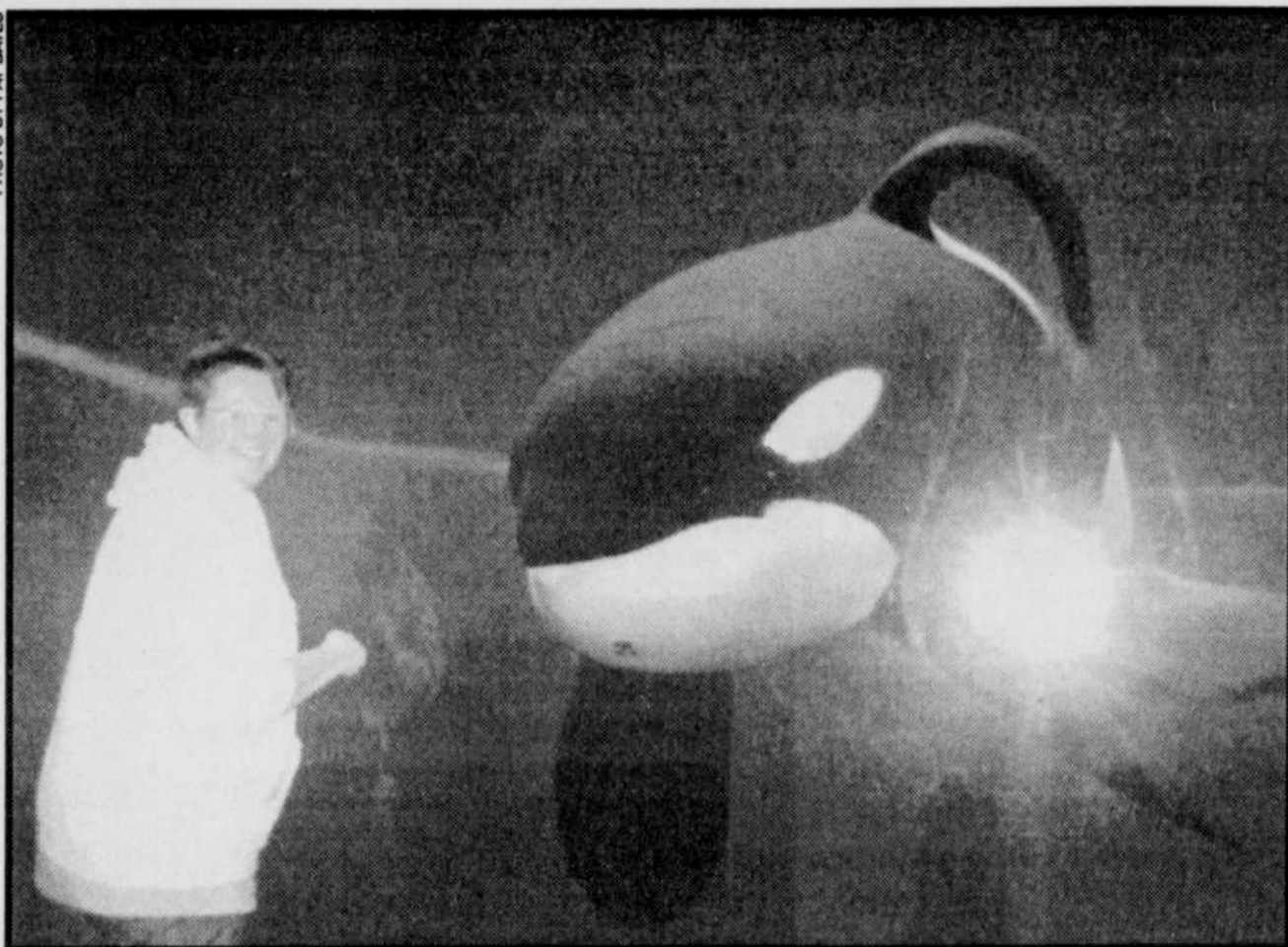
