

The Segrest Story (aka As the Fishes Swim)

By Sandy Moore



Elwyn Segrest at Segrest Farms ~1986.

It all started on a hot summer day in 1940 in the tiny community of Red Lick, Mississippi when, Elwyn Segrest was born to a lay preacher, Elwyn Sr., and his force of nature Southern momma, Celeste. I can attest that being strong and opinionated were genetically inherited by Elwyn.

At a very early age, his grandmother would take him to Woolworth's and seat him in front of the aquarium displays as a cheap babysitter while she commenced to shopping. It was in these humble beginnings that Elwyn fell in love with everything aquatic, and from then, it was an obsession and his avocation.

Although his family wasn't wealthy, his grandfather gifted him with war bonds every Christmas and birthday instead of buying toys, which his momma tucked away for safekeeping.

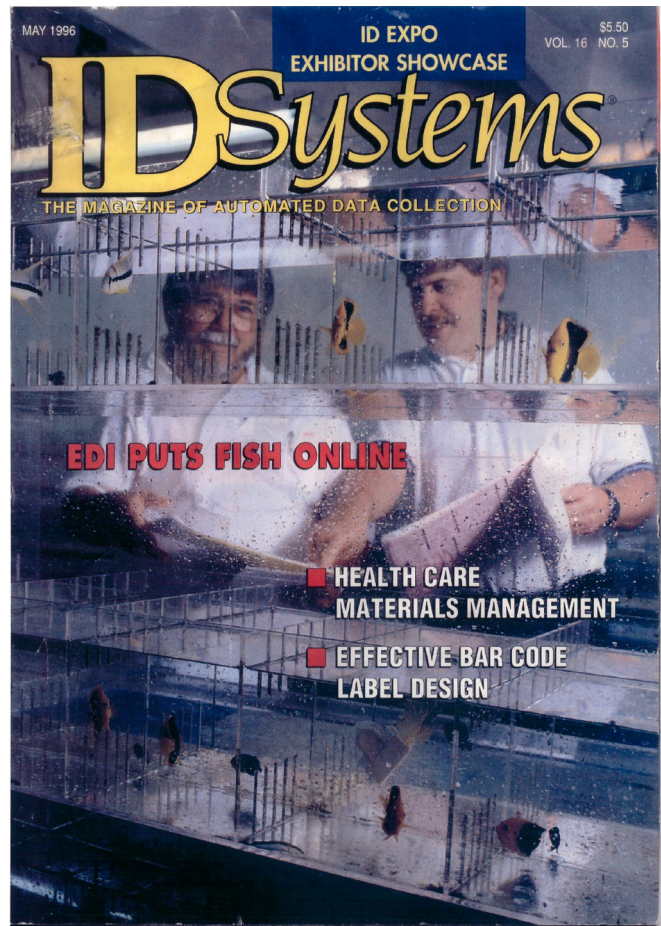
He met his beautiful bride Carol while attending Ole Miss in Oxford, MS, where they were both studying to be educators. He received his master's degree in psychology from Ole Miss. It's the running gag that we have the most well-psychologically adjusted fish in the industry!

They quickly started a family, and soon accepted high school teaching positions in Belle Glade, FL, which offered a higher pay level than was available to them in Mississippi. They loaded up their boys and dogs and belongings, and the Segrest family came down to Florida in their station wagon.

Using \$475 of the \$500 he had in war bonds, Elwyn opened up a small pet store in their garage to add to their income, and maybe a little bit to fulfill his need to own new and exotic species. He bred fish and sold the babies, as well as selling snakes, tarantulas, turtles, guinea pigs, hamsters, birds, and the boomerang spider monkey which he sold several times for \$50 before the owner du jour relinquished it back.



Elwyn at Mizol-Ha Falls in Mexico in 1993, on a fish finding mission with Ross Socolof and Rusty Wessel for Montezuma Swordtails to improve Florida brood stock.



Jack Bramlett Sr. and Russ Whittington, after we were the first live animal company to adopt EDI.

