



**Robert Seidler**

**Co-Founder of Panacea Oyster Co-op (closed)**

**Former Oyster Farmer**

**Sopchoppy, Florida**

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Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Today is Monday, December 13th. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Spring Creek, Florida with Mr. Robert Seidler. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself, tell us your name, and tell us what you do?

Robert Seidler: I'm Robert Seidler, and by nature I'm just kind of a biologist, but I'm a filmmaker and I've been involved with oyster aquaculture for about twenty years on and off. And what do I do? I fix things. [Laughter] And that's kind of a psychological thing, 'cause as a filmmaker it's about making tools to get people to understand or understand the process of change. And so I'm more of a fixer than anything, and that goes all the way back from the time I was a kid. I didn't know I was always a filmmaker until I became a filmmaker.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, I'm wondering if you could start off and maybe we could talk about your early life. Could you give me your date of birth for the record?

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Robert Seidler: Yeah. 11/2/1952.

Annemarie Anderson: Great. And where did you grow up?

Robert Seidler: I grew up in Pinellas County, Florida, and mostly Tarpon Springs, which is a Greek-dominant waterfront community. And I lived on the Anclote River.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Could you maybe talk a little bit about your relationship with the outdoors growing up as a kid?

Robert Seidler: My relationship was the outdoors growing up, and it really did cause me infinite trouble weren't for the fact that my father was a chemist and he understood it. From the earliest time that I can remember, all I wanted to do is be outside. I had a ditch by my house, and I spent endless hours just dipping whatever would come out of the ditch and categorizing it.

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And that was starting at about four years old. And so there was this incredible fascination with science and biology, and the dream was to be in marine science. And I ended up there as an oyster aquaculturist more than anything, but the fascination with nature was so deep everything else suffered except when things were focused on the natural world.

Annemarie Anderson: What was it about outside that you liked?

Robert Seidler: Living things. Everything. And my biggest fascination was with plants, and the plan I had was to be somehow in plant genetics in school.

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And it started out that way and it moved into the realization that sharing information-- there seemed to have been, even in biological sciences, a lot of information pathway blocks. And that started me making different types of little learning tools for people to get their head around things. Because nobody seemed to have enough background information on any process. And so this is where the fixing started, where I started making stuff and sharing stuff. And then I kept making and sharing things about different processes, and then one day one of my professors said, "Why don't you go over to the PBS station? They might be looking for somebody with your talents." I'd never even considered anything like that. So I'm wearing a Tarpon Zoo T-shirt and

shorts. And I'm very task oriented. And as soon as he quit speaking, I went over there and there was a part-time photographer/cinematographer that was there that was leaving in two days.

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And this old man said to me, "Yeah, we can give you a try. We got this guy leaving. We'll see how ya work out." And I showed up there for two days and then I ended up there part-time, and then I ended up a year later as a full-time cinematographer. And that kind of was-- and I didn't realize it-- that was the thing that I probably was supposed to be. And life's always been about condensing very, very difficult things into very, very short things so people can understand them easily. Getting the sense out of stuff. And the same thing applied when I started doing IQF oyster aquaculture. Well, that wasn't aquaculture at that time, it was IQF oysters. And there was a lot of marketing stuff for people to get their head around everything oysters.

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And the skills worked great with that, too, where people can understand that we had a great product and here's why we had a great product. I think it's more of distillment of content, and that's where my skills are, and that's where the fun is, because then you can start talking to people honestly and there's way too much mystery in terms of white noise and conversation these days politically. And there are ways to eliminate that, but people often don't want to lose the emotional aspects of conversation.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: And so we're conflicted right now very dangerously.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. I'm wondering if we could go back to-- you were talking about being in college. Where did you go to school?

Robert Seidler: FSU.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. And what did you major in?

Robert Seidler: It was biology at first, ended up communications.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

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Robert Seidler: I transitioned there to keep my job at Channel 11, which WFSU-TV, PBS, and so I ended up coming out with communications but by far most of my work forever was in biological sciences.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. So you moved to Tallahassee to go to school. Why'd you stay?

What interested you in staying in Tallahassee as opposed to going back to Pinellas County or go somewhere else?

Robert Seidler: Pinellas County was very populated and the median age in Pinellas was mid-sixties. At that time, in the [19]50s, [19]60s, and early [19]70s, it's where older people came to die. And that was the running joke. And when I got up to my first college town, I visited some friends when I was eighteen in Tallahassee who had been working up here, I said, "This is really a nice place."

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And then, after high school, I worked as an electrician's apprentice in the local electrical union for four years, and that was absolutely wonderful. A recession came and I said, hmm, maybe I'll

give college a try. And I took off to Tallahassee and never looked back. And it opened hundreds of pathways I couldn't have imagined. The coursework was very important, but the society associated with the college, college campus and diversity, and information I think is the most important aspect of going away and meeting and learning and growing. I had a roommate from Mexico City who was working on his PhD in economics who was about ten years older than me.

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And the second I touched base with him my learning curve went straight up, 'cause he was finishing up his master's and starting his PhD. We had a big library in the house, and I essentially was a sponge for about six years.

Annemarie Anderson: That's cool.

Robert Seidler: It was really cool.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: You really can't imagine-- and the best part about having four years between high school and college was I had a lot of blue-collar skills given what I was doing, and it made it very easy for me to make a living, very, very easy. And very, very easy to understand a lot of complicated things that most students that were seventeen, eighteen had no idea about. So when I hit the ground at college, it was a lot of fun. It was very easy. I was ready to learn.

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But that four years proved invaluable for the rest of my life, essentially, because that toolset that came during that time really set the baseline for how to learn, why to learn, and then how to

apply learning, too. 'Cause so many people don't have a lot of common sense when it comes to mechanical things or process-driven things associated with blue-collar-type stuff.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: So it was like a four-year degree in blue collar, and then I started working in the university system, 'cause I worked for the university. And it was just this wonderful mixture that I could grab bits and pieces from both directions.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

Robert Seidler: And I related very well to other people because of that, too. I could play very well with any group. And being a filmmaker, that tended to be very, very important.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I'd like to maybe talk a little bit about your filmmaking.

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You talked a little bit about why—you're process-oriented, task-oriented kind of draw to that work, but I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit more about some of the films that you made and learning how to do that work?

Robert Seidler: I left PBS after about six years, formed my own company, and I worked under a lot of both safety grant money and natural resource grant money. And there were two series we produced on nature, which essentially made everything in my life come full circle. One was seven-hour documentaries called *Florida, the Outdoor Adventure*, which took me around Florida for three years producing on the best and coolest places in the state. Each program was an hour, it had about seven different segments, and it was focused on the K-12 student base.

