INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

David Sharps

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with David Sharps conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on February 24, 2021. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

David Sharps is the owner of the Lehigh Valley No. 79 Barge and the president of the Waterfront Museum. First drawn to the water as a juggler and performer in Ocean City, Maryland, and later, on ocean cruise ships, Sharps developed a passion for boats and the expansiveness of living on the water. His earliest experience living on a barge was on the Seine in Paris while studying movement and theater at L'École Jacques Lecoq in the early 1980s.

Sharps discovered the *Lehigh Valley Barge No. 79* a few years later, after moving to New York City, where it was docked in Edgewater, New Jersey. At the time, it was so full of mud that it no longer floated, but Sharps bought it for five hundred dollars and began to make repairs and restorations. By the time the barge floated again, and was seaworthy and habitable, it was clear that it was the only barge of its kind still afloat. Sharps founded the Waterfront Museum in 1986, and the barge was listed on the National Register in 1989.

For the next few years, Sharps, along with other members of the tug and barge community, arranged a series of waterfront festivals in the region, and the barge traveled to a number of temporary docks while Sharps sorted out a home port. In 1994, the barge was welcomed to Red Hook, Brooklyn, which has been its home port—and his family's home base—ever since.

Under Sharps's direction, the Waterfront Museum has continued to develop both historical programming and showboat entertainment from its permanent location in Red Hook. It has also come to serve as a de facto repository for stories and artifact from waterfront history, and a critical cultural space along the Red Hook waterfront. In this interview, Sharps describes detailed aspects of the barge's physical restoration and upkeep, and also reflects on the ways in which the barge offer connections to the maritime past, particularly in New York Harbor.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey	Session: 1
Interviewee: David Sharps	Location: remote via video call
Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic	Date: February 24, 2021

Q: Today is February 24, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing David Sharps for the New York Preservation Archive Project. We're doing this interview remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic via video conference. And David, because I don't have your signed consent form, I'd like to ask you now: would it be ok for us to record this interview and then deposit it into the NYPAP archive after you've had a chance to review it?

Sharps: Absolutely, my pleasure.

Q: Ok, thanks. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Sharps: I am David Sharps. I am the owner of the *Lehigh Valley No. 79* barge and president of the Waterfront Museum.

Q: Can you start by telling me a little bit about the place where you grew up?

Sharps: Oh, fun. I grew up in western Maryland. That part of Appalachia is, like Red Hook, a little bit isolated. It's the largest county in Maryland but the least populated. It's a little tiny triangular county that butts up against West Virginia and Pennsylvania. My dad was born in Independence, West Virginia and his dad had a car dealership, a Chevrolet dealership, and

moved to the big town of Oakland, Maryland, which is the county seat. Today, there's probably like 2,500 people in the three larger towns that make up the county seat of Garrett County. Growing up, we were in the mountains. There was a lake nearby that I would go once a year when my uncle had the Sharps Motor Company reunion for the families down on the lake, but otherwise, we didn't really spend much time at the lake.

I was very interested in sports. My brother was an exceptional athlete. My sister was very intelligent with science and math. And I had to kind of find my own thing that I wanted to pursue. I did try very hard to be like my brother and live up to all the expectations with my sister's smarts. I spent a lot of time really trying to kind of almost be older, I would say. I think I was pretty serious, trying to be very motivated, loved playing basketball and football. Probably the best sport I was at was golf. I continued to play golf in college.

I went to Towson State College there in Maryland and was wondering whether or not I was good enough to play year-round—not play year-round but to be a professional. I felt like I needed to play year-round to maybe see because we only played maybe six, seven months a year because of the weather up there. Our golf team at Towson State won the Mason-Dixon's my sophomore year. We had four freshmen and two sophomores and we had a very good team. I thought I would go to Florida where I could play year-round and see how good I was. I basically found out I was good but not that good, which was disappointing. But in the process, begged my dad to let me go live with a friend of mine at college down in Ocean City, Maryland, who was a lifeguard and I was going to bus tables at a crab house there.

I had taught myself to juggle after seeing a group come through our high school. My mom was a librarian. She had brought some books home and I studied the different patterns, and really enjoyed the technical aspect of juggling. One day I noticed that there was an ad in one of the local papers that there was going to be a professional juggler at the Carousel Hotel and I got very excited. I went to see if I could meet the guy when he was there. I had never met a real professional. I went up to this thirty-something floor of a fancy place to talk to their advertising and marketing person and sat down in his fancy office and said, "I'm very interested in meeting the juggler that's coming next week." And he said, "Oh, he's cancelled. Are you a juggler?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, why don't you show me?" And I went down to my car and got my rudimentary juggling balls and went up and juggled for literally seconds. And the guys goes, "Sit down. You got the job. How much do you think you're worth?" Well, for a little kid in the mountains, having someone in this setting like that, asking me, "What did I think I was worth." It changed my life.

We agreed upon a price for the weekend and I quit my job as a bus boy and never turned back. Worked that weekend. By the end of the weekend, the kids—I should have mentioned earlier—I said kind of acted older. When my brother had his first kid was the first time I opened up to younger people, younger children. I wasn't just trying to be older, being the youngest sibling. And lo and behold, I found out I had a very strong love for youth and kids. And I just adored my nephew, would take him around to my friends and just really enjoyed this little guy. That very much played in with the love I had found as an entertainer, starting as a clown. I started through the eyes of a clown because there was another clown there, Koko, working, and he shared some makeup with me. So I worked that first weekend with a borrowed costume and he showed me

how to put on a white face and I became a clown the weekend of July 4, 1976. When the fireworks were going off all over the country, the fireworks really went off inside of me, and my company was born.

I was kind of like a Pied Piper, with string figures and card tricks and my juggling, just a desire to have fun, in a serious way. The kids were saying, "Well, what's your name?" I didn't have a name other than my own. We had to come up with a name and we went through a few clown names and none of them really sounded great. Finally, a little kid goes, "I think you're pretty serious. How about Dr. Dave?" And I thought, that's cool, and that kind of stuck. For years, I went as Dr. Dave. Later, after I met a woman in West Virginia—I went to Florida, and dropping out of school, trying to pursue work as a clown on my own. I went back home and finished up my degree because my dad really wanted me to get that degree. Finished up at West Virginia University, close to where I grew up. A little bit disoriented, not knowing really what I wanted to do. I knew that I didn't want to be a car salesman like my dad and wanted to strike off on my own.

I met, in St. Patrick's Day in 1977, went backstage to a performance of a mime company and asked to see the director, David Alberts. A beautiful lady steps in front and says, "Well, my name's Karen. I'm the assistant director. How can I help you?" And we talked a bit and met up later and ended up joining forces. I taught her juggling skills, circus skills, and she taught me all that she knew about movement and the theater. We became a duo called Serious Foolishness that took to us about forty different countries. We went to kind of what you would call a graduate school at L'École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, which was an international school for movement and

theater, spent two years there, 1982–'84. We had gotten a job on cruise ships. We worked for Carnival Cruise Lines back when they had one boat, the TSS *Mardi Gras*. I hear now they're launching a new *Mardi Gras* but we were on the original Carnival Cruise Lines ship.

I worked with her as a duo. She went back to college. I worked as a solo. I left the Caribbean and we got a job with Sunline Cruises, where I actually was auditioned over the phone as a juggler, which was a fun story in and of itself. But we went to work for Sunline in the Mediterranean and the Aegean, knowing that we were going to be going to Paris in the fall, and that kind of got us over to Europe, and paid for our voyage over to Europe. I went there, to Paris, where we had a French government scholarship kind of similar to a Fulbright but it was with the French government. Spent two years there and, lo and behold, my love of the waters of the world was really brought alive having worked and lived on the cruise ships for a couple years. I did about hundred week-long cruises. I loved being there on the water and having our porthole open with the sounds of the sea below us. It was just wonderful. I just love being on the water, and wanted to find some way of making my life on the water.

Poking around Paris on the Seine, I ended up as a caretaker of a barge that was on the Seine my second year there at L'École Lecoq. So I spent a year looking after this barge. The captain had gone on vacation leaving me in charge with a couple of other tenants and me in the captain's quarters, in the wheelhouse. That was where I made my abode.

