

Elizabeth Livi, USMMA '19

What made you decide to pursue a career at sea?

I knew I wanted something that was hands on that was going to challenge me and had opportunities for growth. I didn't want to be in an office.

How did USMMA prepare you for your career and all the experiences there? What do you think was the most valuable part?

From the very beginning they start to mold you as a Mariner and as a leader. Right after your freshman year, you have sea year where you're joining a ship with one other cadet. This experience was very eye opening as it showed me what life on a ship was going to look like. I thought, "I love this. This is perfect. It gave me a goal to work towards." Kings Point was the best hands-on training, and I got a Bachelor of Science degree.

How many credit hours did you have to have to graduate?

I know that our program is the equivalent of taking masters classes. I had 20 plus credits in a trimester. So that's 60 plus credits in a year. It's a lot of credits.

Tell me a little bit about what sea year projects are?

After probably 8-10-hour workdays, I would go back to my room, usually grab some ice cream on the way, and sit down and complete a trimester's workload. We take English credits. We're doing maritime related classes like cargo, stability, and navigation. My binder when I came back from sea was huge. I had a million copies of it just in case I lost it. We always joke that if the boat goes down and you get on the life boat, you're taking your project with you. It's the equivalent of a capstone for some people. It's the ultimate independent learning. I still have my project. That's probably going to stay with me for the rest of my life.

Are you still learning celestial navigation?

Yes, we're doing celestial navigation at sea. Sometimes you're teaching your mates or brushing up on the skills with everybody, the captains always get excited once you bring out the Sextant to shoot stars. You get to do sun fixes, azimuth amplitudes, and sometimes you are pretty close, which is always nice when you're less than a mile off from where we actually are.

We've been seeing a lot of the hashtag #womenbelongatsea this year. What would you say to a young woman who thinks she belongs at sea?

I would say you bring a lot to the table, no matter who you are. Everybody has unique talents that they bring, women bring different talents than men. I would hone into what you are good at and let other people know what you're good at. You're going to learn what you're not good at and you're going to improve that. But if you bring something to the table and you improve your work environment, whether that's organizing, whether that's streamlining things, whether that's doing something different that nobody's seen before. Stay firm in your boundaries and how you want to be treated and how you treat other people, and it's going to be good. You're going to come away learning something. They're going to come away learning something. I've been on multiple ships since I graduated. And every time I've learned something.

What makes you most excited about your job?

I feel really blessed to do my job. It's not always easy. I get to go to cool places. I get to do cool things. Sometimes it hits you. I was recently doing an army exercise in the Philippines, and it just hit me that I'm driving a 950-foot-long ship with 20 something people sleeping below and it's me and one other person

and I'm in charge. I'm in charge of the decision making. I also enjoy problem solving or knowing that I have the answer. There's always something to learn. I feel fortunate. Progressing in my career has also been great.

How are you meeting your service requirement?

Currently I'm a Strategic Sealift Officer. Currently I'm working a civilian job, most recently through the union. I am strategically placed around the world for if we were to have an event, whether it's war time or a humanitarian disaster, we are staged to be close to where that could be. I'm fulfilling my reserve requirement as a Strategic Sealift Officer; I am looking at doing a Marine Corps download on a high-speed vessel in Norfolk for the summer.

How many countries have you been to?

I've been to a lot of, I don't know. My dentist just asked me recently, what's the best place you've been. I've been to a lot of places that people don't get to go. I went to Diego Garcia, which you can't go to unless you have a reason to go. Recently I was in Saipan, which was beautiful. I went to Northern Europe as a cadet. I went to Spain. I've been to the Great Lakes.

What's the greatest challenge for a female Mariner, do you think?

The greatest challenge for any Mariner is learning confidence. Then add on everything that goes on with being a female in a male dominant industry. Maybe it's harder to gain that confidence.

Where do you see, you know, the maritime industry, the number of Mariners like crystal ball, 20 years from now?

Since being a cadet, I've seen a lot more women. I sail with a lot more women. I sail with women in the engine department. I've sailed with all the watch standing mates that were women. I do see an increase. I don't feel like such an anomaly anymore being on the ship. I'm not the first woman that a lot of people have sailed with. I hope that trend continues because it is a lot easier to step on a ship when they've got three other women in the department. I have seen an increase of women and I think we're only going to go up from here.

