

THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT PROJECT

An Evaluation of Phase One



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COMMISSIONED BY
Beyond Awareness Campaign
HIV/AIDS and STD Directorate
Department of Health
South Africa

October 1999

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PUBLISHED BY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The South African AIDS Memorial Quilt Project, is one of several AIDS action projects administered and executed as part of the Beyond Awareness Campaign. In its second phase, the Beyond Awareness Campaign (BAC) represents a consortium of four organisations: AIDS Media Research Project (AMREP), Wireless Additive, DramAidE, and Lindsay Smithers FCB.

This evaluation, produced through a four-month process of action research, is the product of a relative outsider, an American communication scholar with extensive experience in communication projects elsewhere on the African continent. This report elaborates the efforts undertaken by BAC staff in the organisation and execution of workshops in which AIDS Memorial quilt panels are made. It also comments on the display of these panels in educational and ritualistic settings.

The report shows that BAC has devised a procedure that by and large works in the running of quilt workshops. It demonstrates further that the panel production activity operates on an effective level among participants, helping them to face and explore emotions felt for the deaths of friends and acquaintances lost to the AIDS epidemic.

Through workshop exercises and games participants are adequately “warmed up” for close social interaction. Through the narrative process, participants are forced to contemplate the pain and loss of an individual death from AIDS. Through the creative/craft-making portion of the quilt workshop, they are led to commemorate the life of an individual. Through group sharing, workshop attendees are invited to internalise the enormity of the AIDS epidemic, to reflect on its impact in their lives, and to put names onto the AIDS death statistics.

The completed quilt panels act as great social levellers reminding all who behold them of our common humanity and our common mortality. In giving equal value to all of the deceased, they highlight, especially through many of the stories of the dead, the painful gender disparities that exist in patriarchal society.

BAC has encouraged workshop participants to diffuse the quilt-making activity by taking starter kits and organising smaller-scale workshops of their own. The results of this so-called “starter-kit” initiative have been inadequately tracked because of shortages and changes in personnel. This report has recommended that the campaign seek the partnership of selected Christian churches and other social sectors in the execution of the South African Memorial Quilt Project.

Church organisations are administratively equipped to handle projects of this type and would be in a good position to monitor quilt panels produced outside the confines of a one-day workshop. Moreover, the historic involvement of the

churches in ministering to the ill and presiding over rituals of the dead, make the churches the natural partners of the quilt endeavour. The project's association with churches will also be useful if the consortium becomes more involved during the upcoming years with quilt displays and other death rituals.

The quilt workshops have generated "products" which greatly vary in terms of aesthetic appeal. The inclusion of genuine craft workers – in beading, in crochet, in needlepoint, and in weaving for example, as co-facilitators would improve the level of cultural appropriateness of the panels and would increase their aesthetic value. And extending the production period of the quilts and housing the production sites in churches, schools, trade unions, or sporting bodies could facilitate these changes. In the end, the shifts in practice would enhance the value of AIDS quilt panels as memorials to the dead.

Exhibitions of memorial panels produced as part of the project can serve as catalysts for discussion of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But the panels must always be handled with reverence, as is fitting for memorials to the dead. A "guard" or a "bearer" whose role is designated through dress should accompany the panels. From time to time, the project should organise a commemoration or a procession in which the panels and the deceased whom they represent are formally and ritually honoured in a public forum.

BACKGROUND

The AIDS Quilt Project in South Africa draws its inspiration from the United States based Names project. That project developed after 1987 when San Francisco AIDS activist Cleve Jones attended a candlelight vigil for all those of San Francisco who had died of AIDS. As marchers passed by the city's old federal building, they pasted on its wall the name of one person they'd lost to the AIDS epidemic. Later, as Jones pondered the name-covered wall face, he thought it looked like a patchwork quilt. Fifteen months later, Jones made a quilt panel to commemorate the death of a friend. The experience was so powerful he decided to start the Names Project foundation, which would provide a framework for the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

Since then, the project has commemorated with quilt panels the lives of over 50,000 individuals who have died of AIDS. Today there are panels from every state in the US and from 40 other countries. At the last public display of the entire quilt, held in 1996 in Washington, D.C. the quilt spanned 28 football fields, and covered a length of some two kilometres.

As of this writing, there are 38 independent quilt affiliates world wide, making the quilt the largest community craft project in the world. South Africa's AIDS quilt project is firmly embedded in a global effort to remember those whom the world has lost to the AIDS pandemic.

The South African AIDS Memorial Quilt was brought to this country in 1989 by Carroll Jacobs. As a theology student studying in the United States, Jacobs was inspired by the healing potential and the calming effect she thought AIDS quilt panels were making on the families and friends of the deceased. Moreover, she felt that the AIDS memorial quilt was particularly appropriate for South Africa, because, as she put it, "there is a very strong need to memorialise (the dead) in the black community".

Jacobs decided to take the craft project back to South Africa. At this time in South Africa's history (late 1980s/early 1990s), the infection rate for AIDS was still quite low with less than an estimated 1% of the sexually active population HIV positive.¹ As no specific funds were set aside to promote the quilt, it remained a small and localised project. Meanwhile, other individuals and groups, inspired by Jacobs and the US Names Project made memorial panels, all on a piecemeal and voluntary basis. It was not until late 1998 that the South African quilt initiative would achieve "project" status.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt Project was included in the project activities of the Beyond Awareness Campaign of the HIV/AIDS and STD Directorate of the Department of Health.

The first AIDS quilt panels produced by the project were made in early 1999. By October 1999, there were more than 300 panels.

CONTEXT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT PROJECT

The quilt project is embedded in a wide range of interventions designed to mobilise South African society in the fight against the AIDS epidemic. These interventions include projects in the sectors of health, social work, corrections, mass media, and education. Most of this activism has come in the last five to six years.

