

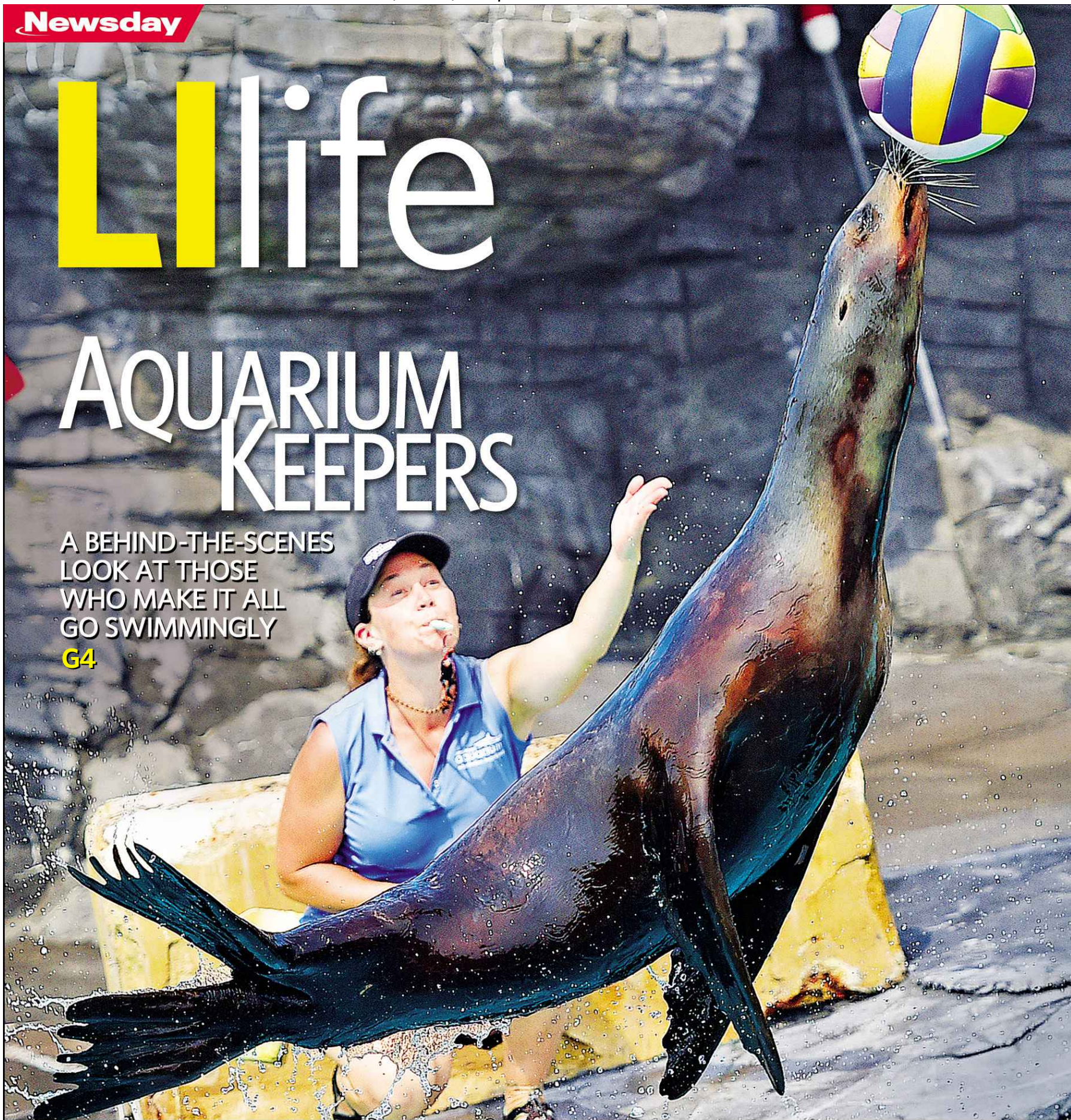
Newsday

Ll life

AQUARIUM KEEPERS

A BEHIND-THE-SCENES
LOOK AT THOSE
WHO MAKE IT ALL
GO SWIMMINGLY

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Coming out as a woman

84 YEARS AS JOEL, 5 AND COUNTING AS JOANNE G27



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Max, an Atlantic harbor seal, gets his teeth brushed by Candy Paparo, director of animal training at the Long Island Aquarium and Exhibition Center in Riverhead.



Maggie Seiler, above, primary penguin keeper at the Long Island Aquarium and Exhibition Center, feeds African black-footed penguins.



Left, the hands of animal trainer Jenna Mercurio support Max's flipper during the morning feeding.



TEAMWORK AT THE AQUARIUM

Behind the scenes with the sea creatures and their caretakers

PHOTOS BY THOMAS A. FERRARA ■ TEXT BY JIMIN KIM

Phil Argiros busily scrubbed the algae off a rock monolith in the “Lost City of Atlantis” shark exhibit, forming a fog and blowing bubbles out of his scuba mask into the path of eight gray-eyed sharks. The creatures, some as heavy as 250 pounds, roved around like sentinels, watching Argiros with their pale eyes.

The scene at the Long Island Aquarium and Exhibition Center in Riverhead — where Argiros, 40, has worked for four years — may be worth its own special cost of admission.

“We always have to have our guard up,” said Argiros, the aquarium’s director of life support systems. “But at the same time, you can’t be tense about it. If you’re afraid and tense, they [the sharks] can read into that.”

Argiros and 14 other trainers and caretakers, in addition to about a dozen summer interns, nurture nearly 5,000 animals



and maintain their habitats at the more than 3-acre facility. Nearly 150,000 visitors come to the aquarium in the summer, almost half the annual total.

