

AIDS quilt organizer knows pain, power of project

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Since Pete Martinez was 21 years old, he has seen 150 friends, loved ones and an employer die of AIDS.

Now at 50, he is helping organize the latest and what may be the last showing of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in its entirety.

With the quilt having grown to include more than 40,000 panels, this weekend in Washington, D.C., may be the last time there is enough space on the Capitol grounds.

"In the beginning, people were leery of making a panel because of the stigma and discrimination. But more people are making them lately," Martinez said.

"What's sad is now we're getting a lot of women and baby panels," he said. Each panel represents someone who has died of AIDS.

Actress Elizabeth Taylor is scheduled to be the grand marshal in the National AIDS Candlelight March that evening. This is also the first time a U.S. president has agreed to co-sponsor the event since the exhibit began almost a decade ago.

A fund-raising dinner Friday at the National Building Museum with former Texas Gov. Ann Richards as keynote speaker has sold out and is projected to bring in \$1 million for AIDS research.

Martinez recently trained local volunteers, including the parents and other family members of the deceased, who plan to help in Washington. With their shoes off, they practiced properly unfolding and folding the quilt panels that matched the ceremonial solemnity of folding the nation's flag.

"AIDS is coming down in the gay community, but increasing in the straight community. So we now have straights coming to ask us how we stopped it," Martinez said.

"You need to educate the younger people who are going out to bars. Pass out pamphlets. Try to make them understand that they're not invulnerable," he said.

Introduced at the training session by volunteer coordinator Perrie Dolph as "Mr. Names Project," Martinez has personally sewn 150 quilt panels representing those he knew who died of AIDS.

Dolph has recruited hundreds of volunteers from the central region of Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Arkansas to help unfold the enormous mounds of material. He has performed many other tasks for the project as well.

"It will now stretch from the Capitol reflecting pond to the Washington Monument, a space about a mile and a quarter long," Dolph said.

Mary Anne Grasso, her AIDS quilt T-shirt adorned with a photo of her son Mark, said she has been planning for a year to go to Washington to include his panel.

"We just have to be a part of it. We lost Mark two years ago, Sept. 12, 1994," Grasso said of the 31-year-old graphic artist.

"We loved him unconditionally. He was the sweetest child a mother could ask for. We have no regrets," she said.

Mark's sister, Judy Peplinski, said, "We have personally felt the anguish and heartbreak of AIDS. But we feel the support of the quilt."

"We believe it's an important way to educate both the politicians and the public on the need for a cure," she said.

Martinez said the timing of the event in the month before the national elections is not coincidental.

"It's important that it's election time. For every one panel out there, there's many more not done," Martinez said.

Previously in hotel management, Martinez said that industry is among many segments of society devastated by the virus.

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