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The AIDS Memorial Quilt: Performing Memory, Piecing Action

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Perspective

The AIDS Memorial Quilt

Performing Memory, Piecing Action

Gregg Stull

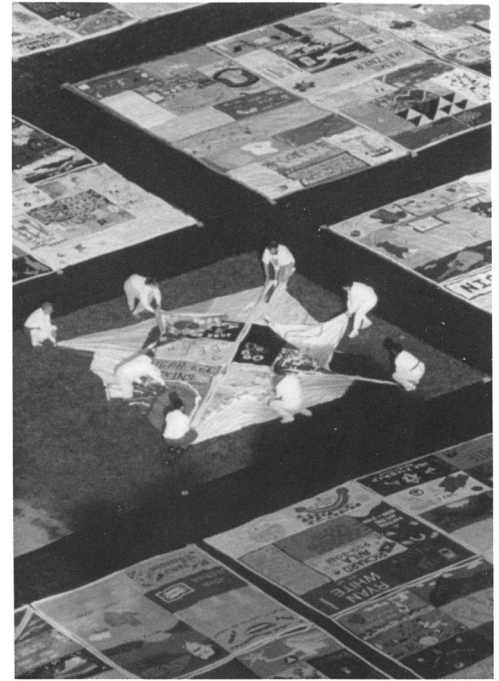
As I stepped onto the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on October 11, 1996, a chilly Friday morning, I was unable to comprehend the enormousness of the display that I had helped to plan over the previous two years. Stretching from the Washington Monument to the U.S. Capitol, the mall was carpeted with nearly forty thousand panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Each had been painstakingly created in remembrance of one of more than seventy thousand loved ones who had died of AIDS. American elms lining the mall framed the fabric memorial and created a peaceful haven for those preparing to walk its twenty-one miles of paths. While the first of twelve thousand volunteers began helping visitors find their way around the display, I stood spellbound by the sight of the quilt—the largest ongoing community art project in the world—the venerated symbol of the fight to end AIDS, which was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

The quilt was conceived on Thanksgiving Day 1985 when San Francisco community activist Cleve Jones glimpsed a headline in the *San Francisco Chronicle*—“1,000 San Franciscans Dead of AIDS.” The headline intensified the rage, fear, and hopelessness that Jones felt as, one after another, friends and colleagues died from the mysterious illness striking gay men in his city. For the first time, Jones realized that he was living in a country whose citizens were not responding to the escalating number of people dying from AIDS. He thought, though, that they might be inclined to act if they remembered that the dead were not just unknown gay men and injection drug users, but beloved sons, daughters, friends, fathers, mothers, siblings, aunts, uncles, husbands, and wives. Moreover, each life had suddenly been cut short, and there was no hope of anyone combating an illness that the nation’s leaders had decided was an issue of morality instead of public health.

That same day, November 27, Jones was coordinating the annual Harvey Milk Candlelight Memorial March, which commemorates the gay community leader who, along with Mayor George Moscone, was killed by Dan White. Jones asked the marchers to carry a placard on which they had written the name of someone they knew who had died of AIDS. At the end of the march, Jones and others taped the placards to the wall of the old San Francisco Federal Building to protest the government’s inadequate response to the AIDS epidemic. As Jones pondered the wall of names on that cold and dreary Thanksgiving, he was struck by how much it resembled a patchwork quilt. He understood at once that the country needed an image, a *quilt*, in order to grasp the full impact of an illness that required urgent attention. The death of Jones’s best friend,

Paul Margolies, photographer.
AIDS Memorial Quilt displayed
on the National Mall,
Washington, D.C., 1996





Paul Margolies, photographer.
Two views of the unfolding
ritual, with teams of volunteers,
National Mall, Washington,
D.C., 1996

Marvin Feldman, over a year later gave rise to the quilt's first panels. On his back porch, Jones and a friend used spray paint on fabric to craft a panel for Marvin that was three feet by six feet, evoking, by its very size, a grave.

Realizing from the beginning that the quilt was to be not only a memorial but also a call to action, Jones later began asking friends and volunteers to make a quilt to display in Washington, D.C., as part of the March for Lesbian and Gay Rights on October 11, 1987. The venture became known as the NAMES Project, and its organizers issued a nationwide call for people to create panels, then send them to San Francisco to be sewn into the quilt. Its signature building block became a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot square, which is composed of eight panels that are the standard three feet by six feet. For that first showing of nearly two thousand panels on the National Mall, volunteers with great dignity unfolded heavy bundles, gently and unexpectedly hoisting the fabric aloft and to the left to align it with the walkway grid. Then they invited visitors to view the quilt.

From this solemn, impromptu move and the need to open hundreds—now thousands—of panels in an organized fashion, arose the ritual of unfolding. It is usually performed with a team of eight volunteers, many of them panel makers, although they do not necessarily unfurl the panels they created. The team wears white clothing, so as not to distract from the colors of the quilt. To begin the ceremony, four volunteers unfold the top corners of the quilt block (made of four of the signature squares), then the other team members open the next set of corners and so forth, until they unfold the entire section. When opening the last set of corners, all eight volunteers lift the quilt and turn it, so that it squares into the design. Speeches never accompany the ceremony, and usually there is no music. After the panels are opened, the names of the people whom they honor are read aloud. At the 1987 showing, Jones remembers invoking the names in a defiant cadence to demand that attention be paid to their lost lives. In a demonstration of both angry civil protest and quiet mourning, the NAMES Project first displayed its quilt.



