

Q Notes

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Out of the House Gunderson exits Congress for quiet life with his mate

by Bob Roehr
Special to Q-Notes

Coming out is the quintessential gay story. Perhaps none has had a longer run in the press than Steve Gunderson, the Republican Congressman from Wisconsin. We have been titillated and outraged with tabloid escapades of outings from the left and homophobic rantings from the right. Now Gunderson and architect Rob Morris, his life partner of 13 years, take their turn in *House and Home*.

Most coming out tales focus on the sexual and psychological self-discovery of a young

into conversation. A Georgia drawl still charms from his lips; his dark brown eyes flash. He seems the natural politician of the two and when I say so, Steve breaks into a full faced impish grin and silently, vigorously nods his head up and down, while Rob protests in vain.

Steve is 45 and even with hair turned silver, still has a fresh-faced, best-little-boy-in-Sunday-school look about him. A warm, soothing voice has helped him build a reputation in Congress as a conciliator who can bring people together to make deals happen.

Their early years together were stormy ones

States may lose only local chapter of NAMES Project

by Gene Poteat -
Q-Notes Staff

CHARLOTTE—The Carolinas are in danger of losing their only chapter of The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. "Due to career and personal life changes, The NAMES Project steering committee has recently lost several dedicated volunteers who have worked many hours displaying the AIDS Memorial Quilt throughout the Carolinas," declares Karen Holt, Volunteer Coordinator for the Charlotte chapter. "If the Quilt is to continue, we need an immediate response from our community."

"In the past several years, the local chapter...has provided over 100,000 people in the Carolinas with the opportunity of seeing the loving creations of friends, lovers and families touched by this devastating disease," says Holt. "Last year alone over 27,000 people were able to see the Quilt panels at concerts, schools, hospitals, a display at Charlotte's Founders Hall...all kinds of places."

The Charlotte chapter, a member of The NAMES Project Foundation, is one of over 40 such groups in the United States, which together form one of the largest grassroots volunteer organizations in the country.

Jane Alexander, Chair of the National Endowment of the Arts says, "The NAMES Project gives important and impressive testimony to a tragic blight. What more poignant demonstration of the power of art can there be?"

The seeds of the Foundation began in 1987. The Quilt itself was conceived in November 1985 by Cleve Jones, a gay activist living in San Francisco. Each panel of the Quilt, made to remember the life of someone lost to AIDS,

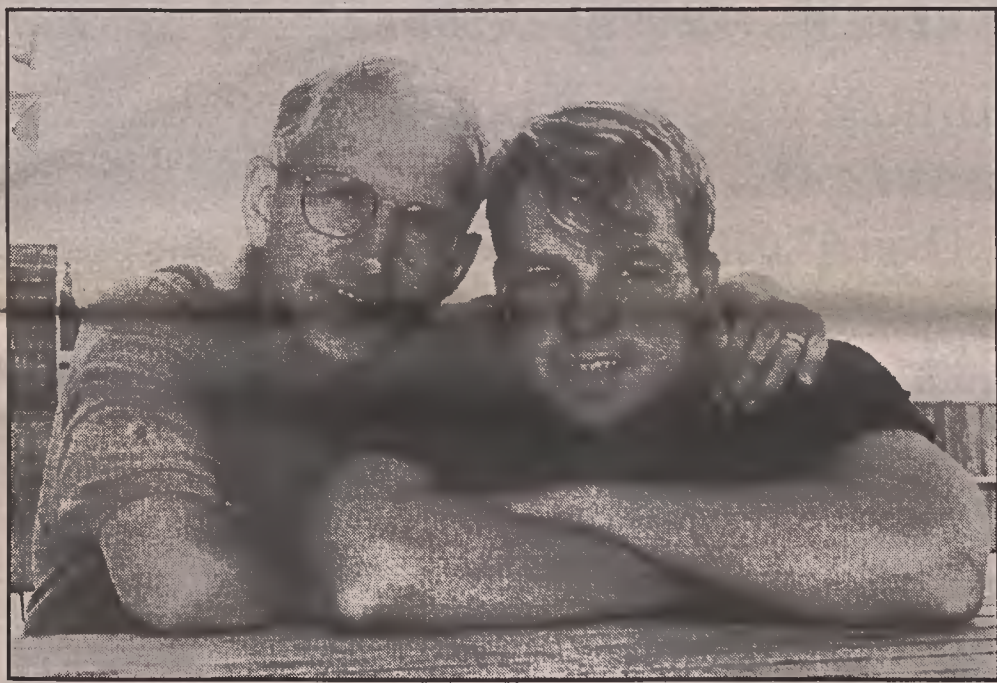
is three-feet by six-feet, the size of a human grave. The panels, which today number over 32,000 and represent 11 percent of all AIDS deaths in the US, are created by family members, friends and neighbors under the direction of local NAMES Project chapters. Based upon the American tradition of quilting, panel-making workshops provide an opportunity for those affected by the AIDS epidemic to comfort one another and share their grief.

The entire AIDS Memorial Quilt, thirty football fields worth of fabric, will be displayed on the National Mall in Washington, DC, beginning October 11. "Twenty-six new panels made through the local chapter will be displayed in Washington," Holt says. The panels, dedicated in May, were created through workshops which were held twice a month by

The NAMES Project Charlotte. "Unfortunately, due to membership changes, the workshops have been temporarily suspended."

