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MARK DUSTIN / DAILY PILOT

Capt. Bob Harrison stands at the wheel of his schooner, Curlew, docked in Dana Point Harbor. Along with a variety of other boats, Curlew is chartered for memorial services at sea.

Farewells at sea

A local water enthusiast is among a growing number of sailors who help people celebrate the lives of — and say goodbye to — departed family and friends.

By Lauren Vane
Daily Pilot

Captain Bob Harrison didn't know what was in store when he purchased an 80-year-old schooner named Curlew.

A sailor all his life, Harrison waited until the time was right to make the big purchase. In his four years of owning the 82-foot schooner and operating a charter company, Harrison has discovered a unique way to share his love of sailing and help others say goodbye to a loved one.

After clients expressed interest, Harrison began offering memorials at sea, an opportunity for family and friends to set sail on Curlew and scatter the ashes of someone they have lost.

"I am a spiritual person," Harrison said. "It was nice to realize that I had something that I could share with people and that would help make that moment special."

When he purchased the boat, his first charter was a memorial at sea, and it just

went from there, Harrison said.

"They just started coming to me," Harrison said.

The memorials at sea, which depart from both Newport and Dana Point harbors, are an intimate and lasting experience, Harrison said.

"People are often drawn to it because there's just this sense of serenity that people have around the sea," Harrison said. "It represents probably something . . . that we can get lost in."

Depending on the family's wishes, Harrison offers both attended and unattended ceremonies. The typical memorial at sea is a two-hour motored sail, traveling more than three miles from shore. Once stopped, Harrison and the crew lower the ashes down to the water in a basket and release the ashes among flowers scattered on the water's surface.

"I think it's a great way to say goodbye to a family member. . . . It's a very beautiful way to celebrate them, especially anyone with any connection to the sea," said Curlew First

Mate Roger Hudson.

As every family is different, the memorials vary, Hudson said. Some are somber ceremonies, and others are parties, complete with champagne and music, to celebrate life, Hudson said.

"I've done quite a few of them, and I plan to go out that way," Hudson said.

Scattering ashes at sea or having an onboard funeral is a common request, said Amy Delft, an associate director of sales at Newport Beach-based Adventures at Sea, a booking agent that arranges memorials at sea on Curlew.

"It's pretty popular," Delft said. "We probably get at least 100 inquiries a year."

The memorials at sea are typically conducted on yachts or schooners, such as Curlew, Delft said. "Most people go out with their families, just have a simple ceremony after they've already had a larger memorial service," Delft said.

The experience does have its price, however. The memorials at sea start at \$1,000.