



Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt



“History will record that in the last quarter of the 20th century a new and deadly virus emerged and that the one nation on earth with the resources, knowledge, and institutions to respond to the epidemic failed to do so. History will further record that our nation’s failure was based on ignorance, prejudice, greed and fear not in the heartlands of America but within the oval office and the halls of Congress.” — Cleve Jones, The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt

Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt

United States. 1989. 79 minutes. 16mm. Color. In English.

Winner: 1990 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature

Interfilm Award at the 1990 Berlin International Film Festival

GLAAD Media Award Outstanding TV Documentary 1990

Peabody Award 1990

Home Box Office Presents a Telling Pictures and The Couturie Company Production

Directed and Edited by: Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman

Produced by: Bill Couturie, Robert Epstein, and Jeffrey Friedman

Directors of Photography: Dyanna Taylor and Jean de Segonzac

Additional Cinematography: Edward Lachman

Narrated by Dustin Hoffman

Music composed by: Bobby McFerrin

Music performed by: Bobby McFerrin and Voicestra

Writers: Robert Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, and Cindy Ruskin

The Storytellers

Sara Lewinstein

Suzi and David Mandell

Sallie Perryman

Vito Russo

Tracy Torrey (1940–1988)

Crew

Executive producer: Sandollar, Howard Rosenman, Sandy Gallin, and Carroll Baum

Associate Producer/Production Manager: BZ Petroff

Musical Supervision: Todd Boeckelheide

Additional editing: Deborah Hoffmann

First Assistant Editor: Betsy Bannerman

Archival Researcher: Jamie Stobie

Additional Cinematography: Frances Reid, Michael Chin, Ed Lachman, Erich Roland

Assistant Camera: Ray Day, Doug Dunderdale, John Dunkin, Samuel Henriques, Phil

Oetiker, Murray Van Dyke, David Weissman, Crag Withrow

Sound: John Haptas

Additional Sound: Elliot Berlin, Doug Dunderdale, Steve Longstreth, Michael Penland,

Bob Silverthorne, Dennis Towns, Marilyn Waterman

Production Coordinator/Washington, DC: Matthew Geer
 Gaffers: Steve Condiotti, Ned Hallick, Peter Thomas
 Grips: Phil Brotherton, Mark Kohr, David Landau, Sandy Stanton
 Crane Operators: Michael Purbaugh, Chris Shellenberger, Patrick Shellenberger
 Producer Assistants: Judy Epstein, Eric Garber, Kevin Grady, Ellen C. Martin, Steve
 Mehall, Anne Moriyasu, Steve Newberger, Susan J. Rossi, Bill Sakolsky, Peter
 Tenney, John Wright
 Assistant to the Producers: Thomas Bianco
 Assistant to Mr. Rosenman: Lin Hempling
 Consultant Extraordinaire: Kathy Witte
 Research Assistants: Melissa Bower, Cindy Eckert, Kathy Post, Wendy Zheutlin
 Production Bookkeeper: Kaye McKinzie
 Legal Services: Peter Buchanan, Jonathan I. Epstein, Geoffrey Menin
 Supervising Sound Editor: Jeff Watts
 Additional Sound Editor: Betsy Bannerman
 Assistant Sound Editor: Anna Davis
 Apprentice Editor: Peregrine Beckman
 Sound Mix: Mark Berger, Saul Zaentz Company Film Center
 Music Recording: Howard Johnson, Different Fur
 Voicestra: Rachel Bagby, Roger Bearde, Joey Blake, Kirsten Falke, Molly Holm, Sara
 Jennison, Raz Kennedy, Rhiannon, Linda Tillery, Dave Worm
 Lab: Monaco Labs
 Opticals: Interformat Cinematte
 Negative Conforming: Doug Jones
 Sound Services: Sound Recording Organization
 Video Facilities Provided by: One Pass, Inc.
 Sound Stage provided by: Colossal Pictures
 Title Design: Karen Hughes, Colossal Pictures
 Title Sequence Still Photography: Janet Van Ham
 Title Animation: Peter Williams
 Photo Animation: Peter Crosman/Camera 3
 Photo Reproduction: Richard Downing
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Markus Faegle
Bob Munk
Debra Resnick
Charles Sublett
Wade Walker
Joe van Es-Ballestreros

and Jack Caster, in loving memory.

The NAMES Quilt has raised funds for AIDS organizations across America. All profits from this film will be donated to the NAMES Project Foundation

Restoration Credits

Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt has been preserved to 2K by the Academy Film Archive, Milestone Film & Video and the Outfest UCLA Legacy Project, a partnership between Outfest and UCLA Film & Television Archive. Preservation funded by the Academy Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Milestone and Outfest. Laboratory services provided by Metropolis Post and Deluxe Audio Services. Special thanks for making the

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UCLA Film & Television Archive

A division of UCLA Library, the Archive is internationally renowned for rescuing, preserving and showcasing moving image media and is dedicated to ensuring that the visual achievements of our time are available for information, education and enjoyment. The sixth-largest moving image repository in the world, and the second largest in the U.S., behind only the Library of Congress, the Archive's more than 450,000 holdings are stored in a state-of-the-art facility that meets and exceeds all preservation standards, from nitrate film to digital. The Archive Research and Study Center, located in UCLA Powell Library, provides free access to its holdings to researchers, writers and educators. Many of the Archive's projects are screened at prestigious film events around the globe.

Outfest Legacy Project

Outfest and the UCLA Film & Television Archive partnered in 2005 to create the Outfest UCLA Legacy Project, the only program in the world exclusively dedicated to preserving lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender moving images at risk of becoming lost due to deterioration and neglect. Over the last decade we have established the largest publicly accessible collection of LGBTQ moving images anywhere in the world; more than 41,000 items and growing.

Academy Film Archive

Dedicated to the preservation, restoration, documentation, exhibition and study of motion pictures, the Academy Film Archive is home to one of the most diverse and extensive motion picture collections in the world, including the personal collections of such filmmakers as Tacita Dean, Cecil B. DeMille, Barbara Hammer, Alfred Hitchcock, Jim Jarmusch, Penelope Spheeris, George Stevens, Gus Van Sant, and Fred Zinnemann. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences was founded in 1927 and began acquiring film material in 1929. The Academy Film Archive, established in 1991, holds over 230,000 items, including all of the Academy Award-winning films in the Best Picture category, all the Oscar-winning documentaries and many Oscar-nominated films in all categories.

Creating *Common Threads*



Bill Couturie, Rob Epstein, and Jeffrey Friedman

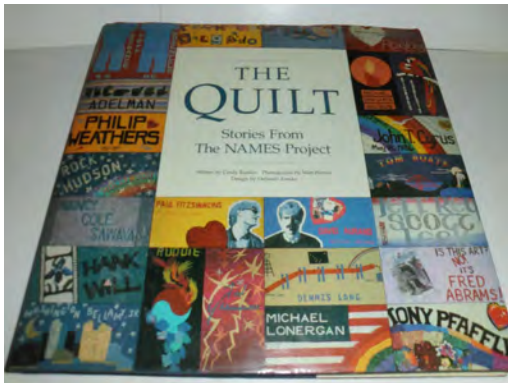
When he was first approached by HBO to produce a film about the AIDS Quilt, *Common Threads* co-producer Bill Couturie was already aware of the Quilt, which had been started by a group of volunteers called the NAMES Project in a San Francisco storefront in July 1987. By the spring of 1988 the Quilt had grown to include 3,000 panels, each a handmade memorial to an AIDS victim. Couturie saw the proposed documentary as “a way to make a film that would be both hard-hitting and affecting... I thought from the start the film itself should be a patchwork quilt. America is a patchwork quilt. People with AIDS are a patchwork quilt. The virus is indiscriminate. So people who otherwise would never have been connected are bound together.”

In a case of parallel evolution, filmmakers Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman had felt similarly moved when they saw the Quilt displayed for the first time in Washington in October 1987. “Up to that point,” Epstein said, “nobody had seen the Quilt in its entirety, and the effect was, needless to say, awesome. We were there at dawn and we were



standing around this huge canvas grid, and the names of the dead were being read. And by the time the Quilt was fully unfolded several hours later there was something before you that was so beautiful and yet so horrifying. Entering this Quilt, entering this weave of lives, interacting with the other people there, made you feel the weight of this epidemic. We were just stunned and awed by the scale of the Quilt and the intimacy of it.” Epstein recalls, “I’d never seen anything like that. We were with our friend [and fellow filmmaker] Peter Adair and he said, ‘Somebody has to make a film about this.’ Jeffrey and I ran with that and ran back to San Francisco and met with the NAMES Project folks and started delving into all the material.”