So that brings us kind of up to 1984. When I came to New York City, coming home from being abroad for many years—Paris, and then just being at sea—and I was running, taking a job up the

West Side Highway, and I noticed there was some live-aboards there at 79th Street Boat Basin and somebody walked out the gate. And I didn't break my stride. I sprinted right in and started walking along the docks. And I had been a caretaker, so I asked a few people, "Oh, do you know anybody that might be looking for a caretaker?" They said, "Oh, you should talk to this guy down here. He has a new boat and he's looking to sell his old one." He was ready to give it away. Little did I know, finding a place to put a boat in New York City was difficult. I pretty much blindly said, "Yes, I'll take it," and we actually towed the thing across the river to New Jersey where we thought we might be able to put it and they were waving us offshore. "Don't bring that thing in here. That's an eyesore." We said, "Well, can we at least land before we turn around and go back?" And while I was ashore, I met one of my barge mentors, John Johnson, who was a woodworker who had a barge and he said, "You should talk to this guy." And he pointed to a sunken barge that was beside him that was owned by a film producer who had moved his operations to L.A., kept his barge, and needed a caretaker.

So it turned out, I talked with him and got the engagement. So I had myself a houseboat in New York City before I even gotten home from my couple of years in Paris. So I got home, "Hi Mom, hi Dad. I got a boat in New York City, I think." I turned around and came back to the city and started living on affectionately what we called the Mud Puppy. It just sat in the bottom of the harbor. The tides would come up and go out. In extreme weather, we would have to lift the refrigerator up off the floor because it did get flooded.

I was there until development came and said, "Listen kid, you are not wanted here. The property's been sold and you really need to move on." At that point, our tug and barge

community that was very active, the Lighthouse Boat Basin, it was called. Ray the Rower was one of the locals that came down every day and rowed. There was a tugboat guy behind me, Christopher Cleary, with *Sotopa*. He said, "You know, David, if you really like the idea of barges, I'll tell you where he best barge that I know is."

And he and John Johnson and I and a photographer that was a friend of ours went up to Edgewater. I have to admit the first time I came into this barge, I used a crow bar, and we opened up the door. I don't think it was locked. We slid it open and took a look at it, stayed for, I don't know, maybe a half hour. I was thinking to myself, well, I've traveled. I have a little bit of savings. I've got to do something. I can't afford much but I may be able to afford this. So I found out the owner's name and went and talked with him. He said, "Well, make me an offer." He was a pile dock builder, piledriver by the name of Harry Shelhorn. And boy, make me an offer. I didn't want to make a mistake. Didn't want him to say no and then be gone. I didn't really have a whole lot to invest. I said, "Let me think about it. I'll get back in touch with you."

So I went down to the local fill-your-belly deli and started asking around. One guy said, "That piece of trash. It's been sitting there. He tried to sell it two years ago—when it was floating—for $2,000." That was good information, that he hadn't been able to sell it for two thousand. I ended up getting back together with him and offered him five hundred dollars. He sighed and looked down, kind of kicked the dock below him and said, "Okay, have fun with it." So I had bought myself a sunken wooden barge for five hundred bucks. I said, "Well, I do need a receipt for tax purposes." I want to go down to City Hall and register this to make myself the rightful owner. So he gets a piece of paper and scribbles on it, "I give David Sharps the Lehigh Valley 79 for one

dollar and other considerations." What could the other considerations be, $499? [Laughs] But it's a legal term that you can use when you sell something. Legally, you don't have to say how much you're buying something for. You have to tell the government what that price is but you don't have to tell everybody. And he had other equipment that he wanted to sell. He didn't want anybody to know he had let something go so cheaply. So he gave me a dollar receipt. Many people say, "Oh, I thought you bought it for a dollar." Well, that was my receipt that I got, was for a dollar, but I paid a few more dollars than that. But at five hundred dollars, I had a lot of wood.

That was 1985. The boat did not float. It had about five to eight feet of mud, Hudson River ooze, as the scientific term is, I think, of what the bottom of the river is in this area, the ooze. It was a contained hull. So when the water filled it up, it would keep everything very still, and the little fine particles would sift down to the bottom and then, through the cracks, the water would basically be filtered, would go out, leaving me the mud that had basically filled to the height of whatever the tide was. The barge was kind of at an incline sitting in the mud flat. So that's where the five to eight feet of mud was. So how do you get five to eight feet of mud out of a barge? Well, I have to say, I had never run a power tool in my life. I tell people I was a clown and a juggler, and with this purchase, I was definitely a fool. Playing right into the Serious Foolishness. But it was a beautiful space. It was all wood. I don't think that I could—at that point, did not see myself as a welder—I could maybe imagine myself as a carpenter. So I thought, well, why not? Let's go for it.

So I moved my possessions from the barge I was living on, hoping to move to the barge and go

on my way. Well, I couldn't live where the barge was sunk. So I had to get an apartment. Got an apartment nearby, and over the next two years, proceeded to run gasoline pumps and evacuated the mud and put it back where it came from, back into the river, by wearing hip waders and slushing it up with my feet, kind of being the human mixing spoon. Got all the mud out, only at that time I had to move from the barge to the apartment. So I stopped for about—I don't know, it's probably winter, so for about four to five months, and I went back. Wouldn't you know? It had already silted back in again. But by this time, I had found a method that works. I'm a pretty patient person. You have to be as a juggler. My wife says I have too much patience. But I started again, but this time I kind of had a better idea of what to do. I cleaned one half of the barge and then moved the whole operation to the other side of the deck.

One day I was down on my hands and knees working in the mud and all of a sudden, I figured it out, what was happening as it was happening. There was just a thin layer of mud left and here I was scratching at the bottom. That wall collapsed because it had all that six, eight feet, whatever it was, on the other side of it and the pressure moved. Luckily, I had been working in that hull for a while and I knew the beams to kind of climb up to and I got up to it pretty high, to watch this huge amount of water break through the wall and finally—I connected the two sides.

So we finished all of that and I was able to get the mud down to about maybe twelve inches, fifteen inches but the pumps wouldn't do any more than that. So I ended up having to do the rest of that twelve to fifteen inches. Over a thirty by ninety surface, that's a lot. That's several multiple tons of mud but I did that by bucket and shovel. Once I had put pumps on the barge and caulked it, working the tides, caulking on the outside when the tide was out, going on the inside,

finding little leaks and sticking like a wire through where I could find it. The next time out, I could see where I was missing. Caulking's not rocket science although there is plenty of technique involved with the oakum.

But I was able to seal up the cracks and put a little tiny pump on it. And one day, I was having lunch with a tightrope walker friend of mine, Bruce Robertson Smith, and we were eating our lunch and looked over and here, the barge, was very gently moving. Now people had told me, "Oh, when that breaks the suction it's been on, it's going to pull planks off, or it's going to jump out of the mud. It's been sunken for so long." But the tide had just lifted it up. It was probably the quietest victory I ever had. We just sat there and watched this thing. You could lean against it and you could push a many ton vessel just by leaning against it. There is no resistance to speak of with a boat that's in the water. So it finally floated.

It was at that point that a friend of a friend who was a carpenter, I hired him, [James] Desmond Kovic, a surfboard painter. His father was a contractor and he was a skilled carpenter/handyman. We started first on the skylights because we wanted to keep the water from coming in. And the walkways and the posts and the beams. Got the doors to open. I kind of worked as his grunt person. When he didn't know what to do, he'd asked his dad, and his dad was happy to help us. And we kind of became best friends during that time and just were really on a mission.

I found out that none of these wooden barges like this were afloat anymore. John Johnson's barge had moved away and later had floundered and was not afloat. So that really gave me a mission of being able to save the last of something, save it from extinction, which kind of gave

me a mission. New York State, we don't have any of the canal boats. None of those are in existence. We don't have any—the most popular cargo vessel was the sloop. We have a replica in Clearwater Sloop, and even that's on the National Register thanks to Pete Seeger and the great group of people that do that. Knowing that there was no Hudson River barges, it put me on a mission.

Norman Brouwer from South Street [Seaport] had kind of gone through that area where all those derelicts had been sunk. The Army Corps had their drift removal program, and they were tearing these barges out with a crane and a bucket and putting them in other barges and carting them away as part of their drift removal program. These big beams, if they float out into the harbor, they can be terrible for ferries or barges or tugboats, or whatever. So the federal government for years now has had a harbor drift removal program. And the deal was once they come through, they'll take your barge and you don't have to pay for it to be removed. But once they go through your area, if you refuse to have it taken out, now it's at your cost to make it go away if it becomes an obstruction to navigation. So nobody wanted anything to do with these barges because we knew at one point, the Army Corps was going to come in and clean them out.

