

# A RISING TIDE

Fisherpoet Elma Burnham founded 'Strength of the Tides' movement to empower women in maritime industries

By KATHERINE LACAZE  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

**F**or Elma Burnham, working as a commercial fisherwoman is merely one facet of her identity.

The resident of Bellingham, Washington, is also an amateur poet — a skill that will be exhibited during the FisherPoets Gathering in Astoria this weekend — as well as a fluent French speaker, marketing consultant for small food-related businesses and the founder of a movement called “The Strength of the Tides Is Hers Also,” which strives to empower, support and celebrate women working in maritime industries.

On Saturday, Feb. 24, during the Fisher-Poets event, Burnham will lead a workshop to share her story and bring awareness to the Strength of the Tides organization, which was founded as a rebuttal to the idea of women’s lives, bodies and strengths being undervalued in today’s culture, according to the official website. The workshop will take place 1:30 to 3 p.m. at the Clatsop County Heritage Museum.

## A family tradition

Burnham was born and raised on Long Island Sound and grew up around the water. Her parents fished on Cook Inlet and worked for Joint Venture Fishers in the 1980s. Burnham graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont in 2013, majoring in French and minoring in elementary education and African-American studies.

It was in 2010 during a summer break, when she worked her first commercial salmon fishing season in Bristol Bay, Alaska. She discovered a love for the profession — from the opportunity to work with her hands to participating in a historic practice and spending long days on the water. She returned each summer for the fishing season until 2017, when she took a year off.

“It was the first time I was in one place for a full year in a long time,” she said.

In general, those who work in the fishing industry lead seasonal lifestyles, an outcome that is challenging but also interesting and “part of the draw,” she said. Each year is a fresh chance to decide if she wants to return for another season.

While the rhythm of seasonal work can provide flexibility and intrigue, Burnham has also found it difficult to build relationships and invest in a community when only living there six or seven months of the year.

She’s worked hard to get involved in Bellingham and make it her home. Last fall, she helped co-organize the Fisher-Poets-on-Bellingham-Bay event, a celebration of Bellingham’s working waterfront.

## Strength of the Tides

Burnham launched Strength of the Tides in November 2016, shortly after the election of President Donald Trump. As she wrote in a September article for the National Fisherman magazine, “It’s not that the issues I worry about today weren’t present under the Obama administration or would disappear during a Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton presidency, but it is undeniably true that my main concerns felt more pressing and raw after Nov. 8, 2016.”

These concerns included the devaluation of women’s roles in many industries, as well as eroding federal policies for environmental conservation and protection. Burnham’s experience in the fishing industry has been primarily positive, she said, adding, “I have a lot of love and respect for the male captains and colleagues I work with.”

However, she knows that is not the case for all women working on the water. “I wanted to take some action about that,” Burnham said. “I believe to do that, you have to start in your own community.”

## Supporting women

Originally, Strength of the Tides focused on commercial fishing, but the community has expanded in the past year to include all maritime industries.

“If the project speaks to you, it’s yours also,” Burnham said. “I’m not trying to exclude anyone. But I also think it’s important to narrow it enough so it has feet and continues moving forward.”

Strength of the Tides pursues its mission through four methods: representation; solidarity and accountability; community; and education.

One aspect of the project is a pledge commanding people of all backgrounds and genders to acknowledge they support women who work on the water and to commit to building safe, respectful workplaces for women.

Additionally, Burnham manages various social media accounts for Strength of the Tides, and posts stories of women who work on the water to the Instagram account on a weekly basis. She’s created a community



COURTESY ELMA BURNHAM

Elma Burnham, founder of “The Strength of the Tides Is Hers Also,” with a King Salmon

on Facebook for people to collaborate, talk shop and share their experiences and advice. She also hopes to eventually host events or facilitate other types of forums for this dialogue.

Finally, Burnham continues developing the education aspect of the movement, with a long-term goal of creating venues for women to teach other women the unique skills of maritime trades.

## FisherPoets

In the off-season, Burnham enjoys journaling on topics that are water- and fishing-inspired. She uses the craft to process and express thoughts and emotions about her experiences on the water.

She is attending the Astoria gathering, which celebrates commercial fishing through poetry and songs, for the third time. She first shared personal material at last year’s event, when she and a friend performed a version of John Prine’s “Paradise” with the lyrics rewritten to be about Bristol Bay.

“It’s a really welcoming place,” she said of the Gathering. “I’m not sure I consider myself a poet all year round, but during the FisherPoet weekend, I feel welcome enough to participate as that.”

The FisherPoets Gathering is one of her favorite weekends of the year, Burnham said. She appreciates the chance to interact with other people who make their living or spend part of their year fishing. During the season, when they’re working, “there’s not a lot of autonomy,” she said.

“Getting them together in most people’s off-season in February, that’s so special,” she said. “It’s fun to see everyone in their street clothes.”

In addition to the workshop, Burnham will be presenting her own work as a fisher-poet 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 23, at the Voodoo Room and 9 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 24, at Wet Dog Cafe.

For more information about Strength of the Tides, visit the Facebook page or [strengthofthetides.org/](http://strengthofthetides.org/). 