

Murray Liebman:

Growing Community – One Fish at a Time

BY TAMARA BUCHWALD • PHOTOS BY RACHEL LINCOLN



Photo by R. Lincoln Photography

For many families, hobbies begin around the kitchen table or during summer vacations. For Murray and his son, Jake Liebman, a shared fascination with fish grew into something much bigger—a thriving neighborhood gathering place that reflects the values of family, community, education, and environmental stewardship.

Murray Liebman grew up in Philadelphia where he spent endless hours at Martin's Aquarium, a local fish store. Those early years helped shape the values that have guided his professional career and, later, inspired a family fish business where neighbors of every age feel at home. The store was proud to launch its Chill Zone, which includes an Oriental carpet and comfortable sofa where you can view a 400-gallon tank full of calm and colorful Discus fish. Many of the Discus were actually bred in their tanks.

As an adult, Murray moved to Washington to attend American University where he would first make Wesley Heights and then the Palisades, his permanent home since 1984. His family loves the area for its community

connections and warm neighbors. These areas also offer proximity to Rock Creek Park and its wildlife. "Wesley Heights has always been a special place. It was the kind of neighborhood where people knew each other, and children could grow up together," said Murray. Compared to Philadelphia, Northwest Washington DC offered far more diversity. Jake's childhood friends went to Rock Creek International and Washington International School and were from various parts of the world such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France.

Although many professionals spend their careers chasing opportunities across the country, the Liebmans have remained deeply connected to Northwest Washington. After earning a law degree with honors from Tulane University Law School and a Master of Law in energy and environmental laws from Georgetown University Law Center, Murray built a career dedicated to influencing America's clean energy future. He served in the White House Office on Environmental Policy, and the U.S. Departments of

Energy and Interior. He spent three years as a Presidential appointee in the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy at the Department of Energy. In 1997, he founded Liebman & Associates, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in clean energy policy, environmental technology, and federal funding strategies. Yet ask Murray what brings him the greatest joy today, and the conversation quickly turns from clean energy projects to colorful tropical fish.

Family vacations often included snorkeling adventures in Israel, Hawaii, and Grand Cayman, where Murray and Jake marveled at coral reefs, tropical fish, and marine ecosystems. Those experiences deepened an appreciation for aquatic life that eventually became a lifelong hobby. Fishing was another family tradition where they spent mornings fishing at Silver Lake near Rehoboth Beach enjoying breakfast at Sharkey's Grill in Dewey Beach with family friends afterwards. They caught bass, catfish, perch, and carp while learning patience, conservation, and respect for nature. Later adventures included memorable fishing trips to the Florida Keys, where Jake landed a 250- pound bull shark along with tarpon and giant grouper. Closer to home, father and son still enjoy fishing the Potomac River near Fletcher's Boathouse and the Delaware River.

On February 11, 2023, a lifelong family hobby morphed into a community venture when Murray and Jake opened Capital Exotic Fish at 3404 Idaho Ave, NW, creating far

more than a traditional aquarium store. "We wanted to build the kind of place where people simply enjoy spending time," Jake explains. Unlike many aquarium stores with crowded aisles and utilitarian displays, Capital Exotic Fish was designed as a neighborhood destination. Bright white tile floors, custom cabinetry, stylish lighting, comfortable seating, reggae music, and beautifully maintained display aquariums immediately create a welcoming atmosphere. The store has become especially popular with local families.

Children often spend considerable time carefully selecting just the right fish for their home aquariums. Staff members encourage questions and take time to educate first-time hobbyists, making every visit an enjoyable learning experience. "Our goal isn't simply selling fish," says Murray, "It's community engagement, providing a place to go and helping people discover a hobby they love for years. That philosophy extends throughout every aspect of the business. Capital Exotic Fish carries one of the largest selections of live aquatic plants in the Washington metropolitan area and specializes in natural aquascaping—the art of designing aquarium environments using live plants, driftwood, and natural stone to recreate healthy aquatic ecosystems. The business itself was built with support from family, friends, and experienced aquarium professionals, who helped transform a lifelong hobby into a successful small business. The family atmosphere extends beyond the fish. Capital



Photo by R. Lincoln Photography

Exotic Fish is proudly dog-friendly, and visitors are often greeted by Jake's Golden Retriever, Bear, or the general manager, Cristina's friendly yellow Lab mix, Mellow.

Jake, meanwhile, continues expanding his appreciation for the natural world through travel. He recently returned from two weeks in Japan, where he climbed Mount Fuji and explored the country's renowned aquarium. Beyond the scenery, what impressed him most was Japan's quiet culture and respect for shared spaces. "People respected each other, respected nature, and respected where they were", Jake says "was something you noticed everywhere." "Those experiences continue to inspire new ideas for creating peaceful, welcoming environments back home."

Community involvement remains central to the family's mission. Capital Exotic Fish supports local aquarium organizations, including the Potomac Valley Aquarium Society and the Capital Cichlid Association, while working with local breeders and emphasizing sustainable sourcing whenever possible. The store offers small evening classes interested in learning how to aquascape their tanks. "It's a great date-night". The Liebman's have also learned an important lesson familiar to every successful small business owner: listen to your customers. Early in the store's history, Murray devoted significant space to one of his favorite species—African cichlids. Although he loved them, customers wanted something different. The family adapted, expanded their offerings, and watched the business flourish.

Whether advising Fortune 500 companies through Liebman & Associates on clean energy investments or helping a seven-year-old choose a first aquarium fish, Murray and Jake share the same philosophy: meaningful relationships matter. For the Liebman's, success isn't measured only by grants won or businesses built, it's measured by creating spaces where community thrives and for Northwest Washington, that's something worth celebrating.



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