

An increasingly popular way to be buried: Become part of an artificial reef

By Kathryn Fink
July 19, 2021



Family members watch as a concrete "reef ball" — made in part with the cremated remains of their loved one — is lowered into the water off the coast of Ocean City, Md. The memorials help replenish reefs. (Tiffany Caldwell/for The Washington Post)

When Rob Shepherd's wife, Beth, died of brain cancer at age 66, he knew she had wanted to be cremated. He didn't know that six years later, he'd be waving goodbye to her remains from a boat in the Atlantic Ocean. Her ashes, now mixed in a concrete ball, were headed to the ocean floor to help form a reef.

Rob, a 69-year-old retiree in St. Louis, had been storing Beth's cremated remains in their original plastic bag on a living room bookshelf; an urn, to him, felt too permanent. He had been planning to return her to Maryland, her

childhood home — and he says it was “a gift from heaven” when he discovered a nonprofit called Eternal Reefs. Since its founding in 1998, Eternal Reefs has worked with families to create concrete “reef balls” that incorporate cremated remains, or “cremains,” and small personal items. Part memorial, part conservation method, they’re deposited to the ocean floor to replenish reef systems. The balls weigh between 600 and 4,000 pounds, and require a crane to be transported.



A crane lowers a reef ball into the water. (Tiffany Caldwell/for The Washington Post)

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“I put in our two wedding rings and her favorite pair of earrings, because I know she wouldn’t want to be without her earrings,” Shepherd said in Ocean City, Md., in May, on the day Beth’s remains were placed into the sea. Her reef memorial cost \$3,995 — not including the price of cremation, which is \$350 on average. The median cost of a funeral with a viewing and cremation was \$5,150 in 2019, according to the National Funeral Directors Association.

To avoid dealing with the Transportation Security Administration — which requires specific types of containers for traveling with cremains in carry-on luggage and can prohibit their entry onto planes — Shepherd had driven Beth’s remains from St. Louis. Later that day, he watched a crane lower her memorial ball into the Atlantic — permanently becoming a part of Russell’s Reef, an artificial reef site off the coast of Ocean City. He and the other families memorializing loved ones aboard the boat clapped.



Flowers from a smaller memorial reef float atop the ocean surface. (Tiffany Caldwell/for The Washington Post)

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Eternal Reefs grew out of the intersection of “deathcare” — an array of products and services related to death and memorialization — and the environmental movement. Now, against the backdrop of the pandemic, the green burial industry is proliferating. A 2021 survey conducted by the trade magazine American Funeral Director found that 51 percent of respondents have attended a green burial, and 84 percent would consider one for themselves. The green approach aims to reduce the environmental impact of burial and, in some cases, uses remains to repair the destruction humans have inflicted on the earth. These options can take many forms, including coffins made of mushrooms, water-based cremation (in which water and chemicals break down the body) and biodegradable pods that use remains to grow a sapling.

Like the rest of the funeral industry, green burial is regulated. A final disposition — the legal term for what happens to your body after death — is a complicated issue. Many emerging technologies require state legalization, including a new green burial approach of composting human remains. In December, a funeral home outside Seattle became the first to legally perform the process, known as “natural organic reduction.” Several other states are currently weighing its legality.

Since Eternal Reefs' inception, it has deployed more than 2,500 reef memorials in 30 permitted locations, including off the coasts of Florida, New Jersey and Texas. CEO George Frankel says the demand for reef memorials has grown steadily — but in the past year, information requests and advance burial plans have skyrocketed. He attributes that uptick to the pandemic. “One of the problems we’ve always had as a culture in this country is that we don’t talk about death very easily or very comfortably,” he told me. “The covid virus has forced everybody to look at their own mortality in a whole different way.”



Family members release their small memorial reefs into the water. (Tiffany Caldwell/for The Washington Post)

Still, plenty of people decided to pursue this option long before the pandemic. Linda Froncak, who was memorialized in her home of Ocean City the same weekend as Beth Shepherd, made preparations for her burial in the early years of Eternal Reefs. Originally from Minnesota, Froncak died of a heart attack two years ago at age 64, which is how 22 Minnesotans ended up flying halfway across the country to the coast of Maryland, sporting custom T-shirts in her honor that said “Reefer Madness” on them.

The funeral industry, which has long hinged on tradition, is seemingly at odds with the advent of green burial. However, funeral homes vary widely in their willingness to embrace new options. Crystal van Orsdel Marchant, a fourth-generation family employee at Van Orsdel Funeral & Cremation Services in Florida, told me that her fellow millennials are all for facilitating green burial, but the industry has always been resistant to change. She points to the 1970s as an illustration: Her family’s funeral home, like most others, held out on offering cremation services even as interest grew. They eventually bought a crematory after her father told his father repeatedly that they needed one.

Five decades later, cremation has surpassed the casketed burial rate in the United States, according to the National Funeral Directors Association — and Van Orsdel Funeral & Cremation Services now offers eco-

friendly burial options, including willow caskets and biodegradable urns. Van Orsdel Marchant says the funeral home may also eventually replace its fleet of hearses with electric vehicles.

Some funeral home owners told me they've seen only the occasional request for green burial options. Whether low interest is a symptom or a cause, though, depends on whom you ask. "Funeral homes are reluctant to change because they're saying, well, nobody's asking for this," says Darren Crouch, co-founder and president of green funeral goods supplier Passages International, whose products include biodegradable urns. "If Toyota came out with a Prius 20 years ago and they didn't put it in the front of their lot, Prius would probably not be a thing right now. We're trying to educate funeral directors that there is significant demand."

As for Rob Shepherd, memorializing his wife via reef ball was more than an environmental decision, and more than an homage to her love of Ocean City. It was an unusual, yet heartening, way to process loss — especially for his grandchildren in attendance, who were too young to get to know Beth when she was alive. "We all took turns stirring," Shepherd said of the process of mixing her ashes with concrete. "We decorated around the top with some of the trinkets and flowers. And we drew pictures with sidewalk chalk on the side — hearts, and goodbyes, and 'Miss you.'"

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/funeral-industry-green-reef-burials/2021/07/16/c6765322-cd24-11eb-8014-2f3926ca24d9_story.html?fbclid=IwAR0wj-QIDY6iS42yYE3v0zXCAeiQcgXqeP4_uddXZLskW4_w4D_bCOdJbR8