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City of sculptures under the sea offers final resting place

Cremated remains find rest in an unusual reef expanding on ocean floor

By Robert Nolin | South Florida Sun-Sentinel
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Guy Gleichmann of Pompano Beach scuba dived to see the burial of the cremains of his mother. Afterwards he explored and took pictures at Neptune Memorial Reef under the sea and three and a quarter miles off Key Biscayne on June 18, 2009. (Carey Wagner, Sun Sentinel / June 18, 2009)

OFFSHORE KEY BISCAYNE - With a spray of silvery water, Guy Gleichmann surfaces from a 40-foot dive where he helped set his mother's remains in their final resting place: A sunken city where brightly hued fish shimmy among fantastical architecture.

"I didn't want to leave," Gleichmann says, doffing mask and mouthpiece. "It's so beautiful down there, it's so serene."

The 48-year-old investment manager and diver from [Pompano Beach](#) wanted a unique and accessible spot for his mother, Emma, who died in December at age 75. So he had her cremated remains mixed into concrete in the shape of a seashell and placed near the statue of a lion.

Ashes to ashes, dust to deep.

Emma Gleichmann was one of nearly 60 souls whose cremated remains rest in nautical sculptures on the sea floor three-and-a-quarter miles off [Key Biscayne](#) at the one-of-a-kind Neptune Memorial Reef. The site offers an alternative burial option, and creates an environment for reef creatures and a destination for divers.

"It will always be a special place when I go diving, to come out here and be where she's at," Gleichmann says. "It just gives you a feeling that they're not totally gone."

The reef, a subsidiary of the

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adsified along pathways or set inside columns and statuary. They eventually will be covered with coral, but plaques reveal who resides there. Cost is \$2,600 for a standard placement of cremated remains. A cremation and placement package runs about \$4,000.

The reef appeals to sea lovers, and the remains of boat captains and divers have found a home there. Others desire a unique alternative to the graveyard. "We're seeing a lot of Baby Boomers because it's different," says Stephen Ziadie, Neptune Memorial Reef's chief operating officer.

Fish, too, swarm there by the hundreds; an eel and two sting rays have taken up residence. "As I'm working, they're around my hands, trying to see what I'm doing," Hutslar says.

Of the 1,200 spots in the reef's initial development, more than half have been sold, he said. The company doesn't own the site -- it's in international waters -- but has federal and state permission to build on it.

Hutslar makes several maintenance dives to the reef each week, and places the remains of five to six people there a month. Nine family members of one woman learned to dive just so they could witness him set her sculpture. "They all got certified for that one event," he says.

Ron Hink, 54, [Fort Lauderdale](#), suggested the reef for his mother Edith when she was in a Naples hospice. "She just lit up and said, 'Gosh, I love the idea, I've always lived on the water, and I'll have waterfront property,'" he recalls.

Hink has dived the reef about 10 times since his mother's remains were placed there about a year ago. "It's just convenient to go see her: 'Let's go diving today and visit the reef.'"

Hink bought space in a column for himself, his wife and two kids. "One by one we'll all go there," he says.

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Plantation-based [Neptune Society](#), the nation's largest cremation company, opened in fall 2007 after four years of permitting hurdles. It encompasses 16 acres and features oversize sculpture: arches, columns, gates and benches, all designed by [Key Largo](#) artist Kim Brandell.

"I was trying to achieve some sort of sunken city, but not Atlantis," he says, calling his architectural style futuristic rather than classical.

The scale is appropriately gargantuan for an undersea necropolis: 5-ton columns on 50-ton bases, arches soaring 25 feet from bottom.

About a tenth of the underwater sculpture garden has been developed, says project manager Jim Hutslar. When the entire reef is completed, perhaps in 10 years, its rings and spokes will resemble a massive mandala. Leaping dolphins, chariots and Neptune himself are planned as future monuments.

In the company's Deerfield Beach plant Hutslar mixes a client's cremated remains into special underwater concrete in 10-pound sculptures of starfish, shells or coral. Family members can watch or participate. Some place small tokens from the deceased in the mix -- fishing lures, angels, bottle openers or rosaries.

"Sometimes I warn the family," Hutslar says. "If you start crying, I may cry."

On the reef, the sculptures are



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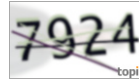
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