

HIV in My Day – Interview 20

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Interviewee: Anonymous (P); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)

Ben Klassen: Alright, just getting started this afternoon. We like to start by asking how you first became involved in the gay community or started engaging in gay life.

Participant: Let's see, that would have been... The first time? Like, not – not teenage hookups with friends?

BK: Well, I think that's part of the story.

P: Yeah, yeah. Well, I guess that would have been fourteen or so there, but I didn't really get involved with the gay world until I moved to Vancouver from Victoria in '84. I moved over there to be with this guy I met – we were boyfriends for about two and half years or so – it was interesting. And that's when this whole AIDS thing came out, which freaked us all out. So, it kind of put me back into the closet and ran away – I wasn't very comfortable with the gay world back then. Not at all, yea. It was a different time – it was rough, it was violent, lots of gay bashing, and no police support. You know back in the early-eighties.

So, when the AIDS thing came out, like I did I – my friends actually right now refer to me as a 4x4 fag as opposed to a queen or anything like that, yeah – so I have kind of always been the redneck gay guy. Ah, and I didn't find there was really a place for me in the early-eighties, so I felt really uncomfortable with that and when the AIDS thing came out that really just freaked me out and I ran away from the gay world, and I didn't come out again until – oh, I would have been twenty-one then. So, I didn't come out again until I was about twenty-eight after that.

BK: So what was there, in terms of Vancouver's gay community, it wasn't exactly, even without the epidemic...?

P: Right, no, yeah, it was the old, you don't know what you're getting into. I guess I have to be in drag all the time and be very effeminate and I never really found there was a place for me. I tried to find places to get involved in, like hiking groups and things, but they kind of just turned out to be like jerk off sessions which kind of pissed me off... because I just wanted to go hiking.

Um, yeah, yeah... it was different. Yeah, I guess my first boyfriend wasn't a great introduction to the gay world, so... I forget the prime minister's name I can see him and his wife... Lillian Vander Zalm! That's right. And he wanted to ship everyone off to an island like a leper colony or so from the fifties. And that was sort of the whole atmosphere I was coming out in, so I didn't feel comfortable coming out of the closet at all. And then years later, it was interesting because I talked to a friend of mine who was a therapist at UBC, and we were talking about comparing coming out stories and it was uh... it was more like not coming to terms with being gay. That was only – ended up in retrospect – ended up only being part of it. It was more like who am I as a person and where do I fit in in society was the big issue. So, once I came to terms with who I am and where I'm going, the gay thing just fell into place and it was easy and the gay world was

easy to enter into. Yeah, and at that time I guess HIV was getting a bit more of a – hang on – no, it wasn't, no that was before AZT or anything. So, still – yeah, it was still a death sentence. Yeah, so the second time I came out of the closet... [laughs]

It's funny because people asked how do you identify as gay and stuff? And I said, if I have to identify as anything I identify as a nudist first then gay as second. So, I was always down at Wreck Beach at the time. So, that's where I met my next – my second first boyfriend, and he introduced me to all my gay friends who I still am very close to now. And it was a great introduction to the gay world. I got to meet a variety of people and I would say in the first two years probably 10 percent, maybe 15 percent of those people all died. Just after the first year and a half that I met them – yeah, real quick, real quick, some of them. Like, the gentleman who introduced me to you, I met him at that time through my first boyfriend and we've been friends ever since then, and he was positive back then right at the beginning. So, it was a really scary time watching friends who were positive and other friends die, and how my positive friends would relate to that and the lack of acceptance there was in the medical community, and no support or anything. Yeah, it was crazy, it was crazy. Very closeted.

BK: Yeah, I don't think your experience of returning to the closet because of HIV is unique. I think a lot of gay men felt the need to do that to some extent at least, because of the fear and anxiety around that.

P: Right, for sure, and it was like a curse from god on gays right, and you know you could get it ten days after on a park bench, and there was all these crazy accusations.

BK: Do you remember what – the first information you were encountering about the epidemic, where were you hearing about it?

