

Names, Memory, and Acceptance

By Jenna LaConte

“Jac Wall is my lover. Jac Wall had AIDS. Jac Wall died. I love Jac Wall” (Hawkins 774). Jac Wall is one of more than 91,000 people memorialized on the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which covers 1,293,300 square feet and weighs over 34 tons (“Quilt Facts”). The NAMES Project, which Cleve Jones started in November of 1985, offers people an opportunity to commemorate “a population America... seemed eager to forget” (Hawkins 756) by piecing together a quilt from squares dedicated to a particular person, or multiple people, who died of AIDS. These quilt tours the United States and is available for the public to visit. Anybody can contribute a panel, and each quilter has complete freedom in regards to the content of his or her block because of the project’s “refusal to place limits on either the expressive content of the memorial or its eventual interpretation” (Capozzola 94).

One particular quilt panel features the name John Purcell, with the dates 1957-1995 carefully stitched below. John Purcell was my uncle, and my mother and grandmother worked together to create his section of the quilt. Images that represent his life-- such as the sledding hill in his hometown, the Eiffel Tower from his time studying abroad in France, and the New York City skyline where he lived as an adult-- border a poem that John wrote in high school. As one might imagine is the case with every square of the memorial quilt, a tremendous amount of both love and grief went into the creation of my uncle’s panel. John, who came out in the late 1970’s and discovered that he was HIV positive in the late 1980’s, left a meaningful legacy that remains relevant in my family.

When I asked my mother about her attitude toward homosexuality, she explained that as an adolescent, “It just wasn’t really on my radar” (LaConte). She was aware that gay people existed, but the concept felt foreign and unrelated to her world. Her indifference came to an end when she returned home from college at the age of nineteen and found a book in her family’s study called *My Son Eric*. On the inside cover, John had written a note to their parents expressing his hope that reading the book would help them to understand him better. The book was about a mother learning to accept her son’s homosexuality; this, for my mother, was the moment she realized that her brother was gay.

“It was like I had discovered a secret that I couldn’t talk to anybody about,” she told me. “Now, looking back, I can’t believe that I didn’t talk to anybody. It was very scary to me because it was something I had just found out about my family, but I didn’t know how to address it” (LaConte). Later in life, my mother found out that her parents had attempted to treat John’s homosexuality as a temporary condition, one that they could help him to overcome, by taking him to a psychiatrist. Tension grew amongst her family members when they were all home, as the unspoken reality of John’s sexuality distanced them from each other.

The turning point for her family came at a time of extreme tragedy: the revelation that John was HIV positive. The AIDS epidemic became prominent in America during a period “when the power to define Americanism rested primarily with conservatives who were hostile to all people with AIDS and gay men in particular” (Capozzola 92). In the midst of this crisis, President Reagan “did not even mention the word *AIDS* publicly until over 21,000 Americans had already died of the disease” (Capozzola 98). In light of John’s illness, my mother’s family found the strength to rise above this intolerance and supported him unconditionally all the way through to his untimely death.

The harsh reality of John's illness and passing presented my mother's family with an opportunity to set an example. They lived in the comfortably wealthy town of Concord, Massachusetts, where her father was a respected doctor and her mother was a model citizen who held the position of town selectman. The culture of the time was one of "stigma, fear, and discrimination," and "many early victims of AIDS refused to be identified as such in their obituaries" (Capozzola 93). However, my grandparents refused to follow this pattern of silence and decided to publicly acknowledge that AIDS was a national crisis, and that it had taken their son's life.

A few years after her brother passed away, my mother was riffling through *The Boston Globe* and the name John Purcell caught her eye. She read through the article and discovered that her brother had been among the first ten people whose obituaries publically stated that they had died of AIDS. "People would call it cancer," she explained (LaConte). More recently, my mother ran into the librarian of the Concord library, whose husband died of AIDS when their daughters were only teenagers. The librarian emotionally revealed to my mother that my grandparents had paved the way for her family to publicly acknowledge her husband's disease. As my mother pointed out, "If it happened to the Purcell family, it could happen to anybody" (LaConte).

