

**Interviewee Name:** Mike Flanagan

**Project/Collection Title:** Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

**Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation:** Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant) and Giulia Cardoso (College of the Atlantic)

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**Interview Description:**

With over 40 years of experience as a Merchant Marine Captain, Mike Flanagan—from Thomaston, ME—wants to support young Mainers in pursuing a similar career path and building the skills necessary to work out at sea. In this interview, he explains how he is doing that by working with the Maine Ocean School and pushing for a discussion about drug use in the fishing community.

**Collection Description:**

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**Transcribed By:** Giulia Cardoso

Start of MIKE\_FLANAGAN\_VMFF2019\_AUDIO

[0:25:08.2]

NS: Natalie Springuel

GC: Giulia Cardoso

MF: Mike Flanagan

[0:00:00.0]

NS: Uhm, great. So that's what we're doing. Uhm, and I'm gonna hold this like, right around here.

MF: Sure.

NS: For you.

MF: Sure.

NS: Great!

MF: Mmhm.

NS: So, tell me, did you just get here?

MF: Uh, I arrived this morning, I was here last year.

NS: Great.

MF: For the Maine Ocean School, and, uh, I actually got involved in, uh, there's another, I'm, I'm a retired merchant marine captain, and there's another merchant marine captain on, working with the school, and the two of us ended up, uh, last year, uh at, when they gathered all the lobster fishermen together, uh, the two of us decided they weren't covering the fact that the drug use on the boats, on the fishing boats in the State of Maine is interfering with the deep water guys.

NS: Oh.

MF: I'm a deep-water captain.

NS: So, let me.

MF: Mike's a deep-water captain.

NS: Okay. Let me have you state your name and spell it, if you could.

MF: Uh. Mike Flanagan. F-L-A-N-A-G-A-N.

NS: Great. And where are you based, Mike?

MF: Oh, well I'm retired now, but I worked for the Military Seal of Command for 38 years, uh, I've been at sea for 41 years.

[0:01:05.0]

NS: Great.

MF: This is the longest I've been ashore for 40 years.

NS: Wow.

MF: 'Cause I retired.

NS: Yeah.

MF: And, uh, but my, so, the Maine Ocean School is, is, I, I really am passionate about these kids, but my original intention was, I had gotten an appointment with uh, Governor LePage for a 15-minute meeting in 2014, to talk about getting kids trained on ships at a high school age. 'Cause I'm not a Maine Maritime guy. I came up through the ranks. And the kids, and we were getting kids that are not, that are popping positive. Uhm, so.

NS: In terms of . . . ?

MF: Drugs.

NS: Drugs.

MF: So, what that does is, after the Exxon-Valdez, the U.S. Merchant Marine, all the American flag ships worldwide required drug screening. And it's not something that's discussed a lot.

[0:02:03.7]

MF: But, uh, you'll hear it talked about at Maine Maritime, because it's a clean campus, by and large. Uhm, but we have found that it's not being communicated to the young in Maine, I mean, a high school graduate, we can, we have the connections to get a high school graduate a \$60,000 a year job, uh, and in fact, uh, there's some two weeks on, two weeks off, with benefits, all that, but you will be drug screened. And that includes marijuana. And uh, they, when the, when the government, the Department of Transportation decided to drug screen, it wasn't like a putative measure. It was because of, wouldn't it, I, I, I drove ammunition ships and tankers. I just came off a salvage ship, my last job was a salvage ship in, uh, bringing up overboard two aircrafts and the bodies. Uh, that's another sea story, but, you get involved in a lot of stuff. That you can't be a stoner.

[0:03:03.4]

NS: Yeah.

MF: And it uh, so, what we found was becau—I'm pretty familiar with the kids around here. I'm from here. And we know what's going on. And Mike, I wish Mike was here. In fact, he texted me some.

NS: And this is Mike . . . ?

MF: Mike Ames.

NS: Mike Ames.

MF: Who was from Matinicus and has just retired as a polar tanker captain. Those are, quote unquote, the dudes, from uhm, Maine Maritime. And he was running uh, to Valdez, Alaska. In fact, he was, I think, he was on as a Chief Mate on the ship in front of (phone ringing) oh, I'm sorry.

