

# How one man's idea for the AIDS quilt made the country pay attention

By Cleve Jones  
October 9, 2016

*Twenty-nine years ago, the AIDS Memorial Quilt was unfolded on the Mall for the first time, with 1,920 panels. Today, it has grown to more than 49,000. The project was the idea of [Cleve Jones](#), a San Francisco gay rights activist. This article is adapted from Jones's book "[When We Rise: My Life in the Movement](#)," which is being published Nov. 29 by Hachette Books.*

I could see it so clearly in my head, and it was starting to make me crazy. All I had were words, and apparently the words I had were insufficient to paint for others the image in my brain: the Mall, [covered in fabric](#) stretching from the Capitol to the Washington Monument. But whenever I began to talk about it, I was met with blank stares or rolling eyes.

Even the word had power for me. Quilts. It made me think of my grandmothers and great-grandmothers. It evoked images of pioneer women making camp by the Conestoga wagons. Or enslaved [Africans in the South](#), hoarding scraps of fabric from the master's house. It spoke of castoffs, discarded remnants, different colors and textures, sewn together to create something beautiful and useful and warm. Comforters.

I imagined families sharing stories of their loved ones as they cut and sewed the fabric. It could be therapy, I hoped, for a community that was increasingly paralyzed by grief and rage and powerlessness. It could be a tool for the media, to [reveal the humanity](#) behind the statistics. And a weapon to deploy against the government; to shame them with stark visual evidence of their utter failure to respond to the suffering and death that [spread and increased](#) with every passing day.

I couldn't shake the idea of a quilt.

My friend Joseph and I started making quilt panels. We made a list of 40 men whom we felt we had known well enough to memorialize, and we began painting their names on blocks of fabric. We talked about how much land would be covered if the bodies of our dead were laid out head to toe, each panel the [approximate size of a grave](#).

For more than a year, activists had been working to organize a mass march for lesbian and gay rights to be held in [October 1987](#) in Washington. I was determined to unfold the quilt on the Mall at the march.

As the annual [Gay Freedom Day](#) celebration approached in San Francisco, we asked Mayor [Dianne Feinstein](#) for permission to hang the first five squares from the mayor's balcony at City Hall, overlooking the main stage and

Interested in this story?



Use this button (+) to add it to your Reading List.

Civic Center Plaza. To our surprise, she readily agreed.

We had a name now: The Names Project [AIDS Memorial Quilt](#).

On Sunday, June 28, 1987, more than 200,000 attended the parade and celebration. The day was dedicated to the memory of people who had [died of AIDS](#). Everyone in the plaza could see the multicolored quilt sections hanging from the mayor's balcony. I finally had more than words to describe my vision. People could see it now. They lined up at our information booth to get copies of our first brochure with instructions for creating memorial-quilt panels. Those brochures would travel back to the home towns of all the visitors. Across America, people began to sew.

On Oct. 11, 1987, the second National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights drew perhaps 500,000 people. The [Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt](#) was unfolded at dawn, with 1,920 individual panels, just a small fraction of the more than 20,000 Americans who had already lost their lives to AIDS.

Later that day, fellow organizer [Mike Smith](#) and I stood in a cherry picker 20 feet above the ground and watched as people made their way along the canvas walkway grid that contained the quilt panels. Only the [reading of the names](#) and the sound of people weeping broke the silence around us. We were exhausted and overwhelmed by the beauty of the quilt and the horror it represented. It was my 33rd birthday.

When we got back to San Francisco, we learned that images of the quilt had appeared in newspapers, magazines and television broadcasts everywhere. New panels arrived in the mail every day along with letters from throughout the United States and around the world, many of them asking us to bring the quilt to their communities.

We set out in early 1988 on our first U.S. tour, visiting [20 major cities](#) in a period of four months. With each stop, people lined up, mostly mothers, to present us with the panels they had sewn for their sons and daughters.

We'd all heard the terrible stories of dying people abandoned by their families and churches. We'd heard of the cruelty directed against [Ryan White](#) in Kokomo, Ind., and the arson attacks against the [Ray brothers](#) in Arcadia, Fla.

But as we traveled, we met all the parents and grandparents who could never imagine abandoning their kids. We met the volunteer caregivers. We were sheltered and fed by strangers. We met the congregations that welcomed people with AIDS and their families. We saw firsthand the power of community organizing to create [needle-exchange programs](#) and other prevention campaigns targeting specific high-risk populations. Compassion, human rights and solidarity were part of the answer to this tragedy. In city after city, the quilt was unfolded as the centerpiece for locally organized education and fundraising efforts, and we witnessed the extraordinary ability of ordinary Americans to rise and meet the new challenge.

As the next display of the quilt in Washington approached a year later, I began to work on a speech that might convey some of what we had learned from our travels.

I labored over that speech for weeks, acutely conscious that it would be delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where the [Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.](#) had told the nation of his dream.

The number of panels in the quilt had grown from 1,920 to [more than 8,000](#). The quilt was unfolded, and the reading of the names went on for hours.

That night, we marched with our candles and I gave my speech, the best I could do. A condensed version follows:

*Today we have borne in our arms and on our shoulders a new monument to our nation's capital. It is not made of granite or steel and was not built by stonecutters and engineers. Our monument is sewn of fabric and thread, and was created in homes across America and wherever friends and families gathered to remember their loved ones lost to AIDS.*

*We bring a quilt. We bring it here today with shocked sorrow at its vastness and the speed with which its acreage redoubles. We bring it to this place at this time accompanied by our deepest hope: that the leaders of our country will see the evidence of our labor and our love and that they will be moved.*

*We bring a quilt. We have carried this quilt to every part of our country and we have seen that the American people know how to defeat AIDS.*

*In the past 15 months, AIDS has killed over 20,000 Americans. Fifteen months from now, our country's new president will deliver his second State of the Union address. On that day America will have lost more sons and daughters to AIDS than we lost fighting in Southeast Asia — those whose names we can read today from a polished black stone wall.*

*We bring a quilt. It grows day by day and night by night and yet its expanse does not begin to cover our grief nor does its weight outweigh the heaviness within our hearts.*

*The American people are ready and able to defeat AIDS. We know how it can be done and we know the people who can do it. It will require a lot of money and hard work. It will require national leadership. And it will require us to understand as a nation that there is no conflict between the compassionate response and the scientific response, no conflict between love and logic.*

*We bring a quilt. We hope it will help people to remember. We hope it will teach our leaders to act.*

### **Cleve Jones**

LGBTQ rights activist Cleve Jones is the author of "When We Rise: My Life in the Movement" and the creator of The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. Follow [🐦](#)

---