



# NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview March 23, 2017

## Rua, Jaqueline ~ Oral History Interview

Madeleine Hall-Arber

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## **Background**

**Name of person interviewed:** Jaqueline Rua [JR]

### **Facts about this person:**

Age 31  
Sex Female  
Occupation Fish Processor  
Residence New Bedford, MA  
Ethnic background (if known) Puerto Rican

**Interviewer:** Madeleine Hall-Arber [MHA]

**Transcriber:** Aneshia Savino [AS]

**Interview location:** Norpel, New Bedford, MA

**Date of interview:** March 23, 2017

### **Key Words**

Pallet, forklift, Spanish, working in male spaces, hard work and ambitions

### **Abstract**

Jaqueline Rua has worked at Norpel for four years and has ambitions to be in management. She describes working conditions, learning English on the job and changes that have occurred in the four years on the job. She has a vast knowledge of types of fish and the packing process. She also trains Spanish speakers who are hired as temps during peak seasons.

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[00:00] Intro, Rua born in Holyoke, MA in 1985, grew up in Puerto Rico, only one in her family in the fishing industry, but many of her neighbors are, family is not in New Bedford

[5:02] Rua performs many jobs, including running the forklift, at Norpel. Among her jobs, she sorts fish, grinds it for cat food, and packs the quality fish for distribution, each day has a different schedule

[9:53] Discussion of pay scales, learning English on the job, now she trains Spanish-speakers on the job, describes her ambitions, Rua's wife also works in the fishing industry, MHA describes the Fishing Heritage Center

[15:42] Use of special tools, physical changes and institutional changes at Norpel, need to work hard, uniforms and safety equipment

[21:28] Rua sometimes checks fish quality for other companies, more women work at other companies, often in different types of work

[24:45] Rua's previous jobs in fishing industry; grinding fish for cat food keeps them busy. Favorite time in the summer when they can have up to three boats in a day

[29:43] End of Audio

[00:00]

Madeleine Hall-Arber: I have to grab these so that I can hear. Make sure it's going through, and I'm going to give a little introduction first. And it's for the recording. So, today is March 23, 2017. This is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center, funded by Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress. As part of this project we're interviewing shore side workers in the New Bedford/Fairhaven fishing industry to record their stories, document their skills and knowledge and better understand their important role in the fishing industry. The recording and the transcript will become part of the permanent collection at the Library of Congress. I'm Madeleine Hall-Arber, and today I'm speaking with Jaqueline...

Jacqueline Rua: Rua.

MHA: Rua. Rua?

JR: Rua.

MHA: Okay, thank you. And this is at Norpel and it's about 1:20. So, can you just introduce yourself and tell me what your job is?

JR: My name is Jaqueline Rua. I've been here for four years, I like my job. I do a lot of stuff. A lot. I do everything!

MHA: Everything?

JR: Yeah, everything!

MHA: What was your first job?

JR: My first job when I started here, it was picking the fish. Picking the fish in the line. When it come the line through inside the boat, it would come inside the company. We just picked up the fish, is broken, we had to take it out.

MHA: I see.

JR: And then I go downstairs. they move me downstairs. Packing. Rolling the pallets, driving the forklift, the pallet jack. Yeah, I learn a lot here.

MHA: Oh, good!

JR: I learned. I like my job!

MHA: Good. How did you...well I'll start with where and when were you born?

JR: Me?

MHA: Yeah.

JR: I [was] born in Holyoke, MA.

MHA: And when?

JR: '85, born 1985. Yeah.

MHA: And you grew up in Holyoke?

JR: No.

MHA: Where did you grow up?

JR: In Puerto Rico.

MHA: Oh really?

JR: Oh yes. In Puerto Rico.

MHA: So, is anybody in your family in the fishing industry?

JR: No. No one. Only me.

MHA: Okay, so, what brought you back to Massachusetts from Puerto Rico?

JR: I just want to try United States. New experience. And I try it, and I like it!

MHA: Oh good! So, when you first came back did you come straight to New Bedford?

JR: No. In Providence, and from Providence, I apply and came here. I was riding from Providence to here every day. It was a 45 minute every day.

MHA: It's a long drive

JR: Yeah, then I move here.

MHA: And you live in New Bedford now?

JR: Yes. Twenty minutes from here.

MHA: That's good. Much better.

JR: Yes, more easy.

MHA: So, is any of your family here? Or did you come by yourself...

