



AQUATIC CALM

Matt Elkins has been interested in aquatic life since he was a youngster, but he didn't take the leap into fish-keeping until about seven years ago, around the same time he started as a letter carrier. As his love for the hobby grew, he found ways to share it with another carrier in his branch, one who was looking for a way to ease his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from his time in the Army and Army Reserve.

"Around my 30s, I really started getting into" keeping fish, the Atlantic City, NJ Branch 370 member said, "constantly reading about it and subscribing to fish tank magazines and learning about it."

Elkins began small, with a 10-gallon tank and a couple of fish, and at first things didn't go well. The fish he had bought at a pet store soon died. Perplexed, he sought information—from the store and, especially, online, where

people who were more advanced in the hobby helped guide him. Some online forums focus on specific species of fish. "I learned a lot from YouTube and from Facebook groups," he said. "There's a huge online community."

One thing he learned: "A lot of it is, unfortunately, [is that] fish are very neglected pets," he said. "It's a lack of knowledge. People aren't trying to mistreat them."

As he acquired more knowledge about the hobby, Elkins graduated to larger tanks.

Through his research, he soon discovered African cichlids, a species of colorful fish that he found cool. "They can be dramatic with how they behave," he said, and he started planning his own setup featuring the fish.

"I spent three months designing my African cichlid tank," he said. Besides the fish, he also concentrated on creating an underwater garden centered



Matt Elkins

around plants. He even gathered rocks from an ocean jetty in the Atlantic City area to include in his layout.

"It was a challenge for me," he said. "Then I wanted to see what else I could challenge myself with."

He soon read a magazine article about shrimp. "People were starting to keep this species from Asia," Elkins said. So, he began to breed them as well, and eventually started selling or trading the shrimp.

The carrier currently has three tanks. The largest is in his living room at home, with the African cichlids, which he plans to upgrade to a 125-gallon tank. Elkins also keeps two tanks at



One of Matt Elkins's fish tanks



Fish belonging to a letter carrier and Army veteran

his mother's house, a 20-gallon tank with shrimp and catfish, as well as a 5-gallon tank with betta fish. ("She's hooked," he says of his mom. "She'll send me updates all day—'There's another pregnant shrimp.'")

He estimates that in a week, the tanks require about five hours of maintenance on his end.

"You can do it however you want. If you want it low maintenance," you can do that, he said, adding that some of the highest-maintenance aquariums can demand seven to eight hours a day of upkeep. "That's like an extra workday," Elkins said.

He's added filters, special lighting to help the plants in his tanks, and other equipment such as bubblers to increase oxygen, wave makers to add currents and various timers. "When people see my tank, I enjoy their reaction—like, 'Wow,'" he said.

Elkins particularly enjoys the daily stress relief his setup provides.

"Before the COVID pandemic, I had never considered being a letter carrier stressful, but that has changed in the last 18 months, and now I'm finding the hobby is helping me to deal," he said. "I'll be sitting on the couch after work. It doesn't matter how bad my day is, I've just been watching the fish. It's almost a meditation thing.

"My particular fish are always danc-

ing for each other," he said, adding that he can get so absorbed by the fish that it can be 20 minutes later "and you don't even realize what's going on during your TV show."

Watching an aquatic environment is a soothing activity for anyone, but especially for those who have undergone the pressure of serving in the military.

In 2019, Elkins read an intriguing article about how aquariums can help military combat veterans with PTSD manage stressors, and how the Department of Veterans Affairs had put tanks into some of its facilities because of the demonstrated benefits.

Just a few days later, a fellow letter carrier overheard Elkins talking about his aquariums and approached him for advice about starting his own. Since Elkins knew the carrier was an Army active-duty and Army Reserve veteran of eight years, he told his co-worker about what he had just read, and they soon struck up a friendship.

The five-year carrier told Elkins that he already had been looking for a fish tank to get started, and he soon bought one.

The carrier, who did not want to be identified, had been diagnosed with PTSD as a result of his military combat experience, and he was intrigued by the fish-keeping hobby as a tool to help manage his stress and anxiety.

He didn't have experience with

aquariums, but he bought some fish—and then bought some more. "I got addicted," the veteran said. "Once you buy a fish, you won't stop."

He now has two 75-gallon tanks in his home, filled with a few dozen colorful freshwater fish that he set up with help from Elkins.

The carrier enjoys just sitting and watching the fish in the aquariums, and says he highly recommends it for other veterans.

"It's a good therapy and helps [with] coping skills," he said, adding that "it keeps my sanity and helps to relieve my stress. When they swim in harmony, my mind begins to relax."

The two carriers get together at least twice a month to work on each other's tanks. In between, Elkins said, "We talk about it quite frequently."

He loves sharing his passion for the hobby and says that enthusiasts like himself can easily get "MTS," or Multiple Tank Syndrome. "You can't stop," he said with a laugh.

It is the bringing of nature into his home that the avid aquarist most appreciates about his hobby, because it helps him slow down and relax. "You have this slice of nature you never get to see in any other circumstances right in your living room," Elkins said. "And the nature doesn't know you're watching it." **PR**