

# Newsday

**Fire Island AIDS Memorial overlooking the ocean will be a fitting 'tribute' to honor those who died, organizers say**



Eric Sawyer, who's involved in a project to build a Fire Island AIDS Memorial, in front of a New York City AIDS memorial on Wednesday. Credit: Ed Quinn

**By Brianne Ledda**

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In the 1980s, Eric Sawyer recalls performing a somber ritual when seasonal residents of Fire Island returned each spring. He would make the rounds, as a family doctor might, to check on friends and neighbors who were ill to see if they had survived the winter.

HIV was sweeping the country at the time, with gay men among its [earliest victims](#). On Long Island, between 1983 and 2022, [nearly 10,000 individuals](#) were diagnosed with AIDS, the disease caused by the human immunodeficiency virus. Across the state, by 2022, more than 130,000 had died from the illness. The Fire Island communities of the Pines and Cherry Grove — havens for the LGBTQ+ community — were especially hard-hit.

“It was a horrible time because we practically witnessed half of our generation dying in front of us,” said Sawyer, 69, a founding member of [ACT UP](#) and [Housing Works](#), organizations dedicated to combatting the AIDS epidemic. “There were no treatments to prevent these deaths and not much was known early on about how the disease was spread.”

Now, more than 40 years later, Sawyer, who is gay and splits his time between Manhattan and his house in Fire Island Pines, and other residents, like Jay Pagano, are planning to create a Fire Island AIDS Memorial for those who died on the island. The memorial will be built between the Pines and Cherry Grove, with a sitting area overlooking the beach and Atlantic Ocean, where the ashes of many who died of AIDS were spread.

“The Pines and Cherry Grove were more affected by the AIDS epidemic probably than any community in the United States or the world,” said Pagano, 79, a Pines resident and past president of the [Fire Island Pines civic group](#).

Pagano said he lost many friends, including two summer visitors who died at his house.

“They’re with me every day,” he said

Organizers said they plan to play recorded interviews with survivors of the epidemic to educate visitors about the impact of HIV on Fire Island.

“We want this memorial to be about experience more than image,” said New York architect Charles Renfro, who is on the planning team and has drawn a preliminary design for the memorial.



Charles Renfro's preliminary design of the planned memorial, which he said will be the "reflecting place of many of our friends and family who died at the height of the epidemic." Credit: Diller Scofidio + Renfro

Designs show a dune-like sound reflector, focusing the sound of waves on a bench with views of the ocean. Pagano said the design would be composed of cemented sand to look like concave dunes coming together.

"It will be about hearing, feeling and seeing the island in new ways and being reminded that the ocean, its sound magnified through a natural reflector, is the reflecting place of many of our friends and family who died at the height of the epidemic," Renfro said.

The memorial is also meant to help educate younger generations, said Denise Roberts Hurlin, 62, one of the tribute's organizers and co-founder of Dancers Responding to AIDS, a nonprofit meant to raise awareness and money to directly help individuals living with AIDS.

"Whether you're an ally or a queer person, it all matters," Hurlin said. "To have this information, as well as a place of beauty to come and reflect, it helps that community into the future."

Pagano said the Fire Island community has embraced the project. The organizers have collected about \$75,000 in donations and said they plan to launch a fundraising campaign through [The Pines Foundation](#), a nonprofit that raises money for programs and projects in the Pines.

Pagano estimates the memorial will cost around \$250,000. Once legislation allowing the memorial to be built on federal parkland has been passed, he hopes to start construction by the end of next year and wrap up the project in 2026.

The [bipartisan legislation](#), introduced on Dec. 14 by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Andrew Garbarino (R-Bayport), would authorize The Pines Foundation to build and maintain the memorial. The legislation is needed because the project would partly fall onto land that's part of the Fire Island National Seashore, a [federally designated wilderness](#) managed by the National Park Service.

Advocates for the memorial are optimistic that the legislation will be passed. Hurlin, reflecting on prospects for the tribute, said she believes the "path to realization has quite a bright light to it."

Sawyer tested positive for HIV in 1985, the same year the screening test was first developed. He'd already been sick for years, with symptoms first developing in 1982.

The diagnosis frightened him. His partner died from the disease in 1986, and Sawyer felt "extremely fearful" he would "perish in the horribly painful and ugly way that [his partner] lost his life."

"I used to go to the back on the ferry boat, on the upper deck at the end of the season when I was leaving [Fire Island] for the winter, and say a little prayer that I would survive ... to be able to come back to that place, which was one of my favorite places on earth, the following spring," Sawyer said.

It seems fitting, he added, that there'll be "some kind of a recognized tribute to memorialize those people lost," in a place so many chose to be the "final resting place for their remains."

"That's part of why we wanted to have the memorial be adjacent to the ocean," Sawyer said, "so that people could go to the memorial site and contemplate and remember the loved ones that they lost while looking into the ocean."

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