What has been the highlight of your career so far?

Anytime something goes wrong, and I feel like I have a handle on it; that has probably been the best thing. Recently, when I was in the Philippines, we had some engine problems, and I knew exactly what to do. I knew who to call. I knew what to do before somebody who was higher above me could get up there and figure it out. Knowing that I had everything under control.

Advice for someone who is about to board a vessel for the first time?

Be yourself. Pack whatever you think you're going to need, and then take half of it out because you don't need it. Always have a joke ready. And call your mom, call your mom when you're out at sea!

Bio: Elizabeth Livi, USMMA '19. Licensed unlimited tonnage Third Mate with a Bachelor of Science in Marine Transportation Security and Logistics. Currently sailing with Master Mates and Pilots. Wide variety of shipboard experience including container ships, bulkers, Military Pre-Positioning ships and shipyard.

Claudia Cimini USMMA '90

What inspired you to pursue a career at sea? Why Kings Point?

Growing up, I was always interested in how things work so engineering was a natural progression. As a plebe I didn't know yet what I'd do after graduation. My first sea year, getting out on actual commercial ships was what convinced me that I wanted to go to sea.

How did the USMMA prepare you for your career/what was the most valuable part?

Sea year! I got to see and learn what it is to be a marine engineer on commercial ships.

If you had a crystal ball you could look into, what would you see for female mariners?

We'd see more.

What were/are the greatest challenges for female mariner?

I think the challenge is that women on average aren't the same size as men. For example, we were setting the height for a periscope. I proposed a height that I felt would work for most people. The other engineer agreed with my setting "we might get someone short" he said. "This height works for average height men and average height women. It works for me because I'm 5'5. That's average height for an American woman. I'm not short, I'm female."

What is the coolest part of the job?

The coolest part of the job is that there were so many cool parts. The coolest part of my job is I, I get to be like Scotty from Star Trek. I get to figure out how to fix something. Despite being in this small, isolated village on this small, isolated island, which is what a ship is. The entire engine room can be five stories. The functioning part of the engine can be even larger.

What does a marine engineer do?

In a nutshell, a Marine engineer's job is figuring out how to make stuff work despite everything. We can get really creative. I remember once running a fire hose and plugging it into a blue oil cooler and using, it was probably the air conditioning system, saltwater pump, because we were having problems when we needed to keep the generator coil cool so that the generator would continue running so that we would have electricity so that we could continue on our way. The most satisfying part of the job is when you figure out stuff like that. If somebody had asked me the day before, what are some ultimate cooling methods for this generator? I don't know if I would've come up with a solution that I actually used at the time.

What is your go to advice for someone going out to sea?

This is what I tell every cadet. I tell them the first two things you do, soon as you get to that ship, you figure out where your fire and emergency station is. Then you figure out where your abandon ship station is. You do that first, you drop off your bag, you do that. The reason you do that is because you never know, you never know when there's going to be an emergency and you need to do your job. Your shipmates are counting on you, and you need to be safe. You need to be able to get yourself out of, for example, a completely dark engineer room if you lose power. I have had the experience of only being on a ship for a couple of days as chief engineer, and I had to release the CO2 into my engineer room because I've had this habit of always knowing my fire and emergency station, always learning that as soon as I joined the vessel, I was prepared.

Anything else that you want to add?

I just really enjoy working as a Marine engineer. I just love figuring out how stuff works, figuring out how to make stuff work. I mean, what cooler job is there than to be MacGyver than to be Scotty from Star Trek.

Bio: Claudia Cimini USMMA '90 graduate from USMMA and majored in marine and mechanical engineering. She is a Marine Engineer, who holds an unlimited Chief Engineer's license for Steam and Motor, and makes her living working on the engines of motor and steamships.

Frances Yates, USMMA '78

How did you end up pursuing a career at sea?

