

Interview with Alan Olson  
2015

Stephanie: They've been such an inspiration to me and what you guys are doing here it's huge. It's huge to them as well, that it's sort of like perpetuating this, almost like a dream.

Alan: Well I know it has been for Terry. And myself obviously. Terry has wanted to do continue to do things like this and Polynesian craft, and getting communities to rebuild their ships and native or indigenous craft. To bring them together so that the art is not lost and the knowledge is not lost. In a similar way to what we're doing here.

S: I'd say so.

A: And it just so happens that our building and the ships that we build are different ships, larger ships, requiring a little bit more resources and volunteer efforts.

S: So, tell me the history of this. Have you been involved in building big ships for a long time?

A: Not big ships but I have – that was Stone Witch there I built, back in the 70's. And I took it around the–

S: You personally built it?

A: Yeah, I mean, I myself. And I had some friends who helped, and I hired some help, but it was my idea and design and I drove the whole thing and skippered and had that out in the Pacific, travelling around, going to some of the islands out there. Pohnpei, and out into the Marshall islands and Hawaii, down to Mexico, Guatemala.

S: Was this just sort of a self-funded thing?

A: It was funded by people who wanted to go with me and could chip in some money.

S: So, like chartering it?

A: Like chartering, yeah. It was like share the sail you might say. Share the adventure. And they weren't real formal in that regard. But they were great times, many thousands of miles.

S: How big is the Stone Witch? Or was?

A: Stone Witch was: we were shipwrecked in Mexico in 1985. She was 70 feet, 75 feet overall, and 35 ton, she was very good boat, very able great boat, did a lot of interesting adventures. We were involved with Greenpeace for a while, and did a number of environmental adventures or actions along this coast in the bay. So –

S: What happened?

A: We hit an uncharted rock that was below the water down in Mexico, about a quarter mile off a point. No one was hurt. She went down in about 150 feet of water, and we all got off safely. And we decided we would bring her back up and salvage her. That's a whole other story.

S: What's that story if you can tell me in a nutshell?

A: Well in a nutshell,

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A: We spent about four months down in Mexico, working off of panga. And compressor, and a with a couple of divers – one a Mexican diver, and one an American diver. Setting up to raise her in about 150 feet of water with lift bags, three lift bags. More than three months, four months, five months we finally got her up after many trials and tribulations. And then realized the damage was more than we thought and not practical to fix with our budget and our – anyways just not practical. The adventure was quite an adventure, a lot of side stories with that, with a little panga trying to get a boat up that weighs 35 tons. But we managed, so that part was successful.

S: But, what's a panga?

A: It's a small fishing vessel. They don't have a – just an open fishing vessel – long, often 20 feet long, 15–20 feet long, some are longer They're open boats, and quite seaworth. Adequate for our job. Usually salvage vessels are big huge things with equipment and stuff like that.

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S: So, you were starting to tell me that after the Stone Witch, then what?

A: I got this idea that the next boat I wanted to be involved with would be a sail training vessel, one that I didn't personally own, that was built by an organization, a non–profit, and felt that that would be a better thing to do with my time. So for a number of years I got some design work, and engineering, but we spent I don't know maybe six years to get it all together, but was not really able to crack the funding nut. I think our preparation was not good enough – we were learning a lot – it's quite a big undertaking. So I set that project on the side, and got myself a new schooner, and went sailing for a few years on the Pacific. And a few other things.

S: What do you mean a few other things?

A: Oh, I worked – I was at a monastery here – a Buddhist monastery here for a few years, five years, here in California. Building temples.

S: Tassajara?

A: No, this is called Odeon,

S: Oh up in Sonoma County

A: Yes, this is in Sonoma. And I built temples up there. And did artwork and got involved with that which was very rewarding. And when I got done with that I decided I should go back to this project.

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A: And get started again, because I couldn't think of anything better to do with my time. And that was back in 2002.