On a recent busy Tuesday, Joseph Yaiullo, better known as “Joe Fish” by his staff, tirelessly walked — and sometimes jogged — around the facility to help.

Yaiullo, 52, the aquarium curator and co-founder, has a bachelor’s degree in marine biology like many of his animal specialists, and has managed the aquarium for 15 years. Being humble and flexible is key, he said.

“I mop, you mop,” said Yaiullo, recalling what he told a former intern about how everyone must chip in.

Of the nearly 40 exhibits, he takes special pride in the 20,000-gallon coral reef tank, which houses a plethora of corals and fish — mostly from the tropical waters of the Indian and Pacific oceans — and which Yaiullo said is responsible for all his gray hairs.

The next morning, he jumped into the tank in his wet suit to wipe the glass. He also pinched off small chunks from large corals and planted them around the vibrant underwater garden to expand it. It was a tranquil task, unlike when Cecil, a seal weighing almost 200 pounds, sank his dog-like teeth into Yaiullo’s right forearm during a veterinary exam last year.

There’s no likelihood of that in the Penguin Pavilion, where Maggie Seiler raises 16 African black-footed penguins amid hilly terrain and a 4-foot-deep central oasis.

“I’ll sit down on the floor and they’ll jump in my lap,” said Seiler, 29, who has been at the aquarium 13 years.

She fed them small fish as one of the seven young penguins affectionately nipped her shoelaces and nine older penguins lounged nearby.

“We really do have a good bond, the younger ones and I.”



ON THE COVER Candy Paparo works with Bunker, a California sea lion, during a show at the aquarium.

Joe Yaiullo, curator and co-founder of the Long Island Aquarium and Exhibition Center, waves to Kaylee Kimmerling, 3, as he cleans the glass in the coral reef exhibit.

■ See a video and more photos at newsday.com/lilife

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THE LIFE AQUATIC

— Continued

In the hospital at the Long Island Aquarium and Exhibition Center, volunteer Justine Dill, left, executive director and senior biologist Rob DiGiovanni and education coordinator Samantha Rosen affix a tag to a rescued Kemp's Ridley sea turtle. The turtle was scheduled to be released back into the wild.



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Rudy, a young Kemp's Ridley sea turtle rescued in the waters off New Jersey after apparently being struck by a boat, feeds in his tank at the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation at the aquarium. He is not a candidate for release back into the wild, but is up for adoption, aquarium officials said.



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Animal trainer Nicole MacDonald wears protective clothing to clean the Snow Monkey Habitat.



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A sand tiger shark makes his way through the water in the shark exhibit.



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Coral grown by ReefGen, a wholesaler that uses space at the aquarium to grow coral for the marine aquarium trade.

Rachael Vietheer, an aquarist, dives with the sharks to clean their exhibit of algae.



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Buckets of fish ready for trainers to use in their morning feeding of the seals.

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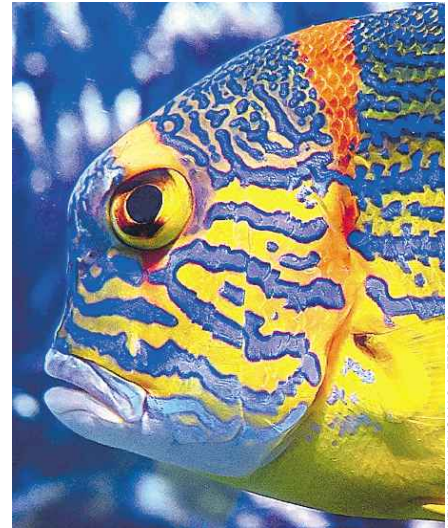
SEEING THE SEA

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Reegan Johnson, 3, of Rocky Point, watches a California sea lion swim by upside down in its habitat at the Long Island Aquarium and Exhibition Center in Riverhead.



A threadfin snapper in the coral exhibit.



An as yet unnamed Atlantic Harbor seal pup.

ALL CREATURES, GREAT AND SMALL

When I arrived at the Long Island Aquarium and Exhibition Center in Riverhead, I was instantly captured by the diversity of life. The creatures, both aquatic and terrestrial and sometimes similar in appearance, possessed personalities unique to themselves. Curious, intense, wise, even goofy, they wore it for all to see. To look into their faces was to understand their being . . . and it was beautiful. The collection of images here attempts to convey this.

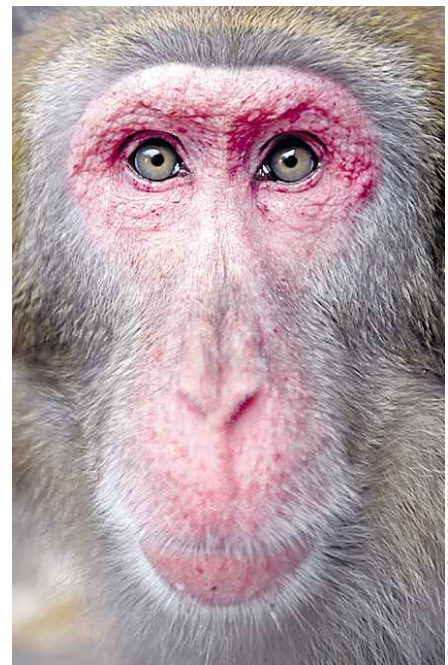
— THOMAS A. FERRARA



A green iguana in the Ancient Reptile Ruins exhibit.



Tube anemone.



A Japanese snow monkey (Japanese macaque) in the Lost Temple of Atlantis exhibit.