

AIDS quilt stirs mournful memories

By Wendy Johnson

Although grieving the loss of friends who have died of AIDS has been woven into the fabric of Provincetown's year-round community, the magnitude of the epidemic was perhaps never quite as glaring as it was on Sunday, when parts of the AIDS Memorial Quilt were displayed all day.

It was a breezy, seemingly perfect fall day, and the shifting autumn sunlight bounced around, making every color seem brighter, but everyday people with long faces and heavy hearts silently climbed the steps to Town Hall, preparing, once again, to mourn.

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial quilt has never been shown in Provincetown before. If the quilt were to be shown here again, it would be a little bigger, a little heavier, said Ken Davis, co-founder of the Rhode Island chapter of the NAMES Project, which, in conjunction with the Portland, Maine and

Long Island chapters, brought the quilt to Provincetown.

Pieces of the quilt were displayed in five houses of worship: Congregation Am Hayam, St. Mary's of the Harbor, the Universalist-Unitarian Meeting House, the United Methodist Church and St. Peter the Apostle Roman Catholic Church. The largest portion was displayed in Town Hall, where opening ceremonies took place at 12:30 p.m.

"The quilt represents the stories of people's lives," said Victor DeLuca of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, during the opening ceremonies. "It teaches us that our lives are not small, but that our lives are all we have. The stories before us on each quilt show us that life is more than mere survival."

The AIDS Support Group displayed a panel at Town Hall. It hung from the top of the stage and stretched down almost to the floor. A rendering of the Pilgrim Monument was painted toward the middle and all around it are stars,

each bearing the name of a client the PASG was created to serve. To the right and slightly above the monument is a quote from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the same quote that serves as the introduction to the *Great Book*:

"And when they shall die, take them and turn them into little stars, and they will make the face of heaven so fine, that all the world will be in love with night, and pay no worship to the garish sun."

Mourners watched in silence from the balcony seats in Town Hall as volunteers carefully unfolded eight squares, each 12' by 12'. The squares each contain smaller panels, each a hand-stitched memorial for a person who has died of AIDS. The larger squares will later be sewn into the quilt, which contains 27,000 panels.

The entire quilt has not been shown since 1992, but will be displayed again next year. Stretched out, it is the length

of 12 football fields, and represents only a small fraction, about 11%, of all U.S. AIDS victims. The Smithsonian Museum has designated the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial quilt as the world's largest community art project, surpassing even the Egyptian pyramids.

Viewing the carefully hand-stitched panels is a powerfully moving experience, as was evidenced by the tears, embraces and eerie hush which filled Town Hall and the worship houses last weekend.

The panels are stitched by friends or family members of an AIDS victim. Each is unique and bears the name of one victim. Some have pictures sewn into them, others contain fabric from a favorite shirt, a tie, a baseball hat. One had an antique lace wedding dress, complete with faux pearls sewn in. Several had either rhinestones, chiffon, or lace sewn in.

"I'm here for my big sister," said Karen Hoyt of Pawtucket, RI, whose sister Donna J. Hoyt died in 1994. Hoyt wrote the name of her sister on the signature square which lay upon the floor. The panel will be sewn into the middle of all of the Rhode Island chapter squares for the Washington display next year.

"She was my best friend," Hoyt said. "We had a lot of good times together here in Provincetown. It's ironic that we're here today with her panel. My whole family worked on it together."

Each panel is submitted with a letter and picture describing the individual life it represents.