Remembering the AIDS Quilt

Morris III, Charles E.

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After eight months on Maui I was back in the Castro. I had no job, no money, and was sleeping on a friend's couch (Jim Foster had taken me in). But I had a plan. I'd written a speech that I hoped would reignite the will to fight. I would give my speech at the candlelight march commemorating the day Harvey Milk and George Moscone had been shot. After that, who knows? I never really worried about career and fortune in those days. I was surviving, and that seemed quite a lot.

It’s hard to communicate how awful it was in the fall of 1985. I’d left town out of my own fear and frustration. And somehow that sabbatical had been recuperative. Physically I felt fine. The shingles had left with only lingering tingles. And I’d gotten myself out of the coke and drinking routine, thanks in part to Randy Shilts, an old friend from Haight-Ashbury days. He, alone among my friends, had encouraged me to go to an AA meeting. It was hard as hell to attend those first meetings.
Then, slowly, I broke the pattern and eventually learned to sleep without numbing myself with drink.

But there was something different in the San Francisco I returned to. Everyone seemed exhausted, almost fatalistic about AIDS. I understood that, certainly; but I also detected signs of hope within the despair. For one, the media had caught on to what was happening. Randy, who’d been a staff writer for the Advocate, was hired full time by the Chronicle to write weekly AIDS columns, and he was extremely dogged in his attempts to puncture all the myths. There was a piece on the fallacy of AIDS being transmitted by mosquito bites, by tainted water, by waiters handling dinner plates. He went into AIDS wards and interviewed the nursing staff and doctors, and the truth was coming out.

Other newspapers followed his lead, and the public began to learn, if not always to accept, that this disease was not divine retribution. And other “points of light” flared up. Bobbi Campbell and his lover sat smiling on the cover of Newsweek in an article on the new disease—appearing shockingly alive and productive. There were respected physicians speaking out and against the panic. These were all important achievements, but still it was just so much whistling in the dark. We desperately needed an immediate fix, and it wasn’t even on the horizon.

Seven years before, on the night of Harvey Milk’s murder, I swore to myself that he would not be forgotten and began organizing a candlelight march to mark the day of his and Mayor Moscone’s deaths. It had become a ritual, with thousands attending every year. A few days prior to the 1985 march, my friend Joseph Durant and I were walking the Castro handing out leaflets reminding people of the candlelight memorial. We stopped to get a slice at Marcello’s Pizza, and I picked up a Chronicle. The front-page headline was chilling: “1,000 San Franciscans Dead of AIDS.” I’d known most of them from my work with the KS Foundation. Virtually every single one of them had lived within a ten-block radius of where we were standing at Castro and Market. When I walked up Eighteenth Street from Church to Eureka, I knew the ugly stories behind so many windows. Gregory died behind those blue curtains. Jimmy was diagnosed up that staircase, in that office behind the venetian blinds. There was the house Alex got kicked out of when the landlord found an empty bottle of AZT in his trash can: “I’m sorry, we just can’t take any chances.” I wasn’t
losing just friends, but also all the familiar faces of the neighborhood—the bus drivers, clerks, and mailmen, all the people we know in casual yet familiar ways. The entire Castro was populated by ghosts.

And yet, as I looked around the Castro, with its charming hodgepodge of candy-colored Victorians, there were guys walking hand in hand, girls kissing each other hello, being successfully, freely, openly who they were. So much had been accomplished since the closeted days when the community met furtively in a back-alley culture. The Castro was a city within the city, an oasis and harbor for thousands who lived there and millions of gay men and lesbian women around the world for whom it symbolized freedom. And now, in what should have been its prime, it was withering.

Angrily, I turned to Joseph: “I wish we had a bulldozer, and if we could just level these buildings, raze Castro . . . If this was just a graveyard with a thousand corpses lying in the sun, then people would look at it and they would understand, and if they were human beings they’d have to respond.” And Joseph, always the acid realist, told me I was the last optimist left standing: “Nobody cares, Cleve. This thing doesn’t touch them at all.”

November 27, 1985, the night of the memorial march, was cold and gray. As we waited for people to gather, Joseph and I handed out stacks of poster board and Magic Markers, and through the bullhorn I asked everyone to write down the name of a friend who’d been killed by AIDS. People were a little reluctant at first, but by the time the march began we had a few hundred placards. Most of the marchers just wrote first names, Tom or Bill or George; some of the signs said “My brother” or “My lover,” and a few had the complete name—first, middle, and last—in bold block letters.

That Thanksgiving night we marched as we had for six years down Market Street to city hall, a sea of candles lighting up the night. One of the marchers asked me who else would be speaking this year, and I said, “No one else. Just me. People are tired of long programs anyway.” I was an angry, arrogant son of a bitch. The candles we’d been carrying were stumps by the time we’d gathered at Harvey Milk Memorial Plaza at city hall.

“We are here tonight to commemorate the deaths of Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, victims of an assassin’s bullets seven years ago this very day.” I talked of Harvey and how even back then he was not really our first martyr, that we’d lost many people to murder
and suicide and alcohol and AIDS. “Yes, Harvey was our first collective martyr, but now we have many more martyrs and now our numbers are diminished and many of us have been condemned to an early and painful death. But we are the lesbian women and gay men of San Francisco, and although we are again surrounded by uncertainty and despair, we are survivors, and we shall survive again, and the dream that was shared by Harvey Milk and George Moscone will go forward.”

