

The Conch Podcast- Roni HankeFINAL.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:05] Hey, Julie here to share a content warning. This episode features brief mentions of suicide and self-harm. Please refer to the show notes for this episode, episode eight at SeafoodandGenderEquality.org to know the beginning and the end of this topic. We appreciate the candidness of our guest and understand if you pick up the episode after this brief mention.

[00:00:25] Hello, my name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We're rocking and rolling along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're uplifting some of the incredible women working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, the challenges they face, and the triumphs they've achieved. Today. We are really excited to have an incredible guest joining us, Roni Hanke. Roni is a sports angler, galley cook and school teacher. Welcome and thank you, Roni, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's get to it.

Roni Hanke [00:01:01] And I'm so excited to be here and I can't wait to delve right in.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:06] Awesome. So I follow you on Instagram and you have, by the way, an amazing Instagram. You have an amazing way to tell stories and you're really, really photogenic and you have this great personal style. And that's what really drew me to you first. But also you're like into fishing. So we're going to definitely hear more about that. So your moniker on Instagram is TikiFishGal, and you describe the tiki part as a combination of fashion, lifestyle, celebration of world culture, and the allure of escape and adventure. So tell us a little bit more about Tiki culture and what that means to you and your life because you have a fantastic sense of style and I just want to learn more about it.

Roni Hanke [00:01:50] Thank you. So, like, as you know, art is so subjective and I believe fashion and subculture is too, including that of the fishing industry. So it's kind of the people that are the dominant crowd that make it culture. So Tiki comes from the 1950s original, like suburban, where they were coming out of the war times and everyone was trying to escape. So futurism was invented around those times in the sixties. And then this exotica, Bettie Page was a huge mover of it with her bikinis that she hand made. And there's a few other women that are notable from those times that were real engineers of the original scene of Tiki. Well, fast forward to 2022. It's become a huge aspect of Disney culture. So there's a lot of like even a sub-subculture of Tiki that's Disney specific, and that's within California. But even within California, you could throw a rock and hit ten tiki bars. It's an alcohol, nightlife culture where people dress in this escapism, futurism, beautiful Hawaiian prints. It also is an infusion of the Polynesian culture. But it's not authentic. It's tourism. It's escapism. It's the invention of fantasy as far as wanting to embody the beauty of Polynesian culture without necessarily the full context. So I'm a part of that music scene, the rockabilly culture, and Tiki is a subculture of that. And I've done that for so long. I was in pinup magazines, published, car show queen, that kind of thing. And so when I began fishing, I integrated that background and became a tiki fish gal because I'm all about branding and you know, Instagram is too. So it's kind of where invented. And when I fish, I'll wear bracelets and crazy makeup and hair scarves. And when you're on a boat, it's very kind of radical because of the salt in the wind and all these things. You know, I've coined it, but it's also a visual thing for me.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:40] That's awesome. That's a great explanation, I think. I'm sure you're one of a kind out there on the waves, right?

Roni Hanke [00:03:46] Totally. But we all have similar spirits, right?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:49] Yeah, exactly. And I think I can see that the tiki culture in the fish culture meld pretty well together because they're both kind of on the water, you know, kind of lulling sometimes, I guess. Yeah, can be crazy, but lulling you to sleep with these sweet sounds of waves and wind.

Roni Hanke [00:04:05] And we're all kind of fantasizing about that next fishing trip. But then when you're out there, it's kind of scary sometimes. And the, you know, exotic adventure is not always easy, right? Like it takes a part of your soul.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:17] That's a really, really good, great quote because you're absolutely right. And especially now, it's really hard to find adventure, right? I mean, right in the middle of these crazy times that we're living with the pandemic.

Roni Hanke [00:04:28] Totally and anyone's individual safety, right, like we're all at our own levels of how we want to engage with our new cultures. And adventure means so much to everyone. But how we engage with that in this new world is very different, I think, for each person.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:43] Yeah, you're absolutely right. That makes a lot of sense. So let's get to the fishing. So you tried deep sea fishing for the first time in 2020. Is that correct?

Roni Hanke [00:04:51] That's correct. On July 4th was actually the first day,.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:54] July 4th. So you're an angler, right? Is that the correct term, sports angler?

Roni Hanke [00:04:58] Yeah, that's the correct term. As someone that fishes. It can be freshwater or deep sea. Anyone that uses a rod and reel.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:05] Gotcha. Which one do you prefer? Freshwater or deep sea.

Roni Hanke [00:05:08] I am definitely a saltwater fisherman. I don't even necessarily do shore fishing, you know, again, subcultures. But I'm a deep sea fisherman. I go out on a boat up to 90 miles away from land. And there's no WIFI, no network, you can't reach, you know, not by phone call. It's all by the boat radars and systems in which you can contact Coast Guard, if there's an emergency. You're really out there. It's like camping on the water.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:32] It's like the ultimate escapism, right?

