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For Immediate Release

SURVIVING VOICES: ENDURING STORIES OF HOPE
National AIDS Memorial Grove Observes World AIDS Day with Events that Inspire Remembrance, Healing and Unrelenting Hope for the Future

• Launches new collaboration with HIV Story Project encouraging survivors to share their personal survival stories and tributes through an interactive video ‘storytelling booth’ for digital media AIDS quilt

• Special awards presented to leaders in the AIDS community that include Robert D. Haas, Chairman Emeritus of Levi Strauss & Co., and the San Francisco Leather Community

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (Nov. 30 & Dec. 1, 2015) – In observance of World AIDS Day, the National AIDS Memorial Grove (the Grove) held two events that brought together more than 1,300 friends and supporters to remember those who have died, honored national leaders and unsung heroes in the fight against AIDS, and awarded scholarships to future young leaders in the fight against it.

New Collaboration Launched to Share Stories of Surviving Voices

The two days of tributes focused on ‘surviving voices’ with the Grove launching a collaboration with HIV Story Project to capture and curate the vast and diverse voices of the epidemic through personal stories by survivors aimed at inspiring future generations with messages of profound courage, unrelenting hope, and unity of humankind.

During the events an interactive video ‘storytelling booth’ was featured where attendees were able to record and share their personal stories about HIV/AIDS. As part of the collaboration, the storytelling booth will be used at events in San Francisco during 2016 with the goal of ensuring the stories of the epidemic are captured and retained as part of a digital media AIDS quilt to inform future generations of both the struggle and hope of the San Francisco community, with a vision of capturing stories nationwide in the future.

“It is important to not only remember those loved ones that are no longer with us, but share the stories of survivors,” said National AIDS Memorial Grove executive director John Cunningham. “This partnership with HIV Story Project will help make sure their voices are heard so that future generations never forget, but also so that we continue building hope for the future.”

This collaboration is born out of a shared vision to ensure the lessons of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are forever secured as an oral history across the vast and diverse stories of our surviving voices. Throughout the pandemic, specific groups and communities have disproportionately borne the burden of HIV. In many cases, these disproportionately impacted communities share a history of being on the margins and being often overlooked. All their stories, across all their experiences, however, are important. All need to be heard, recorded and preserved.

“Stories have the power to heal but only if they are told,” said Marc Smolowitz, executive producer and co-founder of HIV Story Project. “After three decades of this pandemic, there is an urgent need to tell and preserve the HIV/AIDS stories of survival before they are lost, before they are forgotten. In remembering, we heal, and through our healing we inspire. Hope emerges from this healing.”
National AIDS Memorial Grove Honors those Lost, National Leaders and Unsung Heroes

On the eve of World AIDS Day, much of the ten-acre Memorial was illuminated to honor those lost and celebrate the spirit of light and life. Guests experienced a candlelight reflection at the Circle of Friends and the evening included special musical and choreographed artistic performances and a deeply moving video conveying the Grove’s message of hope to guests.

During a special ceremony on World AIDS Day, humanitarian, philanthropist, and Chairman Emeritus of Levi Strauss & Co., Robert D. Haas, was honored with the World AIDS Day National Leadership Recognition Award for his work on the responsibilities of businesses in the AIDS crisis and laying the groundwork for effectively addressing the epidemic within the workplace context. Under his leadership, Levi Strauss became the very first Fortune 500 company to extend full medical benefits to domestic partners of employees at that critical time.

“Bob is a true pioneer who went to great lengths to put values at the center of how he ran Levi Strauss & Co. His courageous leadership addressing the HIV/AIDS issue set the stage for the company's long-standing commitment, while also driving the response from the corporate community at large,” said Daniel Lee, executive director, Levi Strauss Foundation. "Through both his words and his actions, Bob demonstrated an unrelenting dedication to doing the right thing. He was unafraid to raise his voice against opposing social views and corporate cultural norms, and made bold moves to protect the rights of marginalized groups who bore the brunt of the epidemic."

In addition, the San Francisco Leather Community was awarded the Thom Weyand Unsung Hero Award. In the 1980’s, members of the Leather Community were among the first to respond in a meaningful way to the AIDS crisis, establishing charitable organizations that helped with emergency basics such as rent, food, and utilities, and even assistance with pets and legal aid. They formed these organizations, held the board positions, and were the volunteer base and producers of a large majority of charitable events and fundraisers. Throughout the almost 35-year history of the AIDS crisis, the Leather Community has raised countless millions of dollars to help those in need and to further the advancement of treatments and education through conversations about HIV.

Premiered at the event were also over 15 beautifully produced video interviews with leaders from the Leather Community that provide an important historical perspective and are part of the ongoing collaboration with HIV Story Project to capture the stories of surviving voices. Funded by grants from Folsom Street Events and Grassroots Gay Rights Foundation, the videos, along with other digital media AIDS quilt stories, will be made available online at www.GenerationsHIV.org.

“On this day as we are honored, it is those who came before us and left too soon that we really honor,” said Ray Tilton, a longtime leader of the San Francisco Leather Community. “We keep their memories alive in our hearts and carry them with us every day.”

The Grove also awarded $40,000 in scholarships to six outstanding students this year as part of the Pedro Zamora Young Leaders Scholarship Program. Funded through grants from UnitedHealthcare, Wells Fargo and Project Inform, the scholarships support the academic efforts of emerging young leaders who demonstrate an active commitment to fighting AIDS, and who plan to pursue careers and community work to find ways to make a difference in the epidemic. The scholarship program is named in honour of AIDS educator, activist and reality television pioneer Pedro Zamora, who passed away in 1994 from an AIDS-related illness.

World AIDS Day observances concluded with supporters gathering for the reading of the names of those engraved into the Circle of Friends.

For more information about the National AIDS Memorial Grove, its mission, programs and services, visit www.aidsmemorial.org or call (415) 765-0497. For more information on the HIV Story Project, visit www.theHIVStoryProject.org.

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