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World AIDS Day Marked With Memorial Quilt Unveiling in Middletown

The piece, which took 11 months to complete, was created by and by folks in New Haven who are also afflicted with HIV or AIDS.

Posted by [Cassandra Day](#) (Editor) , December 07, 2013 at 06:15 PM



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0 former patients and friends of CHC who passed through

At an event commemorating World AIDS Day, Community Health Center's Oasis Wellness Center unveiled its contribution to the national AIDS Memorial Quilt: a 12 foot by 12 foot quilt square memorializing those CHC patients who lost their battle with HIV/AIDS.

The Community Health Center Quilt memorializes 30 former patients and friends of CHC who passed through the Wellness Center over the last 20 years. The Quilt, which took 11 months to complete, was hand sewn in most parts by a sewing circle in New Haven whose participants are also afflicted with HIV or AIDS and use this group therapy project as part of their wellness program.

It will be on public display at Community Health Center of Middletown through the month of December. It will then spend a year on the road, traveling to each of CHC's additional 12 sites across the state before it goes on to become part of the massive AIDS Memorial Quilt. Of the more than 48,000 individual memorial panels that make up the AIDS Memorial Quilt, nearly 2000 are from Connecticut.

In describing how honored he is to be part of this project, Oasis Wellness Center's HIV Prevention Counselor, Michael Lauro said "One of the more privileged experiences we can have in life is the act of bearing witness. In unveiling Community Health Center's AIDS Memorial

Quilt, we do our part to bear witness to 30 brave souls who have lost their battle with HIV/AIDS. We are humbled by their memory.”

The Community Health Center Quilt pays tribute to those 30 brave souls by telling their story in a very special way. Among them are people like Robin Gipson, who loved listening to music, dancing and spending time with her family. Robin became a dedicated AIDS advocate for the Connecticut AIDS Housing Project. Shawn Bjornberg loved hiking, camping, and vacations in Aruba. Lorraine West had a terrific sense of humor and was full of surprises.

Steve Wattenbarger was an avid cook and talented chef. Janet Piotrowski was a kind person who struggled with homelessness, her faith was awe-inspiring. Fabian Godin is remembered as someone who loved to garden and loved the beach. Janet Smithwick was often seen riding her bicycle across the majestic Portland Bridge, with a turban wrapped around her head. And Carolyn Haskell, was an elderly spitfire who never gave up and was an inspiration to everyone who knew her.

“Some of the people on the quilt we only know from stories we have been told, some we have spent considerable time with, and still others we have been with in their last moments on earth but all of them are now linked together by their common connection to Oasis and our wish for their name to be an on-going reminder of the value of human life,” remarked Kasey Harding, Director of Integrated Care for Special Populations at Community Health Center.

“This quilt captures the lives of 30 friends and represents our organizations commitment to those who have suffered and those who work to alleviate the suffering – we are committed “not to forget” but also “how to remember” and we do this through celebration with the entire community. Thanks to all of the community members who turned out to join us,” said Mark Masselli, President and CEO of Community Health Center.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt was conceived in November of 1985 by long-time San Francisco gay rights activist Cleve Jones. In 1987 a group came together in San Francisco to give life to the Quilt, and document the lives they feared history would neglect.

Their goal was to create a memorial for those who had died of AIDS, and to thereby help people understand the devastating impact of the disease. Today the Quilt is a powerful visual reminder of the AIDS pandemic. More than 48,000 individual 3-by-6-foot memorial panels — most commemorating the life of someone who has died of AIDS — have been sewn together by friends, lovers and family members.

World AIDS Day was first celebrated in 1988, the same year that the International AIDS Society was formed. It has since become one of the most recognized international health days and a key opportunity to raise awareness, commemorate those who have passed on and celebrate victories such as increased access to treatment and prevention services.

According to aids.gov, today there more than 1.1 million people in the United States who are living with HIV infection, and almost 1 in 5 (18.1%) are unaware of their infection. And in Connecticut, the state Department of Public Health reports that there have been 20,091 cases of HIV and 9,506 deaths between 1981, when the virus was identified, and 2011.

CHC’s Oasis Wellness Center is committed to detecting HIV/AIDS as early as possible, preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS, initiating the most effective evidence-based treatment, and ensuring that persons living with this chronic disease receive the most holistic, compassionate, and comprehensive set of services available.

All CHC sites routinely provide HIV counseling, testing, and education in accordance with Centers for Disease Control recommendations.

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