

# Events

## NAMES Project Quilt Draws Thousands

by Fred Pond

Over 8700 visitors came to Hanover, New Hampshire, on May 17, 18, & 19 to visit the Names Project's AIDS Memorial Quilt. Nearly a thousand quilt panels were displayed in such a way that a visitor was prompted to refer to the setting as a large cathedral.

While an estimated seven per cent of the entire Names Project collection was shown, the entire Quilt numbers almost 15,000 panels, weighs 29 tons, and includes some thirty miles of stitching. The last time the Quilt was shown in its entirety, it contained 10,000 panels, each representing someone who has died of AIDS.

In the week preceding the Quilt display, Dartmouth College held a series of lectures for AIDS Awareness Week at the college. The series featured two major actors in the AIDS epidemic: Cleve Jones, founder of the Names Project, and Dr. Jonathan Mann, world-renowned HIV expert.

Mann, who recently stepped down from managing the World Health Organization's Global Program on AIDS, now heads up the Harvard Institute on AIDS. His background includes early work at the Centers for Disease Control and several years in Zaire, shaping that country's response to AIDS.

Through the week, Dr. Mann's message was clear and to the point: the AIDS pandemic is unstable, dynamic, and volatile, with the worst of the disease yet to come. The opportunity to control it is still within our grasp - if we choose to act. To successfully deal with the pandemic, Dr. Mann calls for more education, enhanced social services, and a supportive social environment.

Mann also cites the crucial ingredient

of human rights in dealing with AIDS pandemic: "We need to strike the critical balance between human rights and public health." Mann obviously feels there is a basic, integral connection between equal rights and health care which is accessible to all people in a society.

To illustrate this principle, Mann discussed a possible future vaccine for the HIV virus. While it may not be here for several years, perhaps by the year 2000, he is greatly concerned with how it will be distributed to all people who are at risk. History does not reveal solid, positive modeling for vaccine distribution.

For example, when the hepatitis B vaccine became available in the early eighties, the cost of the vaccination was \$100. Today, the cost is lower, but still exceeds all the childhood vaccinations combined. Hepatitis B still looms as a risk for most of the world's population except for those who have the dollars to buy the protection.

With a wry grin, Jonathan Mann says, "A vaccine distribution through 'normal channels' will not work today." He challenges us to work towards equal rights, which in turn will lead to better health care for all of us.

Mann also spoke on women's health care, recently highlighted in this country by the increase of AIDS in women and children. "A male-dominated society is a danger to public health," he summed up.

Cleve Jones brings a more personal view on AIDS and how the Quilt works to empower people. He spoke of the history of the Quilt: in 1986, a group plastered a San Francisco government building with coffin sized sheets, each with the name of a person who had died of AIDS.

Later, he and a few friends got together and envisioned the Quilt as a way to

express their grief for friends who were dying daily.


Cleve has been involved in the gay and lesbian movement for many years, and was in San Francisco when Harvey Milk was murdered. A principal organizer of the annual candlelight march to remember that time, he was confident that efforts to start the Quilt would be successful, remembering "There's enough angry queens with sewing machines out there to do a quilt."

In an interview conducted in a bleacher overlooking the Quilt, Cleve made the following points about the AIDS epidemic in rural areas: In 1990, there was a five per cent increase of HIV in urban areas, while rural communities experienced a 37 percent increase, due mainly to the infection of second and third levels of affected groups, as well as the increase in heterosexual cases in the United States.

Not only are the rural areas experiencing more HIV infection, Jones feels rural environments aren't ready for the epidemic: health systems are traditionally underfunded, the networks and support are decentralized, and the conservative climate suppresses educational efforts needed to control HIV infection in youth. Cleve makes his points in a calm voice that belies the anger he feels toward the political climate that has ignored AIDS and the people it affects.

Twenty-five new panels were formally accepted into the Quilt during the closing ceremonies Sunday afternoon. The Quilt was then carefully packed and loaded into a truck bound for the airport.

The organizers solemnly cleared the sports arena and went home, but the question remained behind: how many more panels will be sewn before the AIDS pandemic ends?



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