Sixty Years Strong:  
The History of the North Jersey Aquarium Society  
(1953-2013)

By Ted Coletti, NJAS

Around the turn of the 20th Century, a renowned (and by all accounts obsessed) Jersey City aquarist by the name of Eugene Smith gathered together a group of like-minded hobbyists to form America’s very first formal aquarium club (The Aquarium Society). The “tropical” side of the hobby was born a few years later when Montclair hobbyist and customs agent, Richard Dorn, began importing “exotic fish” and distributing them around the region. In the years that followed, northern New Jersey produced a plethora of aquarists and clubs. Entrepreneur hobbyists took notice. Publishers, importers, manufacturers, and hatcheries joined to make northern New Jersey the mecca of the “toy fish craze” of the 1920’s and 30’s. It was a golden age to be a hobbyist. But boom led to bust with the Great Depression in 1937. World War II added the final nail when every aquarium club and show in the Garden State shut down. After the War, New Jersey’s many hatcheries moved to Florida to become the “fish farms” we know today. Fish seemed just another passing fad to the general public. But the hobbyists and breeders from that past golden age knew better...

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In 1953 America was in transition. Modern life was a paradox. We finally ended a “police action” overseas (Korea) only to find ourselves fighting, we were told, the same enemies at home (Red Scare). We created a vaccine for every parent’s worst fear (polio), but replaced it with another (H-Bombs). Most Americans demanded stability after years of Depression and War, while other Americans began organizing against the status quo, demanding change and civil rights.

Even with these new uncertainties, life in 1953 was pretty sweet compared to decades past. New inventions and modern conveniences debuted continually. Life seemed easier and happier. Aquarium clubs, coaxed back to life by veteran hobbyists, were making a big comeback with the new suburbs and middle class hours. It was to this Age that the North Jersey Aquarium Society (NJAS) was born.

The Fanciers (1950’s)

Sometime in 1953, a small band of like-minded guppy and betta breeders from Bergen and Passaic Counties began meeting informally at the American Legion Hall on Lake Ave. in Clifton. The key member was guppy legend, Frank Alger, developer of the Albino Guppy among other strains (see pic on right). The club was formally organized/founded in 1954 with Joe Epper as its first President; Emil Lenhardt as VP; and Genevieve Neu as Secretary. Adrian "Ed" Blum, owner of Van Houten Tropical Gardens in Clifton and Alger’s brother-in-law, was Treasurer. Blum (seen in photo on right at The Fish Bowl in Irvington) remained at that post for the next two decades until he left the hobby with the death of his wife. State of New Jersey legal formation occurred on December 18, 1957. Key members during these formative years included Ron Hilaire, Rodger and Marge Decker, Bob & Jean Campion, Joe Minella, Tony Fazio, Fred & Joan Langewisch, and Hank Voss (the latter still a member to this day).

Club meetings back then were not like today. Generally consisting of smaller groups of serious breeders and pet shop owners, they came to talk technique and socialize. Rarely was there a speaker, and there was no auction. "You didn't have to entertain people like you do today," recalls Hank Voss. Club meetings were often family nights out, with wives gathered in an adjacent room to play cards and chat, while their children played together. But “television ended that quickly” recounts Rosario LaCorte.

During these early years, unsuccessful attempts were made on a club newsletter with titles such as "Club Notes" and "NJAS Bulletin." North Jersey’s sister clubs would be much more successful in their publishing endeavors over the next three decades.

NJAS made its mark on the local hobby scene in 1957 with its First Annual Tropical Fish Show at the VFW Hall on Union Ave. in Rutherford. This began a 17-year run of annual Shows, which were always the first of the season (March). The focus of the first 3 Shows reflected the club’s guppy and betta interests. The club switched their monthly meetings to this Rutherford location sometime between 1955-1958, and then to the back room of Widow's Tavern off Route 3 in Totowa for 1959 (the proprietor was a member and rent was free). At this time, founding President, Joe Epper, strangely disappeared from the club. But NJAS had its sights on bigger and better things that would bring it national recognition in the next decade, and make it the most visible aquarium club in the region.
Second Annual
Guppy and Betta Show

V.F.W. Hall
14 Union Ave.
Rutherford, N.J.