Throughout most of the 1980s AIDS was regarded as a disease of white homosexuals. Both the existent AIDS problem and its potential threat to the broader South African population suffered from the neglect of a Nationalist Party government in the latter years of its rule.

With the 1990s came a rapid increase in the rate of seropositivity among heterosexuals in South Africa together with a growing awareness of the terrible toll AIDS was taking on the African continent. Rates of infection of women presenting at ante-natal clinics increased from less than one percent nationally in 1990 to some 22.8% in 1999.

Qualitative research gathered here in South Africa and elsewhere has suggested that many variables, ie., psychological, social, cultural, and economic factors continued to foster dangerous sexual practices. These conditions would need, in the very least, to be considered and addressed before the spread of AIDS would be contained.

All of the Beyond Awareness Campaign projects since 1997, and indeed most of the AIDS initiatives in South Africa, have shared a common focus. This is a focus on helping the living with a focus on prevention. But at the time of this research, there was only one national AIDS intervention that focused on honouring the deceased – The South African AIDS Memorial Quilt Project.

This research represents a preliminary evaluation, resulting largely from a process of “Action Research”. Since my arrival in South Africa in July 1999, I have participated in numerous BAC initiatives including three quilt workshops and five quilt displays. In both types of activities, I have conducted numerous “intercept” interviews with participants, in English, or in Zulu with the aid of a research assistant/translator. I have also undertaken in-depth interviews or lengthy informal discussions with nine of the project’s ten quilt workshop facilitators. *Ex post facto*, I also conducted group interviews with three different groups who had worked on quilts before my arrival in the country. These data are augmented by my involvement as an evaluator in BAC’s AIDS Mural Project Evaluation and by my discussions with the BAC management team.

In providing this report I describe the workshops in which the AIDS memorial quilts are made and the events in which they are displayed. I discuss the output of the workshops, ie., the quilt panels that are produced and the panel narratives that accompany them. Further, I offer critical comments useful for strengthening the effectiveness of the quilt-making process and the power of

their display. I make recommendations for future directions for the project, and I conclude with a critique of the quilt as a public art form. In so doing, I insert myself in the worldwide struggle against the AIDS pandemic.

THE PROCESS OF QUILT-MAKING

Not a craft form indigenous to South Africa, quilt-making has been introduced in the country with this project. The BAC has organised the South African quilt project in the following way: BAC facilitators contact social groups, community groups, and other organisations to see if there is interest in producing quilts. If the answer is affirmative, the project facilitators and the group contact person agree on a mutually acceptable date and venue, and organise the workshop. Workshops are typically run with 28 to 30 persons, the preferred group size for most facilitators. This number permits the workshop organiser to divide the group into five or six teams of five or six individuals, a reported optimum number for a work group.

A campaign facilitator arrives at the designated site armed with materials for quilt-making. These include calico panels (for the quilt panels themselves), acrylic paints and paint brushes, scraps of fabric suitable for appliqué work, needles and thread for sewing, glue, buttons for decorating, sketch paper and pencils used in the initial design of a panel, and so on. Oftentimes a facilitator brings along sample panels that have been produced elsewhere. What are produced in these workshops are not “true” quilt panels but banner-like items featuring appliqué work and painted images.

Workshops generally begin around 9h00. Participants are given a brief introduction into the concept of the South African AIDS Memorial Quilt project and they are provided with the BAC quilt project brochure illustrating panels made elsewhere in Southern Africa. The participants are then encouraged to begin to formulate ideas for a quilt commemorative dedicated to a person they know who died of AIDS.

Next the session is given over to warm-up games and exercises. These involve South African versions of the “Name Game” complete with hand clapping, movement, and turn taking for self-identification. Other games used by the facilitators may involve a South African variant of “musical chairs” “Vampire in the Dark” and “Trust”. The aim of these games is clearly to warm-up the participants so they will feel comfortable interacting with one another and with the facilitators.

Games typically continue until a 15 to 25 minute tea break that occurs about 10h30 to 10h45. After the break, the participants are divided into groups of about five to seven participants and are invited to share stories of a deceased friend or loved one they might wish to commemorate. Each person in the group is encouraged to tell the story of someone he or she knows who died of AIDS. The work group then selects a person/story to illustrate with a panel. If

no one in the group knows of such a person, or if group members cannot solve disclosure issues surrounding AIDS specific deaths, they may opt to produce a generic panel. After about one half-hour of discussion, participants are encouraged to begin.

The groups I have observed quietly divide the task amongst themselves and quickly get down to work. Often the first task elected by the group is the painting of the calico panel itself so that the background of the memorial will be colourful. Acrylic paints are used for this purpose, and the panels are taken out to dry in the sun before further work is undertaken.

While the panel is drying, group members typically sketch out their visual conception of the panel. Once the group has agreed on a basic sketch, the participants will proceed to produce individual elements of the panel. Typically, work group members will begin cutting items such as figures or flowers from scraps of material provided.

The work groups generally take an hour break for lunch sometime between 12h30 and 1h30. After lunch the quilt-making progresses in earnest, some team members cutting and sewing or gluing elements onto the quilt, others lettering and painting names and figures. Sometime during the afternoon, the facilitator reminds the group that they must designate one team member to commit to paper, in English, Zulu, or the local language of the group, the story of the person they are commemorating.

The groups I have observed work very well together. They seem to easily decide which story to illustrate. They also appear to divide themselves organically into work groups proceeding almost seamlessly from task to task. It seemed clear to me that groups I observed (two older women's groups at community centres and a gender-mixed university student group) were very comfortable and very happy with group projects. Indeed the spirit of *ubuntu* is much in evidence during the quilt-making workshops.

