

Come on in, the water's fun!

Johanna Zucaro

On Friday, June 17, Atlantis Marine World celebrated a milestone - it turned five years old. In commemoration, the Aquarium appropriately held a cake-cutting ceremony. Like proud parents, there were also photographs. Pictures documenting the journey from its infancy, or drawings on a piece of loose-leaf paper, to present day, or becoming Long Island's newest Aquarium occupying more than three acres alongside the Peconic River and historic Main Street in Riverhead.

And walking alongside those visitors who were there to help celebrate was co-owner and co-founder, Jim Bissett. In reflecting on how the Aquarium has grown, Mr. Bissett looked to its beginnings.

"When we started talking about building the Aquarium almost ten years ago, it kept coming back to the children and the experience of an interactive Aquarium. We not only wanted a place where they could visit and learn, but we wanted to capture their imaginations as well," explains Mr. Bissett.

That is when Joe Yaiullo, co-founder and curator, was "asked the easiest question" he ever answered and accepted Bissett's request for his help in the endeavor and went to work on designing the layout. Perhaps that's what makes the Aquarium so special. "Not only was it designed in-house, by the team itself," Jim Bissett reveals. "But that team is still here, at its core, and just as important as the fish in our tanks."

When the Aquarium opened its doors to visitors on June 15, 2000 it became the first large-scale Aquarium to open in New York State in more than 35 years. Themed around the "Lost City of Atlantis," AMW blends science and nature with myth, inviting visitors to explore its inhabitants while discovering the Lost City.

Today, more than one million people have already visited the Aquarium, enjoying its interactive exhibits. "If you're here, you will get wet," Yaiullo promises. Activities such as Snorkel with the Rays (see page 7), Interactive Salt Marsh (page 6), and Trainer for a Day (page 6) make good on that promise.

Other exhibits include a 120,000-gallon Shark Tank, Sea Lion Shows, Seal Kisses, the largest living Coral Reef display in all of North America, Atlantis Explorer tour boat, and the brand new Penguin Pavilion, which opened over the Fourth of July weekend with fireworks and (what else but?) a Black Tie gala.

Future plans include a themed hotel adjacent to the property and a Swim with the Sharks program in the 120,000-gallon Lost City of Atlantis exhibit.

"When I see the Aquarium full of smiling faces, or I hear screams in the shark tunnel, or I watch the crowd around our touch tanks, I realize how successful we are," beams Jim Bissett.

Pictures: AMW Plans, Outside Façade, Birthday

Photo Captions:

AMW Plans: Atlantis Marine World co-founder and curator Joe Yaiullo's original sketches for the Aquarium's layout are practically identical to what the Aquarium looks like today.

Outside Façade: Atlantis Marine World is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (closed Christmas Day). AMW also houses the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation and supports its rescue and rehabilitation missions.

Birthday: Atlantis Marine World co-founder and co-owner Jim Bissett, above, lets them eat cake at the Aquarium's fifth birthday celebration.