

# The Names Project

by Danielle Comeau Canadian University Press

Washington - A crisp wind is sending a chill through the thousands of people already milling around Washington's capital area. Monumental buildings surround us, glowing an eerie white in the bright morning sunlight. The White House, the Lincoln memorial, the Capital building - seen so often on television - look unreal close up.

Beneath the looming Lincoln memorial, people are gathering for the largest demonstration of homeless people ever. By the end of the day, more than 150,000 people will pass by the monument, a stark reminder that in George Bush's 'gentler, kinder nation', millions of people live on the streets.

Across from the memorial is a huge oval-shaped lawn, called the Ellipse. It sits directly in front of the White House. The size of several football fields, it takes several minutes just to walk across. All around the Ellipse there is activity - volunteers, tourists, and curiosity seekers are waiting for the unfurling of the AIDS quilt.

Suddenly, hundreds of people wearing white "Names Project" sweatshirts move onto the Ellipse and start unfolding the largest quilt ever made. More than 10,000 individual panels, roughly the size of a grave and each representing someone who has died of AIDS, stretch across the field, with 49 miles of walkway weaving in between. The panels are made by the lovers, family or friends of someone who died of AIDS.

Seeing the quilt in its entirety leaves one with an overwhelming feeling of grief at the enormity of loss - so many people, young and in the prime of their lives. Statistics are dry and abstract: 60,000 dead of AIDS in the U.S., more than 100,000 reported AIDS cases. The numbers do not give any sense of the human face of this virus: real people die of AIDS, people we know, people we love. The quilt compels one to become emotionally involved.

At a podium nearby, beside the National Christmas tree, names of the dead are read throughout the three days of the quilt's showing. One after the other the names flow, read out by mothers, brothers, aunts, and lovers of the dead. Quietly they line up behind the podium, waiting to publicly share their grief, voice anger at government in-

action over AIDS funding, and drive home the senselessness of these deaths.

Thousands of people quietly wind their way through the quilt. Despite the size of the crowd, a silence hangs over the Ellipse. The reading of names and the roar of jets flying overhead from JFK Airport are the only sounds. Hundreds stand around the podium, watching the readers come up, one after the other. Most people weep openly. It is a scene of incredible grief, yet it is strangely empowering because of the strength of their commitment to not let us forget.

"As a recent PWA (person with AIDS)," says one reader, "I just want them (his dead friends) to know that I'm trying to hold up the strength in their memory." Another reader asks us to "remember my dear friend and roommate Michael Pitkin. Please say hello to him at panel 0914."

A young woman walks up to the microphone. Her voice breaking with emotion, she wants "to remember the most courageous person I've ever known - my brother Barry Nelson Roberts." Phrases such as, "my dear lover of 18 years," and "my precious only son," and "the best friend I ever had," stream out all day. The sense of loss is profound - these people are too young, much too young to be dying of this disease.

William Hibbs is talking energetically with a CBS news reporter at the Names Project's media centre. An AIDS activist with the Dr. James F. Holleran Memorial National AIDS Bereavement Centre, Hibbs has spent a gruelling day as the official spokesperson for the Names Project. "He's supposed to be sick," says one of the centre's staff, "but he's been going like this all day."

In the last two years, Hibbs has been hospitalised 16 times and suffered seven heart attacks. At age 39, he's dying of AIDS and has six months to live. "Yet, I'm one of the lucky ones," he says, because he has medical insurance and a support network helping him through his crisis. With medical bills of more than 200,000, and 1,500 in monthly prescriptions, AIDS is as crippling financially as it is physically.

"What happens to the individuals who fall through the crack? They're treated like lepers, and this is the sad thing - the loss of dignity. That's what the quilt is all about. You see the dignity in those quilts. You see

the love, and also the tears."

Soft spoken and charming, Hibbs is passionate about the Names Project and its role in the AIDS crisis. The quilt forces people to confront the reality that people in the prime of their lives are being killed by this disease.

"It's so vivid. It's like Sunday in the park, only the park is a cemetery." Hibbs hopes people come away from the quilt ready to be more responsible by practicing safe sex.

