place is just so high end and so elevated, but you’re using these stupid Home Depot paint stirrers.” I was like, “Let me make you something nice.” I guess that was just because, at that point, that was my background, was a full sensory experience. So, okay, every part of this experience should have your touch on it. So, I just noticed that one thing. I asked to them about it, one thing leads to another. I make them a bunch of these coffee stirrers and, like I said, earlier, it was techno-primitive. They were made of oak that had fallen in Piedmont Park from this Civil War-era trees. Then I carved all this stirrers, so they had these beautiful handles with these long, leather hangers on them. I think I made, like, thirty or forty of them, and they sold out instantly. I had just—I remember I had hand-stamped into every handle, the coffee shop was called Steady Hand, and so they just said “Steady Hand x Cainnon.” They sold all these coffee stirrers, and this chef was like, “Man, those are so cool. Would you make me a chef’s table?” I was like, “What do you want?” He said, “I want a recycled hard maple butcher block table for this new restaurant that’s going to open.” I was like, “Yeah, man, I’ll start looking for the stuff right now.” He was like, “Just tell me how much it is, and you have this much time.” So, I finished the tables. We made them out of a bunch of old Urban Outfitters fixtures, actually, that were made out of hard maple, so they were going to get thrown away. I cut them all up. I made these beautiful tabletops. I go in and I get paid, and I meet Brian Rackley. I’ll always remember the first time I met him, because he’s standing there in this unfinished

restaurant that they had just named Kimball House. He looks at me and is like, “You look like somebody that wants to get paid.” I was like, “Yeah, actually.” So, he writes me a check. Then I get invited to their opening, which I did not expect, but they were just cool guys and they wanted to show everybody that helped with the place that they appreciated them. So, they invited me and my wife to the opening. They treated us like royalty and they gave us a plate of oysters. The oysters . . . I could not tell you who or where they were from or anything. I have a picture of them. I bet Brian knows what they were. Then they just kind of started inviting me to everything, like, “Hey, this is going on.” I . . . I’m not the kind of person that realizes when people care about me, but I felt kind of cared about, because whenever I would show up at this restaurant, they would bring me a glass of Prosecco or they would let me cut the line and sit me down. So, my wife and I started going there all the time. They were always awesome to us. We started getting into oysters, and we started trying every oyster on the menu. Then, we started going to other places and trying other oysters. Now, when we went on trips, what used to be a coffee obsession of, okay, now we’re going to try every coffee shop in New Orleans. Well, now, we’re going to go to every oyster bar that is doing . . . and there’s an upper echelon, so we’re going to these upper echelon bars and we’re wanting to try oysters from everywhere. Well, I get my promotion. We come back to Florida. I see the guys from Kimball House are in town. I saw, they posted on Instagram, and they were only thirty miles from my house. I’m like, “What are you guys doing?” They’re like, “Oh, we’re checking out these oyster farms.” I was like, “Oh, my God, there’s oyster farms here?” “Yeah, dude, you should check it out.” Whatever. So, I tell my friend, Katie Harris. Katie Harris is a regenerative farmer in Quincy, Florida, and just an all-around

badass, but she's one of those people that she's a connector. I let her know I was kind of interested in this oyster farming idea, and she tells me to call a guy. I call the guy, and she's already talked to him. He's like, "Katie Harris's father told me I should talk to you, and I do anything that that guy says." I was like, "Cool, well, yeah, I'm interested in this." Blah, blah, blah. He tells me about this aquaculture program at a local school, and he tells me about somebody who needs a little bit of help. So, about a week later, I start—every Saturday, I start working on a farm. I kind of considered it a . . . a lesson in what not to do, at this point. I learned everything I shouldn't do. Once again, I'm working every day and writing a business plan. So, I'm just writing everything down. Like, okay, I saw these guys do this; that's not what I want to do. I come from a production background, so producing art and managing teams of artists and trying to make sure things are going a certain way, so now I'm looking at this with both lenses, you know. "All right, I'm learning here, but here's all the stuff these dudes are doing wrong." I'd never do this. Yeah, stop picking up the basket of oysters six times. How do you only pick it up once? Just little things that help people in construction. What I started noticing is, everybody that was getting into aquaculture down here was mostly pretty affluent, a lot of rich people, a lot of retirees. I started trying to think of, "How am I going to be different? I'm so different from all these people." I didn't finish college. I'm a skateboarder that listens to punk music. I was like, "I don't know if I belong in this." But I kind of just stuck with it and I kind of just kept getting deeper and deeper and deeper. I'm in this program now, I'm learning about oysters, I'm working at an oyster farm on the weekends. I figured out how to get a lease, which I realized early on in this class, we're doing all this stuff, we're learning all this stuff, but none of this matters if you

