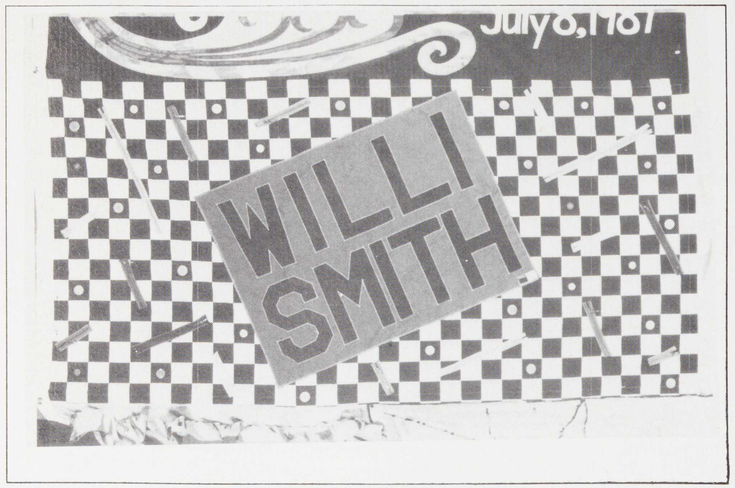
Francisco's Castro neighborhood, where volunteers have frantically been stitching together some 2,600 such cloth panels, each one commemorating a person who died of AIDS. By the time it's rolled out in front of the U.S. Capitol this Sunday, Oct. 11, the day of the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the giant quilt will be bigger than two football fields.



Ron Shellnut, a project volunteer, stitched the panel for fashion designer Willi Smith. Cindy McMullen, a regular at the storefront, says, "When I come here, I don't want to leave."

"These are people with family and friends who miss them terribly," says project manager Mike Smith, though "Ron," and the makers of his panel, remain anonymous.

Bill Moon, a scuba instructor and boat captain, had been at peace in Hawaii, say his friends. Four of them—three men and a woman—got together to make this panel.

"It will create an extraordinary, dramatic illustration of the enormity of this epidemic," says Cleve Jones, the man who initiated and now directs the NAMES Project.

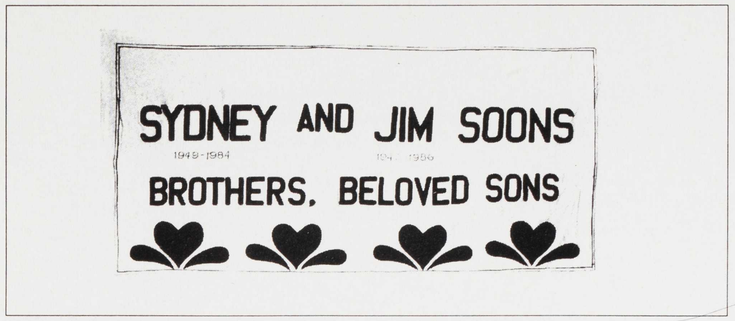
Jones, 32, a Quaker long active in San Francisco's gay community, conceived of the quilt shortly after his best friend, Marvin Feldman, died of AIDS in October 1986. "After Marvin died—and Bill and Gary and Allen and Jay—I started to despair," he admits. He was tempted to "go numb and stop feeling, stop remembering" those people, the close friends who had shaped his life. Instead, he hit upon the quilt as a way to give shape and purpose to his memories. He mulled over the project for a year before joining up with Mike Smith, a graduate of Stanford Business School, who helped him get it off the ground. By July of this year, they had 40 panels made, and word was beginning to spread.

Since then the handmade memorials have come pouring in from all over the country. Some are busily decorated with mementos from the person's life—a photo, a favorite shirt, the laces of a hiking boot. Some are embellished with sequins and feathers, leather and lace. Others are starkly plain. Bobbe Rigler, who took her ailing brother into her California home last year and comforted him as he died in her arms, chose simply to stencil his name, Ronn Charles, in bold silver letters on a red fabric. "He was a real class act," she says. "I wanted it to be just like him."

The staff of the Stanford University library, where David R. Thompson had worked before his death in October 1986, also made a simple banner—red felt adorned with two college pennants, a green parrot and a yellow rose. "At first I didn't want to make it unless it was absolutely beautiful," says Beth Rebman, a cataloger who helped organize her colleagues into a lunchtime sewing circle. "Then we decided that even if it were very simple, we should do it." As they stitched and glued in the library conference room, David's co-workers talked about him in a way that was "sentimental but matter-of-fact," she says, "almost like he was in another room. Mostly it was a lot of fun."

