

PACIFIC **Currents**

FALL 2024



Healthy, Happy, and Thriving!

A window into the day in the life of animal care at the Aquarium.

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LETTER FROM THE CEO

Animal Care, Connection, and Beyond

Our CEO encourages us to connect deeply with animals as a way to fuel our heart and creativity.

Have you ever talked out loud to your cat? Or your dog? You might even have muttered stuff like, “oh you are so cute,” “you are such a bad boy,” or even “I love you.” Do not be embarrassed. When we do this, it is not because we are expecting to have an intellectual conversation. Rather, we do so because we are connected to our animals and have a sense of their inner lives. And if you have talked to your dog or cat, you also probably are aware of when your pets are “sad.” Of course, words like “sad” or any human vocabulary is inadequate when it comes to capturing the thoughts, emotions, feelings, and moods of animals. Science has only just begun to appreciate the full possibility of sentience and emotions in animals.

I bring this up because the theme of this *Pacific Currents* issue is animal care, and it is not as clinical as it sounds. Of course, animal care entails a healthy diet, regular medical check-ups, appropriate vitamins, and medicines. But it also entails really knowing the animals in your care. We have aquarists who can tell when a fish is having a bad day or when our giant Pacific octopus is in the mood to play.

Animal care is not a box we check or some official best-practice manifesto. It is who we are.

We do not just care for our animals. We are totally tuned into their behavior, how they are acting, and what they may need. When we think about a new exhibit, we ask ourselves, “How can we make the habitats as natural as possible? Or how can we accommodate the needs for play and choice? In certain cases, we might decide NOT to have animals for which we feel we could not provide an adequate habitat and quality of life. Animal care is about a relationship between humans and animals with never-ending learning about animal needs. We are in the midst of an exciting time in science when researchers are discovering surprising dimensions of animal emotions and communication.

Ingenious experiments with honeybee foraging behavior have led biologists to suggest honeybees manifest depression after experiencing stress. Experiments have shown that the boldness or shyness of fish can be influenced by their life experiences. Meanwhile, many of you probably read about the twenty-year-old orca who carried her dead calf for seventeen days on what experts termed a “tour of grief” off the coast of Washington state and British Columbia a few years ago. But all that we can do is observe behavior—and on that behavior we impose our preconceived notions.

In closing, I want to mention an orca behavior that has been in the news a lot recently and that reminds us of how much we have to learn about wild animals. Over 673 boats have been rammed by one pod of orcas off the coast of Spain—with seven boats actually sunk by the encounters. The internet has been flooded with stories of an “angry ocean” and orcas getting revenge on humans because of our damage to oceans. Meanwhile, several orca experts counter that these incidents should not be called attacks because

they are not attacking; they are playing with the boats. The behavior is indisputable—what is going on in the orca’s mind when ramming the boats remains a mystery.

The bottom line is this: when we take the time to connect with and wonder about what is going on in the brains of animals, we are uplifted.

We are less self-absorbed and more aware of something beyond the grinding stresses of modern life. Come to the Aquarium, select your favorite animal, and observe them—ask yourself why they are doing what they are doing? Try to imagine what they perceive and sense in the environment. This might seem like a silly exercise. Trust me. It is not. The act of truly trying to understand how another species sees and senses the environment will liberate you from modernity and fuel your heart and creativity. It might even give you practice at putting yourself in the shoes of other humans.

Peter Kareiva

Dr. Peter Kareiva joined the Aquarium of Pacific in August 2020. He holds a B.A. in zoology, M.S. in environmental biology, and Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology. He is committed to science that engages the public and believes that connecting to nature is the one thing that can overcome the deep political and social divides that plague the nation today.



FRESH VOICES

Healthy Habitats Inspire a Healthy Planet

Thriving habitats and animals motivate guests to understand and care for the underwater world.

The Aquarium stands as a vital bridge between our community and the beautiful ocean. Animal care staff meticulously create exhibits that ensure every kelp, rock, and species coexist harmoniously. Their dedication to replicating natural habitats provide healthy homes for the animals, as well as a glimpse into the wonder of the ocean for us. Their effort profoundly influences the public by providing one of the few opportunities for many to witness the underwater world.

Guests come to the Aquarium to connect with these environments and learn. Through interactive exhibits and educational programs, the Aquarium helps us understand the delicate balance of marine ecosystems and the urgent need to protect them. As a

child, I would leave the Aquarium fascinated by the invertebrates I had seen in the tidepool exhibits. I loved learning about sting-rays using their natural camouflage to avoid predators.