Paul Margolies, photographer.
Visitors to the AIDS Memorial
Quilt, National Mall,
Washington, D.C., 1996

With its huge size and use of unusual materials, the AIDS quilt challenges and extends the traditional notion of quilting. The block is bound by canvas edging [into which grommets are set at regular intervals. When shown, the quilt can be joined with plastic cable ties to create larger blocks. Some panel makers use a traditional abstract piecing motif, including the log cabin, flying geese, and drunkard's path techniques, though most people tell a story. The NAMES Project places no restriction on the materials from which a panel may be made, as long as they can be securely fastened to the fabric and long-term conservation is addressed. Panels include feathers, crystals, needlepoint, flags, corsets, wedding rings, bubble wrap, merit badges, cremation ashes, photographs, tennis shoes, stuffed animals, and everything conceivable. Many earlier panels that were made

of paint and fabric weigh less than recent ones that incorporate a great variety of objects into their designs. The entire quilt weighs more than fifty tons.

Each panel memorializes at least one person who has died of AIDS, and many panels more than one. In the quilt's earliest days the organizers believed that each panel should honor only one person. Then in the summer of 1987, staff and volunteers opened a box containing a panel with two names. In the accompanying letter, a mother explained that, since her twin sons had been inseparable in life, she wanted them to be together on the quilt. Soon thereafter the staff received two panels for the same man: the young man's parents and siblings stitched one; the man's lover and friends the other. These panels taught the organizers that the quilt could give voice to relationships and stories that they had never anticipated. The staff also realized that the simple act of making a panel held immense value, and that there was no reason to deny anyone that opportunity. Furthermore, in the names, dates, and stories of the panels, the quilt emerged as a vital tool for AIDS prevention education. It powerfully reminds students and others of the need to make personal decisions that will help stop the rising spread of the infection.

In October 1992, in an effort to connect the AIDS epidemic in this country with the global tragedy, the NAMES Project sponsored the first international display of the quilt. Twenty-two thousand panels were shown on the grounds of the Washington Monument, including those from thirty-six international AIDS affiliates. Although the quilt was to be displayed for a total of twenty-four hours over three days, inclement weather prevented volunteers from unfolding it for all but seven hours. Committed to reciting all the names the quilt commemorates, people stayed throughout the weekend, sometimes in drenching rain, to complete the reading. On the final day, when ominous clouds released a sudden downpour, volunteers and visitors folded the entire quilt and secured it under plastic sheeting in thirty seconds. During the course of the weekend, the NAMES Project accepted twenty-five hundred new panels to sew into the quilt.



Paul Margolies, photographer.
Close-up of the AIDS Memorial
Quilt, National Mall, Washington,
D.C., 1996

Volunteers last unfolded the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt in October 1996. Over a million visitors walked among the panels, including, for the first time, the president of the United States. Among the visitors were thousands of school children, families with strollers, and people of all colors. The quilt seemed almost to defy comprehension, so monumental was the loss to which it testified. Staff and volunteers of the NAMES Project continue to call on the country's highest elected officials for action that will end AIDS. Although organizers of the 1987 display thought that their hard work and perseverance would stop the epidemic, the world today faces a pandemic of unimaginable proportion.

On five separate occasions the quilt has traveled from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., to be displayed in the nation's backyard. On each occasion it has grown larger, testifying to the spread of the disease from urban centers to small towns. The disease has found its way into the lives of people who thought that it would never affect them. Today the quilt contains forty-four thousand panels that honor more than eighty-three thousand people. It covers the equivalent of twenty-six football fields and, if the panels were laid end-to-end, would stretch more than fifty miles. Despite the horrific and mounting devastation of AIDS throughout the world, the enormity of the quilt may preclude it from ever again being displayed in its entirety.

Concerns for the conservation of the quilt are paramount. Panels travel to prevention education and outreach programs around the country and the world. Outdoor displays, exposure to light, and repeated folding and unfolding exact a toll. Although staff and volunteers believe that the quilt fulfills its potential when visitors walk among its panels, they realize that it must be protected. Conservation measures to repair wear are ongoing. The original panels rarely leave the shelves in an effort to reduce deterioration resulting from over a decade of international displays.

The world struggles today to comprehend the global devastation of AIDS. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, almost three million people have died from AIDS since the pandemic began. The AIDS quilt offers a legacy of remembrance and hope, and teaches acceptance of and compassion for each other's differing lives. The NAMES Project remains steadfast in its covenant with the dead to display the quilt in an attempt to create a world without AIDS. In addition to constantly exhibiting portions of the quilt, the NAMES Project offers an online quilt database containing images of almost forty-three thousand individual quilt panels, searchable by quilt block number or by name. There is also an online archive project that will eventually provide access to photographs, letters, and mementos that accompany panels submitted to the NAMES Project. Panels will continue to be accepted until the epidemic is over.

Perhaps then the quilt will be seen as a healing gift from the gay and lesbian community, and, ultimately, a present from this generation to the next. The eloquence of the quilt will stand as witness to a terrible time and a devastating loss of lives.

Notes

The author derived information for this article from discussions with Cleve Jones and others during meetings, conferences, displays of the quilt, and personal conversations from 1990 to 2000.

Some key resources about the quilt include Cleve Jones, *Stitching A Revolution—The Making of an Activist* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000); Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988); and Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, *Common Threads*, a videotape narrated by Dustin Hoffman. The web address for the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is www.aidsquilt.org.