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From postmortems spring a livelihood

An ex-coroner's investigator performs private autopsies. His side businesses include prop rentals for TV and films.

By Molly Selvin, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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Vidal Herrera has heard every joke about death.

But death has been a godsend to Herrera, who runs three growing businesses out of a gray, two-story building along a dreary El Sereno strip of auto body shops and small warehouses.



PHOTO GALLERY
Death, Inc.

After a back injury ended his career as a deputy field investigator for the Los Angeles County coroner's office, Herrera started 1800Autopsy.com, performing private autopsies, DNA tests and other forensic services. So successful, he turns away business at times.

A collector of antique morgue and mortuary equipment -- yes, he acknowledges it's an odd hobby -- Herrera created a thriving studio rental business, MorguePropRentals.com, after a friend gave his name to a TV production staffer searching for props. His "fully dressed" morgue studio, embalming tables, body crypts and other equipment have been featured on "CSI," "House," "Law and Order" and several other TV shows and movies.

Ever the entrepreneur, Herrera launched his third venture last year, CoffinCouches.com, recycling damaged or used coffins into glitzy special-order couches -- high-style macabre for the biker and Goth crowd.

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"Death maimed me, death sustained me, and death motivates me," the stocky 55-year-old reflected. Also motivating Herrera is his entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to take chances.

His autopsy business was born of desperation after Herrera nurtured three discs in 1984 while

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