Photo credit: *The Columbian* (2017)

Threading Communities Across the Nation:

The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt

by Jordan Land - 2017

The modern-day LGBTQ+ rights movement came out of a tumultuous decade. First there were the Stonewall Riots, police raids on bars and in gay neighborhoods that targeted queer communities for persecution and imprisonment. Out of that resistance, started by several trans women of color, came the Gay Liberation Front (Wright 1999). But that too faced challenges, as only a few years later, those same women would be systematically excluded from what became the very first 'Gay Pride' parade in New York City. Nevertheless, they persisted in their message, and physically placed themselves at the front of the parade (nms5746 2016). At the same time, other queer acts of liberation were coming to the forefront of social movements across the country and across developed nations worldwide, and the rights of LGBTQ+ citizens were an increasingly fought-for commodity. This freedom was not without its price; besides the innumerable beaten and imprisoned at the hands of police, key political members were also

lost, such as City Commissioner for San Francisco Harvey Milk, when he was assassinated in-office in 1978 (Cummings). Perhaps the greatest challenge to queer rights, however, arose in the early 1980's, as a mysterious new disease began to rapidly decimate gay and queer communities across the nation, and spread fear amongst both LGBTQ+ peoples and the nation as a whole.

Beginning in 1981, homosexual men in several queer communities were suspiciously contracting otherwise rare diseases, cases normally associated with a compromised immune system (Sharp and Hahn 2011). With the origins and cause of the root disease still nebulous, the collection of symptoms underwent several names, including "4H Disease*", GRID**, and finally AIDS, which stands for Acquired-Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Today, we recognize the syndrome as caused by two strains of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (Kher 2003). Within one year, over 700 cases of AIDS were reported, and 618 deaths were attributed to the disease. That number would triple the following year, and the queer community suffered heavy losses in hundreds of thousands before deliberate and effective action took place.

Activist Cleve Jones was all too familiar with the tragedy suffered among queer and gay men in the 1980's. A student intern under Harvey Milk, now in 1985 he was living in a neighborhood who's own queer identity had grown. The Castro, formerly known as Eureka Valley, became an oasis for gay men discharged from the military during and after WWII. Combined with an exodus of white suburbanites in the 1950s, the low-income area was now primed for an influx of marginalized identities, especially gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans men and women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds (Higgs 2002). It was against this setting that Jones now debated how to show solidarity against the crisis plaguing his community, as well as draw regional attention to the plight. Jones and hundreds of others marched annually to commemorate the loss of activist Harvey Milk, as well as the former mayor George Moscone, both of whom had worked diligently to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ folk within the city. During the 1985 march, Jones gathered the names of individuals lost to the disease that had sprang up only a few years earlier, and they were prominently displayed on the side of the San Francisco Federal Reserve Building.

That inspired Jones to scale up the project, to broaden community collaboration on a national scale and display the work in a setting that would get worldwide attention. They would cover the National Mall.

Photo credit: *Atlanta Pride* (2016)

Friends were critical of the idea; the project was a massive undertaking and had little financial resources to speak of. But Jones became increasingly resolute. He saw the quilt as "… therapy, I hoped, for a community that was increasingly paralyzed by grief and rage and powerlessness." (Jones 2017) Indeed, the queer community was feeling very powerless. Coming off an era of 'free love', they were faced not only with the challenge of a rampant disease wiping out swathes of voices, but also a calloused and inactive government. Reagan's administration didn't even mention the AIDs crisis until 1985, four years after doctors noticed the first symptoms, and by that point over 5,000 people had already perished. In fact, the epidemic was treated as a literal joke (Lawson 2015). There would be no formal urgency to act on the crisis until it effected the Reagan's personally, when their longtime (and closeted) actor-friend from Hollywood, Rock Hudson, succumbed to the disease (Geidner 2015). This paralleled America's

overall feelings towards individuals and communities suffering the most from HIV and AIDs. Many treated it as 'the gay disease' and still do. It was something inflicted upon sinners by an angry god, in some eyes. Teenager Ryan White changed many eyes when he came forward with his HIV diagnosis in 1984 (Encyclopedia Brittanica 2017). It took a white, privileged middle-class child to demonstrate that this disease reached beyond the demonized bathhouses and back-allies of the nation's grieving queer neighborhoods. This was the action that called organizations like Aids Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) to storm the Capital Building in 1990, and for Jones to persevere on his quest for a quilt ("ACT UP/NY Chronology 1990").