The Quilt that Epstein and Friedman saw in Washington, DC in 1987 was composed of 1,920 panels. When the pair filmed its unfolding in October 1988 for *Common Threads*, the AIDS Quilt had grown to 8,288 individual handmade panels.



Working with Cindy Ruskin, who wrote the book, *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project*, Friedman and Epstein began to read more than 2,000 letters written by panel makers. “We narrowed it down to 200 people whose stories we thought looked promising. And we wanted to look at the diversity of the population that was being affected,” Friedman recalled. “We did phone interviews with these 200 people and narrowed it down to about 50 or 60 and we did video interviews of those people and

that’s how we narrowed it down to the final five.”

Initially, Couturie had envisioned the film as 40 to 50 mini-stories, each told in a different style. The structure of the film would emulate the patchwork of the Quilt itself. But the filmmakers wondered whether audiences would be able to follow so many individual narratives.

The team then thought about telling the history of sexuality and sexual liberation over the course of the twentieth century through old movies, sex education films, newsreels, and TV news reports, interspersed with historical facts. But they feared that structure might lend credence to the idea that sexual freedom leads to disease and death. As that false linkage was already being used politically to oppose funding for AIDS research and treatment, the filmmakers continued to work on narrative strategies.

In the end, the team decided that the film would focus on telling five representative biographical stories from the Quilt — each story told through the intimate memories of someone who loved the person who had died. Ideally, that person would be the one who had sewn a panel in his memory. The stories would be intercut with other archival material, including the history of sexuality and sexual liberation, along with interviews

and news footage of the growing health crisis. Additionally, a chorus of representative stories would be told through visuals of dozens of specific quilt panels.

In their book Friedman and Epstein (with co-writer Sharon Wood), *The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making*, wrote about the process that the filmmakers used to cast and structure *Common Threads*:

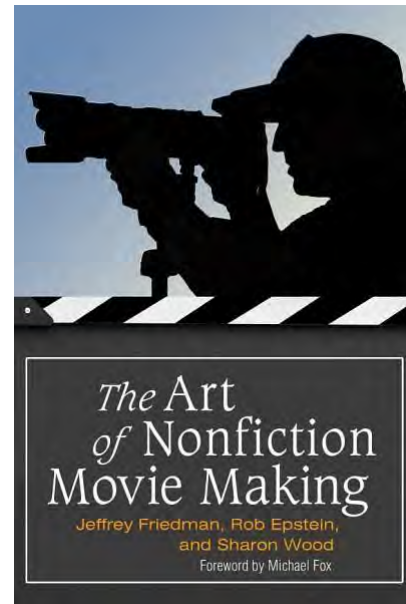
Our criteria in casting the film were very specific to the project. Without being heavy-handed about it, we wanted our cast of characters to be an accurate representation of the demographics of the disease, which at that point in the late 1980s primarily affected gay men, and increasingly intravenous (IV) drug users, people with hemophilia, and heterosexual woman.

Similarly, we were looking for a variety of relationships. Since each story would be built around the life of someone who had died, we wanted our storytellers to represent the breadth of relationships affected by a disease like AIDS: lovers, spouses, parents, and children. So, in a sense, we really were casting roles — we knew we needed parents of a gay man or someone with hemophilia or of an IV drug user. Finally we looked for people whose stories had strong elements for each of the three acts we envisaged in the treatment. Act One would be life before AIDS. Act Two would be about dealing with AIDS, emotionally, physically, and politically. Act Three would be the creation of the AIDS Quilt, as well as life after AIDS, whatever that would turn out to be.

As they conducted those 200 phone interviews selected from the hundreds of letters and panels reviewed at the Names Project workshop, the team was able to take what they were hearing and use it to improve the outline for the documentary. From among the 200 phone pre-interviews, the filmmakers then selected about 30 to meet in person, from different parts of the country, and conduct video pre-interviews. They then spent a week reviewing these “finalist” video pre-interviews to select the final five as the storytellers.

We screened our research tapes and reviewed our notes. We used color-coded index cards to represent different storytellers and broke down their stories into self-contained anecdotes or “story beats.”

After much shuffling and rearranging of the cards, they had their structure. The process entailed some painful choices.



We had two wonderful sets of parents, for instance, and we loved them both. Once couple had lost a son who was gay, and the other had lost a son with hemophilia. We already had our quota of gay men and we were short on hemophiliacs. The decision came down to demographics.

Once the three acts were decided, they began thinking of how many stories could possibly be in the film. They wanted audiences to spend real time with the people in the film — to identify with them. Also, these were stories of people who had died. So the film needed to allow time for the audience to develop a relationship with the storytellers, as well as to get some sense of their remembered loved ones.



The filmmakers decided that ten percent of the screen time would be dedicated to historical context. Other portions of the film would be dedicated to the five storytellers and to footage of the unfolding of the Quilt. Act One would allow time to introduce each story, then in Act Two there would be enough time to tell the AIDS stories, and some time in Act Three to conclude each story.

So, each storyteller would be allotted a certain time during each act. In Act One each narrative would be introduced for 2–3 minutes. In Act Two the AIDS story of each of the five people memorialized would be told in 7–8 minutes. And in Act Three there would be 2 minutes to conclude each storyteller's thread. The documentary ran 79 minutes, with the individual stories, images of the Quilt panels, news reports, and archival footage all spaced evenly throughout.

The directors filmed the quilt in four different ways: live action at the unfolding; on a sound stage with a crane; on an animation stand; and live action at the NAMES Project. Here Director of Photography Jean De Segonzac films from a crane on the sound stage.

The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making includes an excerpt of a preliminary treatment for *Common Threads* based on research Cindy Ruskin had done for her book and on notes from phone interviews. This section comes towards the end of Act Two:

HOME MOVIE – a girl taking her first steps – FREEZE-FRAME.

Tom Waddell

When Jessica was born, Tom had no idea he had AIDS. But then he began developing symptoms. In anticipation of an uncertain future, Tom began keeping an audio diary for Jessica.

We hear TOM'S VOICE as we see a PHOTO MONTAGE of a loving father and daughter together:

TOM'S VOICE

Tonight when I was brushing my teeth I noticed small white patches on my tongue. Sweetheart, I hope it's nothing. But there's a possibility that this is an early sign of AIDS. The fear of leaving you before you ever really know me is my greatest concern... You'll have to understand me in order to understand your own life, and how you came to be...

Tom's final months were spent fighting the US Olympic Committee in court. The USOC sued Waddell and his organization for using the term "Olympics" in conjunction with the Gay Games. The US Supreme Court eventually ruled against Waddell and his organization, and the USOC sought \$96,000 in attorney fees, placing a lien on the home he had planned to leave to his daughter Jessica.

Over more HOME MOVIES of Jessica:

TOM WADDELL (vo)

You're so delicate and charming and bright as a precious stone, you're a miracle to me, my sweet darling...

CUT TO:

NEWS REPORT – OUTSIDE A HOSPITAL –

MONTAGE of RADIO VOICES and HEADLINES –

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Actor Rock Hudson, last of the square-jawed, romantic leading men, known recently for his TV roles on *McMillan & Wife* and *Dynasty*, is suffering from inoperable liver cancer possibly linked to AIDS, it was disclosed Tuesday...

NEWSPAPER MONTAGE – beginning with

ROCK HUDSON HAS AIDS!

We see newspaper after newspaper—AIDS is finally on every front page of every Sunday paper in the US.

Begin a MEDIA MONTAGE – AIDS HYSTERIA –

TV PROGRAM – William F. Buckley’s “Firing Line.” Buckley suggests that AIDS patients be tattooed.

NEWS REPORT – KOKOMO, INDIANA – Honors student Ryan White, 14, is barred from attending school because he has AIDS.

NEW YORK POST HEADLINE – L.I. GRANDMA HAS AIDS!

FADE UP TITLE CARD:

1985:

12,000 cases reported.
6,000 dead.

As often happens, when we were making the film we put the treatment aside and didn’t look at it again until we were finished. Once we had real footage to work with, we had to go through the process of discovering the structure all over again in the editing room. We were surprised to realize how faithfully the finished film adhered to our initial concept.

