A photograph of a white sailboat with a tall mast and rigging, sailing on a body of water. Several people are visible on the deck. The background shows a distant shoreline under a clear sky.

A. J. Meerwald

Surf-Clamming Survivor

Nearly one hundred years into a career which has included harvesting oysters and clams under sail and power, a wartime stint as a fireboat, two bankruptcies, and some time spent on the bottom, the BayShore Center's flagship is getting ready for a major rebuild in Maine

The AJ Meerwald, New Jersey's official Tall Ship, is a restored oyster dredging schooner. Launched in 1928, the Meerwald is today used by the non-profit Bayside Center at Bivalve (NJ) as a traveling classroom and vehicle to enjoy the area's waterways. A variety of public programs include Second Fridays (raw bar, beer and wine, live music, cafe open for dinner), Oyster and Wine tastings, a lecture series, and the OysterRoast fall fundraiser.

We spoke recently with Museum Curator Rachel Dolhanczyk, Captain Josh Scornavacchi, and Director of Education Ali Place.

Marlinspike: Let's start with a little history, because I know that we're getting close to the schooner's 100th birthday. The boat was originally built in the 1920s for oystering under sail, is that correct? Did she not have an auxiliary engine when she was built?

Rachel Dolhanczyk: She was built with an engine, because the *Meerwald* is a "new style" schooner. They could use the engine while working their own grounds, where they would plant the oysters, as opposed to working to seed beds in the spring, when they'd had to work under sail. Not allowing the use of engines was part of the conservation efforts.

MS: What were the "old style" schooners like?

Rachel: They had a clipper bow, and they were shorter: 50-odd feet. And they had a topsail.

The 1920s were good years for oystering. There were just a lot of oysters out there. But there was a move to a larger dredge. And the "old style" boats, as they call them, weren't large enough for the larger dredge.

MS: Your website says that, later in her career, the schooner was used as an oyster dredge under power. How is that different from oystering?

Rachel: It's still oystering, but no longer under sail.

Josh Scornavacchi: You weren't allowed to use the engine to actually go and harvest the oysters out of the Bay. You could use them for your own personal grounds, but you

couldn't use the engine to harvest the oysters during that season. You could only use sails. That was an effort to intentionally make them less efficient at catching the oysters, so that they wouldn't reduce the population past the point of recovery.

But after World War 2, there was a job shortage, and they repealed that law and then allowed you to use engines to harvest oysters, all the time.

MS: So in the 1930s and the 1940s, they're already worried about over-fishing?



After a WW2 stint as a fireboat (top) the MEERWALD returned to fishing



Rachel: From early on, there was definitely an awareness, because here, you have Rutgers' Haskins Shellfish Research Lab. They have a lab here in Bivalve. There were already concerns, because they were importing seed oysters from the James River and that's what brought Dermo to the Delaware Bay.

MS: Brought what to Delaware Bay?

Rachel: Dermo.

MS: What's Dermo?

Ali Place: Dermo. It's a parasitic protozoan that kills the oysters, basically. It was introduced from, I guess, James Bay. But did it originally come from there? I'm not sure.

MSX was a disease that hit in the 1950s, that wiped out like 95% of the oysters. It came from Asia, maybe in the ballast water of commercial vessels, or it could have been US military vessels returning