Then we moved down Market to the old federal building. At that time it housed the offices of Health and Human Services—not such an effective rallying point as city hall, but perfect for our next demonstration, one that turned out to have more impact than I ever imagined. Earlier in the day, Bill Paul, a professor at San Francisco State University, and I had hidden extension ladders and rolls of tape in the shrubbery around the building’s base. As the federal building came into view, I ended the chanting (“Stop AIDS now! Stop AIDS now!”) and explained through the bullhorn that we were going to plaster the facade with the posters inscribed with our dead. And that’s what happened. The crowd surged forward, the ladders were set in place, and we crawled up three stories, covering the entire wall with a poster-board memorial.

It was a strange image. Just this uneven patchwork of white squares, each with handwritten names, some in script and some in block letters, all individual. We stared and read the names, recognizing too many. Staring upward, people remarked: “I went to school with him” . . . “I didn’t know he was dead” . . . “I used to dance with him every Sunday at the I-Beam” . . . “We’re from the same hometown” . . . “Is that our Bob?”

There was a deep yearning not only to find a way to grieve individually and together but also to find a voice that could be heard beyond our community, beyond our town. Standing in the drizzle, watching as the posters absorbed the rain and fluttered down to the pavement, I said to myself, It looks like a quilt. As I said the word quilt, I was flooded with memories of home and family and the warmth of a quilt when it was cold on a winter night.

And as I scanned the patchwork, I saw it—as if a Technicolor slide had fallen into place. Where before there had been a flaking gray wall, now there was a vivid picture, and I could see quite clearly the National
Mall, and the dome of Congress, and a quilt spread out before it—a vision of incredible clarity.

I was gripped by the same terror and excitement that I’d felt standing before other large works commemorating other large issues. Not long ago I’d seen Christo’s running fence in Sonoma County. It was a beautiful and moving sight, and I was struck by the grandeur of those vast expanses of shimmering opalescent fabric zigzagging up and down the golden hills. How it billowed in the breeze with the light playing off it, like a string of azure tall ships sailing on a golden sea. And there was the memory of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. This was a long table, maybe one hundred feet in length, with each place setting designed by a different artist. Both Christo and Judy Chicago had taken commonplace items, sheets drying on a line in his case, plates and utensils in hers, and by enlarging them had made the homely a dramatic, powerfully moving statement. It seemed an apt synthesis: individual quilts, collected together, could have the same immense impact.

When I told my friends what I’d seen, they were silent at first, and as I tried to explain it, they were dubious: “Cleve, don’t you realize the logistics of doing something like that? Think of the difficulty of organizing thousands of queers!” But I knew there were plenty of angry queens with sewing machines. I wouldn’t be working alone, I told my friends. Everyone understands the idea of a quilt. “But it’s gruesome,” they said.

That stopped me. Was a memorial morbid? Perhaps it was. And yet there is also a healing element to memorials. I thought of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall. I did not expect to be moved by it. I was influenced by the Quakers, who are suspicious of war memorials, which they believe tend to glorify war rather than speak to the horror of it. But I was overwhelmed by the simplicity of it, of that black mirrorlike wall and the power it had to draw people from all across America to find a beloved’s name and touch it and see their face reflected in the polished marble and leave mementos.

So I thought about all these things and also about how quilting is viewed as a particularly American folk art. There was the quilting bee with its picture of generations working together, and the idea that quilts recapture history in bits of worn clothing, curtains, jackets—protective
cloth. That it was women who did the sewing was an important element. At the time, HIV was seen as the product of aggressive gay male sexuality, and it seemed that the homey image and familial associations of a warm quilt would counter that.

The idea made so much sense on so many different levels. It was clear to me that the only way we could beat this was by acting together as a nation. Though gays and lesbians were winning political recognition in urban centers, without legitimate ties to the larger culture we’d always be marginalized. If we could somehow bridge that gap of age-old prejudice, there was hope that we could beat the disease by using a quilt as a symbol of solidarity, of family and community; there was hope that we could make a movement that would welcome people—men and women, gay or straight, of every age, race, faith, and background.

To this day, critics ignore one of the most powerful aspects of the Quilt. Any Quilt display, no matter how small or large, is filled with evidence of love—the love between gay men and the love we share with our lesbian sisters, as well as love of family, father for son, mother for son, among siblings. Alongside this love, the individual quilts are filled with stories of homophobia and how we have triumphed over it. There’s deep and abiding pain in letters attached to the quilts from parents bemoaning the fact that they didn’t accept their dead son. And there’s implacable anger in the blood-splashed quilts blaming President Reagan for ignoring the killing plague. All these messages are part of a memorial that knows no boundaries. We go to elementary schools, high schools, the Bible Belt of the Deep South, rural America, Catholic churches, synagogues, and wherever we unfold this fabric we tell the story of people who’ve died of AIDS.

That night, standing with those few men and women in the damp and dark, I saw a way out for all of us, a method of surmounting our fears and coming together in a collective memorial of our experience: all the sadness, rage, and anger; all the hope, all the dreams, the ambitions, the tragedy.

Eleven years later, this picture in my mind’s eye became reality. But that night in November 1985 it was just an idea, and on the 8 Market bus up to the Castro, my friends Joseph Durant, Gilbert Baker, and Joseph Canalli were unimpressed. Reagan will never let you do it, they said. Straight families won’t join any cause with a bunch of San Francisco
queers. It was late, they were tired. An AIDS quilt was a sweet idea, but it was morbid, corny, impossibly complicated. Give it up. But I was on fire with the vision. The idea made so much sense, in so many ways—the irony and truth of it. I couldn’t get it out of my head.