I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I come from a military family. We traveled a lot during my dad's career and I always thought that going to different places was very interesting. I'm the first female in my family to graduate from college. My brother Michael went to the Academy. He came home with all these stories of places he had travelled to. He had been places I had always wanted to go like Australia and New Zealand and the Far East, but I thought, wow, that's great. I was happy for him. This was in December of 1973, months before they opened the Academy to women, and I thought, well, good for Mike, but I'll never be able to do that. Four or five months later, I got a letter from the Academy saying that they were going co-ed and you know, they stated all the positive reasons why I should apply. I got the letter and my father happened to be home at the time, he watched me read the letter and then throw it in the garbage because I thought they'd never take me. He made me fish that letter out of the garbage and said to me, "you're applying." But I said, "they won't take me." Well, long story short, three weeks later, I got an acceptance letter.

So tell me about your experience at the sea. Did you get seasick for starters?

I got over it. Apparently, I think most people you ask that question will say the first couple of days after boarding a ship after being ashore for a while, it takes a little bit of time to get your sea legs. But as I went on, I just got used to it. You concentrate on what you must do, what the job is at hand and just do it. And besides, I didn't want anybody else to see I was a wimp.

What did you learn? How did it prepare you for your career?

The Academy prepares you for life on a ship. You need to be resourceful. You need to use your head and think on your feet. They prepared us well before we went to sea.

Tell me a little bit about just your career?

At the time Texaco had a US tanker fleet. I was lucky enough to get a job as a third mate. I got to go to a lot of places in the world. I never got to the Far East or Australia like my brother did, but I remember waking up one day as our ship was pulling into Rio de Janeiro, a narrow beautiful port. I had to tell myself, you are a lucky person. How many people do you know, get to see a site like this when you're 18 years old and they're paying you to do it!

Did you experience any challenges as a women mariner?

It changed over time, but I'll just share one story with you. When I was a third mate, this is probably my second ship with Texaco. We pulled into Jacksonville, Florida, while I was on watch and a Coast Guard inspection team came on board, which is routine with tankers. The Coast Guard will come and make sure all the equipment is working. This party of two chief Coast Guard petty officers came on board, and I greeted them on the gangway. I identified myself as the mate. One of them says to me, "no, no, no. We

want to talk to the real mate.” Meaning the chief mate. I knew the chief mate had worked a long day and was asleep in the state room. They wanted me to wake him up and I refused to do it. I was wearing a uniform with my name on it and I said, “I’ll tell you what, go up this catwalk, go through that door and go to the bridge where you’ll see the license rack. In it, you’ll see one that has my name on it.” The guy gave me a nasty look, but I wasn’t going to let him go any further on the ship until he acknowledged that I was the Mate. The guy goes up to the bridge, finds my license comes back and reluctantly decides I am the Mate. He goes around looking for things on the deck that could have been written up as discrepancies. He found a few minor things. When the chief mate woke up and I relayed the story to him. He said, “you should have woken me up because I’d have kicked those guys off the ship.”

What's the highlight of your career?

I sailed professionally on my license for a little over two years, long enough to upgrade to second mate. The one thing that stands out in my mind were the many guys on the ship that would say to me, “I wish my daughter could meet you because you are proof that girls can do the sort of job and, and you did it.” I didn’t do everything flawlessly, but I proved to them that I was competent to do the job.

What advice would you give to someone going out to sea?

I would suggest is pack lightly. At least two of the ships I was on the chief mate saw men willing to help me carry my bags up the gangway and I got reprimanded right away for allowing people to carry my bags for me.

Bio: Frances Yates, USMMA ‘78 and the first class from any service Academy to include female graduates. Marine Charterer at Hess Corporation.

Karen Basciano Nola, USMMA ‘05

What inspired you to pursue a career at sea?

I grew up working on the SS John W. Brown World War II, merchant vessel, kind of like our heritage as Mariners. I knew what I wanted to do before I could drive a car. I was playing on a ship that sailed when I was 12 years old until now. I grew up working with pilots and I knew I wanted to be a pilot.

What led you to Kings point?

Most of the guys on the John W. Brown were retired World War II merchant veterans that went to Kings Point during World War II, and they said I was going to Kings Point. I did not want to go to the other academies because I wanted to go on real merchant vessels. I wanted to see different kinds of ships, and I was on a grain ship, a tanker, a car carrier, a bulk ship to Africa, a bunch of containers, bulk ship tanker. I really enjoyed the way Sea Year was at Kings Point. That’s one of the big reasons I went there for that reason.

How did the USMMA prepare you for your career/what was the most valuable part?

