

# The Significance of Women in the Development of a Clam Farming Industry: the Cedar Key Story



Leslie Sturmer  
*University of Florida/IFAS Shellfish Aquaculture Extension*





- Oyster fishery impacted by hurricane and drought, 1985-88
- Introduced oyster aquaculture as an alternative to fishing natural stocks, 1989-91
- First application of JTPA-federal funding for job training in aquaculture

*Trying a new approach in Apalachicola...*





- Over 180 harvesters participated
- One-acre parcels identified for leases
- Local government opposed leases
- Technology transfer problems
- Other sociopolitical conflicts

## Aquaculture: new hope or hopeless?

Times Staff Report  
By Sandy Walker

A heated debate over the merits of the oyster aquaculture program broke out among county commissioners, seafood workers and environmentalists at Tuesday's commission meeting. The dispute followed an update on the project by George Chapel, chairman of the Governor's Aquaculture Working Group.

The project is in the midst of a survey of the 201 one-acre lease sites in four locations that is expected to be completed in March. The oystermen and state agencies are also honing the wording of the lease applications. And, according to Chapel, sales promotion cam-

paigns for the cultured oyster, to be called the "Florida Gem Oyster," are currently being developed.

Opposition to the leases came from local shrimpers and oystermen and also from the commission.

Kevin Martina, Apalachicola shrimper, stated that the Green Point and Nine Mile oyster lease sites were on two of his favorite shrimp beds. Martina implied that some shrimpers would not honor the leasehold markers, but would continue to drag for shrimp in areas they knew to be productive regardless of the risk of destruction to lease-site beds and equipment.

Commissioner Dink Braxton produced a resolution opposing leases in the bay that was previously passed by the

county commission. He questioned the precedent that the proposed aquaculture leases would set for the resolution of historical claims on bay acreage.

A suit has been filed by both Franklin County and the State of Florida against the Carrabelle Trading Company's claim, which emerged in 1989 after a long dormancy. Allowing new leases, even for limited time periods rather than in perpetuity, may influence the outcome of that suit, Braxton feared.

Woody Miley, manager of the Estuarine Reserve, stated that the Trading Company lease was not comparable to the oyster leases, since it was a grant, not a lease.

(Continued on page 2)

# the APALACHICOLA

Volume 105

\$12.50 a year in county  
\$17 a year out of county

Thursday, Apr

## County nixes move by oyster farmers

Times Staff Report  
by Alan Wright

The Franklin County Board County Commissioners delivered another blow to the hopes of the aquaculture project Tuesday morning. By a vote of three to two, the board denied a request to move the research oper-

## Herald

January 17, 1990

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Court to decide questioning of suspects issue  
— Page 8A

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## capee at large

## Franklin rules out bay leases

LAURA CASSELLS

APALACHICOLA — Apalachicola Bay's new "Florida Gem" oyster, the vision of the state's highly touted oyster-farming project here, could be a pipe dream unless Franklin County backs down from opposing creation of new bay leases.

A change of course is unlikely, County Commissioner Buford "Dink" Braxton said Tuesday, because leases are a Pandora's box from which the county cannot pick and choose.

If the county agreed to set up one-acre bay leases for its new crop of state-trained oyster farmers, that could open the door to dozens of old claims on bay bottom, Braxton said.

One such claim, being challenged by the state Department of Natural Resources and Franklin County, asserts that the County Commission granted 6,800 acres of bay bottom more than 80 years ago to a group of men now known as Gulf Trading of Carrabelle.

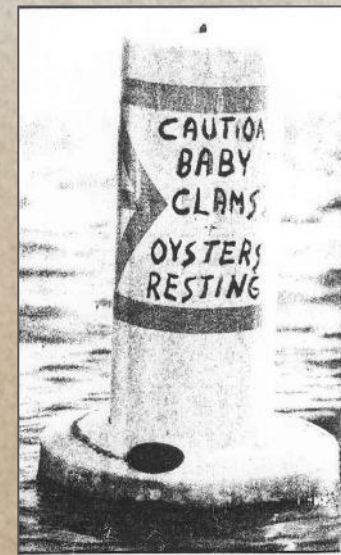
Braxton said he would do nothing to help Gulf Trading prevail in the dispute, even if it means stopping the oyster-farming project before it really gets started.

