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Taking Flight

Pelican Harbor Seabird Station stretches its wings



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Taking Flight

**More rescues than ever, more cramped than ever,
more interest than ever — Pelican Harbor Seabird
Station finally is getting a new home**

By Janet Goodman

Photos by Silvia Ros



Last year the hospital admitted 2551 rescues, including 564 seabirds and shorebirds. Brown pelicans (pictured) topped the list at 143.

On a powder-blue-sky morning in December, just 73 degrees along Biscayne Bay, one of South Florida's most moving rituals is about to begin: the release back into nature of a wild animal treated for multiple injuries.

This creature, a brown pelican, had been brought to the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station, on the 79th Street Causeway in Miami, for treatment of a wing injury and torn beak pouch. An X-ray revealed an ingested metal

fishhook as well. After 49 days of doctoring and rehabilitation at the clinic, it was pronounced ready for release.

One would expect the bird to race from its transport crate once the volunteer had swung wide the gate, but this patient merely hopped out onto the coastal rocks and preened its feathers, in no great hurry for freedom. After several minutes, it lifted off into the air, soaring east before circling north and landing on a jetty not 70 yards away.

It's enough to give goosebumps to the uninitiated, but for the staff at Pelican Harbor Seabird Station (PHSS), it's just another busy day of saving lives. Located on the eastern edge of Pelican Harbor Marina, about half a mile north of Bird Key and just 400 yards south of Pelican Island in Biscayne Bay, the rehab center has been rescuing, treating, and releasing thousands of seabirds, shorebirds, raptors, songbirds, mammals, and reptiles — most of them native to

Florida — for the past 37 years. The non-profit 501(c)(3) wildlife rehabilitation center started out treating only pelicans but has slowly grown to handle more than 300 different species since 1980, with 153 species in 2016 alone.

According to the center's 2016 annual report, last year the hospital admitted 2551 rescues, including 564 seabirds and shorebirds, and 534 songbirds. Brown

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Charleen Trimble, education and outreach coordinator, with Pepe the pelican, ambassador and permanent resident.

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pelicans (which were taken off the Endangered Species List in 2009, but which are facing a crisis again on the West Coast of the United States) topped the seabird-intake list, at 143, followed by 108 laughing gulls. The Northern mockingbird, our state bird, led the songbird category, at 124. Some patients, many of them mammals such as gray squirrels and Virginia opossums, came to the center as orphaned babies. But the heart of PHSS has always been with pelicans, as reflected in the organization's name and logo.

Exotics, such as Muscovy ducks, are brought to the hospital by area residents, but due to limited resources, space, and an emphasis on native species, these animals can't remain there long. They're triaged and treated up to three days.

No rabies vector mammals, such as raccoons and foxes, are accepted at this

time, unless the PHSS board of directors votes to obtain the needed permits, which seems unlikely, given the limited staff and the small size of the rehab center. The 900-square-foot building houses a reception area, administrative offices, and a clinic that doubles as a laundry, kitchen, and bathroom. Outside are six large and five small enclosures.

When an injured or sick animal is found, it is transported to the facility, either by the PHSS ambulance or by a Good Samaritan. It's examined and stabilized in the clinic, usually by Yaritza Acosta, a five-year veteran who is the center's wildlife rehabilitation manager. Veterinarian Beth Hirschfeld is called in for serious injuries and surgery. Each animal receives an ID band showing the date it was rescued and the order in which was admitted.

After treatment, the animals remain inside the clinic for monitoring in a recovery cage until they are well enough to be moved to one of the outdoor enclosures.

Charleen Trimble, in the newly created position of education and outreach coordinator, takes the *BT* on a tour of PHSS in early December 2016. "Notice the slats on the enclosures for the birds that are planned for release," she says. "This is not a zoo, but a rehab facility."

Only a small window is cut away in the slats for viewing. Privacy is essential for the birds' progress because it lessens stress. At feeding time, pools within the enclosures are filled with fish, often Atlantic thread herring (six fish per feeding for each pelican), to ensure as little human contact as possible. Once a week, the pools are stocked with live fish to exercise the birds' hunting abilities.