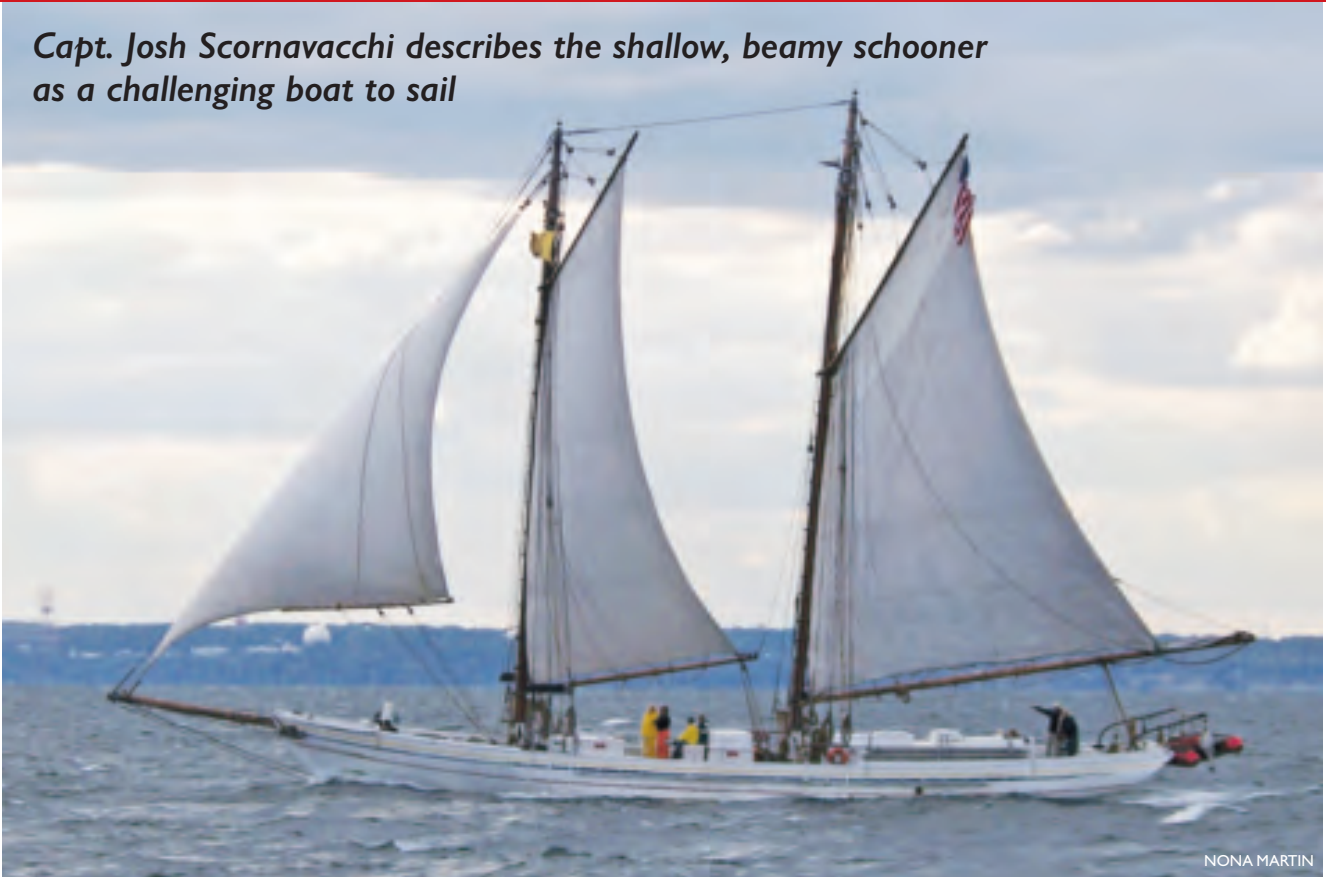
from the war.

Josh: They were taking on ballast water in Asia to cross the ocean and then when they'd come into the river, they'd dump it out, so that they'd be more buoyant. And then they're introducing invasive species.

MS: Um... am I hearing a parrot?

Ali: It's my bird. Do you mind? If he's with me, he won't scream like that. I'm really sorry. I'm just going to get him,

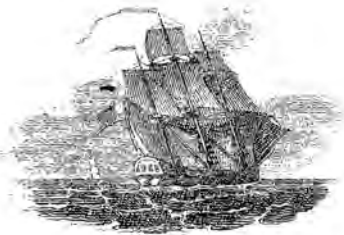
Capt. Josh Scornavacchi describes the shallow, beamy schooner as a challenging boat to sail



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real quick. Is it okay, if he's in this interview?

MS: Does he talk?

Josh: No. He just screams and bites.

MSX shouldn't have taken off the way that it did, but they were also dredging at the time and that allows that salt to creep farther up the river. And so the protozoa was able to spread farther and affect even more oysters than it would have otherwise.

MS: So the backup plan was surf clamming?

Rachel: The Meerwald family operated the boat for about five years after they built her in 1928. Then you get the Great Depression — not much is going on. In 1941, the boat went to the US Coast Guard, which operated her as a fireboat, along the Philadelphia/Camden waterfront for five years.

MS: Not under sail, obviously.

Rachel: No — you'd barely recognize the vessel.

MS: They cut off the rig?

Rachel: Yeah, and there's water cannons and...

Josh: They outfitted her with water pumps and a pilot

house and then covered her in metal.

Rachel: After the war, there was a lot of back and forth between the government and the Meerwald family, over the compensation. They couldn't agree, with attorneys involved and letters back and forth and so on. Finally, by 1947, a price was agreed upon and the Meerwald family was told to come and get the vessel, as is, where is.