The county has a vested interest in making



*The project fails....*





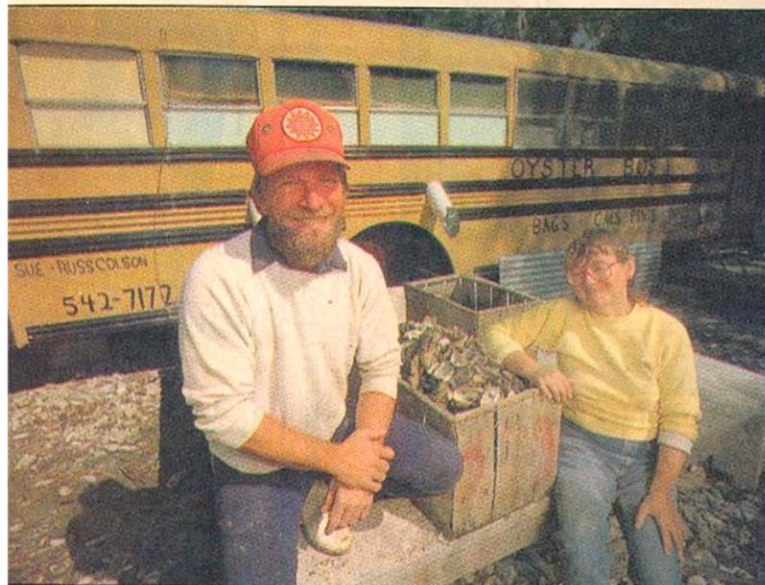
David Vaughan, HBOI;  
Sue Colson, 4-H leader

## *Engaging youth...*

- 4-H school enrichment project, Suwannee, 1990-1
- State funds obtained by Senator Kirkpatrick
- Local 4-H leaders: Sue Colson, Carol Strobach, Pam Colson



# Battle lines drawn on gulf leasing



Russ and Sue Colson are oyster harvesters in Suwannee Town. Sue is president of Suwannee Oyster Association. They run their wholesale/retail business out of the Oyster Bus, a converted church vehicle

By MITCH STACY  
Sun staff writer

**HORSESHOE BEACH** — Depending on whom you talk to in Dixie County's coastal communities, the state Department of Natural Resources' submerged lands leasing program is both a godsend and a curse.

Realizing the importance of developing aquaculture in the state, the DNR last year lifted an eight-year moratorium and altered and tightened the state administrative code that regulates leasing by private citizens or state-controlled submerged lands off Florida's coastline.

The policy allows people to lease up to five acres for clam production or up to 10 acres for oysters and grow the shellfish on that bottom land for at least 10 years.

But opponents in Dixie County — primarily members of a Horseshoe Beach-based group of oyster harvesters — don't like the idea of placing restrictions on what has always been public property. Commercial fishermen, shrimpers and crabbers there also are concerned about how the new policy will affect their livelihood.

"I don't want to see a public land lease," said Debbie Hester, a member of the Horseshoe Beach Oyster Association.



Sen. George Kirkpatrick; Sue Colson, Suwannee Oyster Association



4-H Graduation Day, Suwannee, 1991

*And the tide of anti-leasing sentiment began to turn...*





**Halting Sickness**--David C. Hell, left, chief of the Florida Department of Natural Resources Bureau of Marine Resources, Regulation and Development, explains that his agency wanted the oystering waters closed to prevent sickness. On his right, are State Senator George Kirkpatrick and State Representative Allen Boyd who arranged the meeting. More than 100 oystermen and women attended.

**Dixie oyster beds  
contaminated  
with salmonella**

it" is the liquid that filters  
ill be collected and taken to  
October, first of November,  
oject.

