

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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FIRE ON BOARD THE *ISLAND LADY*  
PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA  
JANUARY 14, 2018

\* ACCIDENT NO.: DCA18FM010

\* \* \* \* \*

Interview of: MICHELLE NITZ  
Casino Dealer

Tuesday,  
January 23, 2018

## APPEARANCES:

CWO [REDACTED]  
U.S. Coast Guard

[REDACTED]  
U.S. Coast Guard (Civilian)

BETH FIFER, Company Representative  
Tropical Breeze Casino

STACY FALCONE, Company Representative  
Tropical Breeze Casino

JAMES CARLSON, Attorney  
Hamilton, Miller & Birthisel

I N D E X

ITEM

PAGE

Interview of Michelle Nitz:

By CWO [REDACTED]

4

I N T E R V I E W

1  
2 MR. CARLSON: If I may, before we start, Michelle. I'm Jim  
3 Carlson. I'm Port Richey Casino's attorney. I'm participating as  
4 a party in interest on behalf of Port Richey Casino.

5 We might get a call from the insurers in the next 20 minutes  
6 or so. Could we take a recess so I could take that call? Because  
7 it's -- you know, it's going to help us figure out how to -- what  
8 to do with the vessel. So I don't want to miss that call.

9 FEMALE SPEAKER: She has to be at work for the boat by, the  
10 latest, 3:00 to leave here.

11 MR. CARLSON: Okay. All right.

12 CWO [REDACTED] I think we'll meet that.

13 MR. CARLSON: I think so, too.

14 CWO [REDACTED] All right, Ms. Nitz, I'm going to start.

15 MS. NITZ: Yes.

16 CWO [REDACTED] My name is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with the U.S. Coast  
17 Guard.

18 MS. NITZ: Hi. How you doing?

19 CWO [REDACTED] And this is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] who's also with the  
20 U.S. Coast Guard. We're here to investigate the vessel fire  
21 onboard the *Island Lady*. So we'll get started.

INTERVIEW OF MICHELLE NITZ

22 BY CWO [REDACTED]

23 Q. Ad you still at [REDACTED]?

24 A. Yes.

1 Q. Okay. Great. And so, can you give me a little background,  
2 your education and work experience?

3 A. Like, all of it, or --

4 Q. Well, just briefly.

5 A. Okay. Well, I graduated high school. I do have a diploma  
6 for core drafting, which went nowhere, because it was right before  
7 computers started, and so I thought I better find something else  
8 to do. And so, I started dealing cards about -- oh, I don't know,  
9 back in like 2005 or so. And then I came here in 2007, and I've  
10 been with this company for, like, just over 10 years now.

11 Q. Okay. In what position?

12 A. Card dealer, casino dealer.

13 Q. Always a card dealer?

14 A. Yes. Casino dealer. Table games dealer. There's a couple  
15 names for us. I don't know, you know, what they are.

16 Q. And can you walk me through the events on 14 January,  
17 basically from when you got to work?

18 A. Just like any other day, you know, we boarded. We're happy  
19 to have people on board and ready to go out. And about the time  
20 we got to maybe Durney Key, the captain kind of noticed a problem  
21 and asked everybody to come to the top deck. We sat on the top  
22 deck just for couple minutes, realized we were going to have to  
23 leave the vessel because it was on fire, and we went downstairs,  
24 we jumped off, we walked ashore.

25 Q. So on the trip out, can you tell me where you were at, where

1 you were located?

2 A. We were hiding downstairs in the cubby, because it was kind  
3 of cold that day and we didn't want to sit upstairs. So we were  
4 hiding at the very front of the bow in the -- on the inside. You  
5 want me to show you right --

6 Q. Yes, please.

7 A. Like right here. See this little tiny space right here?

8 Q. Yes.

9 A. Because we're not really supposed to sit with the customers,  
10 so --

11 Q. So it would be forward of the -- like the bar, bar area?

12 A. No.

13 Q. Countertop, it's the countertop, I guess --

14 A. Yeah. Because the bar's back here.

15 Q. Yes.

16 A. There's like a -- I don't know how else to describe it.  
17 There's just a little -- there's like a little tiny space that's  
18 right up here. Sometimes they have, I don't know, stuff for the  
19 entertainer up there. But yeah, we were kind of hiding back there  
20 to stay out of the cold.

21 Q. At what point did you realize there was a problem on board?

22 A. No, actually it wasn't until after we'd gotten upstairs.  
23 Like they -- we were like, they want us to go upstairs. We're  
24 like, okay, fine, whatever. I even left some of my stuff  
25 downstairs, you know, just because I was like, okay, it's no big

1 deal; we'll go upstairs, whatever.

