

**“HIV in My Day” – Interview 85**

**May 3, 2019**

**Interviewee: Hernan Guardado (HG); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)**

**Ben Klassen:** Just sitting down this afternoon with Hernan. Thanks so much for being here and agreeing to share your story with me today. Just to get started, could you tell me a little bit about how you first started getting involved with the gay community or engaging in gay life?

**Hernan Guardado:** First time, I came from El Salvador, Central America. I didn't know gay people were very open minded in Canada, so I decided to be independent and I moved from Texas to Canada to be who I am, and I became open minded with the gay community, who helped me a lot in my journey and all my way. And I've been very welcomed to Canada to be gay and everybody respects me, who I am. I have a good reputation. I educated myself here, by myself. I went to finish English grade and I took classes, computer classes, and then I worked for a lot of – volunteered for a lot of places, like AIDS Vancouver, Dr. Peter Centre, and the Spanish community. And I'm a hair stylist and I cut hair for people who doesn't [sic] have enough money for haircuts, so I've been doing very good in British Columbia, and I'm happy to be here too.

**BK:** Great. So, when did you move to Canada?

**HG:** I moved to Canada in 1985 and I left El Salvador in 1978 to Texas with my family, but when I found out I was gay, I preferred to tell them I got to go. And I said, “Goodbye. I will never bother you for any penny, I will never call you if I need you, and I want to be independent.” So, I became independent in Canada.

**BK:** And you moved to Toronto first?

**HG:** I moved to Toronto first, and then after that I moved to here, Vancouver, in 1990. And I've been having my lovers in between that.

**BK:** What was the gay community like in Toronto in the 1980s?

**HG:** Oh, in the 1980s, they were very happy, because I didn't know, I loved the music and I loved the freedom to dance and do poppers and stuff like that. [Laughs] And now it's different, but in that time, it was very interesting because people were more sexy. Now it's different.

**BK:** So, there were lots of clubs and bars that you were going to back then?

**HG:** Oh yes, a lot of clubs, and I did volunteer work too in a gay church and I helped a lot of people who were gay, asking questions, kind of like how am I going to get there? – direction and stuff like that. But the only thing I knew was Yonge Street to Isabella in Toronto, that's the main scene, the main streets for discotheques, and I enjoyed it and it was very cool. Like, I've never been hurt – nobody has attacked me or... No, I've been very welcome all the time.

**BK:** That's fantastic. And what about in Vancouver?

**HG:** Vancouver is the same. Vancouver for me – I call Vancouver my mother because I feel like she adopted me in one way, because having all these opportunities in my life, and people who really are in trouble and I can help them if I can. And learning so many ways to survive, and plus dealing with HIV positive, with medication and changing medication, on and on, all the time, because they tried to find a perfect pill for myself for my HIV. So, they did, and since then I've been taking that pill for almost five years now – more. And I'm feeling great because I'm undetected [sic] and physically I'm fine. I had Hepatitis C and I got cured – I went through to take the medication, what I was being told, and I survived it, yeah, with Hepatitis C. And I got pneumonia too. I was in the hospital for almost three months – less than that I believe, but I was there for pneumonia. I almost died. Family came from Texas – my family lives in the United States, and I don't have family here. I have one brother who lives in Toronto and all of my family lives in the United States. I mean here I'm dating someone who's Canadian – we're the best friends we can be. He doesn't allow me to call us lovers, but we're good friends, and that's okay for you, because I'm old enough to understand good and bad. Like, sometimes I think being negative, it doesn't get anywhere, so I have to be positive to understand him the way he is.

**BK:** And back in the '90s, did Vancouver have lots of bars and clubs too then?

**HG:** Oh, they did, absolutely, and steam baths, they were excellent – very proper, clean. They gave you a lot of – anything you need – condoms, poppers, lube, everything you need in that moment, they do have it, and you can buy them from them. And a swimming pool and a sauna – like a very nice steam bath. Like, in Vancouver, I haven't seen one like that since then, and I've been visiting a lot of discotheques and steam baths, but they're very, I don't know, quiet I guess – different style.

