

# Memory Work

(1271 words)

– Kathleen Childs

Adapted from “[Memory Work](#),” 1845 words  
Image album <http://imgur.com/a/OqWsc#0>

Nancy's Favorite Things: Sunsets, Sunbathing, Antiquing, Santa Claus, Ladybugs, Cats, Gargoyles, Maine, Florida, Steven King Novels. I knew I'd get emotional, but I didn't think the tears would actually sting my eyes shut. I start reading again. Short poems. Promises of peace. Bible verses. A slowly bleeding message painted onto felt by his partner in blue ink. An old photograph's protective plastic covering glints in the mid-afternoon sun. Each one of these grave-sized rectangles is a person.

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is the largest piece of folk art in the world. More than 48,000 hand-sewn three foot by six foot quilts form thousands of twelve foot by twelve foot collages that tour across the country. Started in San Francisco in 1987, the project quickly spread nationally, as family members and loved ones sought to pay tribute to the lost. The combined panels now cover 1.3 million square feet – nearly thirty acres. Despite the staggering size, the quilt only represents 13% of the 641,976 estimated AIDS deaths in the United States. The last time the whole project was displayed as a unit was in 1996. Now, it's far too big. All 48,000 panels were displayed in Washington DC this summer in conjunction with World AIDS Day, but it took 60 displays over 31 days to show it, with sites including the Washington Monument, National Mall, the Smithsonian Institute, and many smaller venues ranging from churches, museums and libraries.

Our quilts arrived Friday evening. UPS said they'd be there Monday, and Leanne Haug thanks God for small favors. She'd have gotten them out, but she really didn't want to be working all night. Leanne's been entrusted with the memories of 200 human beings, and after the months of paperwork and university bureaucracy, she takes the task with the lighthearted morbidity of a combat veteran. Leanne talks about the project with excitement, but there are tones of resignation when she tells me she's not going to be sleeping much this week. The previous crop of graduating seniors left Queer Initiative's current administration (which is to say Leanne) without a real road map. The nondescript three foot by eighteen inch cardboard boxes we load into my truck don't seem too heavy – but definitely not a suitable task for one person.

“I’m sure it’ll all come back to me when we actually do it, but there’s a specific way you have to fold the quilts.” Leanne lifts up the corner of a quilt block, and points to the five digit number on the underside on Tuesday morning. “This will end up face-up, so they know which quilt is which when we send them back.” She was here to begin setup at eight, and rushed over from her brand new software engineering internship to make sure the five o’clock take down goes according to plan. Overall, the first day has been a success. Six quilt blocks rest on the Norlin quad, and someone managed to requisition a tent for the volunteers minding the memories. Curious students stopped to examine the quilts, and a few locals came to pay their respects, but not many people took fliers about AIDS prevention or the free condoms. Leanne is relieved to have gotten things out at all. As long as we have people to put them away, we can set more out tomorrow. Today, making it through the day is enough.

“Please take care of my Dog.” Newspaper clippings and Louisiana State University Diploma. A quarter-mystery pattern, each white triangle with a different signature. Terry Caoette’s name in plaid on plaid with a single yellow wax rose. J. Timothy Atkinson: Sweet, Sensitive, and Ever Sincere. Streaks in a lavender’s paint sparkle like nebulae. I take off my shoes, hoping I can stay grounded. e. e. cummings: “if a cheefulest Elephantangelchild should sit” nestled under butterfly wings. Dozens of rainbow handprints. Jerry Payne’s first second and third prizes at the Denver Rose show. The cool grass cushions me as I recite names like liturgy.

Anyone is welcome to enter a panel, and several celebrities have been memorialized several times. Freddie Mercury, singer and frontman of rock group Queen has 25, actor Rock Hudson 16, top ranked tennis professional Arthur Ashe 19, artist and activist Keith Haring, 19. The vast majority, though, are made by and for family, or in some cases the community that’s all one has left. Men who have sex with men still account for 61% of all new HIV infections, and Black and Latino people are overrepresented in all HIV-Positive populations. As such, the AIDS Quilt becomes a powerful statement of defiance, and a rallying point for the gay community. According to the project’s founder,

Cleve Jones: “[the quilt] worked on so many levels for people. It was therapy. It was something to do with your hands. It was a way to encourage people to talk and share memories. It was a tool to use with the media to get the media to focus on it. It was a weapon to shame the politicians for their inaction.”

As I'm taking pictures Wednesday afternoon, a middle aged woman approaches me to ask if I've lost someone myself. I answer that thankfully I haven't, no, I'm just helping out and taking pictures, but she suffers from a chronic illness herself, and her online discussion group let her know the quilt would be here. Watching and reading seems to fire her up, she volunteers to help if we host the AIDS Quilt next year.

That's an idea that excites Leanne when I talk to her on Thursday evening. This week she's been hurting pretty bad for volunteers. Today, she left her job early to help put away the quilts, only two people had signed up to help – activism demands time and energy that's often in short supply. She says she'd like to start hosting the quilt in the spring. People are too busy during the fall. I assume Leanne means herself. She mentioned last night that she was feeling overwhelmed organizing the quilt's volunteers. Community outreach is difficult. The lack of a real infrastructure in the student group stunted our ability to advertise beyond word of mouth. BCAP [The Boulder County AIDS Project] didn't have enough time to respond to our requests for educational material or volunteers. As we collapse the tent at the end of the day, an older man approaches us. He mentions that there aren't many quilts being displayed today. I start to explain that only nine of our twenty five quilts are out today, we're rotating through the collection, but he cuts me off. For him, the intimacy is important. He was in Washington DC this summer and the scale was overwhelming.

According to the Names Project, it would take thirty three days to look at the entire quilt, taking in one panel a minute. I've spent at least sixteen hours transporting or reading our twenty five, and I'm breaking down watching these traveling graves. The other regular volunteers seem equally exhausted. Leanne and Kae wax nostalgic about showering. The week seems endless. Can I even imagine the

task of fighting the disease itself? Remembering the fallen is hard enough.

Fall announces itself with a mortal chill and the threat of snow on Friday, the last day of display. The quilts stay inside, displayed in an obscure corner of the University Memorial Center's basement. Traffic's much lower, and the sentiment feels a little blunted, even closeted. Some quilts hang like gallery-pieces, but several others are spread out on the linoleum, as though the bones lie underneath the building's – our community's – foundation.