The North Jersey Aquarium Society Inc.

FOR FINE AQUARIUMS
METAFRAME

Seek Out

Third Annual
Tropical Fish Show

North Jersey Aquarium Society, Inc.

On Exhibition
- Guppies
- Bettas
- Community Tanks

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 1959
VDW Hall, Rutherford, New Jersey

The Aquarium

Special In This Issue -
- Rare Amazing Guppy Fishes
- The First Africa Fish
- Breeding Guppies - Hints
- The Latest New Fishes Trends

April, 1959
Vol. 1
No. 4
1959 was a key turning point for NJAS. A victim of their own success, the Rutherford VFW was becoming too small for their popular Show. So for their 1960 event, the club moved to the cavernous White Eagle Lodge banquet hall in Bloomfield. (Essex). This was a radical departure from the “back-of-the-bar” Shows that were standard for the day. The planning of the event took an entire year and included a national marketing and PR campaign under the creativity and rallying of Show Chair, Sam Pierson. It would be their first true All-Species Show, and include vendor booths for manufacturers and members. With a membership that included printers, professional breeders, pet shop owners, and media men, the 1960 Show was produced in grand style.

On the morning of the big gamble, March 5th, fate intervened with a record snowstorm. Fears of financial ruin were belayed when 5,000 people and 500 entries (albeit less than expected) braved the weather, including hobbyists from five states and Show entries from as far away as Hawaii (see news article on right). Most hobbyists had never seen anything like it. NJAS had produced the biggest and classiest show in the region (perhaps the entire country) since the 1930’s. NJAS member booths soon ran out of homegrown fish, and runs back to the fishroom for more stock were common. Membership doubled in one year. For the 1961 Show, full lighted hoods were constructed for each tank (see 1965 Show photo below).

The NJAS Shows of the ‘60’s were arguably the best this side of the Mississippi, and possibly the whole country. NJAS legend Chuck Davis recalled “my father taking me as a kid on multiple buses from Hudson County to the White Eagle Lodge just so I could enter my pet guppy...I came back with Rexford, Young, and Alger guppies in that jar from these legends!” NJAS impact in the State may have contributed to more clubs being formed. Between 1950-1965, 21 aquarium societies formed in the Garden State.

Other key NJAS members during these boom years included Len Benavage, Ray Melillo, Gertrude & Tom Murphy, Ernest Buksar, Francois Waumans, and Warren & Libby Young, the latter renown around the country for their prize-winning bettas, guppies, and swordtails. In 1961, club meetings moved to Bellini’s Restaurant on Brighton Street in Passaic. Meetings were now every third Thursday of the month, a tradition maintained to the present day.
Judges from the NJAS 1964 Show.

STANDING FROM LEFT: Arnold Sweeney, Frank Alger, Hank Voss, Emile Paro, Bill Berthson.
KNEELING FROM LEFT: Ron Hilaire, Pete O'Connor, Lou Rexford.
The aquarium hobby began a decades-long decline in the late 1960’s, due to a variety of demographic and societal changes. Television, the Space Race, and the counter-culture made a quant pastime like aquarium-keeping seem passé. The flight from the cities accelerated with the ‘68 Newark riots, and many clubs took a hit with departing personnel. By the early 1970’s, most of the Garden State’s clubs had either folded or shrunk. New clubs that tried to form soon disbanded. NJAS scooped up several experienced hobbyists from these folded clubs, including Tony Cirincione, Sal Grillo, Rosario LaCorte, Gene Pacailler, Bill Jacobs, Frank Dowling, George Torres, George Lauten, Louis Rexford and John Kirschman. But the younger members often had to do double duty. Hobbyist George Mood was president of three clubs at the same time - North Jersey, Exotic, & Metro Area Killie!