**BK:** Now everybody's using their phones to hook up.

**HG:** [Laughs] Absolutely.

**BK:** Young guys at least, I think. So, when did you first hear about HIV?

**HG:** I never heard about HIV. The first time I had a lover and we went to see my – I had to have a pass, identification to tell my boss I was sick, so I went to the doctor, and they said, "Hernan, we have to have a blood test." So, they did it, so two days later, they called me and said, "We want to talk to you." And they said, "You have HIV." So, at that time, there was two pills, AZT and 3TC, something like that. And I told them and I said, "Well, I'm going to die?" And they said, "Not if you take these meds." So, there were just two meds, so I start taking them, and sometimes I forgot because I was so young – I was twenty-one years old. Now, I'm fifty-four, so it's a long time. Yeah, so I did as much as I could to get over from HIV – pills, vitamins, and people who used to tell me not to worry about it. Me, I'm very open minded, I'm very – kind of like, life is life. If one day I have to go, I have to go. I'm very open minded in that way, kind of like I don't struggle for death – if it happens, it happens, but I thank god, I've been very good with my health.

**BK:** When you were diagnosed, the doctor didn't say – because a lot of people heard from their doctors here in Vancouver, “You're going to die in a few years.”

**HG:** Yes, they did.

**BK:** Your doctor didn't say that?

**HG:** Yeah, he did. He says, “You have to be careful because you can die.” And I said – I was over-prepared. I grew up in a poor family back home and I said to goodbye to my family to be independent, so I had to face it on my own. So, I said if life is going to treat me good, I will participate. No, I was not scared – no.

**BK:** You weren't scared?

**HG:** Not at all. And I'm not scared still. I have faith that if something happens – like Hepatitis C bothered me a lot and I survived about it. So, in one way, I'm scared because I don't want to leave my loved ones alone and people, but if the time comes, I think I'm prepared.

**BK:** After you got diagnosed, did you start to get more information on what HIV was?

**HG:** Oh yes, absolutely. That's why I participated in AIDS Vancouver, because I didn't know a lot, so I went to meetings, I went to talks, and I went so many places to tell me about HIV and everything, so I took courses and I read a lot about it. And people giving me good advice they had to survive, yeah. And very kind.

**BK:** So, did you have people who were supporting you after your diagnosis?

**HG:** All the time. I've been supported since the beginning, and I'm still – people want me to come around because I got here as a volunteer at the Dr. Peter Centre, and I talked to a lot of people. Everybody wants me – good man, talking to me, kind of like when you see somebody who is already old and you feel comfortable to say anything, so they feel like that with me. And they treat me very well too.

**BK:** Who were your supports when you were diagnosed? Just your friends or did you go to any organizations in Toronto?

**HG:** Not really because I didn't speak a lot of English, so for me, it was very difficult. I just went with the flow – I just went like, I have to take these meds, but I didn't ask people to let me know about it because I was going to be scared, but a lot of people told me their story by a different way, kind of like movies and – they were very sad, the movies, but thank god, it's never been like that. I guess only in the beginning, before I moved to BC, I was very weak, I was very – I mean, no energy, but knowing I'm coming to a new city made me stronger because a few friends, they were helping me out to come to BC, yeah.

**BK:** In Toronto, you were maybe a little bit isolated because you couldn't speak a lot of English.

**HG:** Yes, because I was very young and no English, plus meeting all these people for me was – when I met the man I was supposed to receive HIV [from], he was a Canadian guy and he told me, he says, “I’m HIV positive,” after sex though. But I said to him, “What is it?” “Oh,” he says, “It’s nothing. It’s like a virus.” Oh, and I said, “Don’t worry about it. Anyway, I like you and I’m in love with you.” So, I stayed with him for almost six months, but I didn’t talk about it, and that moment, we didn’t speak again about it. We continued going until I decided to move on because it was too many jealousies. Young-style life, you know – I’ll be there, you don’t be there, stuff like that. So, I received it from him, but I’m not angry about him because it’s my fault too. Without knowing what I – he gave me HIV, but I don’t take it that way. I think of it as there are consequences about having my life with him, and I forgive him about it – I’m not angry at all, no. Kind of – HIV for me is a lesson to behave and to continue my life.

**BK:** But it would have been very hard for you to get your hands on information about what HIV was if you couldn’t speak English, right? That would be a big barrier.

