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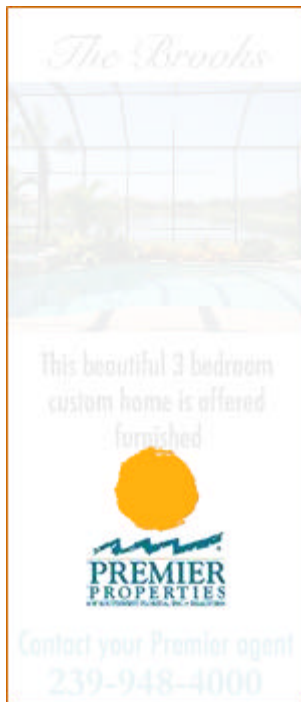
Life after death

Alternative to traditional burial a living memorial under the sea

By [Melanie Peeples](#) ([Contact](#))

Wednesday, October 11, 2006

James Weghorst sat around his house in Naples for eight years after he died. In an urn. His wife, Norma, couldn't decide what to do with his ashes. He had been rather nonspecific in his instructions to her.



"You do whatever you want 'cause I don't care and I won't know," Norma says her husband told her.

She wasn't inclined to bury him.

"There's so much land already eaten up," says Norma's daughter-in-law, Patti Weghorst. And Norma's children weren't much help.

"The kids couldn't make up their minds," Norma Weghorst says. They're scattered here and there, no longer living in the same city. So she had James cremated and decided to hold onto his ashes for a while.

She thought about scattering them out in the Gulf. "We had a sailboat," she says. And her husband always enjoyed being on the water.

But she just wasn't sure. So she held on to them. For a year. Then two. Then three, then four, and before she knew it, eight years had passed.

Then her daughter-in-law told her about Eternal Reefs, a Georgia company that offers an alternative to traditional burial and cremation. Eternal Reefs takes the ashes of the deceased and mixes them with concrete to make an artificial reef to be placed on the sea floor.

Photo Gallery

Life after death



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Photo: David Ahnholz

It sounded perfect to Norma Weghorst.

"Grandpa loved to fish," says Angela O'Donnell, Norma's 21-year-old granddaughter.

So Norma did it. And now his ashes are part of an artificial reef ball, a concrete dome about the size of a large cauldron, with holes all over it — perfect for fish and other wildlife to swim in and out and find food.

Which is why, on this day, the Weghorsts and three other families are standing on the deck of the Fish'n Express III, a Fort Myers Beach fishing boat on its way to the spot in the Gulf where their loved ones' reef balls will be placed on the Gulf floor.

"That's what I'm gonna have done for me, too," Norma Weghorst says. She's a petite but strong 86-year-old woman who wears a hat to keep the wind from blowing her short, white hair. Norma doesn't look like she's going anywhere any time soon, but she's already planned and paid for her own eternal reef wishes. She's also reserved half of her husband's ashes so they can be commingled with hers after her death and put into a reef together.

Also onboard is the family of Charles Clayton Jr., a man who truly loved fishing. "The day he died he was fishing," says 28-year-old Charles Clayton III, who goes by Charlie. "Fishing all day. He came back around 5 (p.m.)."

They had always planned to scatter his father's ashes in the Gulf.

"That was his final wish. To be in the ocean," says his son, who lives in Orlando. But the family could never find the right time or momentum to do it.

Then Clayton's fiancée found Eternal Reefs and gave him a video detailing the procedure.

"Once I watched the videotape I was in tears knowing what I was gonna do," he says.

He's come here on this day with his brother, fiancée, mother and best friend to watch his father's reef ball lowered to the bottom of the Gulf.

"It's not a memorial to death, now," he says contrasting it with the traditional headstone in a cemetery. "Now the fish will come to him," Charlie says, wiping a tear from the corner of his left eye. "Now he is the life of the ocean."

Charlie has already made plans to go scuba diving later this afternoon at the site where his father's reef

will be located, 2 1/2 miles off the North Naples coast near Wiggins Pass. He'll use the longitude and latitude coordinates and his friend's Global Positioning Satellite device.

Charlie wants to see the underwater view of the place where his father will rest for eternity.

He opens a beer, like many of the others onboard the Fish'n Xpress III, and settles in for the last boat ride with his dad.

This idea to put human ashes inside concrete reef balls came from Don Brawley. In the 1980s he and his college roommate would leave the University of Georgia at 7 at night and be scuba diving in the Keys the next morning.

