AIDS Red Ribbon

An International Symbol



A Red Ribbon Bee at the Clocktower. From left: Dieter Hal, Ira McCrudden, Joanna Thornton, Marc Happel, Toby Bochan, James Morrow, Allen Frame.

"The design had to be simple, because it had to be something that anybody, anywhere could do."

Mark Happel,
co-creator of AIDS Red Ribbon

Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus & a ribbon to honor human life

The Visual AIDS organization was founded in 1988 by artists who sought to use their art to garner attention from national news outlets that ignored the AIDS crisis. As the group grew, they formed the Artists' Caucus to plan events and raise awareness of the impact AIDS had on the arts community. They held public events and organized gallery shows, but their biggest impact was the creation of the AIDS ribbon.

In 1991, Marc Happel, a costume designer and member of ACT UP, noticed "big and garish" yellow ribbons tied around trees to honor servicemembers in the Persian Gulf War. Happel was inspired by the idea of using homemade ribbons to honor human life and bring public awareness to this "war going on at home."

Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus members soon adopted the ribbon as their symbol, choosing red, the color of blood and a representation of passion. (*People Magazine,* 13 Sept. 2021).



THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 3, 1992

The Year Of the Ribbon

How a few inches of red satin went from being a political gesture to a fashion statement to a small industry.

By JESSE GREEN

Glitter is irrelevant: the 100,000 plain, homemade ribbons still lag 30,000 behind the dead.

FIVE STAGES, SO FAR, IN THE RIBBON'S CAREER

JUNE 1991 Jeremy Irons, the host of the Tony Awards, is the first to wear the ribbon on camera.

FALL 1991 Jerry Brown is the first Presidential candidate to wear the ribbon. He is on the project's honorary committee.

FEBRUARY 1992 Barbra Streisand draws attention for not wearing a ribbon at the Grammys. (None were left.)

MARCH 1992 Richard Gere, at Academy Awards, urges more Federal spending on AIDS research, less on the military.

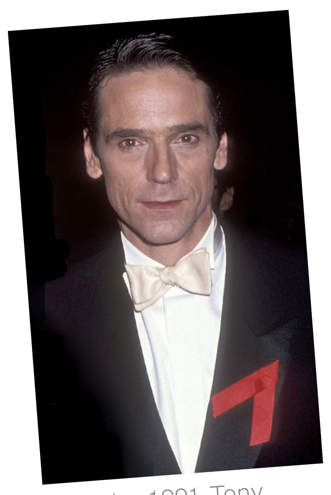
APRIL 1992 Ribbons are used as accessories on fashion models at Bob Mackie's fall collection in New York.



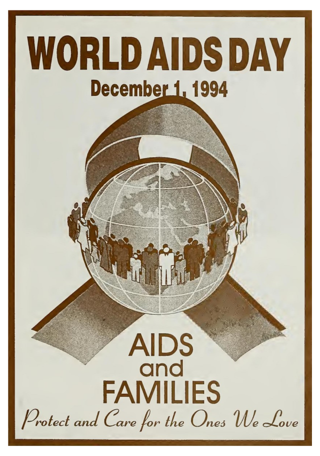
The original instructions were to cut the ribbon in 6 inch length, fold at the top into an inverted 'V' shape, and use a safety pin to attach to clothing.

The Red Ribbon Project

A local ribbon supplier donated spools of red grosgrain ribbon and "ribbon bees" sprang up where Artists' Caucus members, friends, and supporters worked together to cut, fold, and pin ribbons to pamphlets for national distribution. Soon other organizations joined the effort including the "Armory Ribbon Bee Project" that employed homeless women at the Park Avenue Shelter to make thousands of ribbons.



At the 1991 Tony Awards, Jeremy Irons became the first celebrity to wear a ribbon.



The ribbon was adopted as the symbol of World AIDS Day.



In November 1991, 100,000 red ribbons were given out to fans at the Freddy Mercury Memorial Concert at Wembley Stadium. David Bowie and other performers wore the symbol.



At the 1992 Oscars, Elizabeth Taylor (pictured with Paul Newman) wore the ribbon; she was an AIDS activist until her death in 2011.



Princess Diana brought worldwide attention to the ribbon when she wore it at a charity event in 1993.



In 1993, the United States Postal Service issued this stamp.

"This simple six inch ribbon folded in half was made so that anyone could wear it to show their support, however, when Elizabeth Taylor pinned one on, it became an internationally renowned symbol of AIDS awareness. Ms. Taylor was rarely seen without a red ribbon, and we are forever grateful for her activism, dedication and compassion in the fight against AIDS."

Nelson Santos, Executive Director of Visual AIDS

On Seinfeld in 1995, Kramer (played by Michael Richards) refused to wear an AIDS ribbon, resisting "ribbon bullies."



"I know now our work was not confrontation; it was conversation. It was something that a mother in Minneapolis whose son was living in New York with HIV could wear on her dress. Maybe one of her friends would ask, 'What is that?' And she could talk about it."

"There's still no cure. We need to keep talking."

Mark Happel,
co-creator of AIDS Red Ribbon



2023 World AIDS Day logo

Copyright & Controversy

The ribbon has not been copyrighted in the United States to allow it to be worn and used widely as a symbol of hope, care, and support for those living with HIV/AIDS, their carers, and families. Some argue this led to the commercialization of the ribbon. Others that the meaning is diluted as people wear it, then discard it and return to their daily lives. These may be true, but the ribbon is also an internationally recognized symbol that has raised millions for AIDS research and education.