**HG:** My ex-lover, they were crying, and I said, “Why are you crying?” He said, “Hernan, you’re going to die.” And I sad, “I’m not dying.” Well, the little English I had, it was not a lot. So, “I’m not going to die.” And they say, “Yes, you will die, Hernan. You have to do this, you have to do that.” So, kind of like I believe it and I didn’t, because sometimes I thought in that time, they knew what happened because I was going to be more worried than I was supposed to be, you know what I mean? And my friends, they were giving me courage. Like, “Oh no, don’t worry about me. Look after you,” stuff like that. But I didn’t know what they were meaning, I didn’t know what they were saying, taking care of me and stuff like that, but I appreciated.

**BK:** As you started talking with a doctor and getting on treatment and stuff, did you also start to hear about safe sex and prevention?

**HG:** Oh yes, absolutely. My personality as a gay person, I always use protection and I always behave myself with sex. I never did something different, always protecting with condoms if it’s not just oral sex, and that was enough. And nothing like sharing needles or different stuff, you know what I mean? So, it really was very natural – yeah, no problems. And I always told people who I was with HIV, all my lovers. I said, “If you accept me the way I am, I’m HIV positive, and I want to be with you, and I hope you...” Even my lover right now, he’s positive – he’s a bisexual person – and he doesn’t ask me about HIV anymore because I guess he loves me a lot. It doesn’t bother him.

**BK:** Was that hard back in the ‘80s, to tell people that you were HIV positive?

**HG:** In the ‘80s, yes, especially if you meet somebody in the bar, they always get angry at you – you know, you come with the disease and stuff like that – so it was very dangerous. And people – but it never happened to me though. A lot of friends, they got beat up – a lot of friends, they got stuff stolen because the people there that were HIV, they see it’s evil and stuff like that. So, there was a lot of problems with HIV people if they know I had it in that time. Now it’s different. Now there’s more experience, it’s more like – I guess everybody knows already from school, high school, about HIV and sexually transmitted, so I guess we have a good education about it.

**BK:** And being undetectable too, that changes a lot as well, right? Lots of HIV negative guys are really looking for undetectable partners because they're "safe" partners to be with.

**HG:** And also, a lot of people, they have it and they don't want to check themselves – you see what I mean? And they do more dangerous sex life than to respond something to see what's going on with themselves. Even with me, I always say uncarefully too if I know somebody's going to be honest to me, I prefer not to have anything, to say thank you for everything but you're not my type, and that's it. Not to hurt anybody, you know what I mean, but I've been having people who say, "Oh yes, I'm HIV positive," but I never act like, okay, we're going to be wild – nothing like that. That's the only way.

**BK:** When you were in Toronto still, did you start to see people who were visibly sick?

**HG:** Yes, I did. A lot of friends died on me too, and here in Vancouver, the same, they died. I don't know, kind of like surprised me. They went so fast, and I guess every – how do you say? My body is – how do you say this? Some people have a strong body to handle it and some people are very weak to handle it – with one cold, they're going to bed. And with me, I'm the opposite, I'm very strong – no colds. The only time I had the flu, you know what I mean, I've always been very protected, and I don't get it that much. I don't know, maybe because I'm very open minded and I said whatever comes, but it happens.

**BK:** In these early years after your diagnosis, you weren't sick at all, really? You weren't getting sick?

**HG:** I was. Once, I was very tired, always sweating, and no appetite, and very disorganized system, but seeing these, kind of like, I didn't know very well about it, so it kept me going strong. Like, oh, I'm going to pass, I'm going to do this – like, doctor said I had to do this, like needles or pills, anything.

**BK:** What were those early treatments like? Like, AZT, what it was it like taking that?

**HG:** Believe me, it was a lot of vomit, a lot of headaches. You don't feel good about what you're doing because all the food and everything gives you vomiting, and the pills, nausea, you can't sleep, you have to stay awake all the time, even taking sleeping pills was the same. Yeah, and the pills, they were very strong, because the liver was working very hard about it. That's another thing I have to care of it, the liver to get all these meds.

**BK:** So, there were lots of side effects.

**HG:** Oh yes, a lot of side effects, yes, but I passed it, I did it, and I'm a survivor about it until now. I feel happy until Julio Montaner, he was here at St. Paul's hospital, he put me on this cocktail and since then, I'm still taking it.

