



## Limitless Passion to Save Marine Life

by Devon Ellington

The backbone of any successful non-profit organization is an enthusiastic, passionate, talented staff. The National Marine Life Center in Buzzards Bay is a prime example.

Walking into the Discovery Center of NMLC, you are enchanted by the brightly colored murals and the clever, tactile displays. Meet and work with the three dynamic, tireless, fearless women who are the backbone of the Center, and you see why this facility is unparalleled in the area.

Its mission is to rehabilitate and release stranded marine life including sea turtles, dolphins, seals, and small whales.



Photograph by Brie Myre

Its vision includes expanding scientific knowledge of disease cause and cures, exploring the interdependence between human and marine life, and teaching future generations how to responsibly steward marine resources.

A huge portion of that vision includes raising funds to complete the marine life hospital through a variety of events including the magical Mermaid Ball.

It's the passion for NMLC's mission and the belief that an individual can make a difference that drive the Center's staff.

Executive Director Kathy Zagzebski first fell in love with dolphins when she was young, then dedicated her life to marine animals in college. "I enrolled in Duke's Master of Environmental Studies degree program and signed up for the marine mammals class in the summer between my two years of study.

"The marine mammal class was fantastic," Kathy remembers. "Taught by several of the leaders in the field, it opened my eyes to the range and breadth of marine mammal studies. The mystery of the animals captivated me, and I resolved to pursue a career working with them."

Kate Shaffer, the Animal Care Technician and Facilities Coordinator, says, "My job is my passion! So many people give up their dreams to work in this field and I am one of the lucky ones who can honestly say I am what I wanted to be when I grew up! Every day is different in this field."

Adele Raphael, the Office Manager and Volunteer Coordinator, came to NMLC after years in corporate communications, working for companies such as National Grid and NStar. "I wanted to work in an environment where what I did made a difference -- no matter how small -- in the world."

As they lead by example, the women also offer suggestions how each of us can make a difference. "Planting a tree instead of releasing balloons in someone's memory can prevent entanglement and save the life of a marine animal," Kate points out.

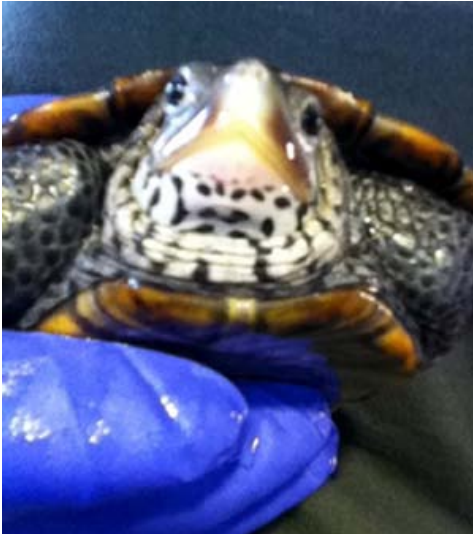
"Recycle, reuse, and reduce," Adele adds. "For the most part, we use sustainable materials when making crafts with our education classes."

Kathy suggests taking it one step further. "Use your economic power to reinforce earth-friendly values at the supermarket, mall, and wherever you shop by choosing sustainably-produced products.

"Avoid using single-use plastic anything. Think about the environment in everything you do, and act accordingly."

An operation with such a small staff means everyone takes on multiple responsibilities. "One day I may be taking x-rays of patients," says Kate. "The next I may be giving a tour or education program to a group of students, and the next I may be putting up drywall in the hospital."

"With the new hospital," she continues, "there will be seasonality in the types of patients we treat, and therefore the make-up of my day. For example, sea turtle cold stunning season is in the fall and winter, and we may have a full house of turtles, but we don't see many sea turtles in the spring and summer."



**Eleanor the Diamondback Terrapin**  
Photograph Courtesy of the National Marine Life Center

Caring for the animals is a long, intense process, and not every story has a happy ending. "It is impossible not to get attached to your patients," Kate admits. "The hardest times are when the decision has to be made to euthanize.

It's difficult to come to the decision that it is more humane to euthanize an animal you have cared for, and invested time and resources into saving.

"The important thing is to keep in mind what is best for the animals, and that many of our patients are endangered species. Even though we can't save them all, each patient we are able to rehabilitate affects the entire population. This makes it easier to pick up and continue even after you have lost a patient."



Meet the Extraordinary Women of the National Marine Life Center (l-r: Kathy Zagzebski, Kate Shaffer & Adele Raphael) Photograph by Devon Ellington

Dedication, long hours, and a small staff could lead to burn-out, but these three women know how to balance their lives.

For Kathy, it means attending conferences. "It's fun to catch up with colleagues all over the country. These conferences also reemphasize, in my mind, the need and opportunity of the National Marine Life Center."

Adele goes to the theatre to unwind; Kate and her husband Matt love to travel and explore new places together when they're not involved in community activities like the Cape Cod Young Professionals, coaching soccer, or scrapbooking.

They all agree that it's the excitement from visiting kids that rejuvenate them. From the fifth graders who choose NMLC as their community leadership service project, selling marine animal-related crafts at the school fair, to the three kids (aged four, six, and eight) who made and sold craft projects all summer to benefit the Center and then brought in the box with the proceeds, the love and support from amazing kids helps fuel the dedication to the Center and its needs.

Spend even a couple of hours at the National Marine Life Center, and in the company of these extraordinary women, and your outlook on the world will change for the better.



**National Marine Life Center**

located at 120 Main Street  
Buzzards Bay, MA 02532.

508-743-9888

visit [www.nmlc.org](http://www.nmlc.org)

for hours and special programs

Devon Ellington publishes under a half a dozen names in both fiction and non-fiction.

Her plays are produced in New York, London, Edinburgh, and Australia.

Visit her blog [Ink in My Coffee](#) and her website, [www.devonellingtonwork.com](http://www.devonellingtonwork.com)

[www.capewomenonline.com](http://www.capewomenonline.com)

**Cape Women Online.....Where Cape Women shine!**