With less general hobbyists in the mix, the Rise of the National Specialty Club began. 1962 to 1971 saw the formation of the AKA, IFGA, IBC, ACA, and ALA. New Jersey had both IFGA and AKA local chapters formed that exist to this day. With access to international airports, and Newark importers like Lombardo’s and Merit, NJAS was a key club in the African Cichlid Craze that began in the mid-60’s and continued through the 1990’s. “This hurt the (serious side of the) hobby by lowering the learning curve,” comments Rosario LaCorte.

NJAS was now meeting in the Styretowne section of Clifton. They were now a smaller, older club who had grown tired of all the work involved for a Show. After a hugely profitable 1973 event which would financially support the club for years, NJAS decided not to have a show in 1974. A spunky young member by the name of Bob Larsen (who had apprenticed under Guppy Legend, Arnold Sweeney), persuaded the Board to let him and his wife Pat produce a Show for 1975. The Board, amusingly, appointed Bob as Show Chairman. That half-hearted decision became the first step in the revitalization of NJAS.

The 1975 show was held at the Knights of Columbus hall in Rochelle Park. It was ill-fated due to the inexperience of the new blood, and lack of guidance from the old-timers. The star of the Show was a multi-tiered 32-tank rack that did not get fastened to the wall. It is reported that either the antics of some nearby children, or the accidental leaning-against by a member’s wife, began a swaying motion that ended in disaster. The resulting tidal wave of fish, broken glass, lawsuits, insurance claims, tears, and hundreds of gallons of water was not nearly as memorable as the site of a walking catfish, quite at home under these conditions, feasting on goldfish fry from a crashed Family Tank. The water filtered through the floor to the Bar one level below, where patrons continued their lubrication, umbrellas in hand!

The ’75 fiasco proved fortuitous, however, as it brought the entire club together and even recruited a few new members. One attendee who took pity on the club that day would become North Jersey’s most famous and colorful leader: Chuck Davis. Some of the old guard were skeptical of these young bloods, but with vocal support from veteran Sal Grillo, a new generation of hobbyists took the reigns of NJAS. Larsen became president in 1976, with Davis as his first lieutenant.

The new NJAS of the 1970’s was innovative, creating a significant impact on the organized hobby nationwide. Member Chuck Davis introduced the first regular monthly meeting live auction (1976) in an attempt to increase attendance. It proved to be a financial shot-in-the-arm as well as a membership boost. NJAS was also the first area club to offer an annual weekend workshop with Show, Speakers, and Auction. Both these practices are now standard for clubs throughout North America. All this led to an influx of new members who remained dedicated to NJAS throughout their lives, such as Ed Ligotti, Jaime Magnifico, Kevin Carr, Charlie & Gary Kaczka, Frank Policaastro, George Fear, Bill Van Benthuysen, Gus Chini, Ron Mitro, Al Brown, George Cole, Frank Zillitto, Rich Martucci, Frank Nell, Mike Sheridan, Kathy Muraca, Dom Mazzitelli, and Dore Carlo, among others.

The decade culminated for NJAS with the hosting of their first national event: the 1979 American Cichlid Association Convention. Cichlid Legend Mike Sheridan served as Convention Chair. It was the height of the gas crisis, and attendance was less than expected, but the club went on undaunted for socially successful weekend, albeit a financial failure. “We spent too much and didn’t get the expected revenue coming in,” remembers Bob Larsen. Legend has it that young member Kevin Carr purchases inflated orange juice and liquor from the hotel when the beverages ran out! The financial disaster of ACA ’79 impacted club policy and culture to the present day. It is why NJAS always watches their bottom line and worries about revenue and the bank balance.

