



Raquel Jimenez and Joel Petersen aboard Fishtown Preservation's trap net vessel, *Joy*, August 2017. As part of Raquel's summer internship she ventured to learn all she could about what Joel does to bring whitefish to port, starting with the patience and skills of shore work. PHOTO BY AMANDA HOLMES

# LEARNING THE ROPES

By Raquel Jimenez, FPS Summer 2017 Intern

I received a text at 8:30am from Joel Petersen asking, “Ready to start commercial fishing training today?”

Equipped with a camera and a raincoat for the potentially stormy day ahead, I walked between the shanties on the south side of the Leland River in Fishtown to the *Joy*, where Joel was already at work.

Though I had only been fishing once before with my brother, I didn’t want to come off as a newbie. The first time I talked to Joel about the possibility of going out commercial fishing, I said, “I don’t want to get in you guys’ way.” He assured me that, “Everyone’s in the way their first time fishing,” but after spending a day working with Joel, it’s hard to picture a time he was as lost as I was.

Joel Petersen is the captain of the *Joy*, a commercial fishing vessel owned by the Fishtown Preservation Society (FPS). The boat is licensed to catch whitefish with a trap net. This and other commercial fishing vessels are becoming a rarity on Lake Michigan. The commercial fishing industry has overcome many obstacles in its history. However, increasing governmental regulations are convincing more and more fishermen to leave the business. The *Joy* and her captain are keeping commercial fishing alive in Fishtown.

Before going out fishing on the *Joy*, I had plenty to learn on shore. Fishing is far from the safest job out there, so Joel started with emergency training. My first lesson included the locations of the fire extinguishers: below the wheel, under the seat, stashed behind the waders and a giant one stored next to the engine. And then flares—one for day use that emits orange smoke, one for night that throws a flame, and a parachute flare in case the boat is sinking. Joel said he’s never had to use the flares. He didn’t mention anything about the fire extinguishers.

The last part of emergency training involved an immersion suit—a large, bright red onesie I liked to call “The Teletubby Suit.” Joel demonstrated how to get the suit out of its bright orange storage bag, unrolled it on the deck of the *Joy* and pointed out its features—attached gloves and boots keep your hands and feet warm, a pillow

that is inflatable by mouth to keep your head above water, and a strobe light to help rescuers find you. He rolled it back up and handed it to me, saying that I would need to be able to put it on in less than a minute.

I raced to unroll, pick it up and step into it, but struggled under its weight. “You don’t have to worry about the time right now,” he reassured me, and I calmed down. Joel told me that the trick was to leave it unrolled on the ground, sit down, and scooch into it. After following those instructions, I stood up and pulled so hard to get the zipper up that the suit slid up over my eyes. Joel laughed and explained that it went up so high to keep the water out. I pulled the suit down enough so I could see. While I had needed some help from Joel, I imagined I didn’t miss the one-minute mark by too much, and would be invincible in the cold water of Lake Michigan.

I had never heard of trap net fishing prior to this summer, so I was struggling to picture how this net was shaped, let alone how it got set to the floor of Lake Michigan, even following Joel’s explanation. Sensing my confusion, he sketched a diagram of a trap net, its arrangement of buoys, weights and different types of lines, which was very illuminating.

Everything that Joel showed me revealed precision and attention to detail. This included how to tie rope to the anchors. I watched as Joel used a series of half hitches to attach the rope to either side of the anchor with a loop in the middle. He picked the anchor up by the newly attached loop and checked to see if it was centered. “That looks straightforward,” I remarked. My confidence ended three seconds later when I didn’t know which way the half hitch was supposed to face. I realized that just because Joel—a fisherman of 27 years—made it look easy, didn’t mean that it was. Joel corrected me and I continued.

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This pattern of patient trial and error continued, until the anchor was ready to go. On my lunch break I tried to recreate the knots in my head. After lunch, we tied the ropes to two more anchors and I was excited to see that I improved the second-time around.

Stacked in a pile nearby were anchors that needed to be repaired. I was surprised to hear that Joel fixes them himself. As the day went by I stopped being surprised as I learned that fishermen do pretty much all of the jobs required to keep their operations going—fixing nets, repairing anchors, making weights for the lines. Joel even helped make the skiff, the smaller boat that is used in conjunction with the *Joy* to help set the nets.

The last job of the day was to take a lead net off the truck bed where it was stored and coil it onto a tarp so that it would unwind seamlessly when it was being set. We worked together, pulling the net foot by foot off the truck bed, encountering chaotic gray knots of twists and catches. Every time we came across a knot—Joel flicked the line in his hand or tossed part of the net over itself and the knot would vanish. When a catch appeared on my side of the net, I was understandably intimidated. We would stop pulling and I would toss and yank the net back and forth, trying to figure out the trick. Joel would point and say, “it’s caught right there on that knot.” Then I’d grab the line off that knot and the net would untangle. As we worked through the net, I started to get a better grasp of it, smiling proudly when I fixed a catch on my own.

It began to rain, and though I had been told that fishermen work through any weather, Joel suggested we take cover. We stood in the net shed, watched the front

roll in and listened to the rain on the metal roof. I asked Joel about fishing with his family in Muskegon and his experience fishing out of Leland. As we were talking about all the jobs and skills required to fish, I suddenly thought, Wait, does he even have a crew? The answer was no. Joel does all of his fishing out of Leland without the help of a consistent crew. Commercial fishing cannot be done by one person, so Joel gets help from the guys at Carlson’s Fishery when they are available, or his dad when he can come up from Muskegon, or—to a very small extent—me.

This realization made Joel’s perseverance as a commercial fisherman even more impressive to me. Fewer and fewer people are fishing for their livelihoods and there are increasing hindrances to their success. At the beginning of the day I thought Joel was simply being generous to train me so I could learn a thing or two for my internship. But I soon realized he is willing to train those who show an interest so he will have enough crew members to do what he loves most and pass on the tradition of fishing.

I worked the rest of the day grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this resilient industry. After the rain stopped, we finished coiling the lead net and cinched the tarp closed with a large rope. We pulled the heavy tarp toward the boat. And then we were done for the day.

Joel texted me after I left asking whether I could help him pack up another lead the next day. I was thrilled to have passed the lead-packing test and honored to be invited back. My first day of training—practicing the skills required for the job, the quiet and beautiful work space, the expertise and love for fishing that keeps the commercial industry alive, **all of it – had captivated me.** ■



Joel Petersen, captain of the *Joy*, demonstrates how to tie ropes to trap net anchors, May 2017. Setting each trap net in Lake Michigan requires up to ten anchors. PHOTOS BY RAQUEL JIMENEZ