The AIDS Memorial Quilt

History of the Quilt

In June of 1987, a small group of strangers gathered in a San Francisco storefront to document the lives they feared history would neglect. Their goal was to create a memorial for those who had died of AIDS, and to thereby help people understand the devastating impact of the disease. This meeting of devoted friends and lovers served as the foundation of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.

Today the Quilt is a powerful visual reminder of the AIDS pandemic. More than 48,000 individual 3-by-6-foot memorial panels — most commemorating the life of someone who has died of AIDS — have been sewn together by friends, lovers and family members. This is the story of how the Quilt began...

Activist Beginnings

The Quilt was conceived in November of 1985 by long-time San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones. Since the 1978 assassinations of gay San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, Jones had helped organize the annual candlelight march honoring these men. While planning the 1985 march, he learned that over 1,000 San Franciscans had been lost to AIDS. He asked each of his fellow marchers to write on placards the names of friends and loved ones who had died of AIDS. At the end of the march, Jones and others stood on ladders taping these placards to the walls of the San Francisco Federal Building. The wall of names looked like a patchwork quilt.

Inspired by this sight, Jones and friends made plans for a larger memorial. A little over a year later, he created the first panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt in memory of his friend Marvin Feldman. In June of 1987, Jones teamed up with Mike Smith and several others to formally organize the NAMES Project Foundation.

Public response to the Quilt was immediate. People in the U.S. cities most affected by AIDS — Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco — sent panels to the San Francisco workshop. Generous donors rapidly supplied sewing machines, equipment and other materials, and many volunteered tirelessly.

The Inaugural Display

On October 11, 1987, the Quilt was displayed for the first time on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. It covered a space larger than a football field and included 1,920 panels. Half a million people visited the Quilt that weekend.

The overwhelming response to the Quilt’s inaugural display led to a four-month, 20-city, national tour for the Quilt in the spring of 1988. The tour raised nearly $500,000 for hundreds of AIDS service organizations. More than 9,000 volunteers across the country helped the seven-person traveling crew move and 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 Grows

The Quilt returned to Washington, D.C. in October of 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.
In 1989 a second tour of North America brought the Quilt to 19 additional cities in the United States 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.

By 1992, the AIDS Memorial Quilt included panels from every state and 28 countries. In October 1992, the entire Quilt returned to Washington, D.C. and in January 1993 The NAMES Project was invited to march in President Clinton’s inaugural parade.

The last display of the entire AIDS Memorial Quilt was in October of 1996 when The Quilt covered the entire National Mall in Washington, D.C. The 1,000 newest blocks – those blocks received at or since the October 1996 display – were displayed the weekend of June 26, 2004 on The Ellipse in Washington D.C. in observance of National HIV Testing Day.

**The Quilt Today**

Today there are NAMES Project chapters across the United States and independent Quilt affiliates around the world. Since 1987, over 14 million people have visited the Quilt at thousands of displays worldwide. Through such displays, the NAMES Project Foundation has raised over $3 million for AIDS service organizations throughout North America.

The Washington, D.C. displays of October 1987, 1988, 1989, 1992 and 1996 are the only ones to have featured the Quilt in its entirety.

The Quilt was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and remains the largest community art project in the world. The Quilt has been the subject of countless books, films, scholarly papers, articles, and theatrical, artistic and musical performances, including “Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt” which won the Academy Award as the best feature-length documentary film of 1989.

The Quilt has redefined the tradition of quilt-making in response to contemporary circumstances. A memorial, a tool for education and a work of art, the Quilt is a unique creation, an uncommon and uplifting response to the tragic loss of human life.

**The AIDS Memorial Quilt Archive**

The mission of the AIDS Memorial Quilt Archive Project is to preserve the powerful images and stories contained within The Quilt while expanding our AIDS awareness and HIV prevention education efforts.

To date all of the more than 48,000 panels that make up The Quilt have been professionally photographed in both 4”x 5” transparency and 35mm negative formats, creating a permanent visual record of the most compelling symbol of the AIDS pandemic. Additionally, these images have been digitized and made available on this website, enhancing display activity and HIV prevention education programs.

