Loose Threads

June 1, 2004 By Rebecca Minnich

With its founder fired, will the AIDS Quilt unravel?

In January, the scandal made every news outlet from *The Southern Voice*, Atlanta's gay rag, to Fox News: Cleve Jones, legendary PWA creator of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, was suing for wrongful termination the Atlanta-based Names Project, which manages those now 40,000-plus hand-stitched panels that have moved millions. The AIDS A-list scrambled to discover why the very group that Jones founded had fired him on December 30.

Jones, 49, diagnosed with HIV in 1985, says he knows: "Because I complained last September to [NAMES Project executive director] Julie Rhoad that their incompetence was hampering our ability to raise funds and endangering the organization," he told *POZ* from his Palm Springs home. He says he had spent two years planning a massive DC display of the Quilt for Columbus Day 2004, a month before the presidential election. It would have been the first complete showing since 1996, when it blanketed the entire Mall and attracted 1.2 million viewers. The nonprofit Names Project, which moved the Quilt and its headquarters from San Francisco to Atlanta in 2001, has scrapped the plan.

The saga threads back to 1987, when Jones and friends stitched the first panels in San Francisco to memorialize friends and lovers lost to AIDS. By 1990, the Quilt had grown too big to be shown in most stadiums—and had spawned the Names Project, with a 15-member board, more than 50 chapters nationwide and more than 30 paid staff. Then ill, Jones stepped down as executive director (ED) and, in a verbal agreement with the foundation, ceded control of the Quilt for a salaried role as spokesman and fundraiser, plus lifetime health insurance.

From there, says Jones, it goes like so: Last year, when he announced plans for the big-bucks DC display, the board gave him until November 15 to raise $2 million—"an extremely difficult hurdle," says Scott Seitz, one of Jones' fundraisers. By late September, says Jones, he had secured corporate promises for half that sum but was rebuffed when he asked the foundation for necessary paperwork to finalize the pledges. "That was when I criticized them."

A few days later, he says, the foundation told him to stop fundraising, and on New Year's Day he was fired in an e-mail. (It has since agreed to continue his health insurance). "I now realize they never meant to go ahead with this project," Jones says.

Not so, Rhoad told *POZ* during a phone call with a Names Project attorney who declined to be named: "We did support the effort. The staff worked with Cleve and several salespeople." As for

not giving Jones the paperwork, “That’s not accurate,” said the attorney, insisting the board halted the fundraising because “the money was not raised—that means money in the bank.” Jones says, “We were never told we had to have the money up-front.”

The attorney also said that Jones was not fired but “was in discussions with the foundation for about 60 days over his role, and he chose to reject all alternatives placed before him.”

But the broader dispute is over who controls the Quilt. “Should a founder who is at this point an employee of the foundation have the right to say, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do, and if you don’t, I’m going to take this all back?’” asked the attorney. “Have you heard of Founder’s Syndrome?” Jones replies: “I have no interest in gaining control of the Quilt. I want it returned to the activist community.” He also wants a new Board and ED for the Project: “I’m not going to back down on this.”

Also at issue is the very mission of the Quilt. Jones believes a massive DC display “would have…put AIDS on the agenda in an election year.” He says the political risk scared the Quilt’s managers: “They’re politically conservative. They don’t like activism, they’re ill-informed, unconcerned, worthless.”

That rankles Rhoad, who says, “We have a strong desire to make sure that this Quilt is [eventually] returned to the national Mall,” adding that “in the last two years we’ve tripled the display activity of this Quilt.” But Jones lashes back, “They mean in small pieces” and says the Project has become merely a mail-order service for groups wanting to display chunks of the Quilt.

To some, that’s not so bad. “I don’t think it’s appropriate to do big Quilt displays these days,” says Mike Smith, former Names Project managing director. “It needs to go to the communities where the epidemic is spreading.” But Jones has supporters. Longtime Quilt volunteer Phyllis Burke of San Francisco says that she and others want the Quilt back in Frisco. “Since it’s been in Atlanta, the dead are invisible again.”

Meanwhile, Jones keeps busy talking to students about AIDS and working with Palm Springs’ Desert Alliance for Peace and Justice. But he can’t make peace with the Project’s leaders, whom he says once discussed retiring the Quilt to the Smithsonian Institute. “It’s like building the Holocaust Museum in 1939,” he says. These aren’t activists—they’re curators.”

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