Roni Hanke [00:05:34] Totally. And you're out there with a group of people. So it's also kind of communal and you're with strangers. So it's not just individualistic.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:43] Right. So I know from reading about you that you didn't grow up fishing. In fact, you begged everyone you could to take you and they wouldn't because you were a girl. And so how did you take the first step to immersing yourself into sports fishing? And I mean, do you feel like you lost out on a bunch of really awesome times when no one would take you fishing? How does that make you feel?

Roni Hanke [00:06:05] You know, I grew up in the desert, so water wasn't near me so it didn't seem like super integrated into my family or friend culture. So it didn't feel like a void or an emptiness. It just felt like a constantly closed door. And I didn't realize it was my passion or my pursuit in life yet. So it's just something you forgot about. It's like a record that you heard once and they're like, Oh, that was fun. So you forgot to play it again. And then when you hear it, it's like, Oh my God, I can't stop playing it. I need to hear that music all the time. But I didn't have that desire yet. I just was, you know, trying to find the interest. And actually, the most notable one was, I was a high school dropout and I ended up in a continuation school. And I begged the principal, if I graduate high school, will you take me? Because he was the only person I knew that did sport fishing at the ocean. And he said he would, but then he never did. And now that I'm a teacher, I connect it more to, you know, trying to engage students to get them to reach the goal. It had nothing to do with fishing and everything to do with giving someone a reason to do something. But looking back, I think if I were to fish then, I probably wouldn't have done any of the professional things I did. I would have become a fisherman at 18 instead of 30.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:07] Yeah. I mean, it would have definitely changed the trajectory of your life potentially, right?

Roni Hanke [00:07:11] 100%.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:13] Well, I'm happy that you've found your passion now. So it's again,.

Roni Hanke [00:07:16] Thanks.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:17] It's on of those better late than never type of things. Right? You started to fish, as far as I understand also from your, very you know, you're a really great writer and you write frequently about your kind of feelings and I think I understood that you started to fish to escape the grief that you were kind of almost consumed by because of your dad's death. So what has fishing given to you?

CW: This passage from 7:39 – 9:42 contains mentions of self-harm and suicide.

Roni Hanke [00:07:39] So, yeah, fishing for me originally I found it because of the pandemic and just being so isolated and at that time you could only do outdoor activities. And I went on a whale watching trip because I was so consumed with the grief loss of my family. My dad did not die of covid. It was lung cancer, but I didn't know where to go with my life. I had lost my teaching position. I at the time I was a public performer. I couldn't do that anymore. And honestly, living at the beach, I felt like the only solace was the water. I just never went into it. I didn't like the sun. So when I went on this whale watching trip, it was really kind of a research project to figure out what it was all about and to see how I would feel when I was out there. I was at a point in my life where I really wanted to take my life and my suicide plan at the time was to drown using like cinder blocks or something because I'm a big person and I have a lot of buoyancy. But I didn't have a real connection with the ocean at all, so it just felt like an empty, easy thing to disappear within. So when I went on this whale watching trip, I actually there were whales that had surfaced that were so out of the blue. The captain was like, "we never see this whale." I couldn't even tell you what it was, maybe a beluga or something. And they were so taken aback and wow, you guys are so lucky to see this. And I actually felt fearful like, wow, I'm going to be eaten by an animal if I go out there and it scared me. And so then I saw a fishing boat and I looked online and it happened to be Davey's Locker. And I went out there for 4th of July because

it was a holiday I spent with my dad. And honestly, it was the first time in two and a half years I felt like everything just silence and I didn't know anybody and it was all scary and uncertain and I did it all wrong. And I have a picture of the first fish I caught and I'll send it over to you for the post. It's really funny. I was wearing a glove, it's just really silly. And the crew there took to me and they taught me everything I knew. And because the crew were so great and made a safe space for me as a single female, I came back and it opened the door for, honestly, they saved my life and they didn't even know it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:42] This is a lot, so I want to break this down a little bit. So you went out whale watching and had this revelation that there are these immense giant creatures in the ocean and kind of rethought your plan a little bit. Then you found the fishing. These are excursion boats, right? So can you describe these boats a little bit more so I understand?

Roni Hanke [00:10:05] It's a sport fishing boat. Most of them are privately owned by someone that purchased the boat, but they don't necessarily run or operate the boat. And so they employ industry, individuals, captains, crew, cook who come out and they take passengers who are at all skill levels, typically on the newer side of fishing. And they have different trips. They do half days, which is where I started. It's six hour trips to go catch smaller fish locally, only about maybe 25 miles from land. Then you go on a 12 hour trip, if you like, called a three quarter day and that's where you're going to catch a yellowtail, something around the 25 lb-ish range. And you are by Catalina Island or other islands where depending where you leave from and the coast of California. And then you can go on an overnight trip or a two day trip to catch bluefin tuna. And those fish range up to 250 to 600 lbs that we locally catch. Six hundred is on the really high range and that's like commercial out here. I think the largest one is about 350. But that's a human with a rod and reel, catching it on their own skill and then crew help them get it in. So it's at all skill levels and you kind of advance as you get more interested in it or you gain more level in your ability or you have more gear. And so I went in with zero knowledge and because of the pandemic I had a whole year and so I spent 364 days pretty much on those boats. Also with the unemployment money, it was great. And these people who were professionals for 20, 40 years were teaching me how to fish.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:11:35] So that's an incredible story just all around, because, first of all, you're dealing with the death of your father. You're dealing with a global pandemic. And these boats, they just kept fishing, right? It sounds like they didn't really even...

