

'Goodbye for now': Cremated remains of 15 people turned into artificial reefs off Pensacola Beach

Annie Blanks, Pensacola News Journal Published 6:00 a.m. CT Sept. 17, 2019

Surrounded by her family on the bow of a fishing boat, Judy Manning said her final goodbyes to her husband, Brian Delf, who passed away in May after a third round of cancer.

Manning held in her hands a concrete reef ball about the size of a basketball, covered in fresh flowers. After whispering a few words to her husband, she threw the ball over the bow of the boat and watched it sink to the bottom through a school of fluorescent jellyfish.

The reef ball was one of 12 deployed Monday about 50 feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico. The reef balls contained the cremated remains of 15 different people — and a few beloved pets — whose families opted to turn their loved ones' ashes into fresh habitat for local marine life.

Living legacy: [Pensacola paramedic's ashes interred in artificial reef off coast of Fort Pickens](#)

"Brian and I were scuba divers and very much pro-environment and loved all of our marine animals," said Manning, who lives in Mary Esther, before the ceremony. "So I knew I was going to do this 12 to 15 years ago. When his cancer came out of remission, it was his third round, and I said, 'You know, we really ought to talk about this.' He wanted to be a part of the reef."

[Eternal Reefs, an Atlanta-based company that gives people the option to have their loved ones' ashes interred in giant reef balls](#), has deployed about 2,000 reef balls since its inception, mostly off the Atlantic Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. It added 12 new reef balls to the Escambia East Near Shore Reef system on Monday, about 2 miles off the coast of Pensacola Beach, in a ceremony attended by families of the deceased on fishing boats.

The families came from all over the Southeast, including Pensacola, Nashville, Tennessee, and Birmingham, Alabama. Their journeys started Friday, when each family attended a "casting" ceremony that allowed them to decorate their loved ones' damp reef ball with handprints and other memorabilia. Some reef balls contained the ashes of just one person, while some contained the ashes of several family members who wanted to be buried together.



Robbie Duke sets wet concrete on top of an eternal reef Friday so family members and friends can permanently place mementos, handprints and more before the reef is placed into water about 2 miles offshore. (Photo: Jody Link/online@pnj.com)

Artificial reefs: [What to know about Pensacola's underwater world of artificial reefs](#)

Some contained the ashes of pets. Brian Delf's reef ball included the ashes of two beloved dogs, Frodo and Candy. Otto "Skip" Mooney III of Atlanta and his wife, Francine, along with Skip's beloved cat Sam, were all interred together in another ball.

Another ball contained the cremains of family members William, Kathleen, Barney, Betty, Bonnie and Robert Bryant. Bill Bryant, who lives in the Pensacola area, said his father, William, could not bring himself to say goodbye to his wife of 51 years when she passed away. So when his father died, Bill knew he wanted to put his parents together in the reef ball, along with other close family members.

On Sunday, the completed and dried reef balls were unveiled to the families, and military honors were held for four veterans representing three branches of the armed services.

At 8 a.m. Monday, the families left from a marina on Pensacola Beach to head to a spot just east of the Pensacola artificial reef system where a barge carrying the reef balls was waiting for them. One by one, a crane dropped each artificial reef into the sea, and the exact coordinates were provided to the families so they could come back and visit any time they wanted.



Eternal Reefs sinks 12 artificial reefs off Santa Rosa Island in the Gulf of Mexico on Monday. (Photo: Tony Giberson/tgiberson@pnj.com)

Crystal Markley cried as the third reef ball was lowered into the water. Her big sister, Adriane Michelle Brown, was interred inside the reef, something Markley said she had planned out herself before her death.

"It was just emotional. I don't think we'll ever let go," Markley said. "I think it's a beautiful thing. I like knowing that she's going to help preserve ocean life now, and I think it'll help keep her soul living."

Each family was given a smaller version of the reef ball, made of concrete and not containing any cremains, to decorate with flowers and throw over the side of the boat after the main reef ball was lowered.

Manning said she planned to come back and scuba dive at the spot to keep an eye on her husband.

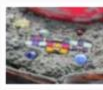
"The actual moment of him entering the water was bittersweet," she said. "I wrote on the inside of the reef our tagline, which is 'Goodnight, my someone.' And that's what went through my brain. 'OK, goodbye for now.'"

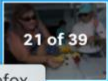
[The reef balls will join more artificial reefs that are helping to replenish sea life in the Gulf of Mexico.](#)

Shelby Davis, general manager of Eternal Reefs, said she thinks the reef balls appeal to people who love the water.

"It's just a very upbeat type of memorial," she said. "When you're thinking about having that reef ball with all the fish swimming around it and all the sea vegetation growing on it, people really like that. They like giving back, a lot of people have said that's the reason why they chose this."

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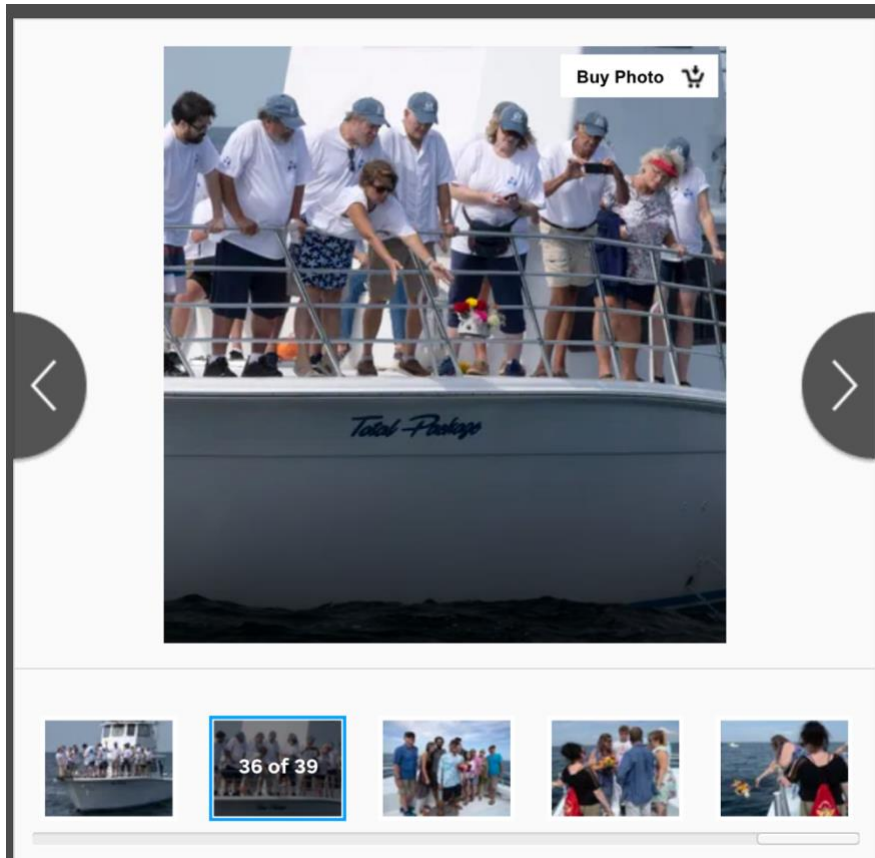
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