**The First Displays: D.C. and S.F., 1987**

When people ask me today when I knew the Quilt would catch on, I say always. From that first night at the federal building I just knew it would work—that people would be touched and respond. But for all my sureness, it was maddening trying to explain the idea, because I didn’t have anything to show. When I told friends I wanted to take ten thousand quilts and lay them out on the Mall in Washington, D.C., on October 11 for the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights, they really thought I’d lost it.

Finally, after a year and a half of thinking and scribbling on napkins, Joseph Durant and I sat down and made a list of forty men we felt we knew well enough to make quilts for, and in February began cranking them out, each of them three feet by six feet. The panels were that size because of the vision of bulldozing the Castro and leaving only corpses lying in the sun. I wanted to show the space that would be taken up by each of those bodies, about the dimensions of a grave. I told Joseph that we’d sew them into twelve-by-twelve-foot squares, large enough to be efficient and small enough that people could reach out and touch the fabric as they walked around them. Joining them together that way also allowed flexibility, so that some of the panels could be made horizontally and some vertically, like the parquet pattern on the floor of my grandfather’s house.

All this was fine with Joseph until he started talking about how we were going to have to build scaffolding to hold it up. I said, no, the power of it comes from laying it flat on the ground. Joseph was adamant that it should be up in the air like a flag, but I knew that that would totally alter the experience. We use both methods of display today, and you can see the difference. If you view the Quilt hanging upright, you have a very different experience from what you have when it’s flat on the ground. You’re much less conscious of your surroundings when you’re looking down and
more likely to pause and perhaps kneel and touch it. The argument spiraled out of control, and, unfortunately, Joseph decided he couldn’t work with me any longer.

I knew then, as I’ve always known, that I couldn’t do it alone, and I asked Gilbert Baker, who I knew was a good seamstress, to become technical director. But Gilbert, who’d created the rainbow flag, wanted to be called artistic director. And then Ron Cordova came on board also demanding that title. I told them both that there was to be no artistic director. The only artistic director would be the people who made these things. All we do is gather them, uncensored, unedited, and sew them together. Our only job is to display them. Fortunately, Ron decided to put up with me in the end, agreeing to become technical director, and he worked like a dog getting things ready for October.

With the Quilt itself begun, we needed someone with management experience, able to oversee the resources and the money I expected to start coming in. I was living at the time with Atticus Tysen, a sweet young man I’d met at Quaker meeting. He told me about Michael Smith, a fellow Stanford MBA who was looking for work. I couldn’t offer a salary, but I had something better, a cause. Mike was the first person I convinced to give me his life. We were a terrible mismatch, and for three years we treated each other with incredible cruelty. But we worked together starting up the Quilt, and it wouldn’t have happened without him.

The key to getting any idea off the ground is reaching people, letting them know and see what it is you’re pushing, and so sometime in May we called a public meeting. We plastered the Castro with flyers and rented the Women’s Building for a couple of hours for our meeting, but as the time drew near, I was stricken with anxiety and became convinced that no one would show up. I was wrong. Two people came: Cindi “Gert” McMullin and Jack Caster. They’d both made quilts much more sophisticated than Joseph’s and mine. Gert’s was for AIDS activist Roger Lyon: an intricate design containing eighteen notes written to Roger from a class of fifth graders he’d spoken to. The notes were really wonderful, and captured the fierce loyalty and love these kids felt for Roger. They said such wonderfully innocent things, like, “I hope you get out of this tuff spot” and “If you don’t get well you owe me 5 dollars.” She’d eventually make two more for him.
The quilt Jack made for his lovers Wade and Joe has always been one of my favorites. It’s a double panel connected across the top with a ribbon spelling out a line of mystic gibberish. Just before he died, deep in dementia, Wade lifted his head off the pillow and with this joyful look said, “I’ve got it, the median above to be three!” Jack had no idea what this message meant, but I think it reflected the confusion we all faced—nothing made sense. I love quilts inscribed with something nonsensical, code words and pet names or an evocative sentence like *Remember that night in August* . . . You’re allowed a glimpse of the intimate communication that existed between these people. That’s what matters most about the Quilt, that it allows us to lose our cynicism in connection with someone we love and to make private declarations public.

Although Gert and Jack were treasures and quickly became an integral part of our team, the meeting could be looked on only as a failure. The idea was catching on too slowly; we’d never get to D.C. if the Quilt remained an underground effort largely confined to the gay community in San Francisco. In spite of our fears, not one of us gave in to hopelessness. We all had so much riding on it, and so all of us—Gert, Jack, and Mike, the nucleus of the early days—tried to analyze exactly what would make it work. The one thing we’d always had trouble with was explaining the idea in conversation. People needed a visual representation to grasp the idea, something they could see and touch.

Getting the Quilt out there, in front of as many people as possible, became our goal that late spring of 1987. We expected to get a good deal of publicity at the upcoming gay and lesbian pride festival. There’d be upward of 250,000 people attending the event, and we would be able to talk with hundreds of them as they stopped by our booth. Also, I’d been invited to speak at the opening ceremonies and would talk about the Quilt and invite all 250,000 to join us, both in making a quilt and in making the presentation in D.C.

