

# King of the Bay

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By Ellen Liberman | Photographs by Jesse Burke



*Jody King has been quahogging in Narragansett Bay for over 30 years.*

**TWO ROCKS, ONE CLAM.** Quahogger Jody King bags the latter, tosses the former, and repositions his rake. His features gather themselves into a mask of fierce concentration as he bears down on the T-handle until the teeth of the metal basket catch the soft underbelly of Narragansett Bay. King rapidly whips the rake until he hears something hard strike the cage. Three rocks. King has devoted this July afternoon to teaching a small group of academics and environmental officials, including Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) Director Janet Coit, how to clam. The class fans out along the shoreline of Wickford Town Beach, thigh-deep in water the

color of olives and bathtub warm. Triumphant cries ring out, while King battles his rake. The ratio favors rocks over clams, and every third try, the old ash handle slips out of the basket's sleeve. Finally, it snaps in two.

"Rock soup!" He grins.

It wasn't his best day on the bay, but, in truth, every day is King's best day on the bay. "Look at the view out of my office window!" he says ashore later, with a sweep of his hand across a Turneresque sky of gray-smudged clouds. "I was born to clam!"

In 2019, 21 million quahogs, worth \$5.35 million, were landed in Rhode Island. By his estimate, King raked in a quarter of a million of them. A son of Warwick, he harvested his first clam off Rocky Point at 8 years old. The idyllic summers of his childhood were spent picnicking there with his parents, Richard and Shirley King, who armed their four sons with buckets and rakes and the following instructions:

"Don't go past that street, don't go past that rock, and don't come back until the buckets are full," he recalls. "You got to play in the mud and the dirt, and you got to bring things home. It was like show and tell. And, there was the realization that I could catch these things. But never in my wildest dreams did I think it would become my life."



Clams paid his mortgage. They literally re-shaped a skinny kid into a smooth-muscled man with a strong back. They taught him an appreciation for marine ecology, and they made him into a teacher who passed along his knowledge to others.

In the last nine years, well over 1,500 Rhode Islanders and vacationers have taken DEM's popular Come Clam with Me class, taught by King several times each summer.

"Jody puts his heart and soul into everything he does," says Kim Sullivan, the department's principal fisheries biologist and aquatic resource education coordinator.

The lesson includes the nuts and bolts of shellfish regulations, an explanation of the hard-shell clam's importance to the ecosystem, and a tutorial on bullraking. King also shares some of his life story and his family quahog recipes. He challenges his students to give them a try—and send pictures. They do, says Sullivan.

"There have been countless rave reviews. He cares about the participants, and he cares about the critters—it's not just a teaching job to him," she says. "I use this program to enhance the public's understanding of a public resource. I pay Jody to help create stewards of the bay. His enthusiasm really resonates and gets that stewardship across. He is one of the state's best clam-bassadors."

Unlike many quahoggers, King had no grandfather, uncle, or cousin to induct him into the solitary fraternity of commercial shellfishermen. His dad, an African American from South

Carolina, was a chef, and his mother was a homemaker of Swedish extraction who grew up in East Providence. The Kings worked hard to keep Jody and his three younger brothers Tracy, Dana, and Lonnie, constructively occupied with church, basketball, and Boy Scouts. (Jody and Lonnie became Eagle Scouts.) He remembers a burning ambition to fill his sash with enough merit badges to resemble a highly decorated war hero. But his high school years were aimless; he didn't plan on college.

"I was a letterman. I played in the chess club. I was a geek, but I didn't think I was smart enough, good enough," he recalls. His Pilgrim High School guidance counselor disagreed, connecting King to the University of Rhode Island Talent Development program, which renewed his self-confidence and prepared him for college-level work. King graduated in 1984 with a degree in agricultural resource technology. He spent his restless 20s serving a four-year enlistment with the U.S. Marines, a stint as an office temp in Boston and one as a longshoreman, and two periods of cooking with his father, who ran the kitchen at the Metropolitan Life headquarters in Warwick. He expected to succeed his father as manager when he retired. But that fell through.

One day, he went quahogging with a friend.

"I watched him make \$200 in four hours, and I thought, 'Wow, if I can make \$100, this cannot be all that hard,'" he says. "I bought a boat, a license, and a motor, and in one year, I was divorced. With me starting a new business and not doing well—it just added to the stress. The learning curve was brutal. I would follow other guys, and I would dig right around [them] and ask questions."

