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LATINOS

High Hopes for Lolita the Orca's Homecoming Improves

JOSÉ SOTO MARTINEZ MARCH 20, 2023 7 MINS

Lolita the killer whale, who was taken to Florida from the wild and has spent most of her life in captivity, at Miami Seaquarium. Credit... Miami Seaquarium

After suffering from a severe infection last year, Lolita the orca's condition has improved, fueling hope that the whale could be returned to her native waters off the Pacific Northwest, where conservation groups have a campaign for her life that concludes tomorrow.

In a report released in late February, a pair of independent veterinarians working alongside the nonprofit Friends of Toki and Marine Seaquarium found that the 57-year-old orca, known as Tokaani, or dancing, signs of significant improvement and better health.

The progress opens up the possibility that Lolita, the second oldest orca in captivity at roughly 19 years, could be transported out of Miami-Dade County and back home to the Pacific Northwest — where her relatives, including the 55-year-old male believed to be her partner, still reside.

"It's too early to get excited," reads the February 28 report (attached below), "however, there is reason to allow some optimism to enter the discussion."

Lolita's new ownership and in light of her poor health, the Seaquarium last March announced the retirement of its star performer. A surprise statement in December 2022, CEO Eduardo Alber of the Dolphin Company, the aquatic park's new owner, said that he and his staff are "100 percent committed" to efforts to release Lolita.

The recent health updates appear to put Lolita one step closer to returning home.

"She looks good clinically although it was expected that she occasionally seemed uncomfortable, stiffer and swimming well in Ted's trainer's behavior reports. Her white blood cell parameters continue to improve with a number of values nearing levels we have not observed in the past," wrote the veterinarians James McBain and Stephanie Norman states.

The promising report comes that in February, the whale's condition, as well as her energy, appetite, and engagement in daily activities, remained stable.

But as noted by the International Marine Mammal Project (IMMP), a more social and active whale would be better for Lolita's health, and the Center for Biological Diversity Science and determining that Lolita's healthy enough to survive the stress of a transfer from Miami to the Pacific Northwest.

Fatoki would also be required to locate the site for a sanctuary and build the infrastructure necessary to care for Lolita.

"Many have advocated for Tokaani's return for many years," the IMMP said on its blog last week. "Because of that wave of support, it remaining Tokaani's home is overcome."

Sacred Sea, an indigenous-led nonprofit, has worked with the Whale Sanctuary Project on a plan to transport Lolita to a proposed sanctuary nearby where she was reared as a calf. The groups have described the sanctuary as a "secure and protected area within the Salish Sea" off the coast of Washington state, where the whale, Sea Shepherd, and other orcas will be visible to passing vessels.

The Whale Sanctuary Project nonprofit has been working on the design for a sanctuary in Port Angeles, Wash., which would include a floating pen in the bay, open water and a "dock" that would allow the whale to be lifted and walked a walkway for staff members to observe and provide medical care to captive whales that have been released.

Lori Marino, president of the Whale Sanctuary Project, said that the recent death of Kalia, a male orca in Canada's Vancouver Aquarium, underscoring the release other aging, captive whales. It is an estimated age of 47, Kalia died of a bacterial infection in the Canadian aquarium's pen on March 1.

"Despite being a member of a highly social species, [Kalia] was forced to spend the last years of her life in a tiny concrete tank without the company of a single member of her own kind," Marino wrote.

Lolita has been in captivity at Miami Seaquarium since 1970, when she was captured in Puget Sound off the coast of Washington at around four years old to the dismay of her family. Since then, the whale has endured with and without a dozen of young orcas captured by aquatic parks around the U.S. either died or, in the case of Lolita's mate Tilikum, Lolita has survived for more than 50 years, most recently on Virginia Key.

February 28, 2023
Dear Friends of Tokaani and Friends of Marine Life,
Lolita's health continues to improve. Please find a report, below.
Based on blood chemistries, fecal samples, and behavioral observations, Lolita's health continues to improve. Her white blood cell parameters continue to improve with a number of values nearing levels we have not observed in the past. Her appetite, activity level, and engagement in daily activities remained stable.
Lolita's ongoing medical issues are a bacterial infection and a mild case of gastrointestinal parasites. Her medical issues are being treated with medication and she is being monitored closely. Her medical issues are being treated with medication and she is being monitored closely

exclusively for single-family dwellings. Back then, Chervony says, the neighborhood was mostly Jewish and English-speaking.

The ethnic homogeneity of yesteryear has yielded to a predominantly Latin population composed of U.S.-born Hispanics and Latin American immigrants garnished with a splash of Brazilian nationals to complete the demographic cocktail.

Now 72, Chervony openly acknowledges the pro-development stance he has habitually adopted during his years as an elected member of the village commission. But he doubts whether all the development projects he and his colleagues on the commission have okayed will bear fruit during his lifetime.

"I'd love to see it happen, but I don't see it happening. None of these properties has a shovel in the ground," he tells *New Times*. "What I have seen is a lot of individuals purchasing these empty lots and selling us on the idea of developing them. But they keep flipping them instead."

