By Rachel Garcia

It’s been a long day of driving, mastering the busy lanes of the freeway and dodging the multitude of cars. Have to love California.

We arrive in Monterey in the early afternoon and once more the city lives up to its reputation for perfect blue skies, a warm breeze and weather rarely enjoyed back home in Newport. After a little bit of browsing up the famous Cannery Row, we meet with Jon Hoech at the front doors of the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

He starts us on our tour in the back of the aquarium, where huge trucks wait to transport water and animals for a new project in the works. The magnitude of this coming project is stunning, and I wish them the best of luck.

Next up is the holding and quarantine area, where different species of fish school in circles, two turtles swim lazily round and a sick otter lies quietly on her back, clam in hand. Through another set of doors, we travel down a hallway and learn the history of the aquarium, large pictures on the wall supplementing the story as we move along.

The tour continues outside with the pump room. Curious people peer in the windows as we’re inside and Jon jokes it wouldn’t be the first time he’s picked up extras while giving a tour.

Up to the rooftop we go, looking down at the surface of the massive kelp forest and learning the secret to keeping these plants healthy and strong. There are a few birds up here as well, waiting for their turn in a brand new exhibit below. We shall miss the opening of ‘Hot Pink Flamigos’ by only a week, so a glimpse at the new residents is a treat.

Back inside, a turn with the jelly-

(See “‘Director’s Corner’ on page 4)
The Steinhart Aquarium was definitely one of my favorite stops on the trip to California. It was a fantastic facility with many exhibits. I particularly enjoyed the albino alligator and the Phillipines coral reef tank. The Phillipines coral reef tank was their largest tank and had lots of cool fish. I also liked the Rainforest Dome. It was three levels with many species found in different parts of the Amazon and other rainforest areas of the world.

fish is next, always haunting as they dance in never-ending blue.

“Pay attention to them now,” Jon instructs, as later we shall see them from the other side of the acrylic. We round the room for a while enjoying their surreal beauty before slipping out through a side door. We stand tightly squeezed in the room behind the jellyfish and I am amazed by the size of the kreisel in front of us. Careful design from the guests’ side hides the true size and keeps edges out of sight. Some of the beauty and magic from before is lost, as the lighting and background from this side actually wash out the vivid colors. I’m happy to leave the tiny room and return to my underwater wonderland.

Following Jon through yet another door, we now find ourselves on the top of the Outer Bay exhibit. It’s time to feed the resident rays. We are all charmed by them rolling on their backs as trained and flipping their wings to bring food to their mouths. Hammerheads and barracudas quickly swallow any morsels that happen to escape.

It’s here that we end our tour. Jon wants us to have plenty of time to stay and explore the rest of the aquarium before it closes, and we say our ‘thank yous’ and ‘goodbyes.’ We each split off into our own little groups and quickly plan the best route of exploration.

I come to realize how much my viewpoint has changed since the last time I visited, now deep into the teachings of the Aquarium Science Program, back-stage tours and volunteer experiences. I feel knowledgeable and see things I’ve never seen before, like the signs of a healthy anemone and the parasites that cling to fish fins. I even pick out the seam of two acrylic pieces glued together, knowing how that process is done. It’s both exciting and fulfilling to know that my education has been successful.

And this is only the first stop on this Spring Break trip; who knows what I will get to experience next?
Sponsorships from TJP Engineering (Imperial Beach, CA), Ozone Water Systems (Phoenix, AZ), Moody Gardens (Galveston, TX) and the college’s Foundation enabled 3 students and Aquarium Science Program director to attend the Aquatic Animal Life Support Operators (AALSO) conference May 2-6.

The following is a brief synopsis by the 3 student representatives, who also presented at a well attended session.

Our thanks to Jack Felts for serving as a liaison between the Aquarium Science Program and the AALSO Board and Commercial members.

Kaite Potter

**Initial impression:** Overwhelming at first but a people came over to talk with us I felt more at ease. Felt very much at ease after the first day on the ground.

**Technology/Presentation that left an impression:** Micro-nano bubble display and technology was cool. Greg Whittaker’s presentation about the damage that Moody Gardens sustained during Hurricane Gustav was impressive. So much damage, yet today, what a recovery!

**On Level 1 testing:** Last year half of the students did not achieve their goal, so that gave me an impression that this is no cakewalk. All of us met 3 or 4 times to do problem sets and discuss related issues with Bruce. All three of us passed the Level 1 Operators exam...We’re hyped!

**On visiting Landry’s Downtown Aquarium Houston:** Clean exhibits with healthy looking animals. A classy facility that was well organized. A lot was invested in exhibit décor which resulted in an aesthetically pleasing exhibit pathway.

Bob Estes

**Initial impression:** I have a number of impressions ranging from intense, to cool, receiving special treatment and having access to facilities and their work areas. Having the commercial members support our attendance was just outstanding. Because of this I felt that we had some expectations to fulfill.

**Technology/Presentation that left an impression:** Micro-nano bubbles, the FEMA/New Orleans presentation, and the potential for zirconium phosphate as a flocculent were noteworthy.

**Thoughts on the Kemah Aquarium:** We went as a small group, so the tour was very personalized. They had the biggest ray touching pool with what seemed to be 100 animals...enormous. Feeding of the rays by the public was a novel program.

**On Attendees:** This was a really welcoming group which made an impact on us. Jack Felts was genuinely interested in our development and participation. We appreciate his efforts to get us to the conference. This group puts on and enjoys a good party!

Cara Johnson

**Initial impression:** Overwhelming though exciting due to the circumstances what allowed us to attend the conference. It was a long day by the time we began to meet people (woke up at 3:00 am to get to the airport).

**Technology/Presentation that left an impression:** Amy LeGaux’s presentation about the recovery effort at the New Orleans facilities following Hurricane Katrina left an impression. The doggedness by which she focuses on the effort is commendable.

**Attendees:** Conference attendees were really quite welcoming. The first day had people “catching up” with each other. It was easy to witness the many friendships were in place. The organization’s Board of Directors of AALSO spent time with us individually which was great. September Love Ruddell checked in with us several times during the week which helped us feel part of the event.

**On Moody Gardens and Aquarium:** This was a new experience to see the Aquarium and Rain Forest as a part of a big presentation (hotel, conference center, waterpark). Most aquariums that I’ve been to have been stand alone facilities.
DIRECTOR’S CORNER  (Continued from Page 1)

been primed on many of the features and should be ready to be efficient and effective.

In a similar manner, we ponder and anticipate what the next year brings. June 2 is the ground breaking event for the 7,500 sq. ft. Aquarium Science building, followed by a June 9 deadline for construction bids. A 335-day construction period is anticipated. See below for the artist’s concept of this building. Even with a dedicated teaching location, local resources such as the Hatfield Marine Science Center and the Oregon Coast Aquarium will continue to be a main cog in providing students with workplace learning opportunities. Such varied experiences are essential to developing well rounded personnel with broad based experiences.

We will also be moving our annual program review by a National Visiting Committee from the first weekend in November to early February. Though students have performed admirably in previous years, the February date allows students to complete a term before engaging industry representatives. If you get a call about participating in the program review, we hope you will consider seeking support from your institution to join us for those 4 days. In closing, thank you for your continued support and if you have that special volunteer who wants to become an aquatic animal caregiver, you know where to send them!

The land cleared for the new Aquarium Science building awaits the June 2 groundbreaking.

Acknowledgments

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*** To Greg Whittaker and Moody Gardens for providing lodging for the AALSO participants.