JR: Yeah they live in Rochester and in Springfield. All the way there. Yeah.

MHA: Ok. So, you have to travel a bit to see them.

JR: Or sometimes they come over here. Yes

MHA: So how about in your neighborhood? Is there anybody else in the fishing industry?

JR: Yep. All my neighborhood working with fish.

MHA: Really?

JR: Different company.

MHA: Are they all in shore side?

JR: Yeah. Little companies, like this one, yeah. like that, like Pier Fish, yeah.

MHA: All right, and how did you get your first job here?

JR: Here? Well my friend, my friend...my first job, I started with American Pride, That was my first, American Pride, and then this is my second one. And I like to work with fish. Yeah, it's more, I don't know, you have to learn and then figure out which fish is... Yeah it's a lot.

MHA: So, when picking the fish as it came in, do they also have you looking for river herring? Haddock, whatever?

JR: Cut? Whatever the haul caught in half, you have to take it out. It has to be the whole body of the fish. It come different, like mackerel, cut one herring, you have to take the herring, leave only the mackerel in the line.

MHA: I see. Yes.

JR: Take it. Broken, everything...

MHA: So was it hard to be able to see everything.

JR: Yeah, it's aaahhhh, it's a lot of fish to... You have to pick it up fast. You have to take it out. Yeah. I like it though. They put me in another experience. Yeah, I like it.

[05:02]

MHA: So, what other jobs, you mentioned that you do the forklift and everything...

JR: The pallet jack, pull the blocks...

MHA: What is that?

JR: The pallet jack? It's with the hand. The forklift is which one you drive with, put the pallets up. That one.

MHA: I see.

JR: Yes, pull the blocks, they come fresh, then we put it to freeze. Come in blocks, the blocks come, that's the process, and then we put them in box, the blocks, 44 box in each pallet, roll it and send it through the labor. And send it. That's all.

MHA: And is that going to export? Or is it ... do you know...?

JR: Uh, no. I don't know. I don't know, we just roll it...

MHA: Do it...

JR: ...and I don't know where they go.

MHA: Okay.

JR: We do different stuff. We do grinding, too. Cat food here. We do a lot of stuff.

MHA: Do you have a favorite part?

JR: When it's grinding. I like when they grind. I like to do that. Always you're busy. Busy busy busy. Yeah, I like it.

MHA: And staying busy is what you like?

JR: Because the hours go more fast. When you stay busy the hours come by fast. yeah. I like it [indeterminate].

MHA: And maybe you can describe a typical day, when you, what time do you first come? And then how, what do you do during the day?

JR: Well the first time, I don't know what do. I don't know which one fish. Which one, I don't know how to pick one. Now I know, each fish, each name. Before I don't know which fish is there. I don't know, I was confused. I'd say, which one, but they look the same. Now I can figure out which fish is, by name, for what is the fish. Yeah. I learn.

MHA: Did they teach you, or learn by doing?

JR: No, they teach me here. They teach me. They teach you and you have to keep on going, going, learn. I feel like, I have to learn, and I learn it. Now I know what is flounder, what is

mackerel, what is herring. What is monkfish, what is redfish, I know all that. Before I don't know. Nothing. They say, oh get that pallet of flounder, I say I don't know, what pallet of flounder? I don't know which one...I don't know. But now I know.

MHA: So, when you come in the morning, do you know what you're going to be working on?

JR: Yes. yes, when it's grimy, I know I just have to just wash the tows. When it's, the boat come, I know what I have to go. I have to go to the pump, kill the pump, control the pump. Yeah, I know each one, yeah.

MHA: So, it changes depending on...

JR: Yeah, depends on, upon the production, ...every day is something different, every day. That's what I like about here. Every time it's different. It's fish every time, but its different job. Yeah. I like it.

MHA: So, what's the busiest time of year?

JR: Here, when the boats come. When the boat comes, that's twelve-hour shifts, like for one week. You can make 60 hours a week, 72. When the boats coming, that's the busy morning. We can, whooh. Yeah because the fish come fresh, and you have to put in blocks and then pack it. That's all day freezing. All day. Yeah. that's the more busy day, when the boats come in. Ooph. Yeah.

MHA: So, they sometimes have to hire outside people to come in when it's really busy right? And, do you have to help train them?

