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For the love of Doc

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D.L. Blakely was watching the Channel 7 news in Fort Lauderdale when the report came on that an eight-foot whale had stranded at Naples. The whale would be transported to a holding facility in Key Largo, the reporter said. A phone number flashed on the screen, calling for volunteers. Blakely dialed it, then drove half the night and was in the water with the whale by sunrise.

Three days later, Blakely, 52, a bit player in movies and television commercials, was an old hand at whale rescue. "If they would have let me, I would have stayed with him 12 hours a day," Blakely said.

They wouldn't. They couldn't. The line was too long. For 11 days in June, the dwarf sperm whale -- *Kogia simus*, the smallest true whale known -- would fight for life. And at least 400 people, including many who had never seen a whale, would volunteer for a four-hour shift in waist-deep water to help this one swim.

"Some of them had experience," said Robert Lingenfelter, 46, volunteer coordinator for the Key Largo-based Marine Mammal Conservancy. "Some of them had no experience. Now all of them have had the experience of their lives."

News of the whale -- almost immediately dubbed "Doc" to settle a tie between that and "Happy" -- spread by word of mouth throughout South Florida, crackled over telephone lines and police radios.

Lynn Stine, a Florida Highway Patrol trooper from Homestead, was a veteran of whale and dolphin strandings. She gave up a night of overtime writing speeding tickets on A1A to hold and steer Doc in a waist-deep lagoon on the Florida Bay side of Key Largo.

"Come on, Doc," she murmured to the whale. "Breathe."

For a few days and nights this month, I was one-four-hundredth of the whale rescue effort. After taking the 15-minute orientation from Lingenfelter, I was on the opposite side of Stine, holding up a 450-pound whale until my left biceps gave out, and I had to change positions. I had my hand on his heart, trying to keep his blowhole up and his dorsal fin straight as we moved in circles around the lagoon.

Like the others, I felt there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

After each shift, volunteers coming into the water would ask, "How is he?" And those leaving would report subtle changes in the whale's behavior. The morning of my first night, which was marked by rain-interrupted sleep on an air mattress, Doc showed more life than I had seen to that point. Blakely, an ex-Marine, swam him around solo, pushing the little whale to take brief sprints to the edge of the yellow boom enclosing the area.

A SERIOUS GAME

Later, in an exercise called "toss the whale," four strong men played a game of catch with Doc, pushing him diagonally across the lagoon. Blakely again set the standard with a 30-yard diagonal toss, aided by the whale's own efforts.

Perhaps we should have known there was something seriously wrong with a whale, a mammal that earns its living diving to 1,000 feet or more to feast on squid, putting up with this nonsense from humans who were thrilled by even a few cetacean strokes.

But we had nothing but hope. And time. And great, unexpected company that rolled in like the tide.

Magically, I smelled steak and chicken grilling outside the tent that first rainy night, beneath an umbrella held by Russ Rector, president of the Dolphin Freedom Foundation in Fort Lauderdale. I cut one steak into seven pieces and passed it around. No one complained. Some came to watch, some signed up for four-hour shifts, some dropped \$20 into the jar labeled "donations", said nothing and left.

"They don't have a lot of money," Logan Walters, a visiting student from Miami-Ohio University, said of the rescue group. ``They have a buoy, some buckets and a tent. They're doing all they can -- Everybody has been so supportive."

Walters was part of a marine science class from Miami-Ohio -- 27 wet-suited students and their teacher, none of whom could get enough of Doc. The Ohio group was followed two nights later by a smaller, but equally earnest, class of zoology and veterinary science students from the University of Florida. True to their reputation, the Gators partied harder, lasting deep into the night, until they fell fast asleep in lawn chairs.

Help came from many places. Miami Children's Hospital offered to donate medical supplies, Lingenfelter said. The local Mariners Hospital recalibrated equipment so they could test the whale's blood. Miami Metrozoo donated ultrasound equipment so that veterinarians could do on-scene diagnosis, and vets Ron and Lisa Burke, of Cooper City, brought themselves to run it. Spencer Slate's Atlantis Dive Shop donated wet suits and boots for volunteers. The high-class Cheeca Lodge sent sandwiches and coffee. And the local Domino's donated pizza.