The biggest takeaway was this like life skills. I learned time management and organization and it prepared me for this career. You know, the career is, may not be military, but it is regimented you must be, there’s no such thing as being late. I think King’s Point prepared me for that in many ways.

Can you talk about your service commitment?

Most of my reserve duties were on merchant vessels, MSC ships, ready reserve. One was a refueling underway ship. That was a merchant ship, but it was very military regimented. That was a very good learning experience. I was on different types of ships as a cadet and once I graduated. Our reserve duties were mostly on merchant vessels ready reserve or not. I know people who did more Navy related reserve duties, but I was only on other merchant vessels during my reserve duty.

What advice would you give to someone going out to sea?

I would say to people, you have to want to do it for what it is and not for any other reason for a woman, I would say, if you want to do it, um, that's great. It takes a certain type of person to work in this industry, especially at sea or on tugboats or even a pilot. The hours are long, and you are gone a lot. I would say you have to want to do it, specifically for the job. I, I love it. It's a great thing. I get to play with big ships every day, different ones, but that's what I wanted to do.

What do you do specifically as a harbor pilot?

I guide the ships in and out of New York and New Jersey Harbor. The ship pulls up and the captain's from wherever he's from and he doesn't know the area, but we do. We are experts in the area, and we know what's safe. We even know when we can exit the channel if we need to. Each job's anywhere from three to six hours long and we guide them in and dock them. Then when it's time for them to leave, we take them out. Then we get off on a moving boat and wait for the next job. I work four weeks on, two weeks off schedule. And I think the longest I'm gone, depending on what I need to do is probably about 24 hours, maybe a little longer. That's a bit more family friendly than, you know, absolute ocean voyages. I would say the hardest part is not knowing when you're going to work.

What do you hope to see in 20 years for women in the maritime industry?

I will say as a woman who has gone through this, and other women I've spoken to, I would say maybe a little more help with the childcare.

What was the coolest moment in your career?

I grew up on the John Brown and she's mostly in Baltimore in Chesapeake Bay. Well, whenever a pilot got on, they got a red John Brown hat that said pilot. When I was really young, before I drove a car, I said, "I'm going to get one of those, but I'm not a Chesapeake Bay pilot. In the fall of 2016, I got the John Brown to come to New York. They spent the week in New York, and I got to pilot her in, and I got my red hat. It was a really big deal. And my sister was the chief mate at the time and my whole family got to come on board. That was the pinnacle of my career, being a pilot and piloting the John Brown.

What's my core piece of advice would you give to someone going out to sea?

Email me. I have a lot to say

Bio: Karen is a 2005 graduate of USMMA and a Sandy Hook Pilot. Karen has worked on the water for over twenty years and is an accomplished maritime pilot in New York and New Jersey waters. As a maritime pilot, Captain Nola is a navigational expert for a port of call. She is a highly skilled sailor, who trained for years to maneuver ships through dangerous and congested waters. At any time of day, Captain Nola possesses detailed knowledge of a particular waterway, including the direction and strength of the wind, current and tide.

Kelsey Ramirez USMMA '19

What inspired you to pursue a career at Sea?

I was recruited for track and field by the Merchant Marine Academy. That's when I started to do my research on Merchant Mariners. When I got to Kings Point, I heard stories from midshipmen who had already gone out to sea, and professors who were former Master Mariners; their hands on experience made me think, "I can't wait to go do my cadet sailing." My sophomore year was the first time I went on a ship as a Navy ship that was stationed in Gaeta, Italy. Immediately when I started as a cadet, I knew this was what I wanted to do.

Tell us about your schoolwork while out at sea during sea year?

An average day at sea depends on your ship. If you're working an 8-5 day, that consists of rounds, maintenance, shadowing the other engineers and seeing what they're doing. After, you work on your Sea Projects. Sea projects for an engineer consist of walking through all the different engineering systems and typing out a report. Like an independent study that you work on while you're on the ship. They're a valuable tool. Kings Point teaches you how to balance your workload. I feel that I'm a much better engineer for going out to sea and working with equipment rather than just studying engineering equations in school. I really like that aspect.

Are you in the Strategic Sealift?