As they worked to film interviews with the five storytellers, Friedman and Epstein also were battling the virus with some of the very subjects they intended to film. While reading the letters that had come into the NAMES Project accompanying panels, one that immediately rose to the top of the list was the letter and panel written by a Navy commander, Tracy Torrey. Cindy Ruskin made contact with Commander Torrey on behalf of the project and the filmmakers knew right away that Torrey and his deceased partner David would have to be part of the film. Soon after Cindy hung up the phone with Torrey, he called back and said, “Look, I don’t have much time left. I am flying to San Francisco next week to make my own panel. You can film me, if you wish.” Torrey, gravely ill with advanced AIDS, flew to San Francisco to make a quilt panel for himself to match the one he had made for his partner David Campbell.

For their first shoot, even before they had film financing in place, the pair went to Beck’s Motor Lodge, a block from the NAMES Project workshop on Market Street, to shoot an interview with the gaunt and weak Torrey. As they wrote in *The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making*, Epstein and Friedman called in favors to get sound recordist Doug Dunerdale and camera operator Frances Reid to the motel for the filming. Torrey died just weeks after they filmed him.



Jeffrey Friedman, Tracy Torrey, and Rob Epstein in Torrey's room at Beck's Motor Lodge



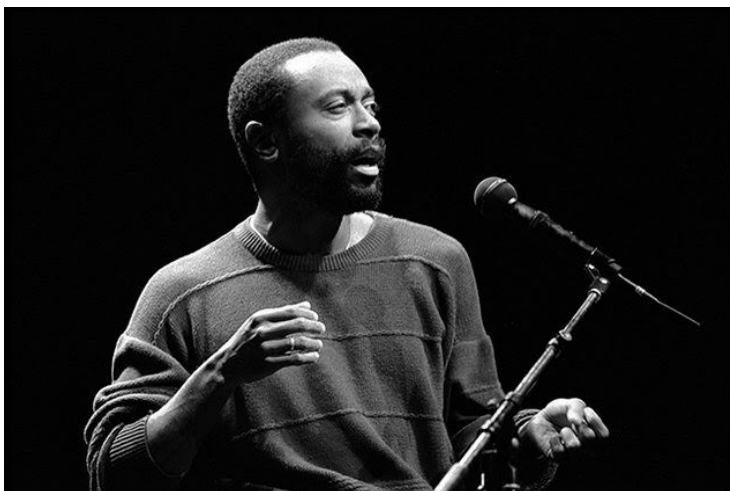
Sound recordist Doug Dunerdale, camerawoman Frances Reid, Jeffrey Friedman, and Rob Epstein outside Tracy Torrey's room at Beck's Motor Lodge

Storytellers Vito Russo and Sallie Perryman had also contracted HIV and Russo was ill with AIDS-related complications during filming. He died in 1990, just months after *Common Threads* won the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary.

While the first shoot for *Common Threads* was an impromptu interview in a motel room, the next was the elaborately planned and meticulously recorded unfurling of the Quilt in front of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. Five cinematographers and crews, a Steadicam operator, three sound recordists, and a crane operator all communicated by walkie-talkie to capture the event. Neither Epstein nor Friedman had produced or directed a production of this scale before, and it had to be precise as the unfolding happened right at sunrise, and lasted only a few minutes. The quality of that footage was so beautiful it helped convince HBO to fund the entire film production.

The interview process was emotional for all — sometimes in unexpected ways. When the team went to film Russo, he spoke off camera about how Willard Van Dyke, his mentor and boss at the Museum of Modern Art film department, had inspired his book *The Celluloid Closet*. Friedman noticed that the sound man was wiping his eyes. Murray Van Dyke had never known the impact his father had had on Russo's life and career.

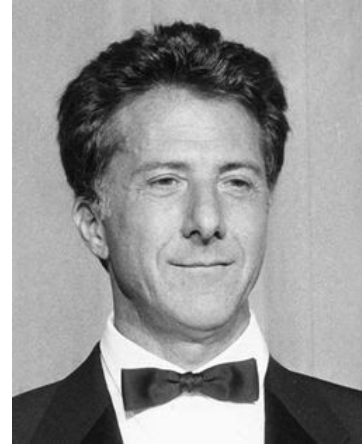
HBO provided feedback as the film progressed. When a rough cut received mixed reactions, the filmmakers realized that their opening was weak and they replaced it with a montage showing the progression of AIDS in the faces of young healthy men, including Rock Hudson to help provide both contrast and context. A comment from the head of the Cis Wilson, the co-head of the network's documentary division, that the film lacked "a ticking clock" proved particularly helpful as the pandemic was still growing. Although earlier treatments had included statistics on the expanding health crisis, that data hadn't made it into the rough cut. Film editor Debbie Hoffmann, who co-edited *The Times of Harvey Milk* with Rob, joined the team with the specific assignment of integrating the news and archival footage and images, to add historical context..



For the initial pitch to HBO, for the unfolding sequences Epstein and Friedman used as their "temp score" Carly Simon's rendition of "Let the River Run" (from the movie *Working Girl*), which "seemed to evoke a chorus of voices emanating from the Quilt." Working with voices as part of the score resonated with the quilt images, and this informed their next move.

During a lunch break from the editing room, the pair spotted Bobby McFerrin at a nearby table, which was a lightbulb moment: Bobby McFerrin's voice is his instrument. Later that week they sent a letter to the singer's manager. McFerrin responded, saying that he was in the process of assembling a vocal ensemble he called Voicestra. McFerrin improvised with composer Todd Boekelheide to create a temp score that featured distinct themes for each of the five characters. After the filmmaking team reviewed it and made notes, McFerrin and Voicestra went into a recording studio and recorded the cues one by one, synched with the film.

Another key component to making the multilayered structure of *Common Threads* understandable for audiences was clear, powerful narration. As Friedman and Epstein noted in *The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making*, "there are certain functions narration can accomplish more efficiently, seamlessly, and even sometimes more gracefully than just about any other filmic element at your disposal." Throughout the documentary, actor Dustin Hoffman's voice and words help introduce recurring themes, provide context and information, and guide viewers as they travel through the heartbreaking timeline of the AIDS epidemic.



The Storytellers: Sara Lewinstein



Sara Lewinstein was a competitive lesbian bowler and softball player when she met Olympic decathlete Dr. Tom Waddell in 1981. Waddell, who was making plans for the first Gay Games, wanted to bridge the divide between gay men and lesbians. Lewinstein recalled years later: "I had a whole different outlook on gay men until I met him. Meeting Tom and [hearing] his philosophy really opened up my eyes.... That's the way we wanted the world to be." The two became friends (and frequent competitors) and decided to become parents. They brought their daughter to the opening ceremony of Gay Games II in 1986. Lewinstein has managed bowling alleys in the Bay Area and, with her daughter, Jessica Waddell-Lewinstein Kopp, has continued her involvement with the Gay Games.

The Storytellers: Suzi and David Mandell

Suzi and David Mandell's son David, Jr. was diagnosed with hemophilia as a toddler. When hemophiliacs started contracting AIDS from the blood factor they needed to survive, the Mandells were faced with an impossible choice: risk infecting their son or take away his chance to be an active kid. After their son's death, the Mandells became crusaders for AIDS education, speaking publicly about their family's tragedy. In 1990, the couple were honored by the AIDS Assistance Fund for their outstanding efforts in their fight against the disease.



