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Leda Cruger

Karen Brewster, interviewer

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Karen Brewster asked Leda Cruger to talk about herself. Cruger said thank you for the invite. She said she was born in Tanana and raised in Galena. She lived out there until she was eighteen. Part of growing up in the village was being creative with their time. There were chores and things to be taken care of after school and basketball practice. Karen asked her how she got into riverboat racing. Cruger said being raised in Galena and going to Korkkrine Bible Camp and they would see the boats go by. She thought it was beautiful watching the boats go by. She had a thing for speed. Her brother started racing when he moved to Fairbanks. When her brother was racing she thought it was dangerous. She watched one of his races and saw how fast he was going and she wanted to try that. She is friends with Wes Alexander, Sr. and Jr. and sometimes they talked about boat racing and she thought it sounded interesting. When her brother was selling his race boat she wanted to buy it. She knew very little about the race boat. Her brother wanted to know what he was going to do with it. She bought the boat not knowing it was thirty years old. They started stripping the boat and she could see lots of layers. Wes, Sr. knew the stories about the boat. Wes, Jr. was interested in racing, too.

Karen asked her if growing up in Galena she had spent a lot of time around boats. Cruger said she knew houseboats and slow boats and she did know the river. She learned from her dad and uncles. Karen asked her if she got right into the boat right away. Cruger said no, but that is what she thought. It had to be completely taken apart. There were pieces missing and things that needed to be reinforced. It took her weeks and weeks to fix it up. Big Wes had a motor from one of the last races he won. The motor she has now is a 1990. Karen asked her what it was like to finally get out on the river. Cruger said it was scarier than she had thought. She thought it was going to be like driving a snow machine. She said when you are in a race boat you are down low and everything is pretty much low except for the sand bars. Wes, Jr. went with her on the first time out. She learned everything her first season as a crew member on her boat. She said ten years later you still learn something every time you get in the boat. She said you have to pay attention to how the boat feels in the water every time you get in the boat. About half way through her first season she asked if she could drive. Once she drove you could feel the boat dig in. Wes, Jr. was a wealth of knowledge for her. The boat was a tank and it was very forgiving. Karen asked her if that was different from the newer boat designs. Cruger said yes. The newer boats are lighter and faster and a little more difficult to control. She still has a boat. She is three boats into it. Karen asked her about the mechanics side of the business. Cruger said she learned by hanging out with her brothers in the garage. They weren't allowed to hang out in the house and they had to be busy. She followed her brothers around and fixed her own snow machine. She can fix the majority of what goes wrong with the top half of the engine and if not she knows how to build a fire. She said she probably could do it. She said the other captains are helpful. She goes to big Wes or Jerry Alexander for help. She said if you can sit around and listen to the stories it is amazing. She said you can talk with an old boat racer for hours.

Karen asked her what year she entered her first race. Cruger said 2003. She said she was a crew member for Wes and Junior with her own boat. She said it went well and they made it back last. She talked about the learning curve. She wanted to drive her boat home to Galena. A couple of days before the boat race they went to Tanana and found a fuel leak on the way down. The route down and back are slightly different. On the way down they could see the return slough and on the way back they went up the slough they ran into a mass of driftwood. They drove right over the driftwood. She said the boat handled it well. The night before the Yukon 800 they drew six or seven for the race. She stayed forward on the boat. She described the trip to Galena. She said there was a lot of vibration. Everyone started off all at once. They had a problem as soon as they started. They were floating backwards. They got the boat going. She said even if you get to Galena it is still anybody's race. She said she was happy to be out on the river. One of the things about being raised on the river is she knows the river. Her mother's family is from Ruby. She knows the river fairly well. As they were coming up to Ruby she said they were on the wrong side. They were approaching sandbars and the pilot turned the boat around. She said one of the experiences on that trip was waves made by barges. Just above Tanana the water came over the boat. She started smelling gasoline. They were between Manley and Tanana and they could see another boat and it belonged to her brother. She got to town right before her brother. She said the first race had a lot of learning lessons for her. She said at the after party they told everyone that she was going backwards at one point. Karen said it got her to do more. Cruger said she had gotten comfortable in the boat. At the end of the season she had an all women crew. Karen asked her if that was the first all women crew and Cruger said yes. They were on just short races. She has continued to race. The last 800 that she captained she scratched in Nenana. She said she realizes that she scratched too soon. She thought she had had motor troubles, but the prop was spun. Karen asked her why she keeps going back. Cruger said she has a need for speed. Karen asked her to describe being a woman in a man's sport. Cruger said she is thankful for the other captains, crew members, Outboard Association and Big Wes and Junior. For the most part everyone was welcoming and helpful. She said she will never be competition, but she wants to be upright and fast and have fun doing it. No one has ever treated her like she is just a girl. She said the only thing that men have on her is the upper body strength. You have to be able to hang on to the steering wheel that has a lot of torque for six or seven hours. She described holding onto the steering wheel. She said you have to be able to maintain control over the boat. In the wind you have to be able to control the boat.

