

## Mom finds comfort in AIDS quilt

Second of two parts.

By CANDACE ATKINS  
LIVING PAGE EDITOR

MARY ELLEN Martinelli said since there was no protocol, she went by intuition when she created the panel for the Names Project Quilt to honor her son Hilary, who died in their Wat-

sonville home Aug. 4, 1990, from AIDS-related complications. He was 38.

one would do it for us. You have all degrees of talent or lack of it and that's just fine."

Martinelli bought a big bag of materials for her panel, but when the time came to make it, she was stopped. It just wasn't time.

'Hilary asked, "Are you going to make one for me, Mom?" I said, "Would you like me to?" He said, "Yes. Try not to make it *too* tasteful.'"

She'd signed up through the Santa Cruz AIDS Project to make a panel just four months after Hilary's 2½-year illness took his life.

"I thought I had to get right out there and make one," Martinelli said, smiling. "I thought it was like a tombstone — you had to hurry up."

What she found when she arrived in Santa Cruz to design and construct Hilary's panel were family members and friends who had lost people to AIDS-related causes a few years, not a few months ago.

But Martinelli stayed, and found a common thread that allowed participants to stitch together, and also to share stories about their experiences that, in her words, "You just wouldn't really share with anyone else ... We got to talk about what an isolating experience it is. And we shared humor. Laughter that was just so warm. It was the first time I'd really had a good laugh since Hilary died. It was a wonderful bereavement group."

She said there were entire families, single men making a panel for a lover who had died and one woman making a panel in memory of her mother who had died. Martinelli said she worked alone "purely because I didn't even think of asking anyone else. I suppose Charles (her husband and Hilary's father) would have liked to put on a little something, but I simply didn't think to ask."

For the first session, project leaders Sue Lapp and Sue Solee asked participants to tell something about themselves and about what it was like to lose a loved one to the virus. There was an instant camaraderie, Martinelli said, that stayed until the group disbanded at the end of the third session.

Lapp and Solee gave some ideas, but left the creative part to those making the panels. Some had specific ideas and plenty of creativity, she said. Others had never sewn a stitch.

"To see some of the things people did," Martinelli said. "Some were just homemade with loving hands. They didn't even know how to hem. And we were told not to worry. Some-

everything away," she said. "I had two false starts like that."

Maybe part of it was because Hilary was a gifted artist. Maybe it was because she knew how important it was to him that she make a panel in his honor.

Hilary had returned to Watsonville from San Francisco with full-blown AIDS in April 1988. The following spring, an exhibit of the Names Quilt was held at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium. Hilary asked his parents to go with him.

"I was startled Hilary wanted to go," she said. "I look back on that as such an act of courage. We walked around hand in hand. Hilary got tired, so we sat in the back of the Civic looking at all those quilt panels on the floor and hanging from the ceiling like Arthurian banners. We had this overwhelming sense of sadness."

But Hilary was determined to see every one of the panels and, several hours later, he had.

"It was an intensely personal experience," Martinelli said. "Each panel was so personal. You got the impression of who made the panel as well as who it was made for."

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Martinelli started with the things Hilary loved: a court jester on a stick she'd brought him from Lincoln Center in New York City, strings of beads and sequins. On New Year's Day 1991, for the third time, Mary Ellen Martinelli spread out fabric and started what she now calls "putting a period at the end of the sentence."

To a background of the Prairie Home Companion tapes by Garrison Keillor, Martinelli said she became a woman with a mission. She worked until midnight that first day and awoke the next morning refreshed and ready to begin again.

She worked that way for three days, playing tapes, taking an occasional break to swim, but mostly, making Hilary's "not-too-tasteful" panel that was eventually embellished with a palette to represent Hilary's art, a rainbow and musical notes for Hilary's adoration of Judy Garland and a miniature of a woman's hand with a fur cuff



Mary Ellen Martinelli and Hilary's quilt panel

because, Martinelli said, "Hilary would have thought it was fabulous."

"As I worked, I thought, 'This is going to be OK,'" Martinelli said.

When it was finished, Martinelli said she had a "tremendous sense of love and pride" for her efforts.

"Hilary would have liked it," she said. "He would have laughed."

Martinelli said the quilt panel not only helped her through a stage of her grief, but it also introduced her to a side of her son she hadn't fully appreciated. When it came time to take the quilt to the Names Project office in San Francisco, Martinelli suddenly realized why Hilary could never part with his own art work without an emotional struggle.

"How was I ever going to give this thing up?" Martinelli said. "Hilary had a hard time selling his art. And here I was, getting in touch with another part of him after all this time."

The others who worked on the quilt project with her had taken their panels to Oakland for inclusion in the Names Project quilt. But Hilary, although a Watsonville native, was San Franciscan to the core. So, the day before the annual Gay Pride parade in San Francisco, where the Martinellis traditionally marched as a family with the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays Federation

Group, she and Charles took Hilary's panel to the Names Project office there.

"I knew it would be very hard to let go," Martinelli said. "But I left it in loving hands. Those people — they're all volunteers — treat those panels like they were altar cloths. They treat them with so much dignity and respect."

Instead of going back to the motel to mourn the loss of her son and now, his memorial panel, Martinelli and her husband visited the DeYoung Museum and later, the Japanese Gardens where they drank tea and watched carp in the pools. It was raining, she said.

"It was a day he would have enjoyed," she said. "The next day we got our balloons and ribbons and marched in the parade. I couldn't have let that panel go a minute sooner."

Martinelli will see Hilary's panel for the first time at the UC-Santa Cruz exhibit since she turned it over to the Names Project. Those who submit panels are allowed to request cities that the panel will be exhibited in, and Santa Cruz and San Francisco were among her choices.

"Seeing it will be a last first," she said. "I've been through his birthday, all the holidays, the Gay Pride Parade ... It will be a grinding emotional experience, but at the same time, wonderful. He's in the company of his brothers and sisters ... It will be a final farewell."