Jack came up with a great idea. I remember him saying, “Cleve, you know Mayor Feinstein. Why don’t you get her to hang the Quilt in front of city hall during the week of gay pride?” We were all immediately excited. City hall sits on one of the busiest streets in the city, so no one could miss seeing those panels hanging on the ornate neoclassical facade. It would be a coup. I’d known Mayor Feinstein casually when I worked for Harvey
while he was a supervisor, but our relationship had been a little cool since
White Night, and I wasn’t sure how she’d react. But as always in those
early days, we had to make the effort. Also, as Jack quite rightly pointed
out, with elections coming up, Dianne’s support might help her chances
of retaining the mayoralty in ways a refusal would not. “It would be good
for her,” said Jack. It made sense, so I dredged up the only decent shirt
in my closet and went down to make my pitch. It was easy. I remember
the mayor twiddling with that ever-present red silk bow at her neck and
saying, “I think it would be wonderful.” She’s got a firm handshake.

Soon after, Warren Caton sent us the stunningly beautiful panels he’d
made for Liberace and Rock Hudson. Exquisitely embroidered and daz-
zling when the light sparkled on the sequins and glitter, these two were
like the first in a series of good-luck charms to come. The next break we
got came thanks to Scott Lago, who also joined our team. Lloyd Phelps,
a coworker of his at Neiman Marcus, had died, and Scott suggested that
a quilt would be a wonderful memorial. The company loved the idea, and
the entire staff of the visual-display department created a quilt for Lloyd.
It was beautiful, a block of golden beige with two kittens on the left side
playing with a strand of yarn that curled from their paws into Lloyd’s
name and then rolled into a ball on the right. Accompanying the quilt was
a dedicatory note: “Lloyd Phelps—an Illinois farm boy with a talent for
producing the most elegant and sophisticated table settings. He loved his
cats and working on his Victorian flat. He was the gentlest of men, with
an improbably deep voice. He was kind, giving, and talented, and all of us
who worked with him miss him very much.”

His panel, along with forty others, was featured in the forty-foot-high
front window of the San Francisco Neiman Marcus store in August 1987.
The NM display facing Union Square, San Francisco’s choicest shopping
area, really helped us break through the perception that the Quilt was
for and about activist Castro clones. We now had chic! And our new
legitimacy translated into a big jump in volunteers, donations, and quilt
makers.

Things were really breaking our way in those early months. But as
our profile grew, so did the flak. The Quilt was fast becoming “our thing,”
meaning the property of those who’d lost and continued to lose their
gay friends. Feeling ownership of something so explosively emotional was
only natural and has propelled the Quilt to its current stature. But in some cases, that proprietary interest fought against the Quilt’s overarching goal, which was to connect all people, regardless of age, race, and sexual orientation, in the fight against AIDS.

All this came to a head over the pope’s visit to San Francisco in June. He was coming to Mission Dolores, which is right in the middle of the gay and Hispanic neighborhoods. When the pope visits a church, the local congregation decides how to welcome him, and the people at Mission Dolores had asked us to bring some sections of the Quilt to the ceremony.

That set off an uproar. While I saw the pope’s acknowledgment as a useful breakthrough, others were outraged. They said the Quilt was made for gays by gays, and it was sacrilege to present it to a homophobe, the man who represents the Catholic patriarchy, two thousand years of oppression. The loudest naysayers were the ACT UP people, a new generation of gay activists for whose identity AIDS was an explosive part. It’s not enough to make a quilt, they sneered; the Quilt is a passive thing. The pope’s blessing, they felt, would be a mockery of everything they had fought for. I took a few deep breaths and told them then, as I tell them now, that we never said the Quilt is enough. It’s one response among thousands, not the final answer. Their faces would harden, and I’d repeat that we would never restrict participation, that we weren’t going to exclude anybody. It was no use. I was an Uncle Tom, a sellout, afraid of my own sexuality . . . and on and on. I didn’t know it then, but Mission Dolores marked the beginning of a long argument with a small minority of people who hate the Quilt. There’s nothing to be done about turning them around.

By mid-July, we had about one hundred panels, all of them stored on Mike Smith’s back porch, and we began to look for a workshop to display and assemble them. Though we had absolutely no money, we leased an empty storefront on Market Street, just by the intersection at Castro. This was a huge move for us. Having a space really made us feel as if it were all going to happen. It seemed cavernous—especially when we set up our single sewing machine, a brave little Singer, on a rickety table. We had nothing else back then—no chairs, no tables, nothing but an incredible amount of light fixtures: the previous tenant had been a furniture store, and the ceiling was a maze of track lighting.
I still marvel at our optimism. I just taped a sheet of butcher paper on the front door with the announcement “This is the new home of the NAMES Project and here is our wish list.” We needed everything from sequins, beads, fabric, and glue to extension cords, computers, telephones, lights, and furniture. At the end of the list, I added, “back rubs, hugs, and money.”

The response was incredible. Within two weeks we were given ten sewing machines (three industrial models!), and volunteers started streaming in. Mike always says it couldn’t have happened anywhere else in the country, and he’s right. Local merchants paid the first month’s rent. Someone left an anonymous gift of five hundred dollars in the donation box, and a hunky chiropractor regularly gave free massages to volunteers who sewed evenings until midnight. Very soon our shelves were overflowing with needles, bobbins, thread, and fabric.

The workshop was magical and at the same time devastating. Every day someone would walk in and recognize a name on the panel, learning for the first time that a friend had died. Guys with AIDS would come in to make their own quilt, then stop coming as they became too sick to work. Sometimes a friend or family member would come by and take the panel to the sick man’s house or hospital bed so he could work on it. More often, we just went ahead and finished it for him. There wasn’t a day that I didn’t cry, but the miracle of it was that over the sound of the sewing machines you’d hear laughter, and it got to be a tradition to sing a rendition of “There’s No Business Like Sew Business.” Everyone was finally able to train their emotions and energies on something concrete.

