HIV in My Day – Interview 28

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Interviewee: Frederick Williams (FW); Interviewer: Sandy Lambert (SL); also present: Ben Klassen (BK)

Sandy Lambert: Thanks for joining us. Where do you come from?

Frederick Williams: I was born and raised in southern Alberta. I was born in Edmonton by accident. I wasn't meant to be in Edmonton, I was from small town south of Black Diamond. I was born on Good Friday. My family is half Ukrainian, so went up to the Edmonton area for Easter, and I came around a little bit early – I was the fancy little Easter egg. I was born and raised in Black Diamond, Alberta, graduated in Black Diamond, went to college at Calgary. Didn't quite make it too far in Calgary 'cause I was coming out of the closet – small town boy, very redneck country where I came from, so being gay down there was not part of the curriculum, but I knew I was. But when I came into the big city of Calgary, woo, the doors came flying open. So, school wasn't really successful for me, shall I say, it was more coming out was more the thing. Needless to say, I found my roots in Vancouver about six months later. Moved to Vancouver in '84 – graduated in '83, moved to Vancouver in '84 after a stint of college there, then I went to college in Vancouver, did a little better, But I actually – my big thing, my big success was a chef – I'm a chef. I went under the western hotels mentorship and became a red seal chef through them, and thirty years later I had a major career as a chef. Had to retire a couple years ago due to health reasons, but other than that, just been living life, trying to survive.

SL: Thinking about the epidemic, you were out of the closet. So, the epidemic started, we started hearing about it in the early-'80s. How did you respond to that?

FW: Being that I came out right at the time of the epidemic was becoming something, nobody really knew about it in '84, but '85, '86, I was a member of the World Games, when I went down to San Francisco, and it was really prevalent there. People were definitely sick and you could see it. Down Castro St. or Folsom St. or any of the downtown gay area, you could see the people were sick – it was obvious. Nobody really paid much attention to it, it was just part of life. We just kept on carrying on with the situation, and a couple years later, '89, I noticed I was getting sick easier, different things happening to me. I was kind of concerned and the epidemic was becoming more educated and there was a name for it and it was called AIDS, and I was concerned right from day one that I probably got it, 'cause I was contracting the same symptoms that they were mentioning when it was first called – gay cancer, was it not? And I was always afraid that I was going to have that to begin with. Going down to the World Gay Games, it was pretty promiscuous, there was a lot of everything going on, people from all over the world meeting people and the gay society is promiscuous to begin with and back then it was extremely promiscuous, and if you had any popularity… [laughs] I don't know how else to say it. Needless to say, you were in the running to become an eligible candidate. I was one of them. So anyway, I had fun but we all pay our prices for having fun sometimes.

SL: You came back, you must have seen a lot of people dying. I mean the papers, in *Xtra West* and that, how did that…?

FW: Actually, it was more my friends, my close friends, direct friends – they were dying left and right. I mean, one week I would be talking to [name], next week he would be dead. Talking to [name], next week he was dead. It wasn't even a question of how long, it was what day are they dying – it was that, how quick they were going. It was really bad from '88 to '95. I mean, that is why I became a member of – I joined the – I was offered to take this protease inhibitor study – was it '91 to '95? It was a four-year protease inhibitor study that they offered me to take. I was getting sick, I was next in line to die – it was like a wave of people just going, and at this point I had lost all my close friends, and then my next bunch of friends. And there was a wave of friends and I would gain some friends from friends and they would die, and when am I…? I was sick, lost a bunch of weight, and I was looking like the typical AIDS victim, right? So, what did I have to lose? And that was what created the cocktail and I am proud to be a part of that 'cause it saved my life and it saved a bunch of other people's lives. And there are a few of us that are still standing from thirty-five years ago and I am proud to be a part of that movement.

SL: During the time your friends were dying, there weren't a lot of resources or organizations, and some of the cocktail were just starting. Were you a part of any activism, like ACT UP?