Roni Hanke [00:11:47] They did stop between about March of 2020 to July. So I got in around the first month, they opened up and it was very touch and go. You had to wear a mask. It was like very intense. But then it kind of loosened as we as a culture all loosened. And so they opened about July of 2020 and kept going.

CW: This passage from 12:05 – 13:08 contains mentions of self-harm and suicide.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:05] Right. And so, okay, again, you're dealing with your grief. You're dealing with the pandemic, you're dealing with your own thoughts about like just unhappy, right? I mean, it sounds like you're saying, I'm, I can't deal with this.

Roni Hanke [00:12:17] What's the point? What's our purpose? Why live? Everything I've done for the last part of my life was over. It felt like.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:23] Yeah, and then you found fishing. So I worked at a sports fishing lodge for 13 years in the Russian Arctic. It was catch and release fishing for Atlantic salmon. So I know my whole life. Yeah, it's crazy. I know the power of fishing based on well, on my own experience, but also on the experience of people that came there. And a lot of them, they didn't get so personal, but they would, I know, tell you that fishing did save their life. And I can speak of one particularly very famous person that said this was Eric Clapton. So he didn't come specifically to where I was, but he was at an adjacent lodge. And he definitely has said very publicly in interviews that fishing saved his life from, you know, drug addiction and whatever else he was doing throughout those years of rock and roll decadence.

Roni Hanke [00:13:08] So well. And it's interesting you bring that up because it's not just rock and rollers. I mean, there's a huge subsection of the field that has X drug use or X felony because for, you know, 60s, 70s, it was only felons that got a lot of those water boat jobs. It was like if you couldn't work on land, you were stuck on the boats. And like those Deadliest Catch, the crab jobs, the very deadly jobs are often still done by people with a record or a hard past because they don't have very many options left. It's sad and I think that also affects why women aren't as integrated into it because of where it comes from and who originally was attracted to it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:47] Well, that's a really great point because I've actually never thought of that and because I have actually never been on like a, well, I've been on commercial fishing boats, but on these kind of what did you call them, cat...

Roni Hanke [00:13:56] Sports fishing, yeah, cattle boats, party boats.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:59] Cattle boats, party boats. And by the way, Crystal, who's behind the scenes here, has also a lot of experience on these boats doing science. Kind of on the science side, but going out on cattle boats in the Gulf of Mexico. So that's something we can talk about later. You guys can find some time to talk about that. So you bring up a really great point about kind of the availability and of jobs for people like you mentioned that are felons potentially that are, you know, out of prison, potential drug addictions or ex, you know, kind of recovering drug addicts. So I think that's a really, really great point and something that I've never thought about because I actually I didn't know. Like I said, you're the first person kind of representing that community of sports fisheries on this show. So I'm really happy to hear that. And that's really, really interesting to learn.

Roni Hanke [00:14:44] And sincerely like as a teacher. I've been a teacher for eight years and it wasn't what I wanted to be. It's what I fell into as well. But you have to live a very strict life because anything you do could give you a record, and if you have a record, you can't teach kids. And so, you know, and I grew up very religious, so I've lived a pretty green life, as you might call it. I tell people on the boats, I'm a Christian girl and it's a joke because I look so alternative. I am Christian, but I just look so edgy and tough and I'm out there that they just laugh when I say it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:12] They can't reconcile with how you look with what you're saying, right?

Roni Hanke [00:15:18] 100% percent. As just a consumer who was fishing, I didn't really know that that was the background or history. But as I became more invested and became employed in the industry, I realized a lot of my coworkers either had past backgrounds or were currently battling demons that they themselves would be taken out of the industry for.

And it was radical to me because I come from being a teacher and a very religious background and as I kind of jokingly say, it's an industry of pirates. And I don't mean to say it negatively because I respect it so heavily and it's privately owned. It's people who saved and worked very hard to have a sport boat or be able to captain a sport boat. It takes years and it's an investment of your soul. But it's so mindboggling how many people in the industry have that kind of pirate background or current pirate lifestyle. And it eventually became a huge conflict without me even trying. I'm just trying to get along. And because I don't do these certain things, it became a conflict in certain boats I worked for.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:22] And so could you explain maybe a little bit what you mean when you say pirate? Like, is it just a devil may care attitude? Or is that actually physically like, you know, I don't know. What do you mean by pirate?

