



MAKING A SUSTAINABLE

Splash



STORY BY CHRISTINE SCHAFFRAN



GEORGIA AQUARIUM'S MERCHANDISE REFLECTS ITS MISSION OF OCEAN AND AQUATIC LIFE PRESERVATION.

Photos above: The Treasures of the Seas Gift Shop prides itself on stocking eco-friendly, sustainable products.

Every morning on her way to work at Georgia Aquarium, the excitement of where Genaron Reynolds is headed begins to build. By the time she winds her way past the whale shark and the African penguins and into the Treasures of the Seas gift shop, her enthusiasm reaches a fever pitch.

After all, this is no ordinary retail experience, Reynolds, the store's general manager, points out.

"You can make an impact on someone's life in traditional retail, but in a theme park environment, you're making an impact on kids that are going to remember this for the rest of their lives," she says.

The Georgia Aquarium has been delighting visitors since 2005 with aquatic exhibits that include sharks, dolphins, sea lions, otters, turtles and whales as well as a bevy of fish, invertebrates, sting rays, coral and a multitude of other creatures. The gift shop joined the experience in 2010.

Whether interacting with the animals via encounter programs, diving experiences, educational presentations, or guided tours, all involve getting up close with aquatic residents that some love and others fear. Either way, it's enough to get the adrenaline pumping and wanting to explore the habitats of the underwater world — some of which can reach the size of a school bus.

FULL AND ABUNDANT

Reynolds isn't the only one to feel the electricity of the experience. After children squeal with delight upon meeting the gigantic resident whale sharks and beluga whales at the aquarium, they are greeted by smaller, softer, squishier versions in the gift shop that they can take home.



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Genaron Reynolds, general manager at Georgia Aquarium’s Treasures of the Seas gift shop, credits her team for the store’s success. Photos: Aiva Genys



The walls and floor exude hues of blue to resemble the ocean floor and make the colorful merchandise pop.

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“When the kids come in here and they see that animal that they just saw in the exhibits and they’re like ‘Oh, Mommy,’ they just literally run towards the plush,” she says. “They get so excited.”

While the size of some of the animals may come as a surprise to guests, the volume in the gift shop is one of epic proportions. When it comes to plush, Reynolds says capacity is the name of the game.

“I think that that is absolutely one of the main reasons as to why we are so successful because we are able to utilize capacity fixtures,” she explains. “We have the best plush in the world. It’s just so realistic.”

Hundreds of small, medium and large whales, seals, octopus, narwhals, sting rays, sharks, jellyfish, penguins, sea horses, turtles and otters are loaded into stacked wooden boxes that reach some 8 feet high.

Reynolds says by far the store’s biggest vendor in plush is Nature Planet.

“We support the mission of Georgia Aquarium being eco-friendly and sustainable, so that is the type of vendor that we use as well,” she notes.

Known for its reputation of helping the planet through various causes and campaigns to help endangered species, the product line is a perfect fit for the gift shop, which looks for opportunities to promote the importance of sustainability.

“We pride ourselves on no plastic and making sure that we have eco-friendly and sustainable products in the gift shop to support that mission

[of the aquarium], Reynolds says. “Our main focus here is the eco-friendly merchandise.”

For this reason, Green Toys, known for its commitment to making 100% recycled toys that are manufactured in the USA, also ranks as a top vendor for the gift shop.

“It just feels good for the kids and for the families to know that the toys they’re buying are safe,” Reynolds admits.

MERCHANDISE WITH A MESSAGE

Since causes play such an important role at the Georgia Aquarium, the merchandise with a message is front and center upon entering the 6,000-square-foot store. With mission-statement products and apparel on the left and rescue kits on the right, there’s no denying what the Georgia Aquarium — and the Treasures of the Seas gift shop — stands for.

And the merchandise is designed to inspire others to follow suit. For instance, toy rescue kits filled with tools to “rescue” an animal are sold as a bundle with medium-sized stuffies for \$40 to inspire children to someday consider a veterinary profession.

“It gives kids the opportunity to be doctors, basically,” Reynolds explains. “They can practice on their plush they just bought, rescuing that plush like something happened to it, using their doctor tools to save the animal. But it goes beyond that because all of a sudden, they want to be a rescue doctor or they want to adopt an animal.”

Beyond the plush and eco-friendly messages, souvenirs abound on racks, spinners, carousels and solid blue walls made to resemble the vast ocean.



Everything from magnets, lanyards, keychains, toys, books, sippy cups, mugs, glasses, fanny packs, jewelry, home products and backpacks surround a steel diving cage in the middle of the store where mannequins model wetsuits.

Items featuring whale sharks, beluga whales and penguins are among the top three most sought after merchandise, Reynolds notes.

When it comes to apparel, a new line called Wear Responsible is proving to “be a big hit” as it strikes a chord being made of 100% organic cotton and fair-labor certified, Reynolds points out.

And there’s plenty of other T-shirts with mermaids, sharks, whales and penguins to delight visitors who are seeking the perfect name-drop souvenir. Hats missing a “bite” on the bill, socks with seals and mermaids, sweatshirts, stocking caps and jackets all have a place in the shop as well.

