



Ashes of dearly departed find purpose in reefs

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If you could never afford oceanfront property in this life, take heart. You -- or at least your earthly remains -- can now spend eternity embedded in an artificial reef, bathing somewhere off Florida or Malaysia or Brazil.

Think of it as the ultimate gesture to preserve the fragile ecosystem of the sea.

Or think of it as your own, private ocean-floor condo.

Eternal Reefs Inc. is a small but growing company offering an environmentally friendly alternative to traditional burial practices by mixing cremated remains -- cremains -- into concrete and molding them into "reef balls." The final product -- resembling a giant dome of Swiss cheese -- is then cured and donated to government reef projects wherever needed.

"You're not merely disposing of someone's remains. You're using them to create," says 53-year-old Lynne Lamb Bryant, who recently sent in her first husband's ashes for the cause. "To me, that's a critical distinction. I think it's a wonderful idea."

His so-called Memorial Reef will be a few miles off the coast of Sarasota. That's also where you'll find the reef-entombed ashes of Carleton Glen Palmer -- composer, arranger and the company's inspiration.

In 1998, when he was dying of cancer, Palmer turned one evening to his son-in-law, Don Brawley of Decatur, Ga., and made a final request.

"When I pass away, take my remains and make it part of one of those reefs you build," Brawley remembers him saying. "He said he'd rather spend eternity in the ocean surrounded by life than in a field surrounded by dead people."

Back in the early 1990s, Brawley and about a dozen former diving buddies, disheartened by the declining health of coral reefs off the Florida Keys, had formed the Reef Ball Development Group to build the molds for the concrete reefs. What began as an all-volunteer effort evolved into a business. By 1998, the Bradenton-based organization had already deployed about 40,000 balls in 250 locations around the globe. But Brawley -- with a degree in psychology and a background in sculpting -- was still working days as a computer programmer and analyst.

Then came his father-in-law's dying wish -- and three months later the sad occasion to honor it.

Brawley never intended to turn it into anything more than a dutiful gesture by a devoted son-in-law. But when he mentioned the story to people, he was struck by the way they embraced the idea.

Voila. In a New Age era of cryonics and launching ashes into orbit and burying bodies in nature preserves, a niche industry was born.

Not to mention a whole new take on sleeping with the fishes.

A relative bargain

Now Brawley has deployed about 60 Memorial Reefs, at least half of them off Florida. He charges anywhere from \$850 to be part of a large "community reef" shared by the remains of 100 people to \$3,200 for the "Atlantis" -- a single, 3,800- to 4,000-pound Reef Ball you get all to yourself.

"The largest of our units, the Atlantis stands out as a pinnacle of the reef and attracts the larger species of sea life," an advertisement reads.

Much of the expense comes from hauling a 2-ton blob of concrete to its final destination -- first by truck, then by barge.

Prices do not include cremation, but they do cover a bronze, inscribed plaque affixed to the reef, two memorial certificates and a survey to record the specific longitude and latitude of the site. Compared with your traditional landlubber funeral and burial, which now average \$4,600, memorial reefs are still a bargain.

So far, much of the marketing has been through funeral homes and Brawley's Web site -- www.eternalreefs.com.

In fact, that's how Lynne Lamb Bryant discovered the company.

The perfect solution

Twenty years earlier, her first husband, Lee Bryant, had died in her arms of a stroke at age 40. They had been married just three weeks and four days. He had wanted to be buried at sea.

But the young widow quickly discovered that such a procedure is rare, expensive and generally reserved for retired Navy personnel. A funeral home director told her to forget it.

Running out of time, she had the body cremated. And for the next two decades -- through moves to California and Texas and even into a second marriage -- she held onto Lee's ashes, storing them in a bookcase, never quite finding a proper solution.

"As time passed, it became clearer to me that I needed to deal with this," said Bryant, who lives outside Houston. "But the only option seemed to be scattering his ashes at sea. And Lee didn't say he wanted to be scattered at sea -- he said he wanted to be buried at sea."

One day when she had nearly given up, she stumbled upon Brawley's Web site. Not only did the notion appeal to her environmental sensitivities, but it seemed entirely fitting for a man who had been a scuba diver and an architect.

Lee's reef was cast about three weeks ago. Sometime in June it will be towed out to sea.

"Now I've decided that's the way I want to go myself," Bryant says. "I want all those cute little fishes swimming around me."

Reef life after death

The company does its best to accommodate the client's wishes on location, but there are limits. Memorial Reefs can go only to permitted sites approved by the federal, state and local governments.

In other words, there is bureaucratic red tape even after you die.

The concrete domes begin to attract tiny aquatic plants and animals almost immediately. Within a couple of years -- with coral and sponges and fish in the neighborhood -- it's tough to tell the difference between the fake reef and the real deal. Which is the whole point.

In just the past few decades, scientists estimate, 27 percent of the world's coral reefs have been destroyed, mostly because of water pollution. If trends continue, 60 percent may be lost by 2030. At stake is not only a strikingly beautiful ecosystem but an essential link in the food chain.

"We lose the reefs, we lose the fish, and fish are a major source of protein for the world," said Michael Solum, the artificial-reef coordinator for Sarasota County.

When he initially heard of the Memorial Reef concept, he wanted to be sure of

two things: that the ashes wouldn't somehow leak out of the structure, and that it wouldn't weaken the reef itself. Tests and clearance from the Environmental Protection Agency reassured him.

Now, he's not only a supporter, but he may one day be a client.

"I think my wife knows that's the way I want to go -- hopefully a long, long time from now," Solum says.

"After all, if you're going to go, you might as well go with a splash."

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