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Idea floated for memorial at sea

Atlanta firm proposes creating a man-made reef that would honor victims of terrorist attack

Jingle Davis - Staff

Monday, October 22, 2001

Advert

An Atlanta company wants to create a memorial to the World Trade Center terrorist attack victims by building an offshore reef designed to attract and shelter sea life for hundreds of years to come.

"Some of the bodies will never be found or identified," said George Frankel, chief executive of Eternal Reefs Inc. "I'm sure there will be a memorial at the World Trade Center site, but it will probably be too painful for some of the families to go back there. I feel we have something else to offer them."

For several years, Eternal Reefs has marketed an alternative to traditional burials by mixing cremated remains into large, environmentally friendly concrete reef balls.

The balls, marked with bronze plaques, are dropped in approved locations on the ocean floor to help rebuild deteriorating natural reefs or create new ones. The reef balls do not need to incorporate actual remains. Clients can opt to include a loved one's name on a reef-ball plaque as a lasting memorial.

Charges for the service vary, depending on the size of the reef ball and whether it is dedicated to the memory of one or more people. There would be no charge for terrorist attack victims, Frankel said.

The rough-surface reef balls, pierced with portholes, are designed to be

quickly colonized by marine corals and seaweed that in turn attract a variety of fish, crabs and other sea life.

A Texas widow whose husband died almost 20 years ago is among those who have purchased memorial reef balls. She sent the cremated remains of her deceased husband, Lee Bryant, to the company in March after reading about Eternal Reefs on the Internet.

"At the time of his death, we were living in Chicago and had been married just three weeks and four days," wrote Lynne Lamb Bryant. "Lee had told me that he wanted to be buried at sea, but I learned that disposing of an entire body that way was a very difficult procedure, complicated by my location in relation to the coast."

Bryant wrote she was reluctant to scatter her husband's ashes at sea because she wanted his remains to be kept "intact."

"Thank you for providing this creative option, one which seems especially appropriate because you create a structure, and Lee was an architect," she wrote.

The first memorial reef balls were cast May 1, 1998, for Carleton Glen Palmer,

a native Atlantan well-known as a pianist, composer and arranger who played with the Atlanta Symphony and with the Wits End Players. Palmer, diagnosed with terminal cancer in the late 1990s, asked his son-in-law, Don Brawley, a founder of the Florida-based Reef Ball Development Group Inc., to put his cremated remains into one of the company's structures.

"He told me he'd rather spend eternity with all that sea life and excitement going on around him than in a field of dead people," Brawley said. "He especially wanted to go somewhere where there were a lot of snapper and grouper. I took the ashes to Florida and put them in a load of concrete that made a total of about 30 reef balls."

After the balls were dropped in the Gulf of Mexico near Sarasota, Brawley said he got such a positive response from people who heard the story that he and Frankel decided to form Eternal Reefs as a companion company to the Reef Ball Development Group. That company has deployed more than 100,000 of its igloo-shape structures at 1,500 reef sites all over the world, including some in Georgia waters.

Frankel, 52, lives in Virginia-Highland; Brawley, 38, in Avondale Estates, so they based their fledgling company here.

After getting approval for their project from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the two began notifying reef coordinators around the United States that Eternal Reefs had structures to donate to reef-building projects.

Since its founding, Eternal Reefs has deployed about 100 of the memorial reef balls, some at three sites off the coast of Florida. Others were used to create a new memorial reef off the South Carolina coast near Charleston last month. Families whose loved ones' remains were included in the Charleston project took a charter boat to watch as the memorial reef balls were dropped from a barge.

Brawley said it was a healing experience for the relatives.

"There were a lot of tears on the way out, but coming back in, people were smiling," he said.

People often return to memorial reef sites, he said. The heavy balls rarely move from where they are placed, even in hurricane conditions, Brawley said. He and Frankel, both scuba divers, say many of their customers like to dive on reefs that include the remains of friends or family members.

"I've gotten to dive on Carleton's reef, and I got such a sense of peace there," Brawley said.

The two said they have notified various authorities about the possibility of donating their services to loved ones of attack victims but have not yet gotten replies. Frankel, a former Coast Guardsman in New York Harbor, watched the World Trade Centers being built. He envisions a memorial reef off the coast of New York.

"We think the families might be interested in having a permanent living legacy to all the victims," he said.

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