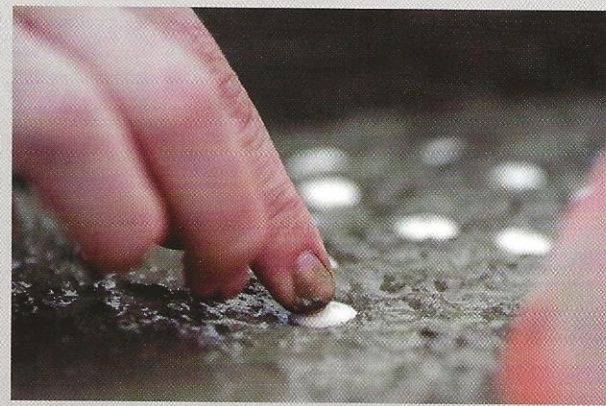


HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

Eternal Reefs honors loved ones in an elegant, sentimental, dignified and environmentally responsible tribute

WRITTEN BY ROBBIE TARPLEY RAFFISH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT L. GURSKY



ON A GRAY AND DRIZZLY SATURDAY in late spring, seven families, with many friends, gathered at the West Ocean City Marina to commemorate the lives of loved ones lost to illness, accident and age. But while the weather may have been heavy and depressing, the tone of the event certainly was not.

All were gathered around seven large, hollow, bell-shaped Eternal Reef memorial balls. They had been cast the day before out of environmentally safe concrete, into which the cremation remains ("cremains") of their loved ones were mixed. The memorials, which feature large holes cut out of the sides, had been decorated with shells, small pieces of memorabilia and plaques noting the name of each loved one. Around them, families shared stories, laughing a little and crying a little, while drinking coffee and visiting.

Accompanied on a boat by family and friends, each memorial would be dropped in the ocean at specific coordinates off the coast of Ocean City. There they would join many other reef balls, coming together to create an active, fully permitted man-made fishing and diving reef.

The memorial balls are the brainchild of Eternal Reefs, a company based in Sarasota, Florida, that since the late 1990s has brought families an alternative way to remember their loved ones.

"People tell us that creating an Eternal Reef memorial is a creative and fulfilling way to make some sense of their loved one's death," said George Frankel, president of Eternal Reefs. "By adding it to the ocean floor, it's more than the 'dust-to-dust' of burial; it's a way to help create and preserve ocean life. Fish swim through the holes and lay their eggs in

the protected environment. Divers can explore the reef, and people can fish above it. It's the circle of life in a way that can, eventually, bring joy and serenity to those who mourn."

Frankel noted that the reef balls accomplish a few other things, too.

"Families love them because they get to help create the memorials. The process can help teach children how to constructively handle loss. And together we create a habitat where there wasn't one before, effectively using private investment [in the balls] for public use."

There's no cost to the state or its municipalities. Eternal Reefs has come to Ocean City each year since 2008 and conducts about 120 memorials a year around the country. When in Ocean City, they coordinate with the OC Reef Foundation, which assigns the ocean coordinates.



A LIFE OF SERVICE

LT. COL. BRUCE A. HART

APRIL 29, 1945 — MARCH 22, 2016



HONOR GUARDS: MILITARY HONORS ARE CEREMONIAL ON THE DAY OF VIEWING FOR ELIGIBLE SERVICEMEN AND SERVICEWOMEN — AS THEY WERE FOR LT. COL. BRUCE HART. IT INCLUDES AN HONOR GUARD AND MEMBERS FROM THE DECEASED'S BRANCH OF SERVICE. FLAGS ARE FOLDED ONTO THE ETERNAL REEFS AND "TAPS" IS PLAYED. AT THE CONCLUSION, THE HONOR GUARD WILL FOLD THE FLAG AND PRESENT IT TO THE FAMILY.



SUSAN HART HAD COME to Eternal Reefs at the request of her husband, Lt. Col. Bruce A. Hart, who was retired from the Army National Guard. He discovered the organization online and told his wife it was his wish to be laid to rest this way.

"He told me more than once he'd rather be with the fish than with the worms," Susan recalled at the ceremony.

Hart had lived a life of service. Having seen active military duty in the mid-1960s, he returned to the States, joined the National Guard and graduated from Towson State College, becoming a high-school teacher. He had coached lacrosse, football, wrestling and volleyball, winning titles and awards (including Coach of the Year and Man of the Year by U.S. Lacrosse Coaches Association) and influencing the lives of countless students and athletes.

In 1984, he was returning from work at an armory when he was hit by a speeding car. The impact broke his neck in three places and left him paralyzed from the chest down. The accident ended an 18-year military career that included a very long list of commendations, including the Meritorious Service Medal and the National Defense Service Medal. He was a graduate of the Command and General Staff College with Honors and was an Outstanding Graduate of the National Defense University.

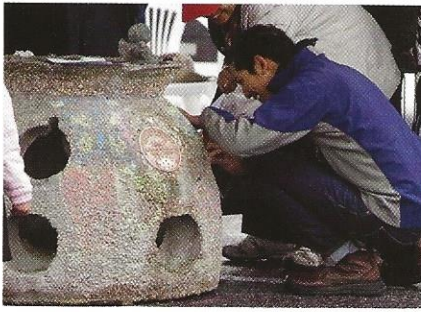
After the accident, Hart went on to become a champion of disabled causes and a very successful businessman who also served as a motivational and disability-awareness speaker.