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It came with seven different posters. And every school in Florida had a set of the program and all of the posters. And it was my PhD in Florida. I had the same crew for the whole three years. It changed all of us profoundly because we were there as a service to nature. We weren't there to manipulate nature. We were explaining to people what nature was, what these places around where they lived, where the valued lied in them and why. And so it was a very natural project that was a catch-as-you-can on what's going on, but it was always about connecting the dots.

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We had a bug segment in each one. We had a pre-European Native American segment in each one. We had a weather segment in each one. We broke the state into seven different regions, so each program was on each region, and it was for the people that lived there to get to know and understand how valuable nature really is to their life, and that we are essentially tied to the planet forever and we need to start paying attention. So that series changed the people that were working on it, and still to this day-- that was twenty years ago-- the other crew members, whenever they see it airing anywhere, they call me and say, hey, it's running in Seattle. Hey, it's running here, it's running there. Because it's still in the PBS system.

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And that led to another series about trails that was called *Florida Takes to the Trails*, on birding trails, biking trails, hiking trails, paddling trails that we did for Visit Florida. And it was as profound because now we had humanized the process and we were moving together with folks to get them in doing different activities. But I was a little bit naïve. Part of the funding came through Visit Florida, and they weren't the easiest folks to work with because they were kind of forced to get into nature-based tourism and they didn't want to. And so they tried to dominate the

content. And we ended up winning and it turned out real good, but it was very, very difficult to get the economic engine in Florida turned to face the natural true engine of Florida. And it got very political and very, very ugly.

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And we got a lot of good credit for getting Visit Florida into the nature filmmaking, but because we were the first people, it was really difficult. It almost killed us. And so those two series took about five years of my life. And they were the most fun. Then there's another five hundred films dealing with-- I have an expertise area dealing with safety in bicycle and pedestrian issues where I used to produce and market a lot of products all through the [19]80s and [19]90s. And I still do that but not at the frequency that I was doing it, because when I was offered the opportunity to work on the nature programming that essentially was the dream of a lifetime.

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And at the point that I showed up in Tallahassee, the first WGBH program on Nova, *Why do Birds Sing?* was airing. And Carl Sagan had just released his *Cosmos* series. And to this day, the original *Cosmos* series by Sagan is probably the best piece of filmmaking ever produced by anybody. And that was my standard. And so when I was finally offered to work in nature and do all the things, it tied everything that I had learned my whole life together. We made all sorts of devices for filming. We did all sorts of things. It was a small crew, it was a hard schedule, but it kept us in the quick of nature for three years, and all of us really evolved pretty profoundly because of that.

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It's hard to imagine because so much of what we learned was so deeply natural it's not easily conveyed by words, 'cause we were out there night and day. We would do two-week stints. We would have tents and just stuff-- there was a lot of ideas. We would guess at what we would get, but there were probably 30 or 40 percent of surprises from being in nature that long that really led to the series being very, very special for the viewer and for us because nature doesn't work on your timeline, you work on its. And we had freshwater system, all the different habitat systems, and we got to understand a lot of the cycling. And we used that to our advantage.

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And that will never leave me, and that's exactly what led me to becoming involved with oysters in 1999 with the IQF process and getting oysters out to the general public, but more than that, getting information about the marine environment out to everybody. So oysters has been an excuse to get people to understand the marine ecosystem, and that is ongoing for me. And spending the six years with Panacea Oyster Co-op really finished that off very nicely. And the oyster aquaculture up here is still going very well, but what was learned from the six years on the water can't really be imagined on how profoundly diverse and quick acting the marine ecosystem is.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Well, maybe we can talk about that. Could you maybe talk about the IQF oysters, maybe explain what that is and how you got involved with it?

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Robert Seidler: Yeah. What we had done is there was a big research project that went on for about two years at University of Florida trying to determine if we could freeze an oyster and still retain its body and taste. Well, after the testing period and doing the focus groups, it turned

out that it was about a 99 percent agreeability between the wild-catch oyster that wasn't frozen and the flash-frozen oyster that we presented. So we had a winner. But the other big issue with our oysters, and they were on the half shell frozen by CO2, was the fact that they were guaranteed 99.9 percent Vibrio free. And they also had a year's shelf life, so that was a gigantic big deal.

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And we had nailed the cruise ship market very well, and everybody was very happy. I was a little bit fussy because I was with them about two years, and I kept testing everything and the one thing you could notice if you were really an oyster person, they had a little bit more aroma after they were quick frozen than they did when they were fresh. It wasn't objectionable, and it didn't seem problematic with the focus groups, but that was the only bad thing that I really noticed. And they weren't as chewy, they were a little bit more squashy, and it was because the cells had exploded. But for the majority of people that was fine. And the company ended up going public and it was doing very well, and then some bad financial things happened with criminal activity at the top.

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Annemarie Anderson: I gotcha.

Robert Seidler: Yeah. And that was very, very sad.

Annemarie Anderson: And where was this based out of?

Robert Seidler: Panacea.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Robert Seidler: Yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: All right.

Robert Seidler: They had a facility in Panacea.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Robert Seidler: It was called Pristine Oysters. And it was doing very, very well and they had a good product, and they were just tying up a deal with China when things happened.

Annemarie Anderson: I gotcha.

Robert Seidler: And the fellow went to prison.

Annemarie Anderson: That's unfortunate.

Robert Seidler: It was very sad.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Well, I'm wondering-- so why Wakulla County? What has kept you here so long?

Robert Seidler: Okay. Wakulla. I came from Pinellas, which is the second smallest county in Florida and presently it has about a million people. Wakulla, I believe it's the seventh largest county in Florida and it has about thirty-five thousand people.

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And 73 percent of the real estate in Wakulla is federally managed between the wildlife refuge, St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, and Apalachicola National Forest. Eighty-five percent of the coastline is St. Marks Wildlife Refuge. So you've got a county that's three-quarters protected and thirty-five thousand people that's incredibly biologically diverse. And I've been here since

1974 now and very little has changed associated with the diversity or quality of the wild lands and the wild coastline. And it's why I settled here.

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It's the biological diversity, period. The best way to explain that and the effects of it properly was I started renting my house as an Airbnb six years ago. And we live in the house. It's a three story and we would rent out the top floor. Had about fifteen hundred people through, 40 percent international travelers, and everybody would get queried. We'd be cooking with them. I'm a guide and I'd be guiding them, and I would always have a hundred questions, and they would always have a hundred questions back. And especially the internationals and almost 100 percent of them were absolutely totally amazed by the character and quality of the natural system in Wakulla and the region.

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Because I did a lot of guiding within a hundred-mile radius and then, because of my experience working in and around Florida for years, and as they were taking off to other locations, I could set them up with places and parks and natural areas. I can custom fit everything to their needs. And I noticed a gigantic advancement with European population over a lot of the traveling Americans where they were most interested in the side shows and the restaurants, where the Europeans or Asians, they were more interested in the natural areas and the natural wonders and the diversity. And largely because they didn't have it anymore where they were from.