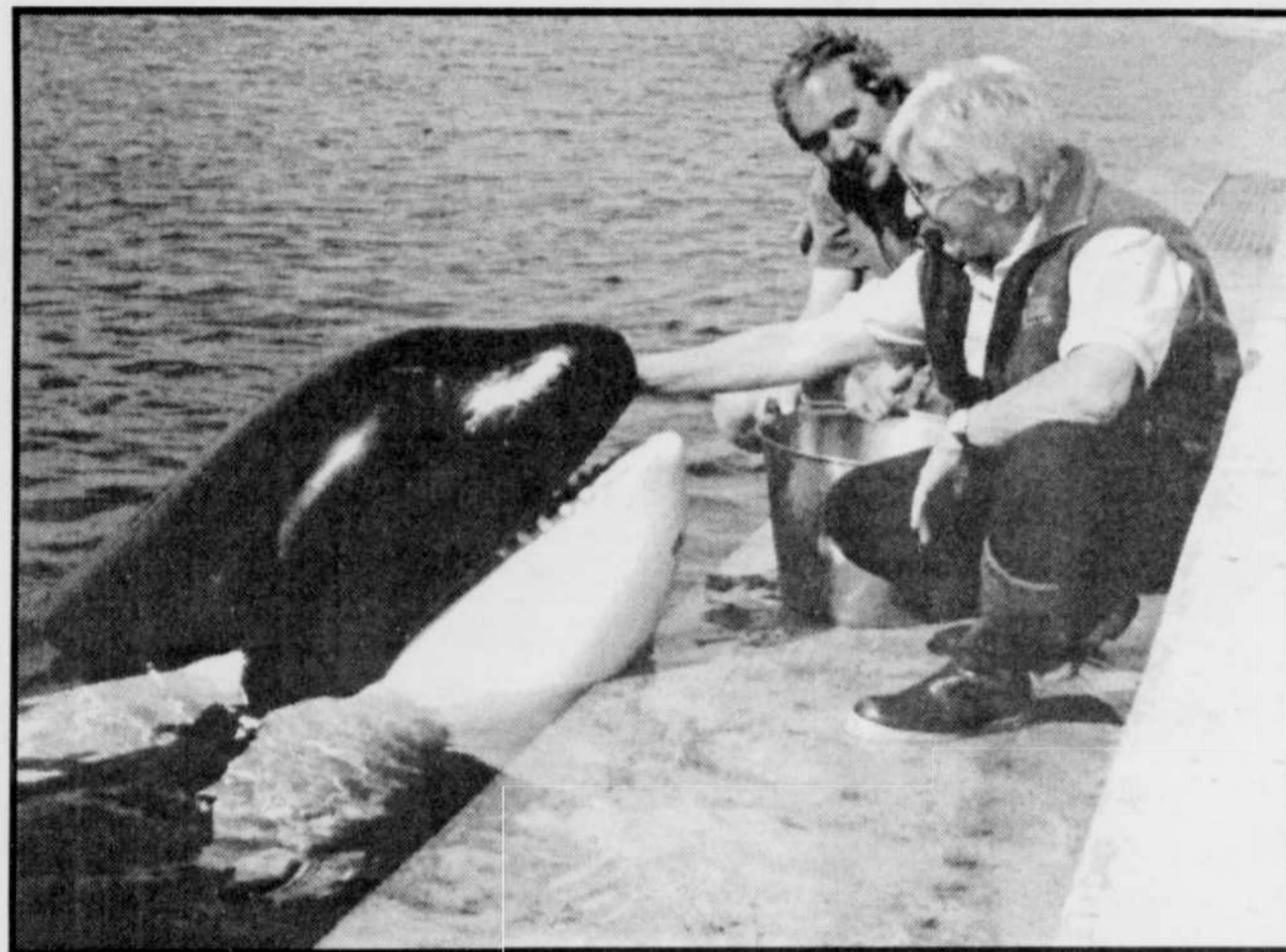


