Loving Las Vegas

For Robert Kingham, everything's coming up cherries

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Forty-five seconds. In the city of 24-hour neon, that's how long it takes a gambler to become a millionaire -- or lose his shirt. For Robert Kingham, that's all the time he gave himself to grieve when his HIV test came back positive.

"I teared up for less than a minute, then I told myself I wasn't going to cry over this," Kingham says of that day in September 1993. "There's no reason to: I'm not going to die of AIDS; I'm too stubborn to let it win."

Instead, he took his problems to the office -- which in Kingham's case is the slot-ringing, card-shuffling environs of the 4,100-room Excalibur Hotel and Casino, one of Sin City's biggest themed megaresorts.

"I preferred that it come from my mouth than through rumor," says Kingham, 34, who bluntly told his fellow casino workers that he had HIV and he would beat it. Disclosure can be a gamble, but for Kingham it paid off. "Now they watch the news," he says of his coworkers, "and whenever something comes up about HIV, they ask me what I think."

Though he was born in Texas, Kingham grew up in Las Vegas, returning in 1987 after a six-year military stint. Even in the Army, Kingham refused to hide in the closet, freely admitting to his fellow officers and superiors that he was gay -- this at the height of the military's mid-'80s homo-purging. "I was raised to be honest and not afraid of who I am, but I guess when my mother told me that," says Kingham, pursing his lips in a sardonic smile, "she wasn't thinking of all the ramifications."

With 5,000 new residents arriving every month in the nation's fastest growing locale, a hometown boy is a rarity in Vegas. But Kingham has no interest in leaving the dry, year-round warmth and the house he and his lover of three years share on the city's outskirts.

Unlike most Las Vegans, who proudly avoid the gaming culture and mock the tourists who lap it up, Kingham gleefully embraces gambling. "I love the idea of being able to turn $1.25 into $1,000 just like that," he says. "For the locals, it's a form of recreation, but tourists are wanting to hit the jackpot." And when those three cherries line up and the slot machine squeals victory, Kingham's usually on hand to congratulate the winner. He oversees a grove of slot machines at the Excalibur,

refilling them with silver dollars, quarters or nickels and supervising the workers who roam the floor turning $10 bills into quarters.

Thus far, Lady Luck is shining on Kingham, who is asymptomatic. Other than his daily doses of 3TC and d4T, his lifestyle has changed little since his diagnosis. He hasn't altered his diet and doesn't bother with an exercise regimen, noting that "walking the casino floor and lifting those bags of quarters all day is exercise enough."

Kingham's upbeat attitude certainly contributes to his ongoing health. "I don't know why I have that gift, but I do. I never looked at HIV as traumatic," he says, quickly spinning some odds: "I'm more likely to die crossing Las Vegas Boulevard at rush hour. AIDS is not going to kill me."

In the meantime, there are fortunes to be won for a quarter, and an atmosphere made heady by extra oxygen piped in to keep those gamblers in a betting mood. And for Robert Kingham, there are people to educate about AIDS. "Many of my coworkers are parents who have teens and they told me that they're more apt to talk with their children about HIV now," he says. "I've met some of the kids and they say, 'You've got HIV? You don't look sick.' It's my form of activism."

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