Calendar

Local Events *page* **61**

Classical Music *page* **71**

Art Museums & Galleries *page* **73**

Theater *page* **76**

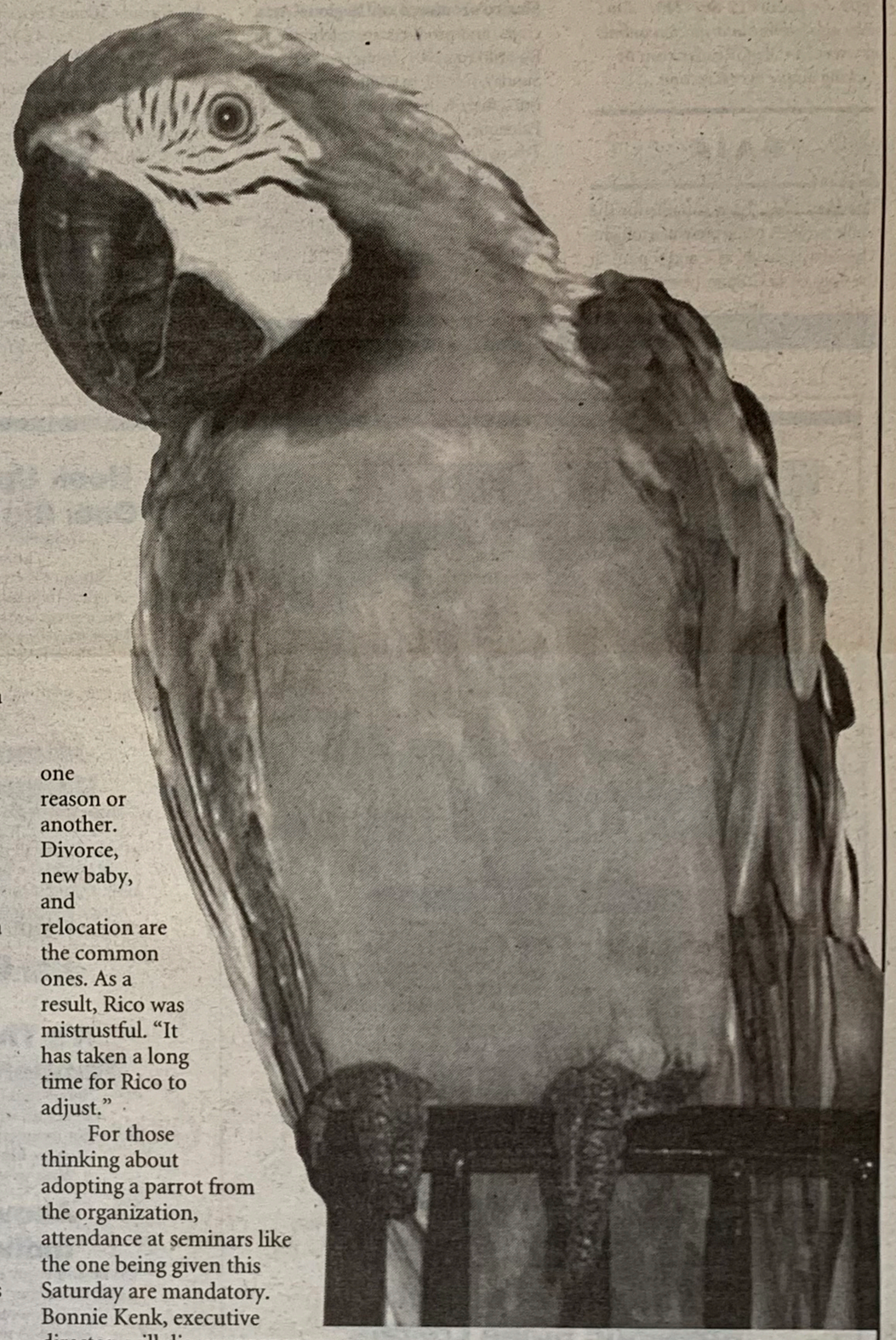
Pop Music *page* **81**

Restaurants *page* **115**

Movies *page* **126**

Parrot Control

Companion Parrot Care



Blue and gold macaw

"I just brought the birds in," says Nadja O'Hagan. "They were outside sunning themselves."