S: And this project meaning–

A: Tall ship. Getting programs for young people on traditional vessels. We started out a little slow, we got a small boat and joined with another organization that was looking to do the same thing and we merged and ultimately ended up through the help of our board to purchase a boat called the Seaward. And that's the boat we have now and been running for the last ten years. And the idea of building a tall ship would always been there. And a few years ago I realized that the Seaward was soon to be filled to capacity and we'd have to add another ship. And that's when the idea became more real, and the design work all the preliminary design work had already been done, and so it was more a matter of are we going to go for it and try to find the money, get the design work finished and build? So, we figured this was a good time and we formed a separate organization Educational Tall Ship, to do exactly that – design, fundraise and build. That was 2011.

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A: And that got us up and running, and we had some initial founding donors, that stepped up, and we also some of them continue to – actually all of them continue to help fund. But we've had to reach out to a greater audience, or greater community to find the funding.

S: What does that mean? Beyond Sausalito, or beyond your–

A: Well beyond our initial funders. Our funding group. We have reached out. We found other funding – we're 75% funded right now. So, we need another 25%. And that's what we're working on, and we're doing pretty good with it. Since we've been working on the vessel there's a lot more enthusiasm for the vessel in Sausalito, throughout the bay area, we've had good luck getting articles and getting press so people know what we're doing. It seems to strike people as

worthwhile. They're impressed with the vessel, they're impressed with what we're going to do with it. They write checks, they help us build, they give us materials. So, it's really become a community endeavor, which is exciting and important in the long run, because without the community who builds the ship and funds the ship and cares for the ship it'll be hard to have a very good business model. Because it'll take money and people forever. And people who want to go out, people who want to help fix the boat. People who will help fund it and that community grows, it's like a college or school or church or something, as that community grows it sort of ensures its sustainability.

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S: Let's go back into your prehistory if you don't mind. Obviously if you're taking on sailing a boat like the Stone Witch out into the Pacific, you have some experience under your belt I'm guessing.

A: Well I did. I started out in small boats in Minnesota on the lakes [laughs]. And decided I really wanted to go to the ocean. And didn't quite know how to do it. But I was 20 and made a decision to build a boat a 40 foot catamaran, up in Minnesota, which I was able to do – I muddled through it and got the boat built in a couple of years, and put it in the Mississippi River and went off to the Caribbean.

S: Wow, was she a wooden boat?

A: Yeah a wooden boat, catamaran that's her right there you can see on the wall there. In between Stone Witch, there's a catamaran there. So that got me started in sailing and cruising and kind of understanding that whole world. When I was – I would get work at the boat years wherever I was with my boat. So I got a lot more experience in boat building and more experience in sailing. And at one point, I was married, I came to California, and anyway my marriage split up. And I came to California and decided I would build another boat here. And that's when I started the Stone Witch. And that took – that was a much more involved boat to build and it took me seven years to build.

S: Oh, so you actually built the Stone Witch.

A: I built the Stone Witch, yeah. In – right down here in the south end of San Francisco Bay.

S: How did you know how to do it?

A: Well, a lot of stuff, you just look it up. And go ask, and go places where they're building things and see how they're doing it. And in terms of Stone Witch, I'd already been building, I'd built my catamaran and made a few mistakes on that, and learned a lot on that about what I should and shouldn't have done. But it was still a reasonably good boat. Got me around the Bahamas and the Caribbean and down the Mississippi. But it wasn't quite what I needed to do longer voyaging for longer periods of time. So that's when I decided on the vessel. And things are – so you can figure it out. If you really want to do something you can just go look around. Figure out how other people have done it – make a plan, and follow it, and change as necessary. It's not that hard really. It wasn't for me. I think certain people have aptitudes in music and numbers I happen to be pretty good with the physical world, so that was something that came easy to me.

S: So, what are you doing all this time to support yourself through building the catamaran and building the Stone Witch.

A: Well living frugally number one. When I built the catamaran my parents said I could live at home as long as I was building a boat. They liked the project so they helped me by feeding me and letting me live at home while I built the boat out basically in the back yard.

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A: Stone Witch was a bigger undertaking. That's why it took so long. I would work and save money and go back and build, and work and save money and build, and that's why it took me seven years. And once I had the boat I was able to manage with people who wanted to go along for the ride, who'd say how can I help? You know, what you got? [laughs.]

S: Right.