"We have lost active members to moving and other changes," Holt explains. "It just kind of happened quickly." A variety of volunteer positions are available. A database coordinator is sought to maintain a computerized mailing list, administrative and clerical positions need to be filled, and individuals with fundraising expertise are needed as well. Logistic coordinators, to handle Quilt requests and workshop sessions, are also vital to the continuation of the chapter. "We get a lot of positive response when we hold displays, and we don't want that to end.... Help us keep the AIDS Memorial Quilt a reality in our communities." ▼

To volunteer with The NAMES Project Charlotte, call (704) 376-2637.



Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-WI) and his life partner Rob Morris

man. Gunderson and Morris offer a different, perhaps older take on the process. There is more a story of building their relationship and an extended family and of accepting responsibility as a member of the gay community in the halls of Congress. Their graceful prose on matters great and small moves you with its revealing candor and honesty.

Rob's office is tucked into the side of an aging strip mall in a Virginia suburb across from Washington. We are sitting in the conference room around a drop-leaf table, comfortably worn, warped and creaking with character. A sideboard holds shards of polished granite flooring and sample faucets, floor plans and photos of solid homes which echo the past while embracing the future.

It is a week after the bloody debate and vote on the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in the House. Steve is still shaken by the virulence of that homophobic outburst. He says it is the first time he has felt "alienated from the institution" of Congress.

He had gone to Speaker Newt Gingrich to propose adding to the bill certain domestic partnership protections for same-sex couples. Gingrich supported the concept, but other conservatives vetoed it. In floor debate, Gunderson asked, "Why should members of Congress be allowed to extend their health insurance and survivors benefits to their second and third wives — when I can't extend it to my partner of 13 years?" The gasps were audible as it seemed to click in the minds of Congressmen, but that did not translate to votes.

Rob, 36, is the exuberant one, diving right

marked by brief separations. Steve's strong Lutheran upbringing and stoic bearing made it difficult for him to accept being gay or to talk about it. Rob needed more communication and reinforcement to make him feel secure in the relationship. Their love and trust were strong and, despite the blow ups, they slowly worked out those issues.

One of the most poignant episodes occurred in 1991 when an AP reporter asked Steve if he was gay. "I'm married to my job," he replied, denying his then eight-year relationship with Rob. It was like Judas denying Jesus. It cut Steve to his moral core, and he would write that it was not fair to Rob. "It would take a few more years for me to realize that I couldn't...separate myself as an individual with personal needs and desires, from the professional public servant."

It was an anguish, a faltering of courage that surely we all know from time to time. Steve lays it out in his own reserved, forthright manner, not pulling any punches. It is one of the many ways we come to understand the humanity of the man.

"For me the 80s was like a big debutante party," says Rob. "Our lives changed when we realized people were getting sick. First we realized we had been remarkably lucky and naive. Second we realized that the fun times were over and the serious times were ahead." His anti-political attitude receded and he began to urge Steve to take a more active role on AIDS and gay issues in Congress.

Pressure also came from activist Michael Petrelis in a series of "outing" activities. The
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Hepatitis becoming an epidemic

by Susan Tedder
Q-Notes Staff

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver that is caused by various viruses and is identified by the letters A, B, C, D and E. Generally, Americans ignore the potential for acquiring hepatitis, though estimates indicate that 1.2 million people in this country have chronic hepatitis B, and another 3.5 million people have chronic hepatitis C. A study conducted in 1990 indi-

Thirty-five to eighty percent of sexually active gay men have some indication of hepatitis B exposure.

cates that gay men are 15.8 times more likely to contract hepatitis B than others in the population, and 35 to 80 percent of sexually active gay men have some indication of hepatitis B, whether they currently have the infection or are recovering from it.

Almost everyone is at risk of contracting hepatitis, primarily because it is so easily spread, even through activities as innocuous as kissing. However, sexual transmission is responsible for

at least 50 percent of reported hepatitis B cases. Chronic hepatitis, a case of hepatitis that the body cannot eradicate within six months, can lead to cirrhosis of the liver or liver cancer. People with chronic hepatitis usually experience no symptoms, and may be unaware that they are carrying the virus and transmitting it to others. Hepatitis B is 100 times more infectious than HIV.

With a potential for infection this high, it is important to gain as much information as possible about hepatitis, particularly the B and C strains. Hepatitis B is communicated by infected blood and body fluids (including semen, vaginal secretions and saliva) which transmit the virus to another person's bloodstream through openings in the skin. Sexual contact is obviously the most common means of transmission, but it can also be transmitted via intravenous drug use, tattooing or body piercing. Blood supplies have been screened for hepatitis B since 1972 and have drastically reduced the risk of transmission from transfusions. A vaccine has been available in the US since 1982 and is recommended for all newborns, children, adolescents and people in high risk groups such as health care workers, people with multiple sex partners and intravenous drug users. The vaccine lasts for seven years. Anyone who might have reason to believe that they have been exposed should be tested for hepatitis B. This is more critical due to the lack of

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