



## My Life in the Pet Industry - Part 2

By Steve Feinberg

I moved to Hollywood, Florida in late 1975. I immediately put in an application for employment with Docktor Pet Center located at the Hollywood Fashion Center. A few weeks went by and I didn't hear from them. I set out to apply instead at the Docktor Pet Center in the Lauderhill Mall. That afternoon, the phone rang. It was the folks at Docktor Pet Center wanting to talk. Not the store I applied to that morning, but the Hollywood store I had applied to weeks before.

I went to the store and met Bob and Jody Hansen. Bob and Jody were from Texas. They were single-store franchisees. They were very nice people and were the epitome of Southern hospitality. I was a kid from New York. They both explained that the store had a very small fish department. Thinking back, it was probably 25 or so 15-20 gallon aquariums. There were two 40-gallon-long "show tanks". No one working there knew anything about fish. Bob asked if I would come aboard to maintain and manage the "fish room". Sure, why not?

I cleaned up the fish room, brought the tanks back to health, and ordered fish. I also waited on the fish customers. The fish room business grew quickly.

There is only so much time you can spend on 25 tanks. I was looking for something else to do. I offered to take over the bird/reptile/small animal room. I had been spending some time in there and doing my research about the animals we had, along with specific and general care. Bob and Jody couldn't hand it over to me fast enough. Less work for them and the rest of the crew.



Photo taken July 1970 by *The Caller-Times*.

The bird/reptile/small animal contained a little bit of everything. Parrots, keets, cockatiels, snakes, lizards and rodents.

I learned about the care and needs of all of these animals while I took care of them. I also became the “go-to salesperson” when someone needed something from the room.

One day, we inherited a very large, very nasty Haitian Boa. This was a mean snake with a big giant snake head and big, nasty teeth. It was probably 4’ long and strong. I took good care of it but did not care to handle it if I didn’t have to.

One day, a young man walked over and asked to see the Haitian Boa. I asked if he was serious because this was a mean snake. I asked if he knew how to handle the snake once I handed it to him. He assured me he was an “expert” and scoffed at the thought that I might even ask that question. I then asked him to show me a credit card or cash.

I put on two very heavy welder’s gloves that came up to my elbows, threw the cover back, pinned, and grabbed the snake behind the head. I then grabbed its twisting body and carefully handed the snake over. We were standing facing each other about three feet apart.

Just as I removed my gloves, the snake broke free from his grip and it fell to the floor. This was one pissed off snake.

Truthfully, inside I panicked. I had no time to think. The snake faced me, reared back, mouth open, and lunged at me. My survival instinct kicked in. As it was mid-lunge, I blindly reached and swept my hand in one fell swoop. By some amazing stroke of luck, grabbed the snake again right behind the head.

I coolly then turned to the customer and said “Listen. If you don’t know how to handle these babies, it’s ok to say so”. I felt like Marlin Perkins on Wild Kingdom. My heart was beating out of my chest at the time.



Hatian Boa (*Epicrates striatus*)

I loved sales and Docktor Pet Center also provided some excellent sales training materials. Salespeople will agree that there's a little rush you get every time you close a sale. I loved it and I was good at it. I enjoyed starting people off the right way and solving people's problems.

Docktor Pet Center's main business was puppies. They were almost all located in busy mall locations.

One day, Bob asked me if I would like to try my hand at selling puppies. I did a quick inventory of the puppies currently in the kennel and tried to learn something relevant about each one quickly.

I saw a customer looking through the glass at a puppy and making kissing gestures, so I went in and brought the puppy out for a meet and greet and some time in the "playroom". I joined them to answer questions. It was a Bichon Frise.

"Tell us about the Bichon," they asked. I only had one night of research and knew only one thing about the Bichon. "They come from the Canary Islands" "Ok. what's their temperament like?" My answer... "I've heard dogs from the Canary Islands likely have a nice temperament". I learned a lot about dogs (and cats) and gave much more insightful and definitive answers quickly.



Now, I was dealing with dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, small animals, and fish. I got a phone call from a man named Joe Turner. Joe was setting up a large fish room in an out-of-the-way bird shop in North Miami Beach. The owners were looking for someone to care for and run the fish room. Their names were Stan and Jean Halpern. The shop was called "Fine Feathered Friends". It sat on a small side street, behind an IHOP in North Miami Beach.

