

# ventura

FINE LIVING IN VENTURA COUNTY

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## CASTING CALL

### THE NONPROFIT ISSUE

REEL GUPPY OUTDOORS

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SOCAL BURN RIDE

# HOOKED ON FISHING

Reel Guppy Outdoors helps families catch memories and more.

BY ALEX WILSON

Kevin Brannon traces his family's history in Port Hueneme and South Oxnard back four generations. His upbringing was more hardscrabble than most: Brannon's dad passed away when he was young and his mom was in and out of rehab while he was growing up. He stayed at foster homes and lived with an uncle and aunt whenever his mom was in treatment, Brannon told *Ventana Monthly*.

"We lived in every motel in Oxnard, I think. So, my elementary school years, man, I was in about two elementary schools a year, my mom moving us around," said Brannon, who graduated from Gateway Community School, a continuation high school operated by the Ventura County Office of Education, generally for students who have been truant, expelled or referred by local school districts for other reasons.

Brannon, 45, found solace in the ocean during his turbulent childhood.

"I'm a Hueneme kid, so hanging out on the pier, surfing, bodyboarding, snorkeling at the jetty...I was just a salt baby, you know," Brannon said.

## A LIFE CHANGED BY FISHING

Brannon also started hanging out around sportfishing businesses at

Channel Islands Harbor, where he found his true life's calling.

"I would sneak onto the dock and fish next to the sport boats," Brannon said. "And then they gave me a job working on sport boats when I was like 11 or 12. And my mom knew that I loved being on the water and it kept me out of trouble. So that's why she let me go to work on boats and go to school, because she knew I was safe and I liked being out there. And I wasn't very academic at school. I was always getting in trouble. So, me being on the water, my mom knew I was the happiest. So that's why she let me work out there on the boats."

Among the many tasks Brannon was assigned was recording a nightly message for a landline telephone answering machine, where he ran down the number of fishes caught that day and the times for the boats leaving the following morning.

"My mom would call just to hear her baby on the recording, you know, at night to hear her little boy," Brannon said. "Basically, when you're working on the boats, man, even if you're a kid, they kind of give you adult responsibility."

Brannon's messages aimed at the fishing community perhaps foreshadowed his work years later promoting the sport through his own TV and radio programs. He also founded a charity aimed at getting fishing poles in the hands of kids (and adults) for free: Reel Guppy Outdoors.

"I just loved being out there," Brannon said of his childhood aboard commercial fishing boats and the anglers he met aboard them. "That's where I started learning how to help people learn how to catch fish, was when I was a deckhand on boats. And that's kind of what we did with the Guppy program; it's the same thing that deckhands teach first-time passengers on a boat."

Reel Guppy Outdoors has a Docksides Learning Center

**REEL GUPPY OUTDOORS  
FOUNDER KEVIN BRANNON**

on Port Hueneme Pier during a recent free fishing day. *Photo by Alex Wilson*



# SHING

at Fisherman's Wharf, generally open Wednesdays through Fridays between 12 and 5 p.m. and Saturdays between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Tackle sales are typically held on the first Saturday of the month, the second Saturday is devoted to rod building and the third Saturday features a guest speaker. The fourth Saturday of the month always offers something different. And on the fourth Sunday of each month, Reel Guppy hosts a free fishing day on the Port Hueneme Pier. (The organization takes off the months of November and December for potentially inclement weather.)

Volunteers are there at the free fishing day to help from 8 to 11:00 a.m. Participants, however, don't have to show up bright and early to get a pole and basic instructions. Some people are early birds, while others get there at 10 a.m. and just fish for an hour, Brannon said.

Not only does Brannon run Reel Guppy Outdoors, he also serves on the board of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and travels nationwide to lobby on behalf of recreational fishing enthusiasts.

"I'm huge in the fishing industry. In California, fishing is something that we have to protect," said Brannon, mentioning new fishing regulations approved in recent years such as limiting areas where fishing is allowed. "It affects those fishing boats that I work on. It affects how we make a living out here. So, I'm on the forefront for recreational fishing. And that's why I recruit so many new anglers, to keep the sport going. So, I'm deep into fishing."

## SHARING THE SPORT

One of Brannon's favorite things about watching people fish for the first time is the confidence it builds. At first some people find it "gross" to touch a fish, but then they get used to it.

"And then, you know, 30 minutes later, they're hooking it and handling it and watching them build that confidence," he said. "We hear all the 'Wow moments,' we call them."

**KEVIN BRANNON** at the Dockside Learning Center in Oxnard.  
*Photo by Viktor Budnik*



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‘Wow, this is the greatest thing I’ve ever done!’ Like, it’s just kind of organic. We just set the stage and keep it authentic and watch people just enjoy it the way that they can. We don’t force them to do anything. We just give them some guidance and some basics and let them, you know, move. And then when they catch that first fish, oh my God. Even when the adults catch their first fish, they’re like 40 years old and are like, ‘My first fish! Oh my God!’ There’s this excitement, man.”

