

The Last One: Unfolding The AIDS Memorial Quilt

In the 80s and 90s, as AIDS ravaged the United States gay community, the AIDS Memorial Quilt was born from the gay community's public battle for treatment and understanding. The Last One is a feature-length documentary tracing the birth of the Quilt and its subsequent impact on media, science and politics. Through the intensely personal stories of founders, volunteers, and panel-makers, in archival footage, verite scenes, and interviews, the film examines how stigma and discrimination exacerbated and still fuel a disease that has already claimed the lives of 30 million around the globe.

HISTORY, REPEATING

In the early 80s, when the medical community was unable to identify either its cause or a reliable treatment, headlines proliferated on "the gay disease," alongside speculation that it spread through casual contact. Adding this theory to the popular belief that gay people lead deviant, abhorrent lifestyles created all too-fertile ground for discrimination and hate-mongering, in turn making AIDS a political anathema.

In response, the gay community raised their voices through civil disobedience and political action. Activist Cleve Jones envisioned organizing his community's grief and anger to include a broader audience. He recalls the night when he asked a crowd of marchers to write down the names of the lost, plastering them on the façade of the Federal Building in San Francisco. There he sees a pattern in the patchwork of names, remembering the quilt his great-grandmother had made for him out of his great grandfather's old pajamas. Unlikely fabrics stitched together. Remembrance. Warmth. Comfort. Love. And the AIDS Memorial Quilt was born.

Panel by panel, family, friends, activists, quilters, and churchgoers made quilts to express their fear, love, and passion, their politics and their grief. To this day, the panels follow a simple form: cloth cut into the size of a standard coffin, with the name of the deceased included in some way. They are sewn together into 12' x 12' blocks, and then at each display, as the cloth is unfurled, the names of the dead are read aloud for hours. The Quilt along with other activist efforts eventually forced the country to acknowledge the need for action.

TODAY'S QUILT

The Last One highlights how the Quilt has transformed over time to serve a new generation living with HIV/AIDS, focusing in particular on the role stigma and discrimination play in an epidemic which all too many people believe is under control in the United States, even as new infections continue at the rate of 50,000 annually.

The stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS traces directly to society's repudiation of the "other," the outcast known by various pejoratives: queer, addict, prostitute,

deviant. Despite the fact that 80% of new infections worldwide today are among mainstream heterosexuals, the lingering ideology that HIV/AIDS derives from abnormal behavior continues to be reinforced by our cultural institutions. Practical changes—safe sex, testing, and drug compliance—are critical to ending AIDS, but will not be successful without ending discrimination.

In 2012, as The Quilt goes on the road for a ten-city “Call My Name” tour, we delve into the epidemic’s impact on the African American community and particularly women, following a core group of volunteers through panel-making workshops.

Pat Nalls, founder of The Women’s Collective, painfully recalls the deaths of her daughter and husband, and her own AIDS diagnosis, made harsher by the lack of services available for women. “There were support groups for gay men, but I didn’t know any women with this disease. I put up a flyer in my doctor’s office asking any women with HIV to call me. The phone rang off the hook.” We follow Pat as she works with clients today who still wrestle with disparities. Their stories illuminate issues facing older women living with HIV in urban areas.

At a Quilt viewing at a high school, we meet Toni, a young African American woman who was born HIV-positive. She describes her diagnosis at age 9 and her feelings: “if people knew what I had, everyone would abandon me, everyone would treat me differently.” Eventually her sense of isolation led her to attempt suicide, and she realized she needed to turn things around. Now Toni speaks out to fight stigma in her community. Through her story, we explore the issues fueling HIV infections among youths today.

THE END OF AIDS

The Quilt is the largest ongoing community art project in the world. Throughout the film, we experience preparations for a critical moment of resurgence for the Quilt and American AIDS activists. First, in July 2012, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival made the Quilt the centerpiece of this annual two-week event. A large section of The Quilt was displayed on The Mall for the first time in over 15 years. The festival held performances, discussions, and workshops to celebrate the Quilt and the creative response to AIDS begun 25 years earlier.

Two weeks later, the International AIDS Conference convened in Washington DC, returning to the US for the first time in 16 years due to a ban on HIV-positive travelers which was finally repealed in 2011. As part of this historic moment, and at the culmination of our story, the Quilt was displayed throughout the city and once again on the National Mall. Annie Lennox, Elton John, UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibe and others gathered to pay tribute to a panel known as “The Last One.”

In 1987, a panel was delivered anonymously with no background, no instructions. But the caretakers of the Quilt knew just what to do: hold on to it and the hope it

conveyed until it could be sewn into the Quilt. It reads simply, "THE LAST ONE." AIDS still threatens nearly every sector of society, but science now articulates a new narrative: if we test and treat enough people globally, the trajectory of the epidemic will shift. It is finally realistic to imagine a day when the NAMES Project can sew "The Last One" panel into the Quilt, representing the last new infection, the last AIDS case, the last AIDS death.