Keeping Up With The Jones

Cleve Jones created the epidemic's most enduring symbol and got ready to die. But instead the Master Quilter is having a midlife crisis and loving every minute of it. David Groff reports

September 1, 2000 By David Groff

This is the town that viatical settlements built," Cleve Jones says, gazing out at the blooming desert of Palm Springs, California. "All these guys who sold their insurance and moved out here to die—now they're redecorating." He lights a cigarette and grins as the improbably persistent rain pounds at the windows of his impeccably suburban living room. "A lot of us here are looking at a second or third chance at life."

The creator of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is improbably alive and well and restless in the same California desert that gave shelter to Bob Hope, Gerald Ford and a generation of powdery retirees—and, more recently, a few thousand PWA refugees. His modest house stands just two blocks from the enclosed, "clothing optional" resorts with coy names—InnTrigue, Inn Exile—where gay men come to vacation with a vengeance. I am staying in one, and despite the rain, I've never seen so many tanned penises.

Like the desert, where sandy scrub lots alternate with ones irrigated into tropical condo paradises, Cleve Jones is a forced bloom, sustained with daily infusions of his own protease MiracleGro. As he enters his third decade living with HIV, he still trails his Quilt behind him—a Linus with attitude. But now the man who refuses to sew his own memorial panel is trying to figure out what to do with the rest of his life.

Twenty-eight years ago, Jones, then 18, escaped from another desert town, Phoenix, leaving behind his Quaker family and hopping a ride to San Francisco. As he recounts in Stitching a Revolution: The Making of an Activist (Harper San Francisco), the memoir he cowrote with Jeff Dawson and published in April, Jones led the marginal life of many gay youth, hustling for food in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. He was soon drawn into the magnetic field of Harvey Milk, the ward-pol evangelist of gay power who was running for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Himself an early master of political gestures—to protest one antigay ballot initiative, he led a march through a rainbow arch of barbed wire—Jones became Milk's agent provocateur. "Cleve Jones, the romantic," author and friend Randy Shilts would write, "framed the era as a grand story, the movement of a dream through time."

Then storm after storm rolled in, roiling him in tragedy. Following his election, Milk was assassinated in 1978, his killer convicted only of manslaughter; the enduring earthquake of AIDS

began swallowing his friends and future. Jones got caught in a whirlwind of workaholism and became sodden with grief. “If I could drink to the point of falling asleep and not dreaming, that was a blessing,” he tells me of the early ’80s. “I was consciously deciding to be unconscious. If I was awake, I had to be working, organizing. When everybody else went to bed, I’d go to the Midnight Sun bar and drink until I could barely walk, and then I’d stumble two blocks down to my studio apartment and pass out, wake up with the alarm clock at 7 a.m., do a line of coke and go to work.”

In 1985, thanks to the intervention of Shilts and others, Jones escaped to Hawaii and 12-step meetings, where the stories of other addicts and alcoholics moved him more than the program itself—just as the stories behind the AIDS Quilt panels would later animate his activism.

As he sobered up, he got sobering news: He was HIV positive. (Later, blood taken in a hepatitis study would indicate that he had been positive since 1979.) He was 31. His hopes to have a baby were thwarted by the diagnosis, and even the prospect of adopting a child was suffocated by his prognosis; in that dark era, many people testing positive would measure their days in days.

In the age of HAART miracles, it takes an effort to remember how the AIDS earthquake never stopped its deafening rumble, and how many Americans ignored the heaving ground. But Jones recalls it fiercely: “Reagan was president. People were dying. Families were denying what their children were dying of. The community was paralyzed.” Jones, who had learned the power of imagery at Harvey Milk’s side, knew what was needed: “There had to be a symbol to break through that. Some national, shared experience that would allow people to talk about what they were going through, allow the pain to be revealed, break through the statistics.” During a candlelight vigil for Milk in November in 1985, Jones called on the crowd to plaster San Francisco’s federal building with placards that named their losses from AIDS. “Where before there had been a flaking wall,” he writes in his book, “now there was a vivid picture, and I could see quite clearly the national Mall, the dome of Congress, and a quilt spread out before it—a vision of incredible clarity.”

While the image haunted Jones, it would take more than a year before he gathered people to make the first coffin-sized cloth memorials that would become not only his legacy but one of the epidemic’s most resonant totems, the AIDS equivalent of the Vietnam veterans’ memorial, with this difference: It’s a monument to a battle still being fought.

