

HEAD:

Keepers of the Quilts

SBHD:

Dignity and dedication are the common threads running through the Southwest Florida Community AIDS Quilt Project.

By Stephen A. Smith

SUGGESTED IMAGES:

PHOTO OF CAROL HART AND EDIE KAPLAN

PHOTO OF THE QUILTS ON DISPLAY AT WAD EVENT AT SAM

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Almost 10 years after the national AIDS Memorial Quilt project began, a Southwest Florida group came together to create and maintain quilt panels to remember friends and family members they'd lost to AIDS. In 1994, transforming their grief into purposeful action, several HIV-positive men memorialized friends and loved ones by creating 3-foot by 6-foot quilt panels similar to the ones made for the national project, but each as unique as the individual it represents. Their only shared trait is their dimensions – the approximate size of a grave.

Carol Hart and Edie Kaplan of Sarasota are among thousands in Southwest Florida whose lives have been affected by AIDS. Their tireless volunteer efforts are dedicated to securing the future of the Southwest Florida Community AIDS Quilt Project.

Puzzles

Jeffery Hart loved crossword puzzles. The accomplished hair stylist and interior designer lived in Dallas, Texas, and struggled to find adequate health care after being diagnosed with AIDS.

After a bit of research, Jeffery's father, Terrell, and stepmother, Carol, were convinced that he'd receive better care in Sarasota. So they brought Jeffery "home."

Following Jeffery's death in August 2000, Carol and Terrell connected with Sister Frances Nevolo, OLC, executive director of Bethesda House of Catholic Charities, a community center that provides support services for people living with HIV/AIDS. Sister Frances connected the couple with Community AIDS Network, and they began volunteering. She also told them about the Southwest Florida Community AIDS Quilt Project.

Take care of the quilts

During the early part of the Quilt Project's history, Bethesda House took on the daunting task of housing and maintaining the quilt panels, under the watchful eye of Sister Frances. But while

she was planning to retire in 2002, Sister Frances approached Terrell Hart with a simple request: “Please take care of the quilts.”

Terrell knew that keeping this promise to Sister Frances would involve more than just knowing where they were folded and stored. Each panel needed to be photographed, numbered and cataloged. While in storage, many of them were deteriorating. Some panels were coming apart because, as Carol Hart explained, their “patches” were glued rather than sewed. Repairing them would require an experienced hand. Among those she enlisted to help restore the untended collection were Edie Kaplan, a skilled seamstress, and “right-hand man,” Norman Carmel.

Norman, who died in 2015, was a member of Temple Sinai, the Sarasota synagogue whose mission promotes *tikkun olam*, which in Hebrew means repair the world. (In other words, leave our world better than we found it.) As the architect of the temple’s annual Seder of Hope, an interfaith interpretation of the Passover meal for people living with or affected by HIV or AIDS, Norman’s role in nurturing the fledgling quilt project can’t be overstated. Traditionally, new quilt panels are dedicated at this event.

This was a lot of work

Frustrated by the dwindling participation of Bethesda House, Carol and her team took possession of the quilt panels. But there soon came a time when Carol and Norman agreed upon two things. First, neither of them was getting any younger. Second, this was a lot of work. If they couldn’t find a suitable partner to take on the storage and maintenance of the quilt panels, the project’s entire future would be jeopardized.

After approval of the Quilt Project’s governing board, CAN Community Health (then known as Community AIDS Network) became “Keeper of the Quilts” and Carol, supported by CAN’s education director, began displaying the panels – in the building and out in the community, keeping the promise her husband had made to Sister Frances.

One can hear the pride in Carol’s voice as she describes the earliest quilt panels hanging in the rotunda of Sarasota’s Selby Public Library in observance of World AIDS Day on December 1, 2004. The display remained at the library well into the new year, and it was viewed by thousands during the mid-January Arts Day event.

Carol says the last time the collection of nearly 200 panels was displayed in its entirety was during Sarasota PrideFest in June 2005, at the Sarasota Fairgrounds.

Edie, Howie and their big adventure

Edie Kaplan has made more than 2,000 cloth facemasks and donated them to various nonprofits, including ALSO Youth, the Sarasota-based youth advocacy and education group. At 81 years young, Edie says making all those masks was one of the few things that “kept her sane” during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Edie’s “lifelong love of sewing” was fostered by her paternal grandfather, who ran a tailoring shop in the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens, New York. Edie began working with the

Quilt Project by repairing quilts, then creating new ones. She also managed the group's website.

For years, Edie's late husband Howard Martin Kaplan (known to all as Howie) made an exhausting daily commute from their home in Central New Jersey to the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, where he taught special education. He retired in 1990.

Days after his retirement became official, Howie's older daughter, Helene, invited Edie and Howie to walk with her in the Gay Pride parade in Philadelphia. Heightened by the outpouring of support from members of area PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) chapters lining the parade route, and her stepdaughter "busting her buttons" with pride, Edie says the experience was one of the most positive she and Howie had ever had.

That November, with the house sold and the car on the Auto Train, the adventurers headed to Florida and all the new experiences awaiting them. Shortly after settling in Sarasota, the couple became active in the local PFLAG chapter. A few years later, Howie, who was at first reluctant to walk in the Gay Pride parade, began singing with the newly formed Gulf Coast Men's Chorus, alongside 48 or 49 gay men (as the "token straight," Edie quips). Go figure.

Two more panels

Today the Quilt Project is housed and maintained by CAN Community Health at the nonprofit's Sarasota, Florida, national headquarters, where John Acevedo, CAN Vice President of Education & Program Services, watches over the collection. He and the other "Keepers of the Quilts" are grateful that Edie was able to keep it together during the COVID-19 Pandemic. She's got two new quilts to make.

"Itching to get back into some sewing," Edie will be visiting CAN soon to get re-acquainted with the quilts and their construction, and get started on two new panels dedicated to the memories of two men taken by AIDS. She's planning to meet with their families to learn more about them. When they do meet, emotions will certainly be running high. Another certainty is that family members, friends, co-workers and others who knew these men will be grateful for the work of the Southwest Florida AIDS Quilt Project, and that Edie's skilled hands will soon be stitching again.

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