A: And first year we were fishing salmon off the coast and so that worked out. And we figured we should go someplace, so we went to Hawaii, got a bunch of people to give us money to go to Hawaii. And then Lahaina and was broke. And got a job the first day off the boat as a carpenter, and decided to do charters off from there. And decided to go back. So, it's just – working as a carpenter, working as boat building, working. And then when we went on expeditions, whoever came had to put some money in the to make it work. So, we would share expenses, and I supplied the boat and they supplied the money. It was very, very cheap, we managed to live very cheaply at that time. So, it wasn't big money. And it worked. It was a good life.

S: Yeah, it seems like, it's kind of a dying art though huh? I mean the whole ability to build a boat is something that — do you feel that it's dying?

A: Well there are periods when – back in the 70's it was a very active, individuals building boats – catamarans, traditional boats, ferro cement boats. I mean it was a big thing back then. I don't know exactly what it was. I think the culture at the time. People wanting to do something different. And there's still boat building going on. It's not at a huge rate, a huge pace. There's just so many boats out there that you can just buy for real cheap, so it doesn't take building a boat if you just want to go someplace. It's a huge undertaking of cost and time. I don't necessarily recommend it in fact. If you really want to go sailing there's all kinds of boats out there you can get so cheap.

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A: And fix up so easily and go out sailing. But the building process itself is fascinating and rewarding so if that's something you really like, which I do, then build something.

S: Yeah, which you're doing.

A: Which I'm doing. And fortunately, a lot of other people find it fascinating and want to help. It's a little bit like painting the fence you know?

S: Yeah what do you think it is? What do you think – are you surprised at a certain point at how many people jumped on board with you.

A: Not entirely, because when I built Stone Witch I brought in a group who came on and they wanted to go out sailing with her when she was finished. So, we worked on her, we went out sailing, we lived aboard, and I made sure I could feed 'em and give them a little beer once in a while. That was my part of it. Their part of it was to work and get the boat built or to go fishing, or to do this or that. Sometimes we were all broke. But we at least had a place to live, and a nice place to live, and we figured it all out. So, I wasn't so surprised. When I was up at the Buddhist monastery we had big projects – I would often – I had a leadership role – and everybody there were volunteers, myself included. And so, we worked every day, six days a week usually ten hours a day, building things. And people like to make things, and people like to think that what they're making has value. And building a temple, a cathedral has huge value. A pyramid – all these things have energized, and inspired people to do these things. And they want to leave something, they want to do something. And it's the same thing – people today don't change that way but they don't always have that opportunity. Everything is so corporatized or this or that. So being able to jump into a project without all the stratus, stratosphere – I don't know what you call

it – it's not simple. But if you keep it simple, and we have, and people can just show up and go to work, then they come.

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A: And they're excited – they're totally excited about it. They're just as excited about it as I am. They look at it as here's a chance to make something of value, that will last hopefully a hundred years or more, and tens of thousands maybe a million kids will sail on this boat, and to think that maybe my grandkids can go – my great grandkids can go –and they'll say my grandfather helped build this boat. That's something you don't often get a chance to do you know, we slip away soon enough. We leave very little.

S: We leave very little. So, what is it? When you think about it, we're all so engaged in this life now, we try to get our kids to do things that have a real potentially practical outcome, sailing seems like a contradiction to that. Getting kids out on the ocean doesn't seem like it has any practical outcome at all. So what's the point? What's the point of getting kids to do that? Building a boat? Spending all this money and all this time to build a boat to get kids out on the ocean? What's the value?

A: Well if you ask a sailor that, they can easily understand why. It's a life changing experience. You say goodbye to the shore, out in nature, with the power of nature on a sailing ship, you're there together, you have to work together, you rely on each other. And it's not a game out there. It's for real. And so most of the things young people do are games. it's all a game. And all the repercussions are not much. And it's all virtual. And they don't live in the physical world, and an intimate, maybe in a harsh way. But that's good, cause then the sun comes out and it's nice and they appreciate it. And I think there's a real lack of engaging in the physical world, in nature. And that's – that's who we are.

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A: We didn't grow up in – we didn't evolve in this kind of atmosphere we find ourselves – we evolved in nature. And when we back away from that very far I think we lost something precious about our humanness.

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S: Do you remember when you were a kid, do you remember how it felt to go sailing for the first time?

