

Dirty Jobs

SAUGERTIES COMPANY CLEANS WHERE OTHERS FEAR TO TREAD

Imagine the most putrid mess you've ever encountered, the three-days-dead skunk by the side of the road, the ham and cheese sandwich turned bacteriology experiment in the back of the refrigerator, the overflowing diaper pail in the nursery at the end of a nasty stomach bug. Now imagine taking that mess and leaving it to simmer a week or so in a small, unventilated room with the thermostat turned up. Welcome to Raquel Steinlage's world.

The 37-year-old PTA mom and Florida transplant is the founder and, along with boyfriend Ian Pallak, proprietor of Ulster Biorecovery LLC. The Saugerties-based company,

which got started in earnest earlier this year, specializes in cleaning up messes that go beyond the merely disgusting into the realm of potentially health threatening. Euphemisms like "delayed discovery" (a rotting corpse) and "gross filth" (a house with dozens of cats and no working plumbing) mask a business that is physically demanding and – for those lacking the right temperament – psychologically punishing.

A tall athletic woman with a calm, steady bearing honed from her years as a crime victims' advocate and funeral director, Steinlage has spent her entire professional life working around the raw physical byproducts of violence, depression, substance abuse and plain bad luck.

"I guess it's that macabre curiosity that everybody has in them, I just had a little more of it," said Steinlage who saw her first crime scene at age 6 when a neighbor beat and stabbed his wife to death in front of her home in a rough section of north Miami. "The kids in my neighborhood called me Quincy (for the hard-bitten medical examiner of the eponymous '70's TV drama)."

After getting her degree in biology and mortuary science, Steinlage worked as a funeral director and as an investigator for the Miami-Dade Medical Examiners office where she experienced the distinctly unglamorous reality behind glitzy TV shows like CSI.

"I just have to laugh," she says of the recent explosion of forensic science-themed cop dramas. "I mean, who shows up to a homicide with their hair down in a low cut blouse and high high heels?"

At Ulster Biorecovery work wear consists of a full protective suit and respirator and the tools of the trade include high-tech cleaning machines like an ozone generator that can knock out the most horrific odors. The work itself goes well beyond a typical mop and bucket approach. Bedding and furniture contaminated with blood or other body fluids must be cut up on the spot and placed into secure bags before it is removed from the scene. Sometimes, carpets, floorboards and drywall must be pried away to find and remove bone chips, brain matter and bloodstains. In most cases, the hard physical labor is done wearing a respirator, which cuts airflow to the lungs leaving one feeling groggy and exhausted. Steinlage and Pallak often find themselves working in derelict houses with no heat or electricity adding cold and darkness to the mix.

"It's physically demanding, psychologically claustrophobic kind of work," said Steinlage.

BEYOND WINDEX

Not to mention potentially hazardous. Dealing with the dead, Steinlage explains, poses a range of health risks to the living, from blood borne diseases like HIV and hepatitis to respiratory and eye problems caused by exposure to putrescine and cadaverine; chemicals which are released in the body after death and tend to leach out through various orifices along with the contents of the digestive tract



Ian Pallak and Raquel Steinlage in the protective gear they wear on the job

and other organs.

You can't just go in there with a mop and a bottle of Windex. Some people do but it may come back to haunt them," said Steinlage. "It's not a matter of whether you're tough or not, it's a toxic environment. It's like going into a room full of bleach and ammonia."

Operating out of a nondescript white truck (the company logo can be removed at the customer's request for added discretion) Steinlage and Pallak travel around New York State cleaning up after traumatic incidents. Steinlage ticks off a list of recent gigs with the nonchalance of any professional talking



Photos by Alan Carey

Ian Pallak and Raquel Steinlage with a statue of St. Michael.

about a day at the office. There's the Dutchess County man who killed the family pets and soaked the house in gasoline before he decided against arson and shot himself in the head, a ritual murder in the South Bronx which involved cleaning up copious amounts of blood (the victim was decapitated and had her heart removed) in a room full of black magic symbols and paraphernalia and the New York City apartment of an elderly couple where the wife died of natural causes and the husband, suffering from advanced dementia, died later of dehydration leaving behind a vile scene which included excrement stored in jars.

For Steinlage even the most grotesque scenes hold little in the way of shock or psychological trauma.

"When I was working with crime victims there were a few cases that were disturbing, just hearing

the stories and working with survivors, but the scenes themselves were never a problem for me," said Steinlage. "I can go into a really gory scene and eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, just view it with scientific detachment. That might seem ghoulish to some people, but it's just life."

LEARNING TO COPE

Pallak, a 35-year-old Navy veteran and Big Indian native, is a bit less sangfroid about the messier aspects of the biorecovery business – his previous jobs included working on film sets and running a deli – but he said he's learned to deal with the horror. When cleaning up a particularly bloody suicide scene, he said, he tried to avoid looking at the pictures on the wall

and other mementos of a violently terminated life.

"I kind of detached myself from thinking about the person who did it and

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why and just did my job," said Pallak. "You go through stages in your mind where you get a little upset but then you tell yourself, we're going in here as the good guys, we're providing a service and when we leave things will be restored to how they were, physically at least. That's the best we can do."


So far, Steinlage said, the business has been a success with a steady flow of clients from around New York State. Recently she and Pallak made the rounds at the annual convention for funeral directors in Lake Placid trying to drum up business. The company is also trying to crack the lucrative market providing services to police departments and other municipalities in part by pointing out that having untrained, ill-equipped employees clean up potentially hazardous blood and filth can leave a city open to lawsuits.

"When you have a guy explode in the back of a police cruiser or in a jail cell you can't just send a guy in with a rag and a bucket of soapy water," said Steinlage. "But that's usually what ends up happening."

Currently, Steinlage said, the majority of the work Ulster Biorecovery deals with are non-crime related scenes, just the everyday horrors of "cat houses" and "poop jobs." And, while she says she used to be fascinated by the spectacular variety of human-generated ugliness, these days she's happier disinfecting a house with a decade's worth of cat droppings than the site of a bloody crime.

"I would love to live in a world where there was no violence and depression to lead people to do terrible things to themselves and each other," said Steinlage. "Then I could just clean filthy houses."

Jesse J. Smith



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