



Robert Rocha

Hi, I am Robert Rocha. I did not grow up in New Bedford, but I do live nearby in Acushnet. Today is April 21st of 2023, and I thought I would share a little timeline about my experience getting to know the city, living here, working here, and becoming one of its advocates.

I knew nothing about this city until I went to college at Southeastern Massachusetts University. Well, that's not quite true. I did know a little bit because my Aunt Joyce lived on Sixth Street for a few years, and turns out she was in the same apartment building as Everett Hoagland, who for several years was the city's poet laureate and later on would become one of my professors at SMU, and one of my favorites. I took two of his courses, which were literature-based, even though I was a biology major.

It wasn't until I first started getting into this city through a college classmate of mine, a guy named Mark McLeod, and we took a drive one day. He drove me down the south end of the city. I had never seen the peninsula before, had never been on any of the Rodney French Boulevards and just thought the view was fantastic, going down East Rodney French. No, take that back, West Rodney French first and then South, then over to East Rodney French, and then over into the parking lot at Davy's Locker Restaurant, which was a fixture here for many, many years.

And then there were some other college friends who lived in the city and occasionally we'd go to their houses for parties and whatnot. That also included dating a girl who lived on Austin Street, like smack in the middle of one of the more densely populated parts of the city. Starting senior year, I was able to start going to Billy Woods Wharf down the south end, Smugglers Den, which was a fun place to hang out, especially in the summer when you get out on the deck, you get some fresh air and it wasn't quite so noisy.

But really, I got to know this city well because I worked at Freestones on and off for a period of 12 years. That started at the very end of 1989, after I'd moved back from two years in New Jersey right after college. I worked as a bartender, as a cook, as a manager, everything but as a waiter. Working there really introduced me to so many people who work in the city, shape the city, made the city a fun place to visit, because at the time I was living in Fall River. That includes meeting District Attorney Ron Pina, and then later District Attorney Paul Walsh. Even during the down times, the fact that there were courthouses nearby at least helped keep Freestones going because a lot of the lawyers liked coming in there for lunch and dinner.

One of my favorite stories from working there as a manager was this one night when we had shut off one customer who had... I think he had actually come in drunk, and we refused to serve him because that was one thing we took there pretty seriously. It was a weeknight, so he left, not very happily. A little while later, one of the wait staff says, "Bobby, Bobby. Somebody's throwing something at one of the windows." I opened the door and I look at this guy. He's got a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken in his hand and he's throwing fried chicken at the window, and it's landing in the window box and it's landing on the ground. And I'm thinking, "Well, that's an absolute waste of food." It was actually kind of funny too. I think we called the cops and the cops came and took him away. There were other silly things that went on there. Nothing quite, quite that weird though. We had some really fun times working there.

And then got a job working for the Coalition for Buzzards Bay, which is now called the Buzzards Bay Coalition. The main office was in Buzzards Bay, Mass, but I was hired to be their New Bedford project coordinator back in 1994. The city had given us a free office in the old Poor Farm building, way down this on south end, off Brock Avenue on Portland Street. Poor Farm certainly had seen better days and one of the wings was completely closed. The center part that I was in, within being there, after about a year or so, they closed that off as well and they moved the tuberculosis lab out. That was either 1995 or 1996.

But I still had that free office space there for a while. And again, I got to know my way around the city, got into most of the schools doing programs with the students there because I was hired to create science programs in



the city. And that's exactly what I did. Then we started getting out to some of the other towns.

We were able to do some good things. We certainly did some storm drain stenciling, encouraging people to not put things other than water down the storm drains. Don't put your trash down there, don't put you long clippings, oil, all that kind of stuff, because it finds its way into the bay and it's bad for the life there.

One of the more memorable people was the shellfish warden at the time, Brad Bourque. Brad was an advocate for not only taking care of the resource but encouraging people to connect to the resource. So he would help people who got shellfish permits. He would point out some areas that were looking pretty promising and direct them to those, because he knew if you connect people to the resource, they're more likely to protect it. He and I would also go out in Brad's boat and we collected samples for the nutrient testing that the Coalition does.

So again, it was a good way to see the city from the water and also see some of the people that were fighting to change decades of pollution and neglect. Brad was certainly one of those people, as was somebody like Ron Labelle, who at the time was head of the department that ultimately became called Department of Public Infrastructure.

And in my time working at the coalition, I got to go sailing on the Schooner Ernestina a couple of times, which was a gift from the country of Cape Verde to the State of Massachusetts. I know the Cape Verdean community and the city in general took pride in having that ship here. So I was always happy to do onboard school programs. A couple of times he got to go out as a guest biologist and sail out for three days and two nights, sleep in the bunks, do a 2:00 AM watch, all those things. That was cool, to be there on the deck of that ship and help connect people to their personal and family histories if they had had an ancestor that had come over from Cape Verde on that vessel.

And now here I am, 18 and a half years into my job at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. There are some people that know this city better than I do, but I think I can rival quite a few people on the city's history, where to find best places to eat, just to find my way around the city. I'm certainly proud of the work that we do here, the way that we reach out to the community to bring people in. This whaling museum is certainly an anchor for the community. I'm proud to tell students that come here for visits and tell anybody that this is a world-class museum and people come here from all over the world just to see it.

I'll wrap up by saying that being here has also given me, being in this city, working here and meeting the people that I've met, connected me to the Azorean Maritime Heritage Society. I've been a member for four, maybe five years, and that's been really important personally because it's connected me to my Azorean roots. My dad's grandparents were all from the island of Sal Miguel. Through the use of Azorian whale boats, we race those here in... We row them, we sail them, both for fun and for racing, in Clark's Cove, but also over at the islands of Pico and Faial in the Azores. That's been really fun, meeting those people and creating the ties for new people coming into these groups but also strengthening the ties that have existed since the late 1700s. I think that's a great thing for me personally. It's a great thing for the city. It's a great thing for cultural history, and AMHS is looking forward to hosting teams from Pico and Faial here in September in Clark's Cove.

I enjoy living here and I know I'll be here for a few more years. I'm glad that the museum is doing this Common Ground project, and I keep trying to push people here to record their story.