

New store aims to revive interest in aquariums

By Rose Simone, Record staff

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WATERLOO — The first aquatic creatures people encounter when they walk into the new Aquariums By Design store in Waterloo are the ones the proprietors probably won't sell many of — sharks.

A big shark and stingray pond is at the front of the store, complete with small sharks suited to aquarium environments.

"It does take up a lot of prime real estate in the store and there are very few people I know of who will put a 1,200 gallon pond into their homes, but I did it because I love sharks," says Stace Bleich, who runs the store with his wife Jaime.



rec-aquariums-17. Stace (left) and Jaime Bleich opened their Aquariums by Design store in Waterloo after 15 years of installing and maintaining aquariums. David Bebee/Record staff Source: Record staff

The Baden couple has been in the business of installing and maintaining aquariums for 15 years. They operated out of their house and had staff on the road looking after aquariums for clients.

The store, which opened recently in the Canadian Tire Plaza at Erb Street West and Ira Needles Boulevard in Waterloo, is a much riskier venture because of the large outlay of capital to stock it and the staff that are required to maintain the 125 fish tanks.

Aquariums have been a passion for Stace Bleich throughout his life, one he inherited from his father, an aquarium hobbyist who always kept a number of colourful aquariums in their home when he was growing up.

After working in an aquarium store in Kitchener, he started his own business cleaning and maintaining aquariums in 1997.

That business now has clients across the province. It maintains everything from standalone aquariums, like the ones people see in dental offices, to big built-in tanks that commercial establishments have as attractions.

Aquariums by Design cleans and maintains the giant fish tank and stream features found at Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World in Vaughan. The tanks are so large divers have to go in to do the maintenance. "That is a huge account for us," Bleich says.

Opening the retail store seemed like a natural progression, he says. "Over the years, we had a lot of clients asking us where they could come and see our tanks and pick out fish, but we were home based so the only way they could do that was from our website."

But operating a store is a challenge. "You have to maintain the water quality, keep the fish healthy, and keep the tanks stocked. It is a lot of work, and you can't just take a break from that," Bleich says.

The store has a staff of seven while the maintenance business employs five people.

Stace and Jaime have been working 14-hour days over the past two months to get the store looking just right. The store has painted undersea mural art on the walls, replicas of palm trees and life-sized fish replicas hanging from the ceiling, including a replica of a 10-foot great white shark.

Although some people do keep sharks as pets, the shark and stingray pond has an educational value, Bleich says. "Usually, the only way kids can see sharks is if they go somewhere where they can see them in a huge tank. But with a pond like this one, they can get up close and we might even have petting times."

The store, which has a staff of seven (five people work in the original maintenance business) also contains a 300-gallon saltwater reef tank.

Bleich has gone to great lengths to stock the store with harder-to-find products such as Manzanita wood. "That is really sought after by people who have live plants in their tanks, and it took us a while to get it," he says.

He says he located his first store in Waterloo because it has a growing population, with new subdivisions coming on stream. He hopes the store will help to revive the hobby of keeping aquariums, which has been on the wane. Statistics show the average age of aquarium hobbyists is about 55.

"The kids are not really asking for aquariums now, they are asking for the Xbox or the Wii," Bleich says. "So bringing aquariums back into kids' bedrooms will be challenging."

That's one of the reasons he went to great lengths to make the store bright and interesting. "I wanted to create an environment that would show people how fun and exciting having an aquarium can be."

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