2 And we were just kind of waiting. We -- that's -- I was  
3 already upstairs when I kind of started to notice the smoke. And  
4 I was just like, oh, that's why they got us upstairs, because  
5 there's a, you know, fire. You know, it was quite a -- I don't  
6 know, it went from like a tiny little fire to we need to get off  
7 the boat. Like it happened within -- like everything was calm  
8 and, oh, there's a little smoke. And then it was like, okay, now  
9 we need to leave. So, you know, but --

10 Q. So do you --

11 A. We all, you know, like --

12 Q. Do you recall how you -- how did you know to go from your  
13 cubbyhole --

14 A. The deckhands told us.

15 Q. -- to the upper deck? How did they tell you? How did they  
16 relay that?

17 A. Verbally.

18 Q. And what did it sound like, basically, I'm asking.

19 A. They just asked, you know, could you guys -- come on, you  
20 guys need to come to the top of the boat. Real calm, just, you  
21 know, no big deal.

22 Q. And then what did they do after that?

23 A. Well, they were looking around, you know, trying to figure  
24 out where they were going to get people off the boat or which way  
25 was the best way to get people to exit. And I remember one of

1 them running to the back to see if they could get to the  
2 lifejackets, but it was already too bad over there. And we didn't  
3 need them. It was shallow.

4 And then they was hurrying us along. And, I don't know, I  
5 just tried to stay calm, tried to, you know -- I don't know what  
6 else -- what else are you looking for? You know, I went down the  
7 -- so we went down the front of the stairs, and Captain Mike came  
8 by and -- you know, people were going off the bow, you know, and  
9 Captain Mike came over to open the side where we usually  
10 disembark, on the -- on this side. Let's see. There's like --  
11 there was like a little exit like right on the side here.

12 Q. So the port side.

13 A. And he's, like, here, you know, you guys -- so he was trying  
14 to filter so it wasn't all people just trying to get off the bow.  
15 And he's like, here's another way off, you know, guys come this  
16 way, and -- so that's the way that we went. We went off the side  
17 of the boat, to try and get people down and out faster, you know.

18 Q. Do you recall who went before you or after you into the  
19 water?

20 A. Cassie and I believe Stephen were ahead of me. Because  
21 Cassie, Cassie's definitely afraid of heights, you know, which I  
22 was happy that at least Captain Mike opened that side door,  
23 because I don't know if she would have made it off the bow. She's  
24 terribly afraid of heights. So when she got over there, we were  
25 able to finally get her out of there.



1 Q. And when you say Stephen Longarello?

2 A. So, yeah, Stephen jumped into into the water first. Yeah, he  
3 -- because she was afraid of heights, and so he's like, I'll jump  
4 in first. He's like, look, see, it's shallow; you'll be okay.  
5 And she's like, it's not that, it's just -- it's far, it's -- and  
6 I'm like, Cassie, you can do it. I think -- and then, I don't  
7 know, just -- we finally got her in. I handed all the bags down  
8 and then I went in. We walked to the shore.

9 Q. Were you injured at any point during the process?

10 A. No.

11 Q. No? Okay, good.

12 A. No. I was good to go.

13 Q. All right. So explain to me on the *Tropic Breeze* what are  
14 your duties and responsibilities as a card dealer?

15 A. Well, we're mostly just in charge of that pit, and, you know,  
16 we clean up the chairs, we clean up the tables, we make sure the  
17 cards are set up, we get the game set up, ready for the gamblers.

18 Q. Do you wear a uniform? A white shirt with an apron?

19 A. I'm wearing it. Here it is.

20 Q. In the event of an emergency, what would be expected of you?

21 A. Well, depending on what table I was on, the first thing would  
22 be to put the lid on, you know. I mean, it depends on the, the  
23 extreme amount of emergency, you know, like -- but that's what  
24 I've always been told, the first thing you do is put the lid on  
25 the tray to protect the money, you know. And then go look for

1 life jackets, I guess. It depends on what the emergency is.

2 Q. Okay. Let's say if it was a fire, what would you do?

3 A. Well, like I said, put the lid on the rack, and I don't know  
4 if we'd have time to lock it. But then we would go out the side  
5 door and start looking for life jackets, and, you know, we'd help  
6 the customers or whatever we'd need to do, and put on our own  
7 lifejacket, help the customers if they need to put on their life  
8 jackets.

9 Q. So the same scenario, let's say it was an abandoned ship. If  
10 the captain said abandoned ship, what would be your actions?

