

A legacy of love

Alive, the spirit lives through the love and expression of each stitch: memories, maps of love, magic

BY HAROLD MOORE

On Saturday, July 30, the quilt said goodbye to Portland. With dignity and grace, love and sorrow, 2,500 men and women stood on the hem of the Names Project quilt and sang "That's What Friends Are For." Together: friends and the quilt.

It began last March when a call went out: the quilt is coming; come to Tom Norton's house tonight. After months of planning, hours of meetings, countless egos put in place, the quilt filled the Earle A. Chiles Center to the rafters with love.

Some of the people who saw the quilt for the first time were shaken. Its size and depth moved even the most callous. The names, rising above the statistics, put such a personal touch on the quilt that to many it is alive, a bouquet of friends who are gone — just for a while — but not forgotten. Alive, the spirit lives through the love and expression of each stitch: memories, maps of love, magic. We all became part of the quilt. We shared feelings and became one under the quilt. After all, that's what friends are for.

Like a whirling dervish, the Steering Committee sought a path and a plan to ensure that the quilt would have its time in Portland and would leave its mark on those who came to see it. With careful battle, sometimes curious statements of individual purpose and what can now be described as single-mindedness, the committee not only completed its task but came out of the experience bonded together as friends. After all, that's what friends are for.

The Names Project: Oregon/Southwest Washington owes a great deal to the University

of Portland and the staff of the Earle A. Chiles Center. Without the Chiles Center the quilt would not have come to Oregon. The professional and generous assistance of the University and its staff was the linchpin of the quilt's Portland success. After all, that's what friends are for.

Then there were the volunteers. It was amazing to see hundreds of men and women sharing of themselves, sharing with the quilt, working together, making it all come together. After all, that's what friends are for.

Aliza Teser of Italian state television said it best: "We came to Portland [with a five-person crew] to film a segment of a special we call 'The Thousand Faces of America.' It's a four-hour program to be broadcast live from America to Italy in October. We have looked all across this country. We have seen the faces of America. But tonight we have seen the thousands faces of America in one place, at one time, sharing and with joy and sorrow being one."

As the quilt goes on its way, it will continue to grow, sadly, in the wake of lives lost to a disease we still do not understand. Yet we are beginning to understand the loss. Each panel of the quilt brings us all closer to one another. Each life lost is a loss we all must share: the creativity, the energy, the love. After all, that's what friends are for.

The quilt lives. It's a friend. It will continue to give of itself and demand attention to the issue of personal involvement. The names on the quilt are our names. The quilt is all of us. The Names Project leaves us with a legacy of love.



The Quilt returns to Washington, D.C.

Dan Sauro, media coordinator for the Names Project quilt's return to Washington, D.C., from October 5 through 13, 1988, said: "We encourage everyone who has been touched by the project to return to Washington, D.C., with the quilt in October. Since last year's Washington, D.C., display another 20,000 men and women have been lost to AIDS. AIDS is everyone's problem."

"This October's unfolding and display are designed to reach out to new communities. Last year the quilt was part of the historic March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, and from that event and events all along the 20-city national tour, the gay and lesbian support has been overwhelming. But now it's time to broaden that support. And the 1988 Washington, D.C., event is planned to use the gay and lesbian support and participation, lifting the issues of awareness and political participation into the minds of the country's collective conscience."

"The quilt," continues Sauro, "is an effective vehicle for drawing awareness to the issues. With the national elections only one month after the October display, the Names Project hopes to attract national political leaders to Washington. We see this as our next step. And we need all the help we know is ours to use. Come to Washington and help."

A schedule of events

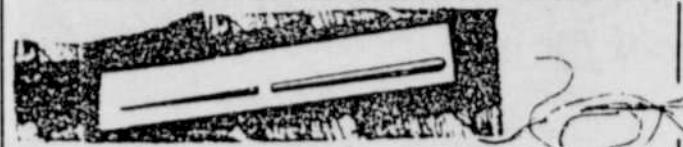
- Wednesday, October 5, Names Project press conference
- Thursday, October 6, Names Project rock concert
- Friday, October 7, Lesbian/Gay community concert to benefit The Names Project
- Friday, October 7, National Lobby Day for Lesbian and Gay Rights
- Saturday, October 8, National Lobby Day for Lesbian and Gay Rights
- Saturday, October 8, Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt — dawn: unfolding; all day: display, reading of names
- Saturday, October 8, National AIDS Activism Conference; call (213) 668-2357 for information
- Saturday, October 8, Candlelight March from Capitol Mall to Lincoln Memorial
- Sunday, October 9, Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt — dawn until dusk
- Sunday, October 9, Kennedy Center gala benefit for The Names Project
- Sunday, October 9, Interfaith memorial service, 6:30 pm, National Cathedral
- Monday, October 10, National Parents Conference on AIDS
- Monday, October 10, Demonstration at Department of Health and Human Services
- Tuesday, October 11, Demonstration and civil-disobedience action at Food and Drug Administration
- Tuesday, October 11, National Coming Out Day

For more information on Names Project events, call (415) 863-5511.

— Harold Moore

Like a fabric mirror, each panel flashes back a glimpse of the unique life of a person. Together, they communicate the amazing diversity of human beings, the wonder of how different we are, each from each.

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN



I came with my notebook, ready to observe and record. Crisp, professional, detached. I left, of course, in tears.

I cried not so much out of sadness, but because the Names Project quilt squeezed a nerve deep inside me. It touched that place that lies deeper than who we are in our daily lives — writers and waiters, accountants and social workers. It touched the nerve that whispers the truth in our ears at night, that reminds us that our hold on this life is incredibly delicate, that all we really have for certain is this moment in our hands and the best — the only — thing we can do is to love each other while it lasts.