don't have a place to do it. Not to sound cocky, but I felt like I was the only person that realized that in class, because everybody's talking about all this other stuff. Nobody's talking about how do you, where am I going to do this? I feel like everybody was waiting for somebody to give them something or who's going to do this part for me. So, I made my focus: I have to get a place to do this if I'm going to do it. I found a lease that came available, somebody was trying to get out of it. I was able to take over that lease, and then I already had my business plan written and everything. That piece of property gave me the leverage, the piece of property, that lease in the ocean that I had the rights to, gave me the leverage to start talking to some banks and get financed to do this. I kind of . . . in true pelican fashion, I just did it a different way than everyone. I bought a gear that nobody uses that I . . . like I said, I found out about oyster farming on Instagram. I started an Instagram for my business and I started reaching out to every farm that I thought was doing good; anybody that I would look up to and I asked them how they're doing it, what are they doing. I kept finding that these people were using a gear that wasn't available around here. So, I decided, I was like, "You know what? I'm going to get this gear that nobody's using." I drive to Gloucester, Virginia and I fill up a Penske truck with all the gear that I think I need for the next two years, and it was all a guess. It was all a guess. [Laughter] But still using that stuff, very happy with it. I'm still the only person in this bay that's using that particular gear, which isn't like—it's just another thing that sets it apart. My oysters float different from other peoples'. I'm treating them different and everything, but I'm also growing them with a completely different gear. Anyways, that's the long version of how I got into oysters. I had lost that job and I really wanted . . . I kind of made a list for myself. What would you want to do? You have a chance to change

your career. They had made me an offer. They asked me if I wanted to move to Philadelphia or New York or L.A. I didn't want to move to any of those places. I was sick of living in the city. I wanted to be in Florida, I wanted to in nature. So, on my list, I was like, "I want to work with nature." I've worked for a fast fashion company, and I always was conflicted with the sustainability of that company. I didn't like knowing that everything I was building was getting thrown away every three months. I didn't like the amount of stuff that was coming from China and just knowing how little they're paying people to make these shirts and how much they're charging the customers for. I was like, "You know what? I want to work with nature. I want to be outside. I want to feel like I'm contributing to the betterment of the environment." I kind of came up with a few different ideas that I thought, "Okay, maybe that's a career path." This one just kind of kept being easy. Like I said, my friend connected me with somebody who put me in touch with a farmer that I could kind of learn under, and then I got into that program. Then I got the lease. I kind of just kept getting deeper and deeper into it. In a way, I felt like oystering found me, just because it came so easy. Not that the work is easy, but everything about starting the business came so easy for me. But yeah, does that answer your question?

[00:49:29.21]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, it really does. I'm wondering . . . let's see. I could have gotten lost in that.

[00:49:37.00]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah, I'm sorry.

[00:49:38.11]

**Annemarie A.:** No, no. I think that's a beautiful moment, when I can be lost in that.

[00:49:46.25]

**Cainnon G.:** Oh, yeah.

[00:49:49.17]

**Annemarie A.:** You were talking a little bit about Katie Harris and Brian Rackley and those farmers. I think being here at Spring Creek, and other places as well—you're the eighth person I've interviewed now—it seems, specifically here, there's such a sense of community among people who are doing this work. So, I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little bit about finding Spring Creek and finding the people who you farm with here.