Every visit fueled my passion to learn more about marine life. I'm not alone in this experience; I've seen the same excitement in my parents' eyes when they encounter unfamiliar animals. They always want to know more about these animals while seeing them in their beautiful exhibits during their Aquarium visit.

Not long ago, I was a child at the Aquarium eager to learn more about marine life. Now, I'm a graduate student in Dr. Douglas Pace's lab at California State University, Long Beach learning about marine invertebrates through the lens of ecophysiology. Our goal is to understand how marine organisms respond to environmental changes, such as those caused by anthropogenic activities.

Warming ocean temperatures have enabled purple sea urchin populations to increase dramatically across the West Coast. The abundance of urchins has led to them overgrazing giant and bull kelp, destroying kelp forests. This ecological shift inspired my master's thesis project, which is studying purple sea urchins during their larval phase to better understand how different temperatures impact early development and adult biogeographic distribution. The larval phase of marine invertebrates is the most thermally sensitive stage, crucial for their survival and successful settlement as juveniles. My thesis project is one of many steps towards understanding how to mitigate the damage caused by purple sea urchins to the ecosystem and restore kelp forest communities.

My research interests have been inspired by growing up near polluted beaches and the enlightening trips to the Aquarium that taught me what those environments should look like. I realized early on that I was destined to help the oceans, but I cannot do it alone. The tireless efforts of Aquarium staff forge our connection to the ocean, and it is up to us to strengthen that bond when we return home.

By working together and taking action, we can create a cleaner and healthier ocean for future generations. This includes

reducing plastic waste, supporting sustainable fishing practices, and advocating for policies that protect our oceans. Through beach cleanups, supporting marine conservation organizations, and promoting awareness, we can all contribute to preserving and protecting our oceans.

Marjorie Lian

Marjorie Lian is a member of the editorial committee of the Teen Climate Council and has been a volunteer at the Aquarium of the Pacific for three years. With the Teen Climate Council, Lian has completed projects with the goal of raising awareness about climate change, such as the children's book titled *Yutaka Finds a Friend*. She has also been a part of many of the youth programs, including Junior Exhibit Guides, Ocean Neighbors, and VolunTEENS.



CONSERVATION CORNER

Animal Welfare: An Industry Standard

As a nonprofit education and conservation organization, the Aquarium of the Pacific is committed to setting the standard in animal well-being and welfare to ensure our animals are healthy, happy, and thrive under our care.

The Aquarium of the Pacific is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Established in 1924, AZA is a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, education, science, and recreation.

Since 1974 AZA has used an accreditation process to certify that its member institutions are meeting the highest standards. The

standards are centered around three core principles, animal welfare, safety, and guest engagement. Institutional performance is measured in 12 areas, ranging from animal care, welfare, & management to safety & security. Adjustments are made to the standards each year as needed, allowing them to continue to represent the best practices possible.

Accreditation

The accreditation process requires an institution to perform a self-evaluation as well as undergo a peer evaluation or inspection every five years. The Aquarium of the Pacific was first accredited in 2000 and has met or exceeded the standards at each five-year review since. As of March 2024, 235 other institutions are accredited by AZA. That is less than 10 percent of the animal exhibitors licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture.

The Aquarium exceeds the AZA standard by providing at a minimum animal welfare assessments two times per year, and in many cases more frequent assessments.

Animal welfare is the core of the accreditation standards. It is both a specific category of standards, as well as addressed in the prologue of each of the other categories of standards. Animal welfare is defined as “an animal’s collective physical and mental states over a period of time and is measured on a continuum from good to poor using both input and output-based measures.” As of 2017 the standards require that the welfare of each animal at an institution be evaluated at least annually. This means all animals, from the megafauna like sea lions to the tiny invertebrates like coral.

The Five Domains of Animal Welfare

Nutrition, environment, physical health, behavior, and physiological wellbeing are the five domains of animal welfare and form the structure of the Aquarium’s animal welfare assessments. During an assessment two to four staff score an animal and its habitat

across a wide range of indicators such as interactions with the public, light intensity, diet, and activity level. A detailed rubric documents what a score of 1 (unacceptable) or 5 (excellent) means in each indicator, as tailored to each animal or group of animals.

