

R.I. drag queen 'Miss Kitty Litter' sheds celebrated persona

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After wearing sparkly red outfits all night, drag performer Miss Kitty Litter took a teary final bow last Sunday in a black gown fit for a funeral.

But not before spraying the stage of the Comedy Connection in East Providence with holiday-scented air freshener, lip-syncing a Christmas drinking song and making insulting jokes about everything from race to gastric bypass surgery. She also snuck in one last ask — this time for donations to benefit House of Hope, a Warwick-based nonprofit working to help the homeless.

"I didn't think it was going to be this hard to say goodbye," she told the capacity audience of more than 200 people. "You've made me who I am."

Over the last 25 years, Stephen Hartley's outlandish Miss Kitty Litter persona has achieved a sort of celebrity status not only in the local gay community, but also in the state's nonprofit and cultural arenas.

As Miss Kitty Litter, he has helped about 50 local nonprofits raise a total of \$1.5 million by hosting events and auctions. Ninety percent of the approximately 135 shows he did this year benefited a charity, he said.

This week, after a goodbye party Sunday evening at the Arcade Providence, Hartley is moving from Pawtucket to Greensboro, N.C., where his husband, Brian Deslauriers, recently accepted a job.

"I never in a million years thought I would leave Rhode Island," said Hartley, 52. "But an opportunity came up, and my husband would have resented me if I said I wouldn't go."

He does not plan to perform as Miss Kitty Litter — self-proclaimed First Lady of Providence — or another drag character after the move.

"I was an icon in R.I.," he said. "I'm too old to become an icon anywhere else."

Hartley said it would have been impossible to retire while still living locally — there would always be another charity asking him to do one last thing, and he wouldn't be able to say no. Over the years, his policy has been to donate his time to any nonprofit that requested help, as long as he didn't have a prior commitment.

“A 6-foot-7 drag queen in heels begging for money at any event — they’re going to give it to me,” said Hartley, who points out that he’s always been careful to leave vulgarity out of his charity work.

Hartley is involved with charitable causes in his life offstage, too. Most recently he’s been working full time in a paid role as development director for House of Hope.

Before taking the job there earlier this year, he spent many years in a similar position at AIDS Care Ocean State. By day, Hartley wrote grants and solicited donations. On nights and weekends, he transformed himself into Miss Kitty Litter to host Drag Bingo and other fundraisers.

“It’s a big loss — I’m not sure how we’re going to replace Kitty Litter at our events,” said Vanessa Volz, executive director of the domestic-violence nonprofit Sojourner House. “She has this very dynamic personality and a way of motivating donors to give generously.”

Growing up in Johnston, Hartley knew he was gay, but never dressed as a woman or aspired to be a drag queen.

He did, however, have a do-gooder mentality. He used to host Jerry Lewis carnivals in his backyard to benefit the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and he made Eagle Scout.

Hartley was exposed to drag in the late 1980s through shows organized by the Imperial Court of Rhode Island, a gay fraternizing group.

By 1990, he was hosting Imperial Court drag shows — as a man in a tuxedo — at Chan’s in Woonsocket. One night, they didn’t have enough performers, so his friend Brian Laquerre (known as B.B. Hayes in drag), encouraged him to walk on stage in a dress.

“A light switch went off,” Hartley said. “I became a totally different person.”

Soon he took on the stage name. Inspiration struck after a friend made fun of him for having cat litter in his wig from leaving it on the floor the previous night.

While his close friends say there are similarities between the personalities of Hartley as himself and as Miss Kitty Litter, she is much bolder.

“You take him out of the dress, and he’s actually shy and a little standoffish in some social situations,” said Deslauriers, whom Hartley married in September 2013, soon after gay marriage became legal in Rhode Island.

Hartley likens drag performance to acting, describing Miss Kitty Litter as a character.

He said he has never wanted to be a woman and doesn't live his daily life as Kitty. When Bruce Jenner announced he was transitioning to Caitlyn, straight people started asking Hartley if he was "like her," he said.