The NAMES Project allows people to step out of the shadows and turn "what was perceived to be a 'gay disease' into a shared national tragedy" (Hawkins 757). Throughout the 1980's, AIDS turned into a universal epidemic. In December 2000, United Nations officials reported that a worldwide population of 21.8 million people had died of AIDS since 1981, at which point the number of globally reported cases had barely surpassed 300 (Capozzola 93). Due to the enormity of the tragedy represented by the quilt, people often compare the NAMES Project to a war memorial, specifically the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

However, unlike the VVM, the AIDS Memorial Quilt “has no official status, no public funding, no fixed location,” and it “keeps growing with the losses from the epidemic” (Hawkins 762). Additionally, the fact that the names on the quilt “appear on fabric rather than cut into granite” (Hawkins 765) symbolizes the fragility and fleetingness of life for the millions of people who contracted HIV throughout this time period.

In October of 1996, the AIDS Memorial Quilt was displayed in its entirety and completely covered the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (“History of the Quilt”). Since then, the NAMES Project has continued to expand, and by June of 2004, one thousand additional blocks had been submitted. Due to its colossal size, separate sections of the quilt travel throughout the United States and are made available for the public to view. Certain rituals are associated with the presentation of the memorial quilt, such as “an intricately choreographed unfolding conducted by white-clad Quilt volunteers” and a ceremonious “intonation of names” (Capozzola 95). During the intonation of names, a speaker reads off every name listed on the displayed portion of the quilt. This humanizes each individual commemorated through the quilt, and it gives a voice to those who may not have felt able to speak out for themselves while they were alive. The audience also has the opportunity to participate in the quilt’s development by writing a personal message on a blank signature panel, allowing viewers to feel a direct connection with the project.

When my mother was pregnant in 1990, the AIDS Memorial Quilt came to Massachusetts. She and my father visited the exhibit and one of the volunteers, upon noticing the extremely pregnant woman standing in a long line, brought her up to the front. A combination of her brother’s recent diagnosis, her lack of preparation for being brought to the front of the line, and pregnancy hormones caused her to feel overwhelmed by the sight of thousands of names

individually stitched by people who had lost someone they loved to AIDS. She immediately broke down crying when she saw the quilt.

Soon after seeing the quilt, my mother gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, my brother Stephen. At the last minute, she decided to give him the middle name of John, in light of her brother's illness. John happened to be visiting Massachusetts from New York when Stephen was born on October 28, 1990, so he was the first one to visit his baby nephew in the hospital. Fast-forward eighteen years to Stephen receiving his housing assignment for his freshman year at New York University. Something about the particular address stood out to my mother, so she went and found her old address book, only to discover that Stephen would be moving into the exact building that John had lived in when he was living in the city. Fast-forward a few more months, to Stephen walking up the stairs of our basement into the kitchen where my parents were eating dinner, and informing them that he was gay.

When I asked my mother if she had ever considered the possibility of having a gay son or daughter, she told me it had been one of her biggest fears as a parent. Although she knew she would always love her children unconditionally, she could not shake the feeling that being gay would cause her child to face further obstacles throughout his or her life. However, the experience of having Stephen come out to her and my father before anyone else opened her eyes to the ways in which the world has become a more accepting place, and the ways in which Stephen has grown into an exceptional young man.

“A lot of what came with that was really, sincerely, great pride in him and his confidence in himself and my relationship with him that he chose to tell us. And that he was such a thinking, smart kid; that his head was on straight about it... I feel like at that point I was sort of learning from him and taking his lead” (LaConte). Here, my mother was presented with the opportunity

to love Stephen for who he was right from the beginning, and to not make the same mistakes her parents had made in trying to change their son instead of embracing him.

The NAMES Project, which has raised over \$4,000,000 for direct services for people with AIDS (“Quilt Facts”), has undoubtedly played a role in the national movement toward the acceptance of homosexuality. Along with these funds, the AIDS Memorial Quilt has raised awareness of an American crisis that the government was willing to let go unnoticed. It created a nationwide conviction that people had the right to grieve for those who died of AIDS, and it broke a universal silence over an unspoken tragedy. The voice that the project gave to the gay community and its allies constructed the world that we live in now, where intolerance still exists, but people are slowly starting to know better.

“Learning that he does not feel that something’s wrong with him, that his experience has been so positive... it’s sort of amazing to me that it’s changed so much and become so much more accepted,” explained my mother. “And I’m so glad that if that’s what he is, than that’s what he can be” (LaConte).

Works Cited

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