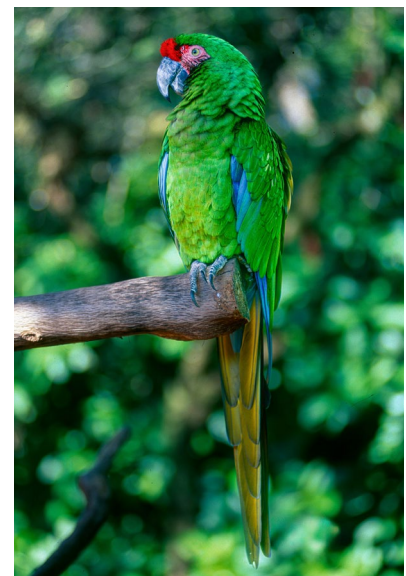
We had a Quaker Parrot named Willie who lived in an open playpen on the counter. For a treat and on command, Willie would jump off his perch and push a small, plastic lawnmower around the counter and make a growling noise while he did it. Willie was very tame and a very cool bird.

It was here that I became immersed in birds. We had all varieties of super nice, healthy birds. We had a large selection of finches and canaries. Parakeets and cockatiels of course. There were all types of conures and parrots. Then we had the “big guys”. A few varieties of cockatoos and quite a few very large macaws. At four in the afternoon, we had to walk out in front of the store. Every bird in the store would squawk at full volume for about five minutes. You couldn’t hear yourself think.

There was one macaw in particular. His name was Napoleon. He was a Military Macaw. At first, he and I did not see eye to eye. I worked with Napoleon every day. Eventually, we became such good friends, that he would even let me hold him on his back. When a bird is on its back, it is almost completely vulnerable. It’s a sign of absolute trust.



Quaker Parrot (*Myiopsitta monachus*)



Military Macaw (*Ara militaris*)

I once waited on David Crosby.

I stayed for a while and then eventually returned to the Docktor Pet Center family in Hollywood with the Hansens.

I met my wife, Lucy at a Hurricane David party in 1979. Later that year, we found out we were going to parents. I was happy to be working.

Bob and Jody decided to sell the business, move to Marco Island, and open a movie theater. The new owners planned to manage the store themselves. I needed a job.

The District Supervisor for Docktor Pet Center Corporate would come around from time to time. His name was Vince Hourihan. Vince was from Boston and had a great New England accent. He was also among my list of amazing mentors I was privileged to work with. An all-around nice man and a straight shooter. I always looked forward to his visits.

Vince knew I would be looking for a job and he called me. He told me that there was a multi-store franchisee in the Virginia area looking for a store manager. We arranged a flight for the interview. It was there I was introduced to Dick Linehan. Dick owned about 20 Docktor Pet Centers, a number of frozen yogurt places, and a few athletic shoe stores. He would make multiple deals with malls for numerous locations. He was accompanied by his right-hand man and General Manager, Larry Hess. I was interviewed and hired. I would be provided a moving expense. I promised I would stay at least a full year. With a child on the way and away from our families, I wasn't sure that would work out.

We moved to Richmond, Virginia.

Larry Hess called me and told me to meet him at the Regency Square Mall store at 10:00 AM sharp. I told him I would be there.

At 10:00 AM sharp, I walked into the mall. Larry Hess saw me and hurried over. "Give me five minutes, I have to go fire the manager," he said. He walked into the store.

A minute later, a very angry gentleman stormed out of the store saying things you would not repeat in front of your kids.

Larry came out to the storefront and waved me in.

I was met with the stunned faces of the store crew. Their boss was let go and less than two minutes had passed. I was introduced as the new store manager.

I asked Larry Hess if I could have a few moments alone with the staff. He looked puzzled but agreed. I asked everyone to meet in the back room.

The first thing I said was that I was sorry that the transition took place the way it did. I assured them that I was as surprised as they were.

Then I said "There must be some issues and room for improvement here or they wouldn't have asked me to be here. I'm not sure what they are yet, but I will. If you decide to stay, I can tell you that you will learn a lot and you will enjoy your work. I believe in having a well-run store that everyone can take pride in. You will also have a lot of fun."

Then I said, "If you're really not interested in participating or working with me, don't let the door hit you on the way out, right now."

You can't row a boat if someone keeps throwing out the anchor. I love that saying.

So, we got to work. It's funny how a crew can be perceived as lazy or sloppy. This crew was when I arrived. As the store cleaned up and they were given a direction and purpose, they became an excellent crew. They took great pride in the store.

A couple of stories about my stay here...

We were given the latitude to order our tropical fish from either of two sources. One source had quality fish, good deliveries, and great service. The other was a guy who gave the store managers little perks and gifts for their business. His fish were horrible and his service was worse.

Most of the other managers took the perks and had very poor fish departments. I chose to go with the more reliable source.