**BK:** When was that?

**HG:** This is almost seven years ago.

**BK:** And now, not a lot of side effects?

**HG:** Not at all, not at all. And I'm undetectable, yes. But I'm still taking my meds still, oh absolutely – I take all of them. And besides all the meds, I have to take depression, anxiety – for the blood, thin the blood and your system. So many issues I'm taking meds for. I'm taking iron for my blood because I'm very low in iron. And my eating health, I eat very healthy. I stopped doing a lot of fatty food and trying to be more healthier and get the rule because HIV positive people and AIDS Vancouver, we have people who comes over from university and tells you how to eat, how to drink anything, and to behave with the disease. It's a lot of help with them, yes. Very good organization. And they provide a food bank – it's very nice. A lot of people really need that – that recipe is available. And I'm happy with it because I'm old enough to understand good and bad. Now, I'm not going to do something bad, I'm going to be happy for myself, you know what I mean?

**BK:** How have your interactions generally been with the medical system around HIV over the years?

**HG:** Believe me, I never had a problem. All my doctors, all the nurses, everybody's number one, very helpful. When I came to Vancouver, Dr. De Wet – I'm not sure if you've heard about him – he was my first doctor for HIV, and after that it was Julio Montaner, and I became a member of IDC, because I feel like I was going to need the hospital anytime, because before I was not feeling weak, I was feeling like something was bothering me with my health. It was kind of the liver, so I chose the hospital first because it's directly in there and I have all the opportunities I have in there.

**BK:** So, you said that some of your friends were getting sick during this time too, so were you going to visit them in the hospital?

**HG:** Oh yeah, a lot of them. No, I did. I went to look a lot of them that were sick in the hospital, and a lot of them died. I went to their funerals, Toronto and here in BC too. A lot of memories, yes.

**BK:** And a lot of them were quite young.

**HG:** Very young.

**BK:** How did you deal with that, with all the loss?

**HG:** With the loss, because I'm born in a country – I'm born very strong, family issues, like I had to survive. And I act and I believe anything happens, now take some time – I don't want to die yet, but if it happens, it happens. I'm very open minded now. Very open minded.

**BK:** It sounds like you're a very resilient man, getting through this period. It's incredible. Did your faith play a role in your survival, in your resilience?

**HG:** No, not really. Kind of like the thing is always follow doctors' directions – take these, behave like that, so I'm still doing it. I didn't stop because I'm going to die, or sometimes you know you meet somebody who is not HIV, and you don't want that person to know about it. It's a lot of struggle, the secret, having to say I'm HIV, if the person sees you are, it's going to be a big trouble. Because I was in Thunder Bay one time, I met this guy in a bar, and we came together at my place, and I did respect not to have unprotected – I did protect it. So, I said to him, "What do you think about HIV?" "Oh," he says to me, "If I knew somebody like that, I would kill them." Oh, and I said, "Really?" And I said to him, "How about if I tell you I have it?" And he became a rebel, like, I had to bring him out from my apartment, but he was hunting me, so angry – angry like you don't have any idea. Accusing me, insulting me from the street to my window, but in the end, I let it go. One year later, I saw him again, and he didn't say anything to me – he just saw me, and he walked away. The thing is he was very young too, he was not prepared to hear HIV, especially in Thunder Bay – one bar for all of the community, and that bar has to be quiet because nobody's gay in there. See what I mean?

**BK:** Disclosing that you're positive can be kind of dangerous sometimes.

**HG:** Absolutely, it can be. Somebody can kill you for it because they say it's a killing disease. I don't see it that way though, but some people, if I sleep with somebody, if I don't say anything, they can be very, very angry at me. Or imagine the same thing, I sleep with somebody, he never told me who he is – see what I mean? Like, how about if I'm negative and he's positive? So, I don't know, I guess everybody is getting involved with good answers nowadays, because for me, I'm a little bit scared to tell people, yeah, because... Young people though, they don't have a clue what HIV is because they tell them in school, but they don't tell them openly, they just tell them, oh, this is going to happen to you if you get the disease – see what I mean?

**BK:** And maybe kids aren't learning about undetectability and what HIV actually means today in the detail that they need to.

**HG:** Yes.

**BK:** How was the government responding? Do you remember how the government was responding in Toronto or Vancouver?

**HG:** No, not at all. Everything was very nice. I got my meds right away, no problem with doctors, and here in Vancouver, the same thing. They've been very – how can I say it? They help a lot, both in Toronto and Vancouver – very well, yes. And all the meds and everything, it was perfect. And you know, so many organizations too to help you find out so many things. It's cool, it's very nice.

