’I Still Remember’

A photography exhibit re-creates iconic moments many long-term survivors know.

November 10, 2015 By Trent Straube

Picture this: Two vibrant young gay men hook up on Fire Island in the age before AIDS. They fall in love and develop a strong (but not strictly monogamous) relationship. Then one of them tests HIV positive and dies. Although his surviving partner and loved ones must move on, they continue to remember, and love, the man they lost.

This story has played out in real life for countless long-term survivors (both HIV positive and negative). For their latest photography exhibit, *I Still Remember*, which debuts on December 1, World AIDS Day, at the Pride Center of Staten Island in New York, photographer Lester Blum and artistic director Vladimir Rios have re-created more than 30 scenes from this iconic narrative.

In one image, set in the present day, the survivors hold a memorial service on Fire Island. Blum says that, to add to the realism, he incorporated the actual cremated remains of a friend who died of AIDS complications. The experience became intense for one of the models, who was overwhelmed with memories that flooded back. Many of the project’s models—gay, straight, male, female, transgender—participated because they were drawn to the story and message.

Vladimir Rios and Lester Blum

“It’s important to remember our loved ones and keep them alive in our memories,” says Rios, who developed the concept (and who played the deceased lover). What’s more, Blum adds, it’s important to document this period and culture. “Young people have no connection to this era, so the photos are also educational.”

Conversation MomentLester Blum

DevastatedLester Blum

PLUS: Blum and Rios previously collaborated on an exhibition titled *Warrior of Hope*, which debuted in New York and is traveling to Santa Ana, California, for a World AIDS Day opening. In these photos, the Warrior of Hope (played by Rios, in a symbolic leather costume by Dmitry Byalik) is in constant battle against inequality, injustice and disease, offering comfort, protection and, of course, hope.

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