Snapshots: Larry Montero

The mortician and 17-year survivor treats corpses to TLC with that gay flair

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I was 24, I had just finished mortuary school, and my lover, Nicky, found out he was HIV positive. That was April 1984. He died in June.

The owner of the funeral home where I worked at the time allowed me to use the facilities for the funeral, but first he took me aside and said, “I’m not going to embalm him, and my son’s not going to, either.” I was devastated. But I was not surprised.

It’s dangerous to embalm anybody, because you’re exposing yourself to their organs, their blood. So I hired a trade embalmer from another funeral business who was gay, and he came over and helped me.

I started my business, Infinity Cremations, six years ago. Right now I’m doing around 250 cases a year. About one-third of the cases I do are gay, and of those, three-quarters are HIV-related deaths.

The number of AIDS cases coming into my business rises and falls. I saw a decline in 1998 and 1999. I can only assume that’s because of the combination therapies. But during the last two years, the number seems to have gone back up almost to where it had been before HAART.

I believe who I’m seeing now are the long-term people like me who have had HIV for many years. I don’t know whether the drugs just aren’t working anymore, or if people have experienced every drug there is and can’t take any more.

AIDS changed the death care profession. Now with OSHA guidelines, you have to assume everyone has a communicable disease.

But if you’ve got to pick up a 90-year-old lady, you’re not going to suit and glove up they way you would if you were working on a 42-year-old white male who weighs 90 pounds.

I love my work. I always wanted to be either a priest or a funeral director.

I do not know if there is a Valhalla after life. But I do know I’m at the pinnacle of mine: 13 years

sober, 17 years positive and asymptomatic.

Why *not* live a good life in case this is it? Doing what I do makes me appreciate life more.

Six Feet Under**,** the HBO series about a family funeral home, is fantastic! It's definitely the most true-to-life funeral-related depiction I've seen. I mean, have you ever met a gay funeral director who's *not* uptight?

There are a lot of closeted gay people in this industry. A lot of gay men who are funeral directors get married -- often to lesbians -- so they become a part of the community and belong to the Rotary Club and have their wives in the garden club.

I think a lot of gay men are attracted to this business because we like to take care of other people. Plus, there's a lot of theatrics: the flowers. The makeup and the hair. And the nails, of course!

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