Elwyn continued acquiring pets, including a couple of Mexican rosehair tarantulas whose purpose in the home was roach control. The Segrests sat in front of the television at night, and those tarantulas would dart out from under the furniture to get the occasional insect that are so pervasive in the subtropics of Florida. Ever patient, Carol put up with them (and the menagerie of other critters) for a good while, until one hopped out of the top closet shelf at her, and then the tarantulas had to go.

Elwyn had the great good fortune of meeting Fred Cochu that year. Fred ran an import/export business in Vero Beach called Paramount Aquarium. Elwyn had the capability and capacity to try to raise new angelfish for Fred, and Fred had just obtained a new strain of angelfish called blushing. They were brand new and commanded the extraordinary price of \$50 each. As Elwyn had no way of affording all the brood stock, Fred gave the fish to Elwyn with a promise to repay the value of the breeders with baby fish as well as exclusivity.

(You all might know his name from the scientific name for Blue Tetra, *Boehlkea fredcochui*, which is a staple item still in the freshwater trade. However, perhaps more importantly, he was the first wholesaler to develop regular air cargo flights using his own DC3 plane. He loaded the plane up with appliances and sold those appliances as he hopped down through Mexico to Central America and down to South America, loaded the plane up at stations like Barcelos in the Amazonas state in Brazil with fish, and flew back up and over to Miami. Interesting in that Fred actually had a shorter supply chain in some of those remote artisanal fisheries than what is available today!)

Elwyn grew those angelfish out, set them up in breeding tanks once they had paired off, and came in one night after teaching to see one of the pairs start to mate, much to his amusement and delight. He grabbed a six-pack of beer and a cooler and settled in to watch his fortune being made. The female made a beautiful line of eggs up the slate, and then the male eyed her, and the eggs, and proceeded to eat his way up to the top of the slate. We almost lost Elwyn to a coronary at this sight! His mind screamed at him, "\$50! \$50! \$50!!!!" The female came back down and lowered her vent, and laid a new row of beautiful eggs, and the male commenced to having another caviar snack. Elwyn was beside himself watching his future earnings being consumed by this jerk of an angelfish! Finally, the female came back down, smacked the heck out of the male, turned back around, lowered her vent, and made yet another crisp line of eggs, and the male finally got the memo and dutifully fertilized them.

Eventually, the Segrest clan outgrew Belle Glade and made the move over to Bradenton. Carol taught at Manatee High School, and Elwyn went to work for Ross Socolof at Gulf Fish Hatchery, even though that Ross knew the moment he hired Elwyn that he was training his next competitor. Together they developed new strains of fish, farmed fish, sold fish, packed fish, and got the first big pet specialty chain store, Petcoa. Some lessons are learned the hard way, and having too many of your eggs in one basket is one of those lessons. For example, you might see if there is interest in the hobby for a new fish before you plant half your farm with it (marble kissers!) When Petcoa went under, so did their partnership.

Elwyn opened up another farm in Parrish. Both he and his field hand, Clarence, worked for the first year without drawing a salary while he established his business. Eventually, he would take a number of loyal key personnel that worked for him at Gulf, and the good-natured rivalry would continue until Ross' retirement.



Elwyn and Quintin Segrest 2016.

In those early days, the crew would come in at 2 am, pack the fish, and drive them to the airport to meet the early morning flights, work the fish, sell the fish, and write out the labels for the next day's pack out.

Elwyn had a dream of becoming a national distributor at a time when all fish wholesalers were regional. His core values for the business evolved:

- Quality – Elwyn firmly believed that the best fish came from Florida. He knew the Customer as well as the Consumer. In our land of immediate gratification, the size, color and male to female ratio matters and Elwyn was fastidious in communicating his expectations to the local farming community, as well as his international suppliers, and he held those expectations firmly. While some customers are solely price driven, Elwyn sold to customers who desired value over price by giving them the best fish available. He also created an aquatic health supervisor position to help properly diagnose and treat diseases to improve the condition of the fish, as well as reduce mortality, at retail.
- Service – Elwyn traveled to the Far East and learned how to medicate and tranquilize the fish in the bags to reduce the volume of water shipped to make air transport economical. He developed a freight included price list to anywhere in the

country and started traveling to make new customers and sell them on this concept. He and his sales team looked at every tank every day, to give the Customer the most accurate assessment of the fish, as well as giving the best possible fill rate. Finally, the turnaround time from placing an order to receiving the fish was as quick as 24 hours.

