LOCAL

'A true leader': Founder of Topsail's sea turtle hospital dies at 90

Jean Beasley founded the sea turtle hospital in the late 1990s and ran the popular facility, now in Surf City, for nearly three decades

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USA TODAY NETWORK

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

- Jean Beasley, the founder of the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, has died at age 90.

- Beasley started the center in memory of her daughter, Karen, growing it from a small building to a 13,000-square-foot facility.

- She was a hands-on leader who dedicated her life to saving and rehabilitating sick and injured sea turtles.

(This story was updated to add new information.)

The driving force and former director of the popular Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center on Topsail Island has died.

Jean Beasley passed away Dec. 2 at age 90.

Beasley, who started the facility and named it in her daughter's memory and her love for sea turtles, steered the hospital from a small 900-square-foot facility, which was often overflowing with patients, to its current 13,000-square-foot home on the Surf City mainland. The original hospital opened in Topsail Beach in the late 1990s, while the new facility opened in late 2013.

"She didn't sit at a desk," said Terry Meyer, who worked with Beasley for decades and still works at the hospital. "She walked the walk. She didn't say we should save

sea turtles. She saved sea turtles. She was a true leader."

'Every one of them special'

Beasley first came to Topsail Island in 1958 and visited throughout the years before moving to the area permanently in the mid-1970s. It was on Topsail Island that Jean and her daughter Karen saw the need for a program to care for the area's sea turtles.

The two formed the Topsail Turtle Project, which helped protect turtle nests and hatchlings as they made their way into the ocean. Jean Beasley continued their work with the area's turtles after Karen Beasley died at the age of 29 from leukemia.

The center had humble beginnings, Jean Beasley told the StarNews in 2021 when she stepped down as the center's executive director.

"We had no money when we started," she said. "When I didn't have enough fish for the turtles, I fished from the dock."

Beasley said she had thousands of memories of her time at the hospital.

"Every one of them special," she added.

'That's Jean's legacy'

Meyer first met Beasley in 1995, a moment that Meyer said made helping sea turtles a focus of her life for the next three decades.

"But at that time I didn't even know what a sea turtle was," she said with a laugh. "But Jean just draws you in. She just had that charisma, and you couldn't say no."

Along with rehabilitating sick and injured sea turtles, Beasley saw the hospital as an opportunity to teach people, especially children, about the marine reptiles and how to share the coastal environment with them.

The hospital's turtle releases, which usually occurred several times a year, quickly became must-see events for school children and tourists, drawing hundreds to the beach in sometimes appalling weather conditions.

The hospital also became one of the key facilities between Florida and New England for caring for injured sea turtles, often receiving cold-stunned patients from hundreds of miles away during the winter.

Along with providing turtle health care, the hospital also operates several education outreach initiatives and an internship program – a nod to Beasley's background as a career educator.

"That's Jean's legacy," Meyer said. "She saved sea turtles, and she also educated and inspired so many people at many ages and levels to try and do the same."

Kathy Zagzebski, the hospital's current executive director, echoed the sentiment.

"Jean's passing leaves a great void in the turtle conservation world," she said in a text message. "She inspired so many of us, both here and around the world.

"At the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, we are committed to carrying forth her legacy."