But Jimmy and I were successful in floating the barge and making it seaworthy. Bob [Robert J.] Burke, who had worked at Union Dry Dock [& Repair], whose family had fixed many different barges. He was quite helpful in telling us what we could do and how to do it. Bobby Allison, Allison Dry Dock [Company], that was down where we were at the Lighthouse Boat Basin, talked with him. The old-timers were always excited to see that somebody wanted to save one of these barges. And it turned out that Jimmy's uncle was Mayor Johnny Grogan of Hoboken. So

we got on this campaign that we were going to take the barge to Hoboken. That was going to be our first port of call and we loved the Erie Lackawanna Plaza right there by the PATH train, and it'd be a great location for a historic vessel right by the Erie Lackawanna Plaza itself, which is quite historic. So we got it floated. Danny [Daniel] Gans and Don Lilolia were kind of our contacts within the city system. Mayor Patrick Pasculli was running for mayor and we became part of his waterfront access plan, that we were going to bring a barge in for arts and culture and put it on the waterfront. He won the election and we pulled into town and we stayed there for the summer of 1989 as our first port of call. We had achieved to actually float the barge and give it a new life. That was in Hoboken.

We had gotten into the good graces of Hoboken. I was working with someone that was with the community board and she said, "Well, would you like to help us out with the waterfront festival that we have?" This was before we came in. I said, "Sure. Why don't have a presence. We can bring a table down. If you want, I can ask a couple of people if they will bring a tugboat over." She said, "Okay." We set up our little table and the next day, Captain Dick Forster who was the person that had towed me around—that was my introduction to meeting Captain Pamela Hepburn of the tug *Pegasus*—they had all been together the day before over at South Street and were talking and said, "Let's go over and help David out. I hear he's helping with a festival in Hoboken." We had the *W.O. Decker* that came in. We had two different vessels that Captain Dick had that came in. We had the *Vernie S*, which was a beautiful little sticklighter crane barge. We had the *Ollie* [phonetic], which came over. There was, I think it was the *Pioneer* sailboat that had came over.

In a day, we had created a seaport and it was a beautiful day. There were all of these people here. Here was a waterfront festival that had no vessels at it, year after year. People were taking people out on the tugboats for rides. It was just like, "We love this!" So I went back and talked to them about bringing the barge to Hoboken, they loved the idea. The artists loved us. The mayor's office just thought we were the cat's meow. The community board, the students, everybody. We had found a lot of kindred spirits.

The only problem was none of those folks owned the property. The property was owned by New Jersey Transit. And we actually had thought that the terminal, which had offices that were being dismantled—at one point, they offered me, if I took down the offices that were created on the second floor, that I could use the lumber and the floorboards. The top flooring of the barge actually came from those temporary buildings that were up there in the Erie Lackawanna Plaza when they were changing. They gutted the place and we thought, wouldn't it be great to have our waterfront museum dockside and an arts location there on the second floor? So we came up with this idea of an arts center.

We wanted to do a masquerade ball, a masked ball, that was up in this space, to just kind of introduce what we thought we could do for our home port. People loved it. We talked to the first level. We went to the second level. We went to the next level. Finally, we got high enough up and somebody was saying, "Now, how much do you pay in rent?" Oh, they let us stay for—nothing. We don't pay rent. Well, all of a sudden, everything changed. Comments like what if we want to put in a restaurant like the Binghamton here? Which was a boat, a floating restaurant that was up in Edgewater, run by Nelson Gross, a historic ferry, the Binghamton. What if we

want to put a heliport like they have in Lower Manhattan? These folks are very well-liked. We're going to have a hard time getting these folks out if they stay for very long, and after a while, they might even have some rights.

At that time, pretty much everything that I did was wrong. I went from hero to zero. The mayor's office came down and said, "David, we've cashed in our chips several times for you but we have other things that we need to do. We can't fight this any longer. You're going to have to find a place to go." All right, well, I was on a one-way voyage because I could not go back to where I took it. That was part of the agreement. I floated it and got out of the mudflats. It wasn't accessible to the public there anyway. So it turned out, not long after that, I got a visit from somebody from Liberty State Park, a historic preservation specialist and they were doing a festival around the 150th anniversary of the train terminal, Central Railroad of New Jersey. Anyway, they thought, being that my barge actually docked there, that was the home port of the Lehigh Valley Railroad was right there at Liberty State Park at the foot of Johnson Avenue. Right beside the Central Railroad of New Jersey ferry, it was the Lehigh Valley operations whose trains went to the Lehigh Valley and Easton and Phillipsburg and Allentown. So that was taking our barge back to its roots.

They agreed to have me come in for a weekend festival and paid us a couple thousand dollars to get there. So we went and did the festival and after the festival was over, I said, "Well, I don't have anywhere to go. They don't want me in Hoboken and, really, I'm an orphan." They said, well, you should talk to the—at that point, due to Reaganomics and the privatization of our parks, the waterfront had already been bid on and sold to a waterfront marina developer. But it

hadn't happened yet. There were a couple years before that was going to take over fully. So the development corporation would be my relationship to the state park. So I stayed there for the winter, went back to Hoboken in the summer, with a couple months of programs. Went to Piermont, New York, at the end of the long dock fishing village, took it there. The next year, we went to South Street Seaport. I really truly was the kid with the barge that didn't have a home.

Until the marina guy came in and pushed the marina, the first thing a marina operator is going to ask is, how long is your boat? Because they figure out how much your rent's going to be by how long your boat is. And I didn't really have the money to pay docking fees. I wanted to continue to be open to the general public. So we were kind of at our wit's end. We went back to the mudflats to work on the boat because it had started to leak and I needed to cover some of the seams. And lo and behold, there was a meeting called by [Hudson River Sloop] Clearwater [Inc.], hosted by none other than Pete Seeger on a historic ship there at the Seaport, whether it was the *Wavertree* or the *Peking*, I'm not sure which. And Michael Mann was there, the famous historian from Brooklyn, and a few other organizations. And we had convened the meeting, Pete had, to find out how we could create river lovers downstate. They had felt like they had really made head roads upstate, with the sloop, but they wanted to widen their reach and how are we going to make that connection to the river downstate.

We went around the room and introduced ourselves and mentioned what projects we were working on. I was sitting beside Pete and I was the last to speak and mentioned what I was doing and Pete says, after I finished, he says, "Well, this is what we're talking about. How can we help David out?" And Michael Mann mentioned, oh, you should go to Brooklyn. Several people had

said, go to Brooklyn. I think they put me in touch with Anthony Manheim, who was working on what became Brooklyn Bridge Park at that time. I met with him. He thought that would be years in the making.

But they told me to talk to Buddy Scotto, rest his soul. He just passed away within the last year or so. He said, "You should talk with Greg O'Connell," a developer who was beginning a waterfront development in Red Hook. And I went to talk to Greg and Greg said, "I think it's a great idea. I think you should go talk to the borough president's office and the community board and see if they have interest. If they're interested, I'm definitely interested." And I did all that, met with Marilyn Gelber, who was then working for Borough President Howard Golden. They thought that Greg would be a great partner for our group.

So we moved from the mudflats of Edgewater. Captain Dick came. We took a quick stop to get lunch in Hoboken as he pulled into our old spot, and then leapfrogged from Hoboken on that infamous voyage over to Red Hook, and that was 1994. And since '94, we found a home port in a community that's embraced us. Greg as a patron has given us a place to focus on our programs and what we do, and not a search for where we're going to be. It's hard to plan a festival of programs if you don't know where you're going to be. So we started in '94. What we had found worked really best was—we had done historic slide shows and talks. We kind of got the same faithful twenty people all the time in Hoboken and Jersey City. But when we reached into our bag of tricks and started using circus and entertainment, and the friends that we had that were musicians and theater, we felt like the showboat aspect really brought the community out. So when we came to Red Hook, we did full groups and a series of showboat performances that

would bring the people to Red Hook. That's kind how we—that's a lot.

Q: Yes, thank you for laying out that history so nicely. I'm going to go back and ask a few follow-up questions about some of the things that you described. So I guess the first thing I want to ask about is if you could describe the community or the scene of boat caretakers, first along the Seine, since that was your first experience, and then also in New York City.

Sharps: Ah! That's a good question. I, as the caretaker of the barge in the Seine, didn't really have a whole lot. If there was trouble with the water, I'd have to either figure it out or find somebody. Being a caretaker is a great position because if you have a problem, it's kind of your problem, but it's not, you know? They always say the best thing is not to own a boat, it's to have a friend who owns a boat. So it's kind of a step removed from that, where you're going to be there but if there's a problem, you can call and then you could get the permission to get a contractor who knew what was going on. I think security's always a big one. If you hear somebody going across the top deck, you go up and holler or stick your head out. Ninety percent of the time, just having somebody there will move somebody on. Winter's always a time you'd have to be careful of things freezing. Maybe be there for a delivery of oil, whatever it is that fires the boilers, or the heat, the motor.