MS: Which was how and where?

Rachel: Up near Camden. They had given up their schooner and she came back as this iron-clad... I don't know what. Nine months later, the Meerwald family sold her to Clyde A. Phillips. And since at this point there's no masts and no sails, he uses her for oystering, under power.

MS: And he renamed the boat after himself?

Rachel: Actually, his wife did. He wasn't planning to change the name, but the wife did the paperwork. She named both the boat and her son after her husband.

MS: How much longer was she oystering then?

Rachel: For about 10 years, under power, with the Phillips family, until 1957. As Josh had mentioned, that's when MSX hits, in September of 1957. Captain Phillips actually died the night before the season opened. They already knew that there were problems, because they would go out and test their grounds and do a little dredging, just to see how the oysters are doing. So his son always says, even though people say, 'MSX can't kill a human,' he knew several men who died because of MSX!

Rachel: Phillips had taken out a loan for \$750,000 to

grow his business. He had several boats, including a bugeye, the Lady Ray, from the Chesapeake, he had a shucking house... he had a lot going on. So, after he passes, then the business is lost to the bank — actually, for the second time. The Meerwalds had lost the boat too. And that's when the boat then goes into clamming.

MS: That's where surf clamming comes in?



*It was a challenge just keeping her afloat (top).
Founder and Director Meghan Wren
with John DuBois and John Gandy (bottom)*



Rachel: Yeah, because at that point, the oyster industry's gone, because of MSX. There's still some guys that oyster, and things come back a bit in the 1970s, but it just decimated the fishery. Anyone still working the water had to diversify and find other ways to survive and use their boats.

MS: So what does surf clamming look like?

Ali: (parrot on shoulder): Surf clams are a type of clam. When you're surf clamming, you're catching surf clams.

The bottom, in the Bay, is pretty much all mud. The oysters grow on top of rocks, or on top of other oysters, or built reefs. But clams are different — they like to dig underneath the sand or the mud. So the strategy to catch them is a little different. With the oysters, you can drag or rake along the top of the sand, to get them out. But the clamming nets have to dig down into the sand.

As a result, it's really, really strenuous on the boat. The clamming vessels usually have big outriggers on them, to support all of the heavy gear that's involved, whereas the oyster boats don't have so much of that. That's part of the reason that the *Meerwald* fell into such disrepair after a while — surf clamming is just not good for the boat.

MS: How long did that phase of her career last?

Rachel: Into the 1970s.

MS: Still called the *Clyde A. Phillips*, right?

Rachel: Yep. She was actually the *Clyde A. Phillips*, longer than she was the *A.J. Meerwald*.

MS: So why did the BayShore Center decide to go back to the original name, if she was the *Clyde A. Phillips* for longer?

Rachel: Because it was decided that the boat would be restored back to as-built, in 1928, when she was the *A.J. Meerwald*.

But the boat was idle a lot. By 1978, anyone who owned it was just using it for the license. So for maybe 20 years, from '58 to '78, she wasn't active every year. And then from '78 to '88, she was just sitting in Salisbury, Maryland, in the mud.

MS: So, how was she saved?

Rachel: There was a man, John Gandy, who we're still friends with. He always had dreams of owning an oyster schooner. And he knew the guy, Donny McDaniels, who had bought the *Clyde A.* for her clam license. And he kept saying, "Donnie, what are you doing with that boat?"

One day Donnie said to John, "Well, you want it that bad? Sold!" And for a dollar or whatever, something crazy, John Gandy gets the boat. This is in '86. He and his son, who was a teenager, would go down to Salisbury, and just try to do some caulking or whatever, not getting much accomplished. But he wanted to bring the boat back here, to Bivalve and do something.

So then the story goes, that by 1988, after two years of putzing around doing this, Gandy and another guy are chatting at the shipyard where Meghan Wren, who was to become our founder and director, was working. She was about 23 at the time. She heard them talking and got interested. She wanted to get involved as well. Later that night, she's tending bar and who comes in but John Gandy and a couple of friends and they keep talking about the boat. So it went on from there, forming a non-profit and so on. But John's the one who brought the boat back, paid to bring the boat back from Maryland and towed to Bivalve.

For the next several years, it was all about fundraising, trying to form an organization, and gathering resources and volunteers. In those early days, they were just trying to get all the weight off of her, all the metal sheeting, and the pilot house — there was so much weight. They were trying to offload what they could, because the boat would sink and the fire department would come and pump it out.