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And I would say 60, 70 percent of the travelers were Northern Europeans, and the rest were a mixture of about forty different countries. And what it did for me, it made me keenly aware of

how valuable our natural resources are generally, but how magical Wakulla County is. And what happens wherever you live, you tend to just get used to it and then you take it for granted. And the quality of place begins when you first visit it. So if you were going to Wakulla Springs in the [19]70s and it was crystal clear and flowing without super nitrification, that's how you see it forever. But the people that come here now and see Wakulla and it's only clear half the year, it doesn't have the biodiversity, they still think it's magical and as cool, but they have no idea how much has been lost.

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And I think there's a great term for it and it's called "tragedy of the commons." And I believe it was coined in the 1600s in Europe, and it's a slow eroding of everything. And how do we maintain the standards and make the natural areas better and not let them erode to worse? And I think that it's a diligence with understanding that we are not outside the system, we are just another animal in the system, and we need to cooperate with all the other creatures that are also sharing our space. And I think that kind of got a little bit too deep with me, but essential, but struggling with that in people. But the Europeans tend to understand this a lot better than Americans generally.

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Of course, there's differences with all groups, but I was very impressed with the travelers from around the world.

Annemarie Anderson: That's really interesting. I wonder if we could also go back and focus on the oysters. So [19]99 you started with IQF. When did that end?

Robert Seidler: That ended-- I believe 2001 is when the company went down.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Robert Seidler: And it was doing very well. There was a hundred and forty-four oysters per carton. Apalachicola Bay-- and there was no oyster aquaculture going on, but there was no shortage of product. Everything was still-- through the last [19]90s and early 2000, things were really bustling.

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And we were moving, oh, a million a month, I believe, at one point and doing very, very well. And it was a lot of fun because this was a very well-intentioned business that was really giving oyster a premium showing on the international market. And that was bringing a lot of attention to the area, too, because of the innovation with what we were doing. So it was really a very nice win-win. And the folks that were the wild-catch folks were making more money working with us than they had been working with the other folks. So it put a lot of people to work.

Annemarie Anderson: I gotcha. That makes sense.

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And so there was kind of a long hiatus. Could you maybe talk a little bit about your first-- the rumblings of oyster aquaculture in this region and your willingness to get into it?

Robert Seidler: Yes. So this was about seven years ago now, and I had spent a lot of time working in Missoula, Montana on projects, and it was like a second home to me. And I was finding a lot of frustration with the South generally and Wakulla County because a lot of things that we were trying to do were failing. We couldn't get the backing and we couldn't get political

support. We couldn't find funding. So I was packing up, selling my house, and leaving. And I had a couple big proposals out that everybody said would never happen.

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Well, at the time I had my home just ready to sell and a biologist for FSU Marine Lab was buying it, two big projects, the Environmental Institute was funded, and a big trail project for bike and pedestrians I was a part of were funded. And I didn't leave, I stayed. And the Environmental Institute, I knew the director. He used to be over state parks, Bob Ballard. And I instantly got with him as soon as this was going on and we started meeting and talking and doing things. And all of that evolved-- I was part of it in a franchise. The Lovels, who are our dear friends, were a big part of it.

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And we just kept distilling our ideas and it distilled down into why not try oyster aquaculture here modeled after what was going on in Australia with off-the-bottom baskets? And it could possibly happen. And that was turned into the flagship program for the Environmental Institute. And so I was part of the first class of that. And we were some of the folks that organized and came up with the idea of a oyster co-op that was modeled after a lot of other co-op types where we worked directly with oyster ranchers or oyster farmers-- I like to call 'em oyster men and women-- and give them a place to go besides just trying to sell their product anywhere they could.

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So that was our big dream. And there was a lot of very well working parts of that dream. And the most incredible stuff was the initial start, because we had put out our baskets, cages out in the

watershed before, essentially, they were permitted, thinking that it's probably a better idea to ask for forgiveness than permission because permission was going to take such a long time. And sure enough, it worked and Marine Fisheries, Coast Guard, and everybody got together, and it took about eighteen months to get it officially approved, and then it was real. And I really think if we would've tried to go the routes of going for permission it never would've happened.

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It would've been entangled in red tape. And because it was working so well, and there were so many excellent things about the oyster aquaculture-- and for me it took everything that I'd ever learned in my entire life and put it into one container. I've worked on win-win projects, and win-win-win. This was a win-win-win-win-win. Everybody, everything won. So we're out and we're putting out diploids. The diploids are spawning and they're recharging and re-recruiting all the unplenished wild-catch oyster beds. They're feeding all the different species of fish that depend on them.

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They're providing habitat, they're providing environmental services where we could've charged the City of Tallahassee and Leon County north of us for water resource cleaning, which was something that we were working on. So we were growing the products in nurseries, hatching the products in hatcheries, and everybody along the way, we were taking a keystone specie and replenishing the ecosystem with it, but we also had an ownership to what was in the cages that we could sell at any size at any time. But what you notice when you're out there-- and given what was in my head from the rest of my life was we got out there and the folks at Spring Creek

Restaurant, the Lovels who had been fishing out there for over forty years-- and they did that to supply the restaurant-- they noticed that a lot of species had gone into severe decline.

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Well, just after one year in the ecosystem, you noticed a lot of species coming back because oysters were back, then two and three years you noticed even more. And the biggest takeaway from all of this was-- I think water is eight-hundred times more dense than air, and with that density holds an awful lot of food, it holds a awful lot of energy. Fish don't have to fight gravity. It's this really special environment. So just in one year-- and so we're playing with the baskets. We get a lot of cross-contamination with other species that get in our baskets, so we can really guess how quick something grows, when a fingerling gets in and a month later you have a four-inch fish.

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Well, it turns out almost everything in the marine environment grows about a foot a year, which is absolutely incredible. And it reacts very quickly to habitat, cover, and food. So the oysters were providing the three most important things to all these species that had been displaced by over-harvesting, by pollution, by general malaise of the wild-catch system. And so in three years, we're out fishing, and Leo Lovel with Spring Creek is out fishing like he had for forty years, and pretty much stated that the ecosystem was pretty much like it was forty years ago. And that was it. That was, I think, the most powerful moment when we realized how profound putting oyster aquaculture into an ecosystem was for that ecosystem, but also for the humanized aspects of the ecosystem.

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So you had all the farmers winning, you had all the consumers winning, and you had all the organisms living in the ecosystem winning. And so there's hundreds of branches out on that, and that is continuing. And then, the University of Alabama did a research paper on this and pretty much it proved exactly that, when you add oysters to the ecosystem, all the fishery numbers improve greatly. And I think I sent you a link to that, the paper. Yeah. And so that confirmed our thoughts and everything that we had noticed, and that really had me incredibly excited that here we all were doing things and making a living, but also doing good with the ecosystems and nature.