A: Yeah I mean we used to – I remember when the snows melted there would be, ponds would come out all around Minnesota so we'd make little rafts, go out in little rafts, and paddle around think of ourselves as great adventurers. And that was just play and it kept growing, into bigger boats and bigger areas of water. For me anyhow. I still feel that way. it's an experience that's hard to replicate in many ways. I mean riding in a car isn't it. Flying in an airplane isn't it. I mean they're all wonderful things but you know, being propelled by the wind and having to deal with nature's forces directly, puts a different light on things. Today adults are so distracted and so wrapped up in their virtual world, they fail to notice what's going on around them. I see it all the time, people are walking down the street looking at their – and me too! What can I say? But when I go sailing there's a time when I'm away from that. There's a time when that all goes away and I am what I am. I'm with nature. I'm with the waves. And that's the same thing for the kids. Because when they go out on either one of – Seaward or the new Matthew Turner, we don't allow them to have devices. We tell them no. We tell them beforehand. No devices. You can have a camera, but that's it.

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A: And if we find you using one we'll confiscate it till the end of the trip, and that's that. And you'd think that they'd be really all freaked out about that but once they get there, and they get all involved in what's going on, it's a relief, it's a real relief. I've talked to them about it later and they go yeah, I really didn't think about it, I was just there, and we're sailing and friends were there and we'd just talk and do things. So, we're giving them a break from the virtual world. It's not going to go away. But at least they can for a moment for a few days or a week or for whatever time they're able to spend on board they'll have that experience.

S: Let me ask you a question, I'm trying to figure out – how – this is a stupid question. It shows you the limit of my sailing knowledge. How do you sail a catamaran down the Mississippi? How is it wide enough? Or is the wind so consistently in one direction?

A: I sailed it down with the motor because I hadn't put the rig on it yet. It was late in the season, I didn't have money for the rig. Winter was coming and if I didn't get out to there I would be locked in for the winter because the locks actually freeze up. So I got the engine in, I got it running, I said let's just beat it down to the warm weather, and put a rig on it and we'll get good sailing down there and that's what we did. Down to Pensacola.

S: So, where did you start?

A: Minneapolis, at the very beginning.

S: And so how long did that take?

A: Took us six weeks to get down. It's a long way, it's 3000 miles and there's a lot of places we needed to stop here and there. And locks, 27 locks. And so, it's you know, quite an adventure in itself to get down the Mississippi River. And the last lock is itself just before you get down to St Louis. And from that all the way down is a free river, a free running river.

S: Is it still that way?

A: Yeah you can't really contain the river after that. It's just got too much behind it.

S: What a feeling it must have been to actually like have a boat that was sound enough that you could sail it down the Mississippi.

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A: It was – it was a good feeling, I liked it, because I got it, built, it was my home, my wife and I and she helped with it too towards the end. It was good. It was good. What I liked about it was an accomplishment that I had done on my own. And whenever I'd had trouble at other times and when I wondered what I could do I just well you know you built that catamaran and you just decided to do it and you did it. And it gave me confidence on some of my other projects, in fact all my projects, that I had taken on since that time, you know if you set your mind to it, you can do it. And that was the same as this although, there was a number of years when I wasn't able to do it, and it really bothered me a lot that I had wanted to build this ship and started out, got an organization going to do it and wasn't able to fulfill it. And I just set it on the back burner and thought I'd always love to go back to it but you know you fail at something, you have a lot of resistance to going through that again. And how can I do it? Who am I to build a ship like that? Takes all this money and takes all this and this – how can I do that? But I still thought that there might be a chance someplace in the back of my mind.

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A: And it was interesting how I finally returned to it was my teacher, my Buddhist teacher at the monastery. And we were doing some work kind of late at night to get a number of prayer wheels up and running because the next day was a very auspicious day. And he was sitting around there, drinking some tea not far from where I was working. And he called me out and he said Alan. And I said yes Rinpoche? He said, are you afraid to die? I'm thinking what kind of question– and

I said I don't think I am, I don't think about it too much. But I don't know how I'll feel about it when the time comes. He looked at me as if I was full of bullshit [laughs.] And he said, what would you regret Alan? And it hit me like a lightning bolt, if I didn't go out and do this project, whether or not I got it done or not. If I didn't go out and do this project – he didn't ask me what it was. He wanted me to know what it was.

