

Quilted Love

One by one, our heroes and idols stumble and fall, their bodies gnawed by the silent grip of AIDS. Rock Hudson's face deflates through a slow leak we could mistake for our sighs. Freddie Mercury, rock and roll's kinetic showman, leaves no time for a curtain call. He dies the day after rumours of AIDS are confirmed.

Celebrities have the status, the prestige to put AIDS in the headlines, where it belongs. Magic Johnson has the AIDS-virus, the power to preach safe sex and be heard. We are told that AIDS could happen to anyone, but the rich and famous never live in the apartment next door. We see them on magazine covers, on the screen, in the news. We risk forgetting that there are thousands more who have died in the shadows of bright lights.

There are others, less wealthy and well-known, those who lived out of the public eye but are remembered in private moments. David Flink. Brian. Lynn MacGillivray. Rejean. Baby Amanda. Their names are sewn on the quilts that make up the Names Project, a hand-made memorial to those who have died of AIDS, from those who knew them.

It began with one name. In 1985, Cleve Jones of San Francisco made a quilt for Martin Feldman. By 1987 the U.S. quilt had grown to 2,000 panels. Today there are over 15,000. Sixteen countries, including Canada, now have memorial quilts of their own.

For the past five weeks, visitors to Toronto's Museum for Textiles have been given the opportunity to see sections of the Canadian AIDS quilt. These pieces of fabric are not shrines to the famous but tributes to the ordinary, and it is this very ordinariness that makes the panels so eloquent, so touching, so devastating.

One of the largest and most colourful quilts is "a gift of love and hope" from the Sunnybrook Medical Centre. "Please accept this panel as our contribution to what we believe is one of the most stirring projects to come out of the AIDS health crisis."

"Those who gave our lives beauty live forever in our hearts" the quilt says of the twenty-nine individuals who stayed at Sunnybrook. And then there are the names: Helmut, Jeff, Seeta, Jacqueline, Darryl, Paul, Alex...

Most quilts are the size of a flag, and range from the simple to the elaborate, the plain to the poetic. Ed's name is spelled with patches. Excerpts of handwritten letters are reproduced on strips of woven cloth that cover Duncan's quilt ("...coming back next Tuesday.") Bradley is given a red triangle with an inscription that speaks for countless others: So many, so young, so little time.

Personal effects transform a name into an individual history: a bandanna, a Scout badge, T-shirts, a pin from a curling club, a bracelet. Stenciled on a pair of pants worn by Carlos, who died at 22, is a phrase in French: Already an angel.

Every quilt is a labour of love. Lovers and family and friends come together to share their thoughts and loss. To sew is to grieve, to grieve is to heal. Anything goes: sparkles, denim, felt, even humour. `Listen honey, my three favourite words — Shopping at Bloomie's'.

Photographs capture a spirit, a casual pose. Fausto, 27, looks at us with the rugged features of a star. Ciao Bello, someone named Johnny writes. His mother leaves a message in Italian: *Ti amo tanto. Ti ricordo sempre.* We love you Uncle Fausto! his nieces and nephews declare.

Doug Ferguson (1946-1983) holds a chimp in his arms. A founding director of the new Toronto zoo, he is flanked by a stitched drawing of two mourning elephants and their young. Their heads are bowed, their eyes are closed. Their sadness spills off the cloth.

We see them, young men in photographs that might have fallen out of a photo album. Christopher sitting on a couch. David at a family get-together. Derek at the lab. Craig in a crib.

Mothers and fathers leave words of love for their sons. Lovers and companions promise never to forget them. Messages from family resound with a stark simplicity that aches. "Dear Uncle Gilles," a nephew writes. "Just suddenly something hit me and that was how much I miss you and love you."

And there are those who have died anonymously, taking their stories with them. A quilt from Calgary is "for those who can't be named". Another, filled with messages from friends and family and the staff of an oncology unit, has a space "dedicated for all AIDS victims who die in solitude."

The Toronto exhibition closes on Sunday, December 1 — World AIDS Day — with a memorial ceremony, when the names on the quilt will be read.

Kevin Brown. Richard LaLonde. Celine Dubord.

At each city where the Names Project is displayed, a large piece of fabric is provided for visitors to sign, to remember loved ones, to share their thoughts, to mourn collectively. On the textile museum's yellow Signature Square a visitor writes: Our love infinite. Our grief immeasurable. Our memories inspirational. The struggle continues.

And so does the quilting. A quilting centre has been established at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, where those who have lost someone to AIDS can contribute a panel. Tragedy is turned into art. The quilt grows.

Remember their names.

Emil Sher

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