PHOTO BY PAT BATES



Amanda Colorado (left) and Keiko



Pat Bates (right) with Keiko and one of his trainers

ORCA AUNTIES SHARE THEIR WHALE OF A TALE

Before Keiko left, a *Just Out* staff member met with the wonderful creature and the women who cared for Keiko during his stay in Oregon

by Renée LaChance

A bank of video monitors lit the faces of everyone in the room. Cameras were trained around the tank at the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport, keeping vigilance over the most famous killer whale in the world: Keiko.

At that moment, the big guy checked out his visitors in the aquarium gallery. The flashes from cameras chased him to the back of his tank. Then he remembered the people at his other window. He sauntered over and looked in at those gathered to see him.

"He wants us to come up and see him," Amanda Colorado interpreted from body language I didn't even notice. "He finally realized we were trainable. For a while he thought we were just stupid or stubborn because we didn't do what he asked of us."

Colorado, Pat Bates, Pam Neff and Pam Williams have worked as "whale enrichment devices" for Keiko since last fall. One day Bates got a call from the office manager at the Free Willy Keiko Foundation office in Newport. The office manager asked Pat if she could get together a crew to watch over the killer whale on short notice just for a weekend. Sure she could. What began as a three-day assignment turned into a year's worth of wonder.

We climbed the stairs to the top of the tank and walked along a catwalk to where Keiko floated on the surface. He sprayed us with his breath and turned an eye up to get a better look at his visitors.

"It's impossible to tell people how special he is, you just have to meet him," Colorado said.

As I approached his black-and-white head, I began to understand what she meant. He truly seemed aware of us and glad for our quiet company.

Colorado introduced me to Keiko and he lifted up his nose to be rubbed. Colorado scratched him with both hands and talked baby talk to him. He felt like a cross between an olive and a hard-boiled egg, she said. Keiko, meanwhile, appeared to really enjoy the attention.

During the two years he lived at the Oregon Coast Aquarium, the media frequently covered Keiko and Keiko's keepers, but there hasn't ever



The orca aunties (from left: Pam Neff, Pat Bates, Pam Williams and Amanda Colorado) toast Keiko's safe departure

been any mention of Keiko's aunties in the major media coverage.

"It's hard being invisible," said Colorado. "No one even knows what we do or what he means to us."

She and the three other orca aunties (or orca babes, as Williams prefers to be called) were Keiko's support staff. All lesbians, they worked

old would enjoy (like peekaboo); they amused Keiko with windup orcas, books and movies.

During the year prior to Keiko's departure, an orca auntie monitored Keiko during the night, taking care of his every need.

"The trainers spend the day telling Keiko what to do. We get to just hang with him and tell him how wonderful he is," said Colorado.

The aunties all speak with intense love and reverence for Keiko. Each believes killer whales are incredibly intelligent beings that shouldn't be held captive, and they hope the foundation rehabilitates other killer whales and dolphins because of Keiko's success.

behind the scenes caring for and watching over Keiko during the hours when his trainers were off-duty.

The aunties prepared his salmon, herring and squid for the day, maintained his tank and the tanks of the live fish that he had learned to eat. They observed his behavior and health at regular intervals. They played games any three-year-

"He's an incredibly intelligent creature," added Williams. "One of the first times I was here, I looked in his eye and it was that same connection you get when you meet a woman for the first time and you know there's something special."

She continued: "One evening he was vocalizing, which meant that he wanted something. I

finally figured out to turn on his play jets, and he set his blue ball next to me on the wet walk as if to say, 'Thanks human, here's your fish.'"

The orca aunties did not get to travel to Iceland with Keiko to see him safely home. They stayed behind to box things up, to celebrate Keiko's journey and to grieve the loss of their charge.

But it is obvious to any observer that Keiko's aunties love him like a nephew. Bates, Colorado, Neff and Williams put their lives on hold to work swing and graveyard shifts to care for Keiko.

"It has been overwhelming and an honor to be part of this whole thing," said Neff. "I came to watch when Keiko arrived and I got to see him off. It is great to come full circle. Now I'm ready to get back to my life."

Each is thankful for her time with him, and they all look forward to getting their lives back to some semblance of normalcy.

"It has been the most amazing gift from the universe to get to hang out with that whale," said Colorado.

Still, one wonders, who could go back to being normal after spending a year up close and personal with a killer whale?

The aunties all speak with intense love and reverence for Keiko. Each believes killer whales are incredibly intelligent beings that shouldn't be held captive, and they hope the foundation rehabilitates other killer whales and dolphins because of Keiko's success. They even wistfully hope to be a part of it.

Bates spent every full moon during the past year with Keiko.

"At night, in the moonlight, that's the best time to be with him. It's magic," she said. "The last full moon we made a bond together that we'll connect that way every full moon."

She held her heart and tearfully added: "I know he said yes."

Keiko's first full moon in Iceland will be Oct. 5. Though no orca aunties will be monitoring Keiko to see if he turns his head toward the moonlit sky that night, it is certain Bates and the other orca aunties will look at the moon and remember their magic year with Keiko.