Some enclosures house permanent residents. These are animals that have recovered sufficiently but couldn't survive in the wild. They're hand-fed and relatively tame; some are nesting, and some are used as animal ambassadors in area schools. Only the

permanent residents get names. Pepe is a brown pelican trained to participate in educational events; Shere Khan (the name comes from the *Jungle Book* stories) is an Eastern screech owl whose eye injury prevents his release.

On this particular day, most of the birds at the facility are brown pelicans, but one white pelican stands out from the rest. Trimble explains that this female was flown in by Delta Airlines in October. She was found on an Iowa lake with a wing injury and a foot infection called bumblefoot. PHSS hopes to release the bird somewhere in the Keys when it fully recovers.

Coordinating the white pelican rescue was Carla Zepeda, hired as the facility's rescue, release, and volunteer coordinator in January 2016. With a degree in biology from FIU and a minor in wildlife conservation, she served as a

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Yaritza Acosta, the center's wildlife rehabilitation manager, and intern Doug Giraldo tend to a recently arrived brown pelican.

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in wildlife conservation, she served as a PHSS intern for the three previous years. Prior to that she worked with chickens on a Mexico cattle ranch, worked with parrots and other wildlife, and did a stint at the Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center in Tavernier.

Her favorite part of the job, says Zepeda, is the rescue itself. Without that intervention, the injured or sick animal would perish. Rescue tallies increased 28 percent in 2016 — with 560 more patients than in 2015 — with an overall release rate at 42 percent; the brown pelican release rate was 65 percent. (The “release” rate refers to animals released

back into the wild; some are transferred, some are euthanized, and some remain at the center as permanent residents.) Animals at the facility for treatment are given up to 180 days for assessing outcomes, and sometimes more.

Stan Saffan, known to many as Captain Stan, owns and operates Therapy-IV, a charter fleet of two 58-foot sportfisherman boats at Haulover Marina. Every week he sees pelicans with hook injuries and fishing line entanglements; either he and his crew or someone from PHSS rescues these birds and gets them to the clinic for treatment.

Saffan has a genuine affection for the animals. “Pelicans are a fisherman’s best friends,” he explains. “They show you

where the bait fish are, and that shows you where the big fish are.” Pelicans recognize his boats and follow them out to the ocean on fishing trips, to the thrill of his customers. He also finds them to be reliable barometers for forecasting big storms days in advance; they leave Haulover until storms blow over.

And every single Monday of the past 25 years, Saffan has sent in at least a \$25 donation to PHSS. He promotes the wildlife hospital to his clients and colleagues, has helped secure corporate gifts, and every year donates a fishing trip for the PHSS fundraising auction.

The ocean-side pier at Haulover was a main source of seabird injuries before Hurricane Andrew destroyed it in 1992. Since then, fishing is only allowed along

Baker’s Haulover Cut, and the pelicans run into hooks and tackle as they swoop up fish. Bait-cutting stations along the charter boat marina are frequented by dozens of hungry pelicans and gulls trying to steal catch-of-the-day snapper and mackerel in ice chests and leaving their marks on boat docks and decks. Crews fend off the bandits with water sprayed from hoses, throw fish scraps for them out into the bay, and keep a couple of animal carriers on hand for birds in need of help.

According to Zepeda, the PHSS rescue, release, and volunteer coordinator, South Florida marinas are where most seabirds are injured.

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Pelican Harbor Seabird Station founder Harry Kelton jokes that the wildlife hospital was a hobby that got out of control.

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There's no such thing as a typical day for Zepeda, who coordinates relief efforts mainly within Miami-Dade County.

"This morning has been nonstop," she says. "We had eight animals brought in, and I haven't yet gone on a rescue in the PHSS ambulance.

"Yesterday," she continues, "we rescued a pelican from our own sidewalk with vision problems, and it was very weak overall. In the spring and summer months, I'm picking up baby birds. In the fall I'm rescuing baby mammals, and

through March I'm rescuing pelicans, other seabirds, and birds of prey."

Tranquilizers are never used to capture the birds. Zepeda uses nets or, if the birds are in pain or entangled, she walks up to them or uses fish to entice them. Often she can grab their beaks and pick them up.