THE INNOVATORS (1970’s)
Cichlid Legend, Dr. Paul Loiselle's, association with NJAS occurred serendipitously in the 1970’s. While working at a large Milwaukee fish store in between jobs in academia, Paul encountered a couple of customers with particular tastes, in town for a hobby event: Chuck Davis and Ginny Eckstein. Davis, who was Director of the Jersey City Sewerage Authority, offered Loiselle a job as Chief Biologist.

Loiselle accepted and returned to New Jersey, where he would write a series of important hobby books, en route to becoming a Curator at the New York Aquarium. He is an active and contributing member of NJAS to this day.

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT:
Bob Larsen and Chuck Davis, with Kevin Carr at far right with the rest of the kids; Chuck Davis, Kevin Carr, and Frank Dowling display their Show.
Some fish diseases and "cures" | Fish Disease | How to Spot it | What to Do For it
---|---|---|---
Mouth Fungus | Fish has bad breath | Avoid kissing for a few weeks
Swim Bladder Infection | Fish swim upside down | Turn your tank upside down
Extreme Dehydration | Fish lie on bottom of tank | Fill up tank with water
Shake & Shimmy | Fish are nervous and dart about | Remove neighbor cat from tank
Ich or Dandruff | Fish covered with white spots | Stop feeding over tank
Fin & Tail Rot | Fish seems to be rotting away | Remove fish and bury it. It's dead.
THE BAD BOYS OF THE SHOW CIRCUIT (1980’s)

The 1980’s were a time of renewed confidence in America. NJAS reflected those traits, as championship guppies, bettas, killies, cichlids, catfish, livebearers, goldfish and many other classes of fish brought numerous trophies and recognition to the club. More and more members began showing fish, joined by the likes of Nini Schultz, Nora Ferrara, Paul Harvey, the Young brothers, and Dr. Joe Jagust. NJAS All-Species Shows often broke the 500 entry mark with sister societies joining in the competition (including a legendary “Whiskers & Warriors Greater City vs NJAS Challenge”).

The emphasis in the 100+ member club had now tilted decidedly towards cichlids (Bob Larsen wrote a lament on this in 1985). The 1983 Show, for example, was cichlids-only. NJAS members won Best Cichlid Hobbyist of the Year more than once with fish from George Fear, Dore Carlo, Kevin Carr, and Rich Kulek. Their presence built an NJAS support group of some of the most famous hobbyists in the country, including Ginny Eckstein, Wayne Leibel, and Lee Finley, among others.

In 1983 NJAS moved its location to the Jersey City Sewerage Authority where Davis and several other key members were employed or lived nearby. Members like Ed Ligotti and Kevin Carr provided new Presidential leadership. The club began building up its treasury to put themselves on more solid financial ground. Frank Policastro became the club’s astute Treasurer, a post he held until his death in 2011.

NJAS reputation in the 80’s was built not only on their events and trophies, but also by their presence at sister Shows around the country. The “NJAS Travelin’ Caravan” visited shows as far west as Denver; north to Niagara Falls; and south to Orlando. “We would drive 400 miles with 60-70 entries, looking—almost expecting—to win all the gold,” recounts Chuck Davis. “We were the first to support a Show, first to donate, first to the bar, first to the dance floor, first to find controversy, and loved it all...as long as we were first!” This enthusiastic style got them the label, “Bad Boys of the Aquarium Hobby.”

“I still had to deal with that reputation into the late 90’s when I was Marketing Chair for the club,” recalls member Ted Coletti. “It took a lot of convincing to get some veteran hobbyists to travel to New Jersey for events, even though our leadership had turned over by then”

Club leadership welcomed the title, however, even commissioning cooler bags with the tagline. MidWest hobby legend, Rich Serva, remembers: “They would come to one of our events, criticize everything, and then write a glowing review in the newsletter.”

Chuck Davis puts things in perspective by pointing out “We made other clubs’ events successful.” NJAS members brought lots of entries into sister shows (as many as 150) and auction fish not seen in other clubs. Generous donations of livestock, dry goods, and “packaged goods” were common. They were the big spenders at club raffles and auctions. You would be hard pressed to find another club in the 1980’s that supported the organized hobby more than NJAS, in spite of their misunderstood confidence.