[00:50:22.00]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah, yeah. So, when I started farming, I was using my mom's old boat. I fixed the old boat and it was a party barge. I used to tote that boat down the coast and put it in a random, whatever boat slip. I'd just go to a boat slip till I felt like I wore out my welcome, basically. [Laughter] Or not a boat slip, a . . . what? I don't even know what they're called because I don't do it anymore. But what, a boat ramp. Anyways. So, I was looking. At one point, there was . . . there was this . . . what? There was this business that got started when they started the oyster farms here called the Panacea Oyster Co-op. In my opinion—she didn't ask—but my opinion is that they came up with a business that

they thought would maybe take advantage of a lot of local poor people. Somebody talked this school into creating a program that would teach people how to be oyster farmers with . . . they didn't have to, but it was strongly encouraged that you became part of this oyster co-op. To me, it looked like they were . . . getting the state to pay for a workforce for their business, this private company. Anyways, say that to say, I felt like that wasn't cool, and that's not why I wanted to get into oysters, that's not why I wanted to work in nature. I wanted to get away from a lot of things about working for a corporation were awesome, but there were a lot of things I really didn't like. And one was how they treated people. So, I was like, when I start my business, I'm going to be above reproach with everything. We're not lying about anything. We are up-front. We are confrontational. If there's a problem, I'm going to come talk to you about it. I was like, that's just how I want to be in business, because I hated the stress of . . . of just office politics and corporate politics and whatever. Anyways, when I was working for that farmer and going to that aquaculture program, I was seeing this again. I saw myself getting—I thought that I was going to get sucked back into it, so I separated myself from both entities. A lot of people called me a lone wolf, because I just kind of didn't, it's not that I didn't like anybody—it is kind of that I don't like anybody—but I also just don't have the time or patience to get wrapped up in any type of . . . I'm going to say drama. But I just, yeah, I don't care to be associated with it, which has served me really well and it's given me a really cool, what do you call it? What everybody knows . . . everybody knows me now as an honest guy and a straight shooter. I guess it's given me a really good reputation. That's how I became the president of the Aquaculture Association of Florida and it's why I get passed around to represent aquaculture quite a bit in Florida, because seafood, traditionally, is

somewhat dishonest business. I think a lot of that is, once again, these larger businesses taking advantage of poor people and taking advantage. I think that's one of the big issues with overfishing, the amount of fish you bring in is the amount of money you make. They're not paying you very much for the fish in the first place, even though they're charging a lot for it. So, you're . . . in a way, you can't blame somebody for pulling in as many fish as they can every single day and not really paying attention to, is this sustainable or is this going to hurt a population or a fishery? But anyways, so. I was kind of lone wolfing it. But I knew what I really wanted was, I wanted a place that I could keep my boat where I'm not toting it every day. That takes up so much time, a lot of wear and tear. I found out that there was an open spot here at Spring Creek and I talked to Mr. Leo Lovel and asked him if I could be here. I started seeing certain farmers, some that I didn't want to see, some that I didn't know. So, I met Jody and Dewey, who own Cypress Point Oyster Company, and just really connected with them. Jody is a yogi and she always is talking about yogi philosophies and this and that. I grew up in church, I grew up Southern Baptist. So, I really appreciated, from a different place, I really appreciated how much she is always talking about—and I don't talk about caring about other people, I don't talk about that stuff, but she was always saying it. I really appreciated hearing. She always says, "I want to be the change. We have to be the change we want to see in the world." So, anyways, I just really connected with them. We kind of just agreed on a lot of things, like I was saying earlier. I don't feel like there's really competition. There's different ways of doing things and there are some that are better than others, but there's a home for every oyster. We're not really in competition with each other. I've always been about that and I've always been about helping somebody else. My wife says that I'm a

