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Eternal life at the bottom of the bay

'Reef ball' burials come to the Chesapeake

By PAMELA WOOD, Staff Writer

Published October 09, 2008

When Michael Weidner was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer, he decided to live the rest of his life to the fullest: boating, fishing, traveling with his family and enjoying nine cruises in four years.

He loved the water so much that he wanted to have his ashes scattered at sea, but his wife, Joanne, found a better way to fulfill her husband's wish.

Mrs. Weidner had her husband's ashes incorporated into a "reef ball" - a hole-filled, dome-shaped, concrete structure plunked in the water to attract marine life.

Mr. Weidner's reef ball was one of eight that were to be placed in the Chesapeake Bay today.

"It's sad, but it's happy because it's what he wanted," Mrs. Weidner said yesterday as she and her Philadelphia-based family took pictures of the reef ball and made rubbings of the medallion inscribed with Mr. Weidner's name. "This is beautiful."

Today, Mr. Weidner's reef ball and seven others were scheduled to be placed on a restoration reef in the Chesapeake Bay. The site near Baltimore is called Gales Lump and already has artificial reefs made from the rubble of old Memorial Stadium.

The hope is that the reef balls will attract fish and maybe oysters and clams, boosting marine life in the Chesapeake Bay.

Reef balls have been used in the bay for several years for restoration projects, but this week represents the first time reef balls containing ashes have been set on the bay floor.

The reef balls are made possible by a company called Eternal Reefs. For 10 years, the Atlanta company has been gradually adding reef sites along the East Coast, from Florida to New Jersey. The cost ranges from \$2,500 to \$6,500, depending on the size of the reef ball.

Eternal Reefs are chosen by people with all sorts of connections to the water: boaters and fishermen, environmentalists and nature-lovers, Navy veterans.

Eternal Reefs CEO George Frankel said the reef balls also appeal to families who have lost someone at a young age.

"This way they're still active and contributing," Mr. Frankel said.



Pamela Wood - The Capital

Wednesday at Discovery Village in Shady Side, members of the military prepare to confer military honors on three veterans whose ashes were cast into concrete reef balls. A total of eight memorial reef balls were scheduled to be placed into the Chesapeake Bay Thursday.

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Spouses can have their ashes put into a reef ball together - if they die at separate times, the family can hold onto one spouse's ashes until the second spouse dies. People and pets can be placed in reef balls together, too.

The reef balls are attractive to people seeking alternatives to a traditional funeral and burial. Families can see a benefit of their loved one helping encourage life, even through death. Water offers comfort and serenity. And while their loved one is at sea, they still are in a tangible place that can be visited.

It also offers a somewhat "greener" way to enter the ever-after.

"People want their death to mean something," Mr. Frankel said.

Mr. Frankel said about half of his company's reef balls were requested by the deceased before their death. For the other half, the family found out about it on their own and figured it would be a perfect fit for their loved one.

Gregory Hinkle knew he wanted to be buried in a reef ball; he was friends with one of the company's founders.

He was a troubled man who died relatively young at age 51. But his family said he liked to live a simple life and found pleasure in helping others - so helping marine life was a perfect fit.

Plus, he loved fishing, said his mom, Sylvia Rennick, and his stepfather, Bob Rennick.

"He was an outdoorsman, for sure," Mrs. Rennick said.

The Rennicks, former Marylanders who now live in North Carolina, came to Discovery Village in Shady Side yesterday to see their son's reef ball. They also witnessed the military honors conferred on their son, who served two years in the Army.

They scrawled messages in chalk on the reef ball, and quietly reflected while sitting on benches along Parish Creek. More family members were expected to join the reef ball deployment today.

"The idea he'll be in an Eternal Reef is comforting to his mom, his siblings, to me and I'm sure, for him," Mr. Rennick said.

For information, visit www.eternalreefs.com.

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