

C O M M E N T A R Y

Tokens of love

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BY TADGH O'SHIELDS

I want to tell about seeing the Names Project quilt at Moscone Center recently.

I did not connect with my brothers. Joel had spent the night in the East Bay. So, after doing chores at home, I figured I would go on my own. I could take it. I was an old pro dealing with AIDS and death. Right?

Finally Joel called. He was already there and would wait for me at the entrance.

The metro was full of people heading downtown for either the quilt or shopping. I stopped on Market Street and bought a yellow rose to lay on Hugh's panel. The panel that my brothers and Randy (my lover-in-law) made has "HUGH RYAN" in yellow cloth letters sewn onto a dark green background. Todd added some sequins to highlight the letters.

I was one block from the hall when the emotions hit me. Some Rock of Gibraltar, Tadgh. By the time I was inside I was a mess. Some panels were hanging in the entrance way. I did not see Joel.

Before entering the cavernous, underground hall, I bought a directory and located where Hugh's panel was.

Visualize this: down the escalator into this huge vaulted room. The panels were laid out in

grids with walkways intersecting. Soft appropriate music was playing. There were more than 2,000 panels. The area covered was the size of two football fields. Thousands of people were there already, but, due to the size of the hall, one never felt crowded. Everyone kept to the walkways. The atmosphere was somber.

I found Hugh's panel. The impact of seeing it was more than expected. I found that I could not directly approach it. I wished I weren't alone after all. I wandered around composing myself, looking for Joel. Finally figuring Joel had experienced the event and probably had gone home, I went and knelt and placed my rose on Hugh's panel. Then I scurried to a chair in a corner and cried. I was not alone in doing this.

This gave me an opportunity to see the crowds. I was gratified at the scope of the crowd. Obviously there were lots of gay men, usually in couples or small groups. Many lesbian couples, too. But also many families. Young fathers carrying children. Mothers pushing strollers. As usual four sexes and six races were evident.

I wandered around on my own. Then I found Joel. He too was emotionally affected, although he has not experienced a loss due to AIDS — yet. He now knows at least two people with

AIDS. We explored the rest of the panels together.

There were monitors, all in white, who would walk around to guide or assist. They had learned to carry packs of tissues.

I saw one woman, possibly the mother of one of the dead, sobbing loudly before a panel, being comforted by others. Someone else would be kneeling and reaching out to touch a panel. We saw a small Xmas tree placed on one. Some people, like myself, left a flower on their panel. Except for sobbing and the music it was very quiet. Reverent.

Some panels were simple backgrounds with names sewn or drawn on. Others were elaborate works of art with articles of clothing (jockstraps, leather jackets, ballgowns, whatever) or feathers or sequins or religious motives sewn on.

The most moving panel was dedicated to "Baby Jessica" and made from a baby blanket with her stuffed toys added.

There was one quadrant of plain canvas panels, with felt-tipped pens available, so people could write the names of the dead who did not have a panel. I wrote "P.K. — 1985" for my cousin's lover. He will never speak to me again. He did not want to be known as an AIDS statistic.

Clusters of chairs were placed in the corners of the hall for those who needed to sit down and cry or just try to absorb the reality of what the panels meant.

As we left, Joel and I stood on a balcony overlooking the hall. With our arms around each other we could see the quilt in its entirety. It is sombering. One gets a feeling of the enormity of the numbers and of the individual pain represented in this quilt that one cannot

comprehend through news articles alone.

We stopped to buy our Xmas tree afterwards. I literally bumped into the mayor-elect, Art Agnos, in the Xmas tree lot. I shook his hand and congratulated him, advising him that I had voted for him. I asked if he had been to Moscone Center to see the quilt. Having just returned from a post-election Hawaiian vacation the day before, he didn't know about it. He told me he had seen the quilt in D.C. on the Mall (he attended the Gay March there), but he wanted his kids (two sons) to see it. He hoped his busy Sunday schedule would permit him to see it.

My brothers and Randy had gone the day before, and we discussed our feelings later Saturday night as they decorated their tree. Most of my acquaintances also went; one worked as a monitor. Seeing the quilt and feeling what one felt were the main topics of discussion in the Castro all weekend.

The quilt will now travel. It is scheduled for Portland — the last stop on the tour — in July 1988. Other cities include Philadelphia, New York and Cincinnati. I think this quilt will awaken the country to the reality of AIDS and more importantly to the fact that it is not "Them" who are dying. It is our brothers, sisters, husbands, children, mothers and fathers who are dying.

Each panel was a pure token of love. 100,000 people experienced the quilt.

Editor's note: Tadgh O'Shields (not his real name) is a former resident of Portland. Joel is his lover; Hugh is a cousin who died of AIDS.

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