In Paris, one day I showed up after school and the boat wasn't there. I started asking around and they said, "Oh, Captain James went that way." So I walked that day all the way from the Pont des Arts all the way to Gare D'Austerlitz which is probably, ah geez, three, four, five miles. I don't know. It was a long way but I finally found the boat. They had moved us because they

were redoing the Pont des Arts which was a beautiful iron bridge that was refurbished.

In New York City, I spent a lot of time cleaning because the barge that we were on, the floorboards are quite wide, with cracks. So if you try to broom, it just pushes it in the cracks. So I kind of gave it a good vacuuming just to get it, because it was always so dusty. I would get a call every once in a while that the film producer was coming back and wanted to use it as a party house, and I would start cleaning up. I did that three or four times and he never came. He finally came and said, "I'm going to sell the barge at auction." So I'd have to show it to people that came down. He had advertised it but nobody was too interested in a sunken barge that had no right to be there on the land, couldn't go anywhere else. So I ended up offering to buy it, and that was the first barge I bought, and lived there just until it was finally pulled out with the crane and I moved my stuff off. I had moved to the other barge.

Keeping the docks shoveled so in the winter they're passable. Kind of being around, keeping your eyes open. On something that floats, you're always having to look for chafing and make sure the lines are in place and in good condition. They need to be tightened from time to time. Getting through a storm is always a time when it's better to have somebody around, at least at the very minimum, checking in.

Q: I wonder if you could explain a little bit more about what drew you to a barge because it sounds like the interest in the history came later. So what was it about the barges that you liked so much?

Sharps: Well, when I was on the cruise ships and traveling in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean and the Aegean, I would take off on my unicycle along the waterfront and kind of get some exercise and see what was around the local area. And quite often, in the marinas, what caught my eye were the wooden ships of sail. I had always thought that my first boat was going to be a wooden sailboat. It made a lot of sense to me because it was easily mobile. Again, I felt I could be a carpenter a lot easier than a welder, and I liked the look and feel of wood. I think my family history has some woodworkers in it, as I find out, on my mom's side. Different pieces that they had that were pretty nice pieces of furniture, or mirrors. I guess a bit of woodworking was in my blood, if you would.

But sailboats are small. And once I had seen the houseboat and its cargo space on the Seine, as far as having a space, a barge makes a lot of sense. You don't need a motor every day and when you need one, you can hire a tug, and you don't have to keep up with the motor. The space itself, this space—its covered deckhouse—was to protect the cargo. And the same thing that protects the cargo is what protects our audiences in the summertime from the heat, from the wind, from the sun, and in the winter, from the snow. So a barge makes a lot of sense when you start looking at a utilitarian space to use. I've always from the very beginning when I had my hands literally digging in the mud, I was thinking of a showboat. I've always loved the aspect of a showboat. It had a lot of space. That's why you don't have a motor. They saved it all for space. The concept of museum by day and showboat by night I thought was a good one, to be able to have open hours but also be able to turn it into, whether it be an event or a show or whatever.

The Japanese have a wonderful open space concept, and with my travels to Japan—when I

would become a member of a club or in college, I was always seeking out open spaces. As a juggler, I didn't want a space that had equipment for everything that you could think of doing. I just wanted either a mat, like a wrestling room or a boxing ring. I've had my work in gymnasiums. I wanted height above me and space around me. If I was wanting to stretch, I didn't want—I love open space. Just the idea of having horizons and a vista and a view, that open space continues. It's one of the things that makes the waterfront so wonderful is to be able to put your back to land and look out and give your eyes kind of a rest, and having space around you.

Defining space is a very—I love it. I love open space. I love the way that, in a week's time, the barge can go from a classroom to an exhibition, to tables coming in for an art opening, where you're welcoming the public with some food and drink, and chairs can come out and go away. Then something needs to be worked on and tarps can be put down and tools can be brought out and it goes from the mode of a shipyard. Open space allows for so much, and open space for a cargo boat is very inviting because that allows you to put the cargo into it. And one of the hardest things to do with the space when you get it is to keep it free and open, especially if you live there. Things just accumulate. Yes. Space is very hard to keep open. When the barge is empty, it has a wonderful inviting feel like no other.

Q: Yes, really interesting to hear you expand on that. I wondered if you could help me understand a little bit better the idea for a museum and where that came from because it sounds like part of it came from that experience in Hoboken and all of the different vessels coming together. But I wondered if that's where you think about its origin, or if there's a different origin and impetus for thinking about not just a showboat but the museum and the history component.

Sharps: Having come to New York City, I think from the very beginning, I realized—and had a gut feeling—that in order to save this barge, it had to be a historic preservation project. Granted, I have put skylights on it that kind of take away the profile of the flat roof that it had, but it's a very dark space and some consolations have been made. But besides that, I've tried to keep the barge looking like it would have been when it was built, replacing as much as I could, like kinds of wood, same scantling sizes, beams. So I think I realized early on if I had a chance to keep a barge afloat, A, it would have to be a historic preservation project, and my desire to share it with the public, I think, doubles down on sharing that piece of history and making it an important fabric of the community.

Throughout the world, it's very hard to have a boat and live on it—anywhere. It only seems to be getting harder. I hope by the end of my mission and vision and long life of what I do, I hope that I can convince a few bureaucrats that indeed having a boat with somebody that lives aboard, looks after it, shares it with the public is not a bad thing. I do own the boat. I rent it to the museum and run the museum. Try to make any conflicts of interest known but I don't know if it's such a great thing to run a boat by committee. I welcome and depend upon a lot of old-timers and people of vast knowledge but it's kind of like having a baby that doesn't grow up. You've got to be committed to it. People would come on and say oh, I could do this. I love this. Well, on a good summer day, it can't be beat. But on the day to day, it's a commitment that I'm in for the long haul, and it's the way that I found works best for me.

It may be different for others but it does disappoint me that most state parks, city parks, federal

parks, most locations, they don't want a live-aboard. And if you're asking someone, especially in New York City to afford to be able to upkeep a boat at their own expense, if nobody else can pay for it, it's kind of up to me to make it work. If you have to keep up the vessel as well as a home––if you're not a millionaire to start with, all your good intentions are not going to be able to be met.

So by me giving the barge to the museum at a low cost and with Greg donating a property for the barge to be, we can run on a very tight budget. Our budget most years is $100,000, a little bit more, a little bit less, except for the years that we go to dry dock and then we can have a bill of a quarter of a million dollars. So how does a little outfit like ours raise a quarter of a million dollars? That's been a challenge. We've done that twice for the boat and once for the dock. I think my biggest advice to someone that goes into something like this is to realize it's a process. It takes a lot of effort to keep something afloat. [phone rings] Just a second, I'm sorry. Sorry.

Q: That's all right. I wondered if could expand on what you said a few minutes ago that if the boat was going to survive in New York City, you knew that it would need to be a historic preservation project. What were the indicators for you that made that clear?

Sharps: I just didn't feel like the temptation to cut big picture windows, to change the look of it––when I was in the mudflats, the fishermen, the shad fishermen, Ronnie Ingold who's mentioned in Joseph Mitchell's great book, *Up in the Old Hotel* [*and Other Stories*]. Ronnie Ingold's mentioned in that as a shad fisherman who lives there. He loved the fact that I was—like so many of the old-timers—really respected the fact that I was trying to restore the barge in a way

that didn't change the look. Granted, like I said, the skylights, which was one of my first projects, that incensed him. And I begged his forgiveness but I had skylights that fit. We could always go back the other way, but with the doors closed, natural light is just so wonderful.

I think in preservation, speaking of modern versus historic techniques, I've tried to use historic techniques like the caulking with the oakum, all the planking. David Short from North Atlantic Shipbuilding & Repair does such a great job using traditional wood beam shipbuilding, large shipbuilding wooden techniques. But after we've done the historic things, we have to fight against the ship worms, which is a whole other topic. One of our biggest enemies is the ship worms. Not really worms—they're mollusks—but they eat the hull. And anything that's wooden in the New York Harbor, like most of our piers, or any wooden boats, are not going to survive outside of a couple years. And we almost foundered in 1999, 2000. We took the barge to dry dock and, after I pay the seams with oakum—I have a company that has been absolutely a champion, Pettit Paints, gives us Splash Zone epoxy, a two-part compound that allows us—it's underwater seam compound and in an emergency, it can be used underwater to fix a leak. If a rivet fell out on the *QE2* [*Queen Elizabeth 2*], they would go to their seam compound to patch it from the inside or the outside, it would still be good.

