

PILGRIMAGE OF REMEMBRANCE

Michigan residents join thousands for D.C. Quilt display

FEATURE

BY TIM RETZLOFF

Seeing the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt on full display in Washington, D.C., Marny Weting's first impression was, "It probably takes that much fabric to soak up that many tears."

Weting, a registered nurse from Marquette, made the trip last month with the NAMES Project - Metro Detroit Chapter on a chartered bus. Fifty people, parents of individuals lost to AIDS, people who are HIV-positive, activists and friends, took the 12 hour ride from Dearborn. These and others from across Michigan and across the nation journeyed to attend what may be the final complete showing of the ever expanding Quilt.

Covering the equivalent of 22 football fields and representing 12 percent of all AIDS deaths in the U.S., the mammoth memorial stretched along a mile of the National Mall. Over the weekend of Oct. 11-13, the Quilt attracted an estimated 1 million visitors.

Soon after the initial unfolding Friday morning, the names of the dead echoed down the Mall, from the Capitol to the Washington Monument, as if across a



BTL photo/Tim Retzloff: Mary Ellen Bell of Royal Oak reads names of individuals remembered in the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. (above)
BTL photo/Tim Retzloff: Visitors pause within the quiet space of the Quilt. (right)

canyon, a canyon of color, a chasm of 40,000 coffin-size panels for those lost to AIDS. The Quilt included panels for hundreds of the dead with Michigan connections, from John Paul Stebbas of Hancock to Mitch Kuipers of Holland.

C l e v e Jones, who created the first panel of the Quilt a decade ago to remember his friend M a r v i n Feldman, began the ceremonial reading. Over

the course of the weekend, all 70,000 names depicted on the Quilt were recited from five sepa-

rate stages.

Vice President Al Gore and his wife Tipper joined in the reading Friday morning. On Friday afternoon President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton visited the display. It was the first time a president had viewed the Quilt in its nine year history.

At the Midwest podium, Jeffrey Davis, a horticulturist from Battle Creek, read several times in honor of his lover, Frank Rudnick. Rudnick died from AIDS in 1990. Davis, who drove to D.C. to attend, said, "It was a feeling of awe. The reading of the Quilt only makes me want to do more." He added that the experience was also painful for him. "Let us always remember and never forget."

As to Clinton's visit to the memorial, Davis suggested that



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the Quilt should give the president a better understanding of the scope of the epidemic, making him more receptive to increasing funding for AIDS research and education. "I'm sure this moved him," Davis said.

Stephanie Harris also read names. She was among eight students and three adults from the Red Ribbon Club at Ferndale High School to ride the bus from Dearborn under sponsorship of the Detroit NAMES Project. The club, formed to increase AIDS awareness, began its third year this fall.

On Friday and Saturday mornings the group helped unfold the Quilt and volunteered for several hours both days. The students also did some sightseeing. "It's been great," Harris said of the trip after her turn reading names.

Rosemary Spatafora, one of the parents on the trip, became involved in the NAMES Project after her brother, Tony Knobbloch, died in Nov. 1991. She and her sister sewed his panel, clustering pink hearts signed by Tony's family in the Detroit area and friends in Charlotte, N.C. This panel became part of the Quilt in June of 1992.

Later that year Spatafora attended the D.C. display with her husband and two sons. In the four years since, the entire Quilt has doubled in size. Reacting to the growth, Spatafora said, "It's just so overwhelming and sad."

"The Quilt itself is visually beautiful, but what it represents is so much loss, pain and suffering," Spatafora remarked. Highlighting the trip for her was seeing the students discover "what it's like to be an activist" and become involved in something they believed.

Bob Whitney of Lincoln Park, helped coordinate the bus from Dearborn. Whitney sees the Quilt as a "comfortable yet dramatic" means of educating and a "good mechanism to grieve and honor people." He expressed pride that the Detroit NAMES Project coordinated a bus and sensed great appreciation of those on the bus.

A retired microbiologist from Detroit Medical Center, Whitney has been active with the NAMES Project since 1993. "I'm involved because I'm positive," he said, revealing that he contracted HIV nine years ago. "I don't see an end to this, and we need to stop it," he said. "I don't want anyone else to go through what I'm going through."

Whitney participated in Saturday's unfolding with

his college-age daughter. Along with this, the most significant part of the weekend for Whitney was participating in the National AIDS Candlelight March held Saturday evening. He witnessed barriers disappear as thousands came together for the same purpose of commemoration.

