

ETERNAL REEFS:

A Living



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Legacy

BY S. KIM HENSON

■ “The weekend gave me closure and a positive feeling like none I’ve ever experienced when leaving a funeral,” said Jeri Small, whose family brought her parents, Fred and Jean Small, and their miniature dachshund, Penny, back to Calabash for their final resting place after her mother died in December 2010. “My parents would have been all over the idea of helping the fish and the environment and being all together and back home again.”

Eternal Reefs made it happen. Based out of Decatur, Ga., the company combines a loved one’s ashes—and sometimes several family members and pets together—in a reef ball, placing it off the U.S. coastline. Of the hundreds of active, government-permitted sites, Eternal Reefs currently uses 14 off the Eastern seaboard and Texas coastline. Families choose from the scheduled weekends to participate in memorial events. The closest locations to the Grand Strand are offshore at Charleston and Calabash.

The memorial feature came about as the result of a conversation Eternal Reefs’ founder Don Brawley had with his father-in-law, Carleton Glen Palmer, just months before Palmer died of cancer. Palmer brought up the idea of a reef ball, saying, “I can think of nothing better than having all that action going on around me all the time after I am gone—just make sure the location has lots of red snapper and grouper.”

Prior to that, Brawley and his college roommate assisted the Reef Ball Foundation in finding a solution for reef deterioration they noticed during scuba diving trips in the late ‘80s. The team helped create artificial reefs, which look like giant Wiffle balls fashioned from marine-friendly concrete. The structure becomes a permanent addition to the ocean and replenishes diminishing natural reef systems in the marine environment.

“Because of its incredible design, the reef ball stays put on the ocean floor, and its textured surface allows for meaningful growth very quickly,” said Eternal Reefs CEO George Frankel.

The smallest reef, at 600 pounds and about two feet high and three feet wide, costs \$4,000. The largest is

twice its size, weighs 4,000 pounds and costs \$7,000. Pricing for a community reef is about half that. Eternal Reefs cast Palmer’s reef on May 1, 1998 and has since placed 1,500 memorial reefs representing about 1,300 families.

After Jeri Small and her siblings, Jeff Small and Nancy Eckmeder, moved their parents to Charlotte because of Fred’s declining health, Jean made it clear that she had never wanted to leave Sunset Beach. When Jeri heard about Eternal Reefs from a co-worker and checked on prearranged sites, Calabash was scheduled for April.

“It was like a cosmic arrow pointing to Eternal Reefs. I wouldn’t have done it if it had been any other location except around Sunset Beach and Calabash since that’s the place they loved,” said Jeri Small.

Family and friends, during the reef ball casting, mix their loved ones’ ashes in cement to be cured into a “pearl” that is placed in the center of the reef to add complexity, an element attractive to marine life. Jeri Small’s nephew gathered sand from the shore and his grandparents’ retreat in Sunset Beach to mix with their ashes. On top of the reef ball, in the wet cement ring intended for handprints, messages and mementos, the three siblings added sand dollars and seashells picked up by their mother along the beach.

When the reef ball is unveiled and after the ceremony, participants make rubbings of the ball’s bronze plaque dedicated to the deceased, children crawl inside and write with chalk, and photos are taken.

The four-day event concludes with the dedication and placement when participants board a chartered boat to watch an adjacent vessel lower the reef ball. On the trip to the reef site, typically a few miles offshore, participants decorate smaller tribute reefs with flowers. Once the large reef is lowered, the passenger boat navigates on top of the placement and, when their loved one’s name is called, family and friends throw the tribute reefs overboard and a passage is read from President John F. Kennedy’s speech “The Sea.”

“It’s a real celebration of the person’s life,” said Frankel, “designed to heal the sea and the soul.” **CBL**