NS: No problem, it happens.

MF: (On the phone.) James, I'm being interviewed right now, what do you need?

(Voice on other side of phone.)

MF: (On the phone.) As a matter of fact, I just, I gave him two of 'em this morning, I gave the one you gave me.

[0:04:05.8]

MF: This is James Gillway, who was the one in the State legislature from Searsport who, and he was a Republican, uh, who beat the Democrat and then the Democrat now has taken his seat and the Democrat's on our board, too, working with us. And so is the—

NS: Of the Maine Ocean School?

MF: Maine Ocean School. We got, got both Democrats, pre-Democrat, Republican, post-Democrat. Everybody's on the same school. It's kinda cool.

NS: So, uhm.

MF: Anyway, back to where I was.

NS: I wanna hear about the Maine Ocean School, but tell us a little bit more about the—

MF: So they, they, they, the kids in Maine from what I can see, are not being told the impact of casual use of marijuana and then other substances. And I know, so a sternman, if you're up around the College of the Atlantic.

[0:05:01.7]

MF: And you know kids that work on lobster boats, those kids are working as a sternman, are making 10, 12, 15,000 dollars a summer. And the drug dealers are on the waterfront now. I mean, they're well established on the waterfront. And these kids to a, to a massive degree, I

mean not, not just like it's an, a, this is like, well over half, and this came up last year, are using drugs. And they are naively being brought into the scene, so last year uh, I had to go back to sea, but Mike got an appointment with the uh, DMR. And to talk about drug screening for fishermen. And he sent me some questions, we're gonna bring it up this year. How many incidents have we had? How many are drug related? We know of some, people die on these boats.

[0:06:00.2]

Uh, we just had a prosecution of a guy, anyway, that, but there seems to be a casual attitude about the dangers associated with it. So, there's that. Me, as a husband and a father, as a father, actually, and as a citizen of Maine, but the other thing is, I have, the State of Maine has been putting kids on ships forever. Uh, if you wanna interview two really great pe-, there's two women working on the Islesboro ferry, with their ki—uh, their kids. I mean, there's just a, there's, the world is your oyster, but you gotta stay clean. And the kids aren't being told right now. Uhm, we have a, one of the kids, we wanna get a guy is uh, high school graduate from Camden, but he's flying 747s. And he worked his way up that way. But you can't, you can't get in. The aviation industry needs people, the merchant marine needs people, uh, there, we've got kids all over the world, uh.

[0:07:02.9]

But they're being drug-screened. And it's amazing how many kids don't wanna play, when they find out, "Well, I'm gonna be drug screened." So, we're trying to get, what I would like to see, I, I've gotta stay focused on this. What I would like to see is an open debate about the necessity to drug screen fishermen. Because those are the kids that are the other captains and chief engineers. Those, there, there's a group of people that are on ships worldwide from Maine that are not out of Maine Maritime. And they came out of those communities. I mean, they came out of these, these coastal communities in Maine and they went into the Merchant Marine as a cook, or as steward utility and they worked their way up.

NS: And, and you went and spoke with Governor LePage about.

MF: No, I, no, I s—I didn't s—speak about that specifically. My s—my, my thing was to get.

[0:08:02.8]

I asked LePage, uh, it was a 15-minute interview and it was to, my idea, my grand idea and I talked about it, I talked it over with a large number of guys from Maine. I mean, there's massive numbers of guys from Maine, and gals now, on ships worldwide. Uhm, and we thought, "Ok, we'll get the high school kids," and I asked LePage, I had this grand idea, I said, "I know what they've got out of Brunswick." The old Naval Air Station. So my idea for LePage was, open up a school in Brunswick and then I'm retiring and we can get some other Merchant Marine guys and we can get, we can st—in fact, I went through the process of getting okay-ed by the US Coast Guard to teach classes, which I'll do for free. Uh, to get the kids at a high school age, to get their Z-cards. Now, a Z-card, I have one in my briefcase, but I don't have it here. It's my license to go to sea.

[0:09:04.3]

By the Department of Transportation. You as a, uh, I assume you're older than 16.