I was stunned by the Quilt’s power in Washington, DC, in October 1987, when the first panels, then numbering fewer than 2,000, were displayed. Here was a gripping graveyard of relics. Admiring a physique photograph silkscreened onto the cloth of one panel, noting the leather harness riveted to another, I realized that I was cruising the Quilt—only to be sucker-punched by the fact that these men were the very definition of unavailable. To make grief not only personal but erotic, that—for some of us—has been an essential part of the Quilt’s peculiar pull.

Jones himself sees the Quilt as a subversive weapon of sympathy. “I believed if you could effectively communicate what was going on,” he says, “people, basically being good, would

respond. And I think I was right."

But in a way the Quilt became a victim of its own success, spurring a decade-long debate over a question as old as Greek tragedy: Can a work of art provoke action? "People say it's not enough to make quilts. Well, duh! Don't be so fucking stupid!" Jones says. "There are a thousand and one things that every one of us can do. And if Mom and Dad Smith lost their kid, well, first they need to grieve. And they need to have a community in which to express that grief, and then out of that will come work. People in the NAMES Project chapters [the sponsor of the Quilt] do not sit around in their basements sewing quilts and crying."

In 1993, Jones, sick and tired, had good reason to do some crying of his own. He had lost a race for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. He was also shattered by the departure—and subsequent suicide—of his HIV positive lover, Ricardo. He decided to withdraw to the small Northern California town of Villa Grande. But instead of dying as expected, Jones slowly rallied on the new protease cocktail. Then things took another unexpected turn. "I ended up taking in this straight boy who needed a safe place to live," he says. "There was a crisis, and within about 24 hours, I was the guardian of this troubled teenager putting up posters of large-breasted women on motorcycles in my home!" He lights another cigarette. "I was having recurrent bouts of pneumonia, and we decided it would be good for us both to have a chance to get away and go someplace that was new," he says, gesturing toward his normally sunny, verdant backyard. They went south to Palm Springs.

Like his previous creation of an AIDS icon, raising a teenager—and, more recently, taking in a baby girl—gave Jones a focus, rousing to action a man who otherwise might have been stupefied by grief. "It was a gift, to be able to get outside of my own problems and ambitions," Jones says pointedly. "You become very focused on this child who requires you to get up at six in the morning and make breakfast. If you've got a baby who needs to be fed, you've got to get up and feed her. If you've got a teenage boy with a history of not going to school, you've got to talk to the teachers every week, and you've got to go over the homework, and you have to be there, and you may not lose your temper, and you may not be sarcastic, and you may not walk out."

Jones, who had cast himself in the son's role to mentors like Milk and former San Francisco mayor Art Agnos—and who characterizes ex-presidents Bush (a Quilt no-show) and Clinton (a booster) as, respectively, withholding and appreciative father figures—was now a daddy. His foster son has graduated from high school and now works in Northern California; he spends holidays with Jones and Jones' parents. "I had been so focused on him, on dealing with school, getting him counseling, keeping him away from drugs, and all the normal parental things," Jones says. "When that responsibility was completed, I thought, 'Well, what do I do now?'"

After being in South Africa for a month, I know exactly what I need to do" is his answer. Jones' aim now is to extend the Quilt's global focus. For the Parliament of World Religions meeting in Cape Town on World AIDS Day last year, he helped engineer a display of North American and South African Quilt panels. He was struck by the amount of text on the African ones. He paraphrases a panel that comes to mind: "Our sister. Her husband threw her out when he found out she had HIV,

and when she died, she left her children with our grandfather."

"It's hard to wrap your brain around the reality that half the people of Africa could die of this disease in the next 10 years," Jones says. "But one must identify what the first step is that we can take. Right now the U.S. and British governments and the pharmaceutical industry have the power to stop mother-to-infant transmission."

With his genius for making connections, Jones was quick to see how AIDS in Africa is linked to the battle here at home. "No one has yet succeeded in breaking through the wall that's preventing the African-American community from responding effectively to the epidemic. Young African Americans still—and I know because I'm on the road constantly talking to high school kids—think AIDS is a white faggot disease," he declares. "So my hope is that by working with the South African AIDS Quilt and creating partnerships between people here and in South Africa, young African Americans will see AIDS in the context of the African homeland. Then I think we may be able to break through."

While panels are now touring the country's black colleges, the NAMES Project is planning to find the Quilt a permanent home in Washington, DC. Jones himself has been free of his administrative duties for several years, though the organization continues to pay him a salary to attend displays and speak about AIDS; honoraria are donated to the NAMES Project.