The accomplishments and antics of this incarnation was documented in their first and long overdue newsletter, The Reporter. Started by Davis, in 1980, The Reporter differed from other club pubs by blending humor, gossip, and Davis’s alter ego authors (Ida B. Kind et al), with solid articles and great artwork by Davis and other members. The Reporter repeatedly won FAAS and NEC awards, and hobbyists around the country joined as NJAS Corresponding Members just to get the publication.

By the end of the decade, new energy and ideas were rolling in from the younger NJAS cadre that included Kevin Carr, Dore Carlo, Rich Goldstein, Russ White, Joe DiBartolomeo, and others. The torch was passed to these new leaders. NJAS continued to grow, and seasoned veterans stayed active to make the club one of the nation’s top aquarium societies.
CLOCKWISE: Frank Zillitto and George Mood; Chuck Davis, Bob Larsen, and Rich Martucci with trophy; The Rumor Mill, one of Chuck Davis’s best-loved features in the monthly NJAS Reporter; Kevin Carr & Dore Carlo; Mike Sheridan

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT: Chuck Davis auctioning; Frank Policastro, Ed Ligotti, and George Mood; Bill Van Benthysen and Steve Selznick.

**RUMOR MILL**

Any NJAS activity will spur a great deal of gossip, and the very successful WHISKERS, WARRIORS & WEIRDOS SHOW was no exception. And these are a few of the things I remember:

ELLEN WILLIAMSON was quite perturbed over the judging, she expected much more from either her entry or the judges.

AL MILLER has found the perfect pump. House current, car battery operated, and regular battery powered. It was full of new and inventive ideas.

CHUCK DAVIS beat PAUL LOISELLE in the small catfish class, but we have just found out that he has also beaten him quite dramatically in 'computer jeopardy' in Long Island.

RICH KULEK (who won many cichlid classes) wasn’t able to hold his own at a local watering hole, where he was chugging it out with "the only sober Kimartin" and later had to be rescued from a locked toilet stall and sent directly to bed.

Shortly there after, the other KIMARTIN, KEVIN was involved in a 'fruit-of-the-loom' fashion show in the hotel hallway.

DON ROBINSON, the only entrant from north of the N.J. state line, entered every class but the aquatic fauna - he had 36 entries and won about $185 in gift certificates.

DR. JOE "the discus king" JAGUST had the class of the show with his 'Best Cichlid' award winner, a grand turiose discus. He was heard to say, "I didn’t want to bring my good ones!"

The 'special competition' for the round trip airfare to the ACA convention in Orlando, Florida was won by DON CARLO. This prompted a logistics of several serious collections by KEVIN 'molly man' CARR and CHUCK 'the gun' DAVIS, which was answered by counter-charges by 'Danio Doro Carlo'. The entire issue is before an independent arbitrator.

Thanks to Chuck Davis for donating the 15 gallon set-up he won at a raffle in Hartford, Ct. No thanks to him winning the tank set-up again in North Jersey. Thanks for putting into the auction as a donation. No thanks for bidding the price up. Thanks to BOB CIOPPA for buying the set-up.

Seen at the show on Saturday was the phantom - TONY ORSO.

DOM MAZZITELLI took the crowd to the Stadium Delli after the show wrapped up. Boy, can he pick‘em. PAN is still waiting for her 'short ribs' dinner.
THE MODERNIZERS (1990’s)

The decade got off to a difficult start for NJAS with the departure of its heart and soul, Chuck Davis, in 1993 for personal reasons. Davis’ exit left the club without a newsletter editor nor meeting place. The existing leadership and some key members exited the club for a bit too. The recession and corporate downsizing of the early 90’s did not help matters.