Roni Hanke [00:16:36] I know it's kind of a buzz word when we think of a pirate, they're like tough and they have treasure and they drink rum. And it's a little bit like that. There's a lot of alcoholism and there's a lot of like cocaine. Not necessarily, it's not condoned and it's not accepted because there's huge rules about being on the water federally and you have to pass tests and the Coast Guard's on you. There's some people that come and go, like transient workers that come for two weeks or 3 to 4 weeks, and they know the captain for like ten years. So they don't get tested and they don't get held to certain standards. They're just allowed on because they need work. Their main crew is so overworked, you know, they're 30 days on a boat doing the majority of the hard fishing, to be honest. People pass off the rods and it takes it out of your body, it takes you out of your mind. And so there's a lot of these pirate people that kind of walk on and they get away with things that for me, as a single female with 90% of men on this boat, maybe one other girl that is a passenger, it's concerning. And I never would mention it, but it's in my head. It's in the back of my mind. It's just creating a layer of safety concerns for me. And then they'll put pressure on me like, Oh, do you do this? Do you want to do this when you're off the boat? No, I don't. It's not my lifestyle. I'm a Christian girl. And then it's like it puts me on the outside because I don't engage in these certain things like drugs or risky behaviors. You know, because of my other job, I have to be very careful with how I handle myself in and out of my job.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:18:00] Right. That's a really good point. And I think we're going to delve into that a little bit deeper, further in our conversation. But, you know, you have ambitions, as far as I understand, to be a professional angler and one day a captain and bring more women into fishing and create fun kind of charter experiences for women and children. And you mentioned that, you know, there's not really a lot of women on these boats, right? Usually that come out.

Roni Hanke [00:18:23] Correct.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:18:23] As anglers trying to gain an experience. So what will it take for you to reach this goal? Is there a need for charter experiences tailored specifically for women? And if so, why?

Roni Hanke [00:18:34] Yeah, as a starting point, I think any exclusion doesn't necessarily raise another excluded group of people. I think it's important to allow all to be included. But I also think there's an important factor about safe spaces provided for newcomers or provided for people who are already at a gender disadvantage just because of culture. Things that a systemic baseline that one person isn't responsible for that one boat or one industry isn't responsible for, but a rather whole world point of view. And I felt it. And so I

can speak a little bit to it, but I'm not against having charter experiences with men and women. And I think it'd be awesome to have a place where we can all feel on an equal level to do that. But I think starting, I would love to nurture a group of women and women with children and create two separate experiences, one where women can be fun, silly hot women because a boat is a little bit like the locker room and it doesn't matter what boat you're on, there's jokes and there's attitude and there's just competition and there's this hot, steamy, bloody thing because it's fishing. It's hard to explain unless you're in it. But I think women don't have a lot of spaces where they can be like that with each other, where it's not in a place of work where they have to be petty or competitive because it has money attached to it and ego. We are more places like a hot, sweaty locker room like men have where we can be open and experience what it is to just be human with one another and natural where we're not competing with each other's ego or finances. I think that we'll have more confidence outside of the boats because of what we've gained on inside of them with one another alongside one another. It takes away some of the competition and adds more camaraderie. With still the infusion of competition and sex, because you're out there in the heat, you're sweating, you know, you're working your body like the Neanderthals did. It's human, you know? Yeah. And there's not too many experiences where women get to do that with one another, where we're not being objectified by even each other or men looking at us. I know it sounds silly, but I feel like that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:43] Yeah, I think you're right. So what does it take to become a captain?

Roni Hanke [00:20:46] Oh, my gosh, years.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:46] It's a lot, right?

Roni Hanke [00:20:48] I'm going to be honest with you. From what I learned, most men start at the age of 11, and that's why women aren't doing it because they just aren't interested at 11. It's gross, worms and blood. And you're killing a fish. It's sad. That's why I think the children part is important. You got to normalize it while they're young. So by the time that they're 12 and 16, they go out for those internships, called being a pinhead. I'm calling an internship because that's business. But the process to become a captain, essentially, most men will start being a pinhead at 11. It's free fishing. And the captain has you come on the boat, you're doing all the dirty work. You're the grunt, you're cleaning, you're cutting squid, the stuff nobody wants to do. And honestly, you're made fun of. You're the B-Boy. I'm not gonna cuss, but you know what I'm saying? Like you're treated like dirt and you work your way up. And that's part of, like, toughening you up and making you a man so that you can withstand the physical and mental endurance you need to become a real crew member because it's endurance mentally and it's so much. And so you start as a pinhead and you go onto a greenhorn, which is still kind of unpaid. It's like that 16 to 18, maybe 16 to 21 as you're gaining your skills and then about 18, you can start to be drug tested, so you can become an official crew member. That's why you can't be a crew member until you're 18 because you have to be able to pass a drug test if the boat is doing it correctly. And so you pass your drug test, you can become a paid crew member, you get a day rate, plus you get tips from your passengers and you do hours and days and you're on a log with the Coast Guard. So in order to become a captain, you have to have 760 plus days on the water and you have to do it within five years. And it's signed off by other captains that you were navigating under and working under. I don't have to drive a boat at all for those 760 days. I could be a cook for 760 days as long as I spent that time on the water. Well, that's the first part. So you do 760 days, you log 760 days in any position, paid position essentially, on a boat, and it doesn't have to be fishing. I could get those days