As a Merchant Marine, you have a five-year obligation to the Maritime Administration and then you have an eight-year obligation to the Navy reserve. I am a Strategic Sealift Officer (SSO). What that means is that I would support the strategic sea lift fleet if we were to be activated. We would man those ships and help get personnel and artillery overseas. As far as our reserve duties are concerned, there are several options- work on the reserve ships, work on the training ship at Kings Point or any of the maritime training ships. It's a great program and it keeps you engaged with the military.

Can you talk just a, just briefly about that for why it's important to be able to have the training that lets you sail on, able to work on a variety of ships.

Being a Strategic Sealift Officer, you must have a certain skill set. We are very valuable to the military because they don't have enough personnel that would be able to navigate and run ships. As a Merchant Mariner, and a Kings Point graduate, we all graduate with either unlimited, third engineer license or third mate licenses. Unlimited means on any ship of any size or any form of propulsion. We are trained to basically sail on any vessel. That's very important to the Navy because they need us if we were to go to war and need to man those ships.

Tell us about your career after graduation?

After graduating as a merchant mariner engineer, we can sail on diesel, steam, gas turbine ships. I have been on both steam and diesel. When I first started on my first ship as a third engineer, I realized that we had to be the Jack of all trades. If our air conditioning went out, we had to fix that. We didn't call an HVAC man to come on the ship. We had to know that information. That's also what we study. We're in charge of everything. Even house like repairs; I fixed a lot of shower heads and sinks that were broken, and installed ovens.

What advice would you give to a young woman who's wondering whether or not she belongs at sea?

I would say that you already do have a place at sea. If you want to go out there, you belong there. The hard part is other people might not already think that. You have to be resilient and persistent and just work really hard. You might have to prove yourself. Just continue to try and push through and try to find

advocates that will help you and that you can lean on if you need any support; mainly just to talk to. There's a plethora of support that you can lean on if you do have any troubles, but from firsthand experience, there are going to be people who doubt you. Sometimes you do have to just continue to work hard, persist and show them that you want to be out there and that you deserve to be out there.

If you had a crystal ball and you just got to look down in it and see 20 years from now, what would you see for female Mariners?

I see women in every sector of the maritime industry. Starting out with just the maritime academies, that's where female Mariners typically start off. Getting more women to apply and show them the career options. Also, that companies advocate for women at sea. That they create a space where women feel comfortable going to sea and that women want to pursue that career. I also want to see women continuing a career further than their twenties and thirties. Maybe there can be companies who work with women and maybe they extend their maternity leave so they can breastfeed their children for longer and keep their job and still be able to go out to sea. I see companies going out of their way to make it possible for women to continue to go out to sea. I think that is happening. I'm enjoying seeing women being resilient enough to continue to do that.

What is the coolest thing you've gotten to do so far in your career?

I got to be a part of a piston pull. We got to take the piston out and do some maintenance on that and to see just this vast machinery come out of this engine and we're a group of four or five people conducting this big operation was awesome.

Advice for a woman about to go out to sea?

Be open-minded. Absorb as much information as you can and ask questions. There's going to be more for you to learn than you can probably handle, but just try to soak it all in because it's all really cool. Try to learn from every department, whether you're an engineer or a deck, make sure to go around the whole ship and just ask questions.

Bio: Kelsey Ramirez USMMA '19 is a 3rd engineer. Ballast Control Operator and Strategic Sealift Officer.

Alaina Basciano, USMMA '09,

What inspired you to pursue a career at sea/why Kings Point?

I have a unique and neat story. My grandfather was a Merchant Mariner in World War II, and he and my grandmother volunteered on the SS John W. Brown, one of the last of the two operating Liberty ships left in the United States. When I was a very young child, I would get to go on this big grey ship and run around all day. When I was 10 years old, my grandmother decided that I was old enough to become a volunteer, so I grew up around hundreds of Merchant Mariners from WWII. I remember one whose convoy was torpedoed; he was a prisoner of war twice and lived in a life raft for two weeks. I grew up in this atmosphere, and I loved it. When I was 13 years old, I decided I wanted to be a captain one day. We had a bunch of Kings Point alumni as volunteers, some from the beginning of USMMA... they influenced both my sister and me. Given that, there wasn't any choice other than Kings Point when we applied to college. Today, my sister is also a mariner, a Sandy Hook Harbor pilot.

How did the USMMA prepare you for your career/what was the most valuable part?