NJAS could have faded into oblivion, but was held together with returning veterans Kevin Carr and Dore Carlo, aided by Anthony Metta, Roy Gambino, Dean Majorino, Hoot Gibson, Rick Geis, George Savapoulas, and Roy Allen among others. The folding of the Exotic Aquatics Aquarium Society brought over Ray Wetzel and Ellen Williamson, and more members. NJAS eventually found a new home at the American Legion Hall in Nutley in 1994, a traditional-style meeting place for the club.

The 1990’s saw technology upgrading quickly all aspects of our lives, from how we communicate to how we find information. A new, younger member, Dave Shuster, joined the club and soon became a Board member, proposing changes to modernize NJAS and make it more friendly to a wider audience.

In alternating Presidencies of Shuster and Carr, several modernizations were implemented: a Telephone Hotline with meeting updates, flyers for members to post in their towns, family memberships, dealer support recognition awards, a P.O. Box, an advanced speaker schedule, a revamped membership database, and smoking policies. Members with enthusiasm and new ideas were recruited and encouraged by Shuster. Ted Coletti created a Marketing position for the Board, a Growers Award Program, and took over the editorship of The Reporter, adding a color cover and consistent monthly schedule. Matt Kaufman started the popular NJAS Breeders Award Program, which was later taken over by Larry Jinks and copied by other clubs. Al Aprea created the first NJAS website (maybe the first in the organized hobby). More youth appeared at the meetings, which were more welcoming. Other active new members during the ensuing decade included Chris Tognetti, Jack and Chris Borgese, Laura & Joe Mizii, Michael Newman, Art Herzog, Dan Evans Farkas, Charlie & Linda Materowski, Tom Gillooly, Christine Policastro, and Nigel Bising among others.

Some of the old “Bad Boys” fans felt out of place and left (temporarily).

All this new blood came in handy, as these new leaders had to take the reins in 1998 with the resignation of president Kevin Carr (personal reasons), Dore Carlo (in solidarity), and Dave Shuster (re-location). VP Helen DiBartolomeo (spouse of long-time member Joe Di,) had to assume the Presidency. She masterfully stepped up to the challenge. NJAS' first female President brought stability to the club and to the Board (a Mom for children?). The modernization continued as more new blood stepped up to the plate. Rick Bolger assisted with the Show (today NJAS’ top Judge) and became editor of The Reporter, switching it to a popular and more economical “digest format.” Fred Sharpell developed a new Constitution with 2-year term limits, and later took over the BAP, a post he held for over 10 years. Kevin & Mary Carroll created a long-overdue logo utilizing Chuck Davis’ famous “Scrubby the Pleco.” A Bowl Show was established at the monthly meetings. Larry Jinks and The Borgeses created a new, portable show rack system that was the envy of other clubs.

All these revamps and expertise culminated in one of NJAS’ greatest achievements. It had been 15 years since an ACA Convention had been held in the Northeast / Mid-Atlantic. In 1999, The Borgeses, Larry Jinks, and Mike Newman rallied the Board to take up the gauntlet. The ACA accepted, and NJAS did a “practice run” with their 1999 Weekend Extravaganza. Promoted as the "Last Great Aquarium Event of the 20th Century," it featured the club’s first marketing campaign utilizing nationwide email, internet, postings, and club mailings via Ted Coletti. It was held at the luxurious Parsippany Hilton and drew hobbyists from as far away as Florida and California. The Show room had to be expanded with unexpected entries, and the Sunday auction went 12 hours. In 2000, to lighten the load, NJAS combined efforts with its good friends at the Jersey Shore Aquarium Society (which shared members and a few officers) to produce a successful and widely attended Weekend Extravaganza in central New Jersey.

With this experience under their belt, the new NJAS under Convention Chair Chris Borgese produced ACA 2001: A Cichlid Odyssey at the Parsippany Hilton. The ACA’s host club pick of was fortuitous as it provided attendees with a pre 9-11 tour of New York City. It was extremely well attended from around the world and included local television coverage. Interestingly, NJAS experienced another memorable “rack crash” in the Show room when a table leg collapsed on the Discus section!