## County Budget

Sec. 2, Page 6

# Dixie County Advocate

... In the Suwannee River Valley at CROSS CITY, FLORIDA ...

"The only newspaper in Florida that loves Dixie County"

Home of the World's 2nd Largest "Red-Belly"

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## Septic Systems Probable Cause

# Oyster Industry Hit Hard With FDA Ban

The oyster industry along Dixie and Levy Counties' famed Suwannee Sound coastline has been hit with yet another ban, this time for up to two years or longer if no action is taken to clean up the waters.

The United States Food and Drug Administration (F.D.A.) along with state agencies announced the ban last week saying it would go into effect on August 31, just one day before the new season was to begin. Just last year, oystermen were faced with bans after officials discovered higher than acceptable levels of bacteria (salmonella) in waters in the same area. Another bacteria called vibrio vulnificus has officials concerned due to its high mortality rate of about 50%.

State Senator George Kirkpatrick, upon receiving the news, immediately called for a meeting at Old Town Elementary School held last Tuesday morning. Calling it a "crises situation," Kirkpatrick, along with Representative Allen Boyd, met with Department of Natural Resources officials and oystermen at the school to hash out what steps could be taken to alleviate the oyster contamination which led to the ban.

A recent study of the Suwannee and the area where the River meets the Gulf concluded that there is potential shellfish contamination occurring due to improperly installed or failing septic tank systems.

Local officials heard last week from Jerry Scarborough, with the Suwannee River Water Management District that the county has met the pre-qualifying criteria for a waste-water treatment facility in the town of Suwannee. The grant would be funded through Farmers Home Administration. A feasibility study regarding the waste-water treatment facility is underway under the direction of the SRWMD. County Commissioners are in the process of trying to get special legislation passed for a reason.



Sen. George Kirkpatrick, standing and Rep. Boyd, seated for right moderated the Dixie-Levy Oysters Meeting last Tuesday at Old Town Elementary.



*Oyster fishery in Suwannee Sound closed, 1991*



# Seeking solutions on a local level...

- Advocated to conduct another retraining program for Levy and Dixie Counties
- Secured funding through petitioning local legislative delegation
- Worked with County Commissions to support leasing through resolutions



