

## Fighting for nonviolence

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— Cleve Jones

BY DELL RICHARDS

Violence has dogged Cleve Jones, 33, all his life. Because he wasn't macho enough as a kid, other boys beat him up at school. Because he is a spokesman for the gay community, thugs tracked him down and stabbed him on the street. And today, because he is antibody positive, he waits for a time-bomb in his body that could explode in a final assault.

In spite of that, Jones — a political organizer and founder of the Names Project — isn't giving up. A man who abhors violence and attends Quaker meetings, he's doing what he's always done: fighting to make the world a safer place.

Jones was born in West Lafayette, Ind., the child of liberal parents who were still in graduate school. As a child, he moved around until his parents completed their education and found jobs as university professors.

For Jones, a self-professed sissy, it was doubly hard being the new kid on the block, walking into classes with children scrutinizing him — only to find him not up to snuff.

"In one sense, I had a privileged childhood in that I come from a white, middle-class family with all of the privileges and benefits of the American middle-class," Jones said. "Good schools, good neighborhoods. . . ."

"But I was an unhappy child," he continued. "I was subjected to a lot of bad treatment from the kids. I was beaten up many times in the locker room and called names."

Jones didn't know at the time that he was the stereotypical image of a gay male — effeminate, soft-spoken, nonviolent — radically different from his childhood peers.

"I always knew I was different, but I didn't know quite what it was," Jones explained. "I thought maybe I was from another planet."

"But other people kept calling me queer and fag. Other people knew it before I did."

To ease the pain, Jones turned to his father's library of psychology books for information and solace.

"First, I went to my father's dusty old Freudian textbooks," Jones laughed. There, he found devastating information on homosexuality, "usually in the same chapter with genital deformities and child murderers."

But Jones also discovered other, more modern books whose authors offered him answers to the riddle of his life.

"There were works in the library by Jean Genet, Saul Bellow and back issues of *Partisan Review*. As I began to read these, I learned that there was a homosexual subculture — which was very important, because I didn't know that there were others."

In the world beyond his father's musty library, gay liberation was becoming more vocal, spawning a revolution that would be heard all over the country.

"Word of the Stonewall rebellion gradually trickled into Arizona. And a gay liberation movement was born in the Arizona desert — GLAD," Jones joked in a voice filled with irony. "Glad to be gay in God's desert."

Upon graduation from high school, Jones joined the group and told his parents he was gay. In spite of their staunch liberalism, his parents weren't pleased.

"They were surprised and frightened," Jones said.

Although he'd planned to go to college, Jones changed his plans and headed for San Francisco — a mecca for eccentrics of every stripe.

"I ended up hitchhiking to San Francisco and was pretty much on the street for the first couple of months," Jones recalled. He worked at

various menial jobs until he landed a position selling Time-Life books.

"I'm embarrassed to say that I excelled at this job," Jones said, "and made ridiculous amounts of money."

It was there that he met Marvin Feldman — his best friend until Feldman's death from AIDS in 1986.

Jones and Feldman were close buddies for 14 years, and the Time-Life job allowed them to travel the world for the first few of those years.

When they came back to San Francisco, the political atmosphere had changed. The Castro District had attracted men from all over the country who were openly gay and strong enough to make their political might felt. Harvey Milk — San Francisco's first openly gay city supervisor — was beginning his political career. Jones was ready for it.

"I come from a political family," Jones said. "My parents are liberal Democrats who were very active in the peace movement. I did a lot of work with farm workers while I was still in high school."

With his background in political activism, Jones was the perfect person to help Milk organize street demonstrations for his campaign. He also helped the gay community defeat the state ballot initiative that would have prohibited homosexuals from teaching in California schools.

When Milk was murdered in 1978 by Dan White — a fellow supervisor and an ex-cop — Jones coordinated a candlelight march. And when White was let off on a plea of temporary insanity from eating too many Twinkies, Jones led the march that turned into a riot.

"People were hospitalized, 14 police cars were destroyed, City Hall was trashed — the windows and metal grillwork completely broken," Jones said. "Civic Center Plaza was filled with burning police cars."

Although Jones was not to blame for the anger of the gay community at blatant injustice, he took the rap for much of the violence. That verdict puzzled Jones, who felt his life had been dedicated to nonviolence.

"I thank God no one was killed, but I can't say that I feel sorry that it happened," Jones said.

"It's one of those little contradictions in my life. I abhor violence but when I think about that night, I have to confess to a certain sense of satisfaction."

During the next few years, Jones was able to put his political savvy to work in state politics. Hired as a legislative aid by Leo McCarthy — then speaker of the California State Assembly — Jones was the first openly gay person to hold such a visible and influential position.

"Harvey had been killed but it was clear that we had survived his murder," Jones said, "and that our political power here in San Francisco was intact."

