

national news

Reflections of a quilt weekend

Nine years later, the AIDS Memorial Quilt is back on the National Mall: Death is the same, but the living are changed

by Bob Roehr

They arrive soon after dawn, these volunteers dressed in white. The sun slants low, barely over the Capitol Building, and the grass is still wet with dew. Quietly, solemnly, with the precision of a drill team, circles of eight unfold, turn, and place each segment of the Quilt upon its assigned plot. Then they move on to the next.

Within minutes the Mall, crossed with black plastic walkways, has bloomed with the joyous colors and silent tears of 70,000 dead. The testaments stretch a dozen blocks, from the foot of the Capitol to the Washington Monument. They fill the vast open space from one side to the other. And under the trees, with each passing hour, the number of new panels brought to this holy shrine continues to swell.

The numbers numb your brain. It is a sea of people wandering like lost souls amid the colorful plots. It is too much to comprehend, like the billions of the national debt, and it loses some of its sting.

Then your eye falls to one panel, you read the name of a stranger from a city you have never visited and the dates of his life, and find that he was younger than you are, but is no more. And you learn that he was passionate for basketball, or theater, or his partner Jerry. And your chest tightens, and your eyes well full, and the numbers are numbers no more, they are Melvin and Dusty and George. They are friends and strangers whom you now know. And they are gone...long, long, before their time.

You listen with a half-turned ear as voices sound from stations along the perimeter intoning the names... "and my beautiful grandson Paul, age 4, dead of AIDS."

Low gasps become moans that rise as one from the walkways.

Grief seems to lay a gentler hand upon these pilgrims than it first did in 1987. Then it seemed that each block had a clutch of family, a couple locked together, a lone man, tears staining their faces, bodies tight with spasms. It was as if this was the only place they could grieve an illness kept secret, a loss not fully explained, a burden unshared.

Grief has not departed the Quilt, but it seems less frequent, less gripping. The secret of AIDS and its loss is no longer bottled up for release only in sanctuaries such as this. It is talked about and explained and shared when it happens. This is one indication of how AIDS has become "normal-



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

ized" within our society. And so the tone has shifted. Before, grief seemed to crowd out all other responses, now there is room for more at the Quilt.

Midway along the expanse of panels sits the red brick Victorian castle of the Smithsonian. It evokes a custom of that era, the affinity for cemeteries where allegorical monuments of stone and bronze drew society to stroll graveled pathways to contemplate truth and beauty and death.

The Quilt is, perhaps unknowingly, our reincarnation of that spirit. It is more democratic in its homilies, more ephemeral in its materials, but today's visitors seem to bring much the same

sensibility as those Victorian predecessors. They ponder the artful stitchery, marvel at the stories and contemplate their own mortality. It is a fusion of folk art and high art with the lesson of our own mortality.

The days and nights are a jumble of events. It seems that each and every organization has scheduled a conference, a service, a fundraiser, a protest around this gathering.

On Saturday afternoon thousands join Hands Around the Capitol in a symbolic statement of the need for continued action on AIDS. "Join hands. Fight AIDS. Vote," rings from their lips. Perhaps

the most festive link in the chain is the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, that transvestigial clan from San Francisco.

At the event's conclusion they gather on a plaza of the Capitol to "exorcise demons" from the building in a call and response. "The first demon is the demon of hypocrisy, of working for the people of America but not all the people—we cast thee out, demons." And the crowd joins with their voices, "Out, demons." Snap. "Begone. You have no power here."

The liturgy continued through "disinformation and lack of access to health care for all," "self-loathing and homophobia," "Newt Gingrich," and the "sloth" of Bill Clinton "who still has a lot of room for improvement." The service ended with, "Go, and sin some more."

Now it is night. The Mall is a river of flickering candlelight flowing slowly westward. It parts at the tall, lit shaft of the Washington Monument, then rejoins and lines both sides of the reflecting pool, down to embrace the Lincoln Memorial.

I think of that genius work of Nazi propaganda *The Triumph of the Will* and understand the power, the pageantry, of fire and of massed people. The crowd roars like some giant beast heard from afar. It is impossible to count its numbers. Hundreds of thousands, so many that organizers long since have run out of candles.

Words from the stage and images from the large tele-screens cannot match the drama of humanity all around. Up close those small flames paint faces from below with the familial warmth of old Dutch masterpieces. It is from a bygone era when man's humanity, not his industry, lit the dark. But here, on the stygian vastness of the Mall, we see that light still shines within.

"We also light the darkness against ignorance, homophobia and bigotry," said Washington, D.C., Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton from the distant stage.

"Let none of us lose our determination," urged actress Judith Light. She chose the words of poet Dylan Thomas: "Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was displayed in its entirety on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., from Oct. 10 to 13. The NAMES Project Foundation estimates that 1.2 million people came to view the Quilt.

Professional Financial Planning For The Lesbian & Gay Community.

At American Express Financial Advisors, we're proud to offer you a brochure that highlights the legal and social realities that affect financial planning for lesbians and gays. Important topics such as planning investments, retirement, estates, and taxes are explored — all with you and your goals in mind. We offer unique services such as Dual Client Analysis, which helps couples meet their financial goals together. So, start thinking about your financial future — and call for this informative, free brochure now.



Financial Advisors

Call one of our Personal Financial Advisors

In Portland:
David Woosley (503) 255-4900
or Jay Saufl (503) 452-6066

In Vancouver:
Bobbie Shatto
(360) 260-8919

American Express Financial Advisors Inc.
7931 NE Halsey, #100 Portland, OR 97213

Call for this informative, free brochure

Acupuncture • Chiropractic • Massage
Counseling • Naturopathic Medicine

CIRCLE HEALTHCARE CLINIC

(503) 230-0812

Brooke Winter, L.Ac.
Jan Corwin, DC
Kip M. Hard, DC
Valerie M. Lyon, MS, LMT
Suzanne Scopes, ND
Elizabeth Carlson, DC, L.Ac.
Patricia Norris, BS, LMT

316 NE 28th Street • Portland, Oregon 97232