MS: Where did the money come from? Was it a lot of small donations or were there a couple of big sponsors who wanted to see this program succeed?

Rachel: The first five years or so, it was just little, little things: donations, people just volunteering, just wanting to see this boat come back to life. The first big grant came from the New Jersey Historic Trust and then there were some other grants as well, that Megan wrote, that came in. It was really those state grants that made it happen.

I mean, people donated money, and became plank owners: if you were an original member, you got a piece of wood, the plank! And then really early on, they had an art auction at a local country club and that first auction raised something like \$6,000 and that paid off the original yard fee, for when the boat first got hauled out. And they were just trying to caulk her, so she would float!

Meghan was telling me that one time a reporter called her up and said, "I want to talk to you about the state of the boat, the fact that she's sunk again." And Meghan was like, "Well, that was last year. Everything's cool." And the reporter said, "No, no. I mean, right now." And Meghan's like, "What?" It was a recurring problem.

But eventually they got the weight off her and they were able to hire professional shipwrights and focus on the restoration.

The head shipwright, Mill Edelman, he said he had to keep reminding himself, they weren't trying to build a better boat — they were trying to build the same boat.

MS: How long until the boat was relaunched and sailing and able to run programs?

Rachel: She was re-launched in September of '95. The rebuild lasted from '88 to '95. But it was really the last year and a half when most of the work was accomplished. And then May of 1996 was the beginning of our first season.

MS: That's a real labor of love.

Rachel: Meghan dedicated her life, for 30 years, to the



organization. It was her passion. Once the grant money came in, that last year and a half, shipwrights were hired and professionals came in to lead the charge. But for all those years leading up to that, it was a struggle just trying to keep the boat afloat.

The cool thing was, the old, old, old-timers were still around, who remembered seeing the boats under sail. So, in addition to research, Megan did a lot of oral histories with the old timers, who remembered what things should look like, so forth. Even the sails — someone donated an original set of sails from the *Sheppard Campbell*, that worked under sail. The *Meerwald's* sails were cut from that original pattern. And Meghan and the others, they would go digging around the old boneyards, looking for gear and measuring things.

MS: Tell me about the programs that you were running when the boat started actively sailing in '96, as opposed to the programs that you're running now. Has there been any evolution there?

Rachel: The programs early on, it was just the boat. There were always school programs, field trips and public sails. The same formula has persisted. Traveling to different ports around the state, participating in different events, that's all kind of been the same, all these years.

One thing that's changed is that we've acquired the Oyster Shipping Sheds built in 1904 by Central Railroad of New Jersey for packing and shipping oysters. The sheds now house our Delaware Bay Museum and the Oyster Cracker Cafe. This is our home port.

Ali: Like Rachel said, we have the building, so we have the museum now, which is awesome.

Rachel: I should mention that, from the late '80s, early '90s, the organization started collecting artifacts, information, oral histories, to help document the schooner.

Ali: I wasn't around in those earlier years, so I can't speak too much to what they were doing then. We focus a lot on

environmental science and marine biology. Our curriculum is updated for current scientific understanding, of course, but it remains largely unchanged. It's been so successful over these years. We've added to it and built upon it, but the foundation that they built in the very beginning days, we're still using that.

We talk about watersheds and we have a net that we catch animals in and teach the kids about the animals that we find in the river and in the Bay. We have microscopes on board, so the kids can look at plankton, stuff like that. It's all very hands-on. I don't think we have any workshops where the kids don't have their hands on something. That's important, because they don't get that very much in school. They're sitting in a classroom and looking at a chalkboard. For the kids to be able to come out and actually see what they have in their own backyard, I think, is the most important thing.

We have a lot of kids that are from Cumberland County and we ask, "Okay, where's the Delaware Bay?" And they're like, "Oh, it's in Florida."

Rachel: And a lot of times, it's their first time out on the water too.

Ali: First time on a boat. First time seeing a bald eagle. You see a bald eagle almost every day. Catch horseshoe crabs and terrapins and fish and eels, all kinds of fun stuff.

Josh: The education program that was already in place, prior to us getting here, was the main reason that I decided to come to the boat. I worked on *Clearwater* prior to this. I heard that this was a similar program, and I really like environmental education. We went to school for biology, so our passion for animals and teaching about the environment and how to protect it and teaching kids and adults, that is really important. But we have added some programming, especially these past two years.

Ali: With COVID, things had to evolve quite a bit, obviously.

