Mourning Becomes Montero

Know your last rights

April 1, 1998 By Paul Harris

I knew in second grade that I wanted to be a funeral director," says Larry Montero. "My grandparents lived next to one, and I was fascinated by the caskets on racks. When a body arrived, the undertaker would call me and I would run out of the house to watch him embalm." Montero goes on to describe the fun he had playing funeral with the undertaker's daughter the way other kids play doctor. "She'd play the organ and I'd conduct the funeral using a cardboard box as a casket."

Thirty years later, Montero's childhood fascination has become his adult career: He owns Infinity Cremations in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. "It's a calling for me, just like being a priest," he says. "My boyfriend doesn't understand it. I lie in bed at night looking at catalogs of caskets, urns and funeral supplies."

Montero, 38, was diagnosed with HIV in 1984 -- the same week his lover died of AIDS. Simultaneously, he experienced a gruesome example of AIDSphobia. "The funeral director for whom I worked wouldn't embalm my lover's body, so I had to do it myself," he says.

As a result, he started a funeral service geared to people who have died of AIDS. Like many "event" businesses -- think catering, theater, party planning -- the funeral biz attracts many gay employees, but that doesn't stop discrimination against PWAs. According to Montero, it ranges from blatant (as in his lover's case) to more-subtle instances where prices are doubled for PWAs. Not at Infinity Cremations: Montero's contribution to his community was recognized on World AIDS Day, when he won a South Florida AIDS Network "Care" Award, beating out American Express.

Despite his almost-daily contact with death, Montero is anything but morbid. After a year on AZT, 3TC and nevirapine, his CD4 count is over 600 and his viral load nearly undetectable. The drugs may be helping him, but they're definitely hurting business -- not that Montero's minds. "I'm grateful to see the number of AIDS deaths decline," he says. "Who knows? Perhaps I'll wind up burying gay men because they die of old age."

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