FW: I was not able to express myself so much back then, because of my family. They didn't understand, so it was really hard. It was like I was living two lives – I was living my gay life here, but when I was talking to my family, they kind of shunned upon it and they kind of exiled me a little bit… that's a whole other story. It took them many, many years – they were way behind me. Finally, I stepped forward and said, this is me and I have to do something 'cause my friends are dying and if you guys don't want to be part of it don't bother calling me anymore 'cause I am going to be sticking up for my friends now. Because I had lost every one of my closest friends except for two, and one of them passed away since. I've only got one left from that movement, which is really tough 'cause I was really popular back then.

SL: Were you visiting a lot of people in the hospital?

FW: That was a tough one for me, I really couldn't go to the hospital. I would go to the funeral. I always said our goodbyes before they went to the hospital. We all made a pack that if one of us was going to get sick, nobody wanted anybody to see each other. Back then it was a really bad, ugly death. And nobody in my group wanted anybody that was still healthy to come and look at them, because they didn't want that. So, what we did is we had our little parties about three months before, when everybody could still go and have a beer or have whatever they did, and still enjoy each other, and say this is our farewell party 'cause they know they are in the last stages, but they could still go out and have fun. That was our pact. It may not seem personable to others, but to us it made a lot of sense. And that was about six of us and five of them passed away. But we all did it together and those five people passed away in about five weeks of each other. For me, I thought that was a better way to go, 'cause I still had a view of them that way, and not that way. I think it is an animal instinct – nobody really wants anyone around them when they are dying. That is what my conception is, that most people don't want anybody around them.

SL: Your friends were your community, so what do you call community now? How do you relate to community?

FW: Community to me – I think AIDS Vancouver support is probably the most amazing facility that Canada has got actually. Well, even AIDS Calgary or AIDS Toronto, all of those facilities are amazing because we have a focus and we have a voice through them and we have a central area where if you have any question, they have the answer. And they have the support you need, and to me that is one of the most amazing things about our gay community is we have each other, and this epidemic has brought us together more so than any other community I have ever seen.

SL: Did you find that when the epidemic started that there weren't many resources? So, how do you talk amongst your friends or how did you get work out?

FW: We listened, we learned off each other, we tried to make people understand that this wasn't a gay disease, which was really tough back then. It was such a socially unacceptable disease, really it wasn't – we were plagued as "you deserved it." I mean, there were banners all over the place that you guys take it up the hoop and you guys deserve what you get and you guys should all be thrown on an island. We got all kinds of stuff – I mean, really guys? That is when we started fighting back. That's when the movement really got strong. I think was in the early-'90s. We had enough of the social abuse and we got different organizations on top of it, like AIDS Vancouver and the gay pride parade. A lot of people say, "Why is there a pride parade? Why is there not a heterosexual parade?" There is a big difference, you guys. We had to succumb to a lot more things than they did, the heterosexual world did. Social acceptance was a big one and then the epidemic of HIV was something that takes a very strong person to even be able to talk about it – even to this day, it's hard. I see what it was like thirty years ago and where it has come to now, it's like, wow. It's like yesterday was not even relevant, but it was, because it made us a lot stronger people.

SL: Wondering if you saw those banners and you saw those hate messages back then, that gay people deserved it. Did that not put something in your spirit that you need to fight for this?

FW: We did fight but sometimes it was hard to get the right message out 'cause if we just fought to that level, we weren't winning, we were making it easier for them to attack. So, we had to find a better way of proving that it wasn't so. So, the best was to do it – was educate our own people and make our own people start having safe sex and making us not be diagnosed as much. And then, as you noticed through the years, the diagnosis was more hitting the heterosexual world, and then they understood it was so much our disease. And then, we started fighting back and our banners started going up – I think that swing was from us educating our own people, if you recall.

SL: Yes. So, when you saw – I remember, myself, when they would do the outlines of the bodies, and have the body bags and the coffins. What was your feelings of that?

FW: I think that was pure ignorance. It was people that didn't understand, it was people that wanted to blame it on somebody, and we were the prime candidates.

SL: Do you not think that maybe it had to do also with something – getting the new drugs in place and new organizations together to help different communities?

