NATIONAL AIDS MEMORIAL COMMEMORATES 25 YEARS OF REMEMBRANCE, HEALING AND HOPE WITH CEREMONY HONORING LONG-TIME SUPPORTERS

Volunteers gather for Community Volunteer Workday; Pay tribute to friends and loved ones lost to HIV/AIDS

SAN FRANCISCO (Sept. 17, 2016) -- Twenty-five years ago a small group of San Francisco residents representing a community devastated by the AIDS epidemic gathered in a dilapidated grove in Golden Gate Park to restore it and create a serene place where people seeking healing could gather to express their collective grief through a living memorial, an AIDS memorial.

Today, hundreds of supporters, volunteers and community leaders came together in “the Grove” to commemorate the 25th anniversary of what is now the National AIDS Memorial. A special ceremony paid tribute to the original founders and honored supporters, including the City of San Francisco, who have helped in its mission to provide, in perpetuity, a place of remembrance so that the lives of people who died from AIDS are not forgotten and their stories are known by future generations.

“Twenty-five years ago our community was ravaged by AIDS and we came together here in this Grove to heal and remember our lost friends and loved ones,” said Jack Porter, a 25-year volunteer who lost his partner Stephen Marcus to AIDS and was honored with the “Heart of the Grove” award for his years of dedication and service. “Today, this memorial has evolved into a national treasure for our entire country to remember, seek comfort and ensure that we always keep their memory alive in our hearts.”

Since 1991, nearly 25,000 volunteers have donated more than 150,000 hours participating in monthly Community Volunteer Workdays and other events to support the National AIDS Memorial. Every third Saturday from March to October, volunteers ranging from the very young to the elderly come together to help maintain the Grove, clearing overgrowth, reintroducing native species and planting new trees, plants and shrubs.

That dedication, commitment and support set in motion passage of legislation spearheaded by U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi and signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996 making the Grove this nation’s sole federally-designated National AIDS Memorial.

“No one knew in 1991, at the height of the epidemic, what the future held for AIDS, and how many more would die from this devastating disease,” said Alice Russell-Shapiro, who along with co-founder Isabel Wade helped spearhead the effort to create the AIDS Grove, first as a place where all lives touched by AIDS could gather in solidarity, in the midst of widespread prejudice and stigma.

Russell-Shapiro added, “What began as a comforting garden setting for compassion and remembrance has evolved into an important national memorial dedicated to all those lost, as well as to keeping the history of the epidemic alive. It is built upon loss -- and the sweat and tears of thousands of volunteers and supporters from San Francisco, across our nation and around the world over these past 25 years.”
The City of San Francisco was an early supporter and advocate for the memorial, approving a plan in 1991 to restore a dilapidated and unusable part of Golden Gate Park - the de Laveaga Dell – to create and maintain the 10-acre memorial in the Grove. Guided by the Recreation and Park Department, a team of prominent architects, landscape architects, and designers, along with a committee of volunteers, dedicated countless hours to create a landscape plan that would be fitting as a timeless living memorial. That work led to the groundbreaking and first Community Volunteer Workday for the AIDS Memorial on September 21, 1991.

“Of the one thousand acres in Golden Gate Park, the ten that make up the National AIDS Memorial are perhaps its most significant and certainly some of its most beautiful,” said Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, who helped unveil a boulder in the Grove honoring the City of San Francisco. “We are honored to be a partner in helping honor the lives of loved ones lost to AIDS by creating a place people can build hope from despair.”

In 1991, one in 25 San Franciscans was living with an HIV infection and one in 50 were living with an AIDS diagnosis. According to the World Health Organization, there are approximately 36.9 million people worldwide living with HIV/AIDS with an estimated 35 million people having died from AIDS-related causes.

“As we commemorate this 25th anniversary of our nation’s AIDS memorial, we are filled with hope for the future,” said National AIDS Memorial executive director John Cunningham. “We recognize the tremendous responsibility and importance of remaining true to the vision of our founders as well as the importance of continuing to tell the story of the AIDS epidemic and the lessons learned from it for future generations.”

The 25th anniversary tribute began with hundreds of volunteers helping landscape and plant trees and shrubbery on the grounds of the memorial, followed by a ceremony in the Circle of Friends in honor of those lost to HIV/AIDS and an emotional performance by members of the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus. Community leaders in attendance included State Senator Mark Leno, San Francisco Supervisor Scott Wiener, Phil Ginsburg, General Manager, San Francisco Recreation and Park Department and Christine Pelosi, former National AIDS Memorial Board member & long-time supporter.

About the National AIDS Memorial: The National AIDS Memorial is a dedicated space in the national landscape where millions of Americans touched directly or indirectly by AIDS can gather to heal, hope, and remember. The National AIDS Memorial, known as “the Grove”, was created twenty-five years ago in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a place where those impacted by AIDS could both grieve and begin the process of healing. In 1996, legislation sponsored by U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi was signed into law by President Clinton that elevated “the Grove” as this nation’s sole federally-designated National AIDS Memorial. Today, nearly 25,000 individuals from around the world have contributed over 150,000 volunteer hours to support the National AIDS Memorial and its mission to provide, in perpetuity, a place of remembrance so that the lives of people who died from AIDS are not forgotten and the story is known by future generations. For more information visit www.aidsmemorial.org, follow on Facebook @NationalAIDSMemorialGrove or @AIDS_Memorial on Twitter.

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