"When he was discharged from the Army, he never quit. He pursued his new life with the same intensity as before, just from a wheelchair," said Susan. "He was an amazing force."

Military honors were performed at the ceremony. Susan and members of Hart's family were visibly moved by the proceedings, which included a flag ceremony and the playing of "Taps." →

A REMARKABLE WAY TO REMEMBER HIS SPIRIT

MICHAEL ANTHONY J. NICOLAS
JANUARY 13, 1998 — OCTOBER 13, 2015



LASTING TRIBUTE: ETERNAL REEF MEMORIAL BALLS ARE MADE FROM ENVIRONMENTALLY SAFE CONCRETE, INTO WHICH THE CREMATION REMAINS ARE MIXED. THE MEMORIALS INCLUDE LARGE HOLES, WHICH ARE DECORATED WITH SHELLS, SMALL PIECES OF MEMORABILIA AND PLAQUES NOTING THE NAMES OF LOVED ONES.



"THIS DAY, THIS WEEKEND, have been so important to me and my family," said Edgar Nicolas, whose son, Michael, passed away at age 17. "My son was a remarkable human being, and we wanted to find a remarkable way to remember his spirit."

After Michael's death, the family, which is separated across several regions of the country, decided on cremation. They then looked for a way to honor Michael's memory. After rejecting several ideas, including spreading his ashes during a family trip, the family was referred by a grief counselor to Eternal Reefs.

"Of all of the places we have traveled, Ocean City is the place we always came back to. He loved it here, building sand forts, playing mini-golf, even trying to fish, although we weren't very good," said Nicolas. "Hundreds of people had come to his memorial service. The line stretched for hours at the funeral home. We received notes from so many of his friends. He had no idea how many people really loved him. Those notes meant so much to us. When we decided to create a reef ball and have it set off the coast of Ocean City, we placed the notes in a glass jar and placed the jar inside the ball. All of those good wishes of love will go with him."

Michael's friend and fellow student Dan Azarian, age 19, and his parents came to the weekend. Azarian ran track with Michael.

"On the first day of practice, he just walked up and introduced himself," said Azarian. "He was so friendly and welcoming. He was a positive person, and there is really no better way to remember him than this. He had a huge impact on people during his life, and he will again, as part of this reef."

The Nicolas family was able to bring closure to an even older loss. Twenty-seven years earlier, they had lost another son, an infant named Steven, to sudden infant death syndrome.

"I have some comfort that my two sons are together now," added Nicolas.

A TRIBUTE TEEMING WITH SEA LIFE

ETERNAL REEFS WAS FORMED in 1998. It is an offshoot of The Reef Ball Foundation (TRBF), which had been created six years earlier by a group of environmentally conscious college friends who enjoyed diving. In order to reclaim the lost natural reefs, the foundation had developed a patented mold system with an environmentally friendly concrete formula. With their advanced technology in the development of "reef balls," TRBF became the recognized leader in scientifically designed artificial reefs. By 2010, more than 700,000 reef balls had been placed in the ocean worldwide.

In 1998, the father-in-law of Eternal Reefs founder Dan Brawley requested that his cremains be added to the concrete in one of The Reef Ball Foundation's reefs. Since then, the company has placed more than 1,500 memorials in 20 locations off the coasts of Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Maryland, New Jersey, Texas and Virginia, substantially increasing the ocean's diminishing reef systems.

When asked why Eternal Reefs has been so successful, Frankel chuckled and said, "It's probably the softest sell ever in the funeral industry. The sale, if you will, can literally take a decade or more. Sometimes a husband or wife passes, and the surviving spouse and adult children decide to hold on to the cremains until the second spouse passes. Then, they can be joined together in one reef ball. For many families, it just makes sense because of their beliefs about the cycle of life, their



love of the ocean or private thoughts."

There is also the economics of it.

"There's no perpetual care, which is the most costly part of burial," said Frankel. "The ball becomes part of the ocean ecosystem. So, the cost of the casting and placement is half to two-thirds less expensive than a traditional burial. Families can include more than one person's cremains in the ball. We even have people who mix their beloved pets' cremains in with them, so they will be together."

Eternal Reef balls start at \$3,995 and rise in cost to about \$7,500, with the largest accommodating up to four sets of remains. A less expensive way (\$2,995), for people who cannot travel, to participate in a casting is Eternal Reefs

Direct, which includes the remains in a reef off the coast of Sarasota.

Toward the end of the ceremony, Ed Nicolas touched the reef ball before heading back to the hotel. He was thinking about the following day, when they would place the ball in the ocean.

"My son was smart, handsome, an athlete and a musician, but most people, when they spoke of him, mentioned his smile and his laugh first," said Nicolas. "I hold onto that. He was only here for a short time, but he made a difference in life. Now he has a new way to make a difference. He, together with Steven, will live on in the ocean."

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