

History of The NAMES Project Foundation

In 1985, political activist Cleve Jones was among those planning the annual candlelight march to honor the memory of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, both assassinated in 1978. While planning the march, Jones learned that more than 1,000 San Franciscans had been lost to AIDS. In their honor, he asked his fellow marchers to write the names of those friends and loved ones on placards and carry them in the march. For the first time, numbers became NAMES.

At the end of the march, Jones and other participants taped the placards to the walls of the San Francisco Federal Building. It was this action, the creation of a wall of names with its resemblance to a patchwork quilt, which gave birth to the idea for The AIDS Memorial Quilt and eventually, The NAMES Project Foundation.

In June of 1987, Jones and a small group of friends and strangers alike, gathered in a San Francisco storefront on Market Street to formally organize The NAMES Project Foundation and to document lives they feared history would neglect. Their goal was to create a memorial for those who had died of AIDS and in doing so help people understand the devastating impact of the disease.

From the start, the public response to the Quilt was immediate. People in each of the U.S. cities most affected by AIDS -- New York, L.A., and San Francisco -- sent panels to the San Francisco workshop in memory of their friends and loved ones. Generous donors rapidly filled "wish lists" for sewing machines, office supplies and volunteers.

On June 27, 1987, the fledgling NAMES Project displayed the first 40 panels of The Quilt from the Mayor's balcony at San Francisco City Hall. Each panel measured 3'x6', the size of a human grave, and bore the name of an individual lost to AIDS. Four months later, October 1987, the first 1,920 panels were displayed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Half a million people visited The Quilt that weekend.

The overwhelming response to The Quilt's inaugural national display led to a four-month, 20-city, national tour for The Quilt in Spring 1988. The tour raised nearly \$500,000 for hundreds of AIDS service organizations. More than 9,000 volunteers across the US helped the travelling crew display The Quilt. Local panels were added in each city, tripling The Quilt's size to more than 6,000 panels by the end of the tour.

The Quilt returned to Washington, D.C. in October 1988, when 8,288 panels were displayed on the Ellipse in front of the White House. Celebrities, politicians, families, lovers and friends read aloud the names of the people represented by The Quilt panels. The reading of names is now a tradition followed at nearly every Quilt display.

As The Quilt grew, so did its mission. The Quilt quickly became a vehicle to visually illustrate the numbers lost to the AIDS epidemic as well as a tool to bring names to statistics, to humanize the devastation and threat of AIDS. As it brought public

attention to the epidemic, The Quilt began to sway government policy and funding decisions, and became a means to unify a generation in the struggle against AIDS.

Through its evolution, The Quilt evolved as a powerful tool for social change. In 1987 when the first panel of The Quilt was constructed, public officials were debating mandatory testing and mandatory quarantines of infected citizens. Homophobic reaction to HIV/AIDS was rampant. First dubbed the “Gay Plague” and the disease of drug addicts, HIV/AIDS was a companion to prejudice and ignorance. The Quilt became a unifying force both for the gay community and for society. Quilt tours became a venue for peaceful demonstration; an opportunity for all people to stand together and honor those lost to AIDS and a means to support the gay community.

In 1989, a second NAMES Project tour of North America brought The Quilt to 19 additional cities in the U.S. and Canada. That tour and other 1989 displays raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars for AIDS service organizations. In October of that year, The Quilt was again displayed on the Ellipse in Washington, D.C. That same year, The Quilt was honored with a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

As of 1992, The AIDS Memorial Quilt included panels from every U.S. state and 28 countries. In October 1992, the entire Quilt returned to Washington, D.C., this time in the shadow of the Washington Monument. To reflect the global nature of the AIDS pandemic, this display was titled the "International Display."

In January 1993, The NAMES Project was invited to march in President Clinton's inaugural parade. Over 200 volunteers, including representatives of national AIDS organizations and Leanza Cornett, Miss America 1993, carried Quilt panels down Pennsylvania Avenue in the parade.

An estimated 1.2 million people visited The Quilt when it was shown in its entirety in Washington, D.C. in October 1996. Covering the National Mall from the Washington Monument to the grounds of the U.S. Capitol Building, The Quilt occupied an area equal to 24 football fields. Some 2,500 new panels were added to The Quilt over the three-day display, putting the total number of panels displayed at more than 40,000. For the first time, a U.S. President and Vice President visited a display of the entire Quilt.

As the years progressed with no end in sight to the epidemic, The NAMES Project Foundation realized another purpose The Quilt could serve—HIV/AIDS education. The Quilt visually illustrates the numbers lost in the AIDS epidemic. In addition, The Quilt has served to open frank dialogue about the epidemic, to confront the stigma attached to AIDS, to help families and communities heal from their losses, and to motivate individuals to take direct, personal action to contain the spread of HIV and care for those living with the disease.

In addition to the national displays in DC, The NAMES Project has orchestrated tens of thousands of smaller displays across the country. Through the years, displays have been presented in schools, prisons, places of worship, museums, galleries, shopping malls, corporations, community centers, hospitals and convention sites. This year

more than 2 million people will see The Quilt at some 2,000 displays around the world. To date, more than 14 million people have experienced The Quilt first hand.

In 2000, the Board of Directors of The NAMES Project Foundation elected to move the Foundation's national headquarters from San Francisco to Atlanta and on December 1, 2002, the new site was dedicated at 101 Krog Street.

Today, The AIDS Memorial Quilt is an epic, 54-ton tapestry that includes more than 45,000 panels dedicated to more than 88,000 individuals. It is the premiere symbol of the AIDS pandemic and the largest piece of community art in the world – a living memorial to a generation lost to AIDS. Currently, there are 22 NAMES Project chapters in the US and more than 40 international affiliates around the world.

Wherever the panels of The Quilt are unfolded, people of diverse backgrounds are moved to take action against AIDS. The Quilt's message is universal and has been received and understood by people of all ages, races, nationalities and backgrounds. From San Francisco's Castro Street to Vatican City, from Taipei to Uganda, from inner-city schools to the United Nations Headquarters, The Quilt has called on the world to respond to AIDS with compassion and resolve. The upcoming Mall-to-Mall tour, a two-year effort by The NAMES Project to stage a 50-city national tour to shopping malls across the country culminating with a return of the entire Quilt to the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in 2006, builds on the Foundation's legacy of touring with The Quilt.

For more information on The NAMES Project Foundation or The AIDS Memorial Quilt, please visit aidsquilt.org or call the national headquarters in Atlanta at (404) 688-5500.