Four Days in the Capital City

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Recently I was privileged to attend a convergence of events in Washington, DC, so rare that it's unlikely to happen again. First, the AIDS Memorial Quilt was displayed on the National Mall for the first time since 1996. The Quilt, founded by Cleve Jones and now cared for by The NAMES Project, is a collection of quilt panels created to memorialize and celebrate people who have died of AIDS-related causes.

My first partner Nick Pippin, an actor, singer and composer, passed away on July 27, 1990. He founded a theater group called People With AIDS Theatre Workshop, which used HIV-positive actors and highlighted the issues they faced. In 1996, I visited the Quilt with his mother and our friends to see the panel we had lovingly made for him; it was on display with thousands of others.

Nick's mom Nita is in the photo below on the lower right. She's now in her 80s and is still going strong. She founded an organization called Miracle House, which provides a home for families of AIDS and cancer patients who arrive in New York City to visit their loved ones but have no place to stay.

This year, the Quilt display overlapped with the momentous return of the International AIDS Conference to the United States for the first time in 22 years. The conference--this year, it is simply referred to as AIDS 2012--originated in 1985 and is the largest regular conference on any health or development issue. It provides a forum for the interaction of science, community and leadership in which they can strengthen evidence-based policy and programmatic responses to the epidemic. It has been held in the United States three times before: in Atlanta in 1985, in Washington, DC, in 1987, and in San Francisco in 1990. Unfortunately travel bans were put into place in the early '90s, that prevented HIV-positive individuals from entering the United States. As a result, the International AIDS Society, which sponsors the conference, refused to hold the event in any country with such restrictions. But in October 2009, President Barack Obama signed an executive order lifting the travel ban and clearing the way for this year's conference to be once again held in the United States.

I arrived in Washington, DC, on Saturday afternoon by train, and the first thing I noticed on the platform in Union Station was my coworker Oriol Gutierrez and his partner Chris Martin. Actually, they weren't there in person. Rather, they appeared on a large poster. It was one of a series of posters created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of its Act Against AIDS campaign. Turns out, the CDC plastered posters all over DC and on the city buses to raise HIV awareness in the capital.

I soon checked into the St. Gregory Hotel near Dupont Circle, which was wonderful. I'd like to extend a hearty thank you to its entire staff for the splendid hospitality we received. They even wore AIDS 2012 pins to promote the conference. My favorite thing about the St. Gregory was this sculpture in the lobby. Marilyn forever!

On Sunday, July 22, I ventured to the National Mall. Because of the rainy weather, only a small portion of the Quilt was on display.

But the panels I did see made quite an impact. I saw panels for brothers, fathers, sisters, sons, mothers and daughters...so many loved ones who are no longer with us. My handkerchief was moist. Here are a couple of my favorite panels from the day:

I was unable to locate my partner Nick's panel on the Mall but was able to find it in The NAMES Project digital archive, which was located in one of the tents. Since the Quilt has become so large and can no longer be displayed in its entirety on the Mall, many of the panels were also displayed in various locations around DC, including the convention center and the arena stage. A friend was able to ascertain that Nick's panel had actually been part of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival display held in DC earlier in the month.

On Sunday night the POZ staff met as a group in the Walter E. Washington Convention Center for the opening ceremonies of AIDS 2012, which began with a salute by Sharon Stone honoring Elizabeth Taylor for her AIDS work. There were welcoming remarks by various dignitaries including UNAIDS executive director Michel Sidibe, U.S. Representative Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), World Bank president Jim Yong Kim and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius. For a full recap of the opening ceremony, click here.

Afterward, I attended a reception at Nine Bar hosted by The Sero Project, which addresses the problem of HIV criminalization in the United States and around the world. The Sero Project was created by POZ founder Sean Strub.

On Monday morning we were back on the Mall bright and early to witness the ritual unfolding of the Quilt. The weather was perfect and the Quilt was displayed all the way from the stage in front of the Capitol to the Washington Monument. It was a breathtaking and moving process.

The highlight of Monday morning was the arrival of Sir Elton John and his partner Daniel Furnish. They came to look at the Quilt with Jeanne White-Ginder, the mother of Ryan White. Here's a photo of Sir Elton as he read names onstage.

On the way back to the hotel for a short break, I happened upon a demonstration about AIDS in Africa in front of the White House.

After lunch, I headed over to the Convention Center and into the Global Village, the only part of the Conference open to the public. The Global Village is a large, diverse area where groups and organizations from all over the world can come together to share ideas and best practices.

The Global Village was abuzz with activity. There were various networking zones, art exhibits, a main stage for live performances of music, dance and theater, and a space for community dialogue. Many nongovernmental organizations--or NGOs--had booths that showcased their work. One hot topic in the Global Village was the U.S. travel restrictions on visas for those with a history of drug use or prostitution. Thousands of foreign sex works were unable to attend the International Conference and add their voices to the discussions about the best ways to stem the epidemic. Some local and global sex workers still managed to attend, and as a result, their networking zone in the Global Village was one of the most active.

Tuesday morning it was back to the Mall for the final day of the Quilt display. It was a very exciting day for me as POZ's resident theater queen. Sheryl Lee Ralph, one of Broadway's original Dreamgirls, did an AIDS-related performance piece during the opening ceremony, and then she read names as brand new panels were added to the Quilt as part of the Call My Name initiative. Ms. Ralph remained at the Quilt for quite a while, chatting with visitors and taking photos.
Soon afterward, several of my coworkers and I decided to go onstage and read names. We were each given two pages of names to read, and we were encouraged to add our own special names and comments at the end. It seemed simple at first. While waiting for my turn, I read over the list to be sure I didn't mispronounce anyone's name.

At the podium each name seemed to take on its own life. These were real people who someone, somewhere was missing. By the time I read Nick’s name at the end, I had totally choked up and started crying, but hopefully I gave him his due. It was a very moving and powerful experience.

But the most dramatic happening of the day occurred around noon when it started to rain. The Quilt organizers shouted from the stage that they needed everyone’s help to protect the Quilt. I found myself and my coworkers racing across the Mall to frantically fold the Quilt panels. The Mall is very big. The Quilt panels are very heavy. I hadn’t expected to get such a workout that day and I was a bit sore for several days afterwards, but we were able to protect the Quilt from the storm. And it was incredible to see everyone, including people who were visiting the Quilt or who just happened to be walking by the Mall on their lunch hour, come together to save the panels of our brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, lovers and friends.

On Wednesday morning, I made one last trip back to the Global Village and ended up buying a nifty heating pad for my partner’s back. Then it was back to the hotel to pack and then off to the train station. I was completely exhausted, but it was a very moving and emotional trip. I slept all the way back to New York City.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/aids-quilt