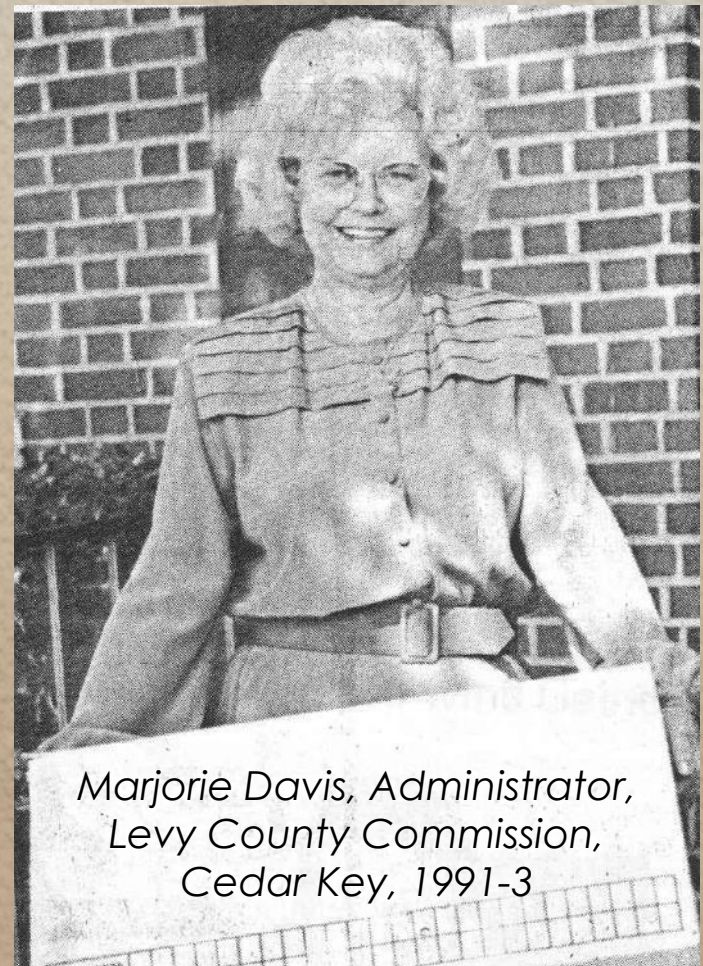
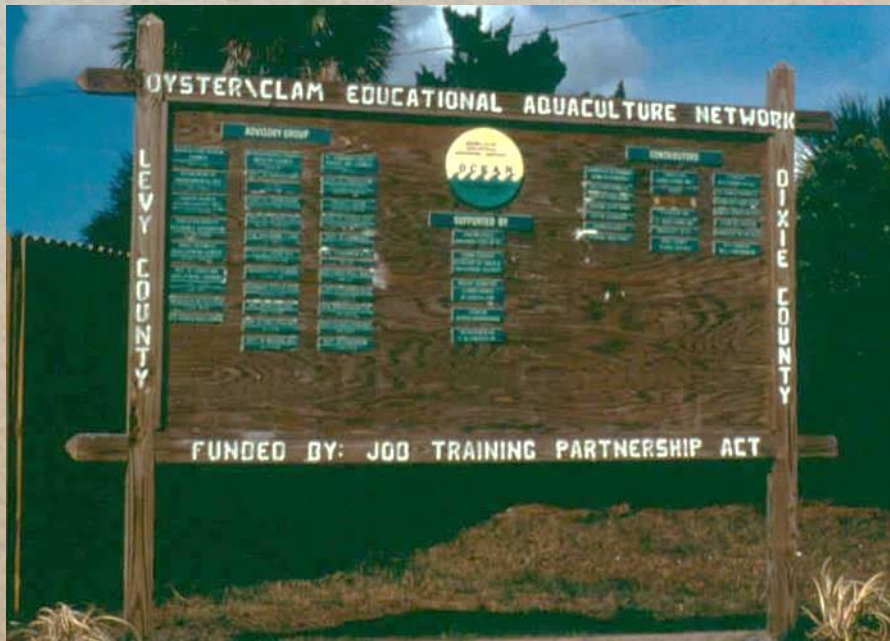
## Farming clams may be an answer for some Florida watermen

Nena and Doug Calvert have operated an oyster and clamming company since 1981. Today, 80% of their business is raising clams on leased bottom. Culturing begins by placing seed clams in stiff, small-mesh bags (center) and later transferring them to softer "grow bags." When the clams reach steamer size — 1" to 1-1/8" — they're ready for market, as the Calverts show at right.



Nena Calvert, Cedar Key Clams and Oysters, sixth generation Cedar Key native  
Started first clam farming business with husband on father's shellfish cultch lease, 1990





**Oyster  
project  
will get  
funding**



*A new way of making  
a living on the water...*



# Community involvement...



Project OCEAN staff including local employees and Nena Calvert as the community liaison



Off To Work--Project Ocean staff member Carol Perry of Suwannee goes to work on a pontoon boat. In the background is the scenic waterfront of Cedar Key. The grow-out area is not far away.



Sue Colson, Advisory committee chair



Leslie Sturmer,  
HBOI Project  
Manager



Sample of soft bag made of flexible polyester mesh to grow the hard clam. Left to right: Everett Quesenberry, Ray Young, and Leslie Sturmer, Manager Project OCEAN at Cedar Key, Florida.