I'd seen pictures of the quilt spread out on the Mall in Washington, D.C., those still, black-and-white photos with the sunrise like an aura behind the Capitol dome and all the visible ground covered with fabric panels and walkways. I'd gotten teary, looking at those pictures. With my notebook tucked under one arm, I wandered through the lobby of the Chiles Center, looking at the photographs again, girding myself for the real thing.

Inside the inverted bowl of the Chiles Center, volunteers dressed in white practiced the unfolding ceremony, joining hands around the little packets of folded quilt. The crowd was sparse and quiet, walking slowly, as if through water or dreams, looking at the hanging panels. On one, "Little Girl 'C'" was printed in wide swaths of purple and pink tempera. On another, in script: "I never got to say goodbye, so I say it now . . . Goodbye, Uncle Peter. I love you, Tiffany."

The messages startled me with their intimacy. A few times, I felt I had to look away, like I'd been caught reading someone's mail. On one vertical panel, someone had printed a paragraph in blue crayon: "David R. from Alaska loved flowers and wanted to open a flower shop, but he managed a bank instead (you know how life can be). [After he got AIDS] . . . the first two nights he attempted suicide with pills but failed, then succeeded with a plastic bag. 1987."

Some panels spoke of the fear that still engulfs AIDS patients, the homophobia that keeps some families trapped in silence. One, in crayon on beige muslin, said, "I have decorated this banner to honor my brother. Our parents did not want his name used publicly. The omission of his name represents the fear of oppression that AIDS victims and their families feel."

There were some panels for "anonymous" and "unknown" victims. But there were not enough to account for all those missing, all the 38,000 people nationwide who have died of AIDS. I wonder about the ones who aren't here — the IV addicts who died unsupported and alone, the men and women cut off from families by fear, the babies who didn't live long enough to get names, the people who died in prisons and on the streets. I think: eight people died for every panel here. I think: at least these 4,000 each had someone who wanted to remember.

The unfolding begins. In a silent, practiced dance, eight volunteers open a quilt section one layer at a time, like peeling an artichoke, until it is completely unfolded. They lift it — it billows briefly in the air — and lower it to the floor. The names are read: Scott Stanton, Joel Reid, Herb Crabtree, Peter, Gary Johnson, Neal Yager. More volunteers unfold more quilt sections, until the floor is covered, a blanket of bright fabric.

Next to me, a man is sobbing, holding one clenched hand to his eyes. A volunteer behind me somehow guesses that I am crying, too, and

presses a Kleenex into my right palm. There is silence except for the steady beat of names being read and the terribly human sounds of grief — gulps and muffled sobs, sniffles, shaky sighs. Finally, the volunteers open a large, sunshine-yellow panel — blank, for people to write messages and names. The 24 volunteers stand with their arms laced, heads down. Silence. Then they break the circle and crouch to write on the new yellow panel.

They are still reading names. The list goes on and on.

Later, I look at the messages on the yellow panel. Scrawled, scripted or neatly printed with felt pens, they have an immediacy the finished panels miss. This is fresh feeling, spontaneous, not yet processed, artfully designed, cut and sewn.

Someone else is reading names now, a woman, and her voice is cracking, hiccupping over the syllables. Tears blur my vision of the quilt to a swirl of colors and shapes. Through the muddle, I think of a friend at my old newspaper job who died of AIDS. I can see him clearly: a cap of curly black hair against saffron skin, always crisply dressed, pictures of two stunning children — his nieces, I think — on his bulletin board. For a moment, I blank on his name. I sit down on the bleachers. I have to think of it. Now I'm sweating. I cannot leave here until I think of his name and write him a message. I race silently through the alphabet, try to picture his byline in the newspaper. Finally I remember. I crouch and write, "Bernhart — I was on the west coast and missed your illness and your death. More, I miss your life."

The next day, Friday, I find myself in the car, heading back to the quilt. My mind, cleared by sleep and time, can again take in the details. I look at birthdates — 1944, 1949, 1953, 1955. Dead out of turn, out of time. I feel obsessed with reading every panel, letting every name sit on my tongue for a moment.

I remember seeing the Vietnam Memorial, the Wall, in Washington, D.C., for the first time, walking along the face of polished black stone, nudged to tears by the names that seemed to go on forever. The quilt speaks of numbers, too. No panel communicates the wide gash AIDS has inscribed in the community as much as the giant section for the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, where 16 waves below the Golden Gate Bridge and 14 clouds above it memorialize the 30 members who have died. But the quilt is like no cemetery, no memorial I have ever seen. The Vietnam Memorial says: Look. All these people died. The quilt says: Yes. And they also lived.

Like a fabric mirror, each panel flashes back a glimpse of the unique life of a person. Was he sequins or calico, leather or lavender lace? Was she an actor or a banker? Did he die at 40 or at four days old? How did he live? How was he loved? Together, they communicate the amazing diversity of human beings, the wonder of how different we are, each from each. And then the quilt pushes us one step further, from difference to unity, toward what it is that we essentially have in common: the capacity to love inordinately, to grieve deeply at our losses and then to speak that grief, moving through it to love and change.

This is a quilt, like those pieced together for centuries in America, that binds people in its creation. In making panels, in looking at them, we express what we most need to believe about ourselves: that we each matter, that we will be loved while we live and remembered when we die. It is right that the symbol for those dead of AIDS be a quilt, a comforter, a blanket not to smother grief but to remind us that the most we can do, finally, is keep each other warm.