FW: Could have been, I guess, yeah. I still think that this could have been avoided with the help of our government a little bit more. Our government had a lot of ignorance themselves and the people in the government kind of threw a blind eye to us, to the situation till it got out of hand. And I blame them for a lot of it, a major part of it. It could have been much simplified and dealt with a lot better all the way around. That being said, hindsight is 50/50, right?

SL: When you were diagnosed, did you have a doctor in place?

FW: I went home for a couple years in '89 'cause I wasn't feeling good and I wasn't happy and I needed my family. And so, I went and got diagnosed at home in the southern Alberta clinic which is like the IDC here in Vancouver, but I was back and forth, so I really never had, per se, a home base, for quite a few years 'cause I travelled – my work made me travel, so I used Vancouver and Calgary as a home base. Thank god for the IDC and the southern Alberta clinic 'cause we became a family. If I was in Calgary, the southern Alberta clinic was open arms to me and Vancouver's IDC, they still are my – they are my everything. If I want some social support or any kind of help, that is where I go. I don't go anywhere else, 'cause they know me, they know my history, they know everything about me, and I can speak open and honestly to them. And I don't know of any other situation in our situation where they have the resources, like we do. Does that make sense?

SL: Just thinking for a second

Ben Klassen: So, you came back in '91?

FW: I was back and forth. I was never really gone 'cause with my work I travelled, so I worked on the railroad, so my home base was everywhere. I still worked, I was not unemployed, I was a Via Rail chef for quite a few years, executive chef for Via. But I'd say I was here more than I was in Calgary, but I spent a lot of time in both. I mean, I enjoy Calgary, as much as I hate to admit it. I think it was because of my family.

SL: Did you ever end up in 10C, or in the hospital, due to your HIV status?

FW: They wouldn't say it was directly involved. I have never had the PCP, but I did almost die of meningitis in 1995, just when I finished the protease study. And it is funny because they say our immune system is down, so we are more susceptible to contract whatever. Well, there were eight people that – and I happened to be in southern Alberta for a pig roast, and I put on the pig roast and four people at that pig roast had meningitis – I did not know that – and three of them passed away, two or three weeks later. And I was – there was eight people [in the] southern Alberta area that dies, and I was number nine. I was given my last rights, and they wouldn't say that I conceived it because of my HIV 'cause my immune system was down, but I am saying that probably it was because I wasn't very healthy back then and I was contracting just about every cold there was in '95 – if somebody had a cold I got it. If somebody had the mumps, I got the measles, the meningitis – and I got the double whammy: I got bacterial and the other one, whatever the other one was – viral. So, I had them both. Why I survived, or how I survived, is beyond me 'cause I was death warmed over and they were giving me my last rights. And I was in Calgary and I was supposed to be at work, but my brother…

It is kind of an off-topic story but I got to tell you it. I was sitting and I couldn't see – I was blind. I don't know if you ever heard of people going blind from meningitis and I was coming in and out of consciousness and I was in a little bubble. I was in an intensive care unit and I was being quarantined, and I was in a bubble of oxygen. And it was kind of funny – it was the day of the Super Bowl, my brothers both smuggled in three cases of beer, watching the Super Bowl with Frederick in his ICU bubble, and they tried to give me a beer. And I remember drinking the beer, and you know what? I was in and out of a coma, and that is what saved my life, 'cause two days later, I woke up. And I was in a coma, but I drank the beer – like semi-coma? I understood what was going on, but I was not functioning. I remember watching the game, but not watching the game. I could hear it but I was like right there watching the game like – but not really 'cause I was not participating in the conversation… Noting, but I was there and that is my only… it was an out-of-body sort of thing and three days later I woke up. And they were giving me my last rights, and I said, "Fuck off" and "Get out of my fucking way" – I was really grouchy, I was throwing things, I tore the bubble wrap, and oh my god, just get me the hell out of here. And I was back to normal – not really 'cause I had to learn how to do a few things. I had to learn how to walk – my brain was behind – but I was just mad. How long have I been here?

SL: How long were you there?

FW: Seven weeks.

SL: Seven weeks in ICU?

FW: Crazy, but I didn't realize it. I thought I was there for like three days.

SL: When you became HIV positive and you were parting still at the same time, did it change?

FW: Did it change how I partied?