GC: Yeah.

MF: You are eligible to get one. And that will allow you to go on an American flag vessel, if you can get the job. Including working in Camden at the schooners, on the schooners. Uh, we had, I was, when I was out in Palau, we had Tim Allen's ship out there. I mean, there's huge opportunities for the young on the various ships. They got—they gotta have these, they gotta be drug free, so we wanted to get them in a high school area, and I'm now tuned in to the anti-tobacco.

NS: Mmhm.

MF: Scene, because, I could care less about somebody smoking cigarettes, but they sure spend a lot of money saying how bad tobacco is, but they're not talking about the impact of drug use. And the sad part about it is, when you talk about it in the manner which I'm talking about it, I'm viewed as the bad guy.

[0:10:04.8]

But you want that \$60,000 a year job, you wanna fly that 747, you wanna do uh, amazing things, you gotta stay clean. So, I mean I know the impact that it has on the, you know, all the medical stuff and all that, but the impact it has on your ability to go forth uh, you can be a Wall Street lawyer, but you're not gonna be working a ship out of Lower Wall Street. You're not gonna be flying a ship, you're not gonna be flying an aircraft out of Kennedy. I mean.

NS: And so, uh, the, the, so then you got involved with the Maine Ocean School?

MF: Okay, so. The reason that I . . . Okay, when I saw LePage, this was my idea. So, my focus, when I'm talking here is the drug thing. But it's not a focus at the Maine Ocean School. That's a very controversial type of thing to load onto the parents.

[0:11:00.7]

And I don't wanna do that. So LePage said, "When you retire, go see the Commissioner of Education." At that time, it was a guy named Deschamp I think. And I called him and he said, I never even talked to him in person, he said, "Go see James Gillway," who just called me, just now. The Town Manager for Searsport, Maine. I'm thinking, "What?" so I drove up to Searsport and James and I met and his dad had been an Exxon Chief, or First Engineer who had got really ill and came ashore, he's from Winterport, and uh, he was in the State legislature at the time. Uh, and there was a national meeting at, in Baltimore, between Baltimore and Washington, the next Tuesday. And I said, "You and I need to go to this." This is, we hadn't really talked more about it. And he sold it to the town selectmen, who count every penny.

[0:12:02.7]

And they sent him to, to this meeting and I drove down and met, and the two of us attended this national maritime conference. And President Obama's Department of, uh, the Marine (sighs) Marit—the, is, the Maritime, the head of the Maritime Administration under the

Department of Transportation was, he said, I remember he said, "I have a nightmare on the tsunami of need in the maritimes." And he said, and he appointed a professor from Kings Point, Shashi Kumar to be the head of this training for the United States. And I introduced myself to Kumar and we did a cold call on him about a year ago in Washington.

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And he spoke, we had a fishermen's dinner here at the Samoset, and he spoke and, and it was a wonderful discussion, he discussed the m—the worldwide women on ships, nationwi—I mean he was all into it, but he's into the colleges.

(Coughing in background.)

We're into the high school. So therein lies our relationship, so that meeting fostered a further thought process in the Maine Ocean School. So we have Gayle, who's, she's the Fish Queen. Uh, me, I'm the Merchant Marine guy, but we got, we got partnerships going on, uh, we've got, we're hoping to get the kids, if we can, permission to ride the ferries. And get certifications. So if you, as a young lady from the College of the Atlantic, in fact, like the lady that's on the Islesboro ferry right now, get your merchant marine ticket, you can get endorsements.

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It's like, if you're doing, if you're doing ticket punches here to be a journalist. You have to have, for us, you have to have signatures. My name has to be there so the Coast Guard can see that there's a certified, qualified person that signed on that, that line. We have people, we're trying to get those people to help the kids.

(Coughing in background.)

Uh, we're trying to get kids jobs that they can get the certification to be on American flag ships. And I remember our first meeting, Gayle's like, "What?!" and I said, "Woods Hole, Scripps," and they, that, that, that launched 'em, I said, "Woods Hole and Scripps have ships all over the world. If you come to them as a marine scientist, in fact, if you're gonna go as a marine scientist to Scripps or to Woods Hole or one of the schools for a PhD, I guarantee this will be a deal breaker."