The structure of day-to-day was very helpful preparation. There is still a sort of military structure aboard merchant vessels, when it comes to rank and chain of command, so that was helpful. Something that they

drilled into our heads was “adapt and overcome”. Even at school you're met with certain challenges, and you have to figure out a way to get through them and to solve the issues to end up on the other side. That gave me the ability to work under pressure, to multitask and be able to function with lack of sleep. I would say the most beneficial part of attending Kings Point was sea year and being able to go out on commercial vessels prior to getting a job on a commercial vessel was invaluable. There's a maximum of two to four cadets on board, so you're immersed, and you just can't get that experience unless you're doing it.

As at its sister federal service academies, every USMMA graduate incurs a service obligation. Can you talk about your service commitment?

Yes, absolutely, being in the Strategic Sea lift Officer Force, the Merchant Marine Navy reserve, as it used to be called, is very important to me having the background that I did on the John W. Brown. I feel like in a way I am paying those men back, who, who came before me in the industry. In wartime, I would absolutely answer the call and “deliver the goods” as they say. I'm [about to go out on my reserve duty], supporting the Cape D class vessels in Charleston, South Carolina. And it's all about preserving and maintaining the ready reserve fleet for a time of conflict.

We've been seeing a lot of the hashtag #womenbelongatsea this year. What would you say to young woman who thinks she belongs at sea? What are the challenges that women mariners face?

My biggest piece of advice is you have to want to be there and that goes for anybody at sea. You have to want to be there because it is not for everyone. It's a completely different atmosphere than a land based job; you really can't compare it to anything else. And second, it's all about your attitude: come on board and establish “I'm here to work, I'm going to work hard and I'm going to do what it takes to get the job done”. Set boundaries from the beginning, whether that's work boundaries or social boundaries. That's my biggest advice: you've got to want to be there and you have to have that attitude. You know, it is a little bit more difficult being a woman, full disclosure. But I found it to be very successful in fostering more cohesive work environment by proving that I wanted to be there and that I was able to do the job.

What has been the highlight of your career?

Hands down without a doubt sailing as captain was the highlight of my career. I still sit in that chair and, and I can't believe it. It's surreal to me that I did it. I set a goal when I was 13 years old that I was going to sail captain, and I did it and it it's unbelievable. And, you know, I sit there often and say, I cannot believe I am in charge of this ship right now. It really is surreal, but I did it and, and I did a pretty good job and had a decent reputation throughout my career. The 70th anniversary of the launching of the John W. Brown was September 7th, 2019, and I was the first female captain on board. It was kind of a full circle moment where my childhood came around. [they were so supportive and, and very proud that day as well.

On a more practical note, what advice would you give a female mariner about to go out to sea for the first time?

Whew, that's a tough one. I would say my biggest, my biggest piece of advice is mirrored in what I said before. Definitely come with a good attitude and work ethic, you know, prove that you want to be there. I'd also let her know that it's unfortunate, but she may have to work a little bit harder to prove herself. It's so worth it, though, because you busted your butt and when you succeed, nobody can take that away from you. You worked hard and so what if you have to work a little bit harder than your male peers? So what? You know women can do it, and you can do it, and you will do it. The fact of the matter is it's a different world out there. It gets hard...you're stuck with the same people for long periods of time where you, you cannot leave because you're quite literally in the middle of the ocean, sometimes out for 30+ days without seeing land. Find easy, traveling hobbies that you can do on your off time to keep you sane.

I've read more books than I ever thought I ever would, being out at sea. That was my release. Just lose yourself in a book.

If you had a crystal ball you could look into, what would you see for female mariners XX years in the future?]

That's hard. I believe I'd see the industry continuing to move in a positive direction as far as accepting female Mariners. I know right now that may be a, a tough thing to admit, but if you look back when women first started at sea, it was much different in, in a negative way. And we have progressed in a positive direction albeit with, with some bumps in the road, some pretty big bumps. And, you know, as of recently, there have been some issues. Unfortunately, I don't think the issues will completely go away, but I think they'll get better. Most companies out there have robust policies already to prevent these issues from taking place or how to deal with them. But the unfortunate part is they're not being enforced. They're already there. They're not being enforced. So, what I see in the future is that the enforcement starts and that starts on the ships with the ship's leadership and with the crews. That's where that starts. Like I said, these things are already in place. They just need to be enforced.