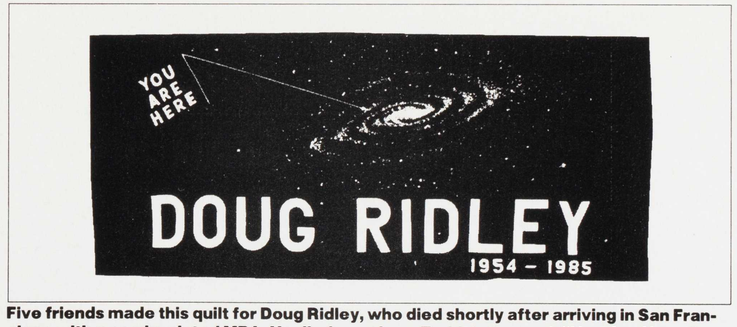
For others, though, the decision to join the project was a wrenching one. Arla, 44, hadn't even known her husband of 22 years was feeling sick before the family doctor called to inform her that he was dying of AIDS. "I had a lot of mixed feelings while he was dying," she says. "Making the quilt brought back some of the happy times." Her college-age son pitched in to iron on decals, and her mother helped with the stitching. But her daughter, 17, was upset by the project and didn't want her father's full name on the quilt. "I don't want people to be nasty to me and my friends," says the high school senior. Yet when the family's panel reached San Francisco without a name, there, among the hearts and waves and animal decals, was a line of glitter script that read, Love you Dad.

Photographs by Ken Kobre

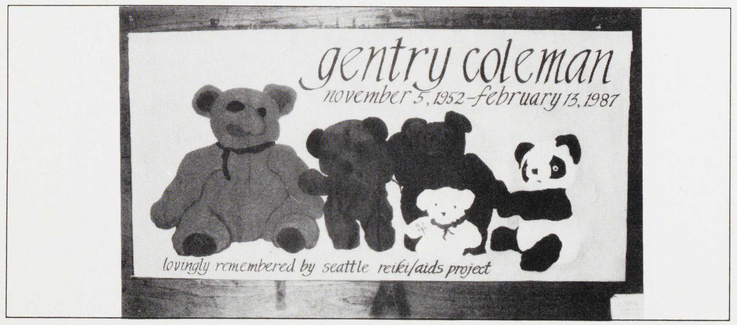


"Their father never accepted their homosexuality," wrote Julia Soon of her dead sons. Two of her surviving sons are also gay. "Pray for all of us," she pleaded.

Michael J. Lamberta died two days before his 32nd birthday. His lover, Kenn Piotrowicz, recruited eight of his close friends to create his panel.



Five friends made this quilt for Doug Ridley, who died shortly after arriving in San Francisco with a newly minted MBA. He died wearing a T-shirt stamped, "You Are Here."



The panel for Gentry Coleman, a computer programmer, was the collaborative project of a Seattle AIDS support group. "He never complained," says a friend.

Another quilt arrived at the San Francisco storefront with a gaping hole in it where someone from the victim's family had snipped out his surname at the last minute.

Ann Des Rosiers, 49, had welcomed her dying son, Anthony, 28, home with open arms when she learned in May 1986 that he had AIDS. But she didn't broadcast that he was there, dying a slow and awful death. "Worcester [Mass.] is a small city and everything is hush-hush," she says, "and that's how we had to live it." It hurt. Des Rosiers is fiercely proud of her son, a Navy man. The project let her express that pride. When Anthony died in July 1987 Des Rosiers and her daughter fashioned bits of his pillows into a red-white-and-blue banner. Anthony's stepfather did the cutting. His grandmother stitched the pieces. "He was my firstborn," says Des Rosiers, who plans to be in Washington when the quilt is unfurled.

For Corinne Gearhart, the deceased was a first love, her old high school sweetheart in Ashland, Ky. A 38-year-old law student, she hadn't seen Ricky McKenzie since 1970, when she moved away from their hometown. "His death really affected me," she says. "I knew him so well when I was young. I don't remember him as a gay man. I remember him as my boyfriend. He was the funniest guy in the world." Ricky's panel is made of blue taffeta and gold tulle, echoes of a long-ago prom.

Hallie Wolfe, who describes herself as a Westchester County, N.Y., housewife, made her panel for a woman she'd cared for as a community volunteer: Nancy, whose first husband was an intravenous drug user, died at 26, weighing only 44 lbs. Nancy's son, Bosco, had died three months earlier, the second child she had lost to AIDS. Wolfe's panel is painted to look like a brick wall, with a No Parking sign sewn on and one scrawled bit of graffiti: Nancy and Bosco were here.