

Robby's Memorial reef Complex Units #1 - # 5

“Robby made me thankful for being able to use my feet. He taught me to enjoy life. And he showed us all how important family and friends are.”

Alex Redding,
Robby's brother

Robby Redding loved spending time at St. Teresa Beach. As a kid, he stayed out on the water from dawn to dark water-skiing, fishing, knee-boarding, and puttering about in the family's Boston Whaler. Yet as much as he loved the ocean, he also loved the people who spent their summers and weekends at St. Teresa. “There is always something going on—bonfires, parties—and Robby was usually the one doing all the planning,” remembers his mother, Leslie. “Being surrounded by friends and cousins and family is a large part of why he loved St. Teresa so much.”

After a car accident left him paralyzed as a junior in high school, Robby was drawn to his beach more than ever. Friends would hoist him into a boat, wheelchair and all, and he'd spend the day as captain, cruising around the Gulf. It was one of the few times he felt “normal.”

Likewise, spending time with loved ones took on new importance. “He thrived on seeing his friends and family get together and enjoy themselves,” recalls Charley, his father. “He became the glue that held a lot of people together.”

When Robby died eight years later, his family created Robby's Reef to honor his memory. “You can buy a star in someone's name, but we liked the idea that in his death, he has given life to a living, breathing memorial,” Leslie said. “There are people who go out specifically to fish and dive on his reef just to be close to him. And it is comforting to know that once it takes hold, the reef will be there forever.”

Because Robby had been a big supporter of local bands, the family hosted a music festival, Robby's Reef Fun'Raiser, to fund the reef. At the first Fun'raiser, local bands played for free and Charley's co-workers from PBS&J, the engineering firm he worked for at the time, stepped in and managed the event. Today, the Fun'raiser is an annual event held after Christmas, close to Robby's birthday (December 27th). Bands continue to donate their time while friends and family members volunteer. Initial proceeds paid all expenses for the reef, and now they fund reef maintenance and ongoing OAR projects.

In all, it took three years to deploy Robby's Reef in the Carrabelle 10 Mile area of the Gulf, 10 nautical miles from Dog Island. The reef features six sites. One is a group of concrete culverts that are favorite shelters for fish. Four others are precast fish habitats and grouper boxes made by Reefmaker (Walter Marine), the largest deployer of artificial reefs in the U.S.

The crown jewel of the reef is the “Crabtor,” a giant sculpture—half crab, half backhoe—fashioned from recycled steel and tractor parts by Mike Bettinger, a sculptor, welder, and owner of Bettinger welding. “Robby was a great kid. He loved fishing and heavy equipment, so the sculpture is a very fitting memorial to him,” said Bettinger, who donated the Crabtor.

As for the reef’s design: “You won’t find anything like this anywhere. It’s a new design based on the latest research. The different structures create very unique habitats,” said Alan Richardson, director of OAR’s all-volunteer team who orchestrated the deployment of the reef and guided the Reddings through the complicated permitting process. “We couldn’t have done this without OAR’s help,” Charley added.

The family couldn’t be more pleased. “Robby’s Reef is a celebration of his life,” said Sarah Jordan Sandy, his sister. “It keeps his memory and stories alive. He loved bringing everyone together, and with the reef and the Funraiser, he is still doing that.”