

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 26, 2022

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Virginia Aquarium Honors New Conservation Center and Darden Family in Dedication

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA – A ceremony was held to dedicate the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center’s Darden Marine Animal Conservation Center (DMACC) on Thursday, August 25. This is a state-of-the-art facility for the Stranding Response Program, and the first of its kind on the east coast. The Virginia Aquarium was pleased to commemorate the newly constructed facility and honor the esteemed Darden family during a small private ceremony, which convened a small but impressive guest list including Governor Glenn Youngkin, Senator John A. Cosgrove, Jr., Delegate Anne Ferrell Tata, Mayor Bobby Dyer, and Councilman Linwood Branch. The Darden family was represented by Holley Darden, a Foundation Trustee, and her husband Mark Szymczak.

Opening the DMACC is a significant milestone in the Virginia Aquarium’s history. Previously, the Stranding Response Program operated from a small, unconditioned workspace near the Oceanfront with limited space and resources to conduct the team’s treatment and rehabilitation work. The DMACC holds national significance as the only facility on the east coast that handles sea turtle and seal rehabilitation and necropsies in one location. The new facility provides holding pools and animal care spaces for rehabilitation, examination rooms and laboratory space for forensic investigations of stranded animals, and office space providing logistical and technological support for Aquarium scientists. In addition, the center creates space for the Aquarium to enhance research and conservation collaborations with universities, state agencies, and federal partners.

“This project represents one of the biggest steps for the Virginia Aquarium to be recognized as a world-class marine science research center and to have a worldwide impact on ocean and marine animal conservation,” said Cynthia Whitbred-Spanoulis, President and CEO of the Virginia Aquarium.

The Darden Marine Animal Conservation Center was named in recognition of the Darden family and the Joshua P. and Elizabeth D. Darden Foundation for their generous contribution to the facility and the Virginia Aquarium’s mission. Elizabeth D. “Betty” Darden shared, “Josh and I always enjoyed the ocean and bay that surrounds Tidewater. Whether boating, sailing, crabbing, or fishing, we were thankful for the clean water and abundant marine life that is unique to our area. We are thrilled to be one small part of helping ensure its long-term survival.”

The dedication included a welcome from Aquarium Foundation Board Member Andy Vakos, remarks from Governor Glenn Youngkin, a presentation of the proclamation from Mayor Bobby Dyer, and a ribbon cutting. Additionally, the Aquarium’s CEO Cynthia Spanoulis presented the Darden’s with the first-ever Virginia Aquarium Conservation Champion award and a David Turner sea turtle sculpture as a gift of appreciation; The Darden’s were selected as the first recipients of this notable award for their commitment to conservation and championship of the project; credited to their stewardship, this facility will further the reach of the Aquarium’s conservation initiatives and provide the necessary tools to make impactful actions that protect the marine environment.

Gifts to the Aquarium Fund help maintain the exhibits and care for thousands of animals, provide educational offerings, allow for research and conservation activities, and operate the Stranding Response Program. The community is invited to make a gift by visiting the Aquarium’s [website](#).

Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center

The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center’s mission is to inspire conservation of the marine environment through education, research, and sustainable practices. The Virginia Aquarium is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums. The Aquarium is also a member of World Association of Zoos and Aquariums. It is located at 717 General Booth Boulevard, just south of Rudee Inlet in Virginia Beach.

The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, supports the work of the Virginia Aquarium. The Foundation procures and maintains the Aquarium's exhibits, including the animals and habitats. It is also responsible for annual and capital fundraising, administration and funding for the Virginia Aquarium Stranding Response Program, conservation and scientific research efforts, and the Aquarium's mission-related education programs. You can be a part of our mission by making a [tax-deductible donation](#) to support our programming.

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