**BK:** When did you get involved with some of those organizations? Like, when did you get involved with AIDS Vancouver?

**HG:** Oh, when I moved here, because I knew that I was HIV positive, so I start Googling and finding out where can I go about it, so I found these places, and people helped me to go through

it. So, everybody is very helpful, because no place to go. They even found me a place to live and everything.

**BK:** So, you got connected to AIDS Vancouver pretty soon after you moved here?

**HG:** Oh yes. And I started working with them – I worked for them for almost seven years, volunteered. I was on their front desk.

**BK:** So, you were answering phones.

**HG:** Yeah, phones and appointments and stuff like that.

**BK:** People calling for information. That must have been interesting.

**HG:** Yes, believe me, it was. And people too, I guess it's me, I did meet a lot of good people. No, nothing negative. Everybody supported me, and still until now. I go places, a lot of people who are not social workers, but they're all around the people who are HIV and dealing with issues, they love to talk to me because I do have a lot of experience about life and family and being negative, and stuff like that. So, to me, giving them good advice is a lot of help for them, and they love to be around me.

**BK:** What was AIDS Vancouver doing back then? What kinds of programs did they have?

**HG:** Well, they have everything. They have food orientation, they have bank food, they have dental, they have – am I making you tired?

**BK:** No, no, no.

**HG:** They have dental, they had so many – lunch, you can go on computers if you don't have a computer. It's a very good place to go for anything you need. They have clothes if you don't have clothes – it's more organizations for HIV, but a lot of people, they don't know about it because they're scared to confront HIV.

**BK:** Yeah, even going inside the building can be challenging for some people because they're going to be identified as HIV positive.

**HG:** Absolutely. And being HIV, it's not easy too, you know, kind of like skin disorders, bone [indecipherable] – so many issues. Like, lips, dry lips, nose, ears, hair, loss of hair, and everything – it goes little by little. Now I'm undetectable, I haven't seen anything different. The only thing I see sometimes myself is my skin and my nails is different from before, but I don't know, maybe it's the age – probably.

**BK:** It sounds like you really found a community at AIDS Vancouver – you built a network there, I guess.



**HG:** Mhm, and Dr. Peter Centre, too – I don't know if you've heard about it. They provide meals, good meals. And sometimes I stopped going because, I don't know, a lot of people, they need more attention than I do, and I'm doing my art at home now. Before, I used to go there to do some art just to feel good about it, but they're very good providers and they help a lot of people, and good organizations, yes.

**BK:** When did you get involved at Dr. Peter?

**HG:** Oh, five, six years ago, because my doctor, Dr. Julio Montaner and Dr. Barrios, they said to me, "Hernan..." They told me about it, so I went and I got the forms, they accepted me, and like if I die, they will take care of me because I'm already a member there. If something happens to me or if I die or any things happen, they will know before anybody. And now we're here with you, it's different – kind of like, I'm glad. See, putting everything in my way to live.

**BK:** It's quite the journey.

**HG:** I know. Very interesting though. Sometimes I feel happy and I feel content because Canada and British Columbia, like my mother again, it's the greatest, living there. I don't think I will move from here. If I move one day, it will be close to it, but not far away. And that's the route I'm going right now with my partner – he wants me to live with him, so we've decided to get a business together delivering. I have to learn how to drive because I don't know how to drive, so it's a big homework. And I'll see if I can make it as a delivery – with him, I can do it.

**BK:** That's exciting. Thinking about the early years of the epidemic again, how was the public responding? Do you remember what was being said in mainstream newspapers or how people outside of the gay community were reacting?

**HG:** Oh yes, everybody was [indecipherable] evil. Catholic people took it the wrong way and a lot of people who didn't believe in – because the disease came from gay men, from a gorilla – you name it, people used to make stories about it. Very dangerous, very dangerous, especially straight people, if they know somebody is HIV, they will be very, very angry, and like, I don't know why, because it's a disease. Nobody can stop it – it happened. But straight people, they are different, especially girls, women. I think they think they don't have it, but everything is transmitted by blood, so it's very hard to understand them, for the straight people to accept who is HIV.