Back home, Jones was already creating the quilt pieces with friends and family, all of whom were already familiar with lives lost to AIDs. "The first was for Marvin; I painted it in the backyard. It wasn't very good, and I fear Marvin would have disapproved ... Joseph and I made a list of 40 men we felt we had known well enough to memorialize and began painting their names on 3-by-6-foot blocks of fabric. We both remembered that night on Castro Street and talking of how much land would be covered if the bodies of our dead were laid out head to toe. Each panel was the approximate size of a grave." The visual impact was not an accident. In Jones' eyes, the quilt would not only be a tool for communities to mourn, but as a provocative visual means to publicly shame politicians for their inaction, and to further antagonize a media that, at this point, was hardly interested in addressing the needs of suffering LGBT+ folks unless it impacted the larger public directly. Jones plans were to unveil the collected quilt pieces in coordination with a march on Washington in 1987, 3 years before ACT UP would take their even stronger needs up the Capitol steps. In June of that year, San Francisco was readying for their 17th International Pride Parade, and already gathered quilt pieces, adorned with the names of innocents lost, hung from City Hall. The first stones of protest were cast, and across the nation, thousands of others began to scribe their pain and suffering onto canvas.

Photo Credit: Wikipedia commons

The National mall is no stranger to protests, however the level of bureaucratic red tape that organizers are required to navigate can be astounding. At every turn, administrators at several levels told Jones and the other activists that such an act simply couldn't be done. But Jones and co. were successful. On the morning of October 11th, 1987, the first pieces of the quilt began to be unfolded across the National Mall. Piece by piece, volunteers unfurled the over 1,900 of NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt panels adorned with messages to lost loved ones, pictures drawn by family and friends, and just a percentage of the thousands of names of victims of the horrible disease. Ironically, one of the biggest concerns came from the National Park Service, who told the organizers that the covering of the grass would end up killing vast swaths of the lawn and be too costly to the American taxpayer. Organizers turned to Representative Nancy Pelosi for Congressional influence. Jones and co. even offered their corps of volunteers to routinely fluff the quilt pieces, but even with that action, it was apparent that the NPS' concerns had some degree of validity. As he was flying out of DC, Jones looked out the window and

noticed "… the Park Service bureaucrats had been right. Despite Representative Nancy Pelosi's assurances, the canvas walkways of the Quilt had left behind a haunting afterimage of the grid on the lawn on which the Quilt had been unfolded."

It is undoubted that this project was impactful years beyond its first inception. Arguably, the first unveiling was enough. The core reasoning behind the quilt was healing; it was an opportunity to be heard when the overall nation was ignoring our cries for help. The act was silent, but it carried a powerful message that stood in opposition to the vile dithering of an oppressive government. Just as the act picked up energy from its initial display in San Francisco, now too did the Washington display energize queer friends, family, and communities across the nation. Over the next four months, the Quilt travelled to 20 cities, all the while volunteers collected panels that grew the project's size to 6000 and counting. By the time the Quilt was brought out to the National Mall for the second year, it was up to 8,200+ panels. Thru 1996, the entirety of the Quilt has been displayed a total of five times, with portions making appearances across the United States. Every panel of the original quilt has been photographed and digitized for archival purposes, and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt remains arguably one of the largest community art projects in existence.

I could only dream of creating such a project. To imagine that a handful of people conceptualized such an impactful conception in their living room, something that garnered worldwide attention and potentially changed the narrative of LGBTQ+ issues and social advocacy, is astounding. Everything about their project seems done to perfection. Normally, I'm a strong critic of community organizers and artists who 'play by the rules'. I argue that, no one during the Stonewall riots was asking for permission to gather, let alone exist, and that there has always been a disconnect between marginalized identities and expectations of civil engagement. However, these organizers were strong in their determination and not easily spurned when it came to bureaucratic BS. It takes continually applied pressure to get those in power to provide resources for those without. The only critique I would have is that, in a contemporary setting where we are more educated and, ideally, more compassionate about the intersecting identities we hold, that any continued pressure on our government to act at the behest of those suffering from AIDS

would include edification about those most effected. We recognize that communities of color are significantly more likely to be plagued by the spread of HIV, due to a consistent trend of lacking resources, in cultures where the notion of colonialized masculinity further oppresses queer folks trying to navigate their world. I still yearn for a Pride Community™ that moves past white cis-male dominated narratives about queerness, and recognizes the complex quilt of identities that shapes our LGBTQ+ bonds.

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