doing sea taxi, driving people around. It's whatever. As long as you're doing it 760 days and it's logged and signed off by people who are certified. Then you take those days and you get enrolled in a test and the test is around \$2,000 and it's like an all day test and it covers four separate areas. It's an outdated test. A lot of it's about plotting on a map like you used to before GPS. And there's going to be some changes that come down probably in the next five years. But that's what it is right now. You pass that test for \$2,000, you do your 760 days, then you're certified. But you still kind of have to do your behind the wheel after you're certified with those two elements. And that way you would apprentice under a main captain. Usually you work as a crew member and then you'll drive like one trip a week and you do that for about a year, maybe two years, depending on the need and who you're working with. And then once you're confident in how to anchor and if you're fishing, you can captain a whaleboat, where you don't have to anchor. Right. And they tell me as a woman, that's what I should be doing. That I don't ever obtain the skills and the level of life I have left to be able to captain a fishing boat. So to me, it sounds like a challenge.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:55] Yeah, that does sound like a lot. I mean, you know, on the one hand, it's good that they have just these strict regulations and things that you have to do. But on the other hand, it sounds like the pirate thing is fudging the rules there, right? That can happen a lot as well.

Roni Hanke [00:24:07] And it's not usually the captain. It's different for a crewmember because they can just walk on and then walk off. Even if they get fired and ruin their reputation. Any person can find any job anywhere unless you have certain background elements that prevent that. So some people are barred to this industry and they have to be careful despite what their pirate lifestyle might be because they don't have other options.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:24:29] Yeah, that sounds about right. So you recently left the sports fishing business. What happened?

Roni Hanke [00:24:35] Sadly, I was working only within it for six months, but that in that six months, I covered about seven different boats. And most of it was just relief towards the end of the season because people are burnt out and need to cook for five days, for three days. But I was picked up for about two months by the largest boat I worked on - 50 people - and that was one of those boats where I had to work with a lot of pirates. And the second captain, because you have a first and a second on those long range trips that someone has to stay up over the night so that you don't crash things like that. And the second captain and I got into it over things to do with the kitchen and just nonsense and him being having a pirate lifestyle and asking me to engage and I wouldn't. So it set me on the outside and I became a target. And then the crew, because I'm new, who am I? I'm the girl on the boat. The crew kind of all sided together. And I was the odd man out and my temper got the best of me on that situation. So I ended the season with them in November. And then I was unemployed and out of the blue I was offered a position at a local landing which was like a dream come true and it was a really great thing. I worked for them for about a month. They had told me I was going to be full time. I had signed the paperwork, everything was a go, you know, my shirt was getting made with my name on it and the logo I designed like it was a very like "I'm all in" situation and then we have different rods. There's a whole community of like custom rods out here. It's a Hollywood thing. Like you pay all this money for a really fancy fishing rod. And I had one with my name on it, the only one. And it catches a specific kind of fish called a fly line rod. It's the only one I have, and it's about a 450, \$500 fishing rod. And it was being used without my permission, which is fine. I mean, come on, you put something on the boat, it's going to get used. No big deal. But a piece of it broke that prevents me from being able to use it this season without