Josh: So now we have some online videos on our website and on YouTube, where you can look at some of our stations, virtually. The quality is not great, because we filmed them with a GoPro, but it's a start. We also are going to be hopefully partnering with Boy Scouts, Sea Scouts, hopefully all the scouts. And doing scout-specific programming, where we help them advance in rank, get merit badges and things like that.

MS: The Surf Clamming badge is not something you can earn just anywhere.

Well, tell me about the sailing. I've only seen pictures and she looks very wide, with a

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shallow draft. I know she's got a centerboard. What is it like sailing a boat like that in a tidal river? It must be challenging.

Josh: Horrible. So, she's stable, very wide, like you said — 23 feet of beam. So, I haven't gotten seasick on it, but it's about three and a half feet of freeboard, only 20-something degrees on your rudder. She draws six feet. If you want to turn around, it's really hard to do a 180, with that boat. Especially in the river, it takes a big area to do it. Doing tight maneuvers in a river is pretty difficult.

MS: Single screw, I assume?

Josh: Single screw, yep. We did just replace the propeller. The previous one was older than the boat. But it was too big.

MS: Do you take her outside the Bay much?

Josh: Like Rachel said, before COVID, we'd go up to Atlantic Highlands, near New York. We'd go up the Hudson River to Albany. We'd go into Atlantic City, Cape May, down to the Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race.

A lot of times, we'll take the Bay to Baltimore and then race to Norfolk, but then we'll run up the coast to get home. It's a wet ride and you have to be careful about taking any waves on the beam — she gets swamped really easily. It's challenging, but it's also fun. Driving around a 93-year-old wooden vessel is pretty exciting.

MS: I understand that you guys are headed up to Maine, after this season, for a major restoration by Clark and Eisele. Tell me a little bit about the work that's going to be done.

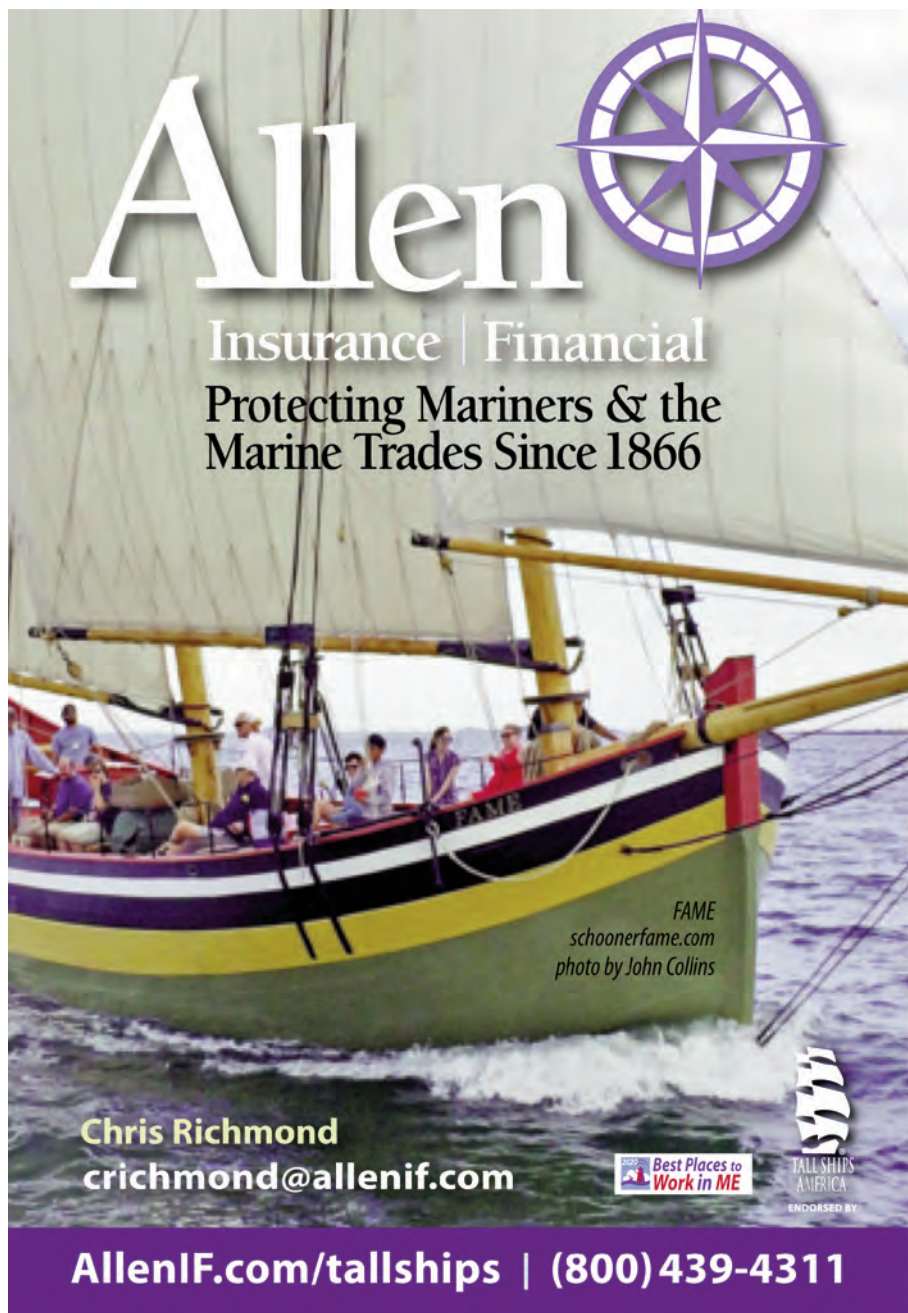
Josh: They're replacing the entire deck. Most of the topsides, really. The aft cabin, though I'm hoping that they'll be able to save a lot of the original interior wood-working, because that's all from the original boat.