The NJAS of 1997-2001 produced outstanding mega-events and conventions, and monthly meetings that kept adding new features. As former President Larry Jinks says, “We had just the right people, in just the right jobs, at just the right time.”
OPPOSITE FROM LEFT: Matt Kaufman, Dean Majorino; Mary Carroll & Linda Materowski; Rick Geis, Christine Policastro, Dave Shuster

TOP FROM LEFT: Al Aprea; Larry Jinks (middle) winning the Rosario Lacorte (on right) Award presented by BAP Chair Fred Sharpell (left) en route to becoming the club’s all-time BAP champion; Gary Crump & Rick Bolger with a little auction helper.

BOTTOM CLOCKWISE: Paul Loiselle, Ray Wetzel, Fred Sharpell, Larry Jinks, Joe DiBartolomeo, Dave Shuster, Al Aprea, Christine Clarke, Rick Geis, Frank Policastro, Roy Gambino, Helen DiBartolomeo, Chris Borgese, Ted Coletti.
THE RETURN OF THE JEDIS (2000’s)

The new Millennium saw the demise of the neighborhood Mom & Pop pet shop. After the early 90’s successful introduction of the Big Box retail pet concept, local shops (and their wholesalers) began to suffer and close. Wholesale pricing, once only known among hardcore hobbyists via mail order ads, became pervasive with the introduction of web-browsing. When the busted housing bubble and resulting “Great Recession” came on in 2007, only the shops with a niche market or distance from a Superstore survived (and struggle to this day). One of those owners who closed up shop was former NJAS President Bob Larsen.

But these few remaining shops were now more receptive to partnering with a fish club, and NJAS wisely created a firm policy of only promoting to its members those independent dealers. In return, these partnering shops promoted NJAS to their customers, and provided gift certificates, donations, and member discounts. This in turn helped NJAS maintain good attendance at their meetings and events, and keep their membership rolls high.

Five straight years of increasingly complex mega events and monthly meetings took their toll on many NJAS volunteers by the turn of the century. Four different administrations took turns leading the club from 1998-2001. To bring stability and focus back to the club, long-time member Joe DiBartolomeo recruited Bob Larsen to successfully run as a Pres-VP slate in 2002. While it was yet another controversial Administration, it’s important legacy was the move to the Meadowlands Environmental Center (Lyndhurst) for meetings and Shows, after the Nutley American Legion Hall cancelled the club’s contract. Compared to the Legion Hall, the cavernous Environmental Center was less intimate with no bar, but meetings were encouraged to end by 10PM. It offered brightly lit and ample parking, and a fitting theme for a fish club. It featured advanced audio-visual capabilities for Powerpoint presentations (which had replaced slides). Best of all: it was free. It was not universally popular among some of the veterans, and some members dropped out due to distance. But many more joined. This new vibe attracted more women, teens, and families, broadening NJAS’ base at a time of declining fish club membership nationwide.

Sadly, not all clubs tried to reinvent themselves for this new Age, and suffered accordingly. Sister societies around the Northeast Council reported declining memberships. Some clubs merged. Blame was placed on the rise of the world wide web, with it’s plethora of chat forums, profitable Aquabid auctions, and websites, which made newsletters, slide shows, and live auctions seem less necessary. Some mentioned how hardcore old-timers were moving away in retirement. And of course, the decades-old excuse of “kids are not interested in fish anymore” made the rounds. But NJAS, with its new space, new blood, and new programs, continued to grow. The 2003 film, Finding Nemo, also gave the hobby a shot in the arm.