Though the majority of volunteers were gay men, there were also lots of straight people coming through our doors to donate time and money: children walked in with their fathers; mothers came by with a quilt they’d made for their husband or son. After a few weeks we realized that the epidemic reached far beyond our little world. And that the Quilt meant something outside the Castro.

In midsummer the *New Yorker* ran an article, and then *People* magazine did a story, as well as the *Dallas Morning News*. After each burst of publicity, we’d get more quilts, including some from people who’d never known the person they were memorializing. When *Newsweek* published a series of photographs profiling 352 people who had died of AIDS, panels
began arriving from people who’d been moved by that piece. There was one we received from a man named Michael Lueders to honor Curt Norrup. Curt had broken up with his lover and attempted suicide. The hospital would not release him until he found a place to stay. Michael, who’d never met Curt except through the article, and who had no experience with AIDS, took him into his home and nursed him through the last months, quickly learning how to handle the mundane chores of caring for a bedridden patient, as well as the more difficult tasks, like handling Curt during his seizures.

The quilt he made for Curt is simple: black cloth letters sewn into gray fabric with pink elephants. Attached was a note: “I spent 14 hours sewing with a lot of love and needle pricks but it was well worth it. I knew nothing of his life when I took him in and because of that we became good friends. I pray that our short time together provided him some laughter and hopefully some joy.”

During that first summer it felt very much like we were launching a small business on a shoestring budget. Nothing was easy, and most of the day-to-day strains fell on Mike Smith. He was part sergeant, part nanny, dealing with everything from overdue bills to staffing problems. While Mike was putting out fires, I was on the road trying to raise our national profile. Begging plane tickets from rich friends and flight attendants, I’d go to cities around the country, hit every gay bar, and convince the manager to let me into the DJ booth and make an announcement about the Quilt presentation at the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Washington. I learned to keep my speech short or suffer the taunts of queens impatient for a disco fix. But for every jerk there were ten or twenty men and women who listened and promised to come.

Every morning I was at home, I’d go to the post office on Eighteenth Street to see if there were any packages. It was a great day if there was one. Usually there weren’t any, and as we went into summer things looked bleak. By mid-July we had less than a hundred quilts, and those were overwhelmingly from the Castro. We’d set the deadline for August 1, just a few weeks away.

One day in late July, having returned from a weeklong swing through Texas, I was standing in line at the post office when one of the clerks looked at me and said, “Oh, it’s Mr. Jones!” And his pal raised an eyebrow
and chirped, “Does Mr. Jones want his mail?” I was used to a certain amount of ribbing. I knew I’d been a pest and that the Castro post office had a high camp quotient, but I was really puzzled when they opened the door to the back room and asked, “Did you bring a truck?” I went through and saw bins, big canvas postal bins, filled with paper packages, hundreds of them.

I called over to the workshop and told them to bring whatever cars were available and park them on Eighteenth and Collingwood. We set up a relay line, picking bundles up out of the bins and passing them through the post office lobby and over the sidewalk into the cars. As we did this, I read out the postmarks and everybody cheered. Two more from Texas! Yeah, Texas. Here’s some from New York City! Yeah, New York City. Here’s one from Delaware. Yeah, Delaware! Here’s one from Virginia! Montana! . . . Montana?

After several minutes, it got very quiet. I think all of us, without saying anything, realized how weird this was, that all across the country people were taking the names of their dead loved ones and pouring all their anger and pain and grief and love into creating works of art and then sending them to a group of strangers at a post office box.

Seeing these panels piled up in the workshop got me thinking about how we’d display them. We all agreed it was very important for people to be able to get close enough to touch the quilts they’d made. We expected they would want to leave mementos like flowers or notes. So we decided to take four of the twelve-foot squares and link them together with grommets and cable ties to form a larger square that was twenty-four feet by twenty-four feet. Canvas walkways would separate each square, so everyone would be able to get within twelve feet of a panel.

The next question was, How do we present it? How do we unfold it? Is there a ceremony, a ritual? Many ideas were advanced, but with all my Quaker mistrust of rituals, I did not want anything fancy or portentous, no music or fanfare or sermons. What we needed was a very simple, dignified, powerful way of revealing the Quilt. Nothing seemed quite right. One morning Jack Caster stumbled in with a terrible hangover and pockets full of wadded-up cocktail napkins, which he excitedly unfolded on my desk. “I’ve figured it out,” he announced. With a rather grand flourish he said, “I call it the lotus fold!” He showed me sketches
of a twelve-by-twelve section with eight panels, then began folding them in, corners to the center, corners to the center, until it was a neat bundle. The idea was to position one bundle in the center of each twelve-by-twelve square of the grid. “When it comes time, we’ll have a team of eight people do the unfolding. The first four will reach in and pull out the first four corners, the second four will do likewise, and so on until it’s flat. Then we’ll just pull it out and it will fit into the grid.” Sheer genius.

We all agreed it was a simple and elegant solution. But what would the unfolders wear? Should they be dressed alike? If they wore street clothes, wouldn’t the colors clash with the Quilt? Black seemed too dark and Druidic; maybe something neutral would work best. White was suggested, then shot down as too nurselike. I thought of the all nurses I’d met in the last few years in AIDS wards across the country and how much love and support they had given. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea. They were heroes. Many were lesbians who had volunteered to care for the AIDS patients others feared to touch. So we decided that the unfolding ceremony would consist of teams dressed in white, unfolding the lotus-folded panel squares while the names were being read. We went to practice at the Stanford University football field and got it all down.