One day, the GM of the “perks” supplier came to see me. He wanted to know why I wasn’t doing business with him. Almost all of the other managers were. I answered “Your fish are horrible. They’re usually sick, underfed, undersized, and frozen by the time they are delivered. The losses within the first 48 hours are staggering. They are undercounted and shorted in the bag. The delivery guy is rude. Your phone people are clueless. You shouldn’t even be allowed to do business”

His answer was “Come on, don’t hold back! How do you really feel?”

We had a Yellow Nape Amazon Parrot. I wish I could remember his name. He sat on an open perch next to the counter. Everyone in the mall came by to visit. Myself and my staff loved this bird. He was a big talker, had a huge personality, and loved hanging out on your shoulder while you went about your business.



Yellow Nape Amazon Parrot (*Amazona auropalliata*)

Our Yellow Nape came from that aviary and was to be on the round-up list.

I called Mr. Hess and told him what I'd heard. He told me that I shouldn't listen to rumors and he hadn't heard anything about any U.S.D.A activity.

The next day, Larry Hess calls to tell that the U.S.D.A would be coming by at some point to take the bird away. I expressed how upset I was that they wouldn't let us quarantine to bird ourselves. He said I needed to lay low and not make any waves.

The day that the U.S.D.A. was scheduled to pick up the bird, I arrived at work at my usual time. As I pulled into the parking lot, I noticed multiple news vans and lots of commotion. I wondered what was going on.

When I walked into the store, there were reporters everywhere. Lights were being set up. And my Assistant Manager, Tina, and another member of my crew, Meg, were locked in the bathroom with the bird.

They eventually came out and we all did some interviews. They interviewed the parrot as well.

When the small, white-coated doctor from the U.S.D.A. showed up he was mobbed by reporters and accused of all sorts of crimes and misdemeanors. I felt bad for him. He was just doing his job.

That night, it was the lead story on all of the local news channels.

The next morning, the phone rang. It was Larry Hess. He said " Steve Feinberg! (he always called me Steve Feinberg) I need you to explain what the term lay low means to you." He went on to tell me that not only did we make the local news, but he caught the story on the local news in Norfolk. Norfolk was 80 miles away. I explained that this was actually probably good press. I was proud of my crew.

Midway through the year, Larry called me very early one morning. It was my day off. He asked me to meet him at the Cloverleaf Mall store. He explained that the manager had just been fired for theft and I was needed to open the store. It turned out to be a transfer. When I arrived, I was informed that the entire crew resigned as soon as the manager was let go. From the looks of the store, it had been ransacked.

Larry Hess stood and watched me survey the store. He really wasn't a hands-on kind of supervisor, so he didn't quite know how to help me. So, he watched me instead. One by one, the employees who had resigned came back into the store and told me they changed their minds. I didn't change mine. I told each of them that their resignations were all accepted.

I decided I would rather run the store by myself than rehire people who would let a store get in this condition.

My saving grace was Peggy. Peggy was the girl who cleaned the kennels and took care of the puppies and the animals every day. She had been doing this here for eleven years. She was very shy and led a very quiet life. I liked her immediately. She seemed surprised when I asked her about her job, how

she liked it, and if she needed anything. She said she liked her job just fine. She sheepishly told me she hadn't had a raise in years. I walked over to Mr. Hess and asked him to approve a raise for Peggy, retroactive for 3 months. He agreed.

It took a week or two, but I hired a new staff. They worked hard, we replenished and re-merchandised the inventory and we were back in business. Tina and Meg both came over to work with me.

Docktor Pet Center ran a promotion called "Pet a Puppy, Win a Puppy". Each store was sent 1000 scratch-off cards. There were 5 scratch-off circles on each card. The customer would have to choose a puppy to hold. If you scratched them off and it spelled PUPPY, you won the puppy in your arms. There was one winning card in the pile of 1000. If you didn't win, you scratched an extra bonus box. There was always a \$25-\$50 off the puppy hidden beneath.

We had banners, posters, and signs in the kennel windows. The store was done up. The promotion was to last 3 weeks to a month or when we ran out of cards.

The big morning came. It was 10 AM and I raised to gate to the store. It was very early and the mall was very quiet.

A nice young maintenance man was sweeping up as he went by the store. He noticed the signs and banners and asked what was going on. I explained the big promotion we were starting today.

He asked if he could try it. Sure, why not? He chose a puppy, took the top card off the deck, and scratched. It spelled PUPPY. He asked if that meant he won and I told him, yes he did.

I called Mr. Hess. I explained that the very first contestant won the puppy. For the rest of the promotion, there was no chance anyone else could possibly win. I always had a surprise for Mr. Hess. We worked it out.