**BK:** Was there a lot of homophobia back then?

**HG:** A lot of homophobia, yes. A lot. And I'm very lucky, I told you I never had problems with that myself, maybe because I never looked for it. I always tried to behave myself.

**BK:** A little bit careful.

**HG:** But it was a lot of problems for me – sadness when I have to tell somebody I have HIV, because I was at that time good looking, they'd pick me up or I'd pick them up, but to talk about

it – see what I mean? If you said something right away, the date is destroyed. If you don't say anything, they'd be angry after that.

**BK:** It's a difficult position to be in, for sure.

**HG:** The thing is, HIV is good in one way – I can have intimacy with oral sex but nothing can happen. The only thing to happen is just contact with blood – see, that's the only thing, but nobody understands that – you see what I mean?

**BK:** Did you find yourself educating people a lot and telling them “this is how HIV works.”

**HG:** Yes, I did, absolutely. A lot of them, I said to them behave yourself and don't cut yourself with needles. Shave, don't use shaving – the only thing I learned how it's transmitted to other people, not to do it. It's true though. Or people brushing teeth – if you have it, if you go to have intimacy, oral sex, sometimes your vessels bleed. See, all those kind of circumstances. So, to me, I think, both things are a possibility. I don't think [indecipherable], it's both of them – if you knew, if you don't, you have to understand what coincidence you're going through, you know what I mean? It's like, if I live with somebody who's going to say, “Oh, you gave me HIV,” if I didn't know about it, see what I mean?

**BK:** So, it's important to have that conversation.

**HG:** But it's hard though because when you like somebody you want to be with, it's not easy. But I'm very lucky. I've had five lovers in my life, and none of them [indecipherable] me, no one ran away from me. All of them, even still, this man, we have known each other for five years, and he's still with me. Of course, safe sex, but he knows about it and no problem because I told him from the beginning, since they got me in my door, and I said, “You know what, I have something to tell you. What do you think of HIV?” If he doesn't say [gasp] something horrible, then I can act myself good or bad, you know what I mean. If he did say it doesn't matter, then I can continue saying it. I don't know if my English is good.

**BK:** No, it's great. I understand, of course. But of course, when you disclose to someone, you're risking the fact that you might get rejected and that's not a nice feeling.

**HG:** Or can be in a fight, you know what I mean? Can be in a fight, and other people, they can probably take you to court probably for that situation.

**BK:** Yeah, the laws are not good in Canada around this. They're terrible, but changing, I think.

**HG:** Yeah, I believe you.

**BK:** You talked about AIDS Vancouver, Dr. Peter. Did you get involved with any other organizations here in Vancouver?

**HG:** Um, I forgot the – McLaren House? No. It's another house here in the West End. I forgot the name of it.

**BK:** Friends for Life?

**HG:** Friends for Life, yes. That's good. I've seen them a few times, a lot of times, but I didn't involve myself visiting them. I dedicated myself to AIDS Vancouver and Dr. Peter Centre.

**BK:** You only have so much time to devote to volunteering, so you have to make some choices.

**HG:** Yeah, and plus, you know, having a Spanish language, my communication is very happy, because a lot of people are interested about my life and how Spanish people feel, because some of them have been rejected, some of them, they've been hurt by other people because HIV, and with me, they feel free to talk about it. The only thing I tell everybody is don't miss your doses and always eat well, and a lot of sleep and eat well, and don't miss your doses, and you'll be fine. It's not much, it's a little bit. Take your meds every day and eat properly. Some of them, they don't have a lot of money – me too, but there's a lot of things you can do to eat better, you know what I mean?

**BK:** And this is why something like the AIDS Vancouver food bank is really helpful.

**HG:** Helpful, but still, it's not enough for a person who lives with a disease or who lives alone, because nobody acts the same, everybody's different – older people, young people, make sure everybody has a different attitude. It's different. With me, kind of like now, I'm going to start getting involved with salads. Before I couldn't stand salad, and stuff like that, you know what I mean?

**BK:** It sounds like you take looking after your health very seriously.

**HG:** I do in a way, because my friend and I, we're trying to get a business together, so I'm trying to get very health, and he's staying by my team too. So, yes, I take care of myself very well, a little bit.

**BK:** That's great. Were you aware of any AIDS activism back in the day? Did you see that here in Vancouver or in Toronto?