So I've used modern techniques but only after I fulfilled the historic way the first time. So over the oakum, of course I put a bottom paint or something to seal the oakum, and then I put a layer of this seam compound, which protects the oakum from being pulled at by the ice or whatever—time, sunlight—and then on the bottom of the boat, we put a layer of tar. Again, great champion of our project, Van Ripps, his Bulldog Asphalt, has given us all kinds of roofing products. We

put a nice layer of tar. And then yet another donor, KYDEX, a CLEARDEX company, we have a thermoplastic and chemical resistant, impact resistant eighth-inch sheathing of four by eight sheets, I think they are, that covers the entire vessel up above the water line of about a foot. So now, even though we have a wooden hull, we are sheathed and protected by a modern layer membrane that allows us—and we did this in 2002 and we took it back out in 2015. And other than A, a mistake we had made in 2002 in leaving one area uncovered, a small area, and B, Hurricane Sandy, which had forced us to abrade against the dock, those two areas we had to deal because we had compromised the sheathing. Right away, the ship worms—it takes time but once they're in, your wood is Swiss cheese. And we were able to check after thirteen years, and what we had done, the process that we've created to protect this 107-year-old wooden boat, is working. So these companies like KYDEX, they have a marine purpose that they might not have known about.

Another example of the modern, at one point, I decided to put a gutter on the roof of the barge because the water would just run down, first, the sides, and they're inclined inside so they would run on the inside, and then the hull is kind of the other way, and now the water's trying to run out. What rots a wooden boat is fresh water, not salt water, and it comes from above, the rain water. It rots from the top down. So the same drop of water—or ice that's melting over a period of weeks, if it's there—the same path of water can literally rot your boat from the rooftop all the way down its sides, down its hull right through the bottom of the boat. So in order to get the water off of the roof, I put on a—who knew, but the Italians made the best gutters in the world, and I got an industrial kind of U-shaped gutter that I think looks like it belongs here. And certainly I've seen, from the number of times—I had changed those walkways because they're

only about a foot wide around the outside of the boat. And I had changed those out two, three times. I've had the boat thirty-five years now. So I'm seeing the effects of what the water can do.

And between roofing materials that I've used, the Durex mat that I've used, of Van's, with the Bulldog products. The Durex mat works. They have a roof slope product that I'm using that forces the wet water off the boat. If you have water that pools in any area, if you use this roof slope, it will actually kind of push a little bit of its way towards where you want it to go. So it doesn't pool. Sometimes there's no way—the boat's listing at an angle, the areas that are raised. If there's no other way to get the water off the boat, I am now chiseling channels that will allow the water to then make its way. It's all gravity. It goes downhill. If it can't go there, if it can't get off, it will work its way into your boat, down the side and through the bottom.

So I embraced modern—I think technology is our friend. I've embraced that but if I can, in any way, I will try to mask it, whether painting it black or putting a faux finish on something, so it looks like the floor boards itself. I try to have those go away, so that what you see is the beautiful wood beams, frames, decks.

Q: And how did you get familiar with the history of your barge as well as what things <u>should</u> look like or how things <u>should</u> function?

Sharps: I go to old-timers all the time, or construction people that are willing to share their knowledge. Captain Pam has been absolutely wonderful. Like I mentioned, John Johnson. As far as the history of the barges, I knew a man, Norman Brouwer, put us on the National Register and

knew a ton. I haven't studied. It's not like I went to school for it. I've listened to people. Our open hours brings a ton of people that tell me stories. I find history out all the time about the boat from other folks. David Pearce was actually a floatman that worked for the *Lehigh Valley*. I believe he's passed away. Unfortunately, people that worked during the lighterage era, which was the era of transportation and commerce prior to containerization, those folks we're losing at a rapid rate. We're trying to get funded for an oral history project so we can talk to people who worked in that lighterage era. I know a bit because a lot of people have chewed my ear off for hours on end, and I just love hearing it. But I'd love to have them speak in their own terms about it.

Books come around. We have a young associate who works with the museum, Stefan Dreisbach-Williams. He's just absolutely wonderful. It's like finding a version of myself thirty years ago, of somebody who's excited about these old barges. It's kind of a strange little niche. Another volunteer who came up, a researcher, Minda Matz. She's found, through the census she uncovered pages that were out of place, and they were up in the Bronx instead of where they should have been in City Hall. We actually found the name of one of the captains of this barge back in the 1930s and other barge families. And she has, through Ancestry.com, researched them and found the families.

One family contacted me, apart from all of that, through—I think it was a friend of the owner of the *Cornell* tugboat, Matt Perricone, and his mom sent me somebody who's family worked on the *Lehigh Valley No. 59* and other barges and we got together with her. Alice Scanlon is her married name but Alice McGowan was her maiden name, and Joseph McGowan was a Lehigh

Valley barge captain.

On our website, under the "Waterfront Tales" section, I've been collecting—people often will say, "Oh, I wish I would have written a book." I'll say, "Oh, don't worry about writing the book. Write me one page." And they'll send me that and we'll put it up. One lady, Fay Jordaens sent me one page and then she sent me another, and sent me another, and several years down the line, she said, "You know, David, I've published my first book!" And here she had so many stories, a lady from out in City Island, bless her soul. She's passed away as well. But everybody knew her as this sexy lady who single-handedly sailed a sailboat out in the middle of—off of City Island. She was a river rat and everybody knew Fay Jordaens that was from City Island who was an old-timer.

But people have come around not only with stories. My wife will say, "David, somebody is coming down the pier with something over their shoulder!" They bring me artifacts. There was another man and his family, Albert Cafiero, brought me the trunk that his grandfather had when he came to America. He ended up a barge captain. He had woodworking tools and everything that he had when he came from Italy was in this one trunk, and they brought me the trunk. He's written a memoir that we have in our collection. Recently, his family brought down some of his woodworking tools and memorabilia, people's longshoreman's cards.

If you look up lighterage system and Google it, there's a good chance that the museum will come up. People are clearing out their basements or moving, or their family member has passed away, and they don't just want to throw it away. They want to find a place to put it and often they'll

call us. I collect ships' bells, and one time, I met somebody at a New Year's Eve party and he says, "Oh, I have a bell from a ship. You can have it if you want." I said, "Oh, that'd be great." He said, "Just one stipulation, you got to take everything else in the basement that goes with it." Here it was a guy out in Sheepshead Bay, who lived on a boat, who was a great collector of maritime things. We started a library because of the books that we got from him and Michael Mann. But we had this ship's bell and other knickknacks and what not. Some are museum quality, some are just memorabilia, not so valuable.

Another lady called me up and she had a wooden cleat from the pattern. When you make something from metal, you start with a piece of wood. People have given us wooden patterns for a gear for a tugboat propeller and for a dock cleat, New York City, Brooklyn, stamped right on it, some patterns like that. So it's my challenge to put together this collection, to digitize it, to try to remember who it was that I talked to who gave it to me and give it some sort of providence. Now, when you look up the *Orange* ferry, Conrad Milster has given us lights from the ferry and a bell system from the ferry, a sign that says Women which is the women's side of the boat when they were trying to give them a place to get away from the men who smoked and used foul language. It was the women's room, it was the women's side of the boat.

But if you looked up and you wanted to do research, wouldn't it be wonderful if, in one search, the collections of the South Street Seaport Museum and the Waterfront Museum. And you'd go, oh, look, this piece is over here of that boat and look, they have a picture that's here. Through digitization, we can help people tell those stories. A lot of people, oh, my grandfather worked on some ship. Can you tell me what life was like during those times? I'd happen to say, "Well,

somebody sent me this that his mother wrote, growing up on a barge. This might help you." So I'm learning my history. I'm an enabler in bringing other people's story here and I'm challenged to be able to put those together in a way that not only the museum can use them but the public can make good service of them.

Q: I think when I was reading the National Register nomination packet, it mentioned that in the 1920s, '30s, in the lighterage era, there was a floating population of New York City. And that was really interesting to me, something I had never thought of before. And you've mentioned how some of these objects that you have, that you've been collecting, connect to that era. But I wonder, living on the barge as you do, what sort of connection do you feel to the previous captains or to that floating population, that historic floating population?

Sharps: Some of the direct connections I see are graffiti that workers—maybe not a captain but probably deck hands have chalked on the battens. Or sometimes they're on a ladder way up at the top, "How many sacks have you given me?" They're writing down as they're tallying whatever it is and adding up and subtracting. So you see a lot of figuring in chalk. Two areas in the back, in the bow of the boat, I have some wonderful graffiti that makes me chuckle, that I cherish. The barge was owned by the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company. It was sold at auction. It continued working but for a stevedoring company called [Wm.] Spencer & Son [Corporation], which was an outfit. They had a group, what they called Spencer's Reindeer, and it was big, black, strong stevedores who would come to work and move two hundred and fifty tons of coffee onto the boat and take it over to Hoboken where the Maxwell House coffee plant was. And they were shaped up in the morning by a Swedish guy by the name of Chris. I was talking to one guy

who said, “Oh, yes, I remember Chris. He was a son of a bitch.” Anyway, the graffiti in the back says, “Chris will get a $100 bonus and his jug for Christmas.” And then right below that, it says, “All Swedes use funnels instead of shot glasses.” And apparently Chris had a temper and he was known for loving his drink. And they kind of immortalized him back there on the battens with their aggressive language towards Chris the Swede.

