

# Growing AIDS Memorial Quilt provides reminder of epidemic

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WASHINGTON — When the AIDS Memorial Quilt was first displayed in Washington nearly 10 years ago, its 1,920 panels filled a block-long patch of grass tucked between a sculpture garden and an ice-skating rink.

Now it stretches from the U.S. Capitol to the Washington Monument — a full mile of fabric with nearly 40,000 panels representing 70,000 people who have died of AIDS, remembered in colorful splashes of silk, suede and teddy bears.

The 42-ton quilt is so big now that organizers may have run out of room to display it all in one place in the nation's capital.

Even at the last major display four years ago, "you could see your way across the quilt," said Michael Smith, director of the 1996 display and a co-founder of the NAMES Project. "Now, standing at one end, just the curvature of the Earth prevents you from seeing the other end."

Smith exaggerates a little, but the size of the quilt, on display on Washington's Mall from Oct. 11-13, remains what catches the attention first.

But its size is also a sign that the epidemic continues. The names on the quilt represent just a fraction of those who have died of AIDS in the United States since the disease was discovered 15 years ago — about 320,000 in all.

The project began in 1987 on Smith's back porch, after co-founder Cleve Jones painted a simple 3-by-6-foot cloth panel with triangles and Stars of David to honor his friend Marvin Feldman.

"This started as spray paint and bed sheets — much more protest banner style," Smith said. "I'm still partial to the simple ones."

But the grief of those left behind also poured out in a torrent of taffeta, corduroy, carpeting, laminated photographs and newspaper stories, Barbie dolls, bubble wrap and credit cards — all sewn securely onto the quilt.

"One has (an audio device), and we have to make sure it has batteries," Smith said. "Another has racer lights. But we draw the line at large pieces of mirror or glass."

All the panels are sewn together in sections connected by muslin walkways, and are unfolded in a solemn

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ceremony at the beginning of each day. Volunteers read the names on each panel aloud.

For some, a visit to the quilt is a deeply emotional experience. "It's hard not to go to the quilt and not

personalize it," said Mike Shriver, a spokesman for the National Association of People with AIDS and who has the virus. "So many of my friends are there. The quilt is a reminder that we don't have a cure."

But this year, those associated with the quilt say there's a more optimistic mood surrounding it.

There's a president in the White House who is relatively friendly toward AIDS and gay issues — and more funding for treatment, care and research.

And last July's conference on AIDS treatment and research in Vancouver brought news about new drugs.

"Now it's not 'us vs. them' any more," Smith said. "Now it's about who has access to health care. Now we're coming full circle. We want to use the quilt as a prevention message."