Traveling Man

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Nello Carlini

On July 29, 2014, after living more than two decades with HIV, Nello Carlini celebrated his 90th birthday. “There are people who have survived longer than I have in number of years, but I think that I’m probably the oldest guy alive with the virus,” he says.

Born in Italy in 1924, Carlini immigrated to western New York with his family when he was 3 years old. In high school, after years of “cruising” for men in Niagara Falls, he decided to become a priest to avoid the pressure of having to get married to a woman. But after he attended a seminary for a few years, it was decided that he was not “priestly material.” Carlini’s penchant for love also got him thrown out of the Army in 1961.

Throughout his life, he has taken up residence all over the world: in Guam, Turkey, North Africa and through-out Europe. He has traveled in Vietnam, Tibet, China, Mexico and across the United States, supporting his journeys by teaching English, drama, speech, French, Latin and Italian to an array of international students.

Carlini also has played a big part in the San Francisco gay community for decades. He acted at Theatre Rhinoceros, the city’s LGBT theater company, and is the former president of Golden Gate Performing Arts.

Carlini was in Italy when he found out in 1995 that he had HIV. He was 71, although he expects he got the virus several years earlier. His nephew, a doctor, made the diagnosis but kept his status a secret so Carlini wouldn’t have to register it with the Italian government and be subjected to its discriminatory laws.

“Before we go any further, I am not a hero,” Carlini says. “I am just a really lucky guy who has good Italian peasant genes and good doctors that have taken care of me.”

He has been on treatment since the AZT days and considers himself healthy for his age, despite twice-weekly dialysis treatments. He currently lives in San Francisco with his 47-year-old boyfriend, who recently emigrated from Cuba to be with him full time. This was the first birthday they were able to share together in the United States.

About 70 of Carlini’s closest friends, family members and colleagues, including his doctor, showed

up at his 90th birthday party in Palo Alto. Guests shared food, stories and a cake. All extras from the party were donated to a local homeless shelter.

“There are three things I’ve learned as I’ve grown old,” Carlini says. First, “I’ve learned to live with loss.” Second, “I’ve learned to live with rejection.” And last, “I’ve learned to have a sense of detachment. At this point in my life, I’m giving things away.

“The only thing I complain about is my mobility,” says Carlini, who has been open about his life with HIV since the very start. “I wish I were able to kick my heels a little bit, because if I could, I’d still be traveling.”

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