"We really worried that the quality of the diving would go down," Brawley says, worried at the time about man's devastating effects on the delicate coral reefs. "We wanted to do something to help the reefs."

So after college, Brawley went to work making reef balls that mimicked coral heads. He thought they looked a lot better than the old refrigerators and cars that anglers were dropping into the water as artificial reefs.

One day his father-in-law told him he had a favor. "He said he'd rather be down there with all that life than in a field with a bunch of dead people."

The casual conversation was pretty much forgotten until later, after his father-in-law died and they'd held the funeral.

The minister approached him.

"I understand you're supposed to get these," Brawley says the minister told him, handing over an urn full of ashes. Brawley was surprised, but honored his father-in-law's last wishes and the first reef ball with cremains inside was launched.

He told others this story and before long, those people were calling him and asking if he'd do it for their fathers and brothers and sons.

Brawley figured, why not? "No reason you couldn't do it for a living," he says, and set about getting the Environmental Protection Agency's permission to add cremains into the concrete reef balls.

"They're public reefs with private dollars," he says. "It's a win-win situation."

Doug Sutor, senior environmental specialist with Collier County Environmental Services agrees. "Collier County has a reef program," Sutor says, funded in part by the state of Florida. He says they usually sink concrete demolition materials — things like culverts and large chunks of concrete.

"The reef balls are interesting material," Sutor says, not to mention more attractive for scuba divers to visit than chunks of old concrete.

But getting them in place isn't cheap. "The majority of the cost is in the barge and getting it offshore and deploying (the artificial reef materials)" says Sutor. "Anytime somebody's willing to do that themselves we're happy to let them do it."

The cost, instead of being borne by taxpayers and the state, is paid by the families of the deceased.

The reef balls come in four sizes and range from a communal reef ball at \$995 to individual reef balls ranging from \$1,995 to \$4,995.

Many families choose to help mix the ashes with the concrete when the reef ball is cast at the company's site in Sarasota. "They mix with their own hands and it becomes a tribute," says George Frankel, Eternal Reefs' CEO. The company adds a bronze plaque to each reef ball with the deceased's name.

Frankel says the materials are environmentally-friendly and each reef ball is expected to last 500 years.

As the Fish'n Xpress III nears the spot where the reef balls will be placed, the motor slows and the Night Stalker, the shrimp boat carrying the reef balls, looms ahead like a date with destiny.

Quiet falls over the Fish'n Xpress III as one-by-one the names are called and each reef ball is hefted from the deck of the Night Stalker and lowered into the water.

Then the Night Stalker leaves and the captain of the Fish'n Xpress maneuvers up to the spot above the reef balls so each family can have a private memorial.

Each family takes a moment on the stern before tossing in a small replica of the reef ball adorned with flowers.

Some pray. Some whisper. Some cry. One raises a beer bottle in salute.

The boat sounds the horn for each family and Don Brawley reads from a 1962 speech given by John F. Kennedy:

"I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea ... I think it's because we all came from the sea ... And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean. And therefore we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, and in our tears. We are tied to the ocean, and when we go back to the sea — whether it is to sail or to watch it — we are going back from whence we came."

Then the boat inches away until the dots of bright red and white and gold flowers fade away, adrift all alone on the gray-green Gulf.

But below, perhaps the first fish are already coming to see a new place for them. A refuge from above. A place to hide, to eat, to mate.

In other words, to live.

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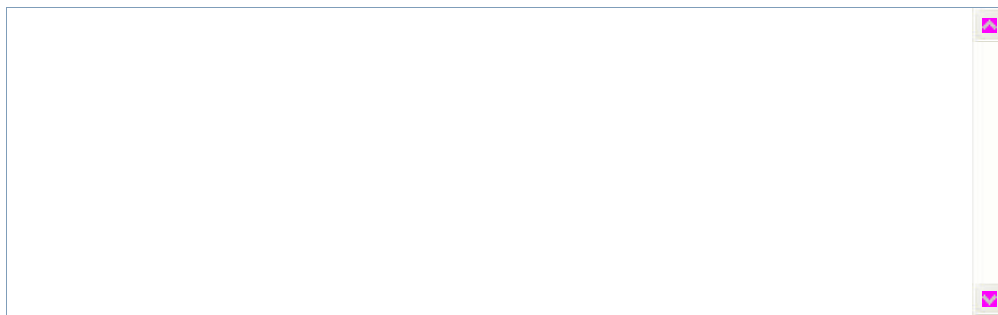
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