S: And the project being

A: Build the ship.

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A: So, it hit me like a– oh my god– what teachers are good for. They sort of know what to ask. So that's what got me started again on it. And I took a different attitude, an attitude that even if I fail, I'm just going to keep at it, so at least I can say I did everything I could.

S: And here you are.

A: Here I am. I'm not thinking that way anymore.

S: And so how long–

A: Well we're looking to launch the vessel in late 2016. And then we'll have some rigging to do, and coast guard stuff, and sea trials, and before we get our final ok to operate as a passenger vessel.

S: [off mic]

A: Later [laughs] late fall. it's going to take some time to get everything ready and sometime in 2017 we'll be ready to actually operate. So, we'll be able to operate in the summer of 2017.

S: [off mic]

A: 1.5 million is what we propose right now. We've raised 4.2 million. So, we've done pretty good. yeah we've done pretty good. But you know it's through the generosity of various folks that we've gotten this far. You don't do any of this on your own and that's the first thing you have to realize. Is, it ain't about you. It's got to be about everybody that gets involved.

S: So, what's your what's your plan for the ship once it's out in the water – then what happens?

A: Well we'll continue to do the programs we do now with Seaward. Which are three and four hour sails with groups of kids, school classes generally. Where they'll learn something about sailing and something about the ecology of the bay, there'll be some science projects we'll do with plankton tows and such. There will be history – the vessel itself the Matthew Turner has a great historical link to the Bay Area during the Gold Rush, right after the gold rush years. So we'll try to get them up to speed a little bit on what that life that maritime life was in the Bay Area during that time. So there's history, there's environment and then there's learning something about sailing. So in three hours of course you can only introduce them to that. But then we have other, we'll be doing three and five day two weeks sails with youth. That are the longer ones, and then that same program is just expanded, so there's more about being involved with the ship and sailing that's for the older students that will be strong enough and old enough to do that. The other program will be for all ages of kids.

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A: The day programs we call them, versus the overnight programs. We'll also be doing expeditions, like Seaward goes down to Mexico every month, or every year for four months. And we'll be doing similar programs with the Matthew Turner. We'll be doing longer expeditions to Hawaii and Galapagos, besides Mexico, and beyond into the south pacific, into Tahiti. So then up Alaska. So, I think Matthew Turner will range further than Seaward. Although I think we'll try to keep a presence in the Bay. If you are too long disconnected from your community with your ship you lose a bit of support. So, we'll be spending time here in the bay and with our local

youth. I learned that from an organization up in Vancouver, SALT, a great organization, they had a couple of schooners. And what they learned is they'd have one and then they'd send it off. I think it – they learned that if their schooners were gone from the community for too long, they lost their support because there was nothing for the community to relate to.

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A: So, they always – they learned that, they kept the boat under construction, or under repair or operating in the area all the time. However, it's a little different I was thinking the other day before when a ship took off it was gone. But today, we're probably going to have streaming cameras, somebody can just go online and see what kind of a day it is. And we'll be sailing out in the middle of the pacific. It's an interesting idea that people could be connected with cameras or whatever.

S: Yeah it's kind of sad

A: Well it's sad in one way, I agree, it is, but it's a different option. I know that I personally if I go sailing, I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to call anybody, if I'm in trouble I'll pull my EPIRB, come and find me. But other than that, I don't want to talk to you. You know it's different, it's a different world, people see things differently. So, just a thought I had. Now you have an option to sail all over the world and people can hit the button and go, let's see what they're up to today.

S: [off mic]

A: I sailed the pacific down to central America down in that area, Hawaii, Micronesia, sailed on through to China, Shanghai, Japan, over the top there, to Alaska. And then from Alaska down the coast. This was on Marma my third vessel, she's a 54 foot overall William Han staysail schooner built in 1929, good boat. That was a good trip, the china trip we called the pacific rim expedition because we had to follow the trade winds throughout the whole pacific. Which worked out very well. But there was a close window when you had to move either south or north because of weather changes throughout the season. Typhoons. So, we were just ahead of the typhoons by about three weeks.

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S: And so why were you doing this?

A: Because I wanted to go.