having it fixed. And I brought it up to the captain who was the one using it and handing it off to customers without my consent. And just by bringing it up, I said, Hey, dude, like this is broken. Like, this is my only rod and it's right before the season starts. So me as a fisherman and I'm like, Oh man, it's like, you're going to go for a hunt and your gun doesn't. It's broken. You can't catch any, you know, it's like heartbreaking. You don't have the money to really fix it. So I was heartbroken, but I was cool about it. And he just ripped into me, you know? It was like something I not even experienced by just trying to address my concern about my own property. And I think he felt like upon himself that he needed to teach me what the industry was about and that the industry is about, you know, don't bring your stuff if you don't want it to be used and abused. And I'm not new like, I get it. I have plenty of crew members that I have observed and learned from and I look at them, use each other's equipment and the respect they have for one another and stuff. So I get how it works. I wasn't new here. And then, you know, even though I signed that W-2 the next day when I texted to the second, "Hey, I want to really I just want to talk about conflict resolution" because as a woman, I'm really concerned, like, hey it's my rod. I don't care. What if someone on the boat, a stranger, were to get me alone in a room and I'm just gonna stop there. Your minds can go where they need to go. You're a woman alone with anyone of any lifestyle, and strangers are coming and going every day. And this is something I welcomed myself into. I know exactly what I'm walking into, but I need to know that the people that are employing me have my back. That's what it was about ultimately, that they have my back in the event something really bad happened. And if they're going to belittle me and demean me over my rod when I know it's pointless as they're making it seem, how would they feel when it's my body or my mind or whatever it might be? You know, the season's long and you are physically taxed and I didn't go into it that deep. I just said, I want to talk conflict resolution. The next day I got a call and I was fired and that was it. And when I consulted a mentor, captain, I have has really helped me so much through my entire career in the field and my desire to become a captain. He told me before I even mentioned it. If you say something, you're going to be fired. Because he knew how the industry was. He knew that you just deal with it. You shut your mouth like a man and you're not going to punch. You be quiet and, you know, make changes. You don't address conflict. You let it go. Because I couldn't let it go, I got fired. And he called it and he did have sympathy and he felt so bad and he said, you know, it shouldn't have gone that way. But he warned me because even he who's done it for 40 years knew exactly what was going to happen.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:46] It's really unfortunate situation and it brings up a lot of questions around like, you're right, like, I mean, yeah, conflict resolution, that's super important, but what is the protocol and what are they doing to make sure that women in their crews are safe? Like, what is that? What are they doing?

Roni Hanke [00:29:00] It kind of just boiled down to, oh, we just realized we don't want to work with a woman. And they didn't say that. But that was kind of the air.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:09] That's so unfortunate. I mean, I hear stories about that a lot. I mean, very similar stories on commercial fishing boats. Women actually literally having to jump ship at the next port just to get off a boat. I think that's something that, you know, SAGE specifically doesn't deal with that, but it's something that we could certainly lend our voice to and think about what is actually the industry doing and not just, you know, this kind of niche sports angler, you know, tour industry, but also the commercial fishing industry writ large. Like, you know, we want to diversify these spaces and what are we doing to make sure that people are safe because we don't want to diversify it if it's not going to be a safe environment, right?

Roni Hanke [00:29:48] I don't think every boat isn't advocating for women or creating a safe space. There are women that come and go to the industry. But I couldn't tell you or point to a boat in my local landings that has a woman as a cook or a deckhand that has been there for more than a year.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:02] So they kind of come and go. They try it, they come and go, and then they're like, I'm out.

Roni Hanke [00:30:06] Yes. And I'm going to be even a little more intensive, you until you if it's not just like the drama or the social aspect of having to deal with a woman on a boat. The second thing is almost every single boat I've ever worked on except for the last one I was on because they were actually respectful in this way. Someone who works on the boat will come up and have a sexual advance towards me and ask me if I'll go down to the bunkroom with them. And that's a crew member. And I'm like, You're kidding. That's not me, girl. You better keep it pushing. I'm not that girl. And not just crew members, but when I've met men at fishing events. Oh, you cook on a boat? Oh, my gosh, that's so weird. And then names start to be dropped of other girls they know locally who worked on boats that have done this, that have done that, that they've heard this, they've heard that. And it makes me so upset because I work really hard to hold my head high and have a good reputation. But even if women aren't doing that, they're being objectified like that if they want to be in the sport fishing industry, it's like, Oh, you work on a boat, that must mean this. And it's like, no, what are you kidding me? Doesn't mean that. It means I love fish. You guys.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:31:13] There's like some automatic assumptions about you just because of past experiences that they've had or things that they've heard about other women on these boats, right?

Roni Hanke [00:31:22] You know, and just the idea that one woman would work in a boat of 50 men that must mean she's looking for something.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:31:28] Yeah, c'mon. It's terrible. So. Well, let me ask you this. You know, and I mentioned SAGE really quickly stands for Seafood and Gender Equality, of course, that's my nonprofit. We're really about building gender equality and empowering women in the seafood industry. And so I think based on your experiences, you know, this is it's not the seafood industry per se, but it's definitely fishing, you know, and that's very, you know, what we're looking at here on the kind of sports fishing side and the recreational fishing side, which is also very important kind of part of the sector. So based on your experience, what recommendations would you have to this industry around rectifying these situation that you've kind of found yourself in? And I mean, what can they do right now to change this systemically?

Roni Hanke [00:32:14] I think the easiest and it's not easy, but I think the quickest and easiest step is by allowing women to have starter positions on the deck instead of in the kitchen because it already holds such a large stigma. And even though it could be a positive thing, men love it. I got a lot of positive energy from men when I cooked for them, but it shouldn't be all I'm worth to get an entry level position on a boat. I shouldn't have to spend 3 to 5 years in that role in order to get my feet on the deck. And I know one girl who started on the deck, but she said that she had to come in with fish cutting experience, which is really important to have no matter what if you work on a boat and as a woman, I'd say go get fish cutting experience so you don't have to start in the kitchen. But men should

allow more opportunities and owners should allow more opportunities for women to start with zero to little knowledge as long as they name a fish and they know the legal size requirements, they should be able to start on the deck, unhooking and tying knots and scrubbing just like a pinhead. If an 11 year old can do it, a woman can do it. And it's not fair that I should have to even say that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:18] It's totally not fair. And you're right. Absolutely right. What other kind of recommendations do you have?

