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Sea Lovers' Families Find Living Memorial; Artificial Reefs Create Habitat From Ashes

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Twelve-year-old Justin Pierce loved to fish and snorkel before he died in an accident driving an all-terrain vehicle. Now his parents think they have found a way for their son to remain close to the water he loved.

They mixed his ashes with cement to form an artificial reef that was placed in the shallow water off Sarasota, Fla., in late October. The dome, which resembles a large concrete whiffle ball, helps to restore a critical underwater habitat while becoming a living memorial with coral and fish.

"In a way, he's still alive," said Justin's mother, Lorna.

The Pierces took part in the growing trend of alternative funerals and memorials. Sarasota has become the largest site for such reefs with more than 100 of the underwater memorials, some containing the remains of more than one person. Another 100 reefs are scattered along the Gulf of Mexico and up the East Coast.

And reefs are not the only option. Cremated remains can be turned into fireworks, shot into space, turned into diamonds, made into artwork or enclosed in keepsake jewelry.

"What is unappetizing to one person is very much appealing to another," said Jack Springer, executive director of the Chicago-based Cremation Association of North America.

The trend of personalizing funeral services is driven, in part, by an increase in cremation. According to Springer, about 687,000 people were cremated in 2003, and that number is expected to increase by about 40 percent by 2025.

"It is expanding the options that are available to families," said Paul Dixon, executive director of the Funeral Ethics Association in Springfield, Ill. "I do think that it appeals to a certain segment of society, but I don't know that it's for everyone."

Roberta Morris, 77, a retiree in nearby Venice, Fla., had planned to spread the ashes of her husband at sea, but then she learned about the cremation reefs.

"It's not death," she said. "It's just the most romantic thing to do with your spouse."

Her husband, Robert, was an avid fisherman until 15 years ago, when he was disabled with a brain disorder. "He would have loved this," his wife said.

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The concrete reefs began as an ecological project, not a funeral service, said Eternal Reefs founder Don Brawley. He and some friends who are amateur snorkelers developed the so-called "reef balls" to help restore the underwater habitat. Now more than 500,000 reef balls rest on the ocean floor off 48 countries.

In 1998, Brawley's father-in-law, Carleton Palmer, said he would like to be cremated and have his remains mixed in one of the reef balls.

"He said he'd rather spend eternity down there with all that life going on than stuck in a field with a bunch of dead people," Brawley said. Months later, Palmer died of cancer and Brawley complied with his wishes, making the first Eternal Reef.

As he told friends about his father-in-law's unique resting place, others expressed interest in doing the same, and Eternal Reefs Inc. was born. The remains of snorkelers, anglers, environmentalists, and a Navy diver with his dog are now entombed in the reefs.

Brawley said the reefs, which start at about \$1,000, help families work through their grief and restore the coastal habitat at no cost to the government.

Families who choose a reef memorial begin by coming to the plant in Sarasota to mix their loved ones' remains in the concrete and pour the concrete into a ball-shaped mold. Families must provide their own transportation to the reef site and lodging. It takes about a month for the concrete to set.

Barbara Jack, 45, of Valley Forge, Pa., said the other families making reefs were "an unexpected comfort." Her 54-year-old husband, Lloyd, died while waiting for a lung transplant. Before he died, he requested his remains be put in an artificial reef, a fitting resting place for the owner of a concrete business who loved to dive in the Caribbean.

Barbara Jack and the other families returned to Sarasota last month to say goodbye and watch the 20 reefs go into the ocean.

They held a viewing, including military honors for Lloyd Jack, a Vietnam veteran, and four others. The next day the reefs were taken out to sea on a barge, and a crane lowered them into the water. The families watched from two boats and threw flowers into the water.

"It was the most wonderful experience," Barbara Jack said. "It is so reassuring that I know he is where he loved to be the most, with his fish."

Justin Pierce's father, Matthew, had trouble holding the video camera still as he sobbed when his son's reef dipped below the water. Justin, who was born in Sarasota, died four years ago, and the Pierces said they felt as though they were bringing him home. His parents now live in Orlando and say they plan to get their scuba diving certification so they can watch Justin's reef grow.

"Even if we're just standing on the shore, looking at the sunset," Lorna Pierce said, "we know he's out there."

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