- Dependability – Segrest was founded in supporting independent pet stores by giving them the broadest availability, with exciting new fish as well as a strong selection of hobby favorites. Variety drives our segment of the pet industry, and we are always looking to be the first to market, to have exclusive fish, and have that special rare fish that will drive foot traffic into the retailer. Our business is located within the fish farming capital of North America, giving us daily access to fresh, harvested fish. With Elwyn's background in farming, he always put an emphasis on supporting the family farms and was the quickest-paying shipper in the business. We paid for fish delivered up through Wednesday on Friday. This benefited us to obtain the first, best, and biggest selection of fish, and in moments of scarcity, we got all the fish.

The first years were hard, and we barely got by on a wing and a bushel full of prayers. Then, our good friend and customer from Louisiana, Paul Norton, decided to close up his regional business there and come to Florida to become a fish farmer. He handed out the Segrest price list to all his customers and colleagues, and the business doubled overnight. It doubled again the next week. And so on, and so on!

Elwyn had the great fortune of hiring Jack Bramlett, a former competitor known as Bramco, in the late '70s. Jack had strengths that complemented Elwyn, like his ability to collect money. Elwyn was always too generous, and Jack kept us afloat. Jack also got us into the reptile and bird business, and later got us computerized with Radio Shack computers, and highly customized software that kept us ahead of our competitors. Jack and Elwyn always hired the most attractive ladies, so the farmers made Segrest their first stop on their deliveries, or during our lunchtime, when we would be in the parking lot catching some rays.

With business in full swing, the future of Segrest Farms' potential was endless, and a legacy company was born. When you have a founder like Elwyn, a potential successor must be able to match the tenacity, drive for success, and willingness to learn.

That is where Sandy Moore came in. Bright-eyed, free-spirited, and with a wild heart, Sandy was born destined to find her way into this profession. With childhood roots both with Summers in the wide open farms of Iowa, and the school years in the wilderness of Florida, her early exposure to the passion for animals and nature was deeply seeded.



Jack Bramlett and David Chan 1998 Shenzhen, China inspecting fancy goldfish breeders.

As fate would have it, Sandy was gifted her first aquarium at the impressionable age of five, and that was it. She was hooked and began her journey in the love affair for everything animal began. Little did she know, that journey started in Florida in the form of an albino Corydoras bought from Woolworth in Iowa, but was sourced from Tampa Livestock. This leading supplier just so happened to be a five-minute hop up the road from the current Segrest location where her mom, Pegi, was one of Elwyn's staff.

As a young entrepreneur, Sandy connected with Elwyn's bold blue-collar personality and began selling wild collected snakes to him for \$5/foot when she was 10 years old. Packed with Grit and determination, she was lucky enough to work for him again during high school, scrubbing, and siphoning, taking the sponges down to the laundromat to wash them, etc. Taking it all in, a true mentorship began, and Sandy continued to dig in.

Sandy went to work for Elwyn full-time in 1992 as secretary to the bookkeeper, then became the Florida fish buyer as Elwyn needed more time to run the business. Wanting to know all aspects of the business, she took over handling a chain out of Phoenix in 1993 after they built their first six stores east of the Mississippi. The next year, Segrest Farms took on another chain of stores out of San Diego, and the business model started to evolve. Those two chains had explosive growth, and the Segrest team worked endlessly to evolve with their needs.



Peggy and Sandy 1996 Chao Phraya River, Bangkok (The night I learned to never ask what you're eating until later).



Sandy - Sixth grade field trip to Nature's Classroom in Tampa.



Sandy - 2019 in Saint Augustine.