That final week before the display was exhausting and inspiring. Everything was coming down now to hours and minutes. Though we’d moved the deadline to September 15 and had by then received 720 panels, another 1,200 had just arrived. Each one had to be hemmed to exactly three feet by six feet, then sewn into a twelve-by-twelve square, and then the entire piece again edged in canvas. Grommets were sewn on to hold the fabric in place within the grid of intersecting walkways. The walkways were made of nine-foot-wide white fabric, which in turn had to be measured and cut to the exact size that Ron Cordova, the technical director, had worked out over so many nights pacing up the street from our warehouse to the Café Flore, precisely the right distance.

We had so much help from so many people. Jeff Kuball, an attendant for the air-freight company Flying Tigers, not only had organized a quilt to be made in honor of three coworkers, but had persuaded seventy Tigers employees to donate time and money so that we could fly the Quilt to D.C. and back. It weighed just under seven thousand pounds. Thousands
of yards of fabric, thousands of metal grommets, 1,920 names, so much love and loss.

When we got to D.C. for the display, Michael Bento snuck us into some empty dorms at Georgetown University (which had just voted to ban gay and lesbian organizations). We used their computers and phone lines to prepare for our invasion of the District of Columbia.

At about one in the morning on October 11, 1987, ten years after Harvey Milk first called for the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights, we formed a caravan and made our way through Georgetown up Pennsylvania Avenue to the Mall: the trucks with the Quilt, a thirty-three-foot Winnebago, and a pickup truck with a four-ton scissor lift. It was eerily quiet, and so dark that we used flashlights to layout the walkways and set up the tables and microphone. Plastic sheeting was set down to protect the cloth panels from the damp grass. At 5 a.m. we were only halfway through laying out the grid, but at dawn we were ready, bundles in position. At 7 a.m. the set-up team held hands in a circle. We’d done it! Ron Cordova’s calculations had worked out, Steve Abbeyta’s grommets held the panels in place—my vision had come true.

And then things went wrong. At the precise moment we began the unfolding, a panicked voice hissed urgently on my earphone, “We fucked up, it doesn’t fit.” Somehow, we’d set the bundles at wrong angles and when the Quilt was laid out, it extended over the walkways. Thank God for Gert. Very calmly and without the least hesitation, she got on the radio and told the unfolders to lift the Quilt in unison, move it a quarter turn to the left, then set it down. They performed faultlessly. The fabric billowed skyward, catching the first rays of sunlight on the sequins and rhinestones, and then settled gently, perfectly, into place—now a permanent part of every display procedure.

As dawn became day, thousands of people lined the perimeter, and I stepped slowly to the podium in the shadow of the Jefferson Memorial. I have almost no memory of walking to the podium, no words to describe the emotion flooding my heart as I read those twenty-four names, each so precious and containing in a few syllables entire lives. I began with Marvin Feldman. It was extremely difficult to speak slowly and deliberately, pausing between each name, and my voice began breaking down at the end of the list. Other readers were Art Agnos, Whoopi Goldberg, Robert
Blake, Lily Tomlin, Harvey Fierstein, and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. Joseph Papp, producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival, ended his list of names with a tribute to “my dear friend and colleague Michael Bennett.” Then, in front of photographers, with his wife, Gail, at his side, Papp untied the ribbons around the red fabric roll under his arm and flourished a shimmering panel emblazoned with Michael Bennett’s name and a metallic sunburst, the design from Bennett’s most famous Broadway production, *A Chorus Line*. He then walked over to the check-in area and turned it in with the other panels that continued to arrive through the day.

And so, a year and a day after Marvin’s death, on October 11, 1987, we unfolded nearly two thousand quilts on the National Mall. It looked incredible. Nothing prepared me for its beauty. There were plain panels of stark white with black lettering and extravagant ones with gold lamé encrusted with rhinestones and silver braid. There was every material, from tweed to leather to silk, and of course ribbons and beads and glitter galore. And everything you could imagine was sewn onto the fabric: locks of hair, record albums, souvenir postcards, a Barbie doll, whistles, crystals, a motorcycle jacket, a tuxedo, a shard of glass, foam rubber french fries, toy cars, a thimble, a cowboy hat, teddy bears, a pink Lacoste shirt, a Buddhist’s saffron robe, and even a padded jock strap. Notes were scribbled in corners; others were sewn in. Some panels held the ashes of the people they memorialized.

And then there were the letters, hundreds of them, that people had sent along with the panels they’d made. On the back of one of those, decorated with a drawing of twelve candles, three lighted and nine extinguished, Lance Hecox wrote, “To 12 men I expected to grow old with. Nine who have passed on and three who will join them soon.”

My friend Gert McMullin wrote of her own grief in one of the most touching letters of them all:

Roger, The day I met you, my best friend of ten years told me he had fallen madly in love with you and that you would be living together. Oh yes, and that you had AIDS. Oh Roger—please forgive me for the ten minutes that it took me to stop hating you. I didn’t know you and all I could feel was anger and then panic that David might become ill. And I had loved him for so long and I didn’t know you at all!
Memories of you are not ones most people share. Wheelchairs, hospital waiting rooms, watching you fall, trying to help you up without you being mad that someone had to help you, watching you sleep, and (the most fun!) talking about all of David’s faults and nasty habits while lying in bed.

Few memories, true . . . but what I have is all stored very tenderly in my heart.

Roger, I have learned one thing in my life. Don’t get to know someone and become friends after they died. I never got the chance to run and play with you or to watch you have the time to be happy.

You have given me one thing—a determination to be the kind of person you would admire. One who touches, wants to be touched and cares. Your respect is my ultimate goal.

