Gregg Marxmiller works to combat domestic violence and sexual assault in Western Alaska. He’s the outreach and communications coordinator for SAFE, a shelter serving Dillingham, a fishing community of 2,400 residents, as well as some 25 surrounding villages. It’s a geographic area roughly the size of Ohio. In any given year, an estimated 20 percent of women in this region – Bristol Bay – will become clients of SAFE, according to the shelter.

It is stressful and important work, but only part of Marxmiller’s job. He’s also a commercial setnetter. “It’s nice to be out in nature and be able to do both jobs. One helps balance the other,” he said.

Marxmiller has fished for Bristol Bay sockeye salmon for several summers. In 2016, the California native decided to broaden his mastery of the financial side of fishing. He attended the Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit, held in Juneau that year.
The summit is a three-day event sponsored by Alaska Sea Grant and others that draws together people who are new to commercial fishing or those who are considering it as a career. Topics include finance, taxes and insurance, the science and regulation of fisheries management, boat maintenance, fuel efficiency, and more.

Attendees get to network and learn from veteran fishermen, legislators, government officials, lenders, direct marketers, and seafood industry leaders.

“There’s a ton of camaraderie there,” he said.

Lea Klingert agreed.

“The networking with their peers is really invaluable. Getting out and meeting each other face to face and realizing they have a lot in common and knowing they are great resources, it’s great,” said Klingert, chief executive of the Alaska Commercial Fishing and Agriculture Bank.

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Klingert is a frequent speaker at the summit, covering topics like the five C’s of credit: capacity, collateral, capital, conditions, and character.

**Making taxes interesting**

The summit soaks participants in a waterfall of information about complicated and, let’s face it, somewhat tedious topics like bookkeeping. Marxmiller said the presenters are good about boiling it down and making it intriguing and easy to grasp.

“There was a guy who talked about taxes and another guy who spoke about insurance. If you can talk about taxes and insurance and make it interesting, you’re solid,” Marxmiller said.

Amanda Johnston, formerly of Kasilof and now of Homer, setnetted in Cook Inlet for 17 years.

The Kenai Peninsula fisherman now deckhands on a drift gillnet boat, the F/V Loki, in Bristol Bay during the summer. Johnston attended the Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit the same year Marxmiller did.

Johnston, in her mid-30s, at first thought she was too old to participate. But she spoke about it with Torie Baker, Alaska Sea Grant’s woman-on-the-ground in Cordova.

“I said, ‘I’m not that young.’ And Torie said, ‘It’s not just for young people. It’s for transitioning fishermen,’” Johnston said.
**Not just for youth**

While most of the participants are age 40 or younger, others are older and are either just getting into commercial fishing or are interested in switching gear groups or trying their hand at direct marketing. Although the conference is called the Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit, no one should feel they’re too old to attend, Baker said.

Johnston and her husband, Aaron, got a lot of useful information from the speakers and also from peers. The energy she got from the conference was useful when she and Aaron decided to make a major investment in the Bristol Bay sockeye salmon fishery.

Late last year, the couple purchased a commercial fishing permit for $95,000. They’re in the process of closing on a loan for another $95,000 to buy the F/V Northland. They’re working with the state’s commercial fishing revolving loan fund, which helps to sponsor the summit and sends loan officers to help attendees understand the program and apply if they’re interested.

“It’s our goal to get the next generation of Alaskans into the fisheries,” said Jim Andersen, lending and collections manager at the fund.

**Graybeards and greenhorns**

That’s the purpose of the summit as well: to reverse a trend called “the graying of the fleet,” a well-documented area of research by Alaska Sea Grant, part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences.

The basic problem is that commercial fishing permit holders in Alaska are aging, and young people face many barriers when trying to break into the business. The trend stems in part to the government’s decision to limit entry to commercial fishing through catch shares (also known as individual fishing quotas or IFQs) and other programs.

The average age of a commercial fisherman in Alaska was 50 years in 2014, up from 40 years in 1980. Meanwhile, the number of Alaskans under 40 holding fishing permits fell from 38 percent of total permits in 1980 to 17 percent in 2013.

“Most fishermen are graybeards,” said Marxmiller. He cited one of the main reasons why: “It’s hard to get money.”

For Marxmiller, he got lucky.

He took out commercial loans for a boat and his permit. But he also “had family who would float me some loans.”

“I had easy entry,” he said.

**Tolerating risk**

Fishing is known for its volatility, which turns some people away. Sometimes the fish simply don’t show up. Prices crash. Permit costs spike. Any number of things can make fishing a shaky proposition. Despite the challenges, some people thrive on it, including the Johnstons.
"I like the risk," Amanda Johnston said. "I like the singular focus of fishing. It’s easy to detach from the world, from your phone, or the Internet. You’ve got one job to do: find and catch fish. I like to work with my hands and be out in nature."

Connecticut native Elma Burnham also fishes in Bristol Bay and does marketing for a family-owned business called Wild for Salmon. A past attendee of the summit, Burnham said the best part was the opportunity to bond with other young fishermen and trade stories.

“There’s a lot of shared culture that goes on in Alaska fishing. We are all doing the same thing but we rarely get to see each other. It’s a really nice excuse to get people together in the same room.”

Paula Dobbyn is an Anchorage-based writer. She also handles communications for Alaska Sea Grant.