Segrest outgrew the Parrish facility and moved to Gibsonton in 1981, to what had previously been the Ellsberry farm. As one of the oldest existing fish farmhouses in Florida, this building has poured concrete walls and ceilings and has survived the most tremendous hurricanes. When the staff had to hand carry hundreds of 20-long glass aquariums into the front building, they thought they would never outgrow such a big building. Three locations later and a global success, that building is now just a small part of the housing at Segrest Inc. The business continued to thrive, and a night crew was added to accommodate the demand and pack 24 hours a day. This method allowed the animals to be picked, packed, and shipped with decreased time in transit, making the Segrest quality guarantee only that much more robust.

As the business grew, so did the pallet for variety. Segrest leadership teams traveled the world looking for great suppliers, bigger/better fish, better packing methods, better flights, and ethical collection and handling methods. Technology upgrades added EDI capabilities, bar codes to the tanks for inventory purposes, a stainless steel conveyor system so the fish get a comfortable journey to the packing table, hired an aquatic veterinarian and a fish health staff, became UPS's largest 100 lb. overnight shipper east of the Mississippi, partnered with a number of sustainability initiatives, and helped grow one of those our suppliers become their own fish distribution facilities.

With freshwater having a solid foundation and underway, Elwyn began the pursuit of supplying marine animals from Segrest Farms. By the end of the 1980s, the new plan went from concept to implementation and was in full swing. Knowing that a short supply chain is imperative to healthy animals, he worked with global suppliers to help build his own collection facilities around the world.

Segrest could then be able to track the full supply chain of the fish from the reef to the retailer and help solve changes efficiently. In addition to healthy fish, sustainability and safety for the divers was key driver. Elwynn ensured that Segrest supplied the divers with the nets and equipment and training to guarantee that fish that came to our facilities were all net-caught. Although the Marine Aquarium Council certification program is no longer in effect, Segrest was one of the first to be certified and we still maintain those standards today.



Visit to the US by Svein Fossa (VP Ornamental Fish International) from ~2017.



Sandy presenting Elwyn with World Pet Association's Lifetime Achievement Award in at SuperZoo in Las Vegas in 2022.

With a clear horizon for expansion, Segrest incrementally grew the business through acquisition. From purchasing Norton's Tampa Bay Fisheries to help with the box lot business, then Sun Pet in Atlanta to add small animals and birds to our offerings, and then EkkWill Waterlife Resources for larger independent customers. To round it out and to increase distribution, the purchase of Blue Springs Fish Hatchery to get allowed Segrest to gain space with the Mass retail market, and a number of their competitors to gain market share.

To continue to diversify internal production, Aquatica Tropicals was purchased, where millions of fish are bred, hatched, and grown annually. This allowed for vertical integration and, once again, the need for expansion. Most recently, Fish Mart in Connecticut, as well as Pet Source in Oklahoma, were purchased, growing our Segrest Inc. family to now a staff of over 500 and a fleet of delivery vehicles of over 100.



Sunny Tan, Sandy and Tom Beat in Singapore in 2009 during Aquarama.



Marshall Meyers of PIJAC holding court in our booth at SuperZoo in 2022.



Excursion to the Rio Negro in Brazil to support Project Piaba in 2014.

At the end of the day, we are animal enthusiasts and are deeply entrenched in industry initiatives surrounding legislation, sustainability, animal welfare, and marketing. The dedicated teams at Segrest Inc. staff are hired for their ability to execute with excellence in their passion for their area of work. It is for this that Elwyn can often be heard saying:

“We can never repay the industry that has given us everything.”



Two divers in PNG that were trained by the support we lend to the Net Caught Training Program, led by Barnett Shutman, who operates best in class facilities in the Philippines and in PNG.

A humble statement that still carries on through the staff today. Elwyn retired from his long and illustrious career in 2015, and Sandy took over the helm as President of Segrest Inc. Under her leadership, Segrest has continued to grow and thrive in an increasingly difficult business environment. With a mindset passed on down from Elwyn, Segrest surrounds itself with the experts in every aspect of the industry. The brand voice resonates through many channels and is attributed to the blessings of many customers and great suppliers, and as Sandy stated:

“the best staff in the industry”

And it all started with \$475 and a dream....