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Final rest goes green in the bay

As alternative to conventional burial, memorial reefs provide marine habitat

By Rona Marech
October 10, 2008



The family of Mary Teresa Mehl watches as the reef containing her ashes is lowered into the Chesapeake Bay. (Baltimore Sun photo by Jed Kirschbaum / October 9, 2008)

Donald Francis Duncan loved the sea as a kid growing up in California and he loved it throughout his adult life, when he sailed on boats with names such as the *Odyssey* and *Vaya* - Spanish for "go."

Now, in death, he won't be separated from the water he so loved.

Yesterday, as his two daughters clung to each other and cried, an artificial reef containing his ashes was lowered by crane into the gray-green waters of the [Chesapeake Bay](#). The rough-hewn concrete structures, which resemble a giant Whiffle ball, are intended to help restore the health of the bay by providing a coral-like habitat for fish and other sea life.

The Duncan sisters were among seven families who bid a final farewell to their loved ones in the excursion arranged by a Florida-based company that has since 2001 placed more than 700 memorial reefs around the country, including some off the shore of Ocean City. Yesterday was Eternal Reefs' first burial in the Maryland portion of the Chesapeake Bay.

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These sort of green burials are becoming increasingly available as people become more environmentally aware or interested in alternatives to conventional end-of-life practices.

George Frankel, CEO of Eternal Reefs, says his products, which cost between \$2,495 and \$6,495, are designed for people who are unmoved by headstones and caskets.

"But if you can explain to them that you can help preserve the ocean or natural real estate, there's value to that, some tangible sense that I'm getting something back for my money," he said. "I think boomers particularly are looking for causes."

The Green Burial Council, a Santa Fe nonprofit that promotes eco-friendly practices, established a set of green standards and began certifying death care providers earlier this year. They already have given their stamp of approval to 100 funeral homes, a dozen cemeteries, three so-called cremation disposition programs (including Eternal Reefs) that help protect and provide habitat and lots of companies that make biodegradable, nontoxic caskets, urns and shrouds, said the executive director, Joe Sehee.

"This is the wave of the future," Sehee said. "If done correctly, it will be a very powerful, market-based conservation tool."

Gregory Wayne Hinkle, who died last year at 51, didn't see himself as an environmentalist. But he was an avid outdoorsman who loved to fish, hunt and spend time at the ocean.

Hinkle had told his family that when he died he wanted to be part of one of the artificial reefs, and yesterday they fulfilled his wishes.

"He liked the idea of fish swimming through," said his mother, Sylvia Rennick, who was joined yesterday by her husband, son, daughter-in-law, granddaughter and 9-month-old great-granddaughter.

"It's a way to be part of life still, after your death," his daughter Tracy Machado said. "I can't think of a better thing for him than being in nature forever."

"That's where he belongs," Rennick said.

Laurie Duncan, and Stacy Duncan had waited years for their final good-bye. Their father died a decade ago at 76, but their mother could never bring herself to do anything with his ashes. They sat for years in her closet, along with the last valentine her husband had given her.

When their mother, Mary Duncan, died in December at 85, the sisters knew they would turn to Eternal Reefs, which Laurie had learned about years earlier from a television program. They traveled to Florida, where the reef balls are made, to mix the ashes of both parents into the concrete and decorate their memorials. Their father's bears a plaque that reprises that old boat name. "Vaya Con Dios," it reads - go with God.

Finally, yesterday, they came to the end of a long road in the waters off [Kent County](#), where the remnants of [Memorial Stadium](#) have been scattered to create a reef.

Shortly after the remains of her parents had disappeared, Laurie Duncan - still hugging her

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sister - read a John Masefield poem. "I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky," she read. "And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by. ..."

They threw small, individual memorials into the water and for a long time the flowers - red, yellow, pink and coral - bobbed atop the water.

Soon after, the boats sounded their horns three times and started chugging back to the dock in Middle River.

"We both very much felt our parents were with us - in a good way," Laurie Duncan said. "This was the perfect thing for them. It's such a great cause because the bay is in such terrible shape. ... If we can help in a small way to make it come alive again, it justifies their lives."

"It's very peaceful," her sister said. "We know where they are and they'll be there for 500 years."

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