Then just to the left of it which helped me a lot, written in a red pencil was, “Kris the Swede, number one fireballer. Spencer & Son.” And that’s what gave me the indication that Spencer & Son was part of the lighterage company, stevedoring company, that ran this barge. I’ve since made contact with somebody who’s family had Spencer & Son, and right away said, “Oh, I wish I would have met you years earlier. The guy who ran the operation whose mind was clear as a bell until the day he died just passed away a couple years ago. He would have had all the stories.” It’s just such a big chance that’s lost. But I’ve since seen photos of the Spencer & Son barges that were loaded by Spencer’s Reindeer.

As I mentioned before, David Pearce, he was a floatman on the tug for *Lehigh Valley*, and when I first got the barge, right away, he said, “Oh, do you mind if I climb up here on top of the cabin?” I said, “No, that’s okay.” “Do you mind if I go downstairs?” “No, no, that’s all right.” Finally, he comes up and he goes, “David, I think this barge used to have a cabin up top. What puzzled me is on top of your interior cabin is tar paper and they would not have put tar paper on an inside cabin. Either this was an open scow with the cabin in the back and they later made the covered barge, which I don’t think,” or, and he showed me the carpentry in the captain’s quarters. There’s a couple of places where you have planks that meet. You really never meet two

or three planks and butt them up, you always interlace them. The butt ends don't end up in a line because the water likes to get into the end grains and would be easier to deteriorate the barge. So they always stagger the butt ends.

He said, "If you look in here, there's a whole line of butt ends that are right down the center. It looks like there might have been a window there. I think they took the cabin from up above and put it in the back." He said, "If you notice, there's a beam here. It looks like they cut the beam away. This barge used to"—and indeed, this is what we concluded from all of that—"this barge used to have five posts," like the one that you see over there that's behind the stove there. There used to be five posts but when they started using forklifts to move the goods around, those posts were killing them. They'd set a pallet down through the cargo door and then they'd have a forklift pick up the pallet, back up, but once you start filling things up, you can't turn the thing around. So they decided to cut the posts out and the only way once they cut the posts out—they were worried about the families who traditionally lived up above. They didn't live in the little cabin that I have that became a caretaker's position in the back of the boat. They had a lot more space. They had a cabin that was twenty by thirty, that was up top for the family and their kids and the dog and the chicken. I have pictures of these folks up on the top of the barge.

And it kept them during the daytime away from all the hustle and bustle. The captain was maybe counting the stuff but he didn't carry the stuff. He'd meet the tug when he came to take their line to put it around the barge. He'd keep an eye on any leaks, if there was problems with the barge, and he'd pump the barge out with a hand pump on the deck. But other than that, as a night watchman, he and his family—again, the railroads preferred having families aboard—they lived

up top. The kids would climb down the ladder, walk across an active railroad yard to go to the ferry of the Central Railroad of New Jersey, and take a ferry over to Trinity Episcopal Church down in Lower Manhattan where they all went to school. That's where all the tug and barge kids from *Lehigh Valley* went to school. They made that trip every day and they'd come back by ferry.

And they might come and they'd look around and go, Tommy, your tug or your barge isn't in today. You've got to go sit with the dispatcher until it comes. Or he might have to stay with a friend if the boat wasn't coming back. Or, if they knew he was going to be gone for several days, their family would work out, okay, don't take the ferry back to Jersey City tonight. You're going to have to go up to Harlem. So the barge and tug kids were some of the best at the early transfer of the subway station because they had to go to the different docks around town. And they went to school all the time until, like with the canal boats, they often, if they were actually taking off upriver, they would come out of school and travel with their family, and would not stay in school. But the population of Red Hook skyrocketed drastically during the winter because this area here in Red Hook was the home—in the Erie Basin and the Gowanus Canal, mainly the Gowanus Basin—that was the home to many canal boats during the winter. And while they laid up, they went to school in Red Hook. And once the canal opened up in the spring and summer and fall, they would be with their family underway.

But this was all told to me by people that have grown up on tugs and barges, books that I have found talking about people underway. I keep my eye out, loving to hear the social aspect. When I put my barge on the Register, it came back—Norman had done a great job talking about the

history and what it was used for—but they wanted to know the social aspect. What about all these people who lived and worked with the barges? Now that we found out in the 1930 census, we have four or five pages of their census information, we've been able to reach out. Right before COVID hit, we were planning a barge family reunion, trying to get together several of these families, who were either themselves or relations of these families. They had pictures, they had stories. It was a proud part of their heritage to have someone who grew up as a barge captain.

Q: Yes, that sounds like such a unique experience. Thanks for illustrating that. I wanted to ask about Red Hook. So what was it like when you moved to Brooklyn, basically? What was the neighborhood like and how did you start to make connections with the community?

Sharps: When I came to Red Hook, I liken it to a non-man's land. There was not many people down here. The sheriff had rented most of the lots where they take your car and sell it. People that were coming here were pissed off because somebody had towed their car and they had to get it back, and they told them okay, wait here. It might be several hours that they were hanging out, trying to get their car back. The streets had quite a few wild dogs. We had the unfortunate experience of having three of our cats eaten by these packs of wild dogs. People would let their domestic dog out to run at night and they'd join this pack, and it doesn't take long for a house dog, once he's running with the pack to become a wild dog. We lost all of our cats to those wild dogs.

There were not too many people in the neighborhood but there were a lot of artists. People came

in during the week that worked here for the remaining businesses that were still limping along. During the weekends, a lot of people would bike down. And the artists, it was a nice compromise to see a space be bustling during the week with business activity and high-lows and commercial work going on, and then they go home for the weekend and the same spaces would be filled with bicycles and people strolling. It became a quiet place during the weekend.

The businesses, of course, there was a fish port that was planned for Red Hook. That ended up going belly up. Hunts Point kind of has that. Fulton Market moved out there instead of here. People tell me that the government came through and was buying up certain things, and if you didn't sell to them, they'd take it by eminent domain. And a lot of people just left Red Hook, a lot of businesses. The BQE [Brooklyn-Queens Expressway], of course, kind of goes through, kind of isolated us, cut us off from Cobble Hill, which was part of Red Hook. Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, that was all South Brooklyn/Red Hook. But Red Hook became what was on the other side of Hamilton Avenue.

It definitely kind of hit its low point when Patrick Daly got killed. The principal got caught in cross fire trying to get a kid back into school at lunchtime and got killed, and that was one of the low points. When we first came, the principal of the school did not want to bring their kids down to the waterfront because it was a dangerous place, even though by that time, we felt like things were starting to change. When my daughter, Dalia went to kindergarten, they started talking about right away community and neighbors, life in Brooklyn. She raised her hand and said, "Teacher, I don't have any neighbors." The teacher kind of saw a teaching moment, and said, "Why, of course, you do Dalia. Who lives to the left of you?" She said, "Nobody." "Well, who

lives to the right?" "There's no house building to the right." "Well, who lives upstairs?" She said, "There's nobody upstairs." And she said, "Well, how about downstairs?" Dalia is starting to get a little bit—didn't want to say the same thing over and over. Finally, she says, "The fish." [Laughs] Finally, her teacher realizes that she's coming to school from a boat out in the river in Red Hook. A little while later, the kindergarten class was coming down to plant flowers in our little garden that we had, and they got to visit the boat. And when they planted their flowers, we had a railroad beam and dirt, and they were all planted just past the railroad beam. They couldn't really reach very far into the bed. We kind of had to replant them because they were all just over the edge, as far as they could reach.

But there wasn't very many people here. But the people that were here, most people said hi to everybody. As the place has—I hate to use the word gentrified—but as it's moved past being a no-man's land and has started to attract residences and businesses, it's not the same. You nod and people will walk by you and they don't know that everybody used to wave to you. They're busy about their own life. You used to see somebody in the street and two cars would park, one going one way and the one going the other and if you got stuck behind them, you kind of waited until their conversation was over. And it might be five minutes if those people were talking. It was their time to catch up and you ended up being in back of one of them. And it would happen often. Now you get honked at if you don't allow somebody to pass by you immediately.