For the first time Jones was happy with his life. He was living in an environment that accepted his sexuality — and his pacifism — and he was using his administrative and political talents to work for gay rights on a statewide level.

Then AIDS struck. Dr. Marcus Conant, a doctor at the University of California Medical Center and one of the founders of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, warned Jones about a new virus that was sexually transmitted. The doctor predicted the fatal disease would be the scourge of the gay community.

By the end of 1985, the threat wasn't just a theory — it was a harsh reality: Jones's best friend Feldman was diagnosed with AIDS.

With the threat so close, Jones organized a memorial during the annual candlelight march



Photo by Dell Richards

for Milk and dedicated it to the first 1,000 San Franciscans who had died from AIDS.

"I knew a great many of those people," Jones said. "I asked everyone to bring a piece of cardboard with the name of someone they knew who had died of AIDS on it."

The march ended at the Federal Building — where ladders had been stashed under trees. Marchers scaled the walls and covered the building with placards bearing names.

"Taped to the gray stone building, it was a very startling image," Jones said. "And as I watched the hundreds of people who stood there for hours on a cold, damp night looking at the names, I realized that we needed a memorial. As I looked at it, I saw a giant quilt."

Jones had become a fixture of the gay political scene, and as one of the founders of the AIDS Foundation he was known as a knowledgeable spokesperson on the AIDS epidemic. After being on the *60 Minutes* program "Life and Death in San Francisco," he began to receive death threats on the phone.

On May 29, 1986, two men were waiting for him outside his apartment. As he walked down the street they called him "fag" and shouted

that there were "too many queers around."

Jones quickened his pace to get away, but he wasn't fast enough. He heard a slight noise and as he turned around, one of the men brought a knife down on him.

Jones still bears a scar an inch wide where the knife severed the shoulder muscle and came within an eighth of an inch of a major artery. It was just another skirmish for him in a lifelong battle with people who can't accept him as he is.

"The beginning of my political awareness was that of fear, of knowing that I was going to be confronted with physical violence because of the way I was," Jones stated.

"When I walk down the street and see men walking toward me, my first reaction is fear."

During the six months he spent recovering, Jones thought about violence, about AIDS and the rising death toll. When Feldman died, he knew he wanted to make a quilt for the people who had been struck down by AIDS.

"When Marvin died, I began to despair," Jones said. "After he died, I came to believe that I — and almost everyone I cared for — was going to be killed by this disease."

And it was clear to Jones that his own personal struggle wasn't unique, that it was shared by thousands of gay men and lesbians across the country. Jones and two friends began making panels, and the Names Project was born.

"We have a commitment to continue building the quilt as long as the epidemic continues," he said. "My greatest personal goal is to be here when we sew in the last panel."

"I'm optimistic for the long term," Jones affirmed. "I believe that a cure will be found eventually and that there is hope for those of us who are still healthy now. I believe that the ideals and aspirations of the gay and lesbian community will continue to move forward."

For the short term, he's sad and pessimistic.

"I'm one of the millions of Americans who have already been exposed to this disease, and I'm terrified," he said. "I think that my chances of survival are tied directly to the level of federal funding for research — and that makes me very frightened."

Jones has learned to live with a constant fear of death and physical violence; he's not letting it stop him. To combat fear, he's dedicated his life to making sure that those who have died from the insidious form of violence called AIDS will not be forgotten.

### Local gay and lesbian community assistance needed for Names Project quilt tour. Portland to be last stop on national circuit.

The Names Project, the national memorial to the tens of thousands of Americans lost to AIDS, has confirmed the schedule for its national tour beginning this spring. Arrival and departure dates are firm, and specific display dates and times are being arranged by the individual host committees in each city.

"We are bringing the Quilt to 20 of the largest American cities beginning in April," said Cleve Jones, executive director of the Names Project. "The country needs a mechanism for generating money and support for people with AIDS and their loved ones." Funds raised from the national tour will stay in the communities in which the Quilt is displayed to support local organizations providing direct services to people with AIDS and others facing the epidemic.

"The Quilt began in the hearts and minds of the lesbian and gay community, yet embraces all people with AIDS and those affected by the epidemic. As we spread the Quilt in city after city, so we continue to spread the message of compassion and love for people with AIDS, and we look once again within our own community nationwide for support and assistance in this immense undertaking."

If you would like to join the local team of Names Project volunteers in your area, write to PO Box 14573, San Francisco, Calif. 94114, sending your name, address and telephone number, and you will be provided with specific information on whom to contact in your city.

Please register your support and commitment by being one of the hundreds of volunteers that it will take in each of these cities to successfully reach out to all America with this poignant visual symbol of the epidemic that continues to take its toll on our immediate and global communities.