No matter how urgent Jones' rhetoric, his voice has a kind of weary roteness, the byproduct of having tried too many times—too nicely—to persuade people to get with the program. A wry tone of suppressed rage marks his reaction to the lessening emphasis on HIV among gay Americans and their leaders. In Africa, he says, "the thing that amazed me was that everyone—whether they were Zulu kids or Afrikaner kids, taxi drivers or businesspeople—seemed so committed to Mandela's dream of an open, democratic society. And I think people of good will all over the world have an investment in what's happening in South Africa." He adds, "I just can't believe that the gay communities in the West will turn their backs on the epidemic now that it's becoming black."

That prospect clearly pisses him off. Lowering AIDS on the gay agenda is "worse than premature," he says. At the gay rights Millennium March in Washington last April, he felt HIV had practically fallen off the radar screen. Movement heavy-hitters such as Elizabeth Birch of the Human Rights Campaign, Diane Hardy-Garcia of the Millennium March and Clinton pal David Mixner largely failed to mention HIV in press coverage of the event. This neglect is not coincidental, Jones says, in a year when the majority of new U.S. AIDS cases are among people of color.

Regrets? He has two. "I regret the hot fuck that infected me with HIV," he tells me immediately. "But I'm certain who I got this disease from, and he was a wonderful man, and it was long before we knew anything about what was happening."

The other? Not being able to father a child, though this remains open to amendment. "I've been researching the techniques for HIV positive men to father children," Jones says.

He wouldn't mind having a lover, either, though finding the right guy when you're positive and as public as Jones isn't easy. Having been burned in the past by negative men, he'd prefer a fellow HIVer—"though I wouldn't want to rule out anyone who applies for this position," he says with a laugh. Being with a positive man would give him "more permission to be frightened," he says. "Not to mention being able to say, 'Honey, I'm having a Crixivan moment.'"

Taking in foster children, getting drugs to pregnant women in South Africa—neither priority is high on the agenda of most HIV positive gay men enjoying the Palm Springs clothing-optional lifestyle. "They should count their fucking blessings," Jones says. "Right now, I'm on my three-drug combo, I'm doing great, I'm undetectable for the first time, I have more T cells than ever. And I don't believe for a minute that it's going to last." His voice grows sharper. "I'm on Sustiva, and for all we know, a year from now my dick is going to fall off or I'm going to have brain tumors. I'm pretty much assuming I'll get a two-year run."

He looks me in the eye, as if demanding that I challenge him to live longer. "So I'm healthy," he says finally. "I have a beautiful home. I have the possibility of a future, and I find it all quite…incomprehensible."

"So who knows?" he says and smiles. "A year from now, I might be a daddy. I might be running for mayor of Palm Springs. Or I might be dead. You just don't know. But bring it on, baby. Bring it on."

IN STITCHES

Whether you think of it as America's largest work of folk art or biggest piece of AIDS kitsch, moveable cathedral, international cult or do-rag of death, there's no arguing that Cleve Jones' brainchild, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, is not only the epidemic's most recognizable symbol but probably its most enduring—and certainly the only one ever nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Since 1987, when Jones made the first panel for his best friend, Marvin Feldman—stenciled pink and blue triangles interlocking to form a Star of David (see below)—the Quilt has been visited by some 13 million people. That first panel and the 42,959 made since each measure three feet by six, dimensions intended to suggest a grave. While the materials used by Jones were ordinary (canvas and spray paint), the Quilt would eventually boast an extraordinary ray of exotica: Barbie dolls, car keys, champagne glasses, feather boas, gold lamé, mink, pearls, rhinestones—even cremation ashes, human hair, jockstraps and wedding rings.

As the AIDS body count grew, of course, so did the Quilt. Today, it occupies 777,380 square feet—about the size of 25 football fields—and weighs in at more than 50 tons. But as the epidemic enters its third decade, the flow of fabric resting places has flagged. In 1999, 941 new panels were added; by contrast, more than 4,900 were sewn in place in 1996—the year of the last display of the entire Quilt in Washington, DC.

Last November, the NAMES Project announced plans to bring the Quilt back to the nation's capital

for good and is fundraising for a permanent home. But even in 2003, when the shrine for this icon of one of history’s worst health crises is completed, it will still not lie in one place, according to a NAMES Project spokesperson. The San Francisco office organizes more than 300 displays of Quilt sections annually; through 47 local chapters and 36 international affiliates, the NAMES Project mounts many more in venues from high schools and synagogues to post offices, churches and corporate headquarters nationwide. And the sew goes on.

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