Aquarium staff store these assessments in our animal database, Tracks. Tracks has a record for each animal that is cared for by the Aquarium. The record has a wide range of information from birth-day to vet records. Each welfare assessment is included in the animal's record, and Aquarium staff are able to use long-term records to identify trends and holistically address issues by adjusting care regimes. Staff can also use Tracks to document daily activities like enrichment offered as well as remarkable behaviors. Record keeping and animal-specific enrichment are other elements of the AZA Animal Care, Welfare & Management standards.

Giving the Best Care Possible

The Aquarium's Animal Welfare Policy and Procedures is the guidebook for how staff give our animals the best care possible as well as meet, and whenever possible exceed, AZA standards. Staff participate in mandatory semi-annual welfare education, and the practices they use continually evolve as new information is received - all with the goal to improve animal welfare. This goal extends beyond the Aquarium's campus to the industry as a whole. Staff share what they have learned with peers at conferences as well as through updating AZA Animal Care Manuals. Aquarium staff also volunteer as AZA inspectors to assist with the peer review portion of the AZA accreditation process.

Sustained, High Quality Animal Wellbeing is a Team Effort.

While animal care staff have the primary responsibility, all departments at the Aquarium participate in achieving this outcome. You can also assist by practicing respectful engagement with the animals, such as not tapping on the exhibits, and following rules shared with you by the staff, such as gentle two-finger touch at the touch exhibits.



FEATURED ARTICLE

Healthy, Happy, and Thriving!

At 7:00 a.m. Megan Smylie, the Aquarium’s sea otter program manager, starts her day at the Aquarium greeting her Aquarium family. Her first task is to check in on the animals under her care.

After carefully ensuring everyone is doing well, she heads over to the food prep room where restaurant-quality food is selected and prepared for the animals. There she checks the whiteboards to see if any vitamins or medicines need to be added per the prescribed care of the veterinary team. After feeding time, next on the agenda could be scrubbing down an exhibit, conducting water changes, taking water samples for testing, or perhaps conducting a thorough assessment of an animal’s health and wellbeing.

Smylie is among more than fifty animal care staff members who are dedicated to the care and welfare of the animals at the Aquarium of the Pacific from the tiniest shrimp to the largest sea lion.

Our animals are the reason we exist, our connection to nature, and our inspiration to protect and conserve. The Aquarium is committed to not only the health of every single animal, but also their wellbeing. From visual checks every morning to in-depth conversations to create a plan to provide individualized care, making sure each animal in our collection is healthy, happy, and thriving is our top priority.

The Aquarium's animal care team has a powerful bond with the animals. Our water quality lab ensures the water in exhibits is safe and meets all the needs for the various animals. The veterinary staff provides state-of-the-art medical care ranging from wellness exams to major surgeries. Volunteers also provide support with everything from food prep to exhibit cleaning. And a cross-departmental Animal Welfare Committee reviews the results of detailed assessments and discusses any concerns.

Below is a window into a day in the life of animal care at the Aquarium.

Grey Reef Sharks: Welcoming New Members to the Family

New animals are introduced to the Aquarium and new habitats for a variety of reasons. In the case of two grey reef sharks that recently were added to the Tropical Reef Habitat, it was to help show an example of a healthy reef to our guests. One of the staff members that works with these sharks is Senior Aquarist Celeste Moen, who expressed "I'm excited to have a representative of this species to help show an example of a healthy and stable reef."

All animals that arrive at the Aquarium go through a quarantine period to ensure they are disease-free and allow them time to adjust to their new home. The new sharks were monitored daily

in quarantine until they were ready to join the others on exhibit. Specialized care for these young sharks is critical for their well-being.

Each day, Moen makes visual checks to see how the sharks are swimming from both the guest perspective and from behind-the-scenes.

Six days a week, Moen feeds these sharks a specialized diet of sustainable seafood that is a specific percentage of their body weights. They are target trained to go to a specific place for feeding, making it easier for staff and engaging for the sharks. Each opportunity allows Moen to closely identify anything unusual in their behavior.

During these checks and feedings, Moen is observing specific parameters to help determine if these grey reef sharks are indeed healthy, happy, and thriving. She checks on their body condition, which includes weight, eye quality, and skin quality, and observing if the sharks are eating the food they are offered. For another parameter, she observes if the home these sharks live in is stimulating enough, asking the important question: “Are these sharks engaging with their environment?” Moen sometimes provides them with “chumsicles” to help encourage the sharks to engage with exploratory behaviors.

Moen is excited about these new additions because these two young grey reef sharks will eventually join the Aquarium’s older grey reef shark out at Shark Lagoon since this is a schooling shark species, and our goal is to get all three grey reef sharks to school together.