SL: Did it change how you partied, or your lifestyle?

FW: No, because I was one of those that said it ain't going to happen to me. I'm strong, I'm not going to get sick. Even when I was getting sick, I was saying, "I can beat this." We were so not educated – even as much as we thought we were, we weren't, until it really came close to home when my best friend died. Hm, maybe I should start thinking about this. That was probably around '92 when everybody was getting scared, 'cause fuck, if it can happen to him – he never got sick and, boom, he's gone in like three weeks. That's how quick people would get to their final phase – it was a matter of weeks and they were told figure out your situation 'cause you only got a few more days left. And we were all looking and thinking, this can happen to us. I remember [name] was a friend and he was a little bubbly, always energetic guy. And we went out on a Saturday night and it was really a nice day – everything was going on and we went to

Buddy's. And I had just become a Buddy's calendar boy, and being pretty vane as we were, I was prancing around like a twenty-four year old would, and [name] came flying in and he said, "Freddy, I gotta party one more day with you 'cause I'm probably going to be dead in a month." And you know, joking 'cause he got diagnosed and he looked sick and he had the marks, and I said, "Oh [name], get out. Look at you." Three days later, he was dead, and that's when everybody went, whoa, 'cause he was everybody's buddy. That's when everybody started, oh, this disease has no mercy on anybody. And this is where I am jumping on the dates, sorry, but [name] was a real eye awakener for… like whoa, we have to take this disease serious. And from that point on, we made our appointments, we started taking the drugs, and some of the drugs was not good for me. The AZT nearly killed – they said there was too much of it? And I was taking too much of it and I was having some really bad effects off of it. I was getting migraines really bad – I don't know it just wasn't working and it was rejecting… I almost couldn't take it. No, they took me off of it and put me on D4T, or whatever. That one was a little better but not strong enough. It was just not enough – it was just the balance of these drugs was not…

SL: What did you think of the side effect that were happening with the D4T?

FW: You know what, I can't even remember. You know, I never really had a lot of side effects – maybe the diarrhea. I had a lot of bad diarrhea but other than that, I never really – I've been really fortunate, 'cause either my body just didn't – my blood count would never change or get worse. And I would hear horrific stories about rashes, a lot of really bad blood in their urine, and I really never had that. I have been very fortunate.

SL: So, you heard about lipodystrophy and lipoatrophy. What did you think about that?

FW: Why didn't I get that? 'Cause I did every drug there was, every combination of drug there was, and I never got those effects. So, there must be different strains of HIV. Some people have – I think it is called strain 1 and then there is the other one, and I think I must have the weakest one… I don't know if it is weaker, or…

SL: Different strain

FW: One that you can live with a little easier, thank god. You must be the same.

SL: No.

FW: No?

SL: I'm a stronger strain. I had the buffalo hump from the D4T, that is why I asked that question.

FW: I never had that. I don't think I was on the D4T for very long, so I don't know. They kept me on the AZT as long as they could, until I was vomiting a little bit – I don't know, I can't remember – until it wasn't working anymore.

SL: How long after your diagnosis, how long did you work for?

FW: I worked right through. I worked for thirty years, except for the time I had meningitis – I took a year off. I have had intermittent time that I have had to take off my work schedule. Sometimes I got sick or I just got tired. My big thing was fatigue and my doctor said, "When you feel really fatigued, you are going to have to take some time off." And so, I would always ignore him. I am a workaholic, I think that is what saved me, actually, was my mind was way stronger and I wouldn't allow that part of me to drop and that has still been a big standard in my life today. I mean, today – I'm a cancer survivor too, and I conquered that too 'cause I wasn't ready to drop.

SL: How did that come about, the cancer?

FW: I don't have a clue. I was working to the bone. Well, my doctor said it was stress. My career was above and beyond me. I had flourished to become a very big corporate executive for Sobus Energy [?] up in the oil sands, had my own office in Calgary on the 49th floor facing the mountains, I had a very plush job. And every Monday I would fly from Fort McMurray to Calgary for my meetings and spend the night with my mom and family and fly back to fort McMurray, and I always flew back and forth to Vancouver. I had a very good job - $200,000 plus a year and bonuses and a cushy nice apartment in the West End, and a partner – a high maintenance partner – HIV negative, high maintenance, that's all I can say.