Love you so, Gert

Most of the letters came from men mourning their dead lovers. This one, from Paul Hill, talked of the secrecy that was necessary even after his friend’s death:

Out of all those people who loved Ric and attended his funeral, only a handful knew that he died of AIDS. Being gay and having lived a lie, it was no problem lying about death as well. My lover who died of pneumocystis quickly became a roommate who died of viral pneumo-nia. This sham angers me now, but during that period of vulnerability which occurs immediately after a great loss, one can be talked into just about anything. This scenario repeats itself many times a day all over the United States. There are just too many people who don’t realize that this awful disease has already touched their lives.

Art Peterson from Atlanta made a quilt for his lover Reggie Hightower and enclosed this note:

Ours was a unique relationship. We had lots of obstacles which we overcame to make our relationship grow: He was deaf, I was hearing; he was black, I was white; we were both gay and proud. We agreed that
these were the happiest times of our lives. We lived and shared a totally “married” life.

I don’t have many ideas on how he should be memorialized—perhaps a carving on the side of Stone Mountain here in Georgia. I feel it’s a shame that I can’t convey to others how great a life he lived—for he left no mark to be forever immortalized except deep within those people he loved and those who loved him. How do I fully express his life to those who never met him? The memories are so wonderful and yet they cause so much pain.

His panel is composed of shirts that he wore—some his, some mine. They were hand-sewn (by me) with double thread and double sewn in places for strength and durability. Please display it prominently.

The handsign in the middle is sign language for “I Love You.”

Sincerely, Art

There are so many stories from that first display. Years before, Hank Wilson had introduced me to Donald Montwell and Jim Maness. They had organized the protest when Dan White was released from jail and fifty thousand people shut down San Francisco. By 1987 Jim was very ill. At the behest of Donald, who’d managed the Valencia Rose cabaret, where Whoopi Goldberg got her start, Whoopi agreed to come to the first display. On Saturday, before we opened the Quilt to the public, Whoopi and Donald and I took Jim out in his wheelchair for a private viewing. As it was quite chilly, Jim borrowed Whoopi’s jacket, a shiny silk road crew jacket emblazoned with “Whoopi.” He never gave it back and was buried in it not long after returning to San Francisco. I think he was holding on just to be at display. It meant so much to so many people.

The response to that first display was overwhelming, something I had not imagined or planned for. I’m convinced that every single person who saw the Quilt with their own eyes became an evangelist, telling a few friends who told others, really turning the tide of grassroots support. And certainly the newspaper coverage spread the word. We were on the front page of newspapers around the world, even as far away as New Delhi.

But the thing that put us front and center in millions of Americans’ minds was the night I was profiled on television by Peter Jennings as a
“Person of the Week” on the ABC Evening News. I first heard about it just two hours before airtime in a phone call from ABC. I thanked the man and hung up, not really believing it. A few friends came over, and we sat around the TV. Nobody bothered to set up a VCR. Jennings started out by saying, “This week the plight of a little girl who fell down a hole has drawn us together,” and I thought, OK, I’ve been bumped by little Jessica McClure. And then he went on, “But tonight we’re honoring another person who’s brought us together in a different way.” And there I was, big as life, walking around the Quilt on television in living rooms all across America.

If we thought press coverage had been good, it soon became great. The impact of the Quilt beamed to millions of homes, with mourners walking among two football fields of panels, packed an incredible emotional wallop. It seemed like the whole country was watching television that night, and the calls and letters just poured into the workshop.

When we got home to San Francisco, the mailbox was overflowing. People all over America had been inspired by the panels and had sent us poems and photographs, paintings, screenplays, and play scripts. There were designs for posters, for T-shirts, and caps. And every day brought letters from all over the country and around the world, many accompanied by quilts. I remember one letter from a mother whose two sons had died. She opened by saying she hoped it was acceptable that she has put their names together on a single panel. They were very close friends, she explained, and then she asked to pray for all of us: “I have two more gay sons. I live in fear.” Another woman wrote of her ignorance and shame, telling of a time when a dying friend who’d been deserted by his lover and family had reached out for a hug and she’s hesitated, afraid of being infected. She hoped he would forgive her.

Some of the letters came from people who’d made quilts for a person they’d never known. “I’m just a housewife,” wrote a woman from Nebraska. “I thought there would be no recognition from his family. I felt bad about that. I feel bad about all the people who die of AIDS that nobody knows.”

Every letter was different, but they all said that same thing: please bring us the Quilt, let us remember our dead. And that’s when I knew that we couldn’t close up shop. We had to go on the road and bring the
Quilt to everyone, in whatever town they lived, large or small. The letters and the quilts have never stopped coming.

We had no idea that Quilt would last beyond that day. I was looking for a symbol to focus the nation on the epidemic at a time when many of us had lost hope. I hoped it could be a tool for healing families divided by homophobia and believed it might unite the nation against the plague. But I saw it mainly as evidence, as mediagenic proof of the enormity of the crisis of killing thousands. For all the beauty and tenderness of each panel, the hard fact was that someone of value had died to make it happen. The Quilt was and is an activist symbol—comforting, yes, but mortally troubling. If it raised a single question, it was, What are we going to do about it? That was the challenge we laid at the national doorstep.

On December 17, 1987, we displayed the Quilt in San Francisco. I’d like to say we had a sense of returning victorious to our hometown and that, back with so many familiar faces, we had a feeling of accomplishment, but for me it was a bittersweet time. Even the fact that the display was held at the newly built Moscone Center, named for Mayor George Moscone, contained an element of ambiguity. And I couldn’t help wondering, as I walked among the panels, which of my friends would soon have their names stitched with so many others.