On a second tour of the facility, wildlife rehabilitation manager Acosta tells the *BT* that seabirds are automatically X-rayed for fishhooks when they come in. She displays a bin brimming with the year's booty: metal hooks, large plastic lures, BB pellets, and monofilament (plastic fishing lines).

Some staff and interns have been trained by veterinarians to remove internal hooks by using one of two procedures. The first, a manual procedure, involves anesthetizing the bird and, if it is a pelican, reaching into the beak and down the throat, feeling for, and retrieving the hook. The second is a "cotton fish" procedure that requires the bird to be fed a dead fish stuffed with cotton. The cotton snares the internal hook and later comes out when the bird eliminates.

Catching the patients in their enclosures and giving them daily exams and treatments is an acquired skill that takes practice, patience, courage, and

self-confidence. Wearing leather gloves, Zepeda walks through the clinic's back door, gripping a juvenile red-shouldered hawk. "It went for my head," she tells Acosta, and with its talons under control, she places it on its back inside a box, slips on the lid, and safely weighs the bird, which has gained 15 grams from the previous day. It is given medicine and then, with long tweezers, is force-fed bite-size pieces of a white mouse.

Four days earlier, a meal of a poisoned rat had nearly killed the hawk before it was rescued. Acosta knows

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Under executive director Christopher Boykin, 2016 revenues of \$494,000 are up 63 percent from 2013, plus PHSS earned “Top-Rated” 2016 status by GreatNonprofits.

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the signs of rat poisoning: dehydration, swollen lower eyelids, breathing trouble, and paralysis. Constant fluids have been administered as part of its emergency treatment, and activated charcoal to absorb the poison and let it safely pass through its system.

The next patient is a belted kingfisher, found five days earlier hanging from a tree, entangled in hook and tackle. Its right wing was injured, but he’s now active and flying. Acosta warns that this species generally does poorly in captivity, and even though

his weight has stabilized, PHSS is administering fluids and supplementing his diet with a liquid fish-eater formula.

Among the other rescues treated this morning are a nestling gray squirrel with head wounds and a quite vocal great blue heron, a juvenile with a dislocated shoulder that was found in Pinecrest five days before.

“The biggest obstacle in rehabbing an animal is that sometimes it’s hard to know what’s going on, since they can’t talk to you,” explains Acosta. “If it’s not an obvious problem, we have to do a lot of testing, reaching out to other resources to see what they’ve experienced. At Pelican Harbor, for the most part, if an animal needs it, we don’t

get a no — we get a ‘do what you can for the animal.’”

One time the center needed to send a razorbill to North Carolina; the public immediately donated the funds needed to send him there. Acosta smiles. “It’s really great when that happens.”

Acosta graduated from Lees-McRae College in North Carolina with a degree in biology and courses in wildlife rehabilitation. She interned at the college’s Blue Ridge Wildlife Institute, which uses RaptorMed software to keep track of its treated animals. Acosta suggested that PHSS use the computer program, and it has become a staple of journaling healthcare here since 2015.

Each animal’s treatment is entered into the system daily, and anyone can access the information through the website www.pelicanharbor.org by looking up the animal’s intake number. This feature keeps data organized for staff, and people who have dropped off wildlife can keep abreast of the care and progress without overwhelming the hotline with inquiries.

“RaptorMed has been a big help,” says Acosta. “For people to see exactly what’s going on with an animal, how it’s being treated, and what we do, that makes them feel better.”

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Outside the cramped 900-square-foot building are the enclosures, six large ones and five small.

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People who find wildlife in distress want to help, but sometimes they can do more harm than good, warns Zepeda. A simple act of giving water or food to a wild animal can cause further harm.

“Never force anything,” she advises, “because it can go down the wrong way, or the food is the improper diet. That makes our job harder [when the animal comes to PHSS] because we have to correct that, then correct the injury or malnutrition.”

Despite the immense rewards, Acosta says, there can be tough moments, even though the staff tries to keep an emotional distance from the animals they’re rehabilitating for release.

“Sometimes you’ll have animals here that you think are doing fine, and they just die suddenly,” she explains. “That can be pretty tough to take. You

wonder, ‘Did I do something wrong? Did I miss something?’ The job is sometimes emotionally and mentally draining.”