"No, I'm a gay man dressed as a woman to entertain you, whereas transgendered is a male that wants to be a woman," Hartley said. "It's totally different, but it's hard for a lot of people to understand."

Stephen and Kitty also have contrasting taste in clothing. Her style is glitzy and glamorous while Stephen's outfit during a recent interview— a grandfatherly sweater, khakis and glasses — was more along the lines of "nerd chic."

"When I see myself in drag, I think that's quite the transformation you've got going there," Hartley said. "I don't think I look like myself at all."

Laquerre has custom-made all of Miss Kitty Litter's costumes and wigs since the early days at Chan's. Off-the-rack women's clothing does not work for Hartley, who is 6 foot 2 without the heels and of average build.

"It was great fun for me because Stephen didn't really care what he wore as long as it fit him," Laquerre said.

Hartley recently emptied the walk-in drag closet he had kept in his basement, giving away more than 400 outfits and 197 pairs of shoes.

Hartley's introduction to drag in the early 1990s came at a tumultuous time in his life. After being diagnosed with HIV in 1988, he spent several years convinced that he was going to die — and living like it.

He indulged in destructive habits, including drinking too much, smoking and running up credit-card debt as many of his close friends developed AIDS and died. As time went on, Hartley realized that he was, in fact, going to live. Today, HIV is undetectable in his blood, and he said he feels "100-percent healthy," with no side effects from the anti-retroviral drugs he takes daily.

"For whatever reason, my T-cells are fine," he said. "I sometimes think that I was left here for something."

He speaks freely about his status as a way to try to reduce the stigma around living with HIV and AIDS.

"There's still people who won't say that they're HIV positive, and I don't understand that," he said. "There's no shame in it. People have no problem saying they have diabetes or cancer."

Kate Monteiro, an LGBT rights advocate who has worked alongside Hartley on various projects over the last 20-plus years, said he has been critical in raising consciousness about HIV/AIDS in Rhode Island.

“Stephen’s voice has been just a clarion reminding us that even as new therapies have been developed and people are living longer, the crisis is not over, people are still dying, and we need to keep fighting,” she said.

Much has changed for the better for Rhode Island’s gay community over the last 25 years, said Hartley, a longtime emcee of Providence’s annual Gay Pride Parade.

“In 1990, downtown Providence was not what is today,” he said. “I would walk to the corner and kind of wait and hide in the dark before crossing the street so I wouldn’t get something thrown at me or beaten up. Today, I walk through downtown and the police are saying, ‘Hey, Kitty.’”

Back then, he said, the gay bars “used to be down alleyways with the windows blacked out,” but now they are on main streets and are frequented by gay and straight people.

Kyle McKendall, publisher of the local LGBTQ magazine Options, said that many gay people associate Miss Kitty Litter with coming out in Rhode Island.

“He’s been everywhere, at the bars, at the charity events,” McKendall said. “Everybody feels connected to him. A lot of people look up to Stephen and admire his confidence to really just be himself.”

Miss Kitty Litter may be beloved, but her brash attitude has also struck fear in Hartley’s friends at times. If a cutting remark will get a laugh or a few dollars donated to charity, she’ll say it.

“On occasion, I’ve been the brunt of it in a room, and it can be a little tough,” Monteiro said. “But it’s always coming from a place of camaraderie, and ‘we’re all in this crazy world together,’ not spite.”

Hartley would like to be pardoned for Miss Kitty’s more offensive lines. “I just hope that I’m remembered for my good work and not my sharp tongue,” he said.

He has plans for a much different life in North Carolina. He’s thinking of trying to get a job at a hotel or country club, or maybe working as a store cashier.

Of course, he will miss performing as Miss Kitty Litter, he said, but he’s also looking forward to some rest, and a job he can forget about after punching out for the day.

“I think I’ve done all I can here,” Miss Kitty Litter said at the end of her show last Sunday at the Comedy Connection.

Then, as the audience clapped, she sent a donation bucket around the club one last time.