But our garden was an attempt to bring the community back to the waterfront, as a place where people, again, can enjoy what used to be our front yard, not a forgotten back yard. What used to once be bustling is now—it is coming back but it's got a lot of new shapes moving around out

there than they did many years ago. But our garden is a place—and the barge too—we like to think no matter what the differences you may feel or are, whether politics or religion or whatever it is you might disagree about, that the barge and the garden and the pier and the meadow were a place where we could all come and enjoy and appreciate what we do have. And enable to bring people together, you hope people can have a dialog about their differences, and be able to still be humane and enjoy what it is that we love and share in common. I think people feel that.

We're open for free, for donations—before COVID. And when you have something that you open your home and you let people come through for free, people are very appreciative. They may give a dollar or so, but their mood, it's not like they've paid thirty-five dollars for something and have a lot of expectations. It's hard to complain about what you receive when you don't pay anything. Then it's easy for people to stick around for a little bit longer. I've had docents and people who have come helped, and they like coming just because of the people they met and the nice feeling that was here.

I hope that people kind of step back into time because they're in a space that doesn't have drywall. It's in a space where things were overbuilt. It's in a place where things were done by hand and are much different. You don't see a lot of items that were bought at Home Depot or Lowe's. That helps to transport people. People who get lost in the middle of a performance of *A View from the Bridge* or *On the Waterfront* or some avant-garde play, they get lost in the place, sitting here on the boat, and all of a sudden, [claps hands] wham! The boat goes up against the dock and they go oh yeah, I'm on a boat. And literally we've put people all in the same boat. And to be able to do that in a world where so many people are so distracted and unable to come

together, and so fractious in their views, you can't underestimate the power of a laugh or a chuckle or a smile, or the healing power.

When I first started in entertainment, I thought it was foolish and frivolous to spend your time, spending years trying to do some trick that would allow you to throw four clubs in the air and throw one especially high to give you time to catch them all except for one that you balanced on your chin, and then proceed to juggle three while one was on your chin. In order to achieve that type of efficiency—to be able to not only know that you know it, but to know that you know that you know it—to give you the confidence to perform it over and over again takes years and years. It's not frivolous.

I've come to really respect—quite often it's people that are from a large family—but people who can be in a big group of people and say something that lightens the air or identifies the elephant in the middle of the room in the way that's not controversial, that will allow all the air out of the balloon, as the pressure has built up. That type of social intelligence, or those types of abilities, often cannot be taught. They come with a personality and a life of experiences that allow them to happen in a way that is not fabricated. It just kind of happens in a wonderful way.

Q: I think that relates to my next question a little bit which is, I was curious to hear how the programming has changed over the years. I think you're giving me a little bit of a taste of what it can be like to be on the boat as a visitor, but thinking about it as being in charge of programming, how do you design and develop that? How does, I guess, the reception of the programming influence its changes over the years?

Sharps: One time we had the hopes of going to Kingston for a showboat festival and the tug *Pegasus* was in dry dock. And Pamela called and said, "I don't think I'm going to be able to tow the barge to Kingston." And I had to kind of buck up and say, well, this is a time where I have to be captain and owner, and I'm just going to hire the boat and spend $10,000 or whatever it is to tow the boat up. It was our vacation. It happened to be the debut of my kids' act because they would not only help take tickets out front or do whatever needed to be done behind the scenes or at the box office, but, being the daughters of a showboat captain, they had to have an act. And they came up with the Flying Mer-Maidens. It was a still trapeze act and it was so precious. And they were out in Kingston trying to drum up business for people to come to the show. And they had a flyer that had the music and they were part of a circus performance. We had a night of film and all these things going on. They went out with their fliers into town and came back so dejected. They said, "Folks don't want to come to a show. They just want to come and see the boat." I think we were asking for five dollars or something and they were out trying to bring people. They go, when can I come and see the boat?

I learned a lot that time. We weren't really set up to do that. But now when we go to a port of call, we always have a time where you can come with your family and just come on the boat. Once they're on the boat, they get the picture. They might get an idea. They see our wonderful ball machine, the sculpture by George Rhoads, that's an audio-kinetic machine. Then you might be able to interest them in coming back and sitting for an hour or whatever it may take for a program. But it really impressed me at that point how important it is to have free open hours. It would allow people to get on the boat.

So that aspect of our programming, we've kept going. I don't know how it's going to work after COVID. I'm kind of waiting for either a vaccine or a cure or good luck, but we were very informal in letting people come. And then we would answer questions and have times where we try to give people some information. But we would have two or three docents that would be there to tell people, let them ask the questions. and kind of guide things the way their interests were. A lot of times people just want a place to get out of the sun and sit down, they kind of listen to everybody else and whatnot.

So we have three aspects of programming, back to your question, the open hours, which I've found are really important, and our best means for advertising. I don't think anybody's going to come to something on the boat until they've been here first or somebody who's been here brings them. So our open hours are a big component and a successful component, even though it doesn't really bring us income. The second, our bread and butter really, is our school groups. History and historic preservation—once you lose something, it's gone forever. Like they say, out of sight, out of mind. It's hard to have a reference point in talking about something when it's not there. And this barge gives a reference point. It gives a reference point to a time of life. It gives a reference point for old-timers to kind of feel comfortable, to jog their memory to start talking about things. But the school kids, I especially like elementary school, kindergarten to fifth grade. They just come wanting to learn so much.

New York history, so much of it, begins—and even today—is tied to the waterfront in a daily consequential way more than people realize. And to help people understand why our waterfronts

look like they do today. Now, they are starting to look a little bit different. I've been doing this for thirty-five years. There was a time when all of our waterfronts looked like they had been bombed out and kids wanted to know how did we lose the war? Well, it wasn't a war that we lost. It was the changes in ships and transportation and commerce, which moved the busy, bustling tugs and barges and railroad over to the highways in New Jersey and onto our interstate system, and away from the rails and away from the water. That was a big thing to help people understand why our waterfront looked the way it was. And a big factor in why it looked different, and why they became obsolete, tied right into the obsolescence of the barge and the whole idea of obsolescence and what is that.

So our school groups try to tell what the purpose of the barge was, it's importance, it developing into obsolescence, and me finding the opportunity of a barge and giving it new life. Hopefully inspiring them to see somebody, a clown and juggler who loves to play just as much as they do, took on something like this that was a project, and through whatever miracles it is, we're afloat and open to the public and active. That's what I hope to instill upon the kids. And then of course, no visit to the barge for school kids is complete without a little bit of serious foolishness from the captain, and to share with them the juggling that took me from the hills and enabled me to travel the world, and come home and make my nest in a boat that I now continue to share with the public.

We mentioned the open hours and the school groups, but programming the other third of the four things we do is the showboat aspect, music and dance and film and theater. Instead of people trickling in over the course of four hours, they're coming at one time. The air fills with the

feeling that wow, this really matters. History's in the making. This is really something special. The showboat aspect allows us to work with other producers. We do produce a few things ourselves for children because I feel like kids' entertainment doesn't happen naturally. Whereas artists and their concerts and their plays and their art and all of that seem to suffice. So I collaborate with a lot of people for adult entertainment and I continue to invite my clown friends and foolish friends that have—some of them tour for school groups nationally and they just don't have a place to perform locally. We'll get pirates and puppeteers and all kinds of things, really great children's entertainment. So that kind of combines into our showboat aspect.

And the fourth and final aspect of programming, which we haven't done much since the death of John Doswell and John Krevey and the activity of the North River Historic Ship Society, which used to get all of the New York City historic vessels together into Hudson River Park once a year. The fourth aspect is taking the show on the road, what I always called our tug and barge tour. I'm always looking for new ports of call. We're talking with people over in Staten Island at the Atlantic Salt [Company] terminal. They opened up their site some years for a salt festival, a waterfront festival, a commercial site that they opened to the public. We can go and partner with Staten Island Arts and the John Noble [Maritime Collection] outfit that's over there, Alice Austen [House Museum,] and be a place where they come on the water and have a celebration. At that time, the school kids could come in. We could do a fundraiser where we kind of all pat ourselves on the back at the end and hopefully raise funds to make it worth everybody's worthwhile.

But the tug and barge, working with the tug *Pegasus* and Pamela, we've been to Cold Spring.

We've been to Poughkeepsie. We've been to Piermont. We've been to Jersey City. We've been to Hoboken. We've been to Hudson River Park. We've been to Brooklyn Bridge Park. We've been to Hudson. We've been as far north as Kingston. We've been as far north as Waterford through, behind the beginning of the lock system there in Waterford for the tugboat roundup, and also where we take the barge out of water for our dry dock period.

