

Native Canadian Community Invites AIDS Memorial Quilt to Aboriginal Friendship Center

by Judy Weiser

A display of nearly one hundred panels of the Canadian AIDS Memorial Quilt was held in the First Nations (Native) community's Aboriginal Friendship Center in Vancouver, British Columbia last September. The display was sponsored by Healing Our Spirit First Nations AIDS Society and the Native AIDS Awareness Program which operates under the guidance of The NAMES Project-Canada's Regional Director.

This was the first Quilt display in Canada organized by Native people and included numerous panels made for First Nations people who have died of AIDS-related causes.

Many of those who volunteered were also serving as HIV-positive speakers for accompanying AIDS education/information workshops being held during the display. The Quilt panels served as visible symbols speaking silently, but powerfully, that everyone is at risk for AIDS.

Another important and culturally-significant highlight was the blending of many traditional Native cultural practices and ceremonies into the NAMES Project display ceremonies. Those included elders speaking in native languages during opening ceremony greetings, sweetgrass smudging (smoke-cleansing/blessing rituals) to respectfully ready the room and volunteers for the event, traditional drumming and chanting during the unfolding of the Quilt, and the closing ceremonies where high-status elders in ceremonial robes attended to formally witness the display's end.

Volunteers were from many First Nations, including the Coast Salish, Cree, Heiltsuk, Nisga'a, Tsimshian, Gitxan, Blackfoot, Okanagan, Siksika, Nuchalnuth, Stolo, and Musqueam Nations.

Visitors to the Quilt display represented the diverse community of Vancouver's population. Many in attendance were touched by the images of the memorial panels.



*Display of the Canadian AIDS Memorial Quilt at the "Aboriginal Friendship Center," Vancouver, B.C.
Photo courtesy of Judy Weiser*

Comments from visitors, particularly youth and volunteers, indicate that the event successfully touched Native people previously unaware of the dangers of HIV and their risk for infection.

The NAMES Project-Canada is now receiving many more requests from Native communities in Canada for similar collaborative efforts in the future, particularly in more rural areas where visual communication is more trusted than lectures delivered by those from outside the culture.

Judy Weiser is the former Pacific Region Director of the NAMES Project-Canada and helped coordinate this event. Acknowledgement is also given to Melissa Bomben, who serves as the current Pacific Region Director and who also helped bring the Quilt to the people of the First Nations.