It took two years for King to find good hunting grounds, to read the wind and the tides, and to master the technique of digging from a boat with a 40-foot, long-handled rake.

"The handle is hollow—like a megaphone in your hand," he explains. "As the basket gets fuller, you can hear sounds of something hard—and that's the sound of money."

"He's got a computer going in his head," says his wife Liana. "How many clams do I need to pay this bill, that bill. He's subtracting quahogs all day long."

King smiles. "And eventually, I get a few for myself."

King is also a high-profile advocate, serving as vice president of the Rhode Island Shellfisherman's Association and as a two-term member of the Rhode Island Marine Fisheries Council.

Bob Ballou, longtime assistant to the DEM director, marvels at King's ability to charm top policymakers aboard his boat, pointing to a scheduled June 2016 clamming trip with Coit, Gov. Gina Raimondo, and then-Warwick Mayor Avedisian. "The DEM director, and the mayor, and the governor all taking the time to join a bullraker on his small skiff? That's powerful stuff," Ballou says. "I think Jody's the only human being on Earth who can pull something like that off. "

## A RHODE ISLAND TRAGEDY

On the edge of Warwick City Hall grounds is a brick circle around a granite oval bearing the etched portraits of 10 men and women who lost their lives in the Station nightclub fire. City hall occupies an island in Apponaug, surrounded by a swift current of traffic, coursing through a succession of rotaries. The memorial in its shadow is a small work of art, tastefully landscaped with six curved benches that invite reflection—and seemingly, an unappreciated blur to the drivers who rush past.

This is another spot where Rhode Island and Jody King have made a mark on each other. On February 20, 2003, The Station nightclub was packed beyond capacity, with hundreds of hard-rocking fans of the band Great White. At 11 p.m., the band's tour manager set off fireworks to herald the headliner's entrance. Almost immediately, they ignited the acoustic foam in the ceiling tile and walls. Thick clouds of toxic black smoke and heat drove everybody to the exit. Only 132 people escaped unharmed, 230 were injured, and eventually, 100 died. King's younger brother Tracy, a tractor trailer trucker who was working club security that night and had gone back into the burning building to rescue others, was among them.

"I got there at 11:30 to check on Tracy, and I saw the worst of the worst," he recalls. Chaos, bodies, ambulances, followed by hearses. In the following days, as the death toll rose, families of the victims gathered at the Crowne Plaza Hotel looking for solace or information on the missing. King was there, too, walking his shaggy shepherd-collie-Lab mix, Princess, around and around the ballroom, as a therapy animal.

"After my brother passed, Jody had to go to so many wakes," recalls his youngest brother Lonnie, now a Dallas-based jet pilot.

For Jody, the tragedy created a family of mourners, and once he attended the wake for one Warwick victim, he felt driven to offer his condolences to as many others as he could. "But [Jody] made sure that I, my mom, and my brother were taken care of. I had trouble going to a couple of them. He had to sit and deal with everything. I don't know how he did it. I would have lost my mind, but that's Jody to a T."

The Station fire was the fourth deadliest nightclub fire in U.S. history and one of the state's most traumatic events in recent history. Blame for the conditions that led to the conflagration—cladding the interior in flammable materials, the overcrowding, the pyrotechnics—fell heavily on club owners Jeffrey and Michael Derderian. Both pled no contest to 100 counts of involuntary manslaughter, and under a plea agreement, Michael was sentenced to four years in prison. Jeffrey received three years' probation and 500 hours of community service. King was one of the few who reached out to the Derderians, who had been his classmates, but not really friends. "He wasn't looking to crucify us because of his brother. He was one of the few who defended us. We were portrayed as demons," says Michael. "He wanted to know the real story, and we took him through the whole series of events. From that point forward he became very involved in the tragedy. We tried to make something good from something bad."

King threw himself into multiple memorial efforts. In 2007, he and the Derderians co-founded the Station Education Fund, which raised millions in scholarships to benefit the 76 children who lost one or both parents in the fire—three of whom were Tracy’s young sons. In 2012, he launched the Warwick Station Nightclub Memorial Fund to pay tribute to the Warwick victims. Warwick Beacon publisher John Howell remembers the day King asked if the paper would run an article about it. “I started asking him questions, and it was clear he didn’t have a master plan. He was planting the seed, but he didn’t know how to plant it or how to make it grow,” Howell says. Howell mentored King in forming a board, finding an architect and a site, and setting up a tax-exempt nonprofit. Jody, though, had his own way of getting things done. When they needed some asphalt for the project, King said he’d take care of it, and in short order, Cardi Construction was on board.

