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Living

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Special reef burials for special folks

By Nicholas Spangler

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(MCT)

MIAMI - When somebody you love dies, you can cremate the body and press the ashes into a diamond. You can send the ashes in a rocket to the moon or mix them with paint for a portrait or stick them in a firecracker and blow them up.

Alternatively, you can mix the ashes into concrete and sink them to the ocean floor, where they will provide a comfortable bed for coral and a hiding place for fish. This sounds less poetic than scattering them over the waves, but you get a certificate with the latitude and longitude coordinates, so you can come back whenever you want.

The company that provides this service is called Eternal Reefs, run by a man named George Frankel. "It's not that they're gone," George likes to say of the loved ones. "It's more like they're doing something else."

The boats for this got under way from Haulover Marina one recent morning, the many living aboard the Kelley and the eight dead on the Stephen. They steamed to a spot half a mile off Golden Beach, Fla.

The living had flown in from all over the country, sometimes carrying the ashes of the dead in plastic bags. There was, among both the living and the dead, a preponderance of fishermen, scuba divers and bold personalities.

"We did all there is," said Deb Chronister, widow of Steven, her sometime high school sweetheart. Steven was a very gutsy man who told Deb, 35 years after their high school breakup, "I figured you wanted to talk to me again," which must have been true, because they got married three years ago. He had a motto that should be famous: "If some is good, more is better and too much oughta be great."

His ashes were mixed into the Atlantis Memorial Reef, Eternal Reef's flagship offering, which weighs two tons and costs \$4,995. The rest of the memorial reefs aboard the Stephen were of the 1,500-pound, \$2,995 Nautilus variety, with a couple of 400-pound, \$1,995 Aquarius models as well.

The concrete was poured into molds a month ago at a ceremony at Eternal Reef's Sarasota, Fla., factory, the ashes mixed in by relatives' or spouses' hands. The molds were specially designed, George said, to withstand tidal forces and protect the "little buds of life" that will grow on their grooved surfaces.



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The finished products - "reef balls," George called them - look like giant gray whiffle balls, withstand up to 10,000 pounds of pressure per square inch and last slightly less than eternity but longer than 500 years. By year's end, 500 will be on the ocean floor off Golden Beach and 11 other government-approved sites off Florida, the Carolinas and Texas. Environmental agencies locate reefs that need shoring up and supervise as the reef balls are placed.

The Barberios stood at the Kelley's bow. Philip Barberio was a special effects man in Hollywood. Remember "Aliens" or "Total Recall" or the hover-scooter chase scene in "Return of the Jedi?" That was him, said Kim, his niece. Craig, his nephew, remembered scuba diving with Uncle Philip in Mexico a few years ago, playing Go Fish at his home a lot of years ago. "I must have been 8, 9. I had chicken pox. My mom was pregnant, so I stayed over there. We played a lot of that game."

Philip would, Craig said, "think this was very cool. Sitting on a mantle - that's not him at all."

The crew of the Stephen kicked their crane into gear. "OK, here we go!" one of the men shouted. "Get it up! Put it down!"

The giant whiffle balls were lifted one by one and lowered 46 feet down. Nobody cried just then. They did later, when it came time to throw flowers and say quiet words.

George, the Eternal Reefs man, rang a bell after each name, and aboard the Stephen the crewmen took their hats off and said some words of their own. Then it was done.

The loud, colorful explosion of a loved one has its merits, but this seemed more conducive to contemplation.

"We didn't go on vacations together," Craig said about his uncle. "There was so much we could have done. Even one more day together would have been great."

"End of summer camping," said Lois, Philip's widow. "We'd go down on the coast. And Thanksgiving - that'd be at our house, followed by bocce ball. We had people at our house for Easter. The next morning he went to the hospital, and he never came out."

"When you lose a parent, the world is not the same place," said Ellen Gordon, missing her dad, Charles Gordon, with her sisters and her mom sitting near. "It's not a secure place anymore. Before, no matter how bad the day got, there was always somebody to call."

Ellen said it'd be great if, after life, everybody you ever loved got back together again.

But she didn't believe much in the afterlife. Maybe at least she and her sisters would get together some day, borrow her dad's boat and come back here for a visit.



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