

In Mexico, your loved one's ashes can be set in stone

A Swiss firm is the first to offer diamonds made from the deceased in Latin America

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MEXICO CITY — In the country that's home to the cult of the Day of the Dead and Saint Death, communing with the dearly departed is nothing new.

But what about wearing them on a necklace or a ring?

Thanks to a pair of Swiss inventors, Mexicans can do just that by transforming their loved ones' ashes into diamonds.

Sound morbid? Gloria Alvarado doesn't think so. Four years after her husband died of a heart attack, the Mexico City health-store owner will now be able to carry him with her wherever she goes.

"I know it's not actually him," Alvarado, 67, said of the half-carat blue diamond she is having made from her husband's remains. "But it will be a reminder of the wonderful man that he was."

Alvarado is one of several dozen Mexican customers of Algodanza, a Swiss company founded by scientists Veit Brimer and Rinaldo Willy in 2004.

It has since expanded into 19 countries in Europe and Asia and entered the Mexican market in November 2005.

It plans to open an office in Houston later this year.

Company officials say they've created about 1,000 "memorial diamonds," most of them commissioned by widows. Algodanza means "remembrance" in Romansh, one of Switzerland's official dialects.

These memories don't come cheaply. Prices range from \$5,200 for a .3-carat diamond to \$18,000 for a full carat.

That's comparable to the cost of a high-quality natural diamond, said Mark Helper, a geologist who teaches a class on gems at the University of Texas at Austin.

An expensive process

Diamond synthesis has been around since the 1960s, mostly for industrial purposes. But because of the high production costs, synthetic gems have not found a significant market, he said.

"It's a very, very special and difficult technique," Helper said.

He said that though he does not know the specifics of the technique used by the Swiss company, it is possible in theory to create diamonds from human ashes.

The concept isn't entirely new. Drawing on Russian technology used in making synthetic jewels, the Chicago-based company LifeGem pioneered the process for the funeral market in 2001.

Another company, Russia-based New Age Diamonds, recently began combining carbon from human or animal hair into its synthetic diamonds.

But Algordanza, which uses exclusively human ashes and advertises itself as the purists' option, is the first to tap into the more traditionalist market in Latin America, starting with Mexico.

The country is known for its deep-rooted customs honoring the deceased, which combine indigenous and Roman Catholic traditions.

The most famous is the annual Day of the Dead celebration in November, when many people erect candlelit altars adorned with sugar skulls, dancing skeletons and photos of their dead relatives. They also lay out the deceased's favorite food and drink.

"In Mexico, paying homage to your loved ones is a fundamental part of the culture," said Luis Garcia, director-general of Algordanza in Mexico. "The link with the dead is very, very strong."

Many of the old customs are fading as millions of Mexicans abandon the countryside for the cities. New ones are also being born, such as the urban tradition of *Santa Muerte*, or Saint Death, which dates to the 1960s.

Despite efforts by the Catholic Church to ban the practice, thousands of people petition the uncanonized Mexican saint for love, luck and protection.

Cremation already popular

The church has been more accepting of another death ritual — cremation — that has become increasingly common because of the acute shortage of cemetery space in the cities. Twenty years ago, only 5 percent of clients of the upscale Gayosso chain of funeral parlors opted for cremation, said Francisco Gutierrez, who oversees the mortuaries' chapels. Today, 50 percent choose cremation.

The chain, which handles 11 percent of funerals in the Mexican capital, signed an agreement with Algordanza in November to market its diamond option.

The venture has the tacit support of the Catholic Church, which has an estimated 90 million members in Mexico.

"The church doesn't object as long as the deceased is treated with dignity," said Carlos Villa, spokesman for the world's largest Catholic archdiocese, in Mexico City.

Gayosso has yet to sign on any clients, but Gutierrez says he's not discouraged.

"It's a matter of daring to take the leap," he said. "But we Mexicans are great at adapting our traditions to modern times."

One example of Mexicans adapting, he said, can be found in a spacious hall of Gayosso's main downtown mortuary.

There, the funeral home has provided niches so that family members can erect tiny shrines to the dead.

In one, miniature green Volkswagen Beetles are displayed around the urn in honor of the occupant's former profession: Mexico City taxi driver.

Eunice Villaseñor, 41, the daughter of Algodanza client Alvarado, said Mexicans know how to poke fun at death. "But we also like to keep our dead with us," she said.