

HOT POTATO

By Ryan Helfenbein

Due to the current pandemic, end-of-life planning is more on the radar of Americans than ever before. Loss of life is right in front of us day in and day out, and many of us have begun to think of our own mortality. End-of-life planning/pre-planning/advanced planning has increased tremendously in the death care industry in recent months. While walking through this process with many who choose cremation, there seems to be one question that is often left behind. This final question completes the cremation plan and when not answered in advance unfortunately puts future family members into a game of 'Hot Potato'.

Before we continue, let me back up and explain that the process of advanced planning is designed to allow us to make all the decisions about what should be done when that final curtain is closed. In addition to outlining what services should be carried out and what merchandise is necessary, we can also be sure that these detailed plans are completely paid for at today's pricing. Yup, this means that your family can leave their checkbook at home when it's time to set the official date of ceremony. This popular option eliminates overspending and assures family members that your final wishes are honored. But all too often during the development of a prepaid cremation plan, the question of what is to become of one's cremated remains is overlooked. And therein lies the start of a good ol' fashion game of "Hot Potato".

Why is this decision so important? Let's look at an example. Say mom passes away, and dad gets her urn after the service. Dad then passes, and the eldest child is left with the urns of both mom and dad. He or she downsizes, and the urns are passed to another family member or possibly even the storage shed. When the next family member downsizes, or the shed is no longer used, what happens to mom and dad then??? Hence the 'Hot Potato' scenario. It's almost certain that no one wants to eternally spend their time moving from one family member to the next and I feel confident in saying nor do we choose to rest in a storage shed along a busy highway either. This is why it is essential that the question of what to do with your cremated remains is answered while still able to do so.

Yes, there are many more options available for cremated remains than there are for casketed burial. Traditional options include the placement of the urn in a cemetery or niche of a columbarium (above ground granite structure with small doorways to house urns). Scattering gardens and ossuaries (an in-ground receptacle for use by many families) are becoming choices for those who want a set place for loved ones to "visit." Most cemeteries today offer some, or all of these options. Locally we find Woodlawn Memorial Park in Easton and Bestgate Memorial Park in Annapolis offering a multitude of these traditional options.

With the increase in the number of us selecting cremation, there are now unique and highly personalized ways to 'do something' with cremated remains. Biodegradable urns made for water and land scattering are widely available, with some including nutrients to grow a tree. Cremated remains can be placed in jewelry or made into gemstones that look like diamonds. There are craftsmen that are spinning cremated remains into beautiful glass keepsakes, and others that cast remains into small stones for easy display and transport. There are companies that will even send cremated remains into the cosmos! Private sunrise scattering ceremonies in Coast Guard approved waters (several nautical miles off the Atlantic coast) can be easily performed by companies such as Atlantic Scattering. For the really adventurous, it's even possible to have your cremated remains be cast into a reef ball and placed into the ocean for all of the fishes to pay tribute to. Wait, ... Ryan did you say I can become part of a reef?

That's right, there's a company called Eternal Reefs, which was able to offer its services here in the Chesapeake Bay until the state clarified its water use regulations in 2012. While Eternal Reefs has been offering this program along the coast of Florida and a few other states, they were not able to operate locally. Fortunately, starting in 2022 Eternal Reefs is in Maryland, with an approved site just off the coast of Ocean City. This program is coordinated through your local undertaker and can be carried out along a few select areas on the Eastern Seaboard. Preregistration is required and it is strongly advised that you talk with your area undertaker regarding the scheduling, including the options for reef casting.

This game of 'hot potato' can be eliminated with the many options available to us today. Those seeking nontraditional send-offs can get extremely creative with these new options. It is important to talk with your certified planning and licensed undertaker within the death care industry to work through these options in advance. Think about what would showcase your life the most, how you want to be remembered for future generations, and what will provide peace of mind for those immediately left behind. Most importantly, be sure that your preference is noted so the ones you love are not stuck when the music stops.

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