JR: Yeah, I help. And they don't know they come to me, the Spanish people, because I speak Spanish. I just teach them one time. They get it fast. It's easy job, to teach you how, you know? Wrap 55-pound block, you know. Yeah, they ask me. They don't know, they come back. We teach them. They like to learn. They like to work too.

MHA: So, everybody who works here, do you think most everybody likes to work?

JR: Yeah. they come every day. They're on point. Like me today. I got an appointment, I just go, that's it, you come the next day. All the time you got a job, but you have to teach them that you want this job. That you want to keep here in this job, that's all. You work every day, don't complain and you got your job. That's it. Yeah.

[9:53]

MHA: So, is everybody paid, I guess I should ask a little differently. Who gets the, the best, the highest pay here? What are the jobs that get the highest pay?

JR: I think it's the people that drive the forklift. Quality. Like Brandon, he supervisors. I get, get paid good too. High employee. [laughing]



MHA: So, when you started out, you knew nothing...

JR: When I started here, I start at \$7.15, now I'm \$13 something. Yeah, and I don't know a lot of English when I start here. This English I know, it was from here, from the boss. Cause he don't know nothing in Spanish. Yeah. I learn more English from here. Yeah.

MHA: You speak very well.

JR: Thank you. Yeah, learning. I have to learn it. I want to learn it. Sometimes, now they train me to speak to the Spanish people. "Go to Jaqueline! Or Sebastian! Or Jaime" because he supervise the other guys sometimes in the night. Only we three, we figure it out, because the other ones speak English. And they learn, they learn fast. It's easy here. Yeah. That's all

MHA: So, are you married?

JR: Yes, I'm married.

MHA: Yeah, I saw the ring...that's why I...

JR: Yeah, I'm married, with a girl. Yeah I'm married.

MHA: And is your husband also in the industry?

JR: Huh?

MHA: Is he also doing fishing?

JR: Yeah, she works here! She's a girl. Yeah. She works with...

MHA: And do you have kids?

JR: No. No kids.

MHA: If you did have kids, would you want them to be in the industry?

JR: If they want to! Yeah. If they want to. I don't want them to be like me, but if they want to be like me, then work. I teach them. But if not, then whatever they want! Possibly, maybe they going to like these jobs. We never know. We never know.

MHA: We never know. That's for sure. Let's see. What do you think makes the best workers?

JR: When you keeping on trying and you get the job more fast. That's what happened to me. I feel like I was nobody when I got here. And I pull myself and I have to teach these people that I came with this job, I want to be somebody here. Yeah, yes, and they give me the... I'm the only

girl here for four years! No girls come here. Only when the boats come. That's the only time you see girls.

MHA: So, it's okay, though. You don't have any problem working here though with the other workers.

JR: No, no complaint. It's nothing, they're respectful. You say, no, it's no. They're respectful. That's why it's like to work here. Never complain, no excuse. Yeah. I like it.

MHA: Okay, So, let's see. What, when you think about yourself in 10, 15 years, from now. Do you, would you still like to be in this?

JR: Yeah, I want to be a supervisor. They already know. They say, keep on going, keep on going, you almost there. Yeah that's what I say. I want to be a supervisor. Or Quality something. I like Quality too. I do Quality too sometime. Yeah, I want to be somebody. I am somebody, but you know, in my job, in my job!

MHA: Right, of course. It's always good to have your eyes...

JR: Yeah...high. It's true.

MHA: So, have you ever been to the Heritage Center yet?

JR: No.

MHA: It's on the same road as the Whaling Museum. It's Bethel Street. And it's just, it's small, but it's good.

JR: What you do? What they do there?

MHA: It's trying to show the fishing industry, the whole fishing industry from setting up the boats during the year to processing and every, all the steps in between.

JR: Oh, that's good,

MHA: So, you and your wife should visit.

JR: Yeah, going to try, going to try.

MHA: And they also have special events, like, I think, next week there's somebody who is from the longshoremens, I think, been a long time working, I can't be there because I'm going to a meeting elsewhere, but it should be interesting. But they do have, they do have sometimes, I think in a couple of, in the beginning of April, two men come who are from Maine, their accents are strong though; the Maine accent. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

JR: Nope

MHA: It's hard to understand.

JR: Okay.

MHA: Even for an English speaker.

JR: I yeah, [indeterminate] I don't understand [both laughing]

MHA: But they're very funny! And sometimes there's music and other things, so, look at the website and...

JR: I'll check it out!