"If you have sex without using a condom or dental dam, you're playing Russian roulette," says Hibbs. "And I'm telling you one of those barrels is going to be loaded, and it's going to explode on you."

The quilt is an educational tool, drawing attention to the need for people to change their sexual practices. It also puts pressure on government officials to increase funding to AIDS programmes. Hibbs credits the Names Project and other activist groups with the continuing rise in funding levels over the past three years.

Hibbs travels all over the world speaking about AIDS, even though his health is precarious at best. "If someone can hear my voice and then go back and think about what they've heard, and from that go out and do something positive like hug an AIDS person, then it's worth it."

A San Francisco man named Cleve Jones, the executive director of the Names Project, first came up with the idea of the quilt in 1986. It was unveiled in 1987 in Washington to coincide with a huge march in support of lesbian and gay rights which drew nearly one million people. That year, there were 2,000 panels in the quilt. The following year, the quilt had grown to 8,200 panels, and this year the number is at more than 10,000. Yet this represents only a fraction of the people who have died of AIDS.

Jones says the quilt initially began as the lesbian and gay community's response to its devastation by AIDS, but it now reaches out to everyone affected by the epidemic. Earlier this year, sections of the quilt toured through 19 North American cities, including Montreal last June, in conjunction with the International Conference on AIDS.

It is a critical time in the AIDS crisis, according to Jones, and this year government leaders have been urged to come view the quilt. "Decisions about AIDS

made in the coming months will help decide whether the ultimate death toll from the pandemic is measured in tens of thousands or tens of millions," says Jones. "It is imperative that those decisions be made with compassion, and we know that seeing the quilt opens people's hearts and minds to the reality of this epidemic and the need for an immediate and compassionate response."

Thousands of people from the Housing Now demo, perhaps tired of listening to speeches or to the Jefferson Airplane, make their way from the Capital Mall to the Ellipse. Walking through

the quilt, one sees names we all know: Rock Hudson, Perry Ellis, Klaus Nomi, Robert Mapplethorpe. But sadder are the anonymous panels, or the ones with only first names or initials, such as "Baby Jessica", "Father Tom - you were a damn good priest", and "Goodbye Dad".

"You've got to remember that every person with AIDS is somebody's child and that we're not the stereotype's at all," says Hibbs. "You've seen actors out there (on the quilt), politicians, babies, young mothers, IV drug users... AIDS is the only thing that I've ever seen in my whole life that does not discriminate."

## Theatre Society Upcomming Production

By Roddy Whether bee

The UPEI Theatre Society is busily engaged in preparing their fall production which features two short plays. The first, directed by UPEI alumnus Nancy McLure, is the 19th century Russian farce, *The Bear*, by Anton Chekhov. It depicts the fiery encounter between a frustrated creditor and a young languishing widow on the 7th month anniversary of her husband's death. The second play, directed by UPEI undergraduate Terry Dawes, is the 13th century Chinese drama *Autumn In the Han Palace* by Ma-Chih Yvan. It tells the tale of a lonely emperor who craves the company of a loving companion and who upon finding her discovers the challenge is in keeping her.

Currently underway are rehearsals and production work by a cast and crew comprised mostly of students and several campus participants, many of whom are making their theatrical debut or are trying their hands as tasks new to them. The experience is proving to be educational and fun.

The production will be presented at the Duffy Amphitheatre, UPEI Campus, on Friday, November 10 and Saturday, November 11 at 8:00 pm and on Sunday, November 12 at 2:00 pm. Tickets are available at the UPEI Bookstore and the Student Union (In the Pit) and at the door. Prices are \$3.00 for students, seniors and unwaged and \$5.00 for the General Public

## The History Society

History Society meetings are held every Wednesday at 2:30 in the lounge (third floor Main). All history majors are welcome. Get out and be active! Be a part of our famous wine and cheese parties and meet some history professors in a casual setting. The next wine and cheese social is November 23rd. More details given at meetings. Come and join the History Hounds, the unbeatable intramural team of history students.