SL: How did he deal with your status?

FW: He met me after I had just finished my twenty-four-year relationship with my other partner. I said I was never going to have another relationship again, especially having to educate them about the HIV. I wasn't in the mood for that, I had enough on my plate, I just wanted to live my life and enjoy my executive role and be alone for a while. I had not been alone for twenty-four years, and one year to the day that I broke up with [name], I met this hunk at a bar in Vancouver. I never go to that bar, he never goes to that bar, but we were both there, and it was almost like fate. And it was the same connection that I had with [name], that I had with him for twenty-four years, and we have been together now for five years. And it is like, why me? Why I can't be single? And I love him dearly and he is at home waiting for me to come home. It was almost like it was meant to be. I mean, I just traded my other one in for a younger new model.

SL: How was getting through cancer?

FW: It was tough. I had to take – now I am unemployed, officially. What I am doing now for work is volunteer, honorarium. It's not a registered job. The government – I am on disability. They told me I could not go back to work, because of the HIV and because of the cancer – there is just too much on my body right now, and you want to stay healthy, that is the way to go. So, that is the way I'm going and I'm actually enjoying it, because for the first time in my life, I'm at home. I am able to do the things with Sandy and the Dudes Club. I never had the opportunity before. I had to take a sacrifice for my career. That is the route that my career went, is to be on the road – that's the way it worked for me and that's the way my job was a success for me. From day one, I would travel – railroads, the oil sands, and even at the hotels, I did a lot of training. The Algonquin – I had a stint of work with the CP hotels which is now Fairmont, and I got a really good gig. I would take a lot of the chefs to the Algonquin. I don't know if you have ever heard of the Algonquin – it's in New Brunswick and it is probably the premier hotel in Canada. It's amazing, it's a capsule, the queen gave it the thumbs up, so that's kind of a premier highlight of my life is taking chefs and tweaking them at this beautiful, five-star, luxurious castle. And I did – had a little mentorship at Banff Springs and Palliser in Calgary and Hotel Vancouver, and I set up the restaurant there – the… I think it is called Le Notch now? French cuisine is my premiere.

SL: That is why you are married – you know how to cook.

FW: Yeah, but it is like a cabinet maker with no cabinets, chef with no cook. The last thing I would like to do – I do it more now, [but] the last thing I would want to do when I came home was cook, so I ate out a lot, and I was such a critic. I was always, oh, I can do so much better. I was always disappointed. I would go to these fancy restaurants and I was more happy going to a burger joint when I was on my days off. Because I had already cooked so many chateaubriand – that and steak napoleon is one of my signature dishes. I don't know if you have ever had, but I changed my recipe – I have a signature dish, I should have cooked that for you. I have a patented dish, it is short ribs. I don't know if you, short ribs are greasy – not the way I do it. Especially with the hoisin sauce, it is very nice.

SL: How do you think things have changed in yours eyes from back in those days to these days?

FW: It is like night and day, but we still have a lot to learn yet. We have to find a cure, so we are not there yet – we can't let our guard down yet.

SL: How do we deal with the younger generation that is…?

FW: I think it has to start in schools, and it has to start on day one and we have to accept that we have gay people coming up. It's not something that just happens, people, it is from the time they are born. I know it was with me. I knew there was something weird about me…

SL: Or different.

FW: They say weird, well, I say I'm better. I think our society should be a little bit more with it, with the technology we got and the social media and everything we got going for us. When we didn't have that before and the technology, the research that we have already done – there is more to be done. At least now the kids have a fighting start to their lives. The kids themselves should be educated before they are going to school – hey, if I'm gay and I'm six years old, please let me be gay. Let them be gay in school. I think our society would be a lot healthier and a lot smarter, and we would get along a lot better, don't you agree?

SL: Definitely.

FW: That is where it should start, from ground zero. Those kids should not have to go through what we had to go through.

BK: You mentioned IDC. Where else were you finding support?