The march, led by actress Elizabeth Taylor, started at the steps of the Capitol and finished with a mass vigil at the Lincoln Memorial. Speakers at the rally included Mary Fisher, who noted, "Some scoff at a rag tag memorial stretched along the lawn." Evoking an image of dying loved ones wrapped in cloth, she added, "But they would only scoff if they were not there at the end." Actress Judith Light, quoting poet Dylan Thomas, urged those gathered, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Rob Bader, executive director of Wellness HIV/AIDS Services in Flint, found the candlewalk an uplifting and necessary counterpart to the sobering Quilt. Joining in the procession, "restores my sense of hope," he said.

Calling the Quilt a "very powerful political tool,"

Bader said, "I'm glad to see it in Washington in an election year. It's the best way to truly remember the people represented in the Quilt."

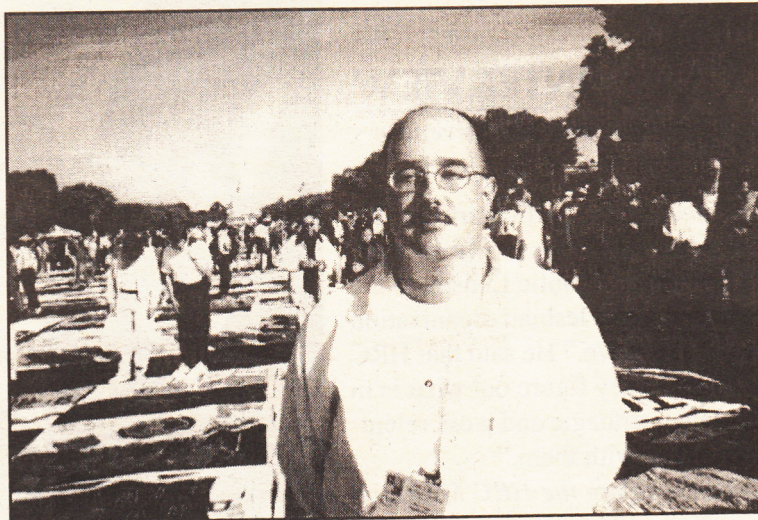
Other AIDS care workers gained meaning from the weekend, as well. Leon Golson, a Detroit man who is HIV-positive and who serves as Midwest AIDS Prevention Project program director, had never seen the Quilt in its entirety. "As an AIDS educator it

helps even me understand its impact," he said.

"The thing that stuck out for me were the waves of emotion," Golson said of the display. He was inspired by how the Quilt allowed people to penetrate emotional walls, the usual barriers to expressing feelings. For him the aisles between sections of the Quilt served as entryways into the most private sides of people. "It was very quiet, peaceful," he said.

Ava, a woman from Detroit who asked not to use her last name, wished she had brought her daughter. It was her first time seeing the Quilt. She had heard how large it was, but to see it, she said, was "overwhelming." Although she didn't personally know anyone with a panel, Ava does know people living with AIDS and people who have died. She was impressed by the patience and love that went into the Quilt. "There's a lot of people out there who care."

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BTL photo/Tim Retzlaff: Steve Austin, of Pleasant Ridge, served as ceremonies chair of the midwest region.

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During the weekend, the NAMES Project received over 4,000 new panels. Patrick Lombardi, volunteer and special events coordinator for the Lansing Area AIDS Network, turned in three panels, two for deceased friends who were LAAN volunteers, as gestures of remembrance. He commended the sensitivity of volunteers at the New Panel Check-in. "I felt very supported," Lombardi said.

Support and love underlay the making of each panel of the Quilt and propelled the collective pilgrimage to Washington. Marny Weting, her husband and two members of a Marquette AIDS support group called the Bridge, drove from the Upper Peninsula to join with the bus from Dearborn. They met up with six others from the support group, including a person from Escanaba, who flew in to D.C.

Nine years ago, Weting became a part-time AIDS coordinator for Marquette County and she helped found the Bridge group. "I knew a few people who were HIV-positive in the U.P. and feeling very alone." Compelled to get involved, she believed she could provide support without judgment. Even after leaving her position with the county, she remained involved in the group.

"By looking at the diversity that was there, you have to see that AIDS is everybody's problem. And the president certainly has to hear that the loudest," Weting said.

The relationships were important to continue, Weting explained. One year the group lost five members and they now have more relatives, friends and lovers than actual persons with AIDS. Weting has sewn two panels for members of the group who have died and she's contributed to others. While in Washington, she visited all the panels she knew.

"By looking at the diversity that was there, you have to see that AIDS is everybody's problem. And the president certainly has to hear that the loudest," Weting said on the bus ride home. "I wish I could get over the feeling that I didn't have to come again. I know I will have to come again."



At the Quilt, October 11, Washington, DC