30 Years of the AIDS Quilt

The inaugural display in 1987 was during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

October 11, 2017 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt was first displayed on October 11, 1987, in Washington, DC, during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. The Quilt covered a space larger than a football field on the National Mall.

The last major display of the Quilt was in 2012 during the XIX International AIDS Conference. Large sections again covered the National Mall (see picture above), but additional sections were displayed throughout our nation's capital.

For years the International AIDS Society had declined to host its conference in the United States because of our ban on people living with HIV from being allowed to travel to our country. President Obama lifted the ban, paving the way for the return of the conference.

I had the privilege of seeing the Quilt in DC in 2012. To say that I was moved to tears would be an understatement. Each 3-by-6-foot panel commemorates at least one person who was lost to AIDS. Witnessing the love stitched into each panel is both painful and healing.

Watch this POZ video from 2012 of volunteers making panels for the Quilt:

One of the most somber yet beautiful moments from 2012 was the traditional reading of the names as sections of the Quilt are laid out. In addition to having the privilege of seeing the Quilt in 2012, I also was blessed to participate in the reading.

Watch this POZ video from 2012 of the reading of the names:

To build upon the success of the 1987 march, the first National Coming Out Day (NCOD) was marked on October 11, 1988. The founders of NCOD were LGBT activists Robert Eichberg and Jean O'Leary. Eichberg was lost to AIDS in 1995. O'Leary died from lung cancer in 2005.

With the rights of LGBT people being increasingly threatened and the health of people living with HIV at risk of being diminished because of continuing attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act, coming out about being LGBT or about living with HIV remains all too important.

Click here to read my coming out story.

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