Around 15h30 the panels are usually completed and the facilitator asks the groups to assemble their creations in a central area for drying. The facilitator collects the groups together in a circle, and asks a spokesperson from each group to present their panel and its story to the other participants. The facilitator reminds the participants of the availability of AIDS information and brochures (which he/she has brought if they are not already available on site) and encourages persons to take them.

Following these presentations, the facilitator reminds the participants that starter kits are available to those participants who would like to diffuse the quilt-making process to smaller groups. Then the participants, the facilitator and the session organiser clean the workshop area and the participants depart. The facilitator collects the written stories, packs up the quilts and supplies and returns to headquarters at the University of Durban-Natal, the University of Zululand, or the AIDS Action Office in Johannesburg. The quilts are brought

from time to time to the University of Zululand where they are sewn together in squares containing eight panels. Grommets, which facilitate panel display, are then sewn onto the 4 x 4 metre squares. The squares are then placed in temporary storage for purposes of cataloguing. When storage facilities have been completed, the squares will be kept in specially designated locked cabinets at the University of Zululand.

Follow-up

At the end of each workshop, BAC facilitators produce a report detailing the number and names of participants who attended the workshop, the number of panels made, the number of starter kits taken, the number of AIDS information pamphlets distributed, and the name of the contact person at the organisation. This information is compiled into a database. The project staff plan to follow-up on all those participants who have taken starter kits and collect in all panels that have been made for photographing.

At present, all quilt panels are in the process of being photographed. The stories illustrated by the quilt panels are being put into databases at the Zululand headquarters. A book containing photographs and stories of the South African AIDS Memorial Quilt is being produced.

EVALUATION OF THE QUILT WORKSHOPS

The warm-up

The warm-up games seem to be effective with school children through tertiary level students and with women from the peri-urban areas whose workshops I have observed. The children and the university students especially appear to enjoy these games. But not all groups are content with the warm-ups. One of a pair of facilitators who worked with urban adult males reported that some of these participants objected to the seeming childishness of some of the games. These facilitators were forced to abandon elements of the warm-up in order to satisfy the participants.

As the project broadens its outreach to include ever more segments of society (see below), the project will have to devise an additional battery of warm-up techniques in the service of a more sophisticated (or reserved) clientele. Facilitators will also be advised to continue remaining both attentive to the needs of the workshop participants and flexible in their own responses to group dynamics.

The craft itself

Most participants enjoy the quilting workshop for the opportunity it provides

to spend a day socialising, meeting new people, learning new things, and reflecting on the dead. Some individuals, however, have expressed disappointment in the workshop's failure to impart a new skill, or to conclude with a marketable product. While it is clear that the making of memorial quilts will never be a commercial venture, it does not seem unreasonable to consider using these workshops to teach a new craft technique or to reinforce customary craft activities of participants. Indeed for this activity to be deeply therapeutic, it must immerse the senses of the workers in the creative "flow" of the production process.⁴

Still, there is something to be said in favour of the efficiency of a workshop that takes neophytes through a process and finishes the day with several completed panels. But what is gained in efficiency is very often lost in skill transfer, in ritual impact, and in the aesthetic value of the outcome. Some of the quilt panels are rather hurriedly conceived and awkwardly produced. And while this adds a somewhat charming element of "naïve art" to the project, I believe it will be less than satisfying in the long run when the South African quilt is as large as it is likely to become. South Africa's people have strong craft traditions, and I believe these should be fostered in a forum of public art. Moreover, and perhaps, more importantly, South Africa's dead must be honoured with objects of beauty. If we are to say there was no shame in the death from AIDS, then the memorials to these dead must speak to their honour and their dignity.

It seems to me that a mechanism should be found to deepen the workshop phase of the project both in terms of depth and technique. Perhaps individuals with craft skills, weaving, beading, crocheting, embroidery, etc. in community centres, schools, churches, or other sites of our quilt production could be enjoined to co-direct our quilt workshops (along with a BAC facilitator). These individuals could also continue to work with quilt-makers for periods that would extend beyond one day. This would permit quilters to learn and to use more sophisticated craft techniques on their panels. In the process of commemorating their dead, the participants would learn a new skill. They would also engage themselves in the activity in a deeper and more focused way. In addition, the output of the quilt workshops (the panels) would be more aesthetically pleasing.

The social component of the process

I have consistently asked participants whether they like these quilt memorial workshops and what they tend to derive from them. The answers I receive are remarkably consistent. Respondents invariably say that making the quilt has given them an opportunity to honour/remember someone who died of AIDS. This is of course what they have been told is the purpose of the workshop. One could conclude these comments indicate little more than a high level of compliance among workshop participants did they not become so absorbed during the sessions.

As noted above, many a participant will choose to honour a person the cause of whose death has been hidden from peers. In such cases, it is quite clear that the grieving process for this friend (or acquaintance) has been incomplete. Even if he/she attended the funeral of someone who died of AIDS, it seems the purgative power of that death ritual has been diluted by a sense of falsehood and shame. The friend of the deceased, moreover, often continues to bear the pain of the dead person because the latter was shunned or hidden by his or her family at the end of life. Commonly, the storyteller friend also experiences guilt because she or he was unable to help the AIDS sufferer in her/his time of need. Because AIDS is a disease that targets persons in the prime of life, it is common for a peer to fail to provide comfort to the dying during the latter's final days. Such a friend may have been separated by educational or professional commitments from the person sick with AIDS. Alternatively, the sick person has been sent by relatives to a rural area to hide the perceived shame of AIDS, and to be nearer the living and dead kin in preparation for death. In any case, it is very common for survivor friends to need to continue the grieving process. The quilt workshops provide a safe environment in which to ponder grief, mortality, and death from AIDS.