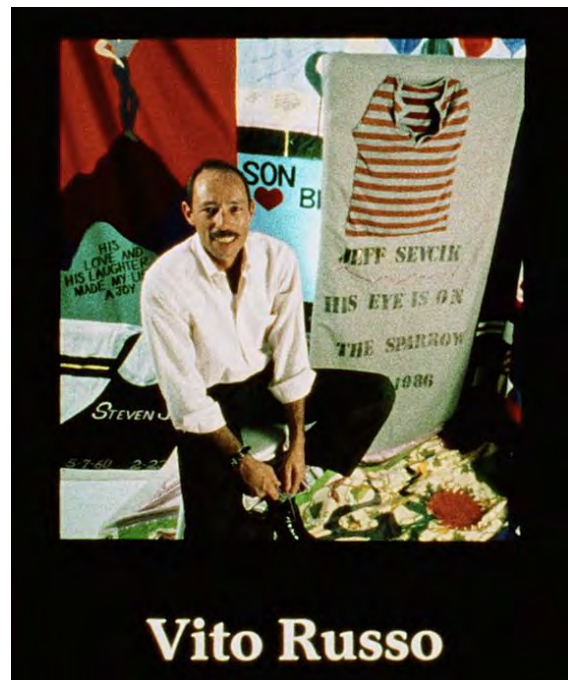
The Storytellers: Sallie Perryman



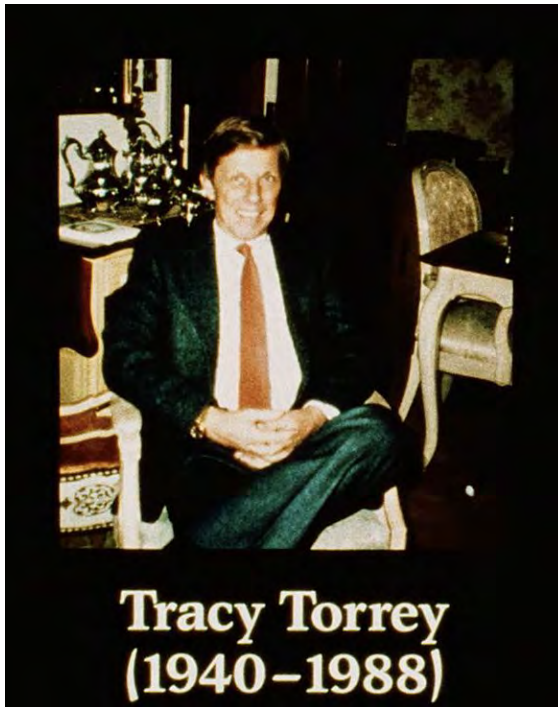
Sallie Perryman's panel honored her husband Robert and his brother, Alford. Two years before participating in the making of *Common Threads*, Perryman herself tested positive for HIV. She decided to appear in the film to help coax members of the black community "out of their denial." As a staff member of New York State's AIDS Institute, she worked for years to promote awareness of the disease. She was lauded for her "outstanding contribution" to an African American HIV/AIDS Forum in 2005: "Sallie Perryman, was responsible for contacting and coordinating the appearance of each of the speakers, and must be commended for her extraordinary efforts... [her] personal relationship with each speaker, and their respect for her, influenced their acceptance and appearance at the Forum."

The Storytellers: Vito Russo

Activist, author, and film historian, Vito Russo was best known for his book *The Celluloid Closet* and for the film of the same name (made after Russo's death by Jeffrey Friedman and Rob Epstein). Russo hosted the television series *Our Time* and helped found GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation). He made a panel for his partner, Jeffrey Sevcik. Russo was active in the AIDS direct action group ACT UP. Speaking at a rally, Russo said "AIDS is a test of who we are as a people. And when future generations ask what we did in the war, we're going to have to be able to tell them that we were out here fighting." Russo died of AIDS on November 7, 1990.



The Storytellers: Tracy Torrey



Tracy Torrey, a former Navy commander, created two quilt panels — one to honor his lover, David Campbell and a second for himself — knowing that he too soon would die of AIDS. After an 18-year marriage to a woman, Torrey met and fell in love with Campbell, a landscape architect. The pair were together until Campbell's death. Torrey said that it was "the happiest five years of my life." Torrey died on June 8, 1988, only weeks after he was interviewed on camera for *Common Threads*. As he said he would be in the film, Torrey is buried beside Campbell in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, DC. The couple share a single headstone.

The Filmmakers: Rob Epstein



Rob Epstein is a director, writer and producer who has been crafting moving, thought-provoking and socially relevant content for over three decades. Since 1987, Epstein and his producing partner Jeffrey Friedman have worked under the Telling Pictures banner, traversing the worlds of non-fiction and scripted narrative. Epstein has produced films that have screened worldwide, in

cinemas, on television, home video and digital platforms, at museums, and at leading film festivals such as Sundance, Berlin, Venice, Telluride, Toronto and New York. He has received two Academy Awards®, five Emmy Awards, three Peabodys, and both Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellowships. Epstein continues to explore and cultivate the

unique brand of socially relevant storytelling that is embodied in his pioneering and award-winning range of work.

Epstein moved by bus from New York City to San Francisco at age 19. His first job was as an usher at the Castro Theater back when there was still a smoking section. While taking a filmmaking class at San Francisco State University, Epstein became a production assistant on a documentary in early development where he met his mentor, Peter Adair. He quickly rose to co-director, with the other members of the Mariposa Film Group. The film became the landmark documentary *Word Is Out*, released in theaters in 1978, airing nationally on prime-time public television. In 2010, it was restored by UCLA Film & Television Archives and re-released by Milestone.



(Rob Epstein filming *Word is Out*)

Epstein's next project was the Oscar-winning feature documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, which he conceived, directed, co-produced and co-edited. The film launched at the Berlinale and became an international festival sensation, winning the New York Film Critics' Circle Award for Best Non-Fiction Film of 1985. Making history, the documentary was the first LGBT-themed film to receive an Academy Award (Best Feature Documentary) and Epstein was the first openly gay director to receive an Oscar. In 2013, the Library of Congress selected *The Times of Harvey Milk* for the National Film Registry, and the film is now part of the Criterion Collection. *The Times of Harvey Milk* was recently named one of "25 most influential documentaries of all time" by Cinema Eye and in 2017, Epstein received their Legacy Award.

Epstein won his second Oscar® for the documentary *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, made with Jeffrey Friedman. Epstein's other films with Friedman include the box office hit *The Celluloid Closet* (Emmy Award for directing), the HBO documentary *Paragraph 175* (Sundance Film Festival Jury Award for Directing), *Where Are We?*, *And the Oscar Goes To* (for Turner Classic Movies), *Linda Ronstadt: The Sound of My Voice*, and *State of Pride*. Their documentary short *End Game* was nominated for an Academy Award in 2019.

In making the transition from documentary to scripted narrative, Epstein participated in the American Film Institute Directing Internship Program, working on the Martha Coolidge movie *Rambling Rose*, starring Laura Dern. He and Friedman collaborated on the narrative feature *Howl*, starring James Franco, followed by *Lovelace*, starring Amanda Seyfried, Peter Sarsgaard and Sharon Stone. Both films premiered at the Sundance and Berlin Film Festivals. *Howl* was developed at the Sundance Institute

Writer's Lab, where Epstein and Friedman were Sundance Screenwriting Fellows in 2009, and was released theatrically by Oscilloscope Laboratories. It received the Freedom of Expression Award from the National Board of Review.

In 2008, Epstein was recognized with the Pioneer Award from the International Documentary Association (IDA) for distinguished lifetime achievement. He has also received achievement awards from Frameline (1990), Outfest (2000) and the Provincetown International Film Festival. In 2016, Epstein was awarded the Kenneth Rainin Foundation Screenwriting Grant by the San Francisco Film Society for his original screenplay *Dogpatch* (working title). In 2018, he received the George Gund III Craft of Cinema Award from the San Francisco Film Society with his longtime collaborator Jeffrey Friedman, in recognition of their distinguished service to cinema.

Career retrospectives honoring Epstein's work have been presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London (ICA), the Taipei International Film Festival in Taiwan, the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal, and the Pink Apple Film Festival in Zurich.

Epstein and Friedman attended the 30th Anniversary screening and restoration premiere of *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, presented by Milestone, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and Outfest on July 22, 2019 in Los Angeles. They are currently researching and writing a hybrid non-fiction feature about the late photographer Peter Hujar.

In addition to his filmmaking career, Epstein is a professor at California College of the Arts, where he serves as Co-chair of the Film program. He has been a visiting professor at the Graduate Film Program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. He has served on the Sundance Institute's Board of Trustees. He is a member of the Directors Guild of America as well as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Documentary Branch where he served as an elected member of the Board of Governors for three terms. He currently serves on the board of BAMPFA. Friedman and Epstein are co-authors of *The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making*, published by Praeger in 2012.



Friedman and Epstein with producer Bill Couturie at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 30th anniversary restoration screening of *Common Threads*

The Filmmakers: Jeffrey Friedman

Jeffrey Friedman grew up in New York City, where he began his show business career acting professionally off-Broadway at age 12.

He began his film career working with some of the most respected filmmakers in the business, on such films as *Marjoe* (edited by Larry Silk, Academy Award® for Documentary Feature, 1972) and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). He apprenticed with legendary editor Dede Allen on the Arthur Penn segment of *Visions of Eight* (1973), and assisted Thelma Schoonmaker on Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (Academy Award®, Film Editing, 1980).



Friedman worked as editor on the NBC prime-time documentary series *Lifeline* (1978) and was associate editor on the Disney feature *Never Cry Wolf* (1983). He has edited numerous documentaries for television, starting with the PBS documentary *Faces Of the Enemy* (1987), for which he also received a co-directing credit. More recently he edited the Academy Award-nominated short documentaries *Kings Point* and *End Game*. Friedman first worked with Rob Epstein consulting on *The Times of Harvey Milk*. In 1987 Friedman and Epstein formed their production company Telling Pictures and began working as a filmmaking team.