# *Learning new skills...*



- “Hands-on” training in clam and oyster land-based nursery and growout culture
- Introduction to depuration methods
- Classroom curriculum
- Development of business plans, lease applications





## *Graduation!*

137 oyster harvesters and seafood workers in Levy and Dixie Counties receive certificate of completion, December 1993

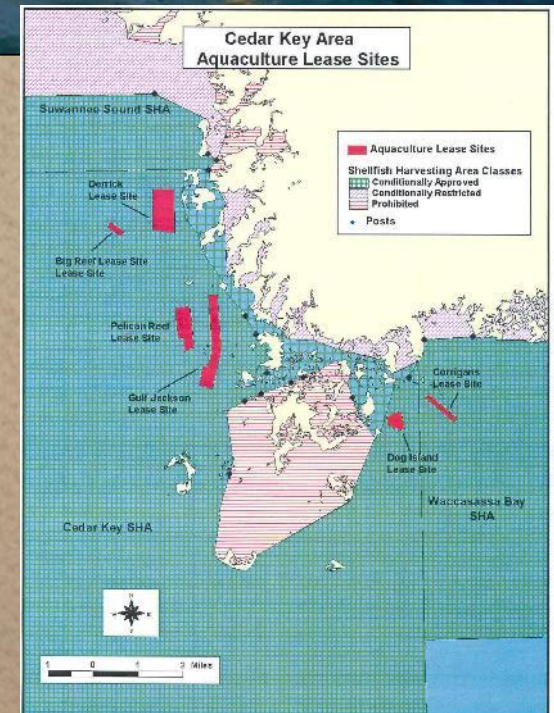


Marjorie Davis, LCBCC; Sue Colson, OCEAN Advisory Committee Chair; Nena Calvert OCEAN community liaison; Leslie Sturmer, Project Manager



# *Aquaculture leases established!*

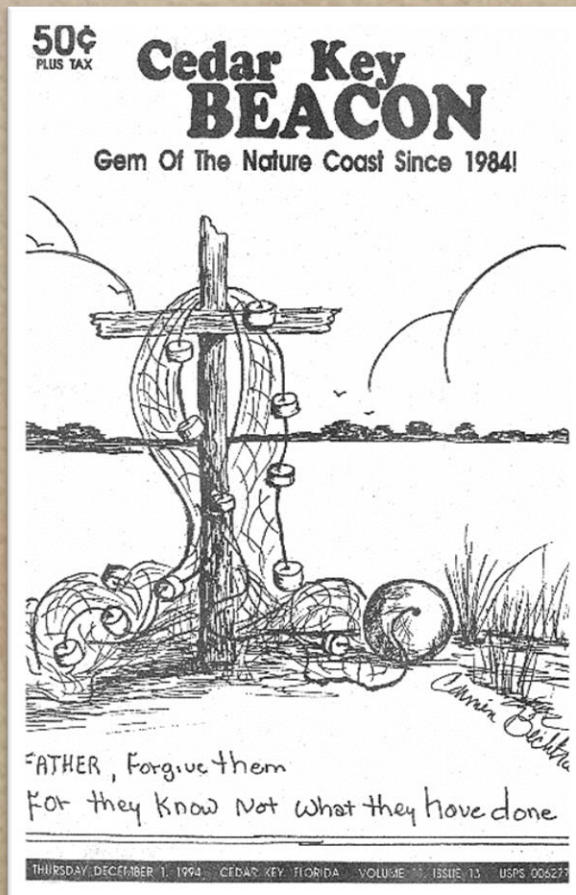
- Graduates receive two 2-acre lease parcels
- Levy County served as conceptual applicant during permitting process
- Concept of high-density lease area developed
- 948 acres of state-owned submerged lands identified, surveyed and marked in Levy and Dixie Counties
- First aquaculture leases located on west coast of Florida
- Lease application and process established