Roni Hanke [00:33:24] I think also just like allowing a space for communication. Like, I think I've also don't have a bad attitude. Women often have bad attitudes, and I think it's because they have to internalize the things they're experiencing or they'll get fired. And so they just internalize it and they have a bad attitude in that face. So I think just allowing that safe space to just talk like and if they don't open up, engage them in a conversation and not be critical or condemn them for what you hear. Because the more open communication we can all have about our challenges, I think we'll grow as a business and we'll all have more access.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:00] Yeah, that's really well said. I mean, so going back to July 4th, 2020, when you go on your first trip, right, and you say that that crew was really, you know, open and they shared with you and they talked. I mean, you were a passenger, but they taught you a lot of stuff on this trip. They essentially saved your life, right? And so how are you getting your knowledge around what you're doing? You know, you're learning on the job, essentially, right? So how forthcoming have people been sharing aside from that first boat experience where you were a passenger, but as a team member now, are people pretty open and sharing their knowledge and experience with you?

Roni Hanke [00:34:39] I think as a passenger, I've never experienced anything as intense as an employee because you're just seen as the cute girl that fishes and you're, oh, you don't have a boyfriend or a brother with you. Oh, my gosh. Let us hang out with you and teach you everything we know. Like fishing is a very communal thing. Like, oh, as long as you're not seen as competition, they'll share their wealth of information because it's like a passing down an apprenticeship. I have old men that have taught me quite a lot at our regular fishermen and we would all fish on the same days at that boat that you mentioned that saved my life. And so that's a huge way of learning is just from other passengers, from great crew members. On other trips I've experienced one time or five times or 20 times the same crew. But I will say as an employee, there was one person, even though he was the one who ended up firing me at that first job in November because of my temper, he really took time to come down into the kitchen because I didn't know how to cook. They just put me in there because I'm a woman and I wanted to be on a boat. I had never heard before.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:41] I thought you knew how to cook.

Roni Hanke [00:35:43] No! I was never a chef. I just feel like you want to cook. Like, here's a a job. You need it? And I was like, Yep, I'll do anything to be on a boat. And that's part of the reason why I'm a chef now is so that I'm going to gain more skills for when I go back and that no man is going to challenge me like I was a chef. So right now it's like I never even cook for people. So I will say, Yeah, that's to show you my huge advantageous spirit to just jump in and do what I want.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:06] Seriously.

Roni Hanke [00:36:07] But I will say there was one type and that really came down because he started it. He's someone that I look up to, even if I wasn't treated equitably the whole time because he took time to come down and have the conversation with me. You really taught me about shopping and inventory and trying to be faster with my prep, and those skills benefited me in every other boat job I've had. And it encourages me, even, I think, to be a chef now. So I'm like, Hey, if that guy could do it and teach me. And he did it for seven years. Like, I can do it and I can learn from other places because he believed in me even just to get his job done, you know? And it's just little things like that, having someone be kind and not be competitive in their language towards whatever and just teach you like, here, here's how you do it. Teach me the first time and I'll try to do it right the next, you know?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:53] Yeah. I mean, I think the idea about mentorship and teaching, you know, passing things down to people is so important. And I'm happy that you've had at least some of that, right?

Roni Hanke [00:37:02] Totally. Yeah. And if not in my employeeship. Definitely as a fisherman among men.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:37:07] Yeah. Yeah. You mentioned kind of at the beginning that you're a bigger girl. And I also saw on Instagram you posted I thought this was a really interesting quote and I want to learn more about it. You said, quote, "I've always found it ironic that we boast about big fish yet loathe big humans." So what do you mean by that?