For the quilters, remembering and sharing stories about the deceased is therapeutic. The pained expressions of the storyteller and the intense but subdued interest of his or her work group counterparts suggest that this quilt producing process helps the participants to heal. The socially shared activity also promotes a greater understanding of the effect of AIDS on the lives of all South Africans. Furthermore, it helps to personalise and therefore to render meaningful, the statistics on the AIDS death toll. Over time, all of these effects should operate to decrease the stigma of the disease. These four benefits are among the stated goals of the South African AIDS Memorial Quilt Project.

Instead of remembering an individual, some quilting groups choose to commemorate a collectivity, for example, all of the infants and children who have died of AIDS; or all of the students of ML Sultan Technikon who have died of the disease. As noted above, groups choose this more generic form when they have no known individual to commemorate or when they dare not divulge the cause of death of a person whose family is still engaged in public denial. Clearly, the production of the generic panels is less conducive to the achievement of the various cognitive and affective goals listed above. Here the activity much more resembles banner or poster making, an external act functional to broader goals of social mobilisation with a much-reduced capacity for internalisation.

One facilitator with whom I spoke described how she challenges those groups who say they are unable to personalise a memorial. She recommends they try to think of a person they may have heard or read about. And she often encourages people to use a pseudonym on the panel to honour the person whose family is still hiding the cause of death. I would laud this general

preference for memorialising an individual because it comes closer to the project's goals of personalising and internalising the AIDS epidemic and because it chips away at the edifice of denial which surrounds the epidemic.

QUILT PANELS AND STORIES

Quilt workshops produce quilt panels that remember the dead. It is instructive to see how these dead are depicted.

Much of the symbolism used in the quilt panels draws heavily from Christian religious iconography. Crosses, religious regalia, bibles, tombstones engraved with the words "Rest in Peace," or RIP predominate. These symbols are frequently used to commemorate the especially devout. Other images depict the favourite pastime or preoccupation of the deceased. These might include trees or flowers for nature lovers; drums, guitars, and CDs for music lovers; books for intellectuals; pots for potters; and even bottles for drinkers. Home and hearth images often containing orphaned children, are made for mothers (and more rarely, for fathers). Sometimes an image of the deceased herself or himself appears painted on the calico.

Some of the panels, particularly those commemorating infants or children, contain images of children's toys and facsimiles of or actual articles of children's clothing sewn to the quilts.

The panels are usually further embellished with AIDS symbols, the red AIDS ribbon, the yellow hand of earlier campaigns, or the heart, a symbol of love. At times, other decorative flourishes are added beyond the panel's central theme. These might include painted frames around the perimeter of the panel; flowers (again), birds, or even human figures, sometimes with joined hands symbolic of unity.

Most of the panels are also lettered either with a commemorative or an exhortatory message. Commemorative messages tell the deceased how much they are honoured, appreciated, loved, or missed. The advocacy messages, often done on the generic murals, contain calls for public commitment to fight the epidemic, to practice safe sex, or to care for the ailing with AIDS.

The panels are remarkable in their simplicity and in their lack of pretentiousness. They give space for the celebration of common touches of humanity: the love of nature; the love of worship; the love of family – even the love of liquor.

Like death, they serve as great levellers, raising the stature of the lowly born and lowering the standing of the mighty. Each individual commemorated gets one coffin-sized panel – no more, no less! The panels remind us all that fate can be cruel; that life can be short; and that AIDS is an indiscriminate killer.

As noted above, each panel is submitted with a handwritten account briefly describing the person commemorated or expanding on the theme of a generic panel. Project staff are compiling these accounts or stories into a book that will ultimately circulate with quilt displays.

Quilt stories have not been systematically evaluated for this report, because their compilation is as yet incomplete. Nevertheless even a cursory glance through these stories is enlightening.⁵

The levelling theme of common humanity emerges throughout these stories. A sense of tragedy and loss is expressed for a single death, or the many deaths – of babies, of children, of students, and of all South Africans who have died of AIDS. And the cry for unity in fighting against the disease again emerges in many of the stories, particularly those of the generic panels.

In as much as the group panels appeal to a sense of commonality, the individual commemoratives raise up to honour, and so to scrutinise, the deaths of individuals. These are deaths whose cause might otherwise go unnoticed and unreported outside the circle of immediate family and friends. And the lives and deaths of wives and lovers at the hands of womanising male partners is a theme in the quilt panels stories that jumps out at the reader. Patriarchal South African society has long silenced women. Women's differential social value has even been symbolised in traditional death rituals.⁶ In an awful way, the AIDS epidemic has finally come to shed light on the sorry state of gender relations in South Africa. And the panels, with their great levelling power, give space to the tragic victims of male heterosexual privilege. If these women were silent in life, their memorials guarantee that they speak to us from the grave!

Perhaps one of the great services of the BAC quilt project has been to give dead women a voice they never had in life; and to give female relatives, friends, and neighbours the safety to speak these stories of loved ones aloud.

Quilt-making and the grieving process: Creating a new ritual?

I have been unable to determine how the commemoration of a friend or a departed loved one in a quilt compares in its ritual significance with common ways South Africans honour their dead and mark their passing from this life. These would include funerary rites, gravestone unveiling, sacrificial offerings to the ancestors, death anniversary postings in the newspaper, and religious and customary devotions of various types. For the majority population of South Africa, particularly in rural areas, deceased ancestors play a role in the affairs of the living. Honouring the dead is therefore of great cultural importance among South Africa's black populations.⁷ And inadequate death rituals will no doubt lead to a profound sense of *anomie* and general malaise among the living.

There is a fear that South Africans, like their counterparts in Zimbabwe, may soon be unable to cope with the death toll caused by this terrible infection.