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That's a big deal. And there's very few times that anyone can have that opportunity. And so that's aquaculture wrapped up for me. It's a big deal because of what it does. Byproducts are you can make a living, byproducts are you can feed people, but the big thing is you can restore, and you can restore in a big way.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. You mentioned about you prefer to call it oyster ranching and oyster aquaculture. I wonder if you could maybe talk about that language and what that means for you and why you prefer certain ways of talking about this?

Robert Seidler:       The whole way you frame something becomes what it actually is.

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And when you're taking something from a point of beginning, you have infinite opportunity, but if you're taking something that already is ongoing, you don't have that opportunity. And farming, because we had a lot of discussion about what are we doing out there in the ecosystem with oysters, and I was of the opinion that farming wasn't a good way to explain it because farming

does a lot more taking than it does giving. And I said, "We're not really takers, we're really more givers." And then, ranching is a little bit better, because it doesn't take as much as farming, but then again, there really wasn't the correct language to explain what it is we were doing, so we kind of ended with ranching, because we had little ranches, we took care of things, we managed them.

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And it was a little bit cleaner, and people had a little different opinion of it. Remember, we had to work in a compromised situation, so there were a lot of things spun off, but they were way too progressive for the majority of people, so we settled on ranching. And I think it really worked because you could talk about it differently than you could a farm. Because when you say farming anything, everybody goes to exactly the same place in their mind's eye. They're just other people farming and taking stuff, and there's pollution associated with farming. There's all these things, and generally everywhere, even in a lot of aquaculture, there's serious nitrogen pollution with farming, the big fish farms.

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And they don't get a lot of good press. And I just had the feeling that it was a very bad way to speak of it, and I still feel that way very strongly. And I think there was a lot of contention when we started this dealing with what it was we were doing, and the branding of what we were doing. And the majority of players at the time believed the story really wasn't very important, it was about the product. And my whole life has been about the story because the story is what opens your eyes and mind to change, and without the story you don't have anything. So I made a deal

with my colleagues with the co-op that I'd produce all this material that they didn't really want to see, and if it didn't work, they didn't have to pay me.

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And this has been done before by me on different projects. Well, I amped up the story about the people and the place, and we released the stuff and it worked very, very well. And I had received a number of very profound apologies from people because they couldn't imagine how powerful the story really could be. And as we get further in with this, the elements of the story will continue to be the most important aspect of any change or any aquaculture, especially when you have a story that's so profoundly positive. And that's the purity of a story. When you tell a real story, you get real results. When you talk about economics or jobs, they're just economics or jobs.

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It's like it's just a farm, it's just people growing oysters. Well, that's not it. There's a very romantic aspect of this, and there's a very curative aspect of this that I have not found in any other industry ever. And I've got about forty years working with hundreds of different businesses dealing with their problems with marketing. And this was one of the cleanest, best, easiest stories to tell, but we're so ingrained with the process of how things work in America we can't imagine things working differently. This works differently. This is a franchise so powerful it could leak into other franchises about doing good and doing restoration. The biggest issue associated with oysters, of course, is water.

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What's the most important thing on the planet for all life? Water. So you have this profound water story that could leak into other industries. And what I noticed was some of the very conservative people that got into oyster aquaculture because they could make money, now they're talking about water pollution, storm water mitigation, and other things where their whole lives they've never cared or even had a thought about anything like that. And now, because their livelihood depends on good and clean water, they're becoming involved with environmental causes which they'd always thought had no importance at all. And that's real change when you see very, very conservative, right-wing people who hated the environmental movement, now they're growing oysters and now they're realizing that water quality matters.

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And so that's because it became part of their story and they started learning the story. So you can't force people to change, but you can hold their hand and get 'em to change. But all the noise we see between the environmental groups and business is really not because it's all conflict based. It's all adversarial and nobody will give an inch, but when you mold oysters into all these other people that did all these other things and they're from all political views, when you mold those oysters into a way that they can make a living, you see a lot of very profound change and it's all of the same type because oysters are very dependent on the ecosystem and very dependent on good water.

Annemarie Anderson: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Robert Seidler: Yeah. So I kinda thought that would happen, and I was very happy that it did.

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But whenever anybody is in with anything that is new, I always say there's a hundred-in-one chance. It's very easy to stop anything that's going on. It's a hundred times easier to stop oyster aquaculture than to start it. And if we had not illegally put the baskets out before we had our permissions, they would've easily stopped it because the environmentalists didn't want to see it. So many people didn't care about anything, about themselves, and it's a very selfish society. And we were stopped from some locations simply because people didn't want to see anything in their view scape. They didn't care that it was gonna make the fishery better. They didn't care whether the water quality was gonna improve. They only cared about what they were gonna see from their porch, and those were both conservative and liberal people.

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It wasn't any strange franchise of these types. It was everybody. It was only the real evolved folks that realized that oysters were good, we're gonna see a little bit of stuff, but we're gonna have a better fishery, we're gonna have better water. That was probably one percent of the population, and that's disheartening, but that's because everything's so polarized and there's so little trust left in our system. And if we don't get back to trusting and honesty and true stories, we're done for. And that's your job.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter] Yeah, it is. I'm wonderin' if we could go back-- I think you've skirted around it. You talked a little bit about water quality and changing minds, but what was the story that you were trying to tell? Like, if you could . . .

Robert Seidler: Oh, okay. The story. Because I've known Leo and the Lovels for thirty-five years or so at least.

0:47:03

And I've always really loved them. And we had a net ban that went into effect [19]94, and I worked a lot with the fishermen to help to change that. So the story-- and it was a profound story because it's always been in my head on the oysters, the story was about rebirth, it was about sustainability, and it was about life. And so all the products that we produce associated with this was about the people, the product, and the ecosystems. And it's a very telling story because it's one on positive change and it's very uplifting for anybody to watch. It was very uplifting for the investors that bought into our business because they could see that we were really doing something good, but also making money.

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And there's a backlog of people that really want to put money into things that work, but also want to work for the ecosystems, but there's really a shortage of those types of businesses. So we amped up that reality by the research that had been done and pretty much proved that if hurricanes don't take us out, if COVID doesn't ruin us, that this could be very profitable, and also make people that might not look so wonderful and warm and fuzzy a little bit more warm and fuzzy. And it was a true story, and it was a very romantic story about the sea and people that really work hard. So there was so many times that we presented-- because remember, we're on the first wave of this.

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Everybody's telling us it can't be done, it's impossible. And, of course, whenever change shows up it can't be done, and it is impossible. And there's three stages of that and that's ridicule, violent opposition, then it becomes obvious because it's self-evident. So at the end, even though they all thought it was impossible, all of a sudden now it's self-evident. And oh, yeah, yeah, we were

with you before. You don't hear them anymore because now they want to be part of it. But those are the actual stages and-- oh, I gotta remember. There was somewhere I was going with that.

