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Saying goodbye at Dare's Reef

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CHRISSY INGRAM

DAILY NEWS STAFF

THE DAILY NEWS / CHRISSY INGRAM in memorial: Katie, Ashley and Susie Moore remember Anita Justice after they watched a reef ball cast to the ocean floor.

SNEADS FERRY — When about 50 people stepped from a dock in Sneads Ferry last week for a voyage out in the Atlantic they weren't boarding a charter for fishing.

They set sail to witness a "green burial" of their loved ones.

Families and friends huddled in groups. They hugged, held hands and peered into the calm waters that would soon turn to 6- and 8- foot waves.

Despite the swelling sea, they were able to say goodbye to eight family members, a dog named "Scruffy" and a sea turtle named "Dare."

The Kemps Ridley sea turtle provided the inspiration for the name of the reef — the first of its kind in the country. And Thursday, two miles off the coast of Topsail Beach, Dare's Reef began to grow.

Ten artificial reef balls — varying in weight from 400 to 4,000 pounds — were lowered to the ocean floor by a crane on a nearby ship. In a matter of days, the balls should begin teeming with fish and other marine life.

Each reef ball was cast of eco-friendly concrete mixed with the cremated remains of loved ones. It's a way for family members and friends to honor those who loved the sea while giving something back to it.

The balls, laden with large holes and priced at \$2,000 to \$5,000, each bore a bronze plaque for whom it was cast.

Eternal Reefs Inc. of Decatur, Ga., the only company in the country to offer the reef ball burial, provided buckets of fresh flowers and mini-reef balls for the memorial service. Family members took great care in decorating them with a meticulous perfection.

"Not carnations — she hated them," said Susie Moore of her sister, Anita Justice of Surf City.

Some requested to be buried 44 feet below the ocean when they died. Others, like Justice, never heard of it prior to her death.

"That's the only thing we regret is that she didn't know about this before she passed away," said Ashley Moore, Justice's niece. "And she would have been happier than anybody on this boat right now."

Family members gathered at the hull to throw roses, carnations, daisies and the mini-reef balls into the active waves of the Atlantic Ocean as a part of the memorial service. Eternal Reefs CEO George Frankel read "The Sea" by John F. Kennedy after the ship's bell had chimed for the individuals.

Patty Webb and her children cried when the bell chimed for their husband and father William Stover. They knew the reef burial was perfect for him — and he could never have been separated from their dog, "Scruffy," of course.

"I think he would have been proud of his son and daughters to find a special place for him and Scruffy," Webb said. "He loved the ocean and it's a remarkable idea."

Dennis Riley said the same of his daughter, Julie.

"I think she would have loved this," he said.

Julie Riley, of Wichita, Kan., died Jan. 12 after battling cancer for 18 months. She had requested a reef burial because she fell in love with sea turtles. She also wanted to improve their environment.

Julie read the story of Dare on the Internet and decided she wanted to be a part of her reef.

Dare's story is one that's becoming well-known, volunteers of the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Research and Rescue Center said Thursday.

Sandy Sly remembers it like it was yesterday. Dare came into the sea turtle hospital in Topsail Beach after injuries caused by a boat. After recuperating and just prior to her release, Hurricane Floyd arrived and Dare had to be evacuated.

She would end up spending four days floating in a tank filled with contaminated floodwater. It was found 27 feet in the air in a tree, Sly said.

"When she returned she was never the same," Sly said. "We don't know what she went through."

It was no longer second nature for Dare to be fully submerged in water.

"The board made a one-time decision to keep her," Sly said. "Everybody got involved and knew her."

Dare died in March 2005 after surgery. Volunteers were among the grieving onlookers on the boat. They thought the reef burial was perfect for the animal.

"If you've ever had a favorite a pet that was hurt that you've nursed back or a person they become a part of you, you have a vested interest in them," said volunteer Nola Jackson, who started the Pleasure Island Sea Turtle Project. "... What a perfect place for a sea creature to go and give back her remains so that other sea creatures can live."

Ashley Moore said the memorial was something her family would never forget. They plan to become certified to dive down to the reef and visit their loved one — families are given the exact coordinates of the location.

Justice's sudden death took the family by surprise. But they knew she wanted to be a part of the ocean.

"She always loved the ocean — the ocean gave her so much joy that now we look at it as she is giving the ocean something back," Moore said.

Family members gathered at the back of the boat afterwards to share stories about her.

"She always wore ball caps," Moore said. "Looking at the beach on the boat now — she walked there every single day. There's probably more of her footprints on the beach than anybody else's."

But there was one ball cap in particular that Justice always wanted from her brother, David Moore. On the journey home, a sudden gust of wind carried that very ball cap off Moore's head and into the ocean.

"She wanted that hat more than I did," he said with a wide grin. "I knew she'd get the last laugh."

For more information on Eternal Reefs, visit their Web site at www.eternalreefs.com. Contact staff writer Chrissy Ingram at cingram@freedomenc.com or by calling 353-1171, ext. 239.

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