habitual victim of being a nice guy, because I don't say no to anything. I help anybody that asks me. Actually, when I quit my corporate job and I was managing my own time, I . . . she was just always making fun of me, because every day, I was pushing a car out of the street or every day, I was getting gas for somebody or giving somebody a ride. She was like, "What? How are you suddenly Superman and taking care of everybody?" I was like, "Well, for the first time in my life, I—the first time in my adult life, but really, my whole life, because I went right from school to being in the workforce—I don't have to be at the place at nine o'clock. Like I can do whatever I want. So, I don't mind if I take a lady to the gas station to fill up her tank. I have nowhere to be, so I had no excuse to not be the Good Samaritan or whatever you want to call it. Back to the community in Spring Creek, I think that we just got a couple of like-minded individuals who get it and realize that it's bigger than us. That's what I want to do, right? I want to do something that's bigger than me; I wanted to help take care of the environment. I think that it's . . . sometimes hard to find your people or your chosen family, sometimes, especially in business. It's been really cool for me because I think that I project an energy that a lot of people know that I'm not . . . like I said, I'm not putting up with anything. I have a very high standard of who and what I'm around and what I spend my energy on. So, another really good friendship I've made from oysters is Murder Point Oyster Company in Alabama. He's become one of my best friends. He's probably the best and biggest farm in the South. I help him get a ton of business, he helps me get a ton of business. It's never about . . . like I can call him right now and ask him, "How much money did you make today?" If I wanted to. I don't do that kind of stuff, but just very open. It's basically collaboration over competition, because we are trying to . . . we're just trying to have a

different . . . I don't know, we want to be different. We don't want any of the stigma of seafood, of, "Oh, everybody's lying about Apalachicola oysters." For instance. For the last ten years, you probably haven't really had an Apalachicola oyster, because they lie about it. Who's they? I don't know. The chefs, the restaurants, the distributors, I don't know. I don't know who. I'm not trying to blame anybody. I'm just trying to say that, half the time when you're getting a fish, it's not the fish that you ordered, and half the time when you're buying an oyster, it's probably not the oyster that you actually ordered. We're just trying to be above all that kind of stuff. We're just trying to walk it like we talk it. It's cool to have a bunch of people that, one, are like-minded, but also people that make you want to be a better person or a better version of yourself. I always call Jody my better angel, because you saw, you see Bugs Bunny or Elmer Fudd or whatever, he's thinking, should I rock this guy's world or should I help him out? You got the little red bunny and then you got the little blue angel bunny. I always call Jody my better angel, because she always kind of challenges me to do the right thing, which she knows I want to in the first place, but it's so easy a lot of times to do the easy, wrong thing. So, we're just trying to build a . . . what a group of people and a business that is above reproach. You can't say nothing bad about us because there's nothing bad about us. That's what I want to do, and I think that's what we're trying to do together.

[01:02:01.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's lovely. Now, I like that idea of sustainability in terms of both environment and place and also people, because I think that sometimes those things don't go together, but they should.

[01:02:15.19]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah. I don't know. I don't want to have an ego out here and I want . . . I want my career to be good for my soul. So, yeah, I'm just trying to walk the line and do something that I'm proud of and that is fun and interesting.

[01:02:46.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, for sure. Well, I was wondering a little bit about maybe marketing. Talk a little bit about how you came to become Pelican Oyster Company and thinking about how to brand and market your product to make it distribution, as well.

[01:03:06.19]

**Cainnon G.:** Yeah. So, like I was saying earlier, when I got started, I made an Instagram. That was before I even had my lease and everything. I was really just kind of trying to use it the same way people use a Pinterest or something, I was trying to collect my thoughts, and I was trying to collect all the farmers that I'm following and all the connections I make, kind of organize them and keep them in one place. So, I called it Pelican Oyster Company because my wife's grandmother had passed away. That's who we named our daughter after, Timberlake. So, Martha Timberlake passed away. We inherited a bunch of stuff from her, and we inherited a bunch of . . . photos of pelicans and little pelican statues and a lot of little tchotchkes, and we were kind of like, "What the heck is this pelican thing about?" This is something we didn't know about her. Well, as we looked into it, we found out that her stepfather was the harbormaster in Tampa Bay. They called