[0:15:00.7]

We've had, we've, we've, I've talked to people at, I've been working with Scripps and Woods Hole for years, and I know their mindset. So you've got those, and NOAA too, uh, you've got the scientists on the ships and those scientists, they either get together with the crew and get in the, in the mode, or they take a long time to do it.

(Coughing in background.)

Some just split. But if you know ships, my opinion, personal opinion, is, it can be a deal breaker for a PhD program, it could be a deal breaker for a Master's program.

NS: The deal breaker would be if . . .

MF: You're certified to work on ships. If you're in a marine science capacity, uh, on ships and so, so that's, that's the thing I try to sell to the young men and women at the school. Uh, but, so, it's the hook. Mike uses the term, "the hook." Uh, Mike's, Mike Ames is the other guy. Uh.

[0:16:00.8]

You get, if you're like around the ocean, there's a hook. And whether it'd be you're into marine fisheries or whether you're into ships, or whether you're into uhm, oh gosh, we've got, we've got Dennis Dorsey who owns a marine expl—like, exploration company based out of Eastport of all places, has offered to give the kids PADI training. In Searsport, so the kids—

NS: This is dive training?

MF: Dive training. Yes, so we give them the basic dive training, but we wanna give them the basic dive training for the real deal. Here's basic dive training and this is the future and I just, ocean archaeologists now are huge. They're going after uh, they're going after a lot of stuff. Shallow and deep. Uh, forensic archaeology and, uh, the bodies that are remaining under the ocean, uh, I, I just got involved with that, watching that.

[0:17:02.2]

There's just an amazing number of things out there.

NS: Jobs.

MF: And so si—jobs.

NS: On the ocean.

MF: On the ocean, that pay a, a living wage. And uh, you can see, we've got, it, it, in fact, they, WERU did an interview with the kids and uh, I've been told those are called students, but, kids, anyway. But they're great kids. And one of the girls is coming from Islesboro, daily, on the ferry. Well, a guy, a friend of mine, who used to be a Chief Engineer with me off and on for twenty years, got wind of her coming back and forth, and he had her down the engine room, which we've been told is not as cool as it sounds, so he could show her the engines. And she's like, all jazzed up about this, and communicating it to the other kids. So, it was funny we have the, the president of the class is this great young lady.

[0:18:01.2]

MF: I mean, she'd be like, MIT or one of those schools and she goes, "I wanna be a harbor pilot" (laughs). I don't know what her parents said, but . . . So, one of our, uh, we have a, uh, retired New York City harbor pilot that lives up here, and he's gonna try to get her when the Penobscot pilots run out to the ships. Not to, just, she'll just ride with the pilot, out to the ship. Now whether we can get the hook to go on the ship or not, but we can get her on the boat that goes out to the ship in Penobscot Bay and pulls up to (sneezes) close to this huge ship as the pilot goes up the ladder onto the ship. She can see what they do. Uh, it's another world on its own, and the money is huge (laughs) uh to do it, because you have the



responsibility for uh, those big ships. But, uh, so, she, there's a, there's a, the kids are jazzed up about it. Uh, Gayle supposedly has got, I think it's a sophomore.

[0:19:01.2]

Is gonna have an internship at the Darling Center. That's cool. A sophomore in high school working at the Darling Center? Oh my gosh. Yeah, but, I mean I ha—we've got another kid that was the captain uh, of the, uh, schooner (sighs). Oh gosh, it's at the top of my, anyway, it's a schooner out of Camden. And uhm, he's, he's like, he's like this studly do-right from uh, California kinda guy. And he wants to get the kids involved in uh, stuff on the schooners in the winter months down South. 'Cause the summer months are taken up with the schooners for the customers and all that stuff. I mean, the kids can work on it, but an actual, I mean he, he actually did a feasibility study of having kids on a boat.