Friedman and Epstein co-produced, directed, and edited *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt* (Academy Award®, Documentary Feature, 1989). Interviewed in 1989 by the *New York Times*, Friedman said: "The main thing I came to realize in making *Common Threads* is that you can't make sense out of AIDS, and that it's dangerous to try to. How do you make sense out of a natural catastrophe? People have tried by saying it's God's judgment, or this is a way for the gay



community to become active and united. But one of the things we have to learn about AIDS is that trying to assign it some larger meaning is off the point. The enemy is a virus.”

The pair produced and directed the documentary feature *The Celluloid Closet*, which Friedman co-edited (Emmy Award for directing, 1995), as well as *Paragraph 175* (Sundance Film Festival Documentary Jury Prize for Directing, 2000). Their documentary feature *And the Oscar Goes To* premiered on Turner Classic Movies in 2014, and subsequently aired on CNN. In 2018, Friedman and Epstein received the George Gund III Craft of Cinema Award from the San Francisco Film Society in recognition of distinguished service to cinema.

The team’s first scripted narrative feature, *Howl* was an experimental hybrid they co-produced, wrote, and directed. Starring James Franco and featuring David Strathairn, Jon Hamm, Jeff Daniels and Mary-Louise Parker, *Howl* premiered opening night at Sundance, followed by the Berlin and London International Film Festivals. It was released theatrically and on home video by Oscilloscope Laboratories in the U.S. and internationally by The Match Factory (National Board of Review Freedom of Expression Award, 2010).

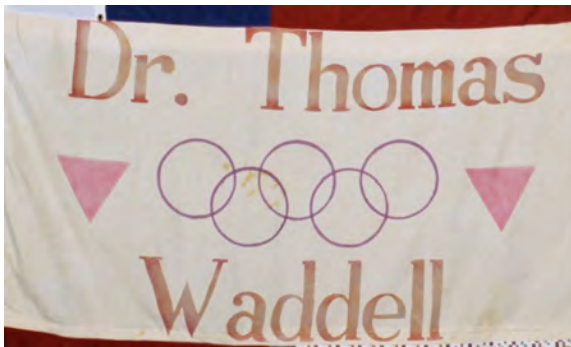
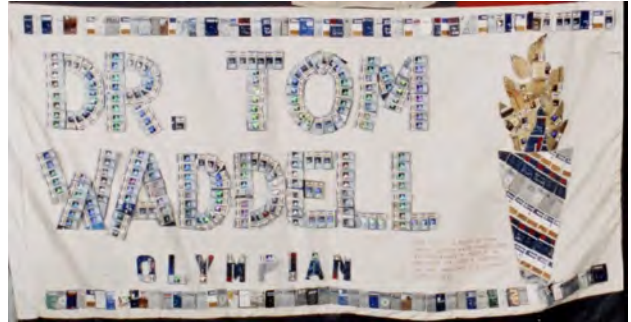
Their next dramatic venture was directing *Lovelace*, starring Amanda Seyfried and Peter Sarsgaard, with Sharon Stone,. *Lovelace* premiered at the Sundance and Berlin International Film Festivals (2013).

2019 was a productive year for the team: their documentary short *End Game* was nominated for an Academy Award; *Linda Ronstadt: The Sound of My Voice* premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival; and *State of Pride* premiered at South by Southwest. Epstein and Friedman also attended the 30th Anniversary screening and restoration premiere of *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, presented by Milestone, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and Outfest on July 22, 2019 in Los Angeles. They are currently researching and writing a non-fiction feature about the late photographer Peter Hujar.

Friedman has taught in the graduate program at Stanford University and at California College of the Arts. He is a member of the Directors Guild of America and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Friedman and Epstein are co-authors of *The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making*, published by Praeger in 2012.

The Remembered: Dr. Tom Waddell

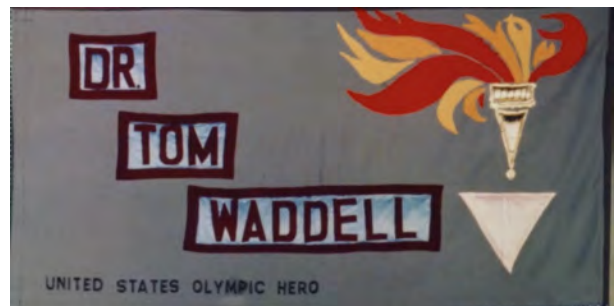
Dr. Thomas Waddell was born Tom Flubacher November 1, 1937 in Paterson, New Jersey to a Catholic family. His parents separated when he was in his early teens. At fifteen, he went to live with Gene and Hazel Waddell and six years later the couple adopted him. The Waddells were former vaudeville acrobats and encouraged Tom to take up gymnastics.



Waddell attended Springfield College in Massachusetts on a track scholarship. He originally majored in physical education but switched over to pre-medicine after the death of his best friend and co-captain on the gymnastics team. Waddell graduated in 1959 and began training for the decathlon. He attended medical school at New Jersey College of Medicine, a division of Seton Hall University, and in 1965 undertook his

medical internship at Beth El Hospital in Brooklyn. That year, he also traveled to Selma, Alabama to participate in the Civil Rights Movement.

Waddell was drafted into the army in 1966 and served as a preventive-medicine officer and paratrooper. When he received orders transferring him to Vietnam, Waddell protested and was unexpectedly reassigned to train as a decathlete for the Olympics. At the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Waddell placed sixth among 33 competitors, breaking five personal records in the ten events. While competing in a high jump competition in 1972, he injured his knee, ending his competitive career. Waddell then turned his focus from sports to medicine. And he began to tell close friends that he was gay.



After his discharge from the army, Waddell had medical residencies at Georgetown University in Washington, DC and at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. At Georgetown, he did research on viruses at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. In 1970, he began a graduate fellowship at Stanford University. Waddell established a private practice on 18th Street in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco in 1974.



Waddell's medical background enabled him to find jobs easily and in exotic locales; he served in the Middle East as medical director of the Whittaker Corporation from 1974 through 1981. Part of this job entailed serving as personal physician to a Saudi prince and later as team physician for the Saudi Arabian Olympic team at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. In the 1980s Waddell was employed at the City Clinic in San Francisco's Civic Center area; after his death, it was renamed for him.



In 1975, Waddell met landscape designer Charles Deaton, 12 years his senior, and they became lovers. An October 11, 1976 issue of *People* magazine featured the couple in a cover article. They were the first gay couple to appear on the cover of a major national magazine.

After joining a Bay Area gay bowling league, Waddell was inspired to create the Gay Games, modeled after the Olympics. In 1981, while founding the Gay

Games, Waddell met two people with whom he formed major relationships. One was public relations expert and fundraiser Zohn Artman, with whom he fell in love and began a relationship. The other was lesbian athlete Sara Lewinstein. Waddell and Lewinstein both longed to be parents, and decided to have a child together. Their daughter Jessica was born in 1983. To protect Jessica's and her mother's legal rights, the couple married in 1985. That same year, Waddell was diagnosed with AIDS. He participated in the second Gay Games in 1986 and won a gold medal in the Javelin event. Dr. Tom Waddell died on July 11, 1987.

The Remembered: David Mandell, Jr.



David Mandell, Jr. was born in 1976 to parents Suzi and David Mandell. Diagnosed as a hemophiliac when he was only nine months old, David was nevertheless an active and happy toddler.

Despite frequent joint pain and bleeds in both ankles, he managed to be constantly on

the go — even crutches and wheelchairs did not slow him down. David's parents wanted their son to have the most normal life he could and encouraged his interests in sports, computers, space, coins, music, scouting, and arcade games. When the family learned that hemophiliacs were contracting AIDS from the clotting factor they needed to control their blood condition, all three had to grapple with a terrifying choice. Should they opt to *not* administer the blood-derived treatment and risk a potentially fatal bleed or treat the blood disorder and risk the deadly virus?. David and his parents chose to treat his hemophilia so that he could continue to have an active childhood.



In 1987, David developed non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma which led to his AIDS diagnosis. At a time when AIDS sufferers were shunned and shamed, David spoke out for the rights of fellow patients. Interviewed on San Diego TV, he said "We didn't come from a different planet. We're still the same human beings that they are. We just have . . . a little difference in ourselves. And I don't see why anyone should put some person down for that." Shortly before his death, David told his mother, "You know, Mom, after I'm gone, you can help the other kids." David Mandell, Jr. died January 21, 1988.

