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Connecticut Sea Grant Alumni-to There from Here

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Sea Grant “Alumni”—to *There* from *Here*



Donna Johnson



Sean Corson



Christopher Meaney

by Nancy C. Balcom

Recently I pulled out my high school yearbook. This trip down memory lane was prompted by the pending high school graduation of my oldest son. We had had a recent, rare conversation that didn't revolve around his primary needs—money, car keys, or food, but instead focused on his thoughts regarding what he wants to be or do in his life. As he heads to college, he has some ideas but really nothing definitive. I assured him that while some people know early on what they want to do, most take awhile to figure this out. Looking back at my yearbook reaffirmed that my internal compass had always pointed to a career related to the ocean. For there, under my high school picture, stated for posterity in black and white, was: “Goal: Be a Jacyln Cousteau”.

To my closest friends and family, I have met my goal. In my mind, I think so too, but not in the manner I had envisioned. Although I had years of French classes under my belt, unfortunately I found that diving and I had a little disagreement called claustrophobia which has kept me pretty much above water and blocked from becoming a true Cousteau disciple. However, I do have a career related to the ocean, one that suits me very well. Better, in fact, than I could have imagined...let's just say, many a spring tide ago in high school.

What about others who have headed down a marine-related career path? Where did that path take them? An opportunity to find out was seeded in an inquiry from the Sea Grant Association about the availability of an alumni database for each state Sea Grant program. While Connecticut Sea Grant has a whole host of people that can be called its “alumni” – individuals who were supported on research projects, held fellowships or internships, or worked as staff in some capacity, no database had ever been established to keep track of them. So, it was time to start and while doing so, enjoy the opportunity to see how the careers of

these individuals have unfolded since they moved on from their connection to Connecticut Sea Grant.

With the help of undergraduate students Katherine Lowenstrom and Victoria (Tory) Price, an alumni database was constructed. Current Sea Grant staff vigorously jogged memory cells while Lowenstrom and Price combed through project reports, annual reports, and old newsletters to generate lists of names. So far, more than 200 “alumni” populate the database. Using the many tools of the Internet, including social networking sites, Tory and Katherine doggedly tried to locate each individual on the list. The ones who were located were sent a five-question email survey, which invariably starts off with, “Are you who we think you are?”

The responses so far have been really interesting. Highlighted in this first column are several former recipients of John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowships. Named in honor of one of Sea Grant's founders and a former Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NOAA, the Knauss fellowship was established in 1979 to provide “a unique educational experience to students who have an interest in ocean, coastal and Great Lakes resources and in the national policy decisions affecting those resources.” The highly competitive program matches graduate students with legislative or executive branch “hosts” in the Washington, D.C. area for one year. Between 1985 and 2010, Connecticut Sea Grant facilitated awards to 25 Knauss Fellows from Connecticut.

Amazingly, only two former fellows cannot be located, and the current whereabouts of the rest underscores just how well these fellowships prepare students for employment in marine policy and management positions, particularly with Sea Grant's mother agency, NOAA. Ten currently work for NOAA as fisheries biologists, oceanographers, ecologists, resource specialists, and physical scientists, and as assistant directors, deputy directors, or directors of various NOAA programs. Two others are employed by other federal or state agencies, three for non-governmental organizations, and three have their own businesses. One teaches at a private school, one works for another Sea Grant program, and another returned to school to pursue another degree. Some were also willing to share their stories with me.

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“You reached the right person. I’m not sure how you tracked me down,” commented Donna Johnson, Connecticut’s first Knauss Fellow, when she responded to my initial email. It took a bit of digging, but eventually I tracked down this former UConn student to Lawrence, Kansas, where she is CEO of Pinnacle Technology, a research and development company specializing in devices for the neuroscience community. After completing her 1985 Knauss Fellowship, Johnson worked in management positions for about ten years, at what is now the National Renewable Energy Laboratory as well as a private renewable energy company. In 1995, she decided to open her own business, however, Johnson says, “I continue to be involved in technical policy at the local and state level and all of that is directly due to my involvement in the Knauss Fellowship program. This program offered by Sea Grant was an incredible eye-opening, growth experience that completely changed my career path and opportunities.” From my conversations with other former Knauss fellows, I think most would wholeheartedly agree with her sentiment.

One such individual might be Yale graduate Sean Corson, from the 2001 class of Knauss Fellows. Corson credited his Fellowship with “directly leading to a position with NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, which ultimately led me to where I am today.” His position with the marine sanctuaries directly led me into a minor fit of jealousy when I learned he worked in Hawaii on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve and the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. (And unfortunately as a result of this fit, I forgot to ask how long it took him to say or spell ‘Papahānaumokuākea’ with any ease!) “At that time,” said Corson, “Papahānaumokuākea was the largest fully protected marine area in the world, located along a remote series of islands and atolls that run northwest of the main Hawaiian Islands half way to Japan.” Sounds like a beautiful place to work, doesn’t it? Today, Corson still works for NOAA but in a different capacity and back on the East Coast. As Deputy Director of NOAA’s Chesapeake Bay Office, he is now charged with overseeing the protection and restoration of the Chesapeake Bay. I did ask Corson to sum up what he knows about Sea Grant in a sentence, and he replied, “Sea Grant provides a great interface between academia, government, and the public.” Sounds like a good ‘elevator message’ to me.

Chris Meaney, an Executive branch Knauss Fellow in 2007, also calls Yale his alma mater. He was first employed as a Marine Habitat Resource Specialist in the NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation. What exactly does that mean? Well, in short, he worked on integrating consideration of essential fish habitat into the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, which is the Congressional guidance under which our federal fisheries are managed. Meaney also helped assess the implications climate change might have for NOAA’s habitat protection programs. Currently Meaney is the NOAA Fisheries Program Specialist in the Program Coordination Office in the Office of the Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere – yup, he definitely works for a federal agency! His role is to serve as liaison between NOAA’s senior leadership and the NOAA Fisheries line office. “We address highly visible, politically sensitive fisheries-related projects and issues that may have high impacts on NOAA’s ability to accomplish its mission,” said Meaney. “This assignment requires interacting with many key decision makers on issues of critical importance to NOAA.”

Meaney is also in a leadership development position for select NOAA employees who demonstrate excellent potential for assuming leadership positions in NOAA. Go Chris! I asked him if being a Knauss Fellow contributed to where he is today. “Yes, no question. It is often difficult to get your foot in the door with the federal government, and the Knauss Fellowship allowed me just that opportunity,” said Meaney.

Finally, I asked Meaney for his version of a Sea Grant ‘elevator message’. He said, “Sea Grant is a superb program that provides valuable services to communities in coastal states through outreach, education, and development opportunities.” I won’t argue with a pat on our collective backs like that! I have to say, I am enjoying these trips down the memory lanes of other people. I look forward to sharing a few more stories in the next issue of *Wrack Lines*.

Nancy Balcom is the Associate Director and Extension Program Leader for Connecticut Sea Grant. She sincerely hopes that 30 years from now, her son’s trip down memory lane will be as satisfying as those of Donna, Sean and Chris, and her own, were.