S: Oh ok

A: I wanted to sail, I wanted to do something. I don't know why I do this [laughs]. Except you know. Seemed like a good idea – let's go sailing. And it was a number of people involved with that. At various points along the way. And go for three weeks or a month or as long as two months. And various legs. And that worked out. We were able to manage to get to all of our locations and pick up people and went on home and it was successful. Not that we made any real money but we ate and we had a good time. Boat was reasonably good shape when we got back.

S: Do you think it would be fair to call yourself the Tom Aawyer of sailing?

A: Maybe [laughs].

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A: Well I mean to engage other people and ideas, it's compelling – let's go sailing. Not everybody wants to do that but there's lots of people who sort of a dream. And so, it's not that easy to do. So this is a way that people – sometimes people will sign up because they want to build a boat and go off and do this. And they'll say this is what I want to do, I want to have some experience. So I want to go on and do this. Sometimes they got off that boat and they never want to do that again. Which is a cheap way to find out rather than buy a boat and go through all that

hassle and then find out. I had a few of them actually found that this is what they wanted to do and they actually got a boat and sailed around, went on big expeditions, lived on their boat, made it their lifestyle. So and then of course those in between.

S: Could you imagine your perfect day of sailing?

A: Yeah. On a reach, doing about seven or eight knots about a fifteen knot breeze on my quarter, about 80 degrees out, big fluffy white clouds. Blue, blue everywhere and all of a sudden we hit it and there's a Mahi Mahi on our hook, and we pull it on deck and we have sushi. And a beer. Warm unfortunately because I don't usually have refrigeration on my boats.

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S: Is there a certain time of day?

A: Sunrise – there's a quietness about sunrise. The night is over, a new day. There's an expectation about sunrise that naturally you feel.

S: Is there a difference between sunrise on the land as on the ocean?

A: Well the biggest difference is that I don't pay attention the same way. I'm in bed, you know, maybe I wake up, maybe I don't. But at sea you're on a schedule. You're very intimate with the passing of the sun and the night, the hours. Because there's watches 24/7, you know everything like that. That's what you live by.

S: [off mic]

A: That's what I want them to experience. And you can't experience that off the screen. And a book can help, but there's nothing like actually doing it. And it does make a difference. The kids – even though they have a tough time, in horrible weather and they're all puking. A couple of years ago we took a group down to southern California, and I jumped on to help with it and they were sea scouts so they had some sense about the water. But you get around point conception all of a sudden the sun comes out and it's warm, and the waves go away and you find an island and drop anchor and it's all part of the passage. It's kind of a rite of passage. Jump in the water, everybody's laughing about how sick they were. And you see dolphins and whales and it's like wow. A cold night on deck and they came out and did their watch, miserable. but they did their watch and that was their reward.

S: [off mic]

A: I'd like to think not, but if you want to go sailing you're going to have trouble and you're going to have to put up with that. I guess life is like that. It's how you deal with your trouble I guess.

S: Tell me if there's anything you wanted to talk about.

A: I don't know if it's appropriate to talk about but the generosity of Terry Causey is outstanding. You know about that – I don't know if that's part of what you're trying to –

S: no uh uh. But it's fine with me if you want to talk about it.

A: Well this project wouldn't have gotten anywhere I don't know. But certainly it's gotten where it is because of his understanding of the value. He is a sailor who has been on the water all his life. He wanted to help folks on the water. Getting kids out, running programs, all of the indigenous native craft that he's helped support. And his commitment to the similar things that I'm committed to. And his generosity, coming on early that we see eye to eye on what's valuable and how much – how essential he has been to the success of this project. And he says, well it wouldn't have happened without either one of us.

S: Well that's true. It wouldn't have happened without you.

A: Well I think – I don't know how – I don't know if anybody would have stepped up the way Terry has.

S: Yeah, he's willing to take a chance on people.

A: Well I'm not letting him down.

S: Well obviously not. [off mic.] It's changed his life too being able to get involved in it.

A: Good it should. He deserves to get a lot out of this.

S: so now do you feel like – if Rinpoche asked you that question now what would you say?

A: I don't know that I would have something at this point. I could have done better but can't we all? So in fact I thanked him for that, a few years later after I got going with this I thanked him for pointing that out.

S: I'm going to wrap it up.

A: That's a lot of talking so I don't know

S: No, it's great – great for me.

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