Families faced with multiple funerals in a single year may simply be unable to bear the heavy burdens of costly, but culturally expected funeral rites. There will be additional pressure for space in cemeteries as the death toll rises. Some families may be forced to cremate their dead, a practice strongly disfavoured in the black community.⁸

Given the severity of the AIDS epidemic and the peaking death toll anticipated during the next decade, it seems reasonable to create a new death ritual at this time. A ritual with a very public face appears needed to help to counter the private shame so many of the survivor families have felt from the scourge of AIDS. A ritual whose celebrants hail from the entire planet earth seems entirely appropriate for this global pandemic.

GROUPS INVOLVED IN THE WORKSHOP PROCESS

I have observed a number of different groups involved in the workshop process. These include two KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) women's community centre participants, and one student group assembled for the Tertiary Institutions Project in the Eastern Cape. *Ex post facto*, I also interviewed men and women from the Westville Prison (KZN) together with the social workers who arranged these sessions. I also spoke after the fact with student activists who worked on quilt panels at ML Sultan Technikon in Durban (KZN). All these data were enriched by interviews/extensive conversations with nine BAC facilitators.⁹

Prison social workers indicated that the quilting workshops helped prisoners to cope with sickness and death from AIDS all around them. Male prisoners, some of them obviously ill with the AIDS virus, spoke sadly about making quilts to commemorate their best friends. They also spoke about the importance of reflection, and the need to face their own impending health problems and deaths. I saw little of the bravado and machismo I had expected from male prisoners, just a deep sense of depression among men living with death, with some of the still healthy ones destined to be raped and possibly infected.

Meeting with prisoners reminded me of the Hawthorne Effect. Prisoners especially appreciate the personal interaction and concern that is demonstrated by BAC facilitators in a quilt workshop. Those engaged in this prison should be commended for their important efforts. The Hawthorne Effect, of course, occurs among less captive groups as well.

Interaction with an exceptional population in an anomalous situation is critically useful. One can argue that an extreme condition such as the prison may help to telescope future scenarios. And in this regard, as the epidemic reaches ever closer to the living, it is clear that people will need additional emotional support. And men, whose AIDS denial behaviour is popularly believed to be fiercer than that of women, will need special assistance for coping with the truth they will inevitably face.

One of the BAC facilitators has perceptively pointed out that the quilt project helps men get in touch with their feminine sides. As the discourse surrounding AIDS prevention focuses increasingly on altering the nature of gender relations, it is useful to build into our projects creative outlets where everyone, but especially men can feel safe while they grapple with emotional issues. BAC's sensitive facilitators, particularly the males, will serve as excellent role models in this process.

Until this time, more women have participated in quilt workshops than have men. This is because women in South Africa tend to be more active in community and self-help groups. But the favourable response of young males to the BAC quilt workshops organised through the Tertiary Institution Projects and the prison initiative indicates that quilt panel making can and should be vigorously pursued among men.

I note that the campaign intends to target sports associations, labour unions, and political parties among other groups. I heartily concur with this plan observing that members of these groups are as much in need of healing as other segments of the population. Involving these groups will help DramAidE to reach more men. It also promises to generate much needed publicity for the project. I would recommend that DramAidE facilitators pursue these "high profile" groups and involve the churches in workshopping more general segments of the population.

People who are themselves HIV positive seem particularly comforted by the production of these quilt panels. The production of memorial panels helps them to reconnect both with their living counterparts and with the dead who have succumbed to the AIDS virus. AIDS activist and special correspondent Kevin Osborne, himself HIV positive had written a moving feature on the quilt project for the *Cape Argus*. The article talks of AIDS patients contributing the making of their own panels. Far from a morbid sign of giving up, he notes the importance of the quilting process in the search for calm, inner peace, and a sense of human collective struggle in the face of impending death.¹⁰

Evaluating quilt exhibitions

I have seen quilt panels displayed in a number of different contexts, three of which I shall discuss herein. First, there was the South African AIDS Quilt launch held at the University of Zululand August 6 and 7. Later there were quilt displays at the Port Shepstone Youth Summit, August 13 and 14; and at the ML Sultan Technikon Edu-fair on August 24 and 25. I shall discuss the latter two first.

Educational exhibitions:

Port Shepstone Youth Summit and ML Sultan Edu-Fair

The AIDS Memorial Quilt panels are sometimes used as a backdrop or set piece for AIDS information forums. At the Port Shepstone Youth Summit which formed part of the BAC Tertiary Institution initiative, AIDS quilt panels lined the hallways through which the participants walked to the conference room. In so doing, the memorials helped set the tone of the conference. They also served as a backdrop for the *Welela* play.

When the memorial quilts are used as set pieces, care should be taken to explain their significance to passers-by. The function and meaning of these quilts is rarely evident without a verbal explanation. A facilitator, dressed as a “bearer,” ie., with some mark of formality, could be assigned to stand by the displays to explain their origin and their meaning.

At the ML Sultan AIDS Edu-Fair, the Durban DramAidE office used the selected quilt panels as identifying symbols and territorial markers of the BAC table. The fair was very well attended and a sense of youthful exuberance permeated the event. Unfortunately, the Edu-Fair setting was not particularly conducive to contemplation, as loud Kwaito music was played throughout much of the event. Unfortunately, the significance of the quilts was lost to most of the on-lookers. BAC facilitators were at great pains to explain the quilts above the din in the ML Sultan gymnasium. In future, I would argue in favour of displaying the quilt panels in a more restricted and controlled area. Again, the panels should be overseen or “guarded” by a “bearer” dressed in something of a uniform, preferably wearing gloves. This will be more satisfying to those whose loved ones are commemorated in the panels, and it will speak to the solemnity and seriousness of these memorials. It will also be more soothing and healing for those who would contemplate the displays at public events. Finally, this form of display will be easier to manage by the BAC staffers called upon to provide the explanations of the quilts. In the long run, the project’s respect for the panels will pay off in increased disclosure and destigmatisation of AIDS.