The Remembered: Robert Perryman

Fellow church members, Robert and Sallie Perryman had a loving marriage that was tested by his alcoholism and drug addiction. When he told his wife about his drug problem, Robert said that he would understand if she decided to leave. Sallie stayed and after the birth of their daughter, Robert was able to quit drugs.

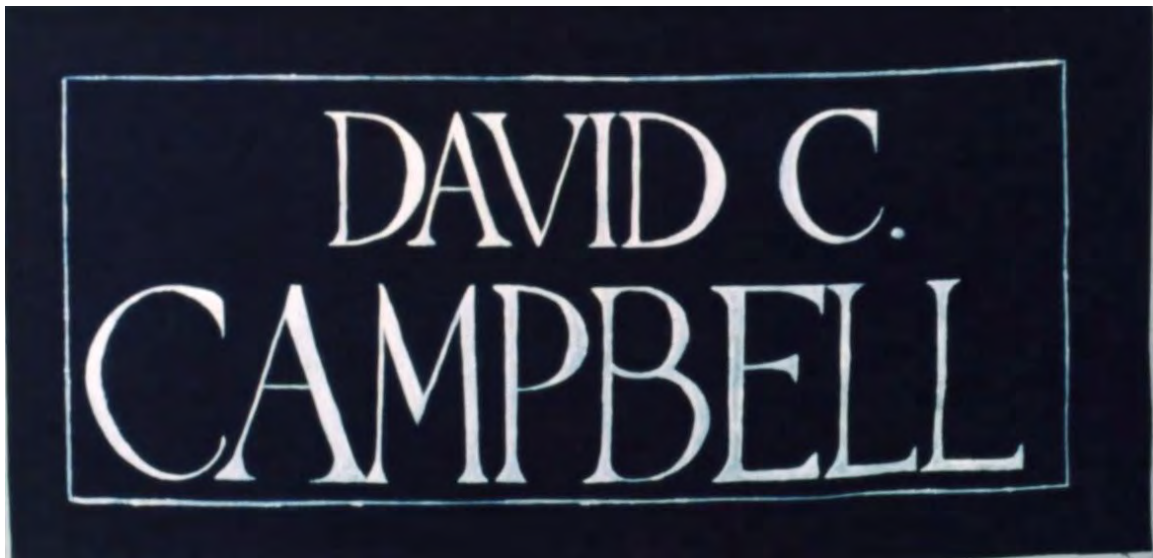


A loving father, he also counseled fellow addicts. A few years later Robert learned that he had AIDS, which he had contracted from intravenous drug use. Robert Perryman died July 30, 1986. Sallie was also diagnosed with HIV but survived. Her quilt panel honors both Robert and his brother Alford.

Alford (Al) Armstrong Perryman danced the role of Earl (Snakehips) Tucker in the documentary *Dance Black America*. He assisted in the reconstruction of historical black dance for "Sweet Saturday Night" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and danced with the companies of Michael Olatunji, Eleo Pomare and George Faison, and appeared with Dinizuli and His African Dancers, Drummers and Singers. He taught jazz and modern dance at Iowa University, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center and the Philadelphia Dance Company, and was the artistic director of the Brooklyn Dance Theater. Alford Perryman died January 19, 1985.



The Remembered: David Campbell



Landscape architect David Campbell was 33 years old when he was diagnosed with AIDS, just nine days before his death. One of the last things Campbell told Tracy Torrey, his lover of five years, before he died was that he didn't want people to know that he had the disease. Campbell had been negotiating to redesign the gardens at Blair House in Washington, DC and feared that the nature of his illness might jeopardize his thriving business. "David was not terribly happy that he was gay," said Torrey, a retired military officer. Campbell chose to become a landscape architect rather than an interior designer because he considered it less stereotypically homosexual. David C. Campbell died on November 19, 1984.

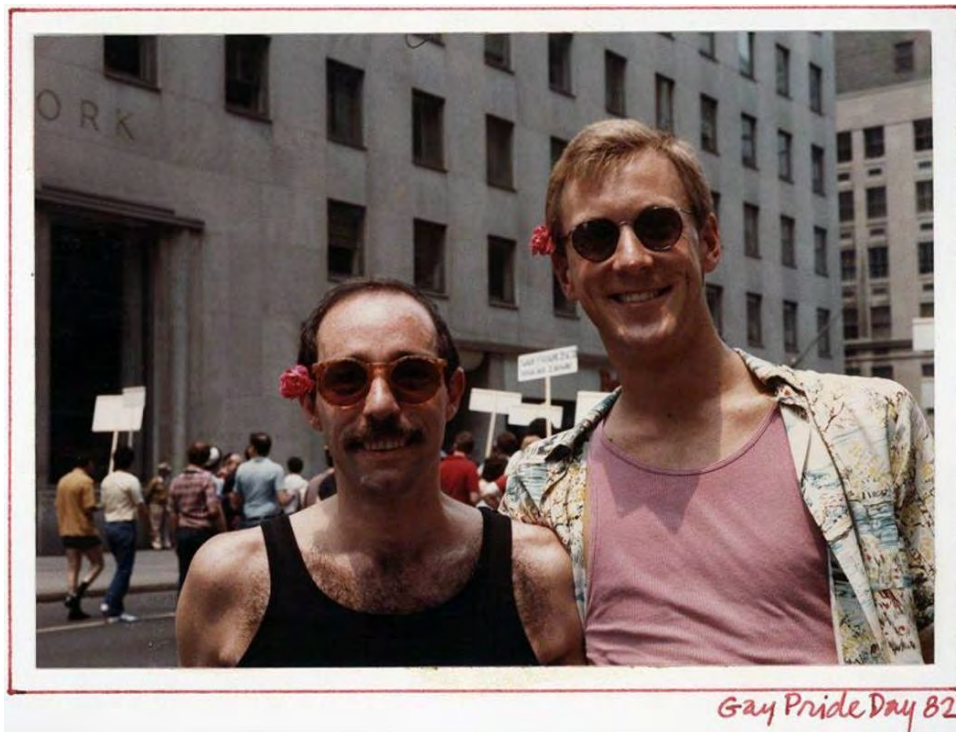


The Remembered: Jeffrey Allan Sevcik



While visiting San Francisco in 1981 for the Fifth Annual San Francisco International Gay Film Festival, writer and film historian Vito Russo met the tall young man who would become the love of his life. Jeffrey Sevcik was high atop a ladder changing the marquee at the Castro Theater as Russo entered for the opening night film. A shy and gentle poet, Sevcik was nine years Russo's junior and his opposite in many ways. Russo loved the limelight and thrived in New York City while Sevcik preferred quiet dinners with friends and the more peaceful pace of life in San Francisco. But the couple shared an intense passion for film and film history and loved to recite lines from their favorite movies together. Their relationship was sometimes rocky — after one breakup, Sevcik wrote Russo: "You changed; you became a very different person. And you never even acknowledged that anything was happening. You checked out never saying goodbye or telling me where it was you were going." The couple shuttled back and forth between coasts until Sevcik's AIDS diagnosis brought them back to stay in San Francisco. Jeffrey

Sevcik died March 6, 1986, just a month before his 31st birthday. Russo spread most of his lover's ashes near Castro Street and brought the rest back to New York.



Gay Pride Day 82

Cleve Jones and the Quilt



“History will record that in the last quarter of the 20th century a new and deadly virus emerged and that the one nation on earth with the resources, knowledge, and institutions to respond to the epidemic failed to do so. History will further record that our nation’s failure was based on ignorance, prejudice, greed and fear not in the heartlands of America but within the oval office and the halls of Congress.” — Cleve Jones

The Quilt was conceived in November of 1985 by long-time San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones. Since the 1978 assassinations of Mayor George Moscone and gay San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, Jones had helped organize annual candlelight march honoring them. Jones, who was a self described “smart-aleck dance-crazed hippy boy,” when he first met Milk in 1976, had come to view the older man as both a political mentor and friend.

Cleve Jones was born in Indiana on October 11, 1954. His parents were both academics and the family moved from college town to college town: Rochester, NY, Pittsburgh, PA, and finally Phoenix, AZ. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, he felt that his gayness was a shameful and painful secret. Bullied at school, he found love and community through Quaker youth groups. But at age 18, when he came out to his left-leaning, antiwar parents, Jones’s announcement was met with denial and guilt. His parents wouldn’t reject him or throw him out, only *if* he would try to become heterosexual. Soon after, Jones left college and traveled with a friend to San Francisco.

