

Island Institute president Kim Hamilton: 'We're built for the challenges the coast is facing in this particular moment'

BY LAURIE SCHREIBER

On April 1, Kimberly Hamilton became the new president of the Island Institute, a 40-year-old nonprofit organization in Rockland that works to sustain Maine's island and coastal communities and operates on an annual budget of \$8 million.

Until July 2022, Hamilton served for five years as the president of FocusMaine, an economic development organization that works to create quality jobs and build a thriving workforce with a focus on the agriculture, aquaculture and biopharmaceutical sectors. She has also served as the chief impact officer at Feeding America and director of strategy planning and management at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

In September 2022, Hamilton became the Island Institute's interim chief programs officer, overseeing climate, economic resilience and leadership programs. The Rockland nonprofit announced her promotion to president earlier this month.

Originally from North Yarmouth, Hamilton lives on Chebeague Island.

We asked Hamilton what brought her to the institute and how she envisions its future. Here's an edited transcript.

Mainebiz: What are some of your accomplishments with FocusMaine?

Kim Hamilton: I'm so proud of what we accomplished in a relatively short period of time. Working with a terrific board, we took that organization from a concept to an organization that's delivering great programs for Maine in our focus areas. This work was driven by strong partnerships with groups across the state. Programs that we launched related to aquaculture and Maine's food economy, in particular, are delivering jobs and opportunities for the people of Maine.

MB: How did you come to be with the Island Institute?

KH: When I left FocusMaine last July, I set up a consultant business and was contacted by the Island Institute with the opportunity to help

The Rockland-based Island Institute works to sustain Maine's island and coastal communities. It has an annual budget of \$8 million.

them develop and continue their important programmatic efforts as their interim chief programs officer. During that process, I fell in love with the mission and developed a deep connection to the staff and the communities we serve.

PHOTO / COURTESY OF NICOLE WOLF

On April 1, **Kimberly Hamilton** became the new president of the **Island Institute**, a 40-year-old nonprofit organization in Rockland that works to sustain Maine's island and coastal communities.



MB: What attracted you?

KH: I knew of the Island Institute and many of their programs. It's a very well-respected organization in Maine. But I didn't appreciate the full constellation of its work. I learned that there's an extraordinary, 40-year history that has touched people's lives. For example, we're in the vanguard in terms of clean energy and the work we're doing to electrify the working waterfront. Our island fellows program has decades of experience placing young people in island communities to help with important community projects. And even before aquaculture had taken off in Maine, the Island Institute had already launched a program for budding aquaculturalists.

The other important piece of the story is that I connected with the Island Institute on a very personal level. I live on Chebeague Island so I understand island life. I also know people who have benefited from our scholarship programs or from our grants for that support small businesses. Added to that, my father was a dockworker. Thanks to the working waterfront, I was able to go to college. This has given me a deep appreciation for people who make a living on the working waterfront.

MB: How does your work with FocusMaine translate to the Island Institute's mission?

KH: I had a really good understanding of the marine economy through my work with FocusMaine and from serving on the governor's 10-year economic development strategy team. These provided a good foundation for moving into this particular role.

In terms of FocusMaine in general, I learned so much from the board and from the founders about the importance of sustained focus in order to get to impact quickly. I see FocusMaine and the Island Institute as pieces of the same puzzle. Both organizations are focused on creating more opportunities for the people of Maine. The two organizations come at this through opposite ends of the telescope. FocusMaine focuses on specific sectors as pathways to economic growth. The Island Institute looks at how communities can take advantage of those same economic development pathways and also cultivate the next generation of leaders who can take that wheel.

MB: Broadly speaking, what are the challenges for Maine's island and coastal communities?

KH: We know that Maine's coast is a dynamic place. At this particular moment, I would say, the elements of change feel particularly daunting, from the Gulf of Maine's warming water to the future of the lobster industry to the cost of housing and health care for our rural communities. As I look at my role is over the near term with the Island Institute, my No. 1 priority right now is to listen. Because the challenges are so multi-faceted, I want to understand from the communities themselves what their vision is for the Maine coast.

MB: How will you carry out your listening tour?

KH: Over the next six months, my intention it is to visit all of the year-round island communities and those places where we are making significant investments. Even though I grew up on the Maine coast, there are many places I haven't been. I don't want to make assumptions. I want to make sure I hear from those communities and leaders directly — and especially from young people who will carry our work forward.

MB: What are the institute's top priorities?

KH: Our climate, economic resilience and leadership programs. Within our climate program, we're helping communities with clean energy transitions and helping people understand the science around the warming Gulf of Maine. Our economic resilience efforts are focused on helping lobstering communities survive and include protecting the working waterfront and supporting new aquaculturalists. The Island Fellows program is the cornerstone of our leadership effort. The Island Fellows are often the most visible presence of our work in communities. Together, these programs play an important role keeping coastal communities vital and sustainable.

MB: What are your thoughts on the institute's future direction?

KH: A 40-year history is significant. It tells me that we have the community relationships that we need and deep experience working along the coast. I like to say that we're built for the challenges the coast is facing in this particular moment and that we can adapt as communities and the coast evolve. I couldn't be more excited to be in this role, in this organization, at this important time for Maine's coast. 