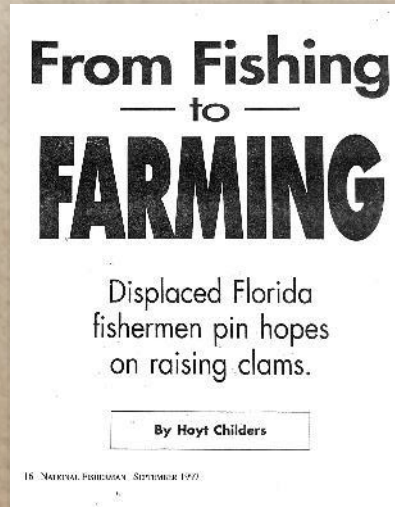
# *A way of life ends...*

- Statewide ban on gill and entanglement nets (1994)
- Hundreds of net fishers affected





# *Another round of training programs...*



## **Project W.A.V.E. Holds Graduation Ceremony For Dixie/Taylor Students**

by Terri Langford  
Last Friday, June 27



*The WAVE graduates were all smiles last Friday night after graduating from the 11 months long program.*



## *Project WAVE, Cedar Key, 1995-8*

- Retrained another 100 fishers in four-county service area (Taylor, Dixie, Levy, Citrus Counties)
- Led the way to two other community-based projects – SW Florida (Project CLAM) and Volusia County (Oak Hill)





Harriet Smith, Project graduate

*“And so we turned to the only thing we could – clam farming.”*

all these adventures ended with the ban on gill nets. I stood at the fish house and the first basket of mullet was hauled up and tried, like the men around me, not to

**And so we turned to the only thing we could - clam farming.**

rough a job training program, we were trained and each leased four acres of submerged land to grow clams.

as extremely difficult and without any money, almost impossible to go forward with the business. We inched forward, however, some of us taking on partners in silence, which would later turn bad. Others, like me, determined to go it alone. The work consisted of counting and measuring baby clams - each about 10 mm across - into a nylon bag that was usually 4' x 4' or 3' x 4'. Then, the bags were planted on the bottom of submerged land leased from the State of Florida. The area where we were growing was about 1/4 mile from Cedar Key. The bags were staked down in rows, like corn. The only difference was: you couldn't see anything -- except, of course, in the dead of winter when the water is clear and everyone worried about having their clam bags stolen because they were so easy to see. I called it “farming by Braille” because you could only feel with your feet and your hands what was going on. After a year or 15 months, you would pull that bag out of the mud, put it on your back, carry it to shore, put it in your truck and take it to a clam buyer. Of course, you would harvest one bag - anywhere from 5 to 50 bags would be brought in at a time, but they were heavy - heavy with sand and mud and heavy with clams. I worked the clam lease - usually by myself - for several years until I finally realized that

***I could no longer work on the water.***

*It was physically too difficult.*

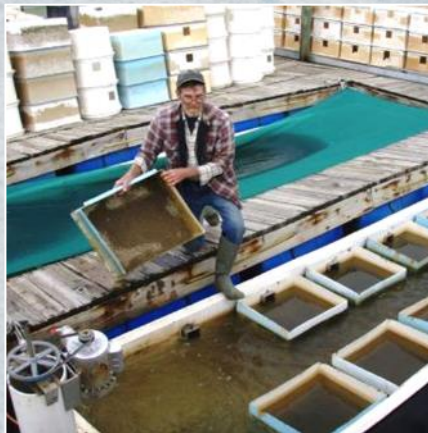
*“I worked the clam lease for several years – usually by myself - until I realized I could no longer work on the water. It was physically too difficult.”*



# *Cedar Key clam culture industry today...*



- >150 certified growers
- Supports >500 jobs
- Ancillary businesses
  - Seed suppliers, gear suppliers, wholesalers, boat builders
- 105M clam production, 2021
  - >90% of state's production
- Economic impact of \$34M







A tribute to some of the women who have supported the clam culture industry over the years and those who represent the future of clam farming in Cedar Key!





