

GG: My grandchildren call me papa G and a lot of my customers call me papa G. George will do fine.

This is George Goulart, the owner of Aqua-Life Central. It's a fish store on Hope and Wickenden.

GG: I've been in the shop since 1980. But I started in the little room across the way where I keep all the dog food now. That was 215 square feet. That was my store when I started in 1980. I had a separate door, entrance, little gas, I had 26 tanks.

The store has grown tremendously. Walking in now, there are hundreds of tanks filled with rare tropical fish. On the walls, you see boxes of chemicals, LED lights, various kinds of imported fish food, filters, fake plants. The store is hot and humid, an environment suited to the fish. On a Saturday morning it's packed with old bearded men-- the regulars. They come here so often that George has them clean the shop.

GG: Everybody that's here that helps out. They usually know. When I pile papers there, they take it and throw it in the basket. It's all crumpled up.

C1 (Customer 1): I didn't want to throw away something good.

GG: I understand. But that's what we do in here. Dan walks by and he sees a crumpled paper he just throws em, Bill the same way.

C1: I know that for next time I'm here, and it seems like I'm here every week.

GG: You know the routine know. You see crumpled papers over there, they go in the basket.

George is in his 60s. The first thing you'll notice about him is that he's always talking. About anything from Providence politics, to local pizza joints, to the three full rooms of fish tanks he keeps in his house. He sits at his throne in the center of the store interacting with the regulars for hours on end. They have these spirited debates about the particulars of fish ownership.

Bill: Point at a 125!

GG: How much?

Bill: Point at a 125!

GG: That's a 135. It's actually 4 inches taller than a 120.

[include whole clip]

....

GG: They don't make them anymore.

George cares a lot about his fish. He humanizes them- sees them as having emotions and motives. He tries to control their social environment in the shop, making sure they're happy.

GG: There's a breeding group in there. One male, three females. That's a seven year old group, and the other group is over there. I got an 8 year old group, they're actually from the same

family. But, that's an older group. If I had them together they'd be world war 3. There would be only one male, and he'd have all six females, but he has three, he has three, they're happy.

[include clip of "troublemaker" in the tank]

George loves talking about fish so much that, a decade ago, he used to have a radio show called "The Fish Doctor."

Radio clip

GG: I used to go fishing every year, opening day, and opening day is big for the sport fishermen and it was for me too . Used to go every year with a friend of mine, we would go up to the ponds in Rhode Island. And went fishing on his 65th birthday, that month was opening day in April. We went out, went to the same spot, I was on his right, he was on the left, and he was fishing and he had always told me, "I want to die with my fishing pole in my hand," and the guy actually had a heart attack right there, 65, he had just retired, he was working since he was 7 years old the guy. He died with a fishing pole in hand, and he had a 2 lb bass on his line. We brought it in and I got it up and I'm looking and then he collapses, I said oh my god. I haven't been fishing ever since. I decided to keep em live.

[debrief bubble]

George puts all he has into this fish store. Beyond the fish themselves, he puts thought into every aspect of the shop. On the outside of the store, there's an extremely elaborate mural, showing an underwater scene in vibrant colors. It's almost psychedelic. This is George's passion project.

I woulda went to RISD..there were other issues, but.. I drew the basic outline. I went through almost 50 guys before they actually realized that what I wanted was a three-dimensional mural. You know, not just a flat piece of paper, that had depth. And actually in the summertime when we redo it, it comes out onto the sidewalk, too. The water, the stones, the rocks...

This mural is not finished. The details on all that coral is not even there. Once the details, what I originally want is all the details, the small polyps that come out of all this live fallen rocks is gonna be in phosphorescent paint. And then I'm gonna have these small, and I was waiting for the technology to catch up with my idea, black lights, all around, hidden in the mural, and at night, automatically goes on, and all the details of the coral reef will glow, all around, top, bottom, walls, floors, everything.

[fade]

When George goes into the shop each morning, it's not like 'going to work'.

GG: See most people go to work for money. I go to work for life. You know, idleness is the work of the devil. People that just sit around, even if you're just, thinking, cause I used to be in those, what they call, back in the '60s, they used to called them thinktanks, I think they still call em thinktanks. Because it's not for nothing. Uh. I don't know if you know what a mensa is. The mensas are the guys with the high IQs. Anything over 145.

GG: They actually have a mensa group. I was one of them.

[bubbles, background noise for transition]

Right as I'm leaving, George starts talking about his faith and his philosophies; Noah's Ark and the book of Genesis, and he says to me:

George: "I got news for ya..."

I don't know what to make of George. After spending a day with him in his shop, he had told me his thoughts on biology, local crime, the Bible ... but interspersed in his long monologues, he'll give me all sorts of advice.

Everything that was put in front of you, take it for what it's worth, you're supposed to be here right now.

But then he goes off on another tangent, usually about fish.

I don't know what's ever gonna come of this, and I don't really care, but I'm not gonna angst over it, cause when I finish with you, I'm gonna over there and check all my tanks, make sure all the fish are naturally acting.

[more clips of him babbling]

THE END