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## Loved ones' ashes help replenish reefs in Gulf of Mexico

Virginia Highland-based company makes it possible

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Sarasota, Fla. — At 9:56 on a sun-kissed morning a few miles off the southwest Florida coast, Christopher Jung slipped into the sea he loved one last time.

His wife of 11 years, Laurie, steadied herself on the deck of a fishing boat as a crew on a nearby shrimper carefully lowered a large cement structure containing his cremated remains into the cool, green ocean.



Frank Niemeir/Staff  
(ENLARGE)

Eternal Reefs staffer **George Frankel** looks over reefs at the company warehouse in Sarasota, Fla.

Moments later a fluorescent orange buoy surfaced, signaling Christopher "Chris" Hyowon Jung — a 45-year-old avid diver and deep-sea fisherman from Roswell — had reached his final resting place at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

"This is so my husband," Laurie Jung said, removing her black sunglasses to blot tears streaming down her cheeks. "This is where he'd want to be, his last fishing trip."

Plenty of people scatter loved ones' ashes at sea. But with the help of an Atlanta company, Eternal Reefs, Laurie Jung said goodbye in an unusual, environmentally friendly way, one triggered by death but designed to attract new life.

Jung and about two dozen others on the battered blue-and-white boat have mixed family members' cremated remains with marine-grade concrete to form an artificial reef, called a "reef ball." Once on the ocean floor it creates a rocky ecosystem that's home to a wide variety of plant and animal life, some of it threatened or endangered.

"It's such a fitting memorial for Chris to be at sea, which he so loved so dearly," Laurie Jung said, "while giving back to the environment."

About 450 miles away, Eternal Reefs' three employees are based in a two-story house on a shaded street in Atlanta's Virginia Highland neighborhood.

Since 2001, Eternal Reefs has handled arrangements for more than 350 people and animals, burying them in government-protected reef beds off the Southeastern coast.

"This is building public reefs with private money," said Eternal Reefs' George Frankel.

### A father-in-law's request

The company's roots go back to the early 1990s when Don Brawley, a University of Georgia graduate, started Reef Ball Development Group, which manufactured concrete "reef balls" designed to help save the disappearing reefs. Reef balls are intertwined on the ocean floor, where algae and other



Frank Niemeir/Staff  
(ENLARGE)

**Laurie Jung** of Roswell (center) lets go of small replica reef

memorial for her husband Christopher Hyowon Jung, whose cremains were placed in the Gulf of Mexico last week.



Frank Niemeir/Staff  
(ENLARGE)

Flowers are available for family and friends to create their own smaller version of the memorial reefs.

#### A LIVING MEMORIAL: HOW IT WORKS

1. Once someone dies and the family decides to use Eternal Reefs, the body is cremated.
2. The ashes are mailed to the company in Atlanta.
3. From there, Eternal Reefs staffers drive the cremains to a concrete yard in Sarasota, Fla.
4. Family members spend a weekend building the reef memorials in Sarasota. They combine the cremains with a special concrete mixture and let it set overnight.
5. Later, family members head out on a chartered boat for a memorial at sea. Eternal Reefs staffers lower the reefs into the ocean.
6. The reefs then attract animal and plant life for years to come.

plants attach themselves.

In 1998, Brawley's father-in-law, Carlton Glen Palmer, asked Brawley if he would inter his remains in one of the reef balls. He died a short time later, and Brawley fulfilled his request. Eternal Reefs was born.

Brawley patented his formula for reef balls and got EPA approval to drop them in the ocean. The Army Corps of Engineers and local municipalities also must approve the sites. Brawley brought on Frankel, a high school buddy, and, later, Chuck Kizina, a scuba instructor with a background in the funeral home business.

Once someone dies and their ashes are mailed to Eternal Reefs, the family spends a weekend building the memorial reef at a Sarasota concrete yard.

The memorial reefs are gray and porous, about the size of a beer keg, with openings that allow fish to swim through. They can hold the cremains of a person, a pet or a family.

To be put into a community reef — where ashes can be mixed with those of strangers — costs \$995. From there, prices range from \$1,995 to \$4,995 depending on the size.

Each reef ball has a bronze plaque with the deceased's name and an inscription. Family members get satellite coordinates of the memorial, and many later dive to see them, Brawley said.

#### A goodbye ceremony

On a recent day, Laurie Jung and her group gathered at Marina Jack in Sarasota, at 7:30 a.m.

There were a couple of children, but most were adults from around the country, strangers who've come to know one another through the lengthy process.

The salt air was penetrated by the smell of a cigarette a woman was smoking and the coffee another sipped as they prepared to board "Flying Fish II," the 75-foot fishing boat Eternal Reefs chartered to take them to the memorial at sea.

Shortly after 8 a.m., the open-air boat began navigating the channel that would lead to the pristine waters of the Gulf.

About a dozen of those on board were there for Dave Wolff, a 39-year-old self-proclaimed adventurer who died in a motorcycle crash in south Florida last year.

"He was a lover of the ocean," said his mother, Joyce. "To put him in a box and put him on a dresser would not be fitting."

#### Reef 'what he wanted'

Chris Jung was stunned when he was diagnosed with late-stage cancer last October. He and Laurie, who loved diving in the Florida Keys, decided his ashes would be scattered there.

Later, Laurie remembered hearing about Eternal Reefs on a Discovery Channel special. She showed him the company's video presentation as he lay dying.

"He immediately agreed that's what he wanted," his widow said. Chris Jung died at home April 21.

About the same time Jung was diagnosed last fall, Debby Murray of Chicago traveled with Eternal Reefs to inter the remains of her mother and her beloved golden retriever off the Florida coast.

"I could not think of anything more I could do for my mother than to have her in the place she loved," Murray said during last week's trip.

Eternal Reefs staffers in the shrimp boat lowered the memorial reefs into the water. After the final memorial reef was lowered, the shrimper departed and the Flying Fish II moved into position over the memorial site. The families had been given football-sized replicas of the reefs (no remains inside), which they decorated with flowers and mementos.

One by one, family members dropped their replica reefs into the ocean.

"Goodbye, my honey. I miss you," Laurie Jung mouthed as she dropped her reef — adorned with orange birds of paradise, her husband's favorite — into the water.

As crew members readied the boat for the 30-minute trip back to land, a line of yellow and pink carnations bobbed in the boat's gentle wake. The group stood silently as Frankel read each name over a loudspeaker, and the captain sounded the vessel's foghorn for each loved one lost.

As he does on each voyage, Frankel concluded by reading from John F. Kennedy's famous speech, "The Sea."

"I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea. ... I think it's because we all come from the sea. ... And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean.

"And therefore we have salt in our blood, sweat in our tears. We are tied to the ocean, and when we go back to the sea — whether it is to sail or to watch it — we are going back from whence we came.

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