Meet Bernard "Happy" Goldlust

The man who gave the bar its name was a natty, pistol-packing curmudgeon from the same town in Ohio that produced Dean Martin. Bernard Goldlust – his real name! – became a North Bay Village fixture in 1955 when he and a partner bought the establishment's bar and package-store license from one Dominic Civetta, a man described in a 1969 letter written by the commander of the Dade County Public Safety Department's vice and intelligence section as a "prominent Organized Crime figure."

"He was a grumpy old man," recalls Howard Inerfeld, who, along with his sibling Steven, met Goldlust in 1993 when they were negotiating the sale of the business. That he had the nickname "Happy" was wholly ironic in its provenance, Howard asserts. "Like a fat man is called 'Tiny' or a bald man is called 'Curly.'"

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"Like a fat man is called 'Tiny' or a bald man is called 'Curly'": RIP Bernard "Happy" Goldlust, who lent the bar his nickname. Photo by Jade Finlayson

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An accomplished swimmer who eschewed alcohol and always came to the bar dressed in a fashionably cut suit and necktie, Goldlust would sit in the bar's interior near its front entrance during the late afternoon and watch the tipplers come and go. Dave Fischbein first met Happy as a 15-year-old boy who the proprietor would occasionally ask to deliver liquor to the homes of loyal customers. He got to know Goldlust better when he returned to the premises as an adult in his twenties. But even in his adolescence, Fischbein could detect a certain whiff of the underworld about the Runyonesque bar owner.

"That was the air he would put out, in kind of a secretive way," says the 66-year-old land surveyor. "He was very observant and street smart, big-time. And if he knew something about the mob, he wouldn't tell you."

Much of the vintage patina that differentiates Happy's from more conventional dive destinations like **On the Rocks** in North Beach dates to Goldlust's 37-year tenure as its owner. The cash register nestled among the liquor bottles on the bar's western side has a distinctively 1950s look. The package-liquor side of the business boasts a black rotary telephone that operates on a landline and is straight out of that same decade. (It proved its worth when a hurricane knocked out local cell networks for days on end.)

Goldlust commissioned a sepia-toned mural that covers much of the eastern wall of the bar and depicts drinkers from different walks of life enjoying beverages and one another's company. Look closely, and you'll note that the elegantly coiffed woman clad in a mink stole and clutching a cigarette holder in her right hand is pockmarked with two small-caliber bullet holes, one just to the left of the part in her blond hair, the other slightly to the right of her left nostril.

Look closely at the mural and you'll note that the face of the elegantly coiffed woman is pockmarked with two small-caliber bullet holes. Photo by Jade Finlayson

Happy himself didn't entirely escape the occasionally trigger-happy ways of some of the lounge's real-life visitors. An undated newspaper clipping tucked under the glass that tops the bar recounts an incident in Happy's parking lot when Goldlust refused to hand over a wad of cash to a would-be robber and was shot once in the stomach with a .25-caliber pistol in broad daylight. "Bernard (Happy) Goldlust was listed in serious condition and still undergoing surgery late last night," notes the article.

Goldlust survived his wounds. But by the early 1990s, he'd grown weary of the entrepreneurial life. He told a North Miami-based cousin of the Inerfelds that he was looking to unload the bar that bore his sobriquet, and a deal was done.

The Future of Happy's Stork Lounge

Howard and Steven have added some technological touches in the intervening years, including an electronic jukebox and, for sports fans, large flat-screen TV monitors that hang from the ceiling. But as moving day looms, the brothers promise to preserve as much of the old Happy's flavor as they can. About two-thirds of the wooden bar that starts near the neon-festooned front window and winds toward the rear of the current setup will be transplanted to the outdoor patio at the new digs. Some of the sooty posters that adorn the walls will come too, as will the mural, complete with bullet holes.

Steven Inerfeld (tending his bar) promises that the relocated Happy's will be "newer, better, and cleaner" than its storied predecessor. Photo by Jade Finlayson

Beyond that, the middle-term outlook for Happy's Stork Lounge is about as clear as a frosted beer mug. The Inerfelds' new landlord will be the Sunbeam Television Company, whose billionaire chief executive officer Andy Ansin completed a $57 million buying spree in the spring of 2021 that saw him snap up six acres of prime (and mostly waterfront) property in North Bay Village. When the lease with Sunbeam comes up for renewal in a scant four years – an eternity in Miami development time – it's possible that a fleet of bulldozers will be poised to demolish the single-story structure where the brothers and their bartenders will have been pouring $6 double vodka-tonics for 48 months.

But fear not for the long-term prospects of the Inerfeld family business. Until recently, none of the brothers' three adult children had expressed even the slightest interest in inheriting the taps one day. That changed late last year when Steven's only child, physical therapist Brittany Inerfeld, pronounced herself an heiress-apparent, eager to learn the finer points of operating a liquor business whose hours are 10 a.m. to 5 a.m., 365 days a year.

"I grew up going to the bar as a kid, and it was torture," the 30-year-old Long Island native recalls. "But as it got closer to the reality of it closing, I realized how badly I didn't want to lose the place. I just want to keep the legend alive for my dad because everyone knows him from Happy's. I don't see it happening anytime soon, but whenever he feels the need to slow down, I'll help pick up some of the slack."

The barflies of North Bay Village and environs will drink to that.

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