What was the thread I was on?

Annemarie Anderson: You were talking about ridicule, and you were talking about the story and how you were trying to change minds with the story.

Robert Seidler:       Yep.

0:50:01

So . . . pause it for a second. [Pause]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Robert Seidler:       So you have this small group of people that are very innovative, you've got a fishing family that's been around for forty years, you've got a new process that's never been done, you've got a long history of trying oyster aquaculture in Florida and it failing. And then, all of a sudden, you have this group that says we have something better. It's off the bottom, it's out of the mud, it's away from predators. There's this sparkling food chain up at the top. There's better flow. And you say, all right, we're gonna press a button and go for it. You really have no idea what you're getting into.

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There are so many unknowns in the marine ecosystem that you can't really ever even imagine them. And you have everything that needs to be your friend like the weather, like the sea temperature, like salinity, like stormwater management, and they all play little parts-- the tides-- into this. So all of a sudden, you're out there and you have a grand vision and it's a good vision,

and then you come up to the reality that is you're gonna learn a lot first. And every region is a little bit different. You might only be two miles apart but the tide's gonna be different, the way the wind treats the water is gonna be different, the habitat's gonna be a little bit different, the salinity is gonna be a little bit different.

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So you have to say, all right, there's gonna be a five-year learning curve, and you have to hang on for five to get everything down. And that's pretty much how it turned out. And what you learn, you can never, ever, ever get rid of because it was so deep to all the players in this. And there's so much resiliency associated with those five years. But it was the hardest of hard work. And then you have the people coming in now that are six, seven years into and it's pretty easy for them . . . [Laughter] because we've fine-tuned the way they grow, the baskets, the cages, the floaters versus the long lines, all of it has been debugged very well. But most people fold the deck at year one, two, or three because it's just too hard.

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This is always the way it is with change because it's just too hard to sustain it through those years because of the amount of work and knowledge and education that it takes to do it, especially when it's new. So it's still going on. We're in year seven. A lot of good people. But what's happening now is there's a lot of very smart people, a little bit different people, that are jumping in with a notebook that's two-thirds of the way full of how to do it versus making the notebook from page one. So everything that we had thought that would happen associated with the ecosystem restoration, the markets, we were told that an oyster would never sell for a dollar. They were about twenty-five cents when we started. They're about eighty cents now. That was

completely impossible. And it will hit a dollar wholesale shortly because it has that much value associated with them.

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With the co-op, we could get an oyster off a lease and back into the cooler within fifteen minutes, and that is an oyster that has never been abused by anything. They didn't wait on the boat. They didn't have a long haul outside of being in the water or cool. We had it down where we had a franchise that we could go from the baskets they were growing in into a quick-cool chiller within fifteen minutes, and nobody was able to do that. And that was a very, very big deal. And then they could stay up to two weeks in hibernation and still be just as fresh. We would keep oysters in the cooler for two weeks, sometimes three weeks, and put them back out and see what kind of mortality, and up to 85 percent survived being chilled for two to three weeks and going back out and eating and starting again, which was just amazing!

0:55:07

So we were very dedicated to understanding what was going on. So every year-- this is where I left off-- the university systems in this region would get together for a big conference showing off the best of their research. And this is Florida A&M University, Tallahassee Community College, and FSU. And there'd usually be about two hundred different vendors that would-- we call them vendors because they were presenting the research. And for three years in a row we were invited to partake in that. And we would explain the difference-- we would shuck oysters and serve them. We'd serve about a thousand oysters at this event. It was at a center made for this. I can't remember the name of the center and on FSU campus.

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But there was so much interest in what we were doing. There were people there doing wine at Florida A&M. There was all sorts of other ag and food-related stuff, but then there was also very hard research with AI and other stuff, but we were part of it. But everybody had a thousand questions for us. And it was like we were the oyster scientists; we weren't the oyster farmers. And so over those five-and-a-half years I was involved, I probably did a hundred events with senators, representatives, all sorts of businesspeople where we would host something and we would have a few thousand oysters, and we would shuck and talk and tell. And that was so important for the general public because now they were getting the opinion that these were serious people doing serious work.

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There was serious restoration going on. It wasn't like oysters used to be where everybody's taking everything. When you talk about wild-catch oysters, all you're doing is going out and catching them. And they have to be three inches. And you're not putting any resource management back into it, but what you're doing is just not taking everything. But when you're culling a three-inch oyster off an oyster bar, you're using a heavy tool, you're knocking oysters off it, you're killing hundreds of other creatures and other oysters that won't survive the battle to get to that three-inch one. So it really was having a-- wild-catch oysters, even though it's historically what happened, is not really sustainable. When you mix wild-catch oysters and oyster aquaculture with the oyster aquaculture oysters spawning and rejuvenating all of the beds that have been voided of oysters, you have a partnership that really can work.

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But when you're into oyster aquaculture, you're buying the baby oysters, you're maintaining the baby oysters. They are your oysters. You're out there all the time taking care of them. It's not that you're gonna go grab and do stuff. You have to cull them. You have to shake them. You have to clean them to keep the fouling organisms off the cages. You have to know when everything's coming. You have to understand the ecosystem in order to make them happy for them to make you happy. But the reality is they're producing trillions of eggs and sperm all the time, all through the summer, and they are recruiting on every place imaginable within five to ten miles of where the oyster leases are, and that's regenerating the fishery and regenerating all the wild-catch oysters, as well.

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And that's the magic and the mystery that we had to get out to people, and that's why we spent so much time shucking. I presently can shut my eyes and shuck oysters as fast as I can with my eyes open because of so many oysters were shucked while I was sitting there talking. And I have dozens of different tools for shucking, so I wanted to find out what tools work best with what oysters. So when I got into this, it was deeper than this. So oysters, I wanted to know the marine aspects, the production aspects, the serving aspects, how long they live aspects, best way to eat 'em aspects. So I spent six years doing nothing but oysters.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

Robert Seidler:       And it's still growing.

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Annemarie Anderson: I have two questions out of that. You were talking about the trial and error and how now people who are just getting into it or have been in it for only a few years have kind of been able to kind of learn from some of the folks who, like you, started at the beginning.

Robert Seidler:        Yeah.

1:00:17

Annemarie Anderson: But I was wondering if you maybe could talk about that trial and error. What did that look like on the water? What did that look like--

Robert Seidler:        The what?

Annemarie Anderson: Trial and error--

Robert Seidler:        Okay. Okay. All right.

Annemarie Anderson: -- of growing and harvesting, and then also marketing that oyster. Because I'm wondering if you faced any challenges in marketing.

Robert Seidler:        Oh, yeah. Yeah. The whole ecosystem for marketing oysters was set in stone with wild catch. You take it to an oyster house, and they give you whatever best price they can afford. It was a commodity. And what we had wasn't a commodity, it was really fine art and a boutique, much like craft beer is a boutique.

