

# I BRAKE FOR KEIKO!

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Like many celebrities who've changed their name on the advice of public relations experts, Keiko, the world's most famous killer whale (or orca for those good PR people) was once named Kago, but this name has dirty connotations in Spanish. As a toddler, Keiko was plucked from the waters off Iceland without a chance to develop the clicking sounds of his family, or pod. He was first sold to Marineland Amusement Park in Ontario, Canada, where he was picked on by older female orcas. On reaching maturity, however, gossip pages began to report of Keiko's short but romantic liaison with a beautiful dolphin who, it was discovered, gave Keiko herpes under his pectoral fins.

Banished from Marineland, Keiko was sold to Reino Aventura, an amusement park in Mexico City. There, Keiko was forced to sing for his supper five times a day. His living quarters was a tiny neon-blue swimming pool filled with tepid chlorinated freshwater, a far cry from the saline solution he was born to roam. Depressed, lonely, and just too darn warm, Keiko swam close to the surface of his tank, atrophying the muscles that kept his dorsal fin erect. Further degrading his manhood, he also began to reproduce the sounds of his dolphin tank-mates and Mexican police sirens.

Amazingly, it was in this state, with his droopy dorsal, scabby pectorals, Mexican-police-siren clicking and severely underweight body that Keiko was picked by Warner Brothers Studio Films to star as "Willy" in the major motion picture *Free Willy*, released in 1993. In this movie, Keiko plays an orca who escapes an amusement park with the help of a kid who is equally estranged from his natural environment as a foster child in a Pacific Northwest family. The movie was a smashing success, eventually grossing \$77,698,625, and was accompanied by the hit single "Will You Be There? (Theme from *Free Willy*)" by Michael Jackson.

Most important, the movie drew attention to Keiko's ill health. A 1-800 number for a whale fund ran in the credits of *Free Willy*, and 300,000 people called demanding "Willy" be set free. Reino Aventura also received more than 100 letters a day asking for "Willy's" release. Under pressure, Reino Aventura tried to give Keiko to Sea World, where he

would receive more attentive medical care. Because of his herpes, though, and the unfavorable premise of *Free Willy*, Sea World refused Keiko. Soon after, JoBeth McDaniels of *Life Magazine* ran a story, "Won't Somebody Please Save This Whale?"

Luckily, Nextel founder and billionaire Craig McCaw read the *Life* article and was stirred to create the Free Willy/Keiko Foundation. Thirty-one thousand dollars was also raised for Keiko by an elementary school in Tampa, Florida. Finally the movie's message of freedom could be brought to life. Keiko would be rehabilitated and released back into the wild!

After easy negotiations, Keiko was purchased by the Free Willy/Keiko Foundation and sent to rehab at the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport, Oregon. At the aquarium, a tank fed by cold, salty ocean water was set up to house Keiko for the next two years. During this time, two new *Free Willy* movies were released, both using an animatronic whale and unused footage from the original movie. The producers at Warner Brothers knew better than to use a real whale this time.

At the Oregon Coast Aquarium, Keiko was visited by school children who brought him paper cutouts and glitter drawings of himself, which were hung on the windows of his indoor viewing deck. On occasion Keiko had the illicit pleasure of revealing his enormous phallus to these schoolchildren, who squealed and chanted "Willy! Willy!" Retirees with RVs out front took photos. A television was also set up for Keiko in the indoor viewing deck. He particularly enjoyed *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, as well as any kind of action movie. While at the Oregon Coast Aquarium, Keiko's main task was to overcome the disgust of eating live fish. For years fish had been Keiko's playmates, and now he was forced to eat them!

Unfortunately Keiko's progress was slower than expected. Because of disputes over money, the aquarium refused to clean Keiko's tank filters, eventually causing Keiko to become sick. Attempts were made to discover Keiko's pod using his language as an identifier, but no pod was found to speak a combination of Mexican police siren and dolphin slang. The world was in doubt that Keiko would be set free. National television programs ran segments criticizing the Free Willy/Keiko Foundation for following their emotions to the detriment of Keiko's well-being. But despite the setbacks and criticism, supporters still rallied for the whale. A *Free Willy!* parade was held in his honor in nearby Portland, a young woman was named *Miss Free*

*Willy*, root beer was bottled with his likeness on the label, and inflatable orcas were sold at local festivals.

