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VIEWS

Posted Jan. 11, 2004

**Kristin Brantmeier column:
It's tough to rule a world,
any world**

I confess, I've always wanted to rule the world. In early November, it finally happened.

Well, I didn't become ruler of *the* world, but I became ruler of *a* world, a tiny aquatic kingdom that exists right on my own desk.

In an effort to add serenity, color and a feeling of omnipotence to my workspace, I decided to get a fish.

Having no kids or pets, and being guilty of plant neglect in several states, I was in uncharted waters as a caretaker-figure.

Someone told me Betta fish live in vases fairly self-sufficiently, which sounded good to me.

I stopped by a major discount retailer, the one that's rumored to support approximately 99.4 percent of our country's economy, because I heard they sold Bettas.

It felt weird to shop for a pet the same place I buy orange juice, batteries and sweat socks, but I headed to the pet department anyway.

Dozens of colorful Betta fish swam in individual plastic cups. After some consideration, I picked out an electric blue male fish.

Then, I chose a large glass vase and a plant to go on top (I can't forget to water a plant if it's living in water, I reminded myself). Supposedly, the plant puts oxygen into the water and serves as a tasty after-school snack for the fish.

Walking around the store with the fish cup in my shopping cart, the name "Charlie" stuck in my head. I decided the fish was sending me telepathic name signals, so I called him Charlie.

After picking out finishing touches like fish food, a net, blue glass stones for the bottom and a color-coordinated ribbon for around the vase, I had everything I needed to create a new little world.

Later, I arranged the stones in the vase, poured in a gallon of drinking water and carefully placed Charlie in his new home. I tied the ribbon

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around the vase and admired my self-created little universe.

Then, I noticed the instructions warning me to rinse everything with tap water first.

Uh-oh. I was already a bad fish-mama, and I'd only had him for an hour. Since it was too late to do anything about it, I just decided to hope for the best.

For the first couple weeks, I anxiously inspected Charlie throughout the day to make sure he was still alive.

Was he eating enough? How often should I change the water? Does he look sick? I dreaded the thought of showing up for work one day to find he'd gone belly-up.

I grilled a co-worker, who's a mom, about how people can possibly deal with raising kids — actual little people — when just keeping this one fish alive felt like such a big responsibility.

"Well, kids are pretty sturdy," she responded hesitantly, no doubt regretting her decision to stop by my desk.

I'm sure she thought I had lost my mind. Based on the amount of energy I spent worrying about the fish, I probably had.

Over time, I've made some adjustments to Charlie's world. My boyfriend pointed out, "What self-respecting male fish would be OK with a ribbon on his house, even if it's blue?" so I nixed the ribbon.

Later, I added a fake plant to the bottom as a fish playground, since Charlie looked a little bored.

Recently, a couple of lady African Dwarf Frogs moved into a new vase next door to Charlie, so my desk has become something of a party zone for the aquatic critter set.

Between watching, feeding, cleaning and worrying, I've realized that being in charge of an entire world is hard work — even if it's only eight inches wide.

Kristin Brantmeier is an Appleton resident and a Post-Crescent community columnist. She can be reached by e-mail at pletters@postcrescent.com

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