In the years following Milk's murder, Jones had become actively involved in tracking the AIDS epidemic and in advocating for funding for treatment and research for the disease. He helped found the organization that went on to be called the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and worked with the Foundation to set up grassroots educational forums. As he was working on plans for the 1985 candlelight march, Jones knew that "there was a terrible stalker shadowing the gaudy never-ending party" that was San Francisco. More than 1,000 city residents had been lost to AIDS — many of them friends and familiar faces from the neighborhood. As Jones wrote in his book, *Stitching a Revolution*, "The entire Castro was populated by ghosts." And Jones suspected that he too had contracted the virus.

On November 27, 1985, the evening of the memorial march, Jones and his friend Joseph Durant handed out poster boards and markers to the gathered crowd. Using a bullhorn, he asked the marchers to write down the name of a friend who'd been killed by AIDS. The march ended at the Federal building that housed the offices of Health and Services. Earlier in the day, Jones and fellow activist Bill Paul had hidden extension ladders and tape in the shrubs outside the building. As the crowd approached, Jones told the marchers to cover the facade with the posters with the names of the dead. Looking at the three-story wall covered with poster board memorials, Jones was struck by the scene: "It was a strange image. Just this uneven patchwork of white squares, each with handwritten names, some in script and some in block letters, all individual. We stared and read the names, recognizing too many. Staring upward, people remarked: 'I went to school with him' ... 'I didn't know he was dead' ... 'I used to dance with him every Sunday at the I-Beam' ... 'We're from the same hometown' ... 'Is that our Bob?'"

It looked, he thought, like a quilt. "As I said the word *quilt*," Jones wrote, "I was flooded with memories of home and family and the warmth of a quilt when it was cold on a winter night." In his mind's eye, he could clearly see the image of a gigantic memorial quilt spread across the National Mall in Washington. Jones thought about the power of other monumental art he had seen and admired: Christo's *Running Fence* and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. "Individual quilts, collected together," he thought, "could have the same immense impact."

That night, Jones's fellow activists were unimpressed by his vision: "An AIDS quilt was a sweet idea, but it was morbid, corny, impossibly complicated." But, Jones wrote: "I was on fire with the vision. The idea made so much sense, in so many ways — the irony and the truth of it. I couldn't get it out of my head."

By February 1987, as the numbers and their personal losses to AIDS continued to climb, Durant and Jones started making forty memorial quilt panels — each three feet by six feet, approximately the dimensions of a grave. Jones's first panel was for his friend, Marvin Feldman. As the project grew, and it happened very quickly, new

volunteers joined them: technical director Ron Cordova and operations manager Mike Smith. Other early panel makers, like Cindi “Gert” McMullin and Jack Caster, stayed on to help the cause. By mid-July, they had fewer than 100 panels — forty of which were displayed in the window of the San Francisco Neiman Marcus store in August. They had grown to the point that needed a workspace where grieving friends and family could come to make panels, so the volunteer team rented a storefront, hung a sign, and the NAMES Project was launched.

After national outreach, including articles in the *New Yorker*, *People*, and the *Dallas Morning News*, in early August a flood of hundreds of quilt panels arrived at the NAMES storefront. By the time the Quilt was spread out on the National Mall in Washington, DC on October 11, 1987 it had grown to 1,920 panels. The NAMES project also received hundreds of letters enclosed with the handmade panels. Many were later collected and published in *A Promise to Remember: The NAMES Project Book of Letters*, edited by Joe Brown and others were featured, along with gorgeous color images of the panels, in *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project*, written by Cindy Ruskin, photography by Matt Herron.

After Cleve Jones moved on to other activist works, the Quilt was moved to Atlanta, Georgia where the current heads were residing and though it was cared for, it was not home. In November 2019, the NAMES Project Foundation announced that the National AIDS Memorial will become the new caretaker of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and NAMES Project programs. As part of the transition, the NAMES Project and the National AIDS Memorial have agreed to jointly gift the care and stewardship of The Quilt’s archival collections to the prestigious American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, making this collection available through the world’s largest public library.

This historic decision returned The Quilt to the San Francisco Bay Area, where 32 years earlier during the height of the AIDS epidemic, a group of strangers gathered at a San Francisco storefront to remember the names and lives of their loved ones they feared history would forget — and with that seemingly simple act of love and defiance, the first panels of The Quilt were created.

Cleve Jones remains a human rights activist and lecturer, and is the coauthor of *Stitching a Revolution: The Making of an Activist* and the author of *When We Rise*. Jones lives in San Francisco and works as an organizer for the hospitality workers’ union, UNITE HERE.

Los Angeles Times

Common Threads Conveys Tragedy of AIDS

Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt confronts us with the reality of AIDS with such simplicity and directness that it is hard to imagine how the enormous tragedy of this disease could be expressed with greater impact.

What film makers Jeffrey Friedman and Robert Epstein (who directed the Oscar-winning *The Times of Harvey Milk*) have done is to interview five people who have lost loved ones to AIDS and to interweave their words with clips from TV news programs to chart both the relentless progress of the disease during the last decade and the inadequacy of the government's response to it.

As narrator Dustin Hoffman calmly ticks off increasingly grim statistics, the film takes the full measure of homophobia in our society. Yet one of its key accomplishments is to make clear how foolish and dangerous it is to regard AIDS as "the gay disease."

Tragedy has made everyone interviewed a figure of eloquence and candor. Sara Lewinstein speaks with humor and affection of the extraordinary relationship she had with Dr. Tom Waddell, a champion athlete who helped found the Gay Games in San Francisco. Although both were gay, they had a child. Soon after, Waddell was found to have AIDS. Sallie Perryman deeply loved her husband despite his drug addiction, which he struggled for years to overcome, only to succumb to AIDS. Another strong woman, Suzi Mandell, had to face the loss of her 11-year-old son, a hemophiliac who contracted the disease through his need for massive blood transfusions.

Writer Vito Russo (*The Celluloid Closet*) speaks with anger of the loss of his lover, Jeffrey Sevcik, and of the time it takes for the FDA to test and release possible life-saving drugs. Navy Cmdr. Tracy Torrey speaks of marrying and raising a family before accepting his homosexuality, only to lose his lover, landscape architect David Campbell, to AIDS.

Torrey is clearly in the final stages of AIDS himself, and, as the film cuts from one interview subject to another, we realize that despite appearances of good health, many of them may either have AIDS or have tested HIV positive. Further disclosures make an already troubling film seem all the more devastating.

Linking these five people--and giving them a measure of consolation — is their participation in the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Indeed, Torrey's last act, before his own death from AIDS, was to make a panel for himself as well as one for Campbell.

Common Threads, which has an understated score by Bobby McFerrin incorporating humming voices, culminates with the ceremonial unfolding of the vast Quilt on the Mall in Washington. *Common Threads* (Times-rated Mature) thus leaves us with an image that is beautiful--but also one that conveys heartbreakingly the overwhelming loss of human life. Proceeds from the film's open-end run Sundays at 11 a.m. at the Music Hall in Beverly Hills will benefit the NAMES Project Foundation, which raises funds and encourages support for people with AIDS and their loved ones.

— Kevin Thomas



A+

As powerful and moving a documentary as you will ever see, *Common Threads* looks at the making of the AIDS Quilt—the amalgam of individual memorial quilts (now as big as 11 football fields) designed and sewn since 1987 by the loved ones of people who died of AIDS. Friends, lovers and family recall their lost lovers, sons, brothers, fathers, in touching stories, home movies, photos, anecdotes that help humanize the scourge. Sober narration (by Dustin Hoffman), haunting music (by Bobby McFerrin) and grim statistics (we're told 335 Americans died from AIDS in 1981 and that the toll climbed to nearly 60,000 by 1989) help increase the considerable impact. The documentary suggests that the federal government and television news were inexcusably slow to respond to the crisis. This one stays with you.

— Alan Carter

Entertainment

WEEKLY

In 1987, when nearly 50,000 Americans had already succumbed to AIDS, some friends gathered in a San Francisco storefront and began piecing together a quilt of panels bearing the names of those they had lost. Today there are almost 13,000 panels and the quilt covers 14 acres. *Common Threads*, the 1989 Oscar winner for Best Feature Documentary, focuses on five of those names, which belong to a child hemophiliac, an IV drug user, and three gay men.