Five parrots live with O'Hagan in her La Jolla home, which includes a netted section of the backyard. They are a blue and gold macaw, a Congo African Grey, a Moluccan cockatoo, a Pacific parrotlet, and a Patagonian conure. "Some people think I have said 'condor.' I do not have a condor."

A vulture would be inconvenient, it's true; but in the wrong home, a parrot — especially one of the bigger, louder varieties — may become a "screaming monster," says O'Hagan. Nor is it any fun for the parrots who are bought by inexperienced or insensitive people. And because some parrots can be very long-lived, with life spans of 80 or 90 years, it's often a lengthy hell for both parties.

LOCAL EVENTS

Even so, parrots are currently the third most popular pet in the United States — "right behind dogs and cats," says O'Hagan, who is a member of San Diego's Parrot Education and Adoption Center. Just as there are Golden Retriever rescue leagues, there are now rescue leagues for parrots. Popularity is peril.

Six years ago, O'Hagan was herself an innocent parrot purchaser. "I knew nothing about parrots when I got my first one." Previously she and her husband raised finches, and plenty of them — 40 at one point. But the parrot was different. Not two weeks had passed before O'Hagan realized she had better study up and bought every parrot-behavior book that amazon.com had for sale.

Bonnie Kenk

"Blue and gold macaws are fun-loving; they like to play. But they also have great big bills, so if you don't know what you're doing, you'll get bitten. These birds are also very intelligent. And if you don't learn how to handle them, they'll learn how to handle you. Goldie quickly figured out that if I put him on top of his cage, where he was taller than I am, he could intimidate me from up there."

Teaching a parrot good behavior is time-consuming, dependent upon dispensing praise not punishment, says O'Hagan, a retired software designer who can afford to spend her day with her birds. Still, it was a long while before she taught Goldie to come out of his cage on command. Even now, she praises him for doing so. "And if I forget to praise him, he says, 'Goldie good' for me," which she interprets as a reproachful reminder.

When O'Hagan and her husband, Michael, were in a local pet store shopping for a second parrot, a blue and gold macaw began screaming at them. The pet-store owner explained that he was set off by the sight of Michael's white hair, because the bird had been owned by a white-haired man who had used his walking stick to attempt to discipline it.

O'Hagan says she knows many other stories and shares one about a cockatoo that was tortured, then thrown into the trash, still in its cage. "You can understand how, if these birds get out of control, they could drive somebody nuts. It doesn't excuse the behavior, but if they're noisy or biting, that can make people angry and abusive."

O'Hagan's own cockatoo, which she adopted from the organization, was abused by its former owner. "Cockatoos are very affectionate. They're sometimes called 'Velcro birds,' because they just want to cling to you. But, again, you have to know how to handle them, so they don't get out of control." When she first got Oliver, she says, he was "a very dangerous bird. Now when I call him my 'snuggle bird,' he comes running across the bed to snuggle with me."

Rico, the conure, is O'Hagan's other adopted parrot, and although he was never abused, he initially exhibited anti-social behavior. "When he got here a couple of years ago, he sat in a corner of his cage, played with no toys, and did not like to interact with me." The trouble was, he'd had a succession of owners who couldn't keep him for one reason or another. Divorce, new baby, and relocation are the common ones. As a result, Rico was mistrustful. "It has taken a long time for Rico to adjust."

For those thinking about adopting a parrot from the organization, attendance at seminars like the one being given this Saturday are mandatory. Bonnie Kenk, executive director, will discuss proper diet, cage size, and a parrot's need for lots of stimulating toys and attention from humans. According to the organization's website, *www.peac.org*, Kenk is also the one who "reserves the right to visit an adopter's home pre- and post-adoption."

Only occasionally does Kenk bring birds to the seminars. "That's not the focus," says O'Hagan. Twice a year, in spring and fall, the organization sponsors a bird fair, where the public can see the birds that are available. In the meantime, candidates are encouraged to attend the seminars. "It's possible that if you're too busy to attend [them], you may be too busy to have a parrot in your life anyway," says the website. "May we recommend finches?"

— Jeanne Schinto

"ABCs of Companion Parrot Care"
Seminar by the Parrot Education and Adoption Center
Saturday, July 28, 12:30–2:00 p.m.
Golden Hill Recreation Center
2600 Golf Course Drive, Golden Hill
Cost: $10
Info: 619-287-8200