FW: My friends were my support. We didn't want anybody else to know our business. Back then, if you were HIV, you didn't want everyone to know. It wasn't even something you told your peers at the bar. It wasn't something you told anybody until your deathbed. I don't know about you, but I know it was that way with us. We didn't want anyone to know. It had to be your immediate close friends that you opened that door to, at least that is the way it was for me.

SL: Or walking in through the doors of an AIDS organizations…

FW: It took me the longest time to ever go into – I didn't even step foot in AIDS Vancouver until the '90s.

SL: So, ten years it took you?

FW: At least. I heard about it, I maybe walked by it, walked around it, looked in, and took the brochures, but hmm, I wasn't letting anybody in that door.

BK: So, what stopped you from going through that door?

FW: Peer pressure, social stigma. Here we go, back – people, judgement, it was a socially acceptable thing up until recently, really. I opened the flood gates probably 2002, 2003, when I said fuck it, I'm getting too old to be worried about what other people think, and I am still here, so obviously I am not going anytime soon. So, I better let everybody know that I'm here and I'm staying and I'm gay and I'm HIV, and fuck you all. And I'm proud of it. 'Cause I'm here and I'm a spokesperson for it, 'cause if I'm still here and I'm striving to survive, that means I'm a spokesperson. Whether I am or not – but doing these sorts of things, I guess you are.

BK: That sense of stigma, was that something you were seeing a lot in the bars?

FW: Everywhere you went. Actually, surprisingly it was even more in the community 'cause they would single you out. "Oh, he's got HIV. He's HIV." And you know, when you hear it from your own peers, gay peers, whatever, that was like – that is – like, "Oh, he's got a big welt on his forehead. Don't talk to him." That is exactly the way it was. I saw it on how other people treated other people. I'm not going to go through that – I'll be dead before they can do that. So, it was our own peers that made us stay in the closet on that one, a lot of us. I'm not saying everyone was like that, but I would say 80 %, our peers were harder on us than anybody, until it hit them close to home, then they would have a different attitude.

BK: When do you think that changed, the stigma?

FW: When society started changing – when it started hitting the heterosexual world a bit more, I think our society started understanding, well maybe it isn't just a gay disease, and I think that's when the stigma started changing. That's when our government started changing 'cause it started hitting their community and they started saying, oh, maybe we better do something about it. Because if it didn't hit the heterosexual community, we would probably still be about ten years behind, that's the way I look at it. That is my true belief. Do you agree?

SL: Oh, yeah. And we still have communities up north that are still fifteen years behind.

FW: Go to Russia. What do they think?

SL: Exactly.

BK: Now you are in a relationship, a serodiscordant relationship. It's amazing to see, looking at the stigma that you would have witnessed in the 80's and now.

FW: And not to mention that he was – before he met me, he wasn't out of the closet yet either, so he was… I met his previous relationship, which was a girl, and she gave me a big hug, "Aw, Frederick, he finally found the right man." I said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "What are you talking about?" I have known he was gay forever, but he needed somebody to bring him out, so really? I kind of felt honoured but kind of bombarded and – 'cause that was the last thing I thought. But he's a princess – I mean, you know how they open the flood gates for some… well, he's not a drag queen yet. He's not, but he's like – everybody says, "Where's your…? You dress so nice," and I am always dressed up and I am a fashion guy, right, but he's more takes two hours in the bathroom to do his hair, which he shaves his hair shorter than yours, so there's nothing to style, but he's there. But me, I have the hair style, and I take thirty seconds, it's just the way it is. He goes, "How can you do that so fast?" And I say, "'Cause I am a star." Just a habit, I just don't spend that extra energy for. He says, "How do you get that tie on so quick?" Do it for thirty years and see how quick you do it.

BK: We don't have too many more questions, I don't think, but how did the epidemic change the community here in Vancouver?

FW: Oh, it brought us together. And there were groups, but now it doesn't matter who you are. When we bring that topic, the AIDS Walk or whatever, the whole community – gay, lesbian, transgendered – everybody is together now. Before, it was that group would put on their own thing, and that group would put on their own thing. I really see it in the lesbian community are more a part of us now than they were ever, I think. I don't know, they are more willing to hug us than they ever were, at least me anyway, where before I had to fight with them to give me a hug. I mean they were butch.