For Zepeda, baby bird and baby mammal seasons are the most challenging times. “Parents often do the best job at raising their young. When all these orphaned animals come in, we become substitutes, and for them to grow up without parental care is hard. It’s tough because it breaks my heart.”

Pelican Harbor Seabird Station was founded in 1980, when Harry and Darlene Kelton started living on a houseboat in the marina not far from the where the facility is located today. They immediately began to notice injured pelicans swimming in Biscayne Bay.

Darlene worked for nearby WSVN-TV, and Harry was a mechanical engineer. Neither of them had a biology background, but they’d catch wounded

pelicans and unhook them. Thirty-seven years later, Harry Kelton jokes that the evolution of the wildlife hospital was a hobby that got out of control.

To help them in their rescue efforts, the Pelican Harbor Yacht Club, which had been leasing its site from the county, for a dollar a year, since the 1940s, put up a small shelter structure on its land, with posts sunk into the ground and a roof over it, but no walls. When the Keltons had to keep a bird overnight, they wrapped a roll of cyclone fence around the shelter to create an enclosure.

A year later a contractor built a second pen adjacent to the post structure, and that’s where they operated until the marina was rebuilt in 1990. Sometimes the Keltons’ bathroom on board their houseboat became a third area for pelican rehab.

In 1981 the Keltons established PHSS as a non-profit corporation; they and their

son, Robert, served as the first board members. “By that time,” says Harry in a phone interview with the *BT*, “we were taking in quite a few pelicans a year. At first we only counted pelicans — we didn’t count the gulls, terns, and other birds that people brought to us. I was chief gofer, pelican feeder, and rehabilitator.”

The facility’s first major challenge came in 1989. “The county sent letters to all 24 boat owners with boat slips, telling us they were going to rebuild the marina and please remove your boats,” says Harry, who is now 90 and serves on the board as secretary.

“Three of us lived on houseboats,” he adds. “So I started talking to some county commissioners, invited them in, showed them what we were doing, and got a lot of support.” (Those commissioners were Harvey

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The rehab center sits at the eastern edge of Pelican Harbor Marina, about a half-mile north of Bird Key and just 400 yards south of Pelican Island.

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Ruvin and Sherman Wynn. Ruvin eventually joined the PHSS board of directors in 1996 and remains on the board today.)

It was during this time that Pelican Harbor Yacht Club was moved to a month-to-month lease and then ultimately forced to move out. Harry Kelton went to a county commission meeting to advocate for keeping his seabird facility on the site. At first the commission offered PHSS a small slice of land on the west side of the county, next to Animal Services. But with the help of Commissioners Ruvin and Wynn, the county decided to allow the center to continue its operations at the marina on the east end of the island.

The commission also offered to build a 900-square-foot building for PHSS on the marina site, which is Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces (PROS) property and lease it to the center for \$25 a month for 20 years with a ten-year extension (it expires in 2020). According to Michael Ruiz, assistant director of Miami-Dade County Parks, “Per the lease, PROS assumes electric, water, sewage, and waste-collection expenses at approximately \$6000 per year.” (Current executive director Christopher Boykin tells the *BT* that the county commission is about to vote on a 35-to-50-year lease extension.)

Over the years, PHSS has grown in many ways. In just the past five years, according to wildlife rehabilitation manager Acosta, the facility has been

transferring out fewer animals to different locations. “We’ve evolved into accepting more than just seabirds, learning how to treat different things, making our range bigger,” she says. “We do more outreach and education, getting our name out there. We’re more accommodating to groups, and the reception room is more welcoming. We have more help now, in terms of staff, especially with the big influx of animals we’ve gotten. Our vets have taught us to do different procedures — every day it seems we’re learning something new, how to treat a certain animal or certain case.”

In 2016 orphaned animals at PHSS numbered 253 opossums and 127 gray squirrels. Fifty-four Eastern screech owls were raised, compared to only ten in 2015. But Kelton is quick to point out

that being located on just three-tenths of an acre, compared to five acres for some other wildlife centers, limits the focus to mainly seabirds and shorebirds.

Boykin notes that PHSS staff has grown to four full-time and five part-time employees. And the number of volunteers has also grown, to more than 40, ranging from two to six volunteers working daily.