# Sue Colson...

Continued leadership-Water quality advocate-Education



*The Way We Worked educational display, 2015*

- Clamalot Clams, 1994-2008
- Charter board of director, Cedar Key Aquaculture Association, 2000-2020
- Commissioner & vice mayor, City of Cedar Key, 2003-present



*CKAA General Membership Meeting, 2009*





# Leslie Sturmer...

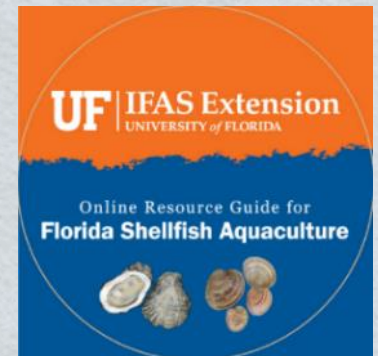
Continued technical support-Applied research-Education



Cedar Key Everlasting event, 2012



- Shellfish aquaculture extension agent, 1997-present
- Board of director, Florida Aquaculture Association, 1991-present
- East Coast Shellfish Growers Association, charter member





# Carla Ermel...

Bag manufacturer - Fabric supplier



- Seventh generation Cedar Keyan
- Manufacturer of clam bags since 1997
- Regional supplier of polyester mesh fabric



Clamerica Celebration, 2010



Christmas Boat Parade, 2014



# Rose Cantwell...

Local leadership — Community involvement



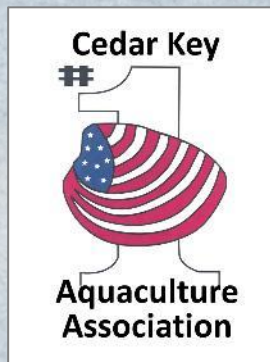
Clamerica Celebration, 2007



Cedar Key Everlasting, 2012



Serving clams at Cedar Key Seafood Festivals

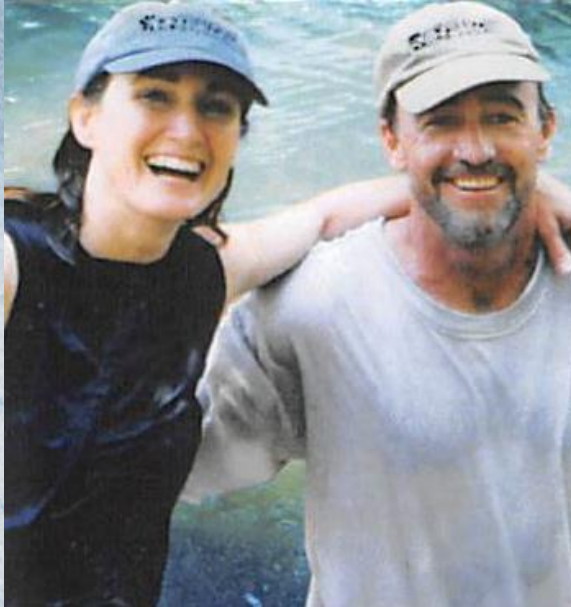


- Established clam growout/wholesale business with husband, 2001
- Serves as chair of Cedar Key Aquaculture Association, 2012-present
- Involved in many local events promoting clams and industry



# Linda Seyfert...

Community involvement –  
Industry promoter



Clam shucking demo,  
Clamerica Celebration, 2010



Romancing the Clam,  
Savannah, 2009

- Established clam business in 1998
- Contributes to festivals, promotional events, special occasions



With Congresswomen Ginny Brown-Waite, 2006



# Gretchen Stone Kelly...

The next generation – Industry leadership



With brother Ian on their Dog Island farm



- From corn farming in Kansas to clam farming in Cedar Key, 2018
- Committee member, National Aquaculture Association (NAA)
- Executive director, Florida Shellfish Aquaculture Association, 2021-present



With Paul Zajicek, NAA executive director  
Coastal Cleanup, 2019



# *Sarah Solano Stokes...*

Second generation clam farmer



With Cedar Key High School SALT class



- Second generation clam farmer
- With brothers now operate father's business established in 1995
- Future Farmers of America member
- Board of director, Florida Aquaculture Association, 2020-present







Thanks to all the women involved  
past, present and future in the  
clam culture industry in Cedar Key!