Roni Hanke [00:37:26] Yeah. Thank you for pointing that out. That was something I may have just said in quick passing, but even when you mentioned it, it really does strike me still, because in my world, you know, people spend their whole lives chasing a 350 lb Bluefin and being able to reel it in. And half of them don't even reel it in themselves. They pass off the final reel to a crewmember. So to me, it's funny that you'll spend five years, two years, ten years obsessing and fantasizing about this fat fish and everything it means to your life. Like people get jackets embroidered and they become a club member because they caught this fish. I'm not even joking. It's a huge deal out here, very competitive. And people get in magazines and they get in like it's not Guinness World Records, but it's whenever there's like a fish world record and people are supported by the book because they've got so many fish and all this stuff. So it's a huge ego thing. But as a woman, I feel like there's a particular way you're supposed to look to be admired and fantasized about and worked for. And I'll be lucky if I even get a ring with my name embroidered on it, let alone a jacket. And so it's kind of like, wow, to see such a huge group of people focus their lives on this thing, but then spend so much energy as a culture putting down women that don't fit a framework, whether it's socially or physically, it's just mind boggling. I'm this big woman who doesn't fit into bikinis and fishes, which a lot of people on Instagram. That's if you're a woman who fishes. If you look up that tag, women and fish, 95% is bikinis and a fish. And they're not even that impressive a fish most of the time. And I would rather see someone like me, you know, flat tires under my jeans covered in wood, big smile on my face with a fish. And I'm not trying to put down any woman because we're all like, we need to celebrate one another in our differences. But I just wish that I didn't feel like I was the Frankenstein, because that's how it feels like you look at a fish like it's a princess, but why am I Frankenstein being on this boat? And I think that's kind of what it boils down to. It's not just my weight, but also maybe just my gender, you know?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:40] Yeah, I'm sure it's a combination of all that, but I thought that was a really thought provoking comment. In fact, I think, again, I'm going to mention

Instagram. I saw one of your posts where you were fishing. I think it was on a lake and you were on like one of those floaties, a floaty in the middle of a lake floating. And people are like in it, go get it, girl. What was that all about?

Roni Hanke [00:40:01] Yeah, I don't ever freshwater fish. And I've been poor recently because sportsfishing is like \$200 or \$60 to even get out there. And so I have a friend with a freshwater boat and he invited me out and I was like, I'm going to fish. He's never fished. He's been there since '85. He's a saltwater fisherman. He won't fish fresh. So I bought everything I needed to buy and they gave me this floatie and I was like, I'm going to go out there and I'm going to catch one. And all these boats were zipping by: people who go there all the time like I was being watched. And me I'm just having fun, like, I'm going to do this. I was so confident and I was like treading water on this little floatie. And I caught one and the whole place went wild. And then I've heard people say, like, I've never caught a fish out here. Why? And that's a woman who fishes. I've never seen a woman fish alone. What? Like I was blowing their mind doing this simple little 99 cent floater thing.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:50] So I love that story and I love that photo or that series of photos so much. And I really suggest people check it out because it really made me laugh and I was like, Yes, you're doing it. Get out there and get that. And I think that's what I think is so cool about you is your adventurous spirit. Yeah, there's a lot of barriers. I mean, there are barriers chucked up at us left and right, right? But I really, you know, I think, wow, like that boat, that first trip really made a difference in your life.

Roni Hanke [00:41:16] It did. And those people, you know, they allowed me to keep coming back and keep asking silly questions and they mentored me to become the person I eventually will be. You know, I'm not there yet, but I'm way more of the person I was when I first met them. I feel.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:31] It's amazing. So SAGE is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry, and this podcast is one of the main ways we do that. So I give everyone this opportunity to uplift someone. So who would you like to uplift and why?

Roni Hanke [00:41:46] So I'm going to uplift my girl named Megan Long on Instagram. Her fishing profile is LargeMouth_Sass and she's from Louisiana. She is a brackish saltwater freshwater fisherman. She's doing a way different game than what I do. But her vibe is so right. She's all about empowering women and being body positive. And she's a tournament fisherman for real. Won trophies. She's the upcoming girl. And I met her on Instagram and I said, Girl, I'm going to go to Louisiana. I'm going to fish with you. And I was a complete stranger. And she allowed me to come to her house and she fished with me last year and took me out. And it was one of the best experiences of my life. And now we're like best friends.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:31] That's awesome. That's amazing. Well, thank you for that shout out and we'll be sure to check her out at LargeMouth_Sass. And then you are again TikiFishGal, @TikiFishGal, right?

Roni Hanke [00:42:43] Yes, totally.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:45] That's how we can find you on Instagram. So I would like to ask this final question because our time is up, but let's put this to rest. Are you a fisherman or a fisher?

Roni Hanke [00:42:56] I'm a fisherman. I feel I read a book by Linda Greenlaw, who's an amazing captain. Check it out. On the East Coast, one of the only long line billfish fishermen, captain. And she said that people would always ask, are you a fisherwoman? And she's like, Why do I have to be a woman? Why can't I just be a fisherman? So I'm a fisherman, too, because Linda Greenlaw said so.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:16] Okay, that's awesome. Thank you for putting the final question to rest. Well, listen, Roni, I want to thank you so much for coming on this show and being so open and honest about your journey. And I mean, it's incredible to meet you and you're a real inspiration. And I just am so happy to have this opportunity to talk with you and share your story. And we'll be cheering you on from afar. And I'm sure this isn't the last time we'll talk to you.

Roni Hanke [00:43:42] Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity, and I appreciate sharing the industry with such powerful women like you and all the ones that are gonna listen in. Thank you so much.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:51] Thank you. Thank you for tuning into the Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just two seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you.

Speaker 3 [00:44:06] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for The Conch podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.