“They help to free up the staff to do their jobs,” says Zepeda. Volunteers maintain the outside enclosures, feed the animals, answer phones, participate in outreach and education events, and even do light construction and maintenance work around the compound.

Donor sponsorship is helping the organization’s expansion. The Batchelor

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Foundation awarded PHSS a \$70,000 matching challenge grant in 2016. The center's own "Adopt a Bird" sponsorship allows donors to choose specific funding levels and bird species to help. (*Biscayne Times* is a sponsor as well.)

In 2015, 33 percent of center's revenue came from corporate and foundation sponsorship, while 51 percent came from individual donations. Fundraising events in 2015, such as the Annual Holiday Fish Drive and the Pelican Party Gala held in April at the Miami Shores Country Club, brought in 12 percent. Program fees and sales of promotional items make up remainder.

According to executive director Boykin, the 2016 gala raised \$137,000, generating almost 25 percent of the center's funding for that year, and is the most successful fundraiser to date.

Over the years, the board of directors has grown to 11 members. Besides Ruvin and Kelton, current members include North Miami Councilwoman Carol Keys, two veterinarians, educators, lawyers, and PHSS volunteers. The newest board member is Kathryn Comer, an assistant professor of English at Barry University who joined the board in the fall of 2016 and continues to volunteer at the center.

Longstanding board member Dr. Jim McCoy retired from his own practice at Bayshore Veterinary Clinic in North Miami Beach in 2013 and was elected board president that year. PHSS founder Harry Kelton says he met McCoy in 1991, after taking a pelican with a pouch tear to a vet who'd administered too much anesthetic, resulting in the bird's death.

"Jim McCoy said if we brought in pelicans after 6:00 p.m., he'd work on them for only the cost of expenses," says Kelton. "He worked for free up until he retired."

The position of executive director was created in 2001 by then board president Wendy Fox, who served until her death at age 54 from cancer in August 2011. She'd started as a volunteer in 1993 and was brought on to the board in 1999. Kelton recounts how she followed in his footsteps as a person who could do it all.

"At my pushing, she became an employee, feeding and handling birds, then she became a director," he says.



Seabirds are automatically X-rayed when they come in, with fishhook clearly visible here, and often ingest large plastic lures and fishing line.

"Wendy was my pick for all time. My wife and I started backing out when we saw how well she was taking hold."

Wendy's son, Brian, joined the board in 2007 and was elected president in June 2011. When his mother passed away later that summer, Brian became the next executive director. Under his leadership, the center developed an internship program for high school and college students, and recent graduates pursuing careers in wildlife-related sciences. (The main focus is animal care, but other internships are now available. The program has since grown to between 8 and 12 interns.)

By November 2012, however, the 28-year-old biologist had resigned his position. Fox did not return phone and e-mail requests for an interview. According to Kelton, "Brian was fresh

out of college. Some people choose one direction, some people choose another."

Fox is now a senior environmental specialist with Hi-Crush Proppants, which produces sand for fracking, in Blair, Wisconsin. During his brief stint as PHSS executive director, he hired experienced wildlife rehabilitator and another Lees-McRae College graduate, Jessica Cline, who became the interim executive director in June 2013. She left to marry her college sweetheart in North Carolina in 2014, says Kelton.

The 2003 death of Darlene Kelton, Harry's wife, was the beginning of a decade of leadership changes at PHSS. But things finally seemed to stabilize with the hiring of Boykin in 2014. His background includes a B.A. in biology from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg and work experience with the Florida

Department of Environmental Protection's Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserves, followed by a decade with the department's Coral Reef Conservation Program.

Under Boykin's direction, 2016 revenues of \$494,000 are up 63 percent from 2013. PHSS has maintained a Gold-level GuideStar nonprofit profile, with a commitment to transparency, and earned a "Top-Rated" 2016 status by GreatNonprofits.

Boykin says he feels strongly about fair employment compensation. "When I started, one of our wildlife rehabbers with a B.A. degree was making minimum wage," he recalls. "She's responsible for the life or death of countless animals, suffers from compassion fatigue, and lives in one of the most expensive cities in the country. These people do it because they care. It's clearly not for the compensation."

Now most of the full-time staff has salaries in the low thirties, but Boykin sees that as still under-compensated. With the recent uptick of donations and animals coming into PHSS, the future is looking better than ever for staff, as well as animals.