She adds that not all vendors are big names with deep pockets. Each quarter, through a partnership between the aquarium and Truist Bank, the gift shop shines a spotlight on a local vendor and showcases its products in the gift shop. At the time

“We want to make sure everybody has such a great experience when they come through that gift shop, and then when someone tells you that they did, it just makes a big difference. It makes you feel good.” — GENARON REYNOLDS

of writing, the vendor was Beautiful Briny Sea, a company known for creating “small-batch salt blends, sugars, and other culinary products ... with integrity, sustainability and a whole lot of love,” according to the company’s website.

MARKETING MATTERS

Since visibility of products — both physically and literally — undoubtedly have an impact on sales, Reynolds says sending a message that speaks to the volume of merchandise packs a punch.

For this reason and to support the amount of foot traffic the gift shop sees, Reynolds says capacity fixtures are key to creating the ultimate display. Add to that a concerted effort to keep the shelves full, and you’ve got a winning combination, she says.

“One of the biggest things in why we’re so successful is the replenishment and restocking that happens here [every day],” she says.

She adds that while some stores prefer to use more boutique-style fixtures, the Treasures of the Seas leans on displays that allow products

Name-drop apparel, including hats and shirts, are a hit at the Georgia Aquarium’s gift shop.



Displays tower over eager children waiting to take home their favorite fish, penguin, whale, turtle or other plush.

to tower above their adoring fans ogling over the mountain of cute and cuddly animals begging to be taken home.

“In the middle of the store we have a huge round fixture like a carousel, but there’s levels to it,” she explains. “And the goal of it is capacity.”

When it comes to marketing, The Georgia Aquarium supports the Treasures of the Seas as much as the gift shop supports the aquatic venue’s mission. In fact, most of the marketing is done internally to remind guests to stop at Treasures of the Seas to shop on their way out or to visit the Sand Dollar, a 900-square-foot auxiliary gift shop located near the venue’s cafe.

Reynolds says a video before the dolphin show while guests are getting comfortable encourages visitors to see what the gift shops have to offer while guest services makes announcements inviting people to swing by the shops. Meanwhile, advertisements on marquees during the five to 10 events a month at the aquarium also show support for the gift shops.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

There’s an ebb and flow to the busy season that’s almost as predictable as the rising and falling of the tide, Reynolds says. It seems to coincide with summer — when kids are out of school and families are traveling — when the aquarium is the busiest as well as around holidays.

For this reason, a team of 30 to 40 employees that range from assistant directors, sales directors, sales leads, stock leads, lead cashiers, cashiers and sales associates are standing by to help customers secure the perfect memento.

But finding the right staff members hasn’t always been easy. Reynolds says one of the biggest challenges since she began working at the gift shop in January 2021 has been hiring a cohesive team. To get the shop up and running after the pandemic, Reynolds says it gave her time to ensure that



ensure that employees were not only trained well, but treated well.

"I think so many people when they hire forget about the employee experience and focus more so on the guest experience. Not that it's not important, because it is. But I think at the end of the day, the employee experience is so important," she notes. "I try to make sure my employees like where they work, that they feel valued, and their opinions matter. All of that plays a part in retaining employees."

Reynolds' positive attitude is not only a mantra for her employees, but her overall approach to being on the sales floor day in and day out. And she tries to teach her staff members to do the same.

"You have to be willing to do whatever needs to be done and get it done and make sure your employees are exhibiting that, too," she says.

For this reason, she is constantly using phrases like "choose the right attitude" and "it's how you handle the wrenches thrown at you" to turn a standard employee into a superior stand-out. Because after all, she points out, she couldn't do the job alone.

"I'm just the general manager. There's no way in the world I can run this business by myself," she admits. "It takes a village to run this business."

And when the stress begins to slip into her normally upbeat state of mind, Reynolds takes a moment and retreats to a somewhat hidden viewing area to say hello to her favorite beluga whale, Qinu.

"In the ballroom, there's a huge window where you can see the belugas on your own without the normal crowd and that's where I eat my lunch," she explains.

"Whenever I'm standing there, [Qinu] comes over and rubs her face up against the wall or the mirror like she sees me and she's saying 'hi.'"

Reynolds adds she doesn't take for granted where she works and uses her surroundings to appreciate the unique position of getting to provide that same experience for guests.

"When you realize that you've made a difference, or you've impacted somebody's experience, it just hits different," she says. "We want to make sure everybody has such a great experience when they come through that gift shop, and then when someone tells you that they did, it just makes a big difference. It makes you feel good." SGN



Replenishing and restocking daily are among the secrets to success,

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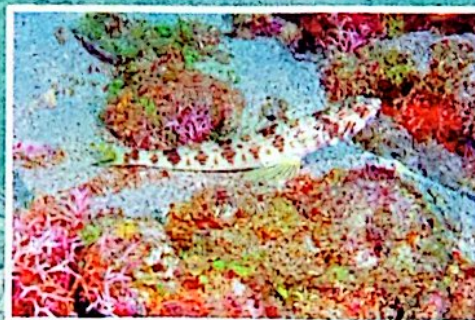
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