I enjoyed my job, but my son Adam was born in July and we were missing our families. A year was coming up and we decided to head back to Florida. I stayed through the holiday season.

A few weeks before we were scheduled to leave, I asked my mom in Florida to send me the Sunday classifieds from the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel. There was a job listed for a pet store manager at the new Broward Mall. It was called Pet Menagerie. At the time, good mall stores were in high demand in the pet industry. Docktor Pet Centers wanted the space. There were two independent pet store owners who wanted the space, but neither could outbid Docktor Pet Center for the store. Chuck West owned Pet Circus and Dave Rafael owned Pet World. Together, they formed a partnership and outbid Docktor Pet Center for the space. They couldn't call it Pet Circus or Pet World, so they called it Pet Menagerie. Chuck bought Dave out of the partnership soon afterward.

I called the number and Judy West, Chuck's wife answered the phone. Judy conducted the whole phone interview fielding questions from Chuck in the background. I told them it would be three weeks before I would be back in Florida. Chuck asked why he should wait three weeks when he needed someone now. I told him I would make him a lot of money. They waited.

My first morning at Pet Menagerie went like this. I met Judy outside the electric gate in front of the store. She handed me a set of keys, and showed me how to unlock, raise, and lower the gate, where the light switches were, the cash register, and the safe.

She said she had to run and she was gone.

My crew started showing up shortly thereafter. They were a very diverse group of people my age. I liked them instantly. I took a look around the store and decided it was overcrowded with inventory. Some are not likely to sell anytime soon. We had three hard-bound copies of "The World of Sled Dogs". Not a big seller in South Florida. I put some on clearance and after a while, tossed the leftovers.

Chuck and Judy owned three stores. One in Fort Lauderdale that Chuck himself managed, another in Lighthouse Point. Judy managed that one. I was managing the mall store. At Docktor Pet Center, I was used to submitting various performance reports. There were no reports to fill out. Only bank deposit slips. So, I put together a small weekly report that showed puppy sales, average supply sales with each puppy, average ring, and customer count. Business was very good.

By 1984, there were seven Pet Circus stores. The problem was that each store had the autonomy to buy whatever they wanted as long as it was in the Royal Pet Supply catalog. They were also buying puppies anywhere they chose. Things were getting out of hand.

Chuck asked if I would consider becoming his General Manager. It took me a nanosecond to say yes. I couldn't wait to get more involved.

The first thing I did was centralize the puppy procurement. There were kennels and breeders I had been dealing with that ran excellent facilities. I cut off everyone else. I dealt with all of the kennels and breeders directly and allocated the puppies to the stores.

I visited each store and told the store managers that we were about to become more consistent in our procedures, policies, and approach. Having been autonomous for so long, a few weren't happy.

Another person who wasn't happy was Steve Augenstein. He owned Royal Pet Supply. The reason he wasn't happy was that I had asked him for a full Royal Catalog. I took that catalog and highlighted hundreds out of the thousands of items. I brought it back to Steve and told him I wanted new catalogs printed showing only those items highlighted. He asked why. I told him going forward these were the only items Pet Circus managers were permitted to buy unless they had pre-approval to order a special item they might need. I also added the retail prices.

After a while, the stores became more consistent and we were building the brand.

It was during this time that I also first met Al Simon. Al came to see us regularly and brought us his Wee Wee Pads, a cologne in a skinny black bottle, and maybe a few shampoos. It was the first product offered by his new company, Four Paws. We did business right in the store. We grew up together and became great partners. Al was a very smart, interesting, and self-made man. He passed away a few years ago. I have great memories of Al.



Photo of Al Simon



Wee-Wee Pads made by the company Four Paws.

At that time, the first manufacturer agreed to sell us directly. It was Aquarium Systems, makers of Instant Ocean. The only caveat was that we had to buy it by the trailer truckload. Chuck liked the savings and agreed. We had some serious Instant Ocean inventory. But, we ran it out on a great promotion until we reached a reasonable inventory level and often put it on future promotions as it drove lots of business. Steve Augenstein was not happy with Aquarium Systems' decision.



Around the same time, we were drop shipping Rolf C Hagen products through a distributor in Miami called Paramount Pet Supply. We would place the order through them, and they would get a point or two for handling the transaction and we received the goods directly. The truck would be unloaded behind our Fort Lauderdale store, we would split it up and distribute it around the company in one of our two company vans. It was a sweet deal.

Paramount Pet Supply went out of business.

Dieter Hagen called. He said he liked the amount of business we were doing and hated to lose the account. He offered to sell us directly. That changed everything.



Photo of Rolf C Hagen.