[0:19:59.3]

And then getting somebody, an entrepreneur in Maine, and he mentioned a guy, but I shouldn't use the name, uh, who's well known in the coast of Maine, to bankroll a group of kids and then they would do the total sale plan. For a week, on this boat going from Tampa to Cuba. And back. And the boats exist. The people exist, that wanna help this stuff. And we're, so we're telling, we're trying to get the ship owners to recognize that these are the kind of kids they want. Because a lot of them don't. Uh, the O'Hara Company has uh, they don't have that many kids from Maine now. And they, y—you're in a lot of money on all the herring boats and the, in the Gulf of Alaska, in the Bering Sea, but kids aren't coming. They used to—

NS: How did you get involved with the Ocean School?

MF: That meeting. The Secretary of Education said "Go meet this guy." And I found, I didn't know what a magnet school was. I mean, pfft, magnet school? Charter school? No.

[0:21:01.8]

MF: And then, and then we hooked up with the uh, Maine Math and Science School. Uh, everybody did a meeting up there, and I remember, uh, I was in the South Pacific talking to everybody in the van as they were coming back from the MSSM, uh, about what they saw up there, and how the kids, the kids all lived together in this remote part of Maine.

NS: At the Maine Math and Science School?

MF: Maine Math and Science. And uh, I've talked to a couple of the kids and part of the magic is, uh, they all live together. And they help one another. And it's reflected in where these kids go. I mean, these kids, I have a, my cousin's daughter, who I've only met once, went there, and she's on a full ride for Marine Science at BU. I mean, and he, he took on an extra job to, to pay for her room. The, the tuition's free, State of Maine pays tuition, but the room and board is, is that.

[0:22:00.9]

And uh, yeah, so, I mean, I, I could (sighs). The joke my wife says is uh, "Ask Mike for the time and he'll tell you how to build a watch," so, uh.

NS: So, uh, wha—we have somebody else coming in in a couple of minutes, so what, tell us a parting shot. Like, what would be a, a really, sort of, a message that you want to share either about the Ocean School, or you came in feeling strongly about the, you—

MF: No, no.

NS: You're concerned about drug use.

MF: Well, the, the, the drug use, but there's a huge adventure out there for life. For the young. And I've been blessed part of that adventure for 40 years, and I've seen it. And I think that there's a, there's a fall-off. Something's happening in our youth that, that, that ability to, it's not how many times you go down, it's how many times you get up. But if you're using stuff that's gonna keep you from doing the job, they're gonna, they're gonna, they're gonna knock you out right away.

[0:23:00.1]

Uhm, and, I can talk about it because I'm so emb—I'm, as the captain of ships, uh, it's important. But I think it needs to be discussed in depth in the coast of Maine. I, I, excuse me, nationwide, but especially in Maine, where we've got these, these issues and, uh, and there's so many of us that wanna help. But, I, people such as yourself need to say, "Hey, maybe this guy's got a point." You know, maybe we'll talk about it in the State legislature or stuff like that. But, uh . . . But, and I want, I, I worry about the youth uh, uh, I'm, I'm very concerned. And uh, and I, and the, and I know that there are huge jobs out there. I rem—parting shot: Vice President from Mobil Oil was at a, I was the Port Captain for Military Seal of Command I had the Pacific ships. There were 32 ships. I was the Senior Captain and I went to this conference, and a Mobil Oil Vice President for Marine Personnel, I remember he goes, he, he showed, he said, "This is our ships that are American flagged, and most of them were in the Gulf of Mexico." I mean there were n—pff, t—the lights just lit up everywhere. He said, "I came to you because I can't man these vessels. The oil rigs and the vessels," he said, "Because kids come on for two weeks, we give them \$60,000, all, all, everything's paid for, but the kids can't handle the job. You know, he, you're getting out there on a, you're getting on a rig that, listen to people, you get killed! I mean, there's a lot of stories about that. But we won't let you get killed, and we're gonna pay you a lot of money and we're gonna train you if you wanna do it." Uh, but they, all of a sudden they couldn't get the kids, the high school kids. This . . . this on the Gulf of Mexico. But I remember thinking, "Mmhm."

NS: Yeah, yeah.

MF: Big opportunity, is all.

NS: Well thank you.

MF: And you can go up to captain!

NS: Right. Thank you so much.

MF: Okay.

GC: Uhm, I'm gonna.

[0:25:08.2]