Fabric of Our Lives

Sewing to remember AIDS losses and to protect against COVID-19

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Since the 1980s, the AIDS Memorial Quilt has honored those lost to the epidemic; new panels continue to be added. Today, volunteers and staff also sew unused Quilt scraps into face masks that help save lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Sewing is how I chose to memorialize my friends I’ve lost to AIDS,” says Gert McMullin, who leads the charge from her sewing machine and has been working on the Quilt since 1987. “I just can’t sit idly by during this new crisis. Sewing masks for BACS [Bay Area Community Services] helps me have hope, and I know they need them, and it will make a difference.”

BACS, which each year provides housing and behavioral health services to more than 8,000 people experiencing homelessness and mental health crises, has received 700 masks, and thousands have been delivered to San Francisco Bay Area hospitals.

The Quilt moved to the Bay Area earlier this year, when the National AIDS Memorial—which includes the AIDS Memorial Grove—became the new steward of the Quilt. Panels were displayed in San Francisco and nearby Oakland this summer during the virtual International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2020: Virtual).

But you don’t have to travel to California to see the Quilt. All 48,000 panels are now pictured in one awe-inspiring image on AIDSMemorial.org. You can spend hours zooming in and out of the digital image while perusing individual panels. What’s more, the Quilt is searchable—just type in a name and the interactive AIDS Quilt will take you to that panel.

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