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Past life: monk; regrets: none

Helping AVOL is his mission now

By Jeff McDanald

HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

For Jean-Luc Cotto, executive director of AIDS Volunteers of Lexington, the Gregorian chanting that softly echoes through his North Limestone office is not just fashionable background music. It's part of the soundtrack to his life.

For seven years, Cotto lived the enlightened but stringent life of a monk of the Order of Saint Benedict. He found the experience deeply rewarding but challenging Ð particularly matters like the vow of silence.

"Because I am an extrovert," he explains, "they put me in a position that most of the monks shied away from. I was greeting and dealing with guests, students and tourists. ... I'd catch them off-guard by bragging that my robe was Versace.

"The problem for me was that at the end of the day when the visitors were gone, it was back to the silence, like going back to the dark ages."

Indeed, it's hard to imagine the animated and jocular Cotto keeping mum. He seems to be a natural public relations man with the engaging personality that is equally at ease in social or business settings.

Since joining AVOL in April 2005, Cotto has applied those skills to great effect. Under his leadership, the organization has significantly increased funding for services to people with HIV/AIDS.

The group is gearing up for its premier fund-raiser, the Art for Life auction, to be held at The Red Mile on Dec. 2.

"Our connections in the community have grown appreciably since Jean-Luc got here," said AVOL board president Natalie Cummins. "Also, our perception in the community has improved."

"It's all about raising awareness of AIDS," adds Cotto, "but we couldn't do what we're doing without the committed support of people like Sen. Ernesto Scorsone, Jim Gray, James Brown, Joe Costa and William Barr. They've opened up their hearts and their wallets."

A call to serve

Cotto was born in Brooklyn Heights, a historic area of New York known for its picturesque and expensive row houses.

His parents were doctors -- his father a surgeon, his mother a pediatrician -- who immigrated to New York from Puerto Rico. Through his parents, Cotto learned the significance of a life devoted to helping others.

The family grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood where the children attended Catholic

school.

"There were seven sisters in the family. I was the only son," Cotto said. When two of his sisters heard the call to join the Franciscan Sisters, Cotto felt compelled to follow them.

"I would have made a good nun," Cotto quips. Instead, Cotto made an earnest, but short-lived attempt at cloistering with the Alexian Brothers in Chicago.

"I was only 17, and I was not really ready for such an important commitment," Cotto said.

Cotto drifted west to Kansas, where he enrolled in Wichita State University. He returned to New York to finish his studies at Hunter College, earning a bachelor's degree in English and a master's in vocational rehabilitation.

Degree in hand, he found employment through state and federally funded social reform projects like Project Return. He was on the streets of New York counseling substance abusers, battered women and children, parolees, and the mentally ill.

When AIDS reared its head in the early 1980s, Cotto was on the front line.

"No one knew what AIDS was," Cotto remembers. "Everyone was wondering how to deal with this new disease. It's interesting that now 25 years later, it's grown to a pandemic, and it's still misunderstood."

He was later recruited to work for the New York Mayor's Office of Public Relations & Community Affairs, where he gained experience of the realities of broken political promises and funding quagmires.

On vacation 20-odd years later, he visited the Abbey of Saint-Benoit-du-Lac in Quebec.

"I'm an avid art lover, and I had heard that there was a collection of French classical art at the monastery," Cotto said. "When I walked in, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the art. Also there was the beautiful chanting that drew me in. I felt at peace and a kind of kinship to the monks."

The experience reawakened his childhood religious aspirations. He was eventually accepted into the order at the Abbey of Saint-Benoit-du-Lac, and later served at Saint Peter's in Saskatchewan and at Saint Meinrad in Indiana.

Inside the monastery walls Cotto was valued for his marketing and fund-raising acumen. He had a knack for keeping the guest houses booked up with tourists. He developed a chanting monks CD and poster, and worked out a distribution deal with Barnes & Noble.

But Cotto found himself struggling to deal with the daily regimen.

"If you're exhibiting excellence in your work, you're under suspicion of being prideful. You can become at odds with yourself like Audrey Hepburn in the movie *A Nun's Story*.

"It's a sad fact that many are hiding from reality inside the monastery. And once inside, I found that those around me were not immune to depression, alcoholism or even suicide. I had the heart and the intention, but the community life was against my nature."

AVOL's financial health

Today, Cotto is focused on the future needs of AVOL, particularly in making the agency more financially independent. The organization provides a wide variety of services for people with AIDS, including helping them avoid eviction or having their utilities cut off and providing food, medicine, and transportation to doctor appointments.

"In order for us to keep serving the community, and educating people about AIDS and HIV, we need to grow our funding," he said. "We need to be looking beyond the grants that we now depend on and look

to private and corporate sources."

To that end, he has high hopes for the upcoming Art for Life auction on Dec. 2.

Cotto says he's happier now in the material world than he was as a monk. And one day, he will pay homage to his former life when he is laid to rest in Benedictine tradition -- dressed in his black robe.

"Do I miss the abbey?" said Cotto. "Terribly."



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If you go

The annual Art for Life auction to benefit AIDS Volunteers of Lexington, or AVOL, will be 4-8 p.m. Dec. 2 at The Red Mile. Tickets can be purchased in advance or at the door at \$50 a person or two for \$85. A cash bar and complimentary hors d'oeuvres will be available. At 4 p.m., guests can bid on a silent auction featuring smaller art items, gift certificates and gift baskets. The live auction will begin at 6 p.m. Call (859) 225-3000.

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AVOL alum gives his talent

By Jeff McDonald
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD-LEADER

When the bidding opens at the Art for Life auction, guests will have a chance to take home a unique piece of Texas.

David Hance, a former AVOL board president, will return to Kentucky with some of his artwork in tow from his new home of Marfa, Texas, a small town near the Mexican border that has developed an international reputation as a haven for artists.

Hance will co-chair and handle the visual design for the event, a key annual fund-raiser for the organization.

"We've taken the event to a new level this year," said Hance, who will open a gallery in Alpine, Texas in January. "The main idea is to raise awareness of AIDS in the Lexington area."

Arturo Sandoval, Lorenzo Ghiglieri and Audwin Wade Price are among the notable local artists who have also donated items for the auction. Other contributions have come from Artique and Tuska Studios. There will be 100 items, including oil paintings, pottery, bronze sculpture and more jewelry than in previous years.

Lexington horse farm owner and businessman James Brown will make a return appearance as auctioneer.

"Because we've been actively seeking higher-quality art this year," said AVOL board president Natalie Cummins, "those pieces are going to be selling for a bit more, but be assured that there will be a number of quality pieces that are very affordable. ... There's a little something for everyone: landscapes, portraits, nudes and abstracts."

Hance