**HG:** AIDS...?

**BK:** Activism. Like, people in the streets, marching in the streets, or anything like that.

**HG:** Oh, no, I don't think so, I haven't, but I did go to Victoria one time to protest for AIDS rights or something like that. I remember – yes, it was a lot about gay people talking because of them that HIV came up, because they think we get the disease from a monkey, from – I don't know, from India. I don't know from where. But this you heard everywhere, it was – I never heard about it but very, very anger, yeah.

**BK:** So, you actually went to Victoria for a protest or something at some point?

**HG:** Yeah, to support for AIDS Vancouver. We went down there for – I think it was the government didn't agree with one of – that was a long time ago though. Yeah, it was a long time ago.

**BK:** When would that have been do you think? In the '90s?

**HG:** No, no. Maybe '95. I remember going to a protest, and everything was well, and I used to participate – how do you say? Native Society, like pow wows, healing, stuff like that, because in Thunder Bay, I used to participate for AIDS. Thunder Bay, they have for AIDS, like AIDS Vancouver, something like that, so they do have that program, and I went, and they helped me a lot, because I didn't have a place to stay. I didn't have no meals, no money, and they helped me. Very open, very nice.

**BK:** When were you in Thunder Bay?

**HG:** Thunder Bay, I ended up in there because I got married with one of my lovers for ten years, and he was a fisherman, so we'd fish salmon and we'd stay in Thunder Bay in the winter, but he had an accident. I left him in a bar, and when I left him, somebody – how do you say – beat up him and everything, so he was in a coma. So, I was home, and the police came over and they told me he was in a coma, so I went, and he survived, thank god. And they beat him enough almost for death, and because Thunder Bay is very – how do you say – when they don't like gay people.

**BK:** Like, homophobic?

**HG:** Homophobic. And then my lover, well, his family didn't know about us – it was a big, big mess. So, since then, I moved here back, I never went back. So, he wants to come back with me, but I didn't have the money to support his needs. His family has money, so I said to him you better go with your family. So, his family didn't know he was gay and all that kind of stuff, so everybody was accusing me because of the accident, and those kind of... I felt very offended. And nobody defended me, because I had to be by myself, and I had to stay there for almost a year until he cooperated to go to court. So, he went to court and said, "I let Hernan go away," so I came back to Vancouver again. It was a very hard time. All my life, I've been married – always had a lover, but all of my lovers, they knew I was HIV positive, and all of them accept me the way I am until now.

**BK:** That's really great. So, how do you think HIV changed the gay community?

**HG:** HIV changed the community... Well, the thing it changed is because a lot of people take it so seriously, if the medication is great, it's nothing to worry about, but they don't see that side, they just see, oh, I'm going to die, or this is not good for me. So, they don't see the other side – it can be fine. Eating well, taking your meds, and not to have so much anger or angry. That's what I think it is – a lot of people treat us without realizing it's fine, because HIV, you can die if you don't take good care of yourself, but if you take care of yourself, nothing's going to happen. And people too though, a lot of prudish people, like they don't like gay, they don't like blood – all that kind of stuff, so it hurts too, yeah. Because people, they feel they're not worth at all,

especially black person – like colour, or Spanish person, because I didn't speak English. See, all have consequences.

**BK:** Did your race or your ethnicity impact the way that you experienced the epidemic?

**HG:** No, I didn't experience the epidemic. The only thing that happened is because I started working when I was five years old and I helped my mum because we were very poor – I helped her a lot. So, when I moved from there, I had already learned to be very strong, to be me, so confronting life, I decide to be independent, so I had to do my life independent. But I'm very lucky to have all of you, even here right now.

**BK:** It's a nice community in a lot of ways. We're lucky here in Vancouver.

**HG:** Absolutely.

**BK:** But did you experience racism or anything like that?

**HG:** Believe me, kind of like me, I'm a very quiet person, but I see a lot of prudishness, a lot happening. I see people, they don't deserve to be treated that way, but they are that way. I don't know, it's hard for me to say, because when I see somebody hurt, the only thing I can tell them is don't worry about it, it's going to be over – I give my advice to them. But yeah, there's a lot of discrimination – a lot. Well, in the West End, you don't feel it, but if you go far away from the West End, especially Burnaby or other cities, and then it's dangerous.