SL: They sure stepped up.

FW: Absolutely, damn rights they did. I mean, it didn't hit them hardly at all, did it? If anything? Very little, but for them just to be a part of it, kudos on them I think because without their support, that is only half of our community. We were the ones – the male part of the community is the one that got hit hard, but without the full community support we weren't getting a voice out there. That's the way I look at that. We needed everybody's support before it became – before people took notice. And I think it works part and parcel 'cause now the transgenders are getting a voice now and that is really good because I have several friends who are transgender and it took me a long time to understand them as well. Now I have had the opportunity to listen and learn about them, and like where have we been? Because you know, I see them, sure they are

– there is a little bit of woman in all of us gay guys and all of us straight guys, there is that little feminine part to us all. My partner, he has a little feminine part to him… [excised] I don't care, but you know, I'm not that kind of guy. That has never been my thing but if that is what makes you happy, so be it. Who am I to say, right? As for the HIV epidemic, I think we are going in the right direction but very slow – too slow, should be done already, we should have a cure already. That is the way I look at it.

SL: It is. They have CanCURE [Canadian HIV Cure Enterprise] now which is… I have my views on that.

FW: What is CanCURE?

SL: CanCURE is – they were looking to get rid of HIV and AIDS, CanCURE. So, I don't know how far that has gone right now cause when they came to Vancouver, I was part of the steering committee, the first pilot site to test what they had to say, and I had questions – you know how I am.

FW: I heard that somewhere in Sweden there was an actual cure, but they weren't bringing it out. The pharmacy, the pill company was holding back until a certain quota of people die from it or the governments are willing to put out enough money for it, or whatever – that is what I heard.

SL: Well, when they had – this is off-topic too… [excised]

FW: I heard that, that was a lot to do – I heard about it. I am kind of educated to that, but I heard that there was a cure and they were working on it and it was just a matter of going through the last bit of. But if you had HIV already, you wouldn't be able to be cured.

SL: No.

FW: That is going to be the problem with everybody.

SL: That is where PrEP or PEP comes into play, right?

FW: Yeah, but that don't do us any good.

SL: No, exactly.

FW: Once you got it, you got it, right? Now it's just a matter of maintaining it. Now we can live a proper, normal life, just got to remember to take your meds. Unfortunately, I am on my last cocktail too, so if I screw up this one, which is seven, eight pills a day… I wish I didn't have to do all that – three in the morning and four in the afternoon. I have been doing that for ten years, the same cocktail – that's the last cocktail I've got left. My body's rejected a few of the others, all of the others. Because I've been a bad boy, I've been doing it the same way forever. If I feel like I'm not going to remember, I'm going out drinking or whatever… I don't drink anymore, but I go out drinking, I don't take my drugs, I don't take my meds that day.

SL: What do you mean you were a bad boy? You weren't adherent to the drugs?

FW: When I was partying, I just wasn't. I'd like – what made me reject them back then is I'd take one or two or three or not take all of them and so then my body rejected the ones that I didn't do normally, and I didn't understand that. This was many years ago now. And so, they told me if you are going to do that, don't take any of them, don't just take the colourful ones. But what I did was some were like chalk. I didn't like them so I wouldn't take them. Was it Septra? Not Septra – there is still one that was like that. I didn't like that one and I had to refrigerate that one and I would forget to refrigerate it.

SL: Sustiva?

FW: Sustiva, yeah. And so, I would forget to refrigerate it and I wouldn't take it, and a lot of complicated parts of the taking of the meds. So, I would have an issue with that and it was like oh man, I would get so confused. Did I take that one? And I was very forgetful – that's one thing that is part of this disease is your mind is forgetful, especially if you haven't been taking the pills back before. So, I was very forgetful. Did I take 'em today or did I not take 'em today? And I was really bad for forgetting. So, okay, I did take 'em but I actually didn't and I never really wrote it down if I did, so now I have a pill daily thing.

SL: You take them at a certain time?

