

Inside Out

For an island insider, looking through the camera lens can change everything

RACHEL DAMON

I never thought that I would be living in Maine after graduating from college, let alone making a documentary about island communities. For most of my life all I wanted to do was get off Chebeague Island, move out of Maine and live in a big city. I knew that choosing a college would be the chance to make a change. Then I started to visit the big city schools and realized that I didn't really want to be as anonymous as I had once thought. I grew up in a community where everyone knew me, and while I usually felt stifled living there, at times it was nice. Going

away to school gave me new insights into my island community.

When my friends came to the island for a visit I learned how to look at it from an outsider's perspective. As we waited on the wharf for the boat, they were shocked that everyone knew me by name and wanted to know how school was going. I had always taken the elaborate process of commuting for granted, but suddenly my friends helped me see what it looked like from the outside.

One course at Colby College literally changed my life. The goal of American Dreams, taught by Prof. Phyllis Mannocchi, was to make short documentaries about Maine topics. I never thought members of the class would want to make a film about lobstering, but they did, and I was proud of my community when *The Thrill of the Haul* was shown at the Maine International Film Festival during the summer of 2005. The project had forced me to look at my own community from the outside, and it helped me to realize how precious it was to be a community member—an insider.

Using my connections, we made a few phone calls and within 15 minutes we had commitments from three different generations of lobstermen, as well as an original score and a title song. I realized the meaning of networking and the importance of community, and my classmates were amazed!

This experience is why I am still in Maine. A family friend heard about my film experience and hired me to complete a project that his late father had left unfinished, a documentary about Maine island boatyards. A boatyard fulfills many needs that range from being the local gas station and unofficial hardware store to serving as the entry point and lifeline in many communities.

Making a film in my own community has been challenging. At times it is hard to distance myself and ask hard questions of people I have known my whole life. The sale of the boatyard on Chebeague was, from the community's perspective, about more than the sale of a business. There was anxiety: Would a developer turn the land into high-priced condos, and if so, where would we buy our gas and who would put our boats in the water? Having grown up in the community I understood the undercurrents, and knew it was important to document how people really felt. I was nervous when I conducted my first interviews, but my neighbors were much more candid through the whole process than I ever expected. I think it boils down to trust.

Moreover, I wasn't a film crew from Manhattan with no connection to the issues or the islanders. I didn't swoop in, film and leave, never to see the interviewees again. In some ways this has made my job even more difficult, because while people do open up in ways they



Rachel Damon is making a documentary about Maine island boatyards.

never would to an outsider, they sometimes say things they regret later. I must present an honest and truthful look at the places where I film, but ultimately the people are more important than the story. I still want to be able to come home for holidays after this film is finished and airs. I want the islanders to be proud to have been a part of the project, not upset with the way they are portrayed.

Yes, to the Chebeague community I am an insider. I know the players and understand how the islanders fit together, but I was never an insider at the boatyard.

Before making this film my experiences there were very superficial. I knew Alden and Madeline Brewer, who started the boatyard, because they were my neighbors. Madeline taught me how to needlepoint. I remember Alden as a man with a gruff exterior who was always incredibly kind to me. Both passed away when I was still fairly young. Other than that, my experiences with the boatyard included capsizing boats in the anchorage and folding sails on the lawn. I had no idea that Hartley Brewer, a quiet man and the current owner of the yard, could speak—let alone be the incredibly funny jokester I've come to know over the course of this project. Most Chebeaguers wouldn't believe that on a slow day he turned the tables on me and stood behind the camera to conduct his own interviews. After watching me film for a few months, he wanted to see what it was like from the other side of the lens.

Hanging out at the yard, I got to know—really know—some incredible people I had only seen in passing. I learned more than how to cover a sailboat; I watched the highly choreographed, dance-like act of hauling a lobster boat. I came to realize that there is much more to people than I ever imagined. How many preconceived notions I erased by taking the time to dig just a little deeper! Practical knowledge is grossly undervalued in much of American society, where a piece of paper written in Latin is seemingly valued above all else. Too few of us know how to navigate in the fog, how to set a mooring, how to haul a lobster boat—all vital skills important to the survival of year-round island communities.

I bring a unique perspective to this film because I understand firsthand the other side of the story. I know that behind the postcard views of "vacationland," there are real communities. I understand that islanders have always been quick to help each other in crisis regardless of how they feel personally, because in isolated, weather- and tide-dependent environments, one never knows when they will be the next person needing a hand. I understand how hard it is to live on an island. I have no idea where I will be or what I will be doing when this project is completed in the fall, but I do know that wherever I go and whatever I do, I will take with me a better understanding of the community that made me who I am.

Rachel Damon graduated from Colby College. She is the daughter of Douglas and Donna Miller Damon and, like her mother, has Chebeague Island deep in her genes.