him Pelican because he was a retired Navy captain or admiral, I'm forgetting right now. But decorated naval captain. Became the harbormaster in Tampa and they called him Pelican, and he loved pelicans. So, I was like, "Let's just call it Pelican Oyster Company. We'll name it after that guy." So, yeah, I start the Instagram, Pelican Oyster Company, start following all these people. I'm talking to everybody, whatever, and I'm kind of just documenting my oyster journey, and I started getting tons of followers. It's a specific—it's very niche, it's very specific, but for oysters, a lot of followers. I came from a music background, being in bands and stuff like that, and then I worked for Urban Outfitters and stuff. I had the opportunity to just be a hundred percent myself. I was kind of like, "You know what? People can take it or leave it." I saw my friends at Kimball House doing the exact same thing. I think they call it highbrow/lowbrow there. It's very high-end food, but it's just some dudes making it. You know what I mean? They're not a bunch of French snobs wearing tuxedos. So, I started noticing that every restaurant is kind of—has the same people working at it, really. And the people in the kitchen, it doesn't matter how nice the food is. The people in the kitchen are probably just like us, because those are the jobs that we do—those are same jobs that were available to me, right? You go into any kitchen and there's a dude listening to rap or punk or metal and so, I was like, "Well, okay. This Instagram's super niche. It's my oyster journey. I want it to be me so I can be irreverent, I can be a weirdo, whatever." I started realizing that that was appealing to chefs and it was appealing to the back of the house. That's who's buying the oyster, anyhow, right? At least, it's who's buying the majority of my oysters, and then they're selling it to their customers. So, I started thinking about it more like that: okay, I'm not trying to sell to people, because people buy a dozen. But restaurants buy a

couple hundred. So, I started kind of . . . I started making, it's an industry Instagram. It's for the service industry, it's not for regular people, whatever regular people are. That really—I think that really helped me stand out, because I'm not sitting here showing you a French champagne with oysters on fine china and whatever. I'm showing you a Miller High Life and me chugging it and eating an oyster or something like that. That's me and that's me being myself, and I think that people can see authenticity and they can see when you're phoning it in. Basically, I was like, I shouldn't try to misrepresent myself as something I'm not. I'm not fine dining every night and stuff like that. I . . . well, I guess I kind of noticed that a lot of oyster farms were marketing themselves as, "Oh, look how fine this is. You can eat this with caviar." You can do all that stuff, but it looked—in my opinion—phony a lot of the times, because I don't know that they knew who they were trying to appeal to. Maybe they do. I don't know everything; I didn't go to school for anything. I'm just going off my gut. It's been good, because I talk directly to a lot of the chefs. The chefs are following the Instagram and they know what's going on, on the farm. I go to . . . any time I do events around town, I always meet guys that are like, "Hey, I've never actually had your oyster, but I follow the Instagram, and I just like what you're doing. You look like you're having fun and you're doing what you love." And I think that those are things that people want to invest their money in. And I am just trying to have fun. [Laughter] I don't know. My marketing is really, like I said, I'm trying to stay with my people. I've worked in the kitchen; I've worked for terrible customers, I've worked for awesome customers. I feel like I know what it's like. Those are the people I want to hang out with, the people in the back of the house. Anyways, that's what I'm kind of catering my marketing to. I try to come at it from a different perspective, and so

to different t-shirts that are just weird, dumb shit that we thought up. Like we have the “Wu-Tang Clam” shirt, which is just a dumb idea I had with a friend. I was like, “What if we started saying Wu-Tang Clam, and it said, ‘Wu-Tang Clam Ain’t Nothing to Shuck With?’” [Laughter] He was like, “But you sell oysters.” And I’m like, “Yeah, but who fucking cares?” It’s stupid. If you’re thinking that hard about it. So, yeah, just try to be light-hearted. I think . . . I like it to look effortless, and I like it to actually be effortless. Any time I’m trying too hard, it’s probably not the right idea, at least as far as marketing stuff goes. There’s some things: you do have to work hard and try and try and try. But I think that finesse, as far as social media and those things, goes a long way, because people can sense authenticity and they can sense when you’re trying really hard to be something you’re not, in my opinion.

[01:11:17.08]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, I think that’s really true. That’s great. Well, we’ve been talking for a while, and I’ll open it up to you in a minute. But that’s my last large sort of question. What do you hope to see for the future of Pelican Oyster Company and Florida aquaculture, just in general?