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We had used the model of what craft beer industry had used with oysters, where the value added was this was raised by individuals that care. This was raised in an ecosystem that's clean. We can track it right back to the point of where it was born. So we had a quality boutique product that was worth a lot more than twenty-five or thirty cents and nobody wanted to hear of it, period.

And they pretty much, the wholesalers, told us we were crazy, that it would never-- and they didn't want any part of this. And essentially the county to the west of us outlawed oyster aquaculture for the first four years because they thought it was a really bad thing. All that has changed. And those wholesalers are in on it now.

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Everybody has realized that the good is-- but initially it was absolutely impossible to talk with these people. And it was often on the very verge of violence because they thought we were taking something from them, not giving anything to them. And essentially, we were giving whole replenishment way for wild catch, because we were injecting trillions of baby oysters into the system through our own oysters that were growing out on our leases. But they couldn't imagine that, and there was not any willingness to trust. It was zero. And it was so hard lined there was a couple of oyster organizations that formed in the state of Florida that were against us. And they came out against us and there was a lot of very nasty tactics used.

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And over the five or six years, there has been a lot of apologies had by those people, especially when we said that we needed a lot more hatcheries than were available, a lot more nurseries. And they said that, no, we don't, we only need this or that. And then they realized that what we said early was very right. We had done the research, but the research wouldn't trump the dialog that all these people had in their heads about how things worked. And this is where all the little stories that I worked on to help break a lot of that were successful. But when you're changing the tide with any industry, it's an almost impossible battle. And what happened was the consumers broke it because when the oysters were loved and people were selling them, and then other news

people would come out and get romanced by us out in the ecosystem, every time those stories, whether they were print or video, it didn't matter, every time they went out another percent of change happened.

1:04:03

And so when I talk about the five or six or seven or ten years it takes to really get something as fact, it's inch by inch, where if you just want to stop it, you can stop it in a day. So we were working this inch-by-inch thing, one percent here, one percent there and it was working very, very well, and others were coming up to speed. But it's just a slow haul. It's a very, very slow haul. And it can be painful because a lot of people just can't sustain that much work and that much harassment. We were after some other leases, some other places, and a lot of environmentalists that were pretty radicalized got with the fishermen's association that used to be the mullet fishermen, and then they were fighting us saying we were taking their mullet fishing grounds.

1:04:58

And this was intentioned because the environmentalists didn't want to see anything in their view scape. And they were all debugged and it all failed, but it slowed us down because they would throw smokescreens up and then they would do big letter-writing campaigns to politicians, and even though it was all lies it had to be dealt with. But this happens not just with oyster aquaculture, with every type of change that there is. And that's why change is so hard to come, because it is fought. Whether it's good change or bad, it is always fought. And there's always fringe groups that are willing to say anything to stop stuff.

Annemarie Anderson: And I'm wondering, too, did you have an oyster lease of your own?

Robert Seidler: I did.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Would you like to talk about that experience and maybe, like, a typical day on the water for you?

Robert Seidler: Yeah. I had long lines and they needed to be serviced at least once a week.

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And you had to get the tides right, because if the tide wasn't right you couldn't stand on the ground to service them. You had to get the barometer right. You had to get the wind right. You had to get everything right. So you had a limited window. And if the weather was bad, it was impossible. So a day would be-- according to what size your oysters were-- but you were out there essentially culling them into sizes and breaking them up. You would put them on the boat, you would start with, say, a thousand in one of the baskets that's about three foot by about ten inches, and by the end of three months there'd be about a hundred in that basket. So you'd be cutting them, cutting them, cutting them and moving them into more baskets that had bigger and bigger holes for the flow. So you had six different baskets with holes at the end about the size of a quarter and at the beginning about the size of a pencil.

1:07:02

And so you were constantly moving. They grow very, very fast. We could have a sellable product in ninety days if we put it in in the spring. They go dormant during the winter. So in ninety days we could have a petite oyster that you could eat very easily. And in six months have a product that was close to three inches. And in a year just this incredible-- could be a six-inch product, five inch. And that's three or four times faster than oysters would grow on the bottom because there's no predation, there's more food. They're always eating, where on the bottom

everything is trying to eat them. So they're just having a very good time. And one of the coolest things, we would take sacks of wild-catch oysters, shucked, and about two-hundred oysters in a sack.

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Then we'd put two hundred of our oysters, and it weighed less than half as much because they were growing faster, they weren't worried about predation, so the shells were able to have a lot less calcium. So for shipping you get the same size meat, but you have the weight of shell, so it was a lot cheaper to ship. And between growing faster, weighing less, being cleaner, tasting better, all those things were real facts with growing them on the top. And we kept learning that. But you stayed busy all the time if you had a couple hundred thousand oysters out there.

Annemarie Anderson: I bet. [Laughter]

Robert Seidler: It didn't ever stop. So you would slow down in the winter, and then when the water hit about sixty-eight degrees all the marine fouling organisms would come out, all the barnacles would seed on everything. And if you weren't there those two weeks to dry your stuff out, in a month everything would be locked tight with barnacles.

1:09:02

And we had to learn this. We didn't know what the cycle was here. Nobody had done it. So now people know when this is coming. Now we know all of these things and it wasn't known before. So it was a lot of work. There was a lot of risk. And we didn't have a market yet. So here we were growing all this stuff and the market was less than cooperative, it was adversarial. So we had to break so many doors down. And that really took years. And then, all the groups that couldn't believe it could be something good. And it's like holding your breath. You just have to

keep pushing, but you can only hold your breath for so long and then you just give up and go on to other things because it becomes too hard.

1:10:02

And the head of the Environmental Institute had a bunch of combatants after him trying to take him out because they saw him as the kingpin in all this. And he was everything but physically assaulted by those people. And it was only a couple dozen people, but when you have a couple dozen people that will do anything to stop you, they have a big effect on you. There was a big chunk that was ugly. Big chunk. There was a lot of thievery, there was a lot of vandalism the first few years. There was just a lot of really bad stuff, but the reality was when you had the product and you had the true story, it really did offset it. But it's not just oysters, it's everything good takes a struggle.

1:11:01

Annemarie Anderson: I think that's true. I'm wondering, did you give up your lease?

Robert Seidler: I sold it.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Robert Seidler: Yeah, I sold it.

Annemarie Anderson: When did you sell it?

Robert Seidler: Just this year.

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Robert Seidler: Yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: What made you make that decision?

Robert Seidler: The co-op, after Michael and COVID, it went under, and I was done. And I was hit from behind a few years ago in a traffic crash in Montana, and I had only one arm working. And it just became . . . yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: A lot for one person.

Robert Seidler: And I became old. [Laughter] But I was there to get it started, and I was there with the co-op, and the co-op was gonna go places.