The Aug. 25 Reel Guppy Outdoors free fishing day was the first time fishing ever for brothers Clayton and Kobe Hermosillo of Simi Valley, who’s grandmother, Melissa Green, lives a short walk from Port Hueneme’s pier. Green told Ventana Monthly that her grandsons had seen people fishing on the pier before and were excited about trying it out.

“It’s an awesome program, especially for kids that don’t have an adult to teach them how to fish. It’s really good for kids to learn to do the nature stuff instead of video stuff,” Green said.

Kobe, 7, felt a tug on his line and reeled in a fairly large crab that was hanging to the bait by one claw, dangling in the air. The eager young angler watched as the crab ascended up the line before letting go and falling back into the ocean. Minutes later, Clayton, 6, caught his first fish ever, and with a smile beaming, proudly lifted the tiny, shiny crea-

ture into the air.

Since the fish, only a few inches long, was obviously way too small to eat, Brannon joked that it would get to live in an “aquarium.” The aquarium turned out to be a bucket of saltwater where people could view the little fish swimming around for a couple of hours before it went back into the ocean to grow up and maybe get caught again someday.

Clayton told Ventana about the experience of catching his first fish. “So good. Like, I was so happy. I’d never caught a fish.”

Vernell Moss and his 12-year-old daughter Victoria have been fishing together many times at the monthly free fishing event. Victoria first tried fishing on a Reel Guppy Outdoors field trip and still remembers the first time she caught a fish.

“It was nice, you know. I took a lot of pictures and I was really happy,” she said. Even more important than the fun of catching fish, however, was the chance to spend quality time with her dad doing something they both enjoy. Victoria had kind words for Brannon as well.

“He puts in a lot of effort. I love Kevin. He’s, like, one of my favorite people,” she said.

Vernell told Ventana Monthly that he first became friends with Brannon on fishing boats. He only has Sundays off since he’s running his own trucking business most of the time. He echoed his daughter’s

**MAKING LEARNING FUN** Reel Guppy Outdoors activity books educate kids about the natural world while they’re being entertained. Photo by Viktor Budnik





**FAMILY TIME** Melissa Green (center) with grandsons Clayton, 6, and Kobe, 7, on Port Hueneme Pier. Photo by Alex Wilson

thoughts about Brannon and how fishing is a great way for families to spend time together.

“I just think it’s great. It’s good for the family to spend time with their kids and stuff. A lot of people are just tied up at home, you know, staying indoors. It’s a way to get outside. And Kevin is great, he’s put together a lot of stuff and you just bring yourself up here and learn,” he said.

## PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF DOCKSIDE LEARNING CENTER

The Reel Guppy Outdoors Dockside Learning Center at Fisherman’s Wharf marked its two-year anniversary last February. The harbor-front shopping center has seen better days and became dilapidated as redevelopment proposals came and went over the years. It now has a brighter future, thanks to an ambitious plan by Robert Dahl, a German

strawberry farmer and developer.

In 1992, Dahl founded the flagship strawberry-themed Karl’s Adventure Village in Germany and has since expanded operations to seven other locations, Ventura County officials said. Dahl’s project at the Channel Islands Harbor will be a strawberry- and maritime-themed village featuring a mix of retail shops, café and bakery, artisan market, hotel, park areas and children’s playgrounds with games and small amusement rides. In addition, a pedestrian pier is also envisioned along the waterway so the community has new walking and fishing access at the redeveloped property. Karl’s Village could be open in about three years, officials said.

The Ventura County Board of Supervisors approved a lease option with Karl’s Adventure Village earlier this year and it’s hoped that the \$16 million project will sail through the approval process at the California Coastal Commission in the coming months, Ventura County Harbor Director Michael Tripp told Ventana Monthly.

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**SHELL GAME** A variety of shells collected from local beaches and found during fishing excursions are on display at the Reel Guppy Dockside Learning Center at Fisherman's Wharf. Photos by Viktor Budnik

“It’s low-cost visitor-serving uses, which is, you know, the kind of thing they want, to bring people to the coast,” Tripp said about the priorities of the powerful state agency overseeing coastal development.

Earlier plans centered on tearing down Fisherman’s Wharf and replacing it with condominiums or a giant apartment complex — plans which were vehemently opposed by many neighbors. Residents seem to have largely embraced the Karl’s Village concept.

Tripp said Karl’s Village developers are still working to determine which buildings at Fisherman’s Wharf can be restored and which ones will be replaced, but however the ultimate layout turns out, the Reel Guppy Outdoors Dockside Learning Center will have a space in the reconfigured center.

“It would be a different location at the wharf, but the company, Karl’s, they came out here and they went and talked to all the tenants at Fisherman’s Wharf and one of the ones that made a big impression on them was all of the little guppies,” Tripp said. “It’s going to be over by Channel Islands Boulevard, but still on the Fisherman’s Wharf parcel.”

Tripp said he appreciates how Brannon steps up to teach people how to fish.

“Kevin’s a lot of fun,” Tripp said. “He’s a good guy. He’s got, you know, a lot of enthusiasm, and I appreciate what he’s doing. He has the same kind of goal that I do, which is to get people out to the water and let them experience it and build some memories.” **V**



Vernell Moss with his daughter Victoria. Photo by Alex Wilson

**REEL GUPPY OUTDOORS**

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