This future planning goes beyond caring for the animal daily but throughout their life.

Ellie the Harbor Seal: Ensuring the Best Golden Years

One of the challenges of animal care is that the animals age much like humans. Older than the Aquarium itself, the 35-year-old harbor seal named Ellie has many of the same ailments that older humans face such as mobility challenges, visual impairment, and normal wear on teeth associated with age. Two of the animal care staff that care for Ellie's needs are Mammalogists Amanda Torres and Erin Bell.

Torres and Bell work with Ellie to train specific behaviors to help get her used to various treatments such as voluntary vaccine injections, blood draws, eyedrops, ultrasounds, and x-rays.

Torres and Bell also brush Ellie's teeth every day. This helps when the veterinary team needs to interact with Ellie.

In addition, Torres and Bell observe Ellie's interaction with the other seals and sea lions in the habitat and how she moves around the habitat. Torres, Bell and the team always try to keep Ellie's training sessions positive to help encourage her to participate in her health care routine. Sometimes they introduce novel food treats, like delicious sardines, to engage her more.

These activities are consistent with all the seals and sea lions, but Ellie has another level of care because of her age. This introduces a monthly geriatric assessment, which ensures the best care is provided for Ellie. To track progress and identify if an animal's needs have changed, mammalogists such as Torres and Bell perform a geriatric welfare assessment monthly. Each welfare assessment is reviewed by the animal care team and management and can help facilitate discussions amongst the animal care team and the veterinary team to develop an action plan.

It can be a challenge taking care of geriatric animals because, according to Torres, “most animals will hide when they are sick or hurt.”

This means the team needs to continually remain on top of the care of older animals like Ellie. Through persistence, dedication, compassion, and creativity, the staff do everything possible to ensure Ellie is both healthy and thriving as she ages.

Lorikeets: One Big Happy Family

The Lorikeet Forest is home to about seventy-five to eighty birds. Keeping track and caring for this many birds requires tremendous work for our aviculturists, or bird care staff. Each day the aviculturists check the whole exhibit. They look at each bird, checking for any unusual behaviors. During this process, the aviculturists will feed the birds, providing more chances to observe them up close. Heather Pens, a lead aviculturist at the Aquarium, describes healthy lorikeet behavior as “highly social.”

Lorikeets are a social bird species, and they feed in societal ranking, beginning with the more dominant individuals.

An example of an unusual behavior that would call for a team discussion is seeing a typically dominant individual lorikeet not feeding in its typical order.

Throughout the day, the aviculturists observe the lorikeets playing, preening, bathing, and vocalizing—which are signs of happy lorikeets. Staff look out for any isolated or lethargic individuals. With close to eighty birds to observe, Pens uses a system that makes identifying them from a distance easier. Each lorikeet has a numbered band and a name. Pens has added colored cable ties to some birds, which helps identify behavioral tags, genetic viability for breeding, and birds that need extra observation for behavioral or medical reasons.

Care of the lorikeets also involves monitoring breeding activities. Successful breeding is a good indicator of their health and well-being. Recently, two scaly breasted lorikeets bred quickly after being introduced to a group of lorikeets behind-the-scenes. Their egg hatched and now is a fledgling learning how to be a lorikeet by socializing with other lorikeets. Pens remarked, “Breeding is the biggest compliment.”

When the birds can raise their young without staff assistance, we know we are setting up the best possible conditions for them to thrive.

Smoky Jungle Frogs: A Living Home

In May 2024 the Aquarium reimagined and reintroduced its frogs and other amphibians in the exhibit *FROGS: Facing a Changing World*. During this renovation, all the new habitats were converted to bioactive, which means everything in the habitat that could be a living organism is in fact a living organism thus completing a small ecosystem. Using bioactive habitats for the amphibians’ homes allows them to live in an ecosystem like their natural habitat, which in turn helps keep the amphibians happy, healthy, and thriving.

One of the largest is the smoky jungle frog habitat. It features over fifty different plant species native to South America and Costa Rica.

There are also decomposers that help take care of the waste in the habitat; these animals include isopods, springtails, and earthworms. The plants and the decomposers all support the primary animal—the smoky jungle frogs.

Erin Lundy, the manager of conservation initiatives, said, “... the quality of life for amphibians is related to the quality of the habitat.”

With biologically active components, sensitive amphibians like smoky jungle frogs can thrive.

