

# national news

## Patterns of The Quilt

*Cleve Jones' brainchild has put a human face on the epidemic and given many a channel for their grief*

by Bob Roehr

**T**he AIDS Memorial Quilt—39 tons of fabric, memories and love to be unfurled Oct. 10-13 on the Mall in Washington, D.C.—sprang from the vision and persistence of one man, founder Cleve Jones.

The Quilt is one of the enduring icons of the pandemic, its functions and purposes as much a pastiche as the panels themselves. It is a testament to those who are gone, consolation for bereaved, and a political vehicle to generate support for the ongoing battle against the virus.

"People are so suspicious when I say this, but it came in a burst of light, it really did," Jones says. "I had the idea about 9:30 pm on Nov. 27, 1985."

His bare feet are tucked under him in an overstuffed chair. A fierce but gentle passion marks his voice as he recounts those days.

He was putting up posters in the Castro for the annual candlelight march commemorating the murders of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official, and George Moscone, the mayor of San Francisco. Newspaper headlines cried out from their boxes: A Thousand San Franciscans Already Killed by the Virus.

"I knew most of those thousand. All of them had lived and died within a 10-block radius of where I was standing. And I was struck by how there was no evidence of the epidemic."

A few days later Jones brought a stack of poster board and some magic markers to where people gathered for the march. He asked them to write the name of a friend who had died of AIDS and carry it that evening to honor their memory. At the end of the journey they affixed them to the wall of the federal building.

"And as I was looking at that patchwork of names about 9:30 on a cold, drizzly night, I thought it looked like a quilt. When I said the word 'quilt' to myself, I was immediately flooded with memories of my grandmother's and my great grandmother's quilts that had been passed down in our family."

There was a click in his mind: "It was really like I was looking at a blank screen and a slide

from a projector where the national Mall and the dome of the Capitol appeared. Spread out before it was this vast quilt."

The idea was slow to take physical shape.

"Nobody was very encouraging, most people thought it was a morbid idea. I would say, I see it as being 3 feet by 6 feet, and people would say, well, that's too big. There was a reason for that. I wanted the fabric to take up the amount of dirt that

was an intern in Milk's office and one of the first to come upon the slain leader's body) led him immediately to see the political aspects of The Quilt. It would put a constant human face on the epidemic, it would not let people forget.

That initial vision has become a reality.

"The Quilt goes everywhere," says Jones. "I can hear our critics sneering about it, but I think The Quilt has incredible subversive power. We

to have to acknowledge [that] what is bringing America around on gay issues is the epidemic."

One thing has caught him by surprise: "I don't think any of us was prepared for the spiritual power of The Quilt. The Quilt has a magical power. I think all of us who work with it are aware of it, and I think most of us are kind of cautious about talking about it."

The hesitancy is one of protectiveness. Jones

knows that many gay men and lesbians have been hurt by organized religion and are wary of talk of the spiritual. So he tries to avoid language that might dissuade any from visiting. He wants the panels to speak directly, unencumbered by religious ceremony, political discussion or other prisms, which are not allowed at displays of The Quilt.

He believes thousands of visitors to the Mall for this Quilt Weekend will take with them a sense of "the incredible nightmare that has gripped this community...the monstrous evidence of the consequences of our society's failure on AIDS." He hopes that "people will see it and be angered, saddened, outraged and strengthened. And leave there determined to end that."

Jones is optimistic about the future. He believes new medicines can be a part of ending this nightmare of AIDS, if only we summon the political will to pay for the science and treatments now coming from laboratories.

He speaks as a long-term survivor, probably infected in 1977, who long eschewed medications. But two years ago, wracked by opportunistic infections, with only a handful of T-cells to fight the virus plaguing his body, he embraced drug therapy and has miraculously recovered.

He is a modern Lazarus, rejuvenated, with 400 T-cells, and is back to crisscrossing the country to fight AIDS through the vehicle of The Quilt.

"Imagine if all of this energy put to saving people could now be put to bear to making this a better country, a better planet. I tell my dad, 'I don't know, I'm pretty scared they are going to find a cure and I'm going to have to get me a real job.' These are exciting times."



PHOTO BY MARCEL MIRANDA III

a body would cover."

In late April or early May, he and a friend made the first two panels, and then more. Forty panels hung from the mayor's balcony at San Francisco City Hall during pride celebrations in June. The concept took off and spread to other cities. By October 1987 there were 1,920 names when The Quilt was brought to Washington, D.C., as part of the second march for lesbian and gay rights.

Jones' background as a political activist (he

are endorsed by the pope, the president and the PTA. Consequently, we are getting into high schools all over the country.

"Now what do kids see when they see The Quilt? They see the most extraordinary visual representation of the love and solidarity of the gay and lesbian community. It's not sanitized, it's not censored, it's all there."

He adds, "America has come to know her gay and lesbian children at the time of their greatest suffering. Ironically and tragically, we are going

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