I don’t mean to suggest that any of my reflections betrayed doubt of our mission. Of that I was rock certain. Neither then nor in the intervening years, over innumerable interviews with reporters and journalists, did I ever flag in telling the story of the Quilt and what we stood for and what we were trying to do. My date book for that month is filled with appointments with ABC, CBS, the Chronicle, the Examiner, and many smaller local papers. Telling one person who would tell hundreds or thousands of people what we’re about has always given me a sense of fulfillment, and in that sense the Moscone display was wonderful.

Certainly, the red-carpet embrace from our fellow San Franciscans was encouraging. All the politicians were there for the opening ceremonies, including Art Agnos, then the newly elected mayor, along with Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, who’d been one of our earliest supporters and has continued to steer us around bureaucratic tar pits to this day. It was through her good offices that we secured space on the Mall in D.C. just
weeks before, and later, in February 1989, she nominated the Quilt for a Nobel Prize. I remember one conversation with her at the San Francisco display when I’d thanked her for the fund-raisers she’d hosted early that summer. She smiled and said with a combination of relief and amazement that she and other politicians had helped raise money out of to loyalty to me, admitting that for all her enthusiasm she’d never imagined that the Quilt would catch on as it had. In this and so many other instances, it was wonderful to be able to return in faith to the people—especially the volunteers and donors—who’d placed their trust in us.

For all the good strokes and sheer relief of being home, I had a sense that we had just begun, that we must hurry. Being HIV-positive may have played a part in my wanting to rush on. I was symptom free, but many others were not. Though we had elevated AIDS to a new level of awareness, mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in the fight against the disease, there had been no accompanying breakthrough in medicine. The fear that dogged my trail that fall was a very simple question: Has our work come in time to make a difference?

One evening after the closing ceremonies I returned to the workshop, exhausted both physically and emotionally, and sat down alone in that quiet, cavernous room, sorting through the stacks of mail at a small table in the back. After a while, I got the feeling I was being watched. We never did lock the doors in those days; never saw the need. I turned and saw an old black woman staring through the front window. She had on a blue dress and matching hat and had a deeply lined, dark face. I went out and said, “We’re open, if you want to come in.” She just crossed her arms and looked down, wouldn’t make eye contact, and came in sideways through the door without saying anything. I went back to my desk, and she walked around. I saw her touch one of the quilts. She picked up a brochure and left without saying a word.

A few days passed. I was again at the workshop. The radio was blaring, the sewing machines were going, there was a couple crying in one corner, there was a group laughing in another corner—just the general chaos and hubbub. And in the middle of this confusion I again got this back-of-the-neck sensation that I was being watched. I turned, and it was the same woman, standing on the sidewalk, scowling through the door, her arms across her chest, wearing the same blue dress.
As she came in the door, I noticed a bundle of fabric in her arms. She walked straight over to me and began her story. She’d come on a Greyhound bus from a small town in Kentucky. A year and a half earlier, her oldest son had returned from Los Angeles, where he’d settled after being discharged from the army. He’d come home to die. Though she was the choir director at her church and had a large, close family, she cared for her son for a year without ever revealing the nature of his disease to anyone.

When it was time for her son to die, she took him to the county hospital. After two days he died. She walked back home and, opening the front door, looked across the living room to her son’s bedroom; and through the doorway she could see the hospital bed, the stack of towels, the IV rack, the bedpan. She closed the door to his room and locked it shut.

Several months passed, and she grieved alone, never uttering a word of the truth, never opening the door to her son’s room. One day, while she was waiting at the dentist’s office, she happened to read a story about the Quilt in a back issue of *People* magazine, went home, and packed a bag. For four days she’d ridden the bus from Kentucky to San Francisco, and now, she said, “I’m at the end.” The whole time she’d talked she had been standing ramrod straight. Now she handed me the bundled quilt in her arms and said, “This is my son. I’m going to go home now and clean out his room.”

There was nothing to say to this woman that she didn’t already know. I stood still and she made her quiet way out the door, pausing only once to give a quick wave—not to me in particular, but to all of us and the quilts and what it all meant. And I felt so proud at that moment, that we in San Francisco, who were mainly young and white and gay, had created a symbol that had traveled across America to this old black woman alone with her grief in the hills of Appalachia and connected her and her son and their struggle with all of us.

I never doubted the Quilt or my place within its mission, but whatever lingering fears I had at the end of that first year about whether I would be up to the task of shepherding a national, even international, project simply vanished after my encounter with that old black woman. Her fortitude gave me the strength and confidence to carry on and brought me to a final acceptance of something I’d struggled with for a long time—my place as a gay man in the world.
The Quilt required me to change. Whether it is the pope or the woman from Kentucky, the Quilt touches something intensely private and personal in everyone who sees it. I had to learn to listen to those feelings, those fears and hopes—not just of my sorrowing brothers, but of everyone who even for a moment had opened up and recognized a common humanity, a link between all of us. For ten years I lived in the gay ghetto, shouted through the bullhorn, marched, and been arrested and jailed. My friends were gay, the music I listened to was gay oriented, the movies I saw had something to do with being gay, and except for a few family holidays it was a closed world. But now our goals demanded a different attitude, a wider reference. Certainly I wanted to startle Middle America and shake them up, but shocking people, hollering, “Look out, America, we’re coming!” just didn’t work. Times had changed, and the Quilt was part of the way we would survive and possibly prevail.