1:11:59

We had a big proposal in to Gulf Triumph which was-- not the Exxon but the BP money. And we were very close to that too, which would have given us a nursery hatchery and a postharvest facility, and our university partners pulled out. So we had Michael, the hurricane; COVID; and then loss of our partnership. And then I said, I'm done, and I just went back to my normal stuff. I'm still on the fringes of oysters, but no regrets.

Annemarie Anderson: I hear that.

Robert Seidler: No regrets.

Annemarie Anderson: I hear that. Well, I only have a couple more questions for you, and one of them is-- I'm interested also, especially here at Spring Creek, the relationship-building aspect of it. And I'm wondering if you could talk about the relationships or some of the folks, the oyster men and women who you worked with at the co-op and what that relationship would've looked like?

1:13:00

Robert Seidler: I did a lot of interviews. I did a lot of photos. I was so excited about the co-op. We had about twenty-five members. They were making a living. They showed up. They got paid immediately. They knew what they were gonna get paid. They had a place for their boat. It made their life easy. They'd show up at the dock, we'd take everything off and pay them. And this never happened with oysters before. And they were only fifteen minutes from their lease. And it made everything just very, very, very easy for everybody involved. It was excellent, and that was a big deal. And that is continuing in a sense here. There's kinda the second generation of oyster people that have showed up that have taken all of our lessons and applied them, and they're doing better and they're doing more innovative types of things.

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A big part of our plan was to get into environmental trips and a lot of other things associated with oyster aquaculture. We did not get to that in our six years. We only got to breaking the markets, getting some good marketing information, and getting things established. We never got to stage two or three. Now these people are working towards stage two and three. One of the things that I'd envisioned were little lighthouses out there as Airbnbs where people would come and stay. It would be self-sustained. We'd use a model that they use as ranger stations out West that are US Forest Service approved and can take a-hundred-and-fifty-mile-an-hour winds. But they would be the sentries out there and they would make sure people aren't out at night stealing and doing things. That would be part of their job at staying out there, and things like that.

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And that is one aspect, but the biggest aspect if we did that would be the marketing aspect. Because little places like that tend to draw a lot of attention from around the world, especially if

it's marine. If you can go stay out in a marine ecosystem, you have oysters and a fishery around you, they would stay booked solidly, but you would be getting free press from all over the world, and that would be marketing the products and the whole product of what we're doing with off-bottom oyster aquaculture. And so I'm still there 100 percent with these things, and if the opportunity came to work on some of the other things that I'd come up with, I would jump back in and work on them immediately. Even though I don't have a lease, that doesn't matter. I learned everything I needed in those six years. I don't have to sell oysters, but I want to sell the process and sell the region and then that, in turn, will sell oysters.

Annemarie Anderson: That's a really great answer.

1:16:00

Yeah. That's really interesting. And it seems like there are other people around here who want to kind of do both of those things.

Robert Seidler: I'm like fly paper--

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Robert Seidler: --I do not let go of something. And meeting Dewey and Jody, that was, okay, next generation, they're here. If we would've pulled off the sixteen million with the co-op-- that's how much-- everything would've changed 'cause we would've had the facility. And we got 95 percent there. And sure, are there problems when you get eight or ten people on a board together? I'm far, far left of center. There were people far from right of center. But I was pretty good at being able to do this because my job is fixing stuff. They're a problem; this is impossible. Not really impossible. Here, let's do this.

1:16:59

And the power of the media is pretty profound.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: You can really get into people's heads. And you use real people to do things, it sticks with people. There's stickiness if you do things right. Of course, there's ways to lie with the media. You see mostly that. But there's ways to get to real truth. And I think because I was so pragmatic 'cause I was working in safety for so many years, I had to be pragmatic to come to the fixes. We're having this many injuries and crashes. What can we do? So you figure out what do you actually do scientifically. And I was working with behavioral scientists and all those folks and you kind of see things as, oh, this isn't a problem. What are the workarounds you need to get-- you're going here, it's not a straight line. It's a strange zigzag that goes backwards and forwards. But when you know that where you're heading is good and you can prove it, if you sustain, you'll get there.

1:18:01

And that's the thing about good, good is real. Good is real. And everybody can get on the good, but it takes different lengths of time to get people to understand the journey because often it's so foreign to them. And because I've worked in automobiles and bicycles-- and when I started the bicycle wasn't even a vehicle. And so I've been in this. I've been in the fatals, I've been in all the causation stuff. I was working crashes and deaths. I'm deep, deep into that, but I also can quickly bring somebody up to speed on the way American is broken when it comes to transportation. But it's getting better. We're getting more greenways and trails. E-bike will change all of that. Like

oyster aquaculture will change oysters, the E-bike will change greenways, trails, and transportation.

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You'll see this in your lifetime. Most people can't imagine it, but that's the big thing right now, and it's really very profound. But the oyster can change everything because it's a powerhouse keystone specie that doesn't move. If you can imagine, mullet are keystone species, too, but they move. But oysters are just on the ground producing food for hundreds of other species, providing habitat and cover and energy, and cleaning the water at the same time. Pretty remarkable.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: Yeah. And when you get to the history of the oyster around New York City or around the world-- because as I started this, I was crazy enough to take off to Europe and then Japan and research what was going on. It had been going on a couple hundred years, and I learned a lot from that research. I found museums that were the most important parts of their town just celebrating the oyster.

1:20:03

And gigantic bodies of water that were three by ten miles that were just about oyster aquaculture and keeping that going because a couple hundred thousand people depended on that. And this was in Southern France, the town of Sète. That was really the hub of oyster aquaculture for Europe. And when you go there and see it and you find the history and you talk to people, you realize that we're not the experts but we're getting on, but there's a lot to be learned. But most people can't absorb that much information. They're there for the day or week.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: Most people don't really want to know. Most people don't really want to think about things a lot. So you have to make little things that help them-- you have to add wonder and story to everything. It's kind of like the best sprinkle.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

1:21:01

Robert Seidler: You add wonder and story, and if it's real wonder and real story, you get some really cool cakes. [Laughter]

Annemarie Anderson: That's true. That's true.

Robert Seidler: And you get a lot of people that want to eat them.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: But most Americans lack imagination and it's just how it is. And I'm incredibly biased because I've been a filmmaker forty-some years. So I'm so biased with all this. When I see a problem, I think, hmm, where's the solution? And that's why I think in solutions, but most people don't even care. They just think about money. So I think about solutions, and solutions lead to my bank account just by chance. So I'm really a bad businessperson.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, I have one more question for you, then I'll open it up for anything else that you want to share, and that's what do you hope to see for the future of oyster aquaculture in Oyster Bay, Skipper Bay, Alligator Harbor, the Gulf of Mexico?