Bio: Alaina Basciano, USMMA '09, Captain. Member of the American Maritime Officers. She began her union career on articulated tug barges, tankers, carrying petroleum and chemical products. Then discovered oceanographic survey vessels, government contract vessel . As a third mate she joined the USNS Henson in 2011 and progressed all the way up to captain; she has been sailing captain since December of 2019.

Mary Culnane, USMMA '80

What inspired you to pursue a career at sea?

What inspired me to pursue a career at sea was my experiences during the sea year as an engine cadet at the United States Merchant Marine academy.

What got you to the USMMA in the first place?

When I graduated from high school, all the federal academies opened to women and unbeknownst to me, Kings Point had opened to women two years prior. I applied to the Naval Academy, however, the slots were taken and my congressman felt I wanted something to do with water. My congressman nominated me to the Merchant Marine Academy and the rest was history. It was a perfect ending to the process. The Merchant Marine Academy happened to be one of the best kept secrets in the United States.

How did it prepare you for your career and what was the most valuable part of your education at Kings point?

The Kings Point education prepared me for a career at sea, not only through the academic process, which was basically four years, uh, compacted into three to allow an entire year at sea called Sea Year, to experience the actual seagoing life. The Kings Point education taught us time management, working under heavy pressures, stress, and the sea year experience was extraordinary. It's the most innovative educational tool ever created, for maritime it is the place. Sea year is a total immersion. It's a realistic approach to understanding the profession.

Tell us a little bit about what a day at sea would be during sea year?

A typical day as an engine cadet during sea year depended on how the engineers, the chief engineer

and the first engineer desired to program your education. Many times, the chief engineer would place you on watch on a four to eight (four in the morning, till eight in the morning) learning how to make rounds, keep an eye on the steam plant or the diesel plant. Standing watch you learn how the system, how the plant operates. Then when you're off they would put you on day work, where you would walk around with a day engineer and learn how to fix things, learn repairs. They would allow you to weld and work in a machine shop. Then when you had a few free hours, you would sit down and be required to complete a sea project--reading books, composing book reports, and drawing the systems. You would learn how every system interacts in the engine room. A small portion of the engine sea project would require one to go to the bridge and see what they do up there. It was very comprehensive, and an extraordinary way to learn engineering.

What advice would you give a young woman who thinks she belongs at sea?

You belong at sea. I would say when you go to see stay focused, be accountable and really take pride in your craft, in your profession. I would also say to young women going to sea, be cognizant of the potential for unintended consequences of your actions. Situational awareness is essential for your safety and for your success at sea.

What are the greatest challenges that you think women who have seagoing careers face?

I started out over 40 years ago, and generally I was the only woman on a ship, which has its own set of obstacles. Back then I would always take the attitude that I was just one of the crew. I saw on every ship, that if you, as an engine cadet, and eventually as an engineer, if you just showed an enthusiasm for engineering that you would fit right in.

What would you say was the highlight of your career at sea?

The highlight of my career at sea was the day I signed articles as a chief engineer. It was 10 years from the time I signed articles as an engine cadet. It was a little quicker than I expected to reach that goal. It was a great day. I can imagine. The captain asked, "are you ready?" And, I responded, "Yes, captain I'm ready. Are you?"

If you had a crystal ball, where do you see women in the maritime industry 20 years from now?

20 years from now, we will see women in every level of the maritime industry, CEOs, captains of ships, chief engineers, all female crewed vessel. I think we'll see it all.

Key advice for young mariners?

Keep an open mind. Stay focused. Be innovative. Try new ideas. Be vocal.

Bio: Mary "Mare" Culnane a USMMA '80 graduate with a BS in Marine Engineering. She holds a USCG Chief Engineer Unlimited License. Mare spent over 10 years shipping on Exxon tankers as well as freighters, container vessels, and passenger vessels. Once ashore, Mare worked as a Port Engineer for MSC; Technical Sales Engineer, Fuel, Lube and Energy Conservation Manager and New Ship Construction Manager for Chevron; Marine Engineering Manager for a start-up San Francisco public ferry system and presently operates Culnane Maritime Consulting LLC.