AIDS Memorial Quilt

A Terrible Burden of Truth

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt has three goals: to provide a creative a positive outlet for those in mourning; to allow time for those making quilt panels to remember and celebrate those who were lost; and to "illustrate for America the impact of the epidemic, not in statistical terms, but in terms of the humanity and the individuality of those lost." Though critics of the project initially scoffed at the idea of this old-fashioned craft, calling it the "stupidest idea they'd every heard of," the AIDS Quilt project's brainchild, San Francisco activist Cleve Jones, felt that the quilt "spoke of cast-offs, discarded remnants, different colors and textures, sewn together to create something beautiful and useful and warm."

> *"I imagined families sharing stories of their loved ones as they cut and sewed the fabric. It could be therapy, I hoped, for a community that was increasingly paralyzed by grief and rage and powerlessness. It could be a tool for the media, to reveal the humanity behind the statistics. And a weapon to deploy against the government; to shame them with stark visual evidence of their utter failure to respond to the suffering and death that spread and increased with every passing day."*
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> *Cleve Jones, When We Rise: My Life in the Movement, 2016.*



In June 1987, the NAMES Project was officially organized, and the first 40 panels were displayed at San Francisco's Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade that month. Within weeks, panels were being created by friends and family across the country. By October's National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, 1,920 panels were laid out on the National Mall. Cleve Jones remembers the "sound of people weeping" as they walked through the grid of panels at the National Mall and being "overwhelmed by the beauty of the Quilt and the horror it represented." A year later, there were more than 8,000 panels, and by 1989, more than 10,000.

In 1988, the quilt went on a national tour to 20 cities; it arrived in Seattle at the end of July. Preceding each stop on the tour, local quilts were created and added to what has become the largest community folk art project in the world with more than 50,000 panels memorializing over 150,000 individuals.

> *"I began the Quilt in my backyard with the name of one man, a man I loved. The Quilt has grown and is now a monstrous thing – a terrible burden of truth and beauty and love... The vastness of the Quilt and the speed with which it grows provides America with the greatest evidence of our failure as a people and as a nation."*
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> *Cleve Jones, speech at the 1992 AIDS Quilt display at National Mall in Washington, D.C.*





"The quilt panel honoring Larry Klein is visited by Barbara Bunce, a friend, left; Hilary Klein, his sister; Stephen Hegg, a friend, and Katie Frevert, his sister-in-law, at the AIDS Memorial Quilt display at the Washington State Convention Center." Seattle Times, 1 Dec. 1991



> *"This is part of the healing process for our family. We put the Eiffel Tower on it – Steve loved Paris, and we scattered his ashes in the Seine. It was painful creating the quilt, remembering how vital and full of life he was. But here we can let go of our sorrow and our anger. Now, we can put our boy to rest. "*
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> *Connie Searcy, mother of Steve Holzman who died in 1987 at the age of 26. Los Angeles Times, 10 Apr. 1988*

The emotional power of the quilt was a counterpoint to the anger of ACT UP. Cleve Jones reminds us, "While the fury of ACT UP was justified and powerful, we needed more than rage to survive this plague. We needed love. And everywhere the Quilt traveled, we found love."

See the National AIDS Memorial website (www.aidsmemorial.org) to learn how you can create a panel and to search the quilt database for a specific person.