Karen talked about having the knowledge of sloughs. Cruger said she found sand bars really fast. She described what she does after hitting sandbars. Sometimes there is damage. One time they were drifting while they fixed there boat and they stopped when they hit a sandbar. The other races were going by on either side of them. Karen asked about repairs in the field. Cruger said for the most part you work as a team. Someone has to maintain control of the boat. She said she wanted to take every tool in the garage and part of learning is only taking what you need. Karen asked about picking crew members. Cruger said Big Wes and Junior were a given. The next time a boat came up from Galena it was Albert Gilbertson and Alvin Williams and they asked her to captain their boat. The current boat she has now she had Tony Peter race with her and she thought her brother would race with her, but she got a crew member at the last minute. Tony Peter went on to have his own boat and has won races. She thought she would never shove or holler at her own crew, but the first time her boat quit, they were full of fuel and everyone went to the back of the boat she did shove. Karen commented how noisy it would be when you are going down the river full speed. Cruger said you can communicate by touching. She said a crew becomes attuned to each other. Karen asked about practice. Cruger said there is lots of practice. Every season all

the captains are out there several times before the races. Most of the captains get out there and check things and there's new crew to train. Cruger said she goes out in the winter on her snow machine to see how the river has changed. Karen asked if she had a favorite race experience. Cruger said she likes the race between Fairbanks and Nenana. Karen asked her if there was any particular Yukon 800 race with favorite moments. Cruger said she liked seeing her brother's boat behind hers. She said finishing is her favorite moment. Karen asked if most people get sponsors or pay out of their own pocket. Cruger said she is late to the game and every sponsor has other obligations and the other businesses said they were too small to support someone so all of her boats have been out of her own pocket. There are major sponsors who sponsor the races as a whole. Karen asked about moments that were challenging. Cruger said scratching in the last Yukon 800. She called it quits fifty miles into the race. She said as a captain it was pretty hard. They tried to fix it several times. Karen asked her if she is still racing. Cruger said maybe, there is still a race boat in her yard. It has been two years since she raced. She had lent things out to other crews.

Karen asked her if she would encourage other young people to do this. Cruger said absolutely. Anyone who likes things like the dynamics of the boat, engineering, and navigation should do it. She would like to see it grow and become as big as it was in the past. Karen asked her what the hardest thing is for a new person to learn. Cruger said staying upright and staying in the boat. She said it hurts when you exit the boat at full speed. The boat that she has is an open boat. The boat can jerk violently when it hits something. She described what she wears in the boat. Cruger said she enjoys racing and the people that she has met and the support she has gotten. She encouraged people to go out and watch the races. They talked about the helmet cam video. She talked about learning about logs on the river. She said she traveled to a cabin twenty-five miles down the river. Karen asked about scary moments on the river. Cruger said seeing the log jam coming at them was scary for her.

Dave Norton had Karen ask about suggestions for becoming involved in riverboat racing. Cruger said they would love volunteers. The Outboard Association has meetings and fund raising. They can always use help at the races. They need safety boats and people who can communicate with people down river. There are seven or eight races throughout the season. The Yukon 800 is the second race in the season. Someone asked if they have a sump pump in the boat. Cruger said no, but they are quick with their sponges. Karen asked about racing in the rain. Cruger said she didn't like racing in the rain. It is cold and miserable. Another person asked about learning before she raced. Cruger said it took six weeks to rebuild the boat. They only had about two-three weeks before the Yukon 800 and they went out about every other evening. That was when she was learning to crew. When she was learning to drive it was on the weekend to camp. She was comfortable with driving the boat after about four hours of training. Karen said after growing up on the river and being on boats a lot she had an advantage. Cruger said she was thankful that she knew the river. Karen reads someone's question. How much of learning is mechanics, boatmanship, crew coordination and river knowledge? Cruger said all of that. Every time you get in the boat you learn something new. You learn hands on. Karen said it's not reading it in a book. Someone in the audience asked about common mechanical problems. Cruger said she liked to work at the top and work her way down. She checks plugs, compression, and then work her way down. You have to check the water pump and make sure the engine is getting fuel. She said the older captains can tell where the problem is just by listening to the engine, but to her it is still a guessing game. Someone asked what causes a spun prop and what is done about it. Cruger said experience is important. They had an extra washer on the prop. One of her crew members kept cranking the prop up. The prop didn't have

enough water and it drove it right up into the hub. She said you just have to keep adjusting it to make sure the right amount of prop is in the water. Karen asked about race strategy. Cruger said be healthy going into a race and everything after that can be learned. Dave Norton asked about getting enough sleep while they are down in Galena. Cruger said she wanted to weigh in with as little weight as possible on her first Yukon 800. She didn't drink water all day and by the time she got to Galena she had a headache and muscle aches. She said eat and be hydrated. Cruger said a lot of time goes into preparing for the race.