After two years of failing to recognize the nutritional value of his tank playmates, Keiko submitted to the vulgarity of eating live fish. Finally a date was set for him to be flown to a sea pen awaiting him in Klettsvik Bay, Iceland. Days before Keiko left Oregon, Craig McCaw, Keiko's billionaire benefactor, was allowed to swim with the whale in his tank. McCaw described the event as the spiritual high point of his entire life and vowed to raise money for the rehabilitation of all killer whales held in captivity.

On September 9, 1998, Keiko was strapped into a giant sling and loaded into a saltwater bed on a US Air Force C-17 Globemaster III and flown directly from Newport to Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland. Five thousand people and 546 journalists visited Keiko at the aquarium that day. Thousands more lined the highway with banners and signs wishing Keiko well. Once in the air, live video feed was broadcast from the plane so millions of fans could watch Keiko dose and eat pretzels during his eight-hour flight. One woman sat in her bathtub for the entire eight hours to show her support.

Once in Iceland, Keiko immediately felt at home in his sea pen and befriended a local pilot whale who introduced him around and showed him a good time. Soon, fishermen noticed they were catching fewer Atlantic salmon in the bay and attributed this to Keiko's voracious appetite. After about a year of wild animal training, the Free Willy/Keiko Foundation allowed Keiko to explore outside his cove. During these outings, Keiko met some distant relatives, and everyone's hopes were lit for Keiko's eventual release.

Regrettably the cost of maintaining Keiko in Iceland was reaching three million dollars a year. Nextel stock had plummeted and Craig McCaw and his wife, Wendy, suffered a bitter divorce. Sadly Craig had to withdraw his support, but luckily Wendy won the custody battle and jumped in to save the whale.

By late summer of 2002, Keiko was spending most of his time free roaming the North Atlantic and making fewer and fewer visits to his Icelandic keepers. But just as school was entering session, Keiko appeared in a small Norwegian harbor sick with an infection. He had come to hear the famed eight-year-old girl who habitually stood on the harbor dock to play on her harmonica the only song she knows, the theme to *Free Willy*. After medical attention

and much-needed home cooking, Keiko disappeared into the wilds of the North Atlantic once again.

All was not well though. As Keiko swam freely out in the ocean, frequently forgetting to call home, the evil Seaquarium amusement park of Miami secretly applied for a permit to capture Keiko. Their plan was to bring him back to America to make him perform his trademark porpoising trick. Quickly Norway, claiming jurisdiction over Keiko, rebuffed the Seaquarium's advances, and Keiko was saved once again.

Soon after, Norway accepted Keiko as a citizen with all rights and privileges pertaining thereto, including kidnapping-insurance coverage. This is where Keiko lived for a year longer, flitting the line between human contact and whale companionship, or dead and live fish dinners.

Early in the morning on December 13th, 2003, Keiko appeared at his old haunt in the Norwegian harbor coughing and wheezing; he had contracted acute pneumonia. His sea pen handlers in Iceland, still keeping a light on for him, rushed to Norway to administer medical care. Sadly, by midmorning at the age of somewhere between twenty-six and twenty-eight Keiko passed away; at long last he was finally free.

Keiko, who was always better known as "Willy," suffered as celebrities often do, from the audience's confusion between character and actor. Luckily, it was this confusion between fact and fiction that saved his life. The Free Willy/Keiko Foundation's objective was to rehabilitate and release a very famous captured whale. This goal was of such lofty ambition as to attempt the impossible—to drive culture out of nature, to restore what was lost, to return Adam and Eve to Eden. And, in this long and drawn-out fluke of a tale, the foundation did make this fantasy a reality. After years of mistreatment, countless embarrassments, and hard work, a celluloid hero was made into a living dream come true. ❗❗