This process continues today, and will remain ongoing as long as new panels are submitted and new blocks sewn together.

Most panels are accompanied by letters, biographies and photos, all of which speak to the experience of life in the age of AIDS, documenting the effect on those lost and those left behind. These “documentary” materials, when combined with the Quilt panel images, make a rich tapestry of information – a legacy to future generations.
The next goal of The Archive Project is to analyze and catalog each panel of the Quilt for both visual and textual content using descriptors developed with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. This information will be combined with the letters, biographies, and photos submitted by the panel makers into an accessible and globally available database. We hope that soon, The Archive Oral History Project will collect stories and testaments from panel makers on video.

Besides the HIV prevention education benefit of such a database, we can only begin to imagine the many ways such a resource might be used. A student in the rural South exploring her heritage might search for all the panels that contain kente cloth, read about the memorialized persons’ lives, and access video interviews with the panel makers to learn about the significance of the African patterns. An art historian might browse through the Quilt panels to discover when and how late twentieth-century cultural mileposts, such as computers and compact discs, first appeared as visual images in American iconography. A researcher might use the panels and letters to study the grieving process. The possibilities are inexhaustible.

The Archive Project ensures that the Quilt and those it remembers live on. The database and oral histories will chronicle the pandemic in very real, very human terms for generations to come. They will serve as a permanent memorial to those who have died, inspiring future generations with their valuable lessons about our lives, loves, community and society.

For more information about the AIDS Memorial Quilt Archive and how you can help support this effort, please send an e-mail to archive@aidsquilt.org.

“Save America’s Treasures” Grant

In 2005, The NAMES Project Foundation was awarded a prestigious “Save America’s Treasures” Federal Grant. Thanks to this $100,000 matching grant, The NAMES Project has brought on board nationally preeminent textile conservator Judith Eisenberg to work with NAMES Project Archive Project Manager, Teresa Hollingsworth on an ambitious, multiphase, collections conservation plan that will preserve the integrity of The Quilt, continue the Foundation’s mission of collecting, caring for and displaying Quilt section, and building the infrastructure to sustain The Quilt for generations to come.

Public displays are an important part of The Quilt’s mission and for 20 years, The Quilt has been an active participant, partnering with organizations across the country to help educate against HIV/AIDS. As many as 3,000 blocks of Quilt are displayed ever year and that means The Quilt is handled frequently and exposed to dust, sunlight and humidity that are detrimental to its overall condition. The current conservation effort will develop a set of standards and procedures that will help us keep The Quilt on the road while doing all we can to ensure the longevity of this unique American treasure.

Eisenberg is currently the principal conservator in textiles and costume for The Jewish Museum in New York; the conservator of textiles and costume for exhibitions for the Museum of Jewish Heritage, A Living Memorial to the Holocaust; the textile conservator for The Rubin Museum of Art in New York; as well as the principal in Judith Eisenberg Textile Conservation.

Archive Project Manager Hollingsworth is the current manager of the Traditional Arts Program for the Southern Arts Federation (SAF) in Atlanta, Georgia, and as such she coordinates the annual Folklorists in the South meeting, co-manages Southern Visions: The Southern Arts and Culture Traveling Exhibits Program, oversees agency ADA/Accessibility (Americans with Disabilities Act) activities, and coordinates international exchanges for the SAF.
Save America's Treasures is a national effort to protect America's threatened cultural treasures including historic structures, collections, works of art, maps and journals that document and illuminate the history and culture of the United States." Established by Executive Order in February 1998, Save America’s Treasures was originally founded as the centerpiece of the White house National Millennium Commemoration and a public-private partnership that included the White House, the National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Quick Fact Sheet

[Printer friendly version] (Links to QuiltFacts_About.pdf)

• Funds Raised by The Quilt for Direct Services for People with AIDS: over $4,000,000 (U.S.)
• Number of visitors to the Quilt: +18,000,000
• Number of names on the Quilt: more than 94,000
• Size: 1.3 million square feet
• Viewing time: To see the entire Quilt spending only one minute per panel – over 33 days