So just to put it all in a nutshell, we do school groups, open hours, a showboat series, and then our tug and barge that we do on the road.

Q: Thanks for that. It sounds like a lot of fun. I know this is a difficult time to think about this but I wanted to ask about the future. What is your vision for, I guess what you'd like to develop or even return to, as we hope for the end of the pandemic?

Sharps: Oh, well, if I could dream, I would love to take this barge to Paris. I have to first check to see if I could get through the bridges. I would also have to get either a lift ship or something that we could put this tender barge into to make the high seas. I think it would be a wonderful film documentary, crazy adventure, that somebody would be interested in. And I guarantee the Parisians would absolutely love a wooden barge. The Europeans love barges. The size—everybody thinks over there, everything is huge in America. Our American cars were big. Everything was big. And to see this barge compared to their little barges that they use, it truly is big and bold. It has a space that is wonderful for programming, for artwork. Nothing would be better to show than John Noble's great works, one of America's great maritime artists, to do some maritime art. We could maybe even work with some of the many museums that are there.

The aspect of museum by day and showboat by night, and just a documentary, that would be a dream of mine. And I would love to go with the *W.O. Decke*r and the Fireboat [*John J. Harvey*], and just make a whole ambassador voyage of historic ships. Here, we all struggle, and sometimes it's hard to be a hero in your hometown. Sometimes when you go away is when you're appreciated the most. And sometimes when you come back from going away, it's a little bit different as well. I know when we leave Red Hook and people find out that I'm leaving, whether it's for dry dock or for a festival, the same people say good-bye to me as if they're not going to see me for two weeks straight. It's just a different mentality when you're able to—we're not a building. We're a boat. And it would be fun to be an ambassador and take some of America's maritime heritage and somehow maybe elevate our own estimation of historic boats that are American and what they mean in value.

There's a lot of struggles. The waterfront has pressures, both from commercial and residential. Everybody wants the view and the access to water. It's been very hard. I've been fortunate to have a place but I know people that have boats that have not had a place that are struggling. Just funds to keep a vision that is, I think, a good wholesome vision that is worthwhile is always a big struggle as well. And that's a shame but I can't complain too much. I'm able to basically work for myself and with an idea that I had. Once you do that, you got to accept that you're both the janitor and the welcome and the cook and the dishwasher. I like the idea of a one-man band and that's what I've kind of wanted to do and have done. Not to say that so many people haven't helped me but our staff—I have one full-time staff person and that is myself. I work with a lot of other people that come in and that's back to when I packed my car with all the things that I

needed and took off and did gigs, that's what I felt comfortable with. I'm not a manager. You give me twenty people and I better hire a manager because I don't know what—I can't tell other people what to do. People ask me where is this? And I'm pointing and walking to go get it, at the same time, rather than telling them. It's just easier for me to go get it myself. Whether that's to my detriment or my advantage, it's who I am, and what I've done and what I'm used to.

Going forward, we're talking about the future, I'm sixty-four now and I do need to start thinking about a transition plan, and how we're going to do and let go of things and embrace new ideas. So I'm ready for that, getting ready for that, trying to envision what that's like. I hope I have another ten years that I can eke out. Who knows? I may be here twenty years from now. Who's that guy in the back room there? But youth and what I've seen through—we had a group on sea change and climate change, when I see them come and talk about what's important to them and see the passion that they have and their capabilities, their competence, I have a lot of hope that if we can embrace the new ideas and be flexible and be open to things, that maybe there will be new answers with new leadership and new ideas.

So the barge is looking into going solar with some things on the roof, which I think is a step in that direction, going green. We're thinking about putting in a harbor cam. So that, going forward, with virtual—I haven't done many virtual things. I spent COVID trying to concentrate on what the boat needs and making friends with all the fish and fowl that come out here to keep me company and keep up the outside spaces that are very popular. The pier and the garden and the meadow are my responsibility here. So I try to make a place where people can come down and enjoy the outdoor spaces. I hope by the end of this year, we're able to reschedule some of the

things that we had to cancel. I hope that people are going to be back on the boat and the sound of laughter and the ability to transport people, not only through the arts and culture but also through a space that has been historically preserved. That is my goal, to come back and be a fabric of the community again.

Q: Sounds very lovely, and doable, I think. I hope.

Sharps: I hope so, little by little.

Q: Yes. Well, those are all the questions that I wanted to ask. But I'd like to open it up if there's anything that you feel is significant, or anybody that has been significant that you'd like to mention, please go ahead.

Sharps: Well, just in thinking that we've succeeded in making possible something that arguably is not feasible, with a space that arguably was beyond repair, to raising the fees to find a place and shore it and fund it and keep it alive and doing all of that. I've had other people who have had projects who say, Oh, David, what suggestion would you give me? And I think, two things. One, when you're struggling with a problem, I've always tried to tell my kids, who have lived through many issues that have developed, whether it be the worms that were eating the boat and were going to sink us within a year, your answer, first of all, lies in a person. A person that you meet that shares with you something that allows you to move forward. And the worst issues that I've ever had, like the ship worms and dry dock and dealing with getting a Coast Guard attraction vessel status and whatever. In the end, the silver lining has been the wonderful people

that I've met, that have solved that problem, whether it be David Short, who has literally kept this barge afloat with his skills and generosity, giving us something that we could afford to do, and saving the hull twice with our dry dock projects. Or the wonderful people who knew that I didn't have a ton of money but they liked what I was doing and they were willing to either help me or suggest to me a way to do it, or suggest somebody else who might have it.

What has ended up in many cases, asking a business or a company, a manufacturer—not a distributor, not somebody in your local neighborhood—but a manufacturer of a product. Let them know what you're doing, let them know why it is you're doing what you're doing, and then make an ask. I have received, Sarah, half a ton of copper sheeting from a man that made copper. I have received a heating system that is made up of so many components of companies, once Teledyne Laars was all in, Amtrol, and Beckett, and all these big names. I wasn't asking for much. They send up stuff to high rises where they're ordering hundreds of them and I'm asking for one or two. For them, it wasn't a lot, but when I made my case, I said please, would you please consider a donation? It's absolutely astounding how many companies have given me stuff!

Now, I'm not very good at asking for money. But stuff? I like talking with business people. I like learning about industries, whether it's the blue board that insulates your structure or whether it's the tar and the roofing materials. Everything you need is produced by a manufacturer who loves work. When you're asking for help, A, they could see that I needed help. [Laughs] And people love to help people that need help. And the people that appreciate help and put that help to good, hard work. And in that way, if you have a house or a performance company, or another type of

vessel, I tell people find out who that manufacturer is, ask for the advertising and marketing department, and send them an inquiry to see if they would be interested. And if the number one guy doesn't do it, there's always the guy number two who's trying harder. There's probably five or six of them and they're very often willing, especially if you're willing to shout it out on social media, refer them to other people.

But most manufacturers, they make their product out about maybe thirty or fifty percent. Their cost is probably half, if not more than half. So for them to give you something that they made in exchange for advertisement, the advertising industry, look at how much money they spent and they're literally throwing it against the wall, not knowing what works and what doesn't. So between the good people that are the answer to your problems and the path to your solution, and the manufacturers—those are my two big suggestions for somebody that's trying to do something that's arguably not feasible.

Q: Well, I think unfortunately, you've inspired me to look into living on a barge. [Laughter] But all that to say, thanks for sharing so many details. It sounds like it's been such an interesting story for you, that you've learned a lot and you've shared what you've learned too.

Sharps: Absolutely. And if folks want to learn more, they can always go to waterfrontmuseum.org, if they have questions or whatever. I answer my phone and emails, if they want to reach out in that way. Even more so, if they want to come and see the boat in action, usually our website on the home page has a slideshow of things that are available and open and going on. That's the best, is to come when there's—I think—when there's a performance.

Q: Okay, thanks, David.

Sharps: Thank you, Sarah.

Q: Yes, I think that's it for today, and I'll be in touch probably in a couple weeks with your transcript.

Sharps: Super.

Q: Yes, well, take care and I hope the snow melt doesn't cause too much damage for you—now that you've explained the process. [Laughs]

Sharps: I've got most of the snow off the flat surfaces. I do that as it comes down. And the roof now with its gutters kind of takes care of what's up there. The boat, as an old-timer one time told me, they stopped building wooden boats not because metal was better, it's because they ran out of the wood. And a wooden barge is actually—if you keep up with the maintenance and upkeep, that it's easier than a metal barge. It's interesting.

Q: Yes, definitely. Well, I look forward to being able to visit at some point in the future too.

Sharps: That would be wonderful. Thank you, Sarah.

Q: Sounds great, bye, David.

Sharps: Bye-bye now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]