1:22:03

Robert Seidler: I want to see the City of Tallahassee, Leon County paying for the water treatment that they're getting from us. I think that would be very nice, and a lot of press about that, because we're doing it. I want to see little lighthouses out there with people as sentries watching over everything and learning and sharing. That would make me the happiest. I want to see a lot of people making a living and a lot of young people involved with this and different process. I would like to see a big facility in Panacea that does postharvest treatment and a few nurseries and hatcheries. That would go a long way. There was one attempted in Alligator Point and the local neighbors, of course, lied about what it would mean, and it was stopped.

1:23:00

And this man was a scientist, a dear friend, and he didn't expect that it would be objectionable. There was no objection to it in reality, but it had such a backlash he just stayed down in Boca. He wouldn't come. He said, "I'm not gonna work with these people." And I don't blame him. His name was Tom McCrudden, a great guy in his late forties. And he was the solution. He knows more about hatching and raising oysters than anyone. And that opportunity showed, but there was such back pressure because of those twelve, fifteen people, he wouldn't play. And I can't blame him. But to get more realistic about what oysters do for the ecosystems, and to help to squash the crazy people that stop good from happening, to out them, to really, really out them.

1:24:04

And that is very, very important. And it's very difficult. A few people can cause so much problem for positive change. And I'm only thinking positive change because they're so engrained in stopping. And I call them the stoppers. And I've done a lot of writing associated with things about the stoppers. And they've been after me many, many times for things. Very ugly stories.

But whenever you're involved with things that are new, there's gonna be controversy, there's gonna be objection, and there's gonna be very strange struggles. And the biggest thing is do not waiver off what is good and hold onto it. Do not give up and it will break through.

1:25:00

There's been three times in the forty years I've been here I've almost moved west, and each time was because I had about given up, and each time stuff broke through. But it'll be interesting to see what happens. I want to keep working with Leo, Jody, everybody around here on the crazy visions of good, and mixing people and places and going out and doing sunbaked oysters by kayak and hosting young people and Airbnb-ers and world travelers. From hosting so many Airbnb folks, especially internationals, there's so much market there to do good and do economic good, as well. Most of those folks have a lot of resources, they have a lot of time, they have a lot of money.

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They don't pollute, they're very nature based, and they're a big asset for the community. They come, spend money, experience stuff that's natural, and then go home. And of course there's always a small percentage of error with any group, but fifteen hundred people in five, six years, you get a pretty good idea of who the market is and why. So if we could focus Wakulla, we would just need, like, 0.0001 percent of international travelers to make this county really hustle and bustle in a positive way. And what it also does-- there's a double-edged sword to anything, of course, but with the internationals, it makes us realize the value of our natural resources, and that also helps us to protect them.

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And you have to use them and acknowledge them to keep them, so you can overrun them, but it would be pretty hard here to overrun anything because we don't have the population base, we don't have the housing base. But it would take just a few thousand people a month to make a big change in our economics. And also, 80 percent of the work force goes to Leon County, goes north. And the more we could focus on nature-based and cultural-heritage tourism the better off we could be. So one of the biggest things-- because I always hit a hundred questions with people, and we live in the South, but the issue associated with Wakulla and the surroundings, it's very authentic, very authentic. It hasn't been big boxed. It hasn't been franchised out to other corporations. And one of the biggest things you notice from the international travelers, why they like it is the authenticity.

1:27:57

That is a big, big deal, even though it's South, it's poor, it's all that, that doesn't matter. It's authentic. And we can keep that authenticity. If we can keep the authenticity and the nature-based habitats and the environment in good shape, we will be that calling place for those people. I've got people that have been back four and five times from Europe that can't wait--

Annemarie Anderson: Wow!

Robert Seidler: It's their favorite place in the world. I've got a guy, he's in Belgium, they're art dealers, six times he's been there, and he travels all over the world and we communicate every week still. And he goes, "You know, being in Wakulla is my favorite place." "Stop this! **Deoni**, quit saying that. I don't believe you." He'll go, "I'm not kidding." Favorite place in the world.

That's a big deal!

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: And he's been out on the oyster leases. Because we hit it off. He's about ten years younger, he and his wife.

1:28:58

We just hit it off. And there's a lot of people that deserve grand tours that wasn't part of the package, but you know because those people are gonna tell a hundred other people. And from, I would say, fifty visitors from Europe told five hundred others. And that's how I ended up with 40 percent internationals in Wakulla County, Florida. And imagine if two or three hundred people did that what could change.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: It's big, it's really big.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, that is.

Robert Seidler: It's really big. Been a lot of fun, too. And I haven't done it since COVID.

Annemarie Anderson: Um-hm.

Robert Seidler: I've stopped. And I think I'm turning my studio into an apartment so that it's completely separate, but I really miss it. I really miss it.

Annemarie Anderson: I bet.

Robert Seidler: So I'd like to see it keep going. I'd like to see the infrastructure show up here that's needed, and that's really-- we need a postharvest center, we need nurseries, we need hatcheries.

1:30:05

And that was part of the co-op's plan that we almost got to. But if I was to give the co-op a rating, I'd give it an A because getting to part two and three you get, like, less than a one percent chance of getting that far with being the lead group to really come in. It's very, very difficult. What probably would've happened to us had we survived and got the funding is we would've been sold. There's three gigantic seafood retailers. We would've sold, but that would've been fine because we had done our work. That's what would've happened had the hurricane not gotten us. And that would've been very nice because it would give us air to keep going on other stuff.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler: 'Cause we busted our butts.

Annemarie Anderson: I believe it. That's a lot of work.

1:31:00

Well, is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to add?

Robert Seidler: I think you covered it. I'm just now getting relaxed.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Robert Seidler: I know how it works 'cause I interview hundreds of people. It's always best if there's anything you didn't like at this point to ask me that, because now I'm in the state of mind where it's all there again. And I know this with people that I interview, and so I'll go back to the first questions after the interview. Essentially, I grew up feral.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Robert Seidler: I was an outdoor boy that just wanted to be-- I didn't want to be in school. I loved to read, I loved to do stuff, but I was feral. I just wanted to be in mud, I wanted to be in

nature, I wanted to be playing with snakes, and that never changed. And the only interest I ever had was in nature. And filmmaking made those interests real where I could share them easily with others to get them into nature.

1:32:01

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Robert Seidler:       And the same thing with Airbnb. And my partner has three grandkids and they come up for usually two weeks a year and I call it the feralization process. Where they live on concrete down in Naples, but when they're at my house it's an acre tied to the water, everything is there. There's bikes, there's motorcycles, there's hatchets, there's axes, there's fire pits, there's bows and arrows and BB guns. Everything is there. And they can't wait to get there because they get to do exactly what they never get to do. And so I think all of us need to think of how do we connect more kids to all of those things, all of those things that are natural.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well, thank you so much.

Robert Seidler:       You're welcome. Thank you.

[End]