[15:42]

MHA: Are there any special tools that you have to use? Well, a forklift, obviously.

JR: Oh yeah, sometimes. Sometimes I have to clean the ... when you press the fish, the detector. I had to use the tools to open the door. I clean that too. I clean all the machines. The stainless-steel machine, I clean it too. I clean too.

MHA: So, have you seen any changes, tell me again how long you've worked here?

JR: Four years.

MHA: How has it changed over those four years?

JR: Oh, it changed a lot! A lot. It changed a lot this company. Because before it was, I don't know who to explain it, the pallet was over here in the front, now the pallet's over here. Like, colors, we paint, everything changed. I like it now! It's beautiful inside, but before... No, it changed a lot, with paint, yeah. We do a lot of stuff. Like in the back we change everything. But yeah, we take apart a piece. Now you can put the beaters in the bag, pallets, its better like that, we go more big.

MHA: It's easier to move around

JR: Yep. More, a little bit more big, yeah

MHA: Let's see. Who, let's see ... it's hard for me to ask, I was explaining to Jaime that I usually interview fishermen, so I know the fishing boats, I know the gear, I know what they do, so I know how, what to ask. But because I'm not as familiar with the processing plant, I'm not exactly sure what to ask to have you explain what you do and what's important. So, if you can think of anything that I haven't asked you that I should, that would be useful for me to know or for someone to know about this business.

JR: For me, if you want a job so bad, just keep trying, don't... Like me, I was going to quit. But they say, keep going, you got this, you're going to learn. Then one morning something told me "you got this" and I got it like. And now I want to go! And every time I say "I'm going to quit" "no, you're never not! No you're not. We need you here!" But I learn a lot here before, like the pay. Now they pay more. Before, you know. Before it was not serious, now they take this company more serious, that's what I like. More stricter, more new rules for everybody. It's sort of like they change a lot.

MHA: What kind of rules?

JR: Like, a [undistinguishable], they don't have them on the wall. Now they have them, now they respect. No laughing, we can laugh, but on break. No more kidding, roughing around, no fooling around. If you do the job, when the job done, we keep fooling around. But before it was... now, I like it now, more stricter, more rules. The uniform, you have to have it clean. You have blood, go wash, it come back.

MHA: So, do many people were uniforms?

JR: Yes. We use the orange, like the leather orange one like is from grinding, and the other one, for when you use the blocks for packing. Yeah, we use everything, glasses, gloves. Yep, wash your hands, everything. Keep going with these guys. Just keep trying, everything going to be...

MHA: So, if somebody was coming into the museum for example, one of the reasons we're doing this is because we're planning the next exhibit down the road, a year or two. But what would you think is important for people to know about fish processing?

JR: The people, they know?

MHA: What, how would you explain to them what you do and what the importance is?

JR: The important, the first thing it has to be, you have to know about what you working about. When I come, I don't know nothing about fish, now I know when the fish is infected, when the fish is contaminated, when the fish is not good. When the fish is stink. Now I know that. That's why you always have to keep. . . Right now I going, for example, I go to the Sea Pier Fish, another company and they give me this rock fish and I say, what you mean, it's not good, this fish. I know my ways about fish. It's not good and I'm not going to grind this fish. Now I know. You know, that's what I want to learn, to teach another people. This is the kind of fish we like. The good quality. We don't want this roe, we don't want this stinky. No. I don't know what to say!

MHA: No, that's good!

[21:28]

JR: Just...like if I get out from here, and get into another company that's because that's when I know, that's what I want to learn, that's why I want to keep going and doing. Like sometimes

they call and Jaqueline, can you check it out this? Is it good? No, it's not good! Send them back. They send them back. And they know...it's not good. That's how we work here, yes. I don't know.

MHA: If somebody was just coming to New Bedford for the first time would you advise them to try to get a job here?

JR: Yeah, like I said, I send my friend here. He was my first friend come here from Puerto Rico, when he say, I don't know how you can do this job, they quit! You teach them, no, no, they quit. They say it's too much. I try to explain to the job, but I try, I keep on saying, try. Look at you, you got the muscles, you can...No, no, no, no, I can't, they quit. They go. Then the next time, don't quit. You try, keep going. No, they make excuses and leave. Say I don't know how you can. I say it because I want to try and I keep trying and when you got it, you don't want to go. You want to keep staying. And then you going to ask for, can you give me more hours? I was like that too. When I started here, I start with six hours. Then twelve. I make 50, 60 hours a week, every day, every week! Yeah. I work a lot. A lot. They can tell you I work a lot.

