

Book Review

AN OCEAN OF INSPIRATION: THE JOHN OLGUIN STORY. Stefan Harzen, Barbara Brunnick, and Mike Schaadt. Rocky Mountain Books, Surrey, BC, Canada, 2011. ISBN 9781926855806, 336 pp.

It is fair to say that the most important gift a mentor can bestow upon a student is inspiration. As the apt title of this book indicates, John Olguin was a veritable and vast source of inspiration for many people. *An Ocean of Inspiration* is an intriguing account of John Olguin's life, from his humble beginnings as an industrious young newspaper boy in the coastal California town of San Pedro, through his initiation to marine biology as a Lifeguard Captain, his actions as a decorated Army hero in the Pacific theater of World War II, and the prophetic inception and development of the award-winning Cabrillo Marine Aquarium (www.CabrilloMarineAquarium.org). By the end of the book, it is clear that John Olguin literally touched millions of lives by infusing them with his passion for marine biology. He sparked a sense of wonder and discovery as he led kids on fascinating journeys, like the remarkable life cycle of the California grunion, the spectacular migration of the gray whale, or the miraculous events that unfold every day in the tide pools at Cabrillo Beach.

As with any charismatic leader, the legend of John Olguin is anchored in many accomplishments achieved by inspiring multitudes of volunteers and dedicated supporters. The lessons he taught by example are simple concepts that anyone can follow: perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity, the strength in and love of community, unabashed enthusiasm, dedication to innovative excellence in education, creative problem solving, goal-oriented commitment, networking and appreciation of volunteers, and the gentle guiding hand of leadership. *An Ocean of Inspiration* could also serve as a guidebook for how to build and maintain an educational program that has lasting and far-reaching impacts on people's lives. Beyond the lessons and captivating threads, this book presents the full spectrum of John's life, complete with solutions to many of his trials and tribulations.

John Olguin was named San Pedro's Citizen of the 20th Century, having built a stellar reputation for community service, fundraising for various

causes, enlisting impressive networks of supporters, and for his exceptional storytelling. I can attest that a single story contained sufficient enticement to enroll oneself as a volunteer. John never squandered these relationships; he cherished them. To this day, there is a never-ending supply of Cabrillo Whalewatch volunteers, partially because they are constantly reminded that they are important, respected, and appreciated. Cabrillo Whalewatch began in 1972. Since then, they have trained a few thousand volunteer naturalists who have educated more than a million students for oceanic field trips to see the annual migration of the California gray whale.

For John Olguin and his disciples, life is a series of adventures, and education is a hands-on experience. Each story he told was an opportunity to involve the audience, no matter their age. Many people still remember when they learned the "grunion dance." The California grunion is a sardine-sized bony fish known for its unusual habit of mating on land. On nights of extremely high tides, the females come up onto sandy beaches and "dance" on their tails, wiggling down into the sand to lay their eggs. Males then wrap their bodies around the females and fertilize the eggs buried in the sand.

Some of these grunion nests are harvested for the Spring Program, which is designed to bring inner-city school kids to Cabrillo Beach and expose them to marine biology. On those festive days, kids flow continuously from school buses to a series of stations on the beach and in the tide pools, having one remarkable experience after another. At one popular station, the kids are given a small glass jar containing a tablespoon of "magic" sand and seawater. As they swirl the sand and seawater, astonishment washes across their faces as little grunions hatch from translucent eggs and swim around inside the jars. These kinds of experiences last a lifetime. Since 1975, more than one million exhilarated kids have passed through the Spring Program.

I was fortunate to have met John Olguin. I soon became a volunteer and learned many valuable lessons. I learned that being passionate about your work produces uncommon results and sustained enthusiasm that inspires others. One very important lesson was that "Nothing is impossible." Most challenges boil down to cultivating creative solutions, planning, persistence, and teamwork. John

urged us to “Do it, do it!” I’ve seen his philosophy work many times. Now when I’m told that a goal is “impossible,” I suspect that it may be a good one. Accomplishing and overcoming such challenges is its own reward, and it invariably reminds me that John Olguin was the original catalyst.

Rarely in life do you meet someone as inspirational and passionate about his work as John Olguin; but when you do, it is unforgettable.

The story of John Olguin’s life is an uplifting and heartwarming account of a common man with an outsized list of accomplishments based on kindness, generosity, community service, and dedication. He loved and respected everybody and never spoke an unkind word. He could teach and communicate with people of any age, race, creed, or culture, especially the children. Referring to these children, Harzen, Brunnick, and Schaadt put it this way: “John Olguin’s decades of innovation and education have planted a seed of curiosity that will forever live in their hearts and minds.”

John Olguin read this authorized biography and shared with its authors how he wanted to be remembered: “Just a man that did the right thing, and left the world a little better than it was when he came into it.” John’s life, and this book, can be an inspiration to us all.

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