More staff, volunteers, and funding couldn't come at a better time. Groundbreaking is expected to begin this year on a new 1911-square-foot PHSS facility.

Kelton recalls that the dream of a larger building began in 2008. "James E. Lockwood Jr., a long-time PHSS supporter, passed away, leaving an estate to be distributed to unnamed animal charities," he explains. "The executor, also a supporter, named PHSS as beneficiary of \$500,000, restricted to the purpose of a new building. We've been planning the building ever since." (Bequests can come through the Pelican Seabird Foundation.)

With then executive director Wendy Fox at the helm, PHSS began planning a two-story building with a parapet-style roof, but the design was later changed to a single-level floor plan under Cline's directorship.

"We decided we didn't want a flat roof with a wall around the sides of it because pelicans would nest up there," remembers Kelton. "The nesting sticks they'd bring would clog roof drains and gutters, causing flooding. For another thing, when you build a two-story

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building, it better be larger than 1200 square feet stacked on top of 1200 square feet, because you have a stairway at both ends of the building and a stairwell takes away from usable space. Then you have to have a handicap elevator. That's another expense. Maintenance fees on elevators are not cheap."

Then just as building plans were in the process of being approved by the City of Miami and county permits were being granted, architect Steven Schwartz passed away from pancreatic cancer. Boykin describes him as a lifelong friend to PHSS; he'd designed the center's current building.

"He worked on the [new design] literally up until the time of his passing," says Boykin. "Although the building will be named after James E. Lockwood, we're dedicating a plaque to Steven Schwartz in the Education Center."

"We're now in the market for an architect to finish up the corrections," says Kelton. "The dry-run through building permits produced a bunch of comments. We have to adjust and go back through with corrected plans."

Kelton says he's happy with the design for the new facility, particularly the added space. "We're just so crowded here. During a busy time, people are crawling over each other. We need the space."

Plans call for a large treatment room and separate rooms for surgery, X-ray, large and small bird cages, isolation, food storage/food prep, laundry, a staff lounge, men's and women's bathrooms, a reception/education area, and three administrative offices. It will be a state-of-the-art wildlife hospital, double in size from the old facility, from three rooms and one bath to 12 rooms and two baths.

The old building will be torn down first and a 500-square-foot trailer set up approximately 75 feet away. Construction will take about a year. "I dread it," says Kelton, "but it's worth it."

"Building a new facility on the tip of a narrow peninsula, surrounded by water on three sides, is no simple feat, and it's not cheap," says executive director Boykin. "Estimates range from \$675,000 to \$1.1 million. In addition to the \$500,000 Lockwood bequest, we have a smaller reserve fund to assist with construction. We're reaching out to several foundations and major donors



Boykin: "Building a new facility on the tip of a narrow peninsula, surrounded by water on three sides, is no simple feat, and it's not cheap."



Intern Doug Giraldo releases a rehabilitated double-crested cormorant back to Biscayne Bay.

to help with equipment for the new facility, as well as 'sponsoring' a room to ensure we have adequate funds and don't exhaust all our revenues."

PHSS is also hoping to modify the existing outdoor animal enclosures, and add new structures.

A wraparound boardwalk is planned for the future site. Boykin explains that a Florida Inland Navigation District (FIND) grant will be submitted by Pelican Harbor Marina, which is a Miami-Dade County park, to cover the costs. "We are writing it and working

in partnership with county staff at the marina and grants office to submit it."

He adds, "We're also working on our black banding permits and hope to have them in early 2017." Upon release, the animal's intake band is removed and will then be replaced with a black ID band. "This will allow us to determine if we're treating 400 individual pelicans or 100 pelicans four times a year."

Did Kelton ever envision the facility lasting 37 years?

"No, ma'am" he answers. He only wanted to help a pelican in need. "I just

saw a poor pelican with fish hooks and wondered, what am I going to do about it?"

He's actually considering real retirement.

"I do think PHSS is in good hands today," he concludes. "It's where my heart is, but I'm starting to talk about one of these days moving up to North Carolina, where my son lives on three acres with a couple of horses and chickens. Maybe next year...or early the year after."

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com