

Quilt offers Lafayette a powerful education about AIDS

By Jeffrey S. Miller

Three emotional days ended with the sounds of a lone piper playing "Amazing Grace," as a display of the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt literally folded up and left the Lafayette campus Tuesday, Apr. 28.

More than 3,600 members of the Lafayette and Easton communities came to see the 632 panels on display in Kirby Field House. An additional 20 panels, commemorating residents of the Lehigh Valley who have died of AIDS, were presented at the end of the exhibit for inclusion in the full Quilt.

Started in 1987 by gay rights activist Cleve Jones as a memorial to San Franciscans who had died from AIDS, the Quilt now includes 15,000 individual three-by-six-foot panels, each commemorating an AIDS victim.

The full Quilt, now larger than 14 football fields, can only be shown on special occasions. Sections of the Quilt, however, travel around the country to educate people about AIDS as well as to raise money to fight the disease. It was one of those sections that came to Lafayette this spring.

"The display met my expectations and much more," said Deb Hoff, assistant director of student residence and co-chair of the committee responsible for bringing the Quilt to campus. "I think we made a difference."

"It was much more powerful than I had thought—I really was overwhelmed by the emotions I felt as I looked at it," said Carrie Davidson '93. "It just smacks you and says that everyone is affected. It was the best educational tool they could have ever had."

Hoff estimates that about 1,000 students came to see the Quilt during its stay. Both she and Davidson tell of students who stopped by the exhibit on their way to athletic events only to stay for well over an hour.

"A lot of people expected to see the Quilt because it was there," said Hoff. "But they didn't expect to be moved by it or changed by it. And many of them were."

Among those was Dave Unanue '92, co-chair of the Quilt committee. "This

has definitely been the highlight of my Lafayette career, and it has changed my life," Unanue said. "I think this is one thing I'll be able to leave Lafayette with and say I made an attempt to make a positive change on our campus and in the community in general."

Opening ceremonies for the Quilt Sunday, Apr. 26, set the tone for all three days, as the words of those who have felt the effects of AIDS firsthand were supplemented by the experience of seeing its victims memorialized.

Lafayette President Robert Rotberg began the proceedings by discussing the growing dimensions of the AIDS



Riley Temple '71, speaking at the opening of the Quilt exhibit in Kirby Field House.

crisis in the public at large and among people of college age. "There is absolutely no doubt that AIDS is the issue of our time and of your age," Rotberg said. "We hope the Quilt makes all of us aware of AIDS as a disease, as a public problem and as a social policy matter."

Rotberg was followed to the podium by Easton Mayor Thomas Goldsmith '63, Riley Temple '71 and Easton Hospital administrator Philip Deitch.

Temple, chairman of the board of Washington DC's Whitman-Walker Clinic, one of the nation's foremost AIDS service institutions, spoke of his

work on the frontlines of the battle against the disease. "Ten years into this epidemic I have long ago lost count of the number of people I knew well who are dead; I have lost count of the number of people I know well who are infected, and absent some miracle, will suffer horribly and tragically, and suffer premature death," Temple said.

"May there be more ceremonies like today which help to rid our world of the stigma which victimized these people. May those of you whose lives have not been touched by AIDS never be touched by AIDS. May those of you who have been challenged by AIDS find comfort in what you see today, and may those of you who experience this quilt for the first time today be touched by it, moved by it, and spurred on to do something—to embrace those who suffer."

Deitch told of his experience watching a childhood friend die of AIDS, and of attending the funerals of 63 clients of Easton's AIDS Outreach program. "The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay once wrote that 'Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.' Sadly, that is no longer true," Deitch said.

"Take care and love yourselves by protecting yourselves," he concluded. "And demonstrate compassion. Let this quilt become part of you."

Lynn Van Dyke, associate professor of English, then took the podium to begin reading the names of those memorialized in the Quilt, as the 128 volunteers from the college and community began the actual opening of the Quilt. Groups of eight surrounded each of the 16 squares. One at a time, the groups unfolded the corners of the 24-foot-sided quilts and turned them to fall into rows. A panoply of colors, shapes and, most of all, names slowly revealed itself until the final quilt, containing a Lafayette panel, was opened.

Several of the panels commemorated artist and Kutztown, PA, native Keith Haring. Actors Ian Charleson and Rock Hudson, choreographer Michael Bennett, political activist Terry Dolan and musician Ricky Wilson were among the famous AIDS victims represented



Lisa LeMoult '92 leads the Lafayette organizing committee in signing the college's panel of the AIDS Quilt. From left to right: Bobbi Kerridge, assistant director of student activities; Meredith Renk '92; Dave Unanue '92, committee co-chair; Gregg Bethel '92; LeMoult; Megan O'Connor '92; Deb Hoff, assistant director of student residence and committee co-chair; Kara McCarthy '92.

in the display. One panel included designs created by grade school children in Fairmount, Indiana, for Ryan White.

Though the famous may have attracted some to the Quilt, it was the names known only to friends and families that had the most effect on viewers.

"I looked for some of the celebrity panels, but it was all the other ones that really got to me," said Carrie Davidson. "You realize that these were all lives, some of them very talented lives, and you see the feelings that go into the quilts. Somehow I felt I knew them, and it had a tremendous effect on me."

The reading of names by college and community volunteers continued throughout the three days of the Quilt display. The only other sounds in the normally noisy Field House were the rustling of feet and occasional sobs and sniffles.

Those sobs, however, became overwhelming in the closing ceremonies.

"The closing was the most emotional thing I've ever been through. It was just wrenching," said Bobbi Kerridge, assistant director of student activities.

The highlight of the closing was the presentation of local quilts to the NAMES project as Dave Unanue read the names of those being honored. One of those presenting a quilt was hospital administrator Philip Deitch. "He has a real authoritative, assured air about him," said Kerridge. "He started walking up very straight, very stiff, and about halfway there, he just slumped. He became a different person entirely."

The piper, James Ruhf of Bethlehem, played in honor of his brother, whose panel was a part of the display. He told the *Allentown Morning Call* that he had not been allowed to play at the funeral proper. "I think it was very nice they let me play here," he said. "Too many times it's somebody else. It's not."

Though the Quilt is now gone, both Hoff and Kerridge expressed hope that the spirit it engendered would grow. "The conversations that are going on are certainly different than they would have been without the Quilt," said Hoff. "I hope they continue to be."

"I just hope that it does something on campus, that it has some kind of concrete effect—even just one or two students carrying it on through volunteer work," said Kerridge.

Her wish may already be fulfilled. "I have much more time in the summer than I do here," said Carrie Davidson. "I'm getting information, and I'm going to try to volunteer for an AIDS network at home. The Quilt inspired me to volunteer—that made it worthwhile."

The NAMES Project AIDS Quilt will be displayed in full Oct. 9-11 on the Mall in Washington, DC.



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Remembrances of lives passed: The AIDS Quilt visits Kirby Field House.

Chuck Zovko