Whenever and wherever the quilts are displayed, “bearers” guarding them should be supplied with BAC quilt project brochures. “Bearers” should encourage those wishing to make a commemorative panel to phone the Innovation Centre office (Durban), the University of Zululand DramAidE headquarters, or the AIDS Action Office Johannesburg, to learn how to join the next available workshop. These office phone numbers should be more prominently displayed in the brochures.

Campaign literature argues that the quilts can serve as a catalyst for educational programmes in schools, health clinics, and other institutions. This evaluation in no way contradicts this contention. It only highlights the importance of treating the quilts with appropriate solemnity, ie., as genuine objects of reverence for the dead. Again, the exhibitor should always behave

like a “bearer” and wear some kind of ritual marker on his/her clothing. This treatment will heighten the drama around a lesson on HIV and AIDS in the schools, as it will lessen the stigma attached to the disease. This approach, moreover, is in keeping with the special reverence South Africa’s black communities have for the dead.

AIDS Memorial Quilt launch

In conjunction with the project launch, a quilt exhibition was held at the University of Zululand on August 6-7, 1999. The floor of Bhekuzulu Hall was covered with quilt panels made in South Africa. A contingent from the Names project USA had also travelled to Zululand and had brought several American quilt panels with them. These were added to 32 South African panels.

To add solemnity to the display, burning candles and vases of bougainvillea were placed alongside the panels. The project launch was marked with requisite ceremony; prayer, scriptural reading, and speeches from dignitaries were all featured. The programme also included musical items and dances by local school and university groups. Perhaps the highlight of the programme was an address by Promise Mthembu, a young woman who is HIV positive and living positively. Testimonies from persons living with HIV and AIDS are always particularly powerful because they make denial that much more difficult.

AIDS information brochures, produced for the Beyond Awareness Campaign and supplied by the Ministry of Health were distributed to all interested takers. Government-issue condoms were also available. Attendees, mostly university and secondary school students, were happy to help themselves to supplies.

I believe this type of exhibit, with its main focus on remembrance and honouring of the dead is effective. The experience is somewhat reminiscent of a journey through the Vietnam War Memorial, one of Washington’s most visited monuments, where people proceed sadly through column after column of granite inscribed with the names of the thousands of war dead. People become very quiet and pensive as they wander through appropriately handled memorial displays. And speeches, flowers, burning candles, and prayer added solemnity to the occasion. But I think there are ways in which the solemnity of these quilt displays could be heightened. If at all possible, the displays should be arranged so as to promote quiet contemplation.

A ceremony should be devised to accompany the ritual display of the quilts. In the American quilt displays, squares (consisting of eight coffin-sized panels) are unfolded in an unveiling ceremony by volunteers entirely dressed in white. The South African people have a finely tuned sense of the dramatic, an appreciation of rituals, and a fondness for uniforms. I think the South African panels should be displayed in a solemn march or parade carried by uniformed bearers, possibly dressed in garb reminiscent of the South African Churches.

(The uniform adopted by the bearers could be modified or abbreviated perhaps to just a sash/collar/hat for less formal occasions, such as those described in the first sub-section.) I envision a truly ecumenical group of bearers who would carry the panels in a semi-sacred procession to a display site. The procession would use bearers from all segments of society and from all faiths. Members of the general public who wished to march behind the bearers would be welcome to do so. Such a ceremony could be undertaken at World AIDS day or at the start of the AIDS Conference to be held in Durban in July 2000.

MEDIA RESPONSE

Media response to the South African Names Project has been positive but not voluminous. The public in South Africa is yet to learn about the quilt project. I think the emphasis on ritual and procession I have advocated above, combined with a more high profile role I recommend below for the churches and other social sectors should be reflected in press releases/press kits sent to the media.

A ROLE FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN THE QUILT PROJECT

The Christian churches, and within them, Christian women, have long been considered the social glue holding together South Africa's black communities. Given their conservative nature, they are believed to offer a force for stability in the new democracy.¹¹ Within this context, the South African Christian community seems engaged on its own terms with the AIDS crisis. BAC could marshal these efforts.

As is typical for Africa generally, levels of religiosity are high in South Africa. As the majority of the South African population is Christian, my comments will address this 68% of the population.¹²

The Durban-based Diakonia Council of Churches, which embraces 16 major Christian denominations in South Africa, has had an AIDS programme since 1994. The council approaches the AIDS crisis through four different lenses: a theological perspective; a prevention perspective; a care perspective; and a rights advocacy perspective.¹³

Diakonia's own briefing documents provide the rationale for its involvement in the AIDS issue. First, they argue that the Christian church is easily the largest social institution in South Africa. Second, they point out that the church is ubiquitous in that Christian churches can be found within the confines of almost every human settlement. Third, they note the sizeable infrastructure already present in the Church, both in terms of materiel and human resources. Fourth, they highlight the credibility of the church. Finally, and above all they argue that the church has an ethic of sexual responsibility and of caring for others.

Diakonia's position on its activism provides ample rationale for BAC to reach out to Christian churches, particularly with the AIDS Memorial Quilt Project. Preliminary overtures into the Christian community with the quilt project have been encouraging.

Two facilitators conducted a quilt workshop with representatives (leaders) from five Roman Catholic parishes. After some initial reticence, participation of the attendees was reportedly enthusiastic. Several participants indicated their willingness to conduct workshops within their own parishes.

