

Lockhart Gives All To Names Project

By Don King
Special To Q-Notes

A Names Project chapter for Charlotte was inevitable. But without Sheila Lockhart and her friend Allen, it might not have come for months, or years.

The Names Project is known by most as, simply, The Quilt. Thousands of panels, usually six feet by four feet, have been made and displayed, and have become the most visible way in the nation to honor the memory of a person who has died of AIDS.

A year ago, Allen was working for Sheila at Chaz/SouthPark. The two had known each other for six years; Sheila hired him frequently to model in and train models for Chaz shows. And when Allen decided to learn hair design at South Eastern College of Beauty School, Sheila, who managed Chaz/SouthPark, told him he had a guaranteed job. He went to work in November, 1988.

Six months later, Sheila noticed that Allen wasn't quite himself.

"Allen would come to work, but he wasn't all there," she said. "Something was visibly bothering him."

"As time went on, you could tell something wasn't right physically. Allen had what he said was a sty on his eyelid, but it wasn't getting well. He insisted he was working on it."

By July, Allen asked Sheila to allow him have time off for treatments for a type of skin cancer.

More concerned than ever that Allen wasn't allowing her and his coworkers to support him, Sheila talked with Rev. Glenn Boland after speaking with Mrs. Boland, who worked at the Chaz headquarters office. Rev. Boland frequently works with AIDS patients, and his church now houses the Names Project's quilt-making workshop.

"Glenn counseled me in ways I could make Allen comfortable talking to me about whether he had AIDS and said it was important that I assure him he wouldn't be fired."

"The next day, my day off, I went to the salon. Allen was sitting in the back room and I recognized that a prescription he showed me was from one of Charlotte's best AIDS

specialists. I told Allen I was so glad he was seeing that doctor.

"Well, Allen was shocked that I had figured it out. When I asked him straightforwardly if he had Kaposi's sarcoma, he fell into my arms crying. He said the doctors had told him he had four to six months to live."

On July 15, a Saturday, Sheila closed Chaz for an hour to host a 29th birthday party for Allen.

"We decorated his station and invited his friends. And we collected \$400 for him."

Allen worked until the day he went into the hospital, the Wednesday before Hurricane Hugo struck on Sept. 22. He died on Oct. 2. After the burial, several of Allen's closest friends decided that "it can't just end like this," and took steps to form a Names Project chapter.

In February, the group felt it had finished the stringent steps for forming a chapter, called the San Francisco office, and found that a national chapter conference was to be held. So Sheila and another of the founding members hand-carried the application to San Francisco, and were granted a charter before returning to Charlotte.

"The day I came back from San Francisco — we took the red-eye flight — we landed at 7 in the morning, I got to work at a quarter to 8, and I was terminated that afternoon at 3."

Sheila had come to Charlotte 12 years ago when her husband — they have been divorced now for six years — was transferred by General Motors from the New Jersey-New York area to Charlotte. So Sheila started over again in her career.

She had attended Fairleigh-Dickinson University in Rutherford, N.J., and had worked as an accountant. In Charlotte she worked first as a manager for Precision Cutters, then for Seligman & Latz, which operated hair salons in Ivey's. She was recruited in 1983 by Charles Potts, getting in on the ground floor of the Chaz chain, which now has more than a dozen salons in Charlotte, the Raleigh area, and the Myrtle Beach area.

"I told Mr. Potts that Allen had AIDS a couple of days after talking to Glenn Boland

the first time," Sheila said. "He sat and listened and didn't comment very much. He's an older gentleman, very conservative. He told me to handle the situation, that I'd be okay if my decisions were good."

"I think his concern was how clients would feel about a person with AIDS doing their hair. I reminded him that people can't get AIDS from a hair designer, and that we had to be careful that the clients might give Allen something."

"I became good friends with Allen's friends, who were mostly gay, from cooking and cleaning for him and being with him at the hospital. I love them very much and came to know that they were very caring and giving individuals."

"Wonderful friendships developed, and I became interested in AIDS because of that. I met more people who were sick and dying and learned so much from them."

"I believe Mr. Potts knew about my socializing with gay people more and more. Gay people became a big part of my life. They took me to gay bars and it was a lot of fun. I met female impersonators and became friends with them."

"And I showed Mr. Potts photos of a group of us who had worn costumes on Halloween. He asked me who one of the individuals was, and I had to explain that it was one of our employees, a man, dressed in drag. I was laughing about it, but when I told him this, his face dropped. He looked at me and said he was a little worried about me. I assured him I was fine, that these guys treated me with a lot of respect and love."

"That was the first inkling I had that he wasn't happy with my friendships with gay people."

"I didn't discuss the Names Project idea with him and told the people on our steering committee that I would have to keep a low profile. When the trip to San Francisco came up, however, I had to tell him that I needed four days off, and he said he hoped I wasn't going with a bunch of gays. I didn't tell him why I was going."

"When I was terminated, he was very friendly in the 2 1/2 hours we talked and said he'd do anything to help me find a job. He

gave me a month's severance pay and pay for two weeks' vacation. There was no animosity then, and there still isn't."

"There was no official reason for my firing. Mr. Potts just said it wasn't working out, and that he felt the need for a change. He said he would tell the state unemployment people and anyone who called wanting to hire me that I was leaving through mutual agreement. He tried to make it as easy as possible."

Sheila was still unemployed in late April, but had been offered a job that she was considering.

"I get such satisfaction in what I'm doing now (with the Names Project) and have made so many friends. I'm grateful for the opportunity — and the honor — of knowing these people and being accepted by them."

"Naturally, people ask why a straight businesswoman is involved with the Names Project. They want to know if my interest is legitimate, and they seem to fully understand when I tell them about the people I've gotten to know through Allen's illness and death."

"I can't wait for the day when we close the quilt-making workshop, the day there is not one more name to add to The Quilt. That will be the happiest day of my life."

Names Project/Charlotte
P.O. Box 36261
Charlotte, N.C. 28236
Phone 704/541-6679
(local to Charlotte)

Making Panels, Volunteering
Panel-making workshop: Wednesdays 7:30 p.m. at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Fellowship Hall, 1900 The Plaza. Open to people wanting to make quilt panels or volunteer to help with the Names Project.

Next National Display
Oct. 4-7, Atlanta, Chicago and three other cities across the U.S. The Quilt has outgrown The Mall in Washington, D.C.



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