MHA: You're ambitious.

JR: And I never complain. I can do something. Like, sometime, they put me to wrap this bag, no Jaqueline, I need you over here! I jump to the other one, packing the box, no! Can you jump to the other side, put the tape, like. Running and running. Twelve hours you got different, like every two hours you get something different to do. That's what I like. Not the same time, don't you get bored doing the same? Nah. In the beginning, yes, I was like that. No, I want it. I talk to him, I say please, he say no, because you're a girl. I say no, I can. And I teach him, I didn't know that I can do this job. But they say, nope, all yours! Yes!

MHA: So, why do you think there aren't very many other women who want to do this kind of work?

JR: I don't know why. I know a lot of girls, when I go to another company, there's more girls. That's what I feel like, why is my company not too many girls? But I see the job, because this job is for men. It's too strong. But I go to another factory and they're cutting the fish, or they're cleaning, only picking up little plastic boxes with fish, I can't, I like the heavy job. I don't know why. I don't know why. I say my girlfriend, I don't know how you can do that. I can't just, oh my god, that's for men! Sometime she comes here and visits and says I can't, but if that's what you want, keep going, you know she....

[24:45]

MHA: So, how about the other companies, do you meet other women in some of the other companies?

JR: Yeah, I was working before at Mar-Lees that was bacon with scallops, where it's only for girls. The only men there was the cleaning guys and that's it, and the mechanic, to operate the machines. But all the girls. I was working like with 65 girls.

MHA: Really?

JR: Yeah, a lot of tables and they give you pack and bacon, and scallop. Put the scallop. The more fast you can do, out it, pass. I work in the Hy-Line. That was packing, too. Fish. I don't know I work on a... a... lot of job. And when I come here, Pier Fish, I work there. Cleaning, I like to clean, oh my god. I'm picky with it clean. Oh, my god. Yeah, I like to clean too. But I don't like to be bored on my job, oh my god, they told me, oh it's going to be slow, I go, oh my god, why? I want more, more job. Yeah, I like to work.

MHA: So, with the grinding, it sounds like its helped keep things busier

JR: Yeah, because sometimes, you have to [undecipherable], you know what it is [undecipherable]? I'll explain it. It come tows, it's like blue tows, like beaters. We have to make six fish, different fish for the mix, and then that frozen block, like flounder, different fish six in each, then they put that, go grinding. Then they put the tow, they do all these all day, cleaning the fish from the floor, wash each tow, doing the label. Yeah, it's busy I like when its grinding too. The most is when the boat come. Oh, my god! We got working company plus agency, a lot of agency oh my god, so many people working here when the boats come. A lot of people. But its good.

MHA: And that's mostly in the summertime?

JR: Yeah, I can't wait for summer. Waiting for the boats, sometimes three boats come here at the same time.

MHA: Really? Wow!

JR: I don't know.

MHA: So, when if you, when you move up to management, supervision, will you get more involved with finding out where the fish is being sold?

JR: Processing, yes, I'm going to be, because we send the grinding, but they send it to another company, they do another process to the food, cat food. We send the grinding, then over there they put, I don't know what they do in the other place.

MHA: Put it in cans maybe?

JR: Yeah. It's more, doing more if you're supervisor. I want to keep going, I want to be supervisor. I want to.

MHA: So, do you ever have the opportunity to socialize with other people....

JR: Yes!

MHA: You work so hard! You still have a little time?

JR: Yeah, sometimes, no go explain to him, do this job, sometimes it be like one hour. I don't move, I have to see, when he learn, I move. Because I don't want to wait for him to come back. No, stand and watching you, ... No, you're doing this wrong. Start again, do it right, man. Like this? Yes. Try it again. Like this? Yes. Ah, ok you got it, then I leave. I don't want to feel that they feel pressure like, no. Teach me what you know, if you don't know, come to me and get me. That's it. That's what I tell you and that's it.

MHA: Can you think of anything that I have not asked you that you think I should?

JR: [laughing] I don't know. Thinking and thinking, I got a lot of stuff in my mind, but no.

MHA: It's very interesting to talk to you.

JR: Thank you. Better help in something!

MHA: Yeah, it will be good.

JR: Thank you.

[29:43] End of audio