

# TIDELINES

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## *Forever at sea*





# Eco-friendly reef balls memorialize loved ones

BY LAURA LEWIS  
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**CALABASH**—Nancy Pate clutched photos of her late husband, Allen, as she and other family members gathered in the parking lot of the Hurricane Fleet fishing charter.

The Jacksonville resident was among three families who gathered there April 8 to personalize eternal reef balls cast of eco-friendly cement and cremated ashes in their loved ones' memory.

The following Monday, the families headed out to sea aboard a Hurricane boat for ceremonies memorializing their loved ones as the three reef balls, orchestrated by Eternal Reefs of Atlanta, were lowered via shrimp trawler at an artificial reef site in the ocean.

"This is the perfect thing we could have done, because my husband and I met scuba diving," Pate said of her husband, a "multi-tasking Marine, fireman, police officer, disaster planner, paramedic, EMT and SWAT medic" who died of cancer Jan. 20 at age 48.

"He was what every little boy wanted to be when he grew up," Pate said, adding her husband often said he never wanted to grow up.

"Allen and I used to vacation a lot—we scuba-dived in all kinds of waters," Pate recalled, remembering her husband through an emotional week-end of laughter and tears shared with

friends and other family members taking part in the preparation and ceremonies.

Anytime they "would argue or fight like married couples do, we would always go diving, and it would kind of take us back to where we fell in love," she said, gazing toward one of the decorated reef balls bearing a metal plaque engraved with her husband's name.

"So this is perfect, and now my son and I will be able to scuba-dive with him."

Another reef ball memorialized former Sunset Beach residents Fred and Jean Small and their beloved Dachshund, Penny. The Smalls' children, Nancy Eckmeder and Jerilyn Small of Rock Hill, S.C., and Jeff Small of Charlotte, and grandson Ray Small were on hand to say their final goodbyes.

The third reef ball paid tribute to Michael Bryan Caldwell of Chatsworth, Ga., who died last October at age 30.

"If you only knew how much he loved water, you'd add some more," said Stephanie Ensley, Caldwell's best friend, as she joined other friends and family members mixing cement and cremated ashes and adding mementoes to personalize his reef ball.

"These three families have come together to memorialize loved ones who chose cremation," explained George Frankel of Eternal Reefs. "What they're going to do is become part of



One of three reef balls is lowered into the ocean April 11 from the Predator shrimp boat of Shallotte. Memorial services for family and friends of the deceased were conducted aboard a Hurricane Fleet fishing charter.

an eternal reef."

The concrete reef balls, described as giant Wiffle balls with their holes designed to provide habitat for marine life, weigh as much as 4,500 pounds, according to information provided by Eternal Reefs.

They're touted as an environmentally sustainable way to replenish dwindling ocean reef ecosystems once they're lowered onto the ocean floor. These are the first ones the company has ever done off the Brunswick County coast, Frankel said.

The cement and ashes the families were preparing were used to cast what Frankel said is called "the pearl," with one to be placed inside each ball. Family members also could personalize the top of each reef by placing handprints, messages, seashells and small mementoes in the wet mixture that would then be allowed to dry.

Come Monday "we'll take these reefs out [to sea] and they'll be a permanent part of the marine environ-





Family and friends of Allen Pate of Jacksonville mix eco-friendly cement and cremated ashes to be used to personalize an eternal reef ball in Pate's memory on April 8. Three reef balls were taken out to an artificial reef site by the Predator shrimp trawler of Shallotte the following Monday and lowered into the ocean during ceremonies, orchestrated by Eternal Reefs of Atlanta, with families aboard a Hurricane Fleet charter boat out of Calabash.



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ment," Frankel said. "They'll be contributing for many generations."

The following Sunday, the finished reef balls were unveiled as families gathered once again at the Calabash waterfront for a viewing and ceremonies, including military honors.

Monday morning, at 8 a.m. sharp, families and friends of the departed loved ones headed into the ocean aboard a Hurricane fishing charter. A separate vessel, the Predator shrimp trawler of Shallotte, carried the three finished reef balls to the site of the reef several miles off the Brunswick County coast. Frankel said the site is in proximity to the Shallotte area.

"Let's go build a reef," Frankel announced as the Hurricane boat left the Calabash docks and headed toward the reef site.

During the 45-minute ride,

families used flowers to decorate smaller tribute reef balls that would also be dropped into the ocean during their respective dedication ceremonies.

They were accompanied by three officials with the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries to verify the correct location "and that [the reefs] get deployed," said Chris Jensen of the NCDMF.

"We have 40 ocean reef sites, eight estuarine sites throughout the state," Jensen said.

As clouds moved in, they used a global positioning system to locate and mark this particular site, known as reef No. AR460, prior to the ceremony.

Allen Pate's cousin, Joy Coomes, of Owensboro, Ky, was among family members who sailed out for the ceremony.

She said it was perfect for him "because he loved water, whether it was the bathtub" or the sea.

"It's got me rethinking what I want to do," she said.

One by one, as families watched with mixed emotions, the reefs were lowered into the water from the Predator to fall toward the ocean floor.

"Bye, mom, dad," Nancy Eckmeder called as the Smalls' and Penny's concrete reef disappeared into the sea.

After the Predator left, the Hurricane moved into position over the reef. Families tossed flowers and tribute reefs from the Hurricane's stern.

Frankel concluded the day's ceremonies with the reading of an essay by John F. Kennedy, "The Sea."

"We are tied to the ocean," Frankel read at the essay's conclusion.

"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."

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STAFF PHOTO BY LAURA LEWIS

Jerilyn Small, center, tosses flowers into the ocean from the stern of the Hurricane as she and her siblings, Nancy Eckmeder, left, and Jeff Small pay a memorial tribute to their parents, former Sunset Beach residents Fred and Jean Small and the Smalls' pet Dachshund, Penny, whose ashes were all part of the Eternal Reef program and service.