

# Woman-Owned Aquaculture Business Grows and Grows

## *MARBIDCO Helps Company Start and Expand*



A little over a decade ago, Victoria, a retired career woman met Robert T. Brown Sr., a waterman, who makes his livelihood on Maryland's waterways.

Their union became the perfect match to start a new business that has become their passion: shellfish aquaculture.

With Robert T's knowledge of Maryland seafood industry and Victoria's 39 years in finance in private business and with the federal government, they became the perfect team to start a new business.

Victoria was raised in Charles County. Her parents purchased a tobacco and black angus' cattle farm. She owned a bar and grill at the age of 21 and since then, obtained two college degrees, became a world-traveler as she worked as a vice president, comptroller, financial manager, for government agencies and in private industry and created another start-up business in logistics support.

Robert T. has lived his life on the water for the past 65 years when he began soft shell crabbing at the age of seven.

In 2001, he established Shop Cove Seafood & Ice business in Coltons Point, St. Mary's County. There he distributed ice across Southern Maryland, and caught and sold oysters, blue crab, rockfish, croaker, and other species in the waterways surrounding his property to sell to locals and commercial businesses.

The idea of a third business was a bit too much for these two entrepreneurs. The couple sold the ice business but kept their license to continue to sell ice to local fish, oyster, aquaculture, and crab businesses.

Victoria, and "Robert T.," as she calls her husband, then created a business plan to become oyster farmers, and started Shop Cove Aquaculture, LLC.

Their aquaculture business has grown tremendously through their dedication and with the help of MARBIDCO.

Victoria originally balked at the prospect of taking loans out for the business.

Then she met Dr. Matt Parker, an aquaculture business specialist with the University of Maryland Extension whose expertise includes marine aquaculture economics, production, ecosystems, and business planning.

He told her the benefits of MARBIDCO's programs – some even offering loan forgiveness with a satisfactory repayment record.

That was the sales pitch that sold her. "He can make anyone understand anything" said Victoria of Matt. "He explained the loan process to me, and I started filling out the paperwork."

Victoria and Robert T. were among the first group of recipients in MARBIDCO's Maryland Remote Setting Aquaculture Financing Fund program in FY 2013, using the funds to purchase oyster shell and seed/larvae.

Through the Maryland Remote Setting Aquaculture Financing Fund program, an applicant must hold a nursery permit from DNR or have applied for one. In addition, all applicants must have production and business plans that demonstrate the financial feasibility of the planned aquaculture operation.

Both the Maryland Shellfish Aquaculture Financing Fund and Maryland Remote Setting Shellfish Aquaculture Financing Fund are in partnership with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and provides affordable financing to commercial watermen who want to start or expand shellfish remote setting aquaculture operations.

In the beginning the couple had acquired five aquaculture bottom leases totaling more than 80 acres located in St. Patrick's Creek, Breton's Bay, and St. Clements Bay in St. Mary's County. They also had four remote setting tanks at the Colton's Point location in St. Mary's County.

The couple subsequently applied for and received two Maryland Shellfish Aquaculture Financing Fund loans. This program can be used to purchase substrate (e.g., oyster shell), seed (or larvae) or capital equipment.

Persons holding State submerged land or water column aquaculture leases, or those who have applied for such leases are eligible to apply. In addition, all applicants must have production and business plans that demonstrate the financial feasibility of the planned aquaculture operation.

Loan funds were used to purchase equipment including a forklift as well as seed and oyster shell.

“I would not have had such a successful enterprise without MARBIDCO. It is a wonderful program for those that want to get into the business – more people need to know about it,” said Victoria.

Their success, she said, stems from sticking with their original business plan and the support of MARBIDCO’s programs.

Today Shop Cove Aquaculture has 350 bottom leased acres, expanding into St. Mary’s Sanctuary, Canoe Creek, and others, 10 remote setting tanks, two 40-foot-plus deadrise boats, three skiffs and a barge. Since Shop Cove Aquaculture’s inception, they have produced one billion spat to harvest or sell to local and commercial companies.

The couple participate in organizations supporting watermen. Robert T. is president of the Maryland Watermen’s Association and Victoria belongs also. He is a member of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which was formed to coordinate and manage fishery resources.

She is also trying to raise money to help restore and gain available new technologies at Horn Point Oyster Hatchery (UMES), to keep it “a center of excellence,” said Victoria.

At the end of FY 2023 MARBIDCO welcomed Victoria as its newest member of the Board of Directors representing the Commercial Seafood Harvesting and Processing Industry. With all of her knowledge of commercial fishing and aquaculture in Maryland, she is a welcome addition to the board.