**BK:** The West End feels pretty safe?

**HG:** Absolutely.

**BK:** But maybe outside of that, there's still some racism or discrimination, I imagine.

**HG:** It's a big problem with people, especially straight ones. They cannot accept it – I don't know, it's difficult.

**BK:** One question we always like to ask near the end is what advice you have for younger folks who did not live through the epidemic. So, we were talking about younger gay men who didn't live through this, right, and don't really understand what HIV meant back in the day, so what advice do you have for younger folks out there in the community who didn't experience this?

**HG:** For younger people, I think before they act in real life, they should get informed about everything before they do meet somebody who has HIV or if so many places or so many websites you can go and tell you about it. And so, the younger people needs [sic] to behave and to accept themselves, and not to get hurt, because everywhere life is not perfect. If it's not one thing, it's another thing. So, you kind of have to take everything calm and read about it. And to be honest – that's the main thing, to be honest. Imagine if somebody says to me, "I'm HIV positive." If I'm not, I think I have to walk very gentle – "Oh, I'm sorry. I cannot do that with you then, so I will see you another day. I'm sorry, goodbye." But they don't take it that way. A

lot of people take it like, “Oh, why didn’t you tell me from the beginning?” So, for good people, I guess, they need to be honest and they have to accept everything – it doesn’t matter what – and get it together with a lot of advice, for here, everywhere.

**BK:** And what advice would you have for folks who might be newly diagnosed who just found out that they have HIV? Do you have any advice for people who are newly diagnosed like that?

**HG:** No, I haven’t. No, I haven’t, because all my friends, they’re gay, and it’s very weird, when I talk about HIV, the only thing we talk about HIV is the people who are sick already – you see what I mean? No, I don’t see anything different, not at all.

**BK:** Well, we’ve covered all of my questions. We always like to leave some room at the end just to see if there’s anything you’d like to add or expand upon that we might have touched on.

**HG:** No, the only thing that I want to say, kind of like, thank you for the support and thank you for letting me know more technology about the situation, because I thought nobody had problems anymore about HIV, but still, I guess. If I have somebody who needs my [indecipherable] or my advice, I think I will be the best person to help somebody to focus in a good way, not in a bad way. In a good way kind of means don’t judge before something happens – not to be a judged person, and it is helpful for so many people, because I believe nowadays, nobody cares about HIV anymore. Nobody asks if you are – well, because I haven’t been out probably, but I guess it exists. I don’t know, straight people, I don’t know how they deal with it, but as a gay person, first of all, you have to ask – if you’re young, you may ask. If there’s any trouble to have sex with a person, you know what I mean? But if it’s not, to be realistic, but that depends on what kinds of friends you have or what kind of family, because families can be very strict – they can pull you, like homophobia and struggle, and stuff like that. I don’t have that situation – that’s the reason I feel this way, because nobody tells me what to do. The only thing I do is follow my doctors’ prescriptions, eat well, and try to sleep as much as I can. And I don’t practice so much public sex, I don’t. My age is pulling me inside – like, I’m very satisfied having sex or not having sex – it’s not a big deal for me.

**BK:** Just part of aging, being a little older, or...?

**HG:** Not really, I’m just not interested anymore, and I told my doctor, I said to him, “I’m losing erections and everything.” And he says to me, “Well, it’s part of aging.” But the thing is, I don’t think so. It happens because I guess the medication pulled me – I don’t know, different feelings I guess, I mean, different actions. Like, I don’t feel attraction for anything – I’m very weird, and even my partner says to me, “Well, you still like me?” And I say, “Yes, I do. Don’t worry about it. My heart is for you, but [indecipherable].” Yeah, it’s difficult. And young people are so beautiful – like you. Very nice. I mean, HIV, one day, it will be cured forever. Even right now, it’s cured with the medication. Imagine more the technology will be advanced, it won’t happen anymore – now we’ve ended up with one pill, and before it was seven pills.

**BK:** With really bad side effects, so we’ve come a long way.

**HG:** Absolutely.

**BK:** Anything else you wanted to add before we stop?

**HG:** No. I'm very happy to be here, and thank you for the interview, and nothing – congratulations to the companies and the people who tried to help everybody. Yeah, it's very wonderful, nice. God bless.

**BK:** Well, thank you so much. I'll just stop the recorder.