11 A. It would be basically the same thing, you know, try to secure  
12 what you can, try to grab what you can, and go out the side door  
13 or wherever the -- most of the time the deckhands will -- you  
14 know, the deckhands or the captain or somebody will tell us which  
15 way we need to go, you know. So like somebody will be there,  
16 okay, everybody, you know, go to the -- like we did, you know, on  
17 the shuttle, you know, they say go to the top deck. You know,  
18 they'll tell us if there's an emergency this is where we need to  
19 go. So --

20 Q. And do you ever --

21 A. I imagine the entertainer might even make an announcement,  
22 you know, because it -- go all over the PA and, you know, and say  
23 okay, everybody, we need you to go -- there isn't one on the  
24 shuttle, though. There is on the big boat.

25 Q. There's no PA on the shuttle?

1 A. There's something, like a little --

2 Q. Do you recall a safety announcement on the way out?

3 A. Oh, they always do the safety announcement. That's the first  
4 thing that he always does.

5 Q. Is that broadcast on a PA or is it just verbally?

6 A. Well, I wasn't upstairs that day, so -- I was downstairs. So  
7 I could hear him -- yeah, I think he did have a microphone that  
8 day. I'm sorry. I wasn't really paying attention.

9 Q. No, that's fine.

10 A. You know, I've been here for 10 years. I heard the safety  
11 announcement a million times. You kind of tune it out, you know.  
12 So -- I'm trying to remember if he had a microphone that day. He  
13 might have. It was pretty -- because he was doing bingo, so I  
14 think he had a microphone that day. So there's a good chance that  
15 it was throughout the boat and -- you know, but I was downstairs,  
16 you know. But usually he does bingo downstairs -- I don't know.

17 Q. Do you ever recall hearing the announcement of fire or  
18 anything like that over the PA?

19 A. No. But they just told us -- I mean, they -- I remember  
20 telling us that we were going to have to jump, we were going to  
21 have to get off the boat.

22 Q. Did you take -- I might have already asked this. Did you  
23 take any photos or videos that day?

24 A. No.

25 Q. Asked you about the injuries. Had you -- have you ever went

1 out -- well, actually, I'm going to back up a little bit. And I  
2 don't recall if I asked this either because I got out of order,  
3 but have you ever done a drill on board either the *Tropic Breeze*  
4 or the *Island Lady*, a fire drill, flooding drill, abandon ship  
5 drill?

6 A. We might have. I -- or it could have been on -- on the  
7 shuttle, I don't think so.

8 Q. Do you recall any training: fire, abandon ship, flooding?

9 A. Well, I actually have the STCW training from another boat.  
10 You know, I went through -- the boat that I used to work on was  
11 much bigger. It was about seven stories high, and we had to go  
12 through like crisis training and all that kind of stuff. I  
13 actually have a little thing somewhere in -- lost in my files from  
14 years ago, with that kind of training. So I've had that sort of  
15 training before.

16 Q. What boat was that?

17 A. It was the *Ocean Jewel*. Went out of the port of St. Pete for  
18 a little while, and then it went out through the John's Pass.

19 Q. Was this awhile back?

20 A. Yes. Back in like 2004 or '05.

21 Q. So then you know what I mean by training for fire, abandon  
22 ship, crowd control, flooding?

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. Do you recall any of that recently within your 10-year  
25 employment?

1 A. Not right offhand.

2 Q. I think that's it. Oh, one more. Have you ever had to --  
3 have you ever embarked, got underway, went down the channel, then  
4 had to turn around and come back to the dock?

5 A. Actually, that is the first time that I've ever been on the  
6 shuttle when it's had to turn around.

7 Q. What time?

8 A. The -- last Sunday, the Sunday when the captain had to turn  
9 the boat around.

10 Q. On the 14th?

11 A. Yes. Yeah, that was the only time. I've never been on the  
12 shuttle when it's had any other problems.

13 Q. What about the *Tropical Breeze*?

14 A. I don't recall ever having to go back on that boat either,  
15 unless there was a -- like, a tide issue or -- like we've had to  
16 go back early, but I can't recall any other problems or times.

17 Q. Due to a mechanical malfunction or anything like that?

18 A. No.

19 Q. Okay. Great.

20 CWO [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

21 MR. [REDACTED] No. Thank you.

22 CWO [REDACTED] Hey, thanks for your time. Appreciate it.

23 MS. NITZ: You're welcome.

24 MR. [REDACTED] Thank you.

25 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

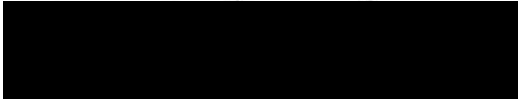
IN THE MATTER OF:            FIRE ON BOARD THE *ISLAND LADY*  
   PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA  
   JANUARY 14, 2018  
   Interview of Michelle Nitz

ACCIDENT NO.:                 DCA18FM010

PLACE:

DATE:                             January 23, 2018

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,  
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed  
to the best of my skill and ability.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Karen Coen Brooks  
Transcriber