[01:11:37.27]

**Cainnon G.:** Huh. Yeah, well, for Florida, I would really love to see Florida . . . well, two things. I’d love to see Florida aquaculture kind of rise to the occasion and take this opportunity that we have to change how seafood is done. There’s a lot of people that are coming to aquaculture and they’re treating it like the way we used to do things. I don’t

think that's the right approach. I think we have an opportunity to be a new thing entirely and really separate ourselves and have some distinction. I'd really love for people to kind of rise to the occasion. I'd love to see more young people out here. Yeah, just being stewards of the environment, really, because what we're doing is good for the environment. We only take what we make, and we're not pulling extra oysters out of the water. We're not taking from any population; no fisheries are being harmed. We're adding an ecosystem. The state only lets us use dead areas, so we're adding an ecosystem. When we add that ecosystem, we add every . . . every piece of that chain, of that food chain, up, is brought back. So, yeah, we put these oysters in the water. And now, all the little crabbies are back; all the little shrimp are back, and then everything that eats those is back, and then everything that eats that thing is back, and it just keeps going on up. So, it's helping populations, and not only is it doing that, but it's cleaning the water. Right? It's cleaning the water while it's out there. Then we take those and replace them and then we start it all over again. So, I guess I just think we have a really good opportunity to create something that's good, good for the ocean. The ocean makes up . . . however much of the earth, a lot of it. If we can take good care of the ocean, it's just going to be beneficial for everybody. As far as the industry—or as far as Florida goes, I really hope that Florida maybe embraces sustainable seafood and embraces . . . what we're doing comes with a higher price point. Because we're not just taking advantage of the ocean's coffers anymore. We are creating something from nothing. Because of that, it costs a little more money. I hope that people will realize that it's worth it. You know what I mean? It's just like buying a nicer beer, it's just like buying the nicer coffee or the nicer steak or whatever. I think the coast, and, you know, Florida's almost all coast, is

used to cheap seafood. So, I sell the least oysters in Florida, and I don't sell any oysters locally. It's kind of crazy, right? I'm sending all my oysters—I want to be local. One, it goes with what I want to be doing as far as I don't want that footprint. I don't want to be shipping oysters to Washington, California. I don't want the gas. I don't want to be the reason that all that gas is being used and everything like that. So, yeah, if I could ship them closer, I would. If I could sell more closer, I would. But I see a lot of . . . I'm having a hard time getting any traction in Florida, just because, one, there's a lot of us and people are kind of cutting each other's throats to get the business. They're lowering their prices and this and that. But as far as Pelican goes, I hope that we keep growing. I hope that I'm able to keep doing this. I really hope that Mother Nature or God shows us a little grace and gives us maybe a few years of no natural disasters or . . . [Laughter]

Pandemics, whatever, because I'd really like to just sell some oysters and not have anything inhibit that. It just seems like, every time I get going, something happens that is very out of my control, i.e. hurricane, pandemic. It takes a while to build something over again. But I just hope that I get to keep doing something that I really have become passionate about, and something that I really enjoy. Yeah.

[01:17:02.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's lovely. Well, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to share, or anything that you'd just like to say?

[01:17:16.14]

**Cainnon G.:** I don't know. I've really enjoyed hanging out with you the last few weeks and getting to know you, and I appreciate you taking the time to document the South. Nothing I can really think of that people need to know, I guess just pay attention to where your things are coming from. I think it's super important to be mindful of what you're buying, and what you're buying is really what you're investing in and encouraging. Whether that's not buying the shoes that are made by little kids who aren't getting paid, or if that's not buying something that has to get shipped across the entire world to get to you, a lot of the things that are convenient are the things that are really hurting us. If I could maybe impart any—I don't know if it's wisdom or not, but it seems to be the harder things that are better for us. Whether that's eating some good vegetables that we had to go to a farmer's market to get, rather than hitting that drive thru that's on the way home, just maybe letting go of some of the convenience. I guess, to bring that back to oysters, the seafood is harder to get. It's going to continue to be harder to get. Wherever you are spending that money, those are the ones that are going to be encouraged to keep going. You can keep spending your money on the fish that are being overfished, and keep encouraging that fisherman to destroy that ecosystem, if you want to, or you could invest in some food that's restoring an ecosystem and encourage that so that we can keep doing that. Maybe that. [Laughter]

[01:19:23.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Okay, thank you so much for your time. Let's be quiet for about twenty seconds so I can get some extra sound out here, if that's okay.

[01:19:34.07]

**Cainnon G.:** Um-hm.

[*End of interview*]