



Jones, Cleve (b. 1954)

by Tina Gianoulis

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A portrait of Cleve Jones, courtesy Cleve Jones.

Since the beginning, Cleve Jones's life as a gay man has been firmly interwoven with his life as a political organizer. As a newly out émigré from the Midwest during the mid-1970s, he leaped into San Francisco electoral politics with his work on Harvey Milk's election campaign for the Board of Supervisors.

A decade later, when a new and frightening disease began to rock the gay community, he conceived the idea of a memorial to its victims that could not only provide closure to those who grieved, but could also serve as a tool for education and outreach. As executive director of the Los Angeles SHANTI Foundation, Jones has continued a career of public service that revolves around his life, his community, and his beliefs.

Jones was born on October 11, 1954 in West Lafayette, Indiana. (Since 1987, Jones has been fond of declaring that he was born on National Coming Out Day; October 11, the date of the 1987 March on Washington, on whose organizing committee he served, was proclaimed a holiday for glbtq people.)

When he came out at the age of seventeen, Jones left the Midwest and, like many gay teenagers escaping parental disapproval, headed west to San Francisco. There he met Harvey Milk, an outspoken gay activist who was working to gain a seat on the city's Board of Supervisors.

Milk became a friend and mentor to Jones, who began to work on Milk's election campaign. When, after two unsuccessful tries, Milk finally became a City Supervisor in 1977, Jones worked as an intern in Milk's office.

When Milk and San Francisco mayor George Moscone were assassinated on November 27, 1978, Jones was one of the leaders of a spontaneous grief-stunned candlelight vigil. Though he continued to work in California electoral politics, serving in the offices of state assembly members for several years, it was an anniversary memorial to Harvey Milk that would provide the inspiration for Jones's career for more than a decade.

In 1985, Jones again led the annual candlelight remembrance of Milk's life and death. A new disease called

AIDS had invaded the gay community with devastating suddenness during the early 1980s, and Jones had been working to help the community deal with its impact. In 1982, he had helped found the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, one of the first AIDS support organizations in the world. Upon hearing that over 1000 gay men had died of AIDS in the San Francisco area alone, Jones added a new element to the 1985 Milk memorial march. He asked marchers to write the names of friends who had died on placards, which were then affixed to the wall of the federal building.

As Jones looked at the patchwork of name-bearing placards, he was reminded of his great-grandmother's patchwork quilts.

Jones began to envision a unique way to put a human face on the growing number of AIDS victims: a huge quilt made up of panels representing each of the dead. These panels would be three feet wide and six feet long, the size of a grave, and would be made by the deceased's friends and family. In 1987, he started the quilt himself by sewing the first panel in honor of a close friend, Marvin Feldman.

Jones's idea of an AIDS Memorial Quilt struck a deep chord with those mourning the victims of the epidemic. The time-honored art of quilting made a surprisingly comforting bridge between gay male sensibility and more traditional cultures.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt contains panels representing gay men, straight men, women, and children of many races and cultures. Panels are creative and varied and contain everything from feather boas to teddy bears. Some people with AIDS have even made their own panels.

When the Quilt was displayed for the first time at the 1987 National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Washington, D. C., it contained 1,920 commemorative fabric panels. By the fifth time it was displayed, nine years later, the quilt had grown to 45,000 panels, and covered the National Mall from the Capitol to the Washington Monument.

The AIDS Quilt has been described by some as the largest community art project in the world and has raised awareness about AIDS internationally. Indeed, the practice of creating quilts to memorialize the lives of those who died from AIDS quickly became an international phenomenon, with independent organizations--such as the NAMES Project in the U. K. and the AIDS Quilt in Australia--dedicated to such memorials sprouting up around the world.

In 1987, Jones became executive director of the Names Project Foundation (NPF), which raised the money required to store, move, and display the quilt around the world. The NPF was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

In 1994, Jones was himself diagnosed as HIV-positive. He resigned as director of the NPF, and was given the position of founder and spokesperson and guaranteed health benefits for the remainder of his life. In 2001, the NPF relocated its offices and the quilt, which now weighs some 50 tons, to Atlanta.

However, Jones and the new administration of NPF did not agree in regard to some basic policies, and in 2004, when he complained publicly, he was dismissed from his position.

Jones had always felt it important to display the quilt in different locations, so that a wide variety of people could see it. The new leadership of NPF, Jones asserted, only sought to create a museum to house the memorial.

Jones filed suit against NPF, alleging wrongful dismissal. His suit asked that NPF be placed in receivership and that the quilt be returned to San Francisco and once again be deployed in the fight against AIDS.

After being accused of renegeing on their promise to provide Jones with life-time health benefits, NPF promised that it would honor its agreement.

In December 2005, the suit was settled, with each party receiving some satisfaction. Jones was awarded 280 of the original quilt panels for display around the San Francisco Bay Area under the management of a new organization, San Francisco Friends of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. He was also granted sole discretion to nominate four people to fill two new positions on the NPF board of directors. Further, NPF agreed to provide an official link to his organization on their web site.

For its part, NPF was granted the right to manage the remainder of the quilt as it sees fit.

In 2004, Jones became director of the Los Angeles SHANTI Foundation. SHANTI, named for the Sanskrit word for inner peace, offers practical and emotional support to people with life-threatening or chronic diseases. In his new position, Jones continues his community-based activism.

Among the awards Jones has received is the Harvard AIDS Institute's AIDS Leadership Award.

[Jones is depicted by actor Emile Hirsch in Gus Van Sant's 2008 film biography of Harvey Milk, *Milk*. Jones, who urged Van Sant to make the movie, served as a consultant to the filmmaker. He has described *Milk* as a beautiful film that authentically recreates the time and spirit it depicts.

In 2009, Jones and veteran activist David Mixner called for a National Equality March to refocus the gay rights movement from a strategy based on incremental local gains to a national strategy aimed at winning equality at the federal level.

Although the National Equality March was hastily organized and promoted largely through bloggers on the Internet, it attracted upward of 250,000 participants to Washington, D. C. on October 11, 2009. Expressing impatience with the lack of action by the Obama administration to fulfill the promises made during the presidential campaign of 2008, the speakers, including Jones, demanded full equality under the law for glbtq citizens of the United States.]

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.