

## IN THE

## Swim

*Eastsider Steve Clayton helps businesses go fish*



Steve Clayton is seen through one of the aquariums in his home. His company, Clayton Aquariums, installs tanks in businesses.

By Doug Margeson  
Journal American Staff Photographer

**B**ELLEVUE — Steve Clayton wants to put some life into your workplace.

That life is an aquarium, a big glass box full of a lot of little fishes, fishes with color, shape and personality.

"Humans aren't meant to live in sterile environments. It's contrary to our nature," Clayton said. "So, putting an aquarium in your workplace makes it a livelier, more natural place to work."

Clayton has been putting that philosophy into effect for more than 35 years with Clayton Aquariums Inc. The Bellevue-based company is, as far as Clayton knows, the largest aquarium service company in the country, with more than 700 clients in a thousand-square-mile area bordered by Olympia, Mount Vernon, Bremerton and Issaquah. The company also has customers in Oregon, California, Alaska, Utah and Arizona.

And all came to Clayton. The company does not make cold sales.

Why such success?

Because, as Clayton already said, our species is not meant to work in windowless, lifeless boxes. Not that many companies haven't tried to that over the years. You know: Quit staring out the window and get back to work. Ultimately, that approach will come up short, because it is the nature of humans to occasionally look out the window, Clayton said. And if humans don't have a window, we'll do something else, although we probably won't be happy

with it.

NOTICE HOW the conversation has taken on the tones of a wildlife biologist describing some critter's behavior? Not surprising. Clayton and his staff spend the day surrounded by critters; tank after tank of saltwater and freshwater fish. All of those fish have things on their minds that have very little to do with profit margins and flow charts. And they show it.

"Yeah, I feel a lot of affection for them," said Peter Korch, operations manager for the company. "Some will say fish aren't capable of intelligence, but I'm not so sure. They certainly have personalities of their own."

Korch pointed to a 100-gallon tropical tank that held fish waiting to be transferred to one of Clayton's commercial aquariums. Most of the fish were swimming around in various ways. One was hiding in a shell. Every now and then, he'd stick his nose out and look around, but he apparently didn't like what he saw and would scoot back in.

"Just arrived from overseas, still getting his bearings," Korch said. "In a few days, he'll be used to things and swimming around like everyone else."

Everyone else is the 30 or so species of saltwater fish the company has swimming around its office at any one time. Another dozen or so freshwater varieties also grace its tanks. Saltwaters are more popular, however, because they are bigger and offer the most striking colors.

Tropical fish are the most common because it is

easier to heat an aquarium than to cool it, which you have to do if you want a North Pacific aquarium, Korch said.

**THE FISH** in Clayton's aquariums have it made. They are chosen for their ability to adapt to captivity. In addition, their environments are carefully controlled. Water chemistry is critical.

The water in a commercial tank usually is tap water with special salts added. The salts — mostly sodium chloride with minute traces of dozens of other compounds — come from chemical companies and are very close to 100 percent pure. Mixing them to the correct level in the water actually is fairly easy, particularly when you are working with large tanks, Korch said.

Other aspects of keeping tropical fish are a bit more complicated. The tanks must be filtered and cleaned, which involves systems of pumps, filters and aerators. Making those systems efficient, dependable, cheap and quiet is the fish guy's holy grail, a quest that's never quite over, Clayton said.

**Fish need food.** Tropical fish need some very special food, including stuff like coral polyps, sponges and various forms of soft coral. Without their specialized foods, they'll die. They'll also die if the water chemistry and temperature isn't right.

But they generally don't die, usually living about five years, sometimes as long as 10, Korch said. In most cases, that's considerably longer than they

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would live in the wild, where bigger fish are on the constant prowl for a meal, he said.

The only major danger they face is a power outage, and that danger isn't very major at all, Clayton's biologists said. Fish tanks retain their heat for about four hours. Often, an aquarium can be without power for an entire weekend and the majority of the fish will survive. However, if it looks like an outage will be a long one, Clayton's crews have battery-operated heaters and pumps that can install. Or, as they had to do when a fire knocked out power to downtown Seattle for about a week a few years ago, they simply remove the fish until power can be restored.

The fish come from all over the world, although most these days are gathered in the South Pacific, Korch said. There, they offer obscure, third world places valuable income.

Because of that, the methods for gathering them have become quite

sophisticated over the years, and quite humane. The local fishermen don't want to destroy the resource, which was a concern in the old days when a guy would catch a hundred fish and throw them in a bucket with the expectation that two or three would survive, Korch said. Now, brokers have large and sophisticated storage and transportation systems which keep the vast majority of fish alive, he said.

The fish's value varies. Clayton rarely uses fish worth more than \$150 each because there is no need. Cheap fish are just as beautiful as more expensive fish, whose value is usually based on their rarity, not their beauty, Korch said.

**CLAYTON'S AQUARIUMS** can turn up in some surprising places. Bob Guertin, manager of the Bellevue branch of Seafirst, ordered one of Clayton's tanks a few years ago in an attempt to make the bank more comfortable. Some interior decorating touches — desk lamps, a new color scheme, etc. — helped, too, but the aquarium was the key, Guertin said.

"Now we wouldn't want to be without it," Guertin said. "People bring their kids to look at it and the staff loves it. Some of our folks even come in on their day off to make sure the fish are fed. It's like having a pet at home; it gives people a sense of shared responsibility and. And that's great for staff morale."

The folks at Hugh G. Goldsmith and Associates, a Bellevue engineering firm have similar feelings.

"It's fun to watch, but it's not distracting," said Nancy Goldsmith, personnel manager for the firm. "It gets people talking. We think it's helped increase our productivity."

And it's fun, Goldsmith said. All of which makes Steve Clayton a very happy guy.

"Long ago, I set out with a goal: To create aquariums for people, to share the fun I've had with aquariums over the years. Aquariums set a mood."

What kind of mood.  
"Hard to define," Clayton said. "Look at it this way: Picture an aquarium. Than picture a blank wall in its place. Which do you prefer?"