FW: Yeah, but I also have them already lined up. They aren't vacuum packed 'cause if I don't do them myself physically I won't do them if I don't package them daily. I have a whole month, a little plastic thing with AM PM, and if I don't do that, it ain't going to get done. I will forget, I will throw them in my briefcase, and they will stay there for a month. Serious, that is the only way it works for me. I can't rely on other people. That is one thing I have always been, I have been hard on other people. The fact I have to do things my way or else it doesn't get done the way I want it to get done, I am such a perfectionist. It is a kind of a bad thing in some cases but it's a good thing in others 'cause that is what made me successful in what I have done.

BK: Did HIV change your relationship to the gay community?

FW: Made it closer, made me closer, 'cause it made me closer in some senses and I also have a lot hatred towards the gay community in a lot of senses too, cause I just don't agree that – I think that some things should be anonymous, I think your personal life shouldn't be on a platter board. These people go to these gay bars, "Oh, I'm gay and HIV." Buddy, I don't really care if you are gay or have HIV or not, really, just have respect for the people who have passed away from it and are dealing with it and we don't need to know who they are. We don't. Just forever who is out there and that is, good luck and we are all there for you as a community but we don't have to single people out. Do you agree? That is the way I look at it. Maybe it is a bit if a hypocritical way of looking at it, but I just don't think that we have to be so direct to each other, but yet be direct to each other.

SL: If it comes up, it comes up.

FW: Yeah, it's not like you have to tell me that you are gay and you are HIV and you are gonna die next week or whatever. Or I have this problem, or that problem. Okay, I have a tooth ache too – who cares? I care but I don't care. Tell me something substantial, like what are we having for dinner tonight. Anyway, sometimes we dwell. What, I've had HIV for thirty years and I have been in two car accidents in that time and those two car accidents could have killed me – went off a 100-foot embankment. The only thing that saved me was Mary Kay's pink little Cadillac, out of nowhere. Now, there's a story in itself – where had I ever seen a Mary Kay Cadillac before? Never until I fell off a 100-foot cliff in my Toyota. Holy fuck, who would thought? State of Washington, Mary Kay cosmetics lady, she saved my life. Now, that's a story in itself, hence the scar, but I would have died if she hadn't done something and that is a guardian angel in itself. That is what made me understand that god is out there and he is looking out for us in some way or somehow whether we realize it or not, 'cause Mary Kay doesn't just happen to be on the I 95 between Spokane and Coeur d'Alene in Idaho. No kidding, I was – I woke up out of this one. I know what happened. I was going around those windy roads, I was on my way to Laclede, Idaho, Spokane to visit some friends… Back then Pan Am air, he was an airplane pilot, very hot. We had a bit of a rendezvous. I was actual cheating on my partner of twenty-four years, but he was worth it. But on my way back from Laclede to Spokane and from Spokane I was coming up to Vancouver – it was really windy and this big semi was coming around and he was taking over the road – it was either go head on or go over the embankment. I took my chance and went off the embankment, but the embankment had these bushes at the bottom – that's what saved my life ultimately. But I probably would have bled to death if she hadn't come 'cause I had cracked my forehead, my skull was cracked – it was pretty ugly. Then they took me to this freakin' little hospital little hillbilly hospital and the best stitch job I ever got – I hardly even got a scar out of the deal. I can't even remember what year that was – '88? How did I do. Okay?

SL: You did great. Is there anything you would like to add?

FW: No, not really, being – I'm just thankful that I am still around to be part of this and letting people know that there is still some of us surviving from the era of the epidemic when it was the plague. It wasn't an epidemic, it was a plague. How I was chosen as one of the few – there's a few of us, there are a few… some are in better shape than others. I think I'm one of the better ones. I am in extremely good health. I went for a physical recently and all my cardio, and I am in better shape than most people half my age. I work harder than most people half my age, but I have to – that is what keeps me going. To each their own – whatever makes the boat float. I wouldn't be here today if I wasn't who I am. For what it's worth, everybody has their own ways of healing and coping with their life and not everybody's life is perfect, but everybody has a story and how you deal with that story or that story line, only you can make it.

SL: Thank you so much for sharing you story with us.

FW: My pleasure.