“He said, ‘All it takes is a few clams.’ He was bringing a bushel of little necks to these people in appreciation for what they were doing for the project,” Howell chuckles. “He always has a lot of clams to play around with.” On October 20, 2012, nine years after he first approached Avedisian about the idea, then-Gov. Lincoln Chafee and former Gov. Donald Carcieri dedicated the newly constructed memorial.

“Losing Tracy was a big deal,” King says. “But in losing him, I’ve learned to live life to the fullest.”

## THE 5%

One of King’s most vivid mental images is of his father, spread-eagled across the family ’68 VW. “We were on the way home from basketball, about three minutes from the house. All of a sudden, the car is surrounded by a half dozen cops, and two pulled my father out of the car and threw him over the hood. Their guns were drawn—talk about racial profiling. A store up the street had been burglarized. They pulled us out and dumped all of our basketball bags—you can imagine how that smelled. They left us there in the middle of the street and they said nothing,” King recalls. “I can’t imagine what my father wanted to do, but couldn’t because we were little kids, and he was a man. He just said, ‘They must have made a mistake.’” King doesn’t tell this life story to his clamming classes. Why should he?

“Ninety-five percent of my life has been amazing,” he says. “I don’t want to dwell on the 5%. The 5% doesn’t define me.” But it has gotten harder to ignore. King grew up protected in a white community who knew and accepted his interracial family. But as he aged and moved beyond Lakewood, he began to understand that his skin color meant that some people would dislike him on sight, and others would casually use it as a weapon against him. For the most part, he practiced what his father always preached: turn your cheek and live another day.



John Calicchia, King's URI roommate and close friend, says that King was adept at flipping on its head the racial dynamic that oppresses so much of American life.

"I remember walking into a room where everyone was white, and he caught a couple of glances. He raises his hand and says 'Hi! I'm Jody and I'm the token black man for this event!' It caught them off guard and reduced all the tension in the room. He went around and shook everybody's hand," says Calicchia, now a child psychologist and professor at Bridgewater State University. "It was pretty amazing. He knew how to defuse situations with that I'm-going-to-kill-you-with-kindness-until-you-understand-who-I-am."

But, on the water, King says, tolerance can be perceived as weakness. "Some people will exploit that, and I couldn't be the soft guy I was made to be growing up," he says. "There were times guys would prejudice me, use the n-word on marine radio. I had to make my mark out here, and if someone used the n-word, I would come after you, bow to gunnel."

"Most people don't know that his temper can flare if he's wronged," his wife says. But that's the 5%. And King never wanted to make it part of his presentations—until the May 25 homicide of George Floyd, who was asphyxiated by a white policeman on a Minneapolis street in full view of other officers and onlookers. "We watched a lynching live, and it had an effect on me—and the world."

And it has compelled him to have more candid conversations with his students.

So, in the shade of an oak on the Wickford Town Beach, he talks about his first car, a 1972 yellow Plymouth Duster. King named it Darlene, after a high-school friend who whacked a bully with a tennis racket after he directed racial slurs at the pair in a Pilgrim hallway. (They all went to the principal's office.) That's only 5% of the afternoon. Everyone's there to learn how to catch clams from a veteran quahogger.

At 60, King is part of a graying and shrinking cohort. When he started in 1989, there were many more diggers, and seven times as many quahogs—153 million—were harvested that year. He isn't sure how much longer he'll be out there, but he regularly consults an aspirational photo on his phone of a colleague who still bullrakes in his 90s.

"There's only two people in charge: God and Mother Nature. My body will tell me," he says. In the meantime, Jody King is proud that he's pulled a living out of the bay—and bits of history too: round-bottomed ballast bottles and centuries-old clay pipes displayed in his Oakland Beach home. And once, a terrified Maltese. (True story: in August 2018, King was crewing a race in Greenwich Bay, when he saw what looked like a mop floating by. It turned out to be a dog that had fallen off another boat. King persuaded the captain to turn around the 40-foot sailboat to scoop it up. When they could not get close enough, King broke every safety rule he ever knew, diving off a moving boat with no life jacket. He held the dog and treaded water for 15 minutes before the crew got close enough to pull them out.)

"I'm a piece worker. I'll never be a millionaire," he says. "But a quahogger is a respected profession in Rhode Island, and I love—love—my job."