Caring for Animals Like Family

Happy, healthy, and thriving animals create a foundation for trust and connectedness that exists between the husbandry staff and the animals that they care for daily. They are like family, and like family we care deeply for each of them, striving to provide the best possible care, well-being and quality of life. The impact of the Aquarium's animal welfare practices can be seen and experienced in the Pacific Visions Theater film, *Love & Life Beyond the Glass*.

As Smylie and the other animal care staff clean their stations and habitats around the Aquarium for the next day, they get ready to return to their own families. But even then thinking about their Aquarium family is never far from their minds.



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Animal Updates

Read about a rescued loggerhead sea turtle and remember Yutaka the giant sea bass.

Remembering Yutaka

Aquarium staff is mourning the unexpected loss of Yutaka the giant sea bass, who passed away on July 17. “As the first of his species successfully hatched and raised at a public aquarium, he was loved, especially by those who raised him and watched him grow over the years. Yutaka holds a special place in our hearts,” said Nate Jaros, Aquarium of the Pacific senior director of fish and invertebrates. “Yutaka was about less than a centimeter long when he was hatched in 2016 and grew up to approximately sixty pounds at the Aquarium. He will be greatly missed.”

Yutaka was found unresponsive in his habitat, and Aquarium staff did everything possible to save him, responding with immediate medical care. Despite all efforts, the beloved fish passed away. A

necropsy exam was conducted, and the Aquarium is awaiting any additional findings to help determine cause of death. Giant sea bass are an endangered species found in the Northwest Pacific Ocean from Humboldt, California to the Gulf of California. The Aquarium has been part of a program to help breed, rear, understand, and restore this important local kelp forest species. Yutaka's successful birth represented a monumental step in these efforts.

Aquarium Caring for Rescued Loggerhead Sea Turtle

A loggerhead sea turtle is behind the scenes at the Aquarium, where it is receiving care and rehabilitation after the Marine Mammal Center in San Luis Obispo rescued it near Avila Beach on June 17, 2024, and transferred it to the Aquarium with authorization from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA).

The turtle is twenty-two inches in length and weighs around fifty pounds. "Upon arrival, this sea turtle was hypothermic, in poor body condition with flipper wounds and eye ulcers, and dehydrated. We also took x-rays that showed that the turtle had a mild pneumonia," said Dr. Brittany Stevens, Aquarium of the Pacific veterinarian.

When it arrived, the turtle was warmed slowly to a normal temperature, started on antibiotics, and received hydration fluids, eye ointment, and care for its flipper wounds. "We have been giving the sea turtle a daily diet of mixed restaurant-quality seafood to help improve its strength and restore it to a healthy body condition," said Stacy Hammond, Aquarium of the Pacific aquarist.

Loggerhead sea turtles have a wide habitat range, so the status of this species is determined by specific regions. In the northern Pacific Ocean, loggerhead sea turtles are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, according to NOAA.

The Aquarium of the Pacific has rehabilitated and released sea turtles since 2000. Some have been fitted with satellite tracking devices that allowed scientists to gather data about their

migration patterns and habitats. The last rescued loggerhead sea turtle brought to the Aquarium was rehabilitated and released back into the ocean in November 2015. The Aquarium recently rehabilitated and released a rescued green sea turtle in May 2024.



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Philanthropy Highlights

Read about the small supporters, the future veterinarians, and volunteers inspired by the Aquarium's efforts and programs.

Small Supporters, Big Impact

A heartfelt thank you goes out to the University Montessori School's Kindergarten class for their incredible support of the Aquarium through their annual philanthropy project. Led by Miss Elizabeth, twenty-five enthusiastic students raised over one thousand dollars to help their favorite animals: sea otters and octopuses.

The Montessori Schools of Irvine, founded by Cheryll and Richard Ruszat, aims to teach its students the value of collective impact. "We want them to know that every little thing they do helps. The kids were so excited and proud to share how much they had

raised,” said Cecelia McGregor, director of University Montessori, one of their schools located on the UC Irvine campus.

The students took charge of decorating collection jars and fundraising with their families. They raised funds through chores, lemonade stands, bake sales, and spreading awareness about the Aquarium of the Pacific. Their efforts supported critical work like our partnership with Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Sea Otter Surrogacy program. Through this program we play a vital role in the rehabilitation and care of orphaned sea otter pups, preparing them for reintroduction into the wild. Through this initiative, experienced adult sea otters at the Aquarium serve as surrogate mothers, teaching the pups essential survival skills.

