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In awe of a Queen Angel

MARSHALL ARTS by *Marshall Ward*

WATERLOO - After one look at a Queen Angel, with its shimmering blues and yellows, I could only muster an awestruck "wow." "Queen Angels are considered by many to be the most beautiful fish in the ocean," Stace Bleich, owner of Aquariums by Design in Waterloo, told me recently when my family visited the new store in the Canadian Tire plaza at Erb Street West and Ira Needles Boulevard.

The Queen Angel fish is one of the first aquatic creatures we encountered walking into the brightly lit store. It was swimming around in a 1000-gallon indoor pond that also includes sharks and stingrays. "I wanted to create an atmosphere where people feel like they're on vacation looking at exotic species of fish," said Bleich, who opened the business last month with his wife Jaime.

The Baden couple has been servicing aquariums for 15 years. "The underwater world has always fascinated me," said Bleich, who got his first job at a local aquarium store when he was 14. "There seems to be a trend in this industry with aquarium stores to make the fish rooms dark and gloomy. I understand the idea, as they don't want customers to see anything but the fish and tanks, but I disagree with that theory. I think you can have a bright fish room and still show off your fish."

It works, I told Bleich, as I marvelled at the store's tropical environment, complete with a large bubble column, a tiki bar (fish bagging station), artificial palm trees, painted ocean murals, and life-sized replicas of puffer fish and a shark hanging from the ceiling. Even the floor is the colour of sand. "We wanted people to feel like they're on the beach, and we're working hard to create a fun and exciting experience," said Jaime.

My daughters were fascinated as they took their time gazing into the tranquility of over 100 tanks, watching and identifying starfish, hermit crabs, corals, sea anemones, spiny urchins and aquatic snails, along with a vast variety of freshwater and saltwater fish. "Freshwater is beautiful, but the colours you get with saltwater tanks is just unbelievable and every day you see something different with the live rock. Saltwater is becoming a lot more popular for hobbyists," said Bleich.

Bleich told me the average age of aquarium enthusiasts is 55, but he hopes to change that. "I want kids to be excited about aquariums, because nowadays children don't ask for aquariums as much as they used to," he said. "They ask for video games and I think they're missing out on an amazing hobby."

With nearly 300 clients across Ontario, the Bleichs maintain everything from standalone tanks in retirement homes and doctor's offices to big, built-in aquariums in restaurants and commercial establishments. "You can really lose yourself in an amazing waterscape, because if an aquarium is done properly and done right, there's nothing more beautiful than a living piece of art in your own living room. It's unparalleled." Jaime chimed in: "We really wanted to create a store where people will say, 'Wow, aquariums are really neat and maybe we should think about getting a tank.'"

Before leaving the tropical splendor of Aquariums by Design, I took one more look at the Queen Angel, peering closely at the brilliantly dark blue ring on her forehead — the crown of the "Queen."

Wow.

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