

An Ocean of Inspiration – The John Olguin Story

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Excerpt - Introduction

We have all found ourselves, at some moment in life, looking for a little bit of inspiration around us, something to help us live a better, more positive and more productive life. We look for a person or an idea that can help us deal with the difficulties that challenge us in school, at work, in relationships with others, or in life in general. We feel adrift sometimes, alone in a sea of uncertainty, hoping that things will get better, sooner than later. Then that miracle comes along – not an obvious one, but a miracle nevertheless – that somehow draws us in and has an unforgettable impact on us, despite our doubts or our inability to see that the help we seek in life is right in front of us. It may not look like inspiration or a miracle at first; little gifts of life like this can sometimes look more like warts than treasures, more like dirty rocks than precious gems, until we find that ocean of inspiration that will change our lives forever.

You have no doubt heard or read stories about someone who achieved great success despite being born dirt poor, or born with a physical disability, or who was the product of an abusive father, perhaps someone whose first language was not English, and who never obtained a college degree. Several success stories involve someone with half a dozen or more brothers and sisters, crammed into a two-bedroom house, part of a family that moved around almost every two years because of the dysfunction in the family, and that strained under a father who couldn't hold onto a job. If you were this struggling person and you had to work at a young age to help feed your family, and every time you tried to get a job or make a move that made life more bearable, you were told "NO" over and over again, what would you do?

You're about to meet an extraordinary man: John Olguin (pronounced Ohl-geen), who faced every single one of those obstacles, including a heavy lisp, yet he went on to become a war hero, develop a museum/aquarium that is now rated as one of the best in the world, become a mentor to thousands, and much, much more. He never took "No" for an answer; he always found a way to get things done, no matter what the obstacles. And on top of everything else, he

was a nice guy who never let his ego get in the way of his mission of personal and professional generosity, humanity, love of people and children, his hometown of San Pedro, California, and his wife and children. This is what drove John to do all the things he did so successfully, overcoming obstacles that would have shattered others. People like John truly only come along once in a lifetime.

Self-made success is not new in America. Bill Gates (Harvard University) started Microsoft in his garage; William Hewlett and David Packard (both Stanford University) started what is now HP, a multinational information technology company, in their garage; and long-time television queen Oprah Winfrey, who was born into poverty in Mississippi, yet secured a full scholarship to Tennessee State University, became the richest African American of the 20th century. Other significant success stories have included the YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter blockbusters, and all of these ventures were either motivated by profit or became huge multi-million and multi-billion dollar giants.

John Olguin was never in it for the money and he didn't get rich for all his hard work. He was a newspaper delivery boy in his early teens, became a beach lifeguard, fell in love with the ocean, and started sharing his enthusiasm with anyone who would listen. For John, life was not only about his love of teaching young children that the ocean and its creatures were special and worthy of discovery and well-being, he also wanted his young followers to pass on that knowledge to others. He wanted to help young people find careers in the field of conservation and marine science, but most importantly he wanted to help them find their own passion and total success in all aspects of their lives. He went beyond the call of duty and helped his museum volunteers get into prestigious colleges and universities, and he partnered his students with world-renowned scientists in hard-to-get-into programs who respected John's recommendations. Not every Whalewatch student became a scientist, but hundreds of scientists today can be traced back to John. Many others became lawyers, doctors, teachers, artists, entrepreneurs – you name it, John helped make it happen over his career and his lifetime.

If you didn't have a dream, John would help you create one and then enable you to achieve it. He was committed to helping his audiences avoid the kind of difficult childhood he had suffered, and he cultivated and shaped people around him with his ideas, his values and his passions. He was a face-to face, hands-on Pied Piper, with a magic voice that enthralled all who had the good fortune to be within the sound of it.

If John had texted or Tweeted his invitations to whale watching, lectures, or other opportunities, it would not have had the kind of impact he had telling fish stories with his body, because his body language spoke volumes for kids in ways that technology cannot.

You had to be in the room with John to absorb his contagious energy and excitement. As John was inviting kids to get on the Whalewatch boats, or go grunion hunting on the beach, he didn't have to worry about today's litigious environment, where we're killing off learning opportunities for kids by requiring the signing of legal releases, making Saturday trips complex legal test cases. Simplicity in our society during John's time made his success possible and his dreams were easier to achieve then, as opposed to now. He and his students, as well as their supportive parents, took the risk that learning about nature, human dynamics, and the ocean's inhabitants could develop future leaders, museum and aquarium directors, and entrants into a variety of fields of endeavor.

John became one of the early founders of ecotourism by adding hands-on education to the up-close experience of being with nature's creatures on the Whalewatch trips. He turned curious middle school and high school students into the teachers of the younger schoolchildren who visited the Cabrillo Beach Museum. John trained them so well and got them and their audiences so excited and motivated with his fantastic storytelling that what began as simple trips to watch whales became a dual career as a lifeguard and an untrained, but passionate, sea life museum director.

John Olguin was also one of the original environmentalists, whose love for nature, the beaches he served as a lifeguard, the funky ocean museum he turned into an outright sensation, the wild "jellyfish" dances he performed for kids, his legendary and unforgettable storytelling all created an awareness of the bodies of water surrounding our communities and hugging the coast. The deep, mysterious ocean was now an open book for children to study and enjoy.

And imagine how powerful John's tutoring and mentoring must have been that it inspired a young volunteer-turned scientist, John Ljubenkov, to honor John Olguin by naming a new species of anemone (a marine animal having a columnar body and one or more circles of tentacles surrounding the mouth) after him. It is called *Edwardsia olguini* and it is one of many examples of John's impact on his students and museum volunteers.

John was an outdoors person on and off duty, through and through, as was his wife, Muriel. You'll see how their bedroom was outdoors - yes, they slept under the stars through most of their 62 years of marriage, 365 days a year, come rain or shine. They stayed physically fit by rowing from San Pedro to Catalina Island through the dangerous 24 miles (one way) of the

shipping channel that brings the world's commerce to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the largest port complex in the U.S. and the third largest in the world.

It's not often that a person from such humble beginnings, with no formal college education, lives a life that has such a significant impact on the dreams of children, business, war, science, and on education at any age, aspiring careers in all fields, and on the early stages of a worldwide movement to learn about the oceans around us and the magnificent creatures that inhabit them and fascinate us.

In addition to the honor of editing this book, I had the pleasure of knowing John since we were both born in San Pedro and I learned of his passion for the ocean as a child. He also impacted my life by motivating my daughter, through her years as a young docent and Sea Ranger, to become an outdoor educator and teach preschoolers to senior citizens about the ocean's creatures, as well as the rest of nature's beauty and its sustainability. My wife works at Cabrillo Marine Aquarium and has coordinated school visits for thousands of children to the aquarium from throughout Southern California, as well as from parts of Arizona and Nevada. I saw the power of John's enthusiasm and persuasion firsthand.

Enjoy meeting John Olguin and getting a glimpse into his magnificent life, then share this amazing story with the important people in your life.

Published by Rocky Mountain Books. \$29.95

Signed copies can be purchased directly from the authors (harzen@taras.org; 561-762-6473). Otherwise, the book is available at the Gift Store of the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium and Williams Bookstore in San Pedro, California and on Amazon and Ebay.

All proceeds go to the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium in San Pedro, California, and the Taras Oceanographic Foundation in Jupiter, Florida.