In 2003, the club once again pulled out all the stops with a wildly successful 50th Anniversary Weekend in Woodbridge. The event featured 3 Shows (NJAS, IBC, IFGA) and speakers flown in from around the globe. In 2004, Kevin Carr returned to the club, and together with Bob Larsen, served alternatively as President for the next 10 years, along with Joem Robertson for a term. A few times the Larsen family of Bob, Pat, and Bob Jr. all served on the Executive Board for a season. A new, very eclectic NJAS Board emerged, composed of members spanning 5 decades of fish club participation. New officers and returning veterans included Alesia Benedict, Rich Martucci, Ray Wetzel, Frank Zillitto, Ed Ligotti, Doug Mayer, Joem Robertson, Al Bennett, Ginny Grandinetti, Sarah Molonoski, Joe Jaskot, Frank Nell, Dennis Branden, Jim Costello, Carlos Pardela, Jay Luto, Pete Nitzsche, and Liz Landou among others. Chuck Davis even returned as Reporter Editor.

In addition to returning veterans, the complexion of the club was also reverting back to its early eclecticism. The rise of regional and internet-based specialty clubs with their own online chat forums, live auctions, and hatchery orders, siphoned off many of the hardcore cichlidophiles and plant people from NJAS meetings and auctions. This created a broader mix of hobbyists and auction items, which some members welcomed.

The last reversion occurred late in the decade when the club decided to move from the Environmental Center due to restrictions being placed on their monthly meetings and storage requirements. A move was made to the basement hall of the nearby Lyndhurst Elks off Route 3. This decision was seen by some members as a step backward, but logistically and financially it was a necessary move. NJAS continued to add new members and visitors to its meeting with its new online and social media presence.

LEFT: VP Bob Larsen honoring original member Hank Voss at the club’s 50th Anniversary event; husband and wife team of Christine and Frank Policastro.
CLOCKWISE: Paul Nitzsche, Rosario LaCorte, Pete Nitzsche; Jack Borgese; Tom Gillooly; Ted Coletti & Kevin Carr sing the Anacharis Blues; Kevin Carr clowning around with gracious host Jim Costello at one of the summer picnics; Alesia Benedict; Pontoon Ride at the Meadowlands Environmental Center.
Now in 2013, NJAS’ membership stands at about 100 members, and monthly meetings are attended by about 50-70 hobbyists. The club continues to adapt with the times to stay relevant and attract enthusiasts. The Reporter was converted to an emailed PDF format, saving thousands of dollars that was re-directed to their speaker program (something no hobby website or anonymous forum can compete with).

NJAS members recently survived three devastating storms in a span of 12 months (Irene’11, N’oreaster’11, Sandy’12). The Lyndhurst Elks Lodge, flooded out twice and resulting in one cancelled Show, had to be scrapped by the club. After a return to the Meadowlands Environmental Center for a year, then the old American Legion Hall in Nutley (until it was sold), NJAS finally has a new home in its Diamond Anniversary at the Nutley Elks Lodge.

Bob and Pat Larsen retired to Pennsylvania, but new blood continues to step up to the Board, such as Yianni Maris (speakers) Bob Hicks (treasurer), and Bob Gill (BAP). Rick Bolger and ex-President Russ White both returned to the club after decades. Frank Policastro Jr. and Bob Larsen Jr. carry on the legacies of their parents as members of the Board, the latter as President for the 60th Anniversary year.

Looking back on the sixty-year history of the North Jersey Aquarium Society, one wonders:

- How did NJAS survive when 21 of the 23 Garden State aquarium societies established between 1951-1979 perish?
- How does it keep such a high membership and meeting attendance in spite of competing interests from modern life?
- Why has it been consistently a top club since its inception sixty years ago?

If there are any recurring themes throughout the history of the NJAS, any threads that weave through the decades of this club, one is salient: lack of complacency. New programs, new ways of doing things, new leaders - they have been encouraged, attempted, and tested. Turf battles, hard heads, and unchangeable traditions do not occur in the frequency seen in other clubs.

That is the culture of NJAS. Aquarium societies around the world can learn from this approach.

Today’s NJAS contingent outside That Fish Place in Lancaster, PA where member Bob Larsen Sr. was speaking.

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