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▲ **Ashes of dearly departed find purpose in reefs: May 30, 2001**

If you could never afford oceanfront property in this life, take heart. You least your earthly remains -- can now spend eternity embedded in an art bathing somewhere off Florida or Malaysia or Brazil.

Think of it as the ultimate gesture to preserve the fragile ecosystem of th

Or think of it as your own, private ocean-floor condo.

Eternal Reefs Inc. is a small but growing company offering an environmei friendly alternative to traditional burial practices by mixing cremated rem remains -- into concrete and molding them into "reef balls." The final pr resembling a giant dome of Swiss cheese -- is then cured and donated to government reef projects wherever needed.

"You're not merely disposing of someone's remains. You're using them to says 53-year-old Lynne Lamb Bryant, who recently sent in her first husb for the cause. "To me, that's a critical distinction. I think it's a wonderful

His so-called Memorial Reef will be a few miles off the coast of Sarasota. where you'll find the reef-entombed ashes of Carleton Glen Palmer -- con arranger and the company's inspiration.

In 1998, when he was dying of cancer, Palmer turned one evening to his Don Brawley of Decatur, Ga., and made a final request.

"When I pass away, take my remains and make it part of one of those re build," Brawley remembers him saying. "He said he'd rather spend eterni ocean surrounded by life than in a field surrounded by dead people."

Back in the early 1990s, Brawley and about a dozen former diving buddie disheartened by the declining health of coral reefs off the Florida Keys, h the Reef Ball Development Group to build the molds for the concrete reef began as an all-volunteer effort evolved into a business. By 1998, the Br based organization had already deployed about 40,000 balls in 250 locati the globe. But Brawley -- with a degree in psychology and a background -- was still working days as a computer programmer and analyst.

Then came his father-in-law's dying wish -- and three months later the s to honor it.

Brawley never intended to turn it into anything more than a dutiful gestu devoted son-in-law. But when he mentioned the story to people, he was

the way they embraced the idea.

Voila. In a New Age era of cryonics and launching ashes into orbit and bodies in nature preserves, a niche industry was born.

Not to mention a whole new take on sleeping with the fishes.

A relative bargain

Now Brawley has deployed about 60 Memorial Reefs, at least half of them Florida. He charges anywhere from \$850 to be part of a large "community" shared by the remains of 100 people to \$3,200 for the "Atlantis" -- a single 4,000-pound Reef Ball you get all to yourself.

"The largest of our units, the Atlantis stands out as a pinnacle of the reef attracts the larger species of sea life," an advertisement reads.

Much of the expense comes from hauling a 2-ton blob of concrete to its final destination -- first by truck, then by barge.

Prices do not include cremation, but they do cover a bronze, inscribed plaque affixed to the reef, two memorial certificates and a survey to record the site's longitude and latitude of the site. Compared with your traditional landlub and burial, which now average \$4,600, memorial reefs are still a bargain.

In fact, that's how Lynne Lamb Bryant discovered the company.

The perfect solution

Twenty years earlier, her first husband, Lee Bryant, had died in her arms at age 40. They had been married just three weeks and four days. He had to be buried at sea.

But the young widow quickly discovered that such a procedure is rare, expensive and generally reserved for retired Navy personnel. A funeral home directed her to forget it.

Running out of time, she had the body cremated. And for the next two decades through moves to California and Texas and even into a second marriage she kept onto Lee's ashes, storing them in a bookcase, never quite finding a proper

"As time passed, it became clearer to me that I needed to deal with this, Lee Bryant, who lives outside Houston. "But the only option seemed to be scattering his ashes at sea. And Lee didn't say he wanted to be scattered at sea -- he said he wanted to be buried at sea."

One day when she had nearly given up, she stumbled upon Brawley's website. We only did the notion appeal to her environmental sensitivities, but it seemed fitting for a man who had been a scuba diver and an architect.

Lee's reef was cast about three weeks ago. Sometime in June it will be cast to sea.

"Now I've decided that's the way I want to go myself," Bryant says. "I want those cute little fishes swimming around me."

Reef life after death

The company does its best to accommodate the client's wishes on location, but there are limits. Memorial Reefs can go only to permitted sites approved by federal, state and local governments.

In other words, there is bureaucratic red tape even after you die.

The concrete domes begin to attract tiny aquatic plants and animals almost immediately. Within a couple of years -- with coral and sponges and fish nearby -- it's tough to tell the difference between the fake reef and the real deal. Which is the whole point.

In just the past few decades, scientists estimate, 27 percent of the world's reefs have been destroyed, mostly because of water pollution. If trends continue, another 27 percent may be lost by 2030. At stake is not only a strikingly beautiful ecosystem but an essential link in the food chain.

"We lose the reefs, we lose the fish, and fish are a major source of protein in the world," said Michael Solum, the artificial-reef coordinator for Sarasota County.

When he initially heard of the Memorial Reef concept, he wanted to be sure of a few things: that the ashes wouldn't somehow leak out of the structure, and that it wouldn't weaken the reef itself. Tests and clearance from the Environmental Protection Agency reassured him.

Now, he's not only a supporter, but he may one day be a client.

"I think my wife knows that's the way I want to go -- hopefully a long, long time from now," Solum says.

"After all, if you're going to go, you might as well go with a splash."

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