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Eternal Reefs help families say goodbye

By **KATI BEXLEY** | [More](#) by this reporter | kati.bexley@staugustinerecord.com | Posted: Tuesday, November 7, 2006 ; Updated: 9:45 Tuesday, November 7, 2006

Don Brawley, owner of Eternal Reefs, likes to think of it as "beach-front for eternity."

Brawley created a company that gives people a different option in cremation; people's remains are mixed into a large concrete ball and then placed on the sea floor, serving as a man-made coral reef.

"At first my husband said, 'Whaaat?'," said Judith Seraphin, a St. Augustine resident who on Monday memorialized her godmother, Betsy Kerr, in an eternal reef.

"But (my husband) looked into it and said, 'Betsy, you got it. We promise.'"

Eternal Reefs, based in Decatur, Ga., brought its services to St. Augustine for the first time Monday, and families gathered to say goodbye to loved ones who will be placed offshore of Flagler Beach. The company was unable to lower the families' 11 concrete reef balls -- similar looking to giant whiffle balls -- into the water because of rough seas, but the memorial service was still held. The reef balls will placed in the ocean at a later date.

The families came from as far as Nevada and Wisconsin, said Chuck Kizina, Eternal Reefs chief operating officer.

The reef balls range in weight from 500 pounds, costing roughly \$2,000, to nearly 4,000 pounds, with a \$5,000 price tag.

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"We are very competitive (in price) to funeral services," Kizina said, who worked in the corporate end of the funeral industry for 11 years before coming to Eternal Reefs.

"We are the only alternative that I know of that's come along that's really different. ...This is good for the environment and it allows families to be involved in the memorial."

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Families can mix their loved ones ashes into the concrete and put a hand print or Seraphin's godmother, are combined

write a message into the reef ball. Some people's remains, such as with another person's ashes and are put into the same reef ball.

"I met the women who mixed her brother's remains in with Betsy. She was very nice," Seraphin said. "Then you put a brass plate with the person's name on (the reef ball) and we have GPS (Global Positioning System) of the site so we can visit Betsy whenever we want to."

Eternal Reefs works with authorities to identify areas that are in need of artificial reefs, but families can choose where they would like their loved ones placed.

The company began in Sarasota in 1998, and now has reef balls off the coast all over Florida, Texas and New Jersey, Kizina said.

The Reef Ball Foundation, which created reef balls and has created reefs worldwide, periodically monitors Eternal Reefs' projects to ensure the environmental contribution.

Despite the company's growth, the idea still raises eyebrows.

Seraphin admits both she and her godmother originally thought the concept was strange.

"(Betsy) said when she first heard about it she thought it was ridiculous. It sounded silly," Seraphin said. "Then she thought about it and it seemed most sensible thing she'd heard of."

About four years ago, Seraphin's godmother told her she wanted her remains to be in a reef ball. Kerr was from outside Philadelphia, but she's years in San Diego, Seraphin said. She enjoyed watching whales and she had "a fascination with fish."

"She said she was never happier than when she was in the water," Seraphin said. "I just think (the reef ball is) such a wonderful way to give back to the universe."

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