The broad infrastructure and facilities of so many South African Christian churches make it possible for BAC to consider transferring some of the administration of the workshops and most of the execution to the churches. In this model, campaign staff would operate behind the scenes running workshops only with church leaders, and challenging them to diffuse the quilt concept within their groups. BAC staff could be on hand to facilitate the odd workshop to the faithful only when church personnel were unavailable. Meanwhile, the project staff could concentrate their quilt workshop efforts on the more secular elements of society heretofore mentioned, ie., business, labour, sports teams, etc.

But before passing the project onto the churches, Beyond Awareness staff must investigate a range of doctrinal and moral teachings of the churches on the subject of AIDS. If a given church's position on the teaching of sexuality is not congruent with that of the project, BAC will have to decide whether and in which capacity it wishes to work with a given group of believers. Moreover, BAC will need to determine the relative importance of the quilt project as a catalyst for teaching about sexuality.

Some churches, notably the Catholic church are keen to become involved with the issue of AIDS, but are loathe to promote condom use because of the Roman Catholic church's stand on artificial means of birth control and pre- and extra-marital sex. While the quilt workshops would work in this religious context to personalise the epidemic, to lessen the stigma of those with AIDS, and to promote healing, discussion surrounding the workshop might serve to undermine the safe sex message. Beyond Awareness will need to decide whether to abandon the discussion or abandon the Catholics.

Leaders in the Clermont Road (Durban) branch of the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission, a vast independent Pentecostal South African church, expressed to me a more relativistic position on the subject of sexuality. While noting that sexual abstinence is their preferred teaching, they do recommend condom use for those who "can't abstain" from sexual activity. Scholars of African Independent Churches have long noted the instrumentality that characterises African religion, its inclusivity, its action orientation, and its preference for performance over dogma.¹⁴ The emphasis of these churches on healing and their deep involvement in the community means they are likely to focus

increasingly on AIDS in the years to come. And doctrinal and moral teachings on the subject of sexuality will in all likelihood take a back seat to the immediate needs of caring for the sick and the dying. Nevertheless, a general survey of the various Christian church teachings *vis à vis* AIDS and sexuality, and on their outreach and healing ministries in the face of the epidemic, does appear warranted.

The project has already begun some preliminary investigations of selected Christian churches in Durban with the view to determining their suitability for the quilt and other initiatives. The research uses the technique of open-ended interviews with one or more church group leaders. A copy of the topic guide in use for these endeavours is attached to the end of this report.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As HIV/AIDS spreads through the community, the lives of every South African will be touched. Denial will become impossible and the need for messages of awareness will lessen. HIV/AIDS interventions will of necessity shift to the care of the sick and the dying. In this context the role of the churches, as healers and as bridges to the hereafter, will become increasingly important. The quilt project will need to find ways they can work collaboratively with the churches. Ongoing quilt workshops and the organisation of quilt rituals should continue to provide the quilt project with an *entrée* to the churches appropriate for future collaboration.

The role of public arts in social mobilisation

Art Critic Heather Wainwright proposes four criteria for activist art projects. These are rigorous social goals, systematic self-evaluation, accessibility to the general public, and intrinsic aesthetic value. The project brochure for the South African Names project lists five clear goals.

- 1) To provide a creative visual symbol or remembrance and healing for those whose lives have been touched by HIV/AIDS.
- 2) To promote a greater understanding of the effect that AIDS has on all our lives.
- 3) To show the massive impact of AIDS by giving insights into the people whose lives lie behind the statistics.
- 4) To honour those who have died of AIDS, and to remember their names.
- 5) To provide a starting point for AIDS education and action.¹⁷

This evaluation has elaborated on the various means through which the AIDS Memorial Quilt Project is fulfilling its goals. The engagement of this consultant in a project of formative evaluation, the first in a series, is evidence that the South African Names project is operating according to global standards of

public art. The question of accessibility has been touched upon in this report. With time, and through co-operation with South Africa's Christian churches and other major social sectors, more people will be afforded a chance to share in the making of a panel. As more panels are created, fewer of the dead will be forgotten and more stories will be heard. And with increased media coverage together with more, bigger, and more ritualistic memorial processions, the quilt project will become visible and comprehensible to all of South Africa's people. With time, it may serve as a unifying force, binding them in common grief and in the determination to survive the epidemic. Finally, the aesthetics of the individual quilt panels have been considered. I have argued for the insertion of craft-skilled facilitators into the workshop process and I have recommended BAC promote better and more indigenous standards of craftsmanship. To do so will require the panels to be produced over a longer period of time in collaboration with church groups and other social sectors. In the interest of aesthetics, I have suggested the formalisation and ritualisation of quilt panel displays and the staging of official quilt processions for the AIDS dead.

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Footnotes

- 1 Amatikulu Centre, n.d.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 For analyses of sexual risk taking see for example Campbell, 1997; Swart-Kruger and Richter 1997; and Cameron, Witte, and Nzuko, 1999.
- 4 See Schechner, 1985 and 1988 on the function of “flow” in ritual processes.
- 5 Sample quilt stories are supplied in the Appendix of this document.
- 6 Death rituals for Zulu adult males, for example, generally involve the slaughter of a cow. Deaths of women and children are accompanied by animals of lesser value. Goats are commonly used for women by this cattle-loving group.
- 7 There is a clear bias in this work in its discussion of the AIDS crisis among South Africa’s native black African population, wherein the AIDS epidemic is the most virulent. See Togni, 1997, p. 31.
- 8 Metropolitan Life Ltd., projects between 1.5 and 3million+ extra deaths from AIDS in South Africa over the next decade. See Togni, 1997, p. 36.
- 9 I was unable to meet with one of the Zululand-based facilitators.
- 10 Osborne, 1999, n.p.
- 11 Steyn, 1996, pp. 41-2.
- 12 Ramsey, 1999, p. 158.
- 13 Diakonia, “Reflections,” n.d., p. 1.
- 14 Steyn, 1996, pp. 31-43.
- 15 Togni, 1997, p. 34.
- 16 Wainwright, 1997, p. 16.
- 17 Beyond Awareness Campaign 2 1998, “The South African AIDS Memorial Quilt,” pp. 4-5.