They're going to be replacing the old winder box cabin top [where the motor for the dredge was mounted] and the main hold and focsle cabin tops, basically all of them. And then some of the topside planking, some of the hull planking above the waterline, is going to be replaced.

We're hoping to send some of our crew up there as well, to get some much needed bosunry work done, since the masts will be down.

Hopefully they'll be able to service the stays and the chafe gear up there, the leather work — all of that can get taken apart and gone over really well. We're not sure yet, but we might get some electrical work done — it depends on the budget — and maybe some spar work.

MS: Tell me about the choice of



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Clark and Eisele. I mean, Maine is a long way from you guys.

Josh: Clark and Eisele are just really fast, efficient, effective shipwrights. Last year we had an issue with our rudder, where it cracked at the rudder post, and Clark came down.

Rachel: Dropped everything and ran down here.

Josh: Garrett Eisele, yeah, on a minute's notice, he drove all the way here from Maine. Took the measurements, drove back to Maine, grabbed the lumber, drove back again, fixed it in less than a week and then drove home.

MS: And then he said, "By the way, you guys need a major rebuild on this boat."

Rachel: We were planning that already; we've been planning this for almost two years, now. We got funding from the New Jersey Historic Trust, once again. That grant was written almost two years ago, but it's a long process. And so, during COVID, we were doing conference calls, making decisions, so wood could get ordered. Not everything was ordered before the prices went through the roof.

But Clark and Eisele had started coming down — when was that, Josh? It's been a few years now. The past several Novembers, they were coming and spending a month or so and doing work and making a punch list of future projects.

Josh: They came down on to replace a few planks and we thought it would take months, but they did it in weeks. They're just extremely efficient.

Ali: Very high quality work.

Josh: And they worked long hours. There'll be out there at night, sometimes, just getting it done.

MS: You will have to pick your spots, to move the boat from here to Maine, I assume.

Josh: We're going to be stopping at Point Pleasant — at least that's the plan — for about two weeks and hopefully doing some programming. Sails, public sails, dockside programs. And then from there, we're going to go straight to Belfast. It'll be five or six days, if the weather's good.

MS: Knock on wood. We only have about a minute left before Zoom cuts us off. I'd like to hear more about your parrot, Ali.

Ali: His name's Tinga. I got him when I was 10, for my birthday. And he is like having a toddler for 20 years. As you can see, every time I get on the phone, he's noisy. He can't stand it. He just wants to be on my shoulder, bugging me.



Above, Ali Place works with young scientists at the Bayshore Center. Below, Ali's parrot Tinga



MS: Does he sail?

Ali: No. I don't think he can handle that.

MS: That would be a good look, you on the boat with the parrot on your shoulder.

Ali: I think he'd freak out and fly into the water.

Rachel: One cool thing about going to Maine, we'll get to see two of our sister ships, Delaware Bay oyster schooners, that are working the Windjammer trade. The *J. & E. Rigg* and the *Isaac Evans*.

MS: Now the *Boyd N. Sheppard*.

Rachel: The *Ada Lore* was one of ours too, that was lost a couple of years ago. She was restored here in Bivalve, not long after our boat. She was one of the new-style schooners. The *Boyd N. Sheppard* is an example of an old-style schooner. ☺