Volunteers included local bartenders and waitresses. Kate Banick, 22, a recent graduate of Rhode Island University, heard about the whale her first day in the Keys and was there nearly every day. Dubbed "the whale whisperer," Banick kept up a mantra of get-well wishes. Another woman, Audrey Goodwin, had left Cleveland for the Keys because, she said, "I was tired of reading about these guys. I wanted to be these guys." There were SCUBA instructors and construction workers and one hard-to-please attorney. A videographer brought same-day coverage of the sinking of the Spiegel Grove and showed it, complete with sound, on his laptop screen.

Veterinarians came all the way from Sarasota, where the Mote Marine Laboratory has kept a pygmy sperm whale (slightly larger than the dwarf and the only other member of the genus *Kogia*), alive for 18 months since it beached, along with its mother, at Sunny Isles in January 2001. The mother, Mia, died three days after being brought to Mote. The calf, Ami (get it? Mia + Ami) has grown large and healthy on cloned mother's milk, squid and human companionship.

Vet Charles Manire brought endoscopic equipment to look inside Doc, and extract any obstructions -- although dwarf sperm whale strandings are rare, stranded pygmy sperm whales are often found with plastic bags in their stomachs.

That was our best hope. Because, despite all the attention, Doc was not getting better. If it was

something simple like a grocery bag inside him, we fantasized, they could take it out, bring Doc up to Sarasota to live with Ami. And when they were both ready, he could teach her how to fish and they could swim into the sunset.

HOPEFUL SIGNS

It was a long shot -- like world peace, orange trees without canker or a baseball team with fans. But we had seen hopeful signs and felt we had earned the right to believe them.

When it came time for the ultrasound test, Manire and Ron Burke set up shop in a U-haul trailer while a half-dozen of us went through a dry run on how we would get Doc out of the water and up on the examining table. The whale had passed a similar dress rehearsal the day before.

"He gave us every indication that he was going to be friendly and noncombative, no matter what procedure we put him through," said Rick Trout, vice president and lead rescuer of the Marine Mammal Conservancy, who has worked strandings since 1988. A former whistle-blower against the U.S. Navy's dolphin training program in San Diego, Trout says he and his associates have helped rescue and return 26 of 46 animals to the wild.

Manire gave Doc an injection of Valium to blur the stress, and we prepared to haul away.

Then Doc stopped breathing. For eight minutes. Finally, with the help of cold water sprinkled on his blowhole by Trout, Doc took a breath. We quickly hoisted him into the truck and onto the table. The veterinarians began to scan him with ultrasound, detecting a strong, if rapid, heartbeat. Doc took one more breath. Another eight minutes passed. No breathing. There was no time for the endoscopy.

"Back into the water!" Lingenfelter screamed, and we hurriedly hauled the slippery whale the few steps out of the truck and back to the lagoon.

Once there, Trout punched the whale's heart in an effort to restart it, and Laura L'Heureux-Kupkee, the Key Largo vet, gave him a second injection in an attempt to restart his breathing.

FIGHTING TEARS

Twenty-two minutes after all these efforts failed, Doc was pronounced dead. Stunned, fighting back tears, Trout had no words. It was 2 p.m., June 15. Tourists had come to the Keys to see the whale. But no one had come to see this.

Manire would perform a necropsy, but I would not stay to see it. The whale's skeleton would be saved for a teaching aid. The necropsy would show that Doc had a failing heart and a hole in his lung, which was causing him to bloat and list to one side. He was older than we supposed from his size, his playful behavior and willingness to be held.

Nothing in veterinary science could have saved him once he hit the beach in Naples, Manire said. And no amount of human aid could make him live another hour. His eyes, which only moments before had stared into ours, had turned to silver. He had survived more than 11 days, a record that now seemed as empty as we felt.

"These creatures are kind of hanging on the edge of life as it is," Ron Burke said. "A little stress can push them over. On the other hand, if you don't try something, then they'll just fall over on their own."

We had tried everything we knew, and lost him. But those who touched the whale were also touched by

him. Doc had brought something out in us that made us all better, if only for the time we shared his company.

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