With the help of Dustin Hoffman's narration and a beautiful score by Bobby McFerrin, directors Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman put faces on the names by letting the victims' families reminisce. We hear the tapes that Dr. Tom Waddell, an Olympic athlete, made to his little girl as he was dying; the parents of a hemophiliac, David Mandell Jr., recall how they cared for their son, only to sit by finally, "watching the heart monitor cease."

The stories are terrifically moving without manipulation — the viewer is likely to cry more than anyone onscreen — but the feelings that hit hardest are anger and frustration. Epstein and Friedman include news snippets that show the country's early, brutal indifference toward the disease. The Moral Majority calls it "God's punishment for the gay life-style." A motherly figure complains that "All this sympathy for AIDS victims just really bothers me."

The tape ends after 1988, telling us that 55,388 Americans have died (as of the middle of this summer the figure had climbed to 87,644). Hoffman reports that by 1987, "the national debate over how to confront the epidemic had begun." But these filmmakers are trying to pierce the national conscience, not to soothe it: "For those who already had the virus," says Hoffman, "the years of denial and neglect continued to take their toll." **A**

— Jess Cagle

VARIETY

Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman Revisit the Making of Their 1989 Landmark AIDS Doc *Common Threads*

By Mark Malkin, July 18, 2019
Senior Film Awards, Events & Lifestyle Editor

It's been 30 years since the release of the Oscar-winning documentary *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt*, but directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman remember when they decided to make the film like it was yesterday.

The two were at the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights when they saw the massive Quilt displayed on the National Mall.

"We were just stunned and awed by the scale of the Quilt and the intimacy of it," Epstein tells Variety. "I'd never seen anything like that. We were with our friend [fellow filmmaker] Peter Adair and he said, 'Somebody has to make a film about this. Jeffrey and I ran with that and ran back to San Francisco and met with the Names Project folks and started delving into all the material.'"

They began reading more than 2,000 letters that were written by panel makers to find stories to highlight in the film of five people memorialized in the Quilt.

"We narrowed it down to 200 people whose stories we thought looked promising and we wanted to look at the diversity of the population that was being affected," Friedman said. "We did phone interviews with these 200 people and narrowed it down to about 50 or 60 and we did video interviews of those people and that's how we narrowed it down to the final five."

The non-fiction film tells the stories of Gay Games founder Dr. Tom Waddell, a young hemophiliac named David Mandell Jr., intravenous drug user Robert Perryman, film historian Vito Russo's partner Jeffrey Sevcik and landscape architect David C. Campbell, whose lover U.S. Navy commander Tracy Torrey died of AIDS during the making of the film.

It was the early days of the AIDS epidemic and so much still wasn't known. "It was heartbreaking," Epstein said, adding, "We clearly had no idea where we were in the scope of the epidemic. We didn't know we were at the tip of the iceberg. We had no sense of that at the time."



The 79-minute doc went on to win the Academy Award for best documentary feature. To mark its 30th anniversary, 56 panels of the Quilt will be on display at the Academy in Beverly Hills on July 20 and July 21 ahead of the premiere of a 2K digital restoration of the film on July 22. The restoration was completed through a partnership with Academy Film Archive, Milestone Film & Video and Outfest UCLA Legacy Project, Outfest and UCLA Film & Television Archive.

A discussion with Epstein and Friedman along with producer Bill Couturié and executive producer Howard Rosenman will take place after the premiere screening. The program is the first collaboration between the Academy and Outfest.

An HIV diagnosis is no longer the death sentence it once was. With proper treatment, HIV is now considered a manageable condition.

"We thought everybody was going to die and keep dying," Epstein said.

Friedman added, "It was way too early. Things were just getting worse and worse at that point."

But then Epstein pointed out, "The final words of the film were from Vito Russo. He's in voiceover and says, 'Someday, this will be over and behind us.' We're not quite there yet, but we're certainly in a different place than we were then."

COMMON THREADS: STORIES FROM THE QUILT

Critics Consensus

No consensus yet.



100%

TOMATOMETER

Total Count: 8



96%

AUDIENCE SCORE

User Ratings: 143

Milestone Film & Video



Milestone celebrates 30 years of releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features.

Thanks to the company's early work in rediscovering and releasing important films such as Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*, Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the Mariposa Film Group's *Word is Out* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, Milestone has long occupied a position as one of the country's most influential independent distributors.

As part of the Milestone's commitment to challenging the canon, Heller and Doros seek out films that have been lost, overlooked, and underappreciated — especially those that have been neglected because they were made by women, people of color, and LGBTQ filmmakers. They also seek out films that offer strong political and social content and that explore communities and history rarely seen in big-budget cinema. Milestone has been responsible for the discovery of Leo Hurwitz's *Strange Victory*, Kathleen Collins' *Losing Ground*, Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*, and now, Peter Adair and Rob Epstein's *The Aids Show*.

In 1995, Milestone received the first Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I Am Cuba*. Manohla Dargis, then at the *LA Weekly*, chose Milestone as the 1999 "Indie Distributor of the Year." In 2004, the National Society of Film Critics again awarded Milestone with a Film Heritage award.

That same year the International Film Seminars presented the company its prestigious Leo Award *and* the New York Film Critics Circle voted a Special Award “in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films.” In November 2007, Milestone was awarded the Fort Lee Film Commission’s first Lewis Selznick Award for contributions to film history. In January 2008, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association chose to give its first Legacy of Cinema Award “to Dennis Doros and Amy Heller of Milestone Film & Video for their tireless efforts on behalf of film restoration and preservation.” And in March 2008, Milestone became an Anthology Film Archives Film Preservation honoree.

Milestone/Milliarium won Best Rediscovery from the Il Cinema Ritrovato Awards for *Winter Soldier* in 2006, *The Exiles* in 2010 and for the series, *Project Shirley* (Clarke) in 2015.

In 2011, Milestone was the first distributor ever chosen for two Film Heritage Awards in the same year by the National Society of Film Critics for the release of *On the Bowery* and *Word is Out*. The American Library Association also selected *Word is Out* for its Notable Videos for Adults, the first classic film ever so chosen.

In December 2012, Milestone became the first-ever two-time recipient of the prestigious New York Film Critics’ Circle’s Special Award as well as another National Society of Film Critics Film Heritage Award, this time for restoring, preserving and distributing the films of iconoclast director Shirley Clarke.

Important contemporary artists who have co-presented Milestone restorations include Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Barbara Kopple, Woody Allen, Steven Soderbergh, Thelma Schoonmaker, Jonathan Demme, Dustin Hoffman, Charles Burnett and Sherman Alexie.

In 2009, Dennis Doros was elected to the Board of the [Association of the Moving Image Archivists](#). He went on to establish the organization’s press office in 2010 and served three terms on the board. In 2016, Doros was honored with AMIA’s William O’Farrell award, in recognition for services to the field. The next year he was elected President of the AMIA and he serves as well on the board of [Co-ordinating Council of Audio Visual Archives Associations](#). In 2018, Doros was named to the [National Film Preservation Board](#), which helps select the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry every year.

In 2019, Doros and Heller were honored by the Art House Convergence with the organization’s Spotlight Lifetime Achievement Award and by Denver Silent Film Festival with the David Shepard Career Achievement Award. In 2020, Milestone received the Ambler Cinematic Arts Award.

In recent years, Milestone has restored Mikhail Kalatozov’s *I Am Cuba*, David Hockney and Philip Haas’ *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China*, and Gilbert & George and Philip Haas’ *The World of Gilbert & George* and *The Singing Sculpture*.

In 2019, Doros and Heller worked with:

- the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Academy Film Archive to restore the great gospel documentary *Say Amen, Somebody* directed by George T. Nierenberg;
- the Eye Filmmuseum to restore the 1915 Italian feminist, steampunk, jewel thief, cross-dressing, aviatrix thriller *Filibus*;
- and the Academy Film Archive and UCLA's Outfest Legacy Project to restore Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's Oscar®-winning documentary *Common Threads*.

Milestone is working with the Academy Film Archive and The Film Foundation on the restoration and preservation of the films and videos of Ayoka Chenzira. Milestone is collaborating with the Sunrise Foundation to preserve, restore and score Eleanor Antin's modern silent film, *The Man Without a World*.

In 2016, Milestone produced its first (and only) film, Ross Lipman's documentary essay *Notfilm*, which was named to more than a dozen Best Ten Lists. Doros and Heller's one other coproduction is their 24-year-old son Adam, who is a working engineer.

"*They care and they love movies.*" — Martin Scorsese

"*Milestone Film & Video is an art-film distributor that has released some of the most distinguished new movies (along with seldom-seen vintage movie classics) of the past decade.*" — Stephen Holden, *New York Times*

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