“These young philanthropists exemplify the idea that anyone, no matter their age, can make a difference. Thanks to the generosity of supporters like them, we can make a lasting impact on the lives of sea otters and other marine animals. Together, we can protect our oceans and support the causes that matter most to us, fostering a healthier, more vibrant ocean for future generations,” said Ryan Ashton, vice president of development.

Learn more about conservation initiatives like [Sea Otter Surrogacy](#).

Inspiring Future Veterinarians

In honor of National Dolphin Day on April 14, Millie the dolphin from MemorialCare Miller Children’s & Women’s Hospital Long Beach visited the Aquarium for a checkup and brought a few of her friends along to assist Veterinary Tech Louise Leborgne and Dr. Brittany Stevens with the exam. They learned the similarities between animal and human care and helped with a few stuffed animal patients.

“Thank you, Aquarium of the Pacific, for being a wonderful partner and having such a positive impact on the lives of our pediatric patients!” said Rita Goshert, director of the Child Life Program at the hospital. “The Aquarium’s programs and support have touched the lives of hundreds of our pediatric patients and their families through the weekly live television broadcast to patients’

rooms, in-person visits, and opportunities to send many of our families to the Aquarium for special family days.”

Earth Day Volunteers

To celebrate Earth Day in April, 50 employees from seven of the Aquarium’s corporate supporters got their hands dirty with a morning of habitat restoration at the Los Cerritos Wetlands, a local and crucial habitat in Long Beach. The hard-working volunteers removed 400 plus pounds of non-native, invasive species, while planting more than 70 new plants of eight native species that will grow to restore native habitats for generations to come. Thank you to all who participated.



FALL 2024

Aquarium Accolades

Read about Aquarium honorees from our community.

International Children's Festival

Alina Jean-Baptiste was this year's Young Hero Award recipient and honored at the nineteenth International Children's Festival. She is a student at Long Beach Polytechnic High School and dual enrolled at Long Beach Community College.

Jean-Baptiste is active in the Poly Green Team and leads fundraising events and information booths on environmental issues. She manages the club's social media accounts where she engages followers on important topics such as climate change. Through her efforts Jean-Baptiste hopes to help people realize and understand how to make a difference in their lives and others.

Earth Day Festival

Skye Moret was honored at this year's Earth Day Teen Climate Fest with the Corinne Monroe Earth Day Award.

Moret is an assistant professor in the Pacific Northwest College of Art at Willamette University. She teaches classes on collaborative design and design systems. With a background in marine science, Moret's early research on marine plastic pollution drew attention to the need to further research this important topic. This led to the first dedicated scientific trip to study plastics in the Atlantic Ocean. Moret uses art to convey scientific data.

For more than a decade, Moret has spent numerous hours at sea teaching oceanography, working with the U.S. Antarctic Program, and conducting research with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. She inspired students at the Aquarium in a Teen Science Café in 2023, which can be watched on the Aquarium's YouTube channel.

Pacific Islander Festival

Geri Kuhia Brigoli, also known as "Auntie Geri," was honored at the twenty-first annual Pacific Islander Festival with the Heritage Award.

Auntie Geri is a singer dedicated to the preservation of Hawaiian culture and language through music. Songs are an important part of Hawaiian culture, serving roles of communication, celebration, and preserving history. Auntie Geri grew up on Oahu in the town of La'ie, where she sang with her parents forming the Kuhia Ohana for many years. Auntie Geri has spread this Hawaiian tradition at numerous other festivals and events, including the hula dance festival Merrie Monarch, and even with music legends such as Elvis Presley.

Locally, she has been part of Long Beach's E Hula Mau Polynesian Festival and performed at the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center. Due to her numerous contributions, she had a scholarship named after for students studying the performing arts.

Pride Night

Jessie Santiago was honored at this year's Pride Night with the Heritage Award. She accepted the award alongside Cal Bigari, a co-founder of Salon Benders. Santiago is an artist, entrepreneur, and community leader dedicated to creating spaces and opportunities for all people, including those in the LGBTQ+ community.

In 2017 Santiago rejuvenated one of Long Beach's historic landmarks by establishing Salon Benders. There, she fostered an inclusive environment for many while leading a team of stylists practicing trauma-informed beauty. This unique approach resulted in a strong community and a vital place where LGBTQ+ individuals could freely express themselves. Although Salon Benders recently closed its doors, Santiago remains committed to her mission of creating inclusive spaces.