Appendix 1

Church Topic Guide

Name of Person Interviewed _____-

Title: _____

Name of Church: _____

Address: _____

Denominational Affiliation _____

1. What special programmes does your church have to assist HIV/AIDS patients in your community?

Describe

2. What special rituals/prayers does your church have for a person who is HIV+?

Describe

3. What programmes/activities does your church have to assist HIV+ persons in South Africa

Describe

4. How many persons are you aware of in your church who are HIV+? _____
5. How many people in your parish/congregation have already died of AIDS? _____
6. Did you perform a funeral service for this person? Can you tell me about it?
7. What actions does your church recommend in order to keep people from contracting the disease.

Discuss

8. What is your church's teaching on the subject of polygamy?

Discuss

9. What does your church/congregation believe is the cause of this disease in an individual? (Punishment from God; Evil in the world; indiscretion; promiscuity; failure to practice safer sex):

Discuss

10. What does your church/congregation believe is the cause of this epidemic in South Africa?

Discuss

11. What would you say is your church's official response to the disease?

Discuss

12. Does this official response differ from your own as a pastor? As a human being?

Discuss

13. The AIDS Memorial Quilt Project is making a quilt to commemorate those who have died of AIDS. It is envisioned that the process of producing quilts will help people to personalise the epidemic and to come to terms with the deaths of friends or loved ones. Might your congregation be interested in participating in a quilt workshop?

Appendix 2

Some examples of quilt stories

Panel Two – May 1999. Made at home in memory of Joyimle Shandu.

This panel tells the story of how mother living at home was HIV positive and father refused to wear a condom. When mother told father she was HIV positive and that AIDS is a disease affecting millions of South Africans he hit her.

Panel Three – May 1999. Made at home in memory of Fikile Dlamini.

This panel tells the following story 'I am a housewife and my husband is a womaniser who has been infected by HIV/AIDS virus. I am six months pregnant and I always begged my husband to practice safe sex. But he says there is no rain so he won't be wearing a raincoat. Now I know that my baby's life and my future is ruined. My baby may not reach the age of 3. But what worries me is that he is still womanising even though he has been infected. He says that he will not die alone.'

Panel Four – May 1999. Made at home in memory of Duduzile Mthethwa.

The panels reads 'Think twice with HIV, say No to sex, Don't do sex without marriage, because HIV kills many people. Say No with sex because if you say yes with sex HIV will kill you. Think of KwaZulu-Natal, of pupils per day who get HIV, Duduzile Mthethwa died with HIV positive.'

Hibberdene South Coast, KwaZulu-Natal – 31 March 1999. Made by out of school youth.

Panel One is a map of Africa. The panel was made by Nkosinathi Cele. It is dedicated to all the people on the African continent who are living with HIV/AIDS and those who have died of AIDS. 'I say to all those who have died we miss you with all our hearts and we still burn the candle of hope that one day we will meet again. And to those who are living with the virus I urge them to keep their candle of hope burning that one day a cure for HIV/AIDS will be found. To those who know that their status is negative show that you care and wear a red ribbon.'

Panel Two. This panel was made by Thami Cele.

'I dedicate this panel to all those who have lost their loved ones to AIDS. To those that are living we should join hands in an effort to fight AIDS and pay our respects to the victims of AIDS. Because of their death the whole world has realised how serious the issue of AIDS is, because of their death most people have realised how precious life is and have changed their behaviour.'

KwaNdengezi Youth Group, Durban KwaZulu-Natal. Panels handed in 20 May 1999.

Panel One

We dedicate this message to all those who have lost their loved ones because of

AIDS. We as the South African youth want to put an end to the spread of AIDS and HIV. So let us join hands and fight because together we stand and divided we fall. We dedicate our quilt panel to our loved ones and to all South Africans, black, white, coloured or Indian who have passed away because of AIDS. We are saying we miss you, we love you and you will always be in our memories and our prayers. The cross in our quilt symbolises holiness in our memories and the condom stands for our hope that we as youth will practise safer sex and that they will rest in peace.

Panel Two

This panel is made in remembrance of our friend's mother. 'We will always remember you most of all because you had the courage to tell us that you were HIV positive. You did not keep quiet like others. To us you are a hero because you exposed yourself and told other people about AIDS and HIV. It was not your choice to be infected and it was not because you were sleeping around. Life was hard on you like it is on all of us. We hope that your soul is in peace and God be with you.'

Panel Three

Our quilt is dedicated to our loving mother Ntombifikile Fakazi who died of AIDS in 1997. She found out that she was already infected after she was taken to hospital because she had been bitten by a snake. She had six children that she really loved. Her kids were her first priority, she always made sure that they were taken care of and well provided for.

PANELS MADE BY TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

ML Sultan Technikon [collected 20 May 1999]

Two panels made in memory of those who died of AIDS

The Student Counselling Centre have launched a massive Beyond Awareness Campaign for 1999. The first project undertaken was the AIDS Memorial Quilt panels that were drawn and designed by 8 committed students from our Technikon. These students have pledged their support for all HIV infected people. The theme of the two quilt panels is based on the concept that it is a memorial to all ML Sultan students and HIV infected babies who are lost to AIDS. The following students were involved: Ayesha Sardar, Aalia Kajee, Ramona Maharaj, Kubashnee Naidoo, Deo D Sewbaran, Ayurda Deonarain, Kajal Sununan and Nerusha Jugdeep.