

Under the sea

Funeral Service Times heads stateside to speak to Don Bawley, co-founder of Eternal Reefs



In 1999 Don Bawley's father in law fell terminally ill. As his last wish he asked for his ashes to become part of a coral reef. Alongside his business partner and college room mate Todd Barber, Don had created the Reef Ball, a mechanism that helps regenerate coral reef. It was a perfect vehicle to fulfill the wish.

Pretty soon others were showing similar interest and Eternal Reefs was born. It has been growing ever since and there are plans to offer the service overseas – including here in the UK. We sat down with Don as he looked back on a remarkable story.

What's your background? How did you get into this business?

I grew up just outside of Atlanta and graduated from the University of Georgia in Athens in 1987. There I met Todd Barber. After graduation I went into the computer field and Todd went into business consulting. We remained friends and continued to collaborate together on the Reef Ball idea.

Eventually Todd left consulting and started the Reef Ball Development Group to build designed reef systems and create new habitats for fish and other sea life. Starting in 1992, Reef Ball quickly became the world's standard for reef and fisheries development programs.

The Reef Ball Development Group has become the Reef Ball Foundation which provides education to schools, fishing clubs, dive organisations, and so on. Reef Balls are now in more than 60 countries and 3,500 projects, with more than 700,000 Reef Balls in the water worldwide. We can now do coral transplants, shellfish bed restoration, mangrove restoration, beach erosion and retention as well as habitat development.

Where did the idea come from?

Todd and I were avid scuba divers and we would frequently take trips to the Florida Keys to dive. We used to dive the same spots and quickly became aware

of the degradation of the reef systems. After several experiences of seeing the damage to the reef systems we decided to see if we could come up with an idea that would help to restore the reef systems.

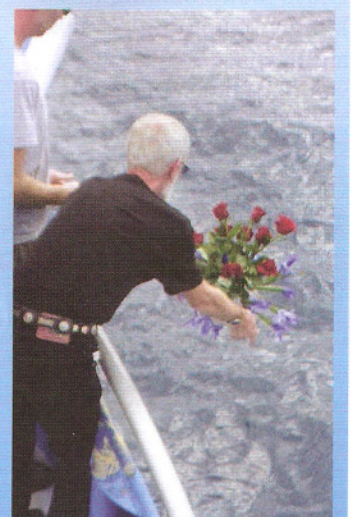
Many days, nights and beers later we came up with a designed reef system that we called a Reef Ball. It is round, not allowing energy any flat surfaces to build up, and hollow, to allow small and juvenile fish places to hide from predators. It is vented with holes to allow water to circulate throughout the Reef Ball, nourishing the entire family of marine life inhabiting the structure. In addition we learned to coat the inside of the Reef Ball mold with sugar water.

This would retard the concrete from setting up and we would wash the ball when it came out of the mold. This would create a pitted surface that gave the marine micro-organisms the opportunity to hide from predators while they matured and reproduced, jump starting the entire food chain and starting the development of marine life.

Lastly, with 80 per cent of the weight in the lower half of the Reef Ball they are very stable in the marine environment.

They work like they are supposed to and they stay where they are placed.

In 1999 my father-in-law became terminally ill and asked to be mixed into one of our reef projects. He said a lot of things that really resonated with my wife and myself. He was a musician and he wanted the rhythm of the sea around him. He also said he couldn't stand



"After several experiences of seeing the damage to the reef systems we decided to see if we could come up with an idea that would help to restore the reef systems"

↳ the idea of being in a field with a bunch of old, dead people. He would rather have all that life and action going on around him. When he passed he became the first Eternal Reef off Sarasota, FL.

As I told people this story almost everyone said that this is what they wanted, or they knew someone who this was perfect for. My wife Jane summed it all up for me when she said, "its not so much that he is gone, its more like look what he is doing now".

Thus was born, Eternal Reefs, the memorialisation side of the Reef Ball Foundation.

What attracts people to this kind of option?

People like the idea of contributing and being involved with a cause. With all the environmental issues today, making this last act of helping to make a difference really has value to them. Certainly

"As the industry is losing revenue from traditional burials to cremation we have seen a huge increase in demand for our services"

fishermen, sailors, divers and environmentalists like the idea, but anyone who has led an active life or one of contribution finds real comfort in having all that life and action going on around them.

What sort of people are interested in your service?

Families and friends enjoy the opportunity to participate with the creation of their loved one's reef. But, everyone at least knows of someone who this would be perfect for.

How closely do you work with the funeral industry?

The funeral industry is slow to adopt new ideas and this has been no exception. Gradually we have been getting them to offer our program as more and more people and families have requested our service. The growth in the interest in cremation has been very helpful in pushing the industry to adopt our service and the recent economic concerns are driving the cremation rates through the roof.

As the industry is losing revenue from traditional burials to cremation we have seen a huge increase in demand for our services. People will spend money when they see they are getting value for their dollars and while less and less they see this value in

traditional burial, they really see value in making their last act one of contribution.

Is interest in alternative funerals growing?

The whole concept of green burial is taking off in the US and we work closely with the Green Burial Council. They are focused mostly on land preservation while we work in the oceans.

What plans does the company have? Will you be offering a similar service in the UK?

We are currently exploring several international opportunities and we are most definitely looking at the UK in the next few years. **FST**

Eternal Reefs was founded and run by Todd Barber and Ron Bawley. For more information visit www.eternalreefs.com 