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Eternal rest, supporting life: Reef balls contain ashes of loved ones

By [Jessica Waters](#)

Saturday, July 29, 2006

Like many of us, Don Brawley gains comfort from visiting the resting place of a loved one.

But while most people don somber suits, walking in silence through row upon row of small gravestones set into the regulation-clipped green lawns of area cemeteries, Brawley perches on the railing of his boat.

While others kneel quietly on a small patch of dirt to draw closer to their departed relative or friend, Brawley slides goggles down over his eyes, slips the regulator into his mouth and tumbles backward into the blue waters of the Gulf.

As others stand, surrounded by the stillness of a cemetery to connect with those passed on, Brawley reaches out and touches a life-encrusted reef, surrounded by colorful fish, thriving crustaceans and the teeming life of the Gulf waters to talk once again with his father-in-law, Carleton Glen Palmer.

"I don't get to visit his (Palmer's) reef as often as I would like," Brawley said Tuesday, "but I got to dive there about two weeks ago and it brings a tear to your eye because it's all covered with life and I know it wouldn't be there if he didn't make that choice."

Palmer's crematory ashes, encased in an artificial reef ball designed and created by Brawley, lay on the bottom of the Gulf waters near Sarasota as part of a man-made reef structure put in place to encourage and sustain sea life. Surrounded by grouper and snapper, Palmer is exactly where he asked to be.

"He (Palmer) told me shortly before he died that he would rather spend eternity down there with all that life and excitement going on than to be with a bunch of dead people," remembered Brawley.

This October, Lee and Collier county residents will have an opportunity to make that same choice as

Eternal Reef adds the coast of Southwest Florida to the growing list of memorial reef locations.

Started with that unique request by his father-in-law, Brawley's company, Eternal Reef, offers family members the chance to include their loved one's crematory ashes in a similar reef formation.

Nearly 20 years ago, Brawley became involved with the environmental restoration and protection of the coral reefs of the Florida Keys where he enjoyed diving. Designing a unique concrete form that mimicked natural coral heads, Brawley worked with local and state agencies along the Atlantic seaboard and Gulf coast to rebuild ecologically necessary systems by providing the artificial foundations for natural reef banks. Set in groups, the concrete reef balls act as a magnet for sea life, from microorganisms to fish. Building their own living cloak over the manmade forms, crustaceans add on to the reef, rehabilitating and rebuilding dying reefs and adding new habitat to the marine environment.

"The ocean is like a nutrient-rich desert," said Brawley. "When you put these reefs down, they create an oasis in the ocean. It creates the habitat for all the buds of life to grow and that's what everything else — the fish and larger forms of life — are drawn to, creating whole new little communities for ocean life to flourish."

In 1990, the first reef ball project was completed off the coast near Fort Lauderdale, and more than 400,000 of the specially designed concrete balls have been placed on ocean floors worldwide.

Photo Gallery

Eternal Reef

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It was in this context that Palmer's request found fruition. After fulfilling his father-in-law's request, Brawley said he started thinking of a way to offer that option to others, and from that small beginning, Eternal Reefs was begun.

Fitting in with the rapidly increasing number of people choosing cremation over burial, Eternal Reefs facilitates closure in a meaningful way that gives back not only to the families and loved ones, but also to the environment, said Brawley.

"The reefs create a permanent, living legacy for generations and a living memorial to loved ones," he said. "It is a final act to give back to the world, the planet and the environment."

Statewide in Florida, nearly 50 percent of the deceased are cremated; either through their own previously stated preferences or the decisions of family members. In Japan, where population continues to skyrocket and land is at a premium, the percentage is closer to 95 percent, according to statistics

provided by the American Heritage Cremation Society.

Motivations for the choice vary, but the high cost of funerals and the simplicity of the cremation process work hand in hand with the increasing environmental considerations and the lessening of family ties to tradition to make cremation the increasingly popular choice.

In 2005, the Lee County medical examiner's office processed 3,944 requests for cremation. More than 2,365 cremation requests have come through the ME's office so far in 2006.

Requests for cremations account for more than 50 percent of their services, said Donnell Sullivan, general manager of Fort Myers Memorial Gardens and Funeral Home.

Changing culture and changing attitudes are at the root of the shift from burials to cremations, said Sullivan.

"It's about people not being in the same place they were and being in the same place they grew up," he added. "We are a mobile society."

The Southwest Florida Eternal Reef will be located approximately three miles off the shore of north Collier County, near the Lee County border. Six families have already signed up to include the crematory ashes of their departed in the project, and Brawley said they would love to see another 10 families join.

"One of the unique things about this is it's not just one family going through this," he said. "We might have up to 15 families going through the same process, and they often make real strong friendships between families."

He said the shared experience assists the families in achieving closure because they realize they are not the only ones going through the difficult time.

Those interested in being included in the Lee/Collier reef project are asked to register with Eternal Reefs no later than Aug. 11. The reef casting will be on Sept. 11, and the reef dedication ceremony will be held on Oct. 9.

For more information on Eternal Reef and to participate in the local reef, visit the Web site at www.eternalreefs.com.

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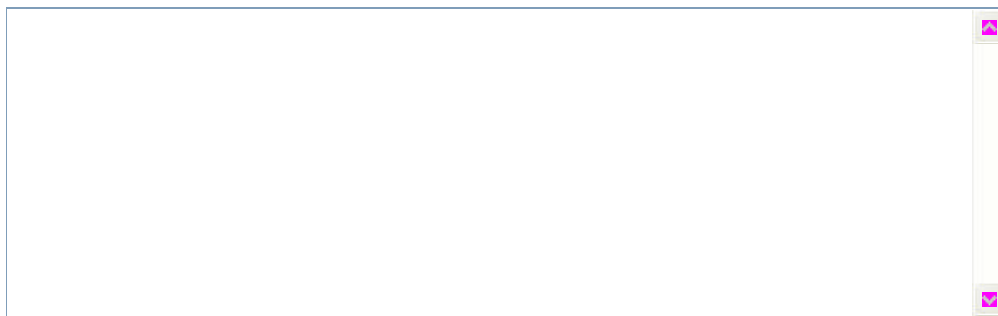
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