P: Where did I...? It would have been the news I guess, yea the news is – yeah. It was like the gay disease, the epidemic that was attacking the gay world. Yeah, a lot of – I think the news and the media offer inaccurate information anyways. What they say may be true but it's only a small sliver of the whole truth and they sort of just leave it up to you to decipher, which – I hate to bring in the religious part, but I think a lot of the religious groups sort of ran with that. It seems to me – I think Anita Bryan, you know her? Yeah, Anita Bryan, she went down to Wreck Beach one time with a full camera crew and they're like, "Look at all these naked people! What about the children, what about the children!" And you can see all these kids playing in the background and stuff – it was crazy! So, a lot of really heavy religious people being very vocal. And I think, probably, Vander Zalm was one of them.

BK: Yes, I think he was for sure.

P: For sure. A boyfriend of mine that I had met, who I guess in my early thirties – he was gay, obviously, and his brother was also gay and his brother was heavily into the leather scene and became positive and finally passed away. But my boyfriend, he worked for B.C. Ferries actually, on, you know, one of the ships, and Vander Zalm was on there and he refused to serve Vander Zalm, because he wanted to put his brother on a desert island – not a desert island, but an island

to keep it away, right? So it was really dynamically political the whole time in a suppressive sort of way. Yea it was crazy. It seems so long ago now. [laughs]

BK: Yeah, I hope a lot has changed since then but...

P: Well, it's kind of funny 'cause I always sort of considered, like, HIV and AIDS pushed us out of the closet and got us our gay rights. If it wasn't for HIV I don't think we would probably have the gay rights that we have right now. Mind you, I am kind of one of these optimistic people. But, I mean, look at women's rights in the fifties – they got the right to vote and they got equality in the fifties but nothing has changed. Where gays, we were forced out of the closet we were forced out in the open and demanded equality because we needed the support – we needed the medical support. And yeah, so I think HIV was probably the biggest fight for gay rights, oddly enough.

BK: It seems to have definitely politicized – just being gay was political all of sudden again.

P: Yea for sure.

BK: So, you moved to Vancouver in '84. That time after you were kind of learning about AIDS and you withdrew from the community – did you just completely cut yourself off? Like, you weren't engaging in aspects of...

P: No fun, sex, social anything like that? No, no, I wasn't involved at all. My boyfriend at the time, we had split up, and then after we split up, I thought, "Well I can't do this," so then I went back into the closet. That wasn't the reason for splitting up. But uh, he did follow me around wherever I moved. [laughs] So that would have been my only connection to the gay world, to have my ex-boyfriend move into the building of whatever building I moved into. [laughs] Yeah, it was kind of odd, but oh well.

BK: That does sound a little odd. [laughs]

P: Yeah, for sure. Yeah.

BK: Was that a way of protecting yourself? Was that a way of dealing with your fear around the epidemic?

P: Yeah, it was – the epidemic was more like the last straw for going back into the closet. It was – it was a lot of insecurities of who I was as a gay person and where do I fit in society, And you know, "My life is going to go down the wrong path, and everyone is going to abandon me." And then when the AIDS came out it was like, "Oh, that's it," that was the last straw. "I'm done with this," and I hid away for a while. But then it wasn't until – until I had come to terms with myself that the HIV and the AIDS sort of became easier to understand.

BK: I guess you wouldn't have had any idea of what the community was doing around the epidemic in the eighties and...

P: No, just what would have been on the news. Like, Little Sister's was around then and they were always on the news fighting for equality and stuff – I always remember them. And the parades, but I don't remember attending a parade for years – yeah, probably the nineties I started going to parades, and they were really tiny.

BK: Yeah, they are a lot different now.

P: Yeah, a lot different now. Actually, a friend of mine and I were discussing that they are so different now – that it's really almost counterproductive – more of an advertisement tool for big business.

BK: It's become that. It's mostly, like, banks and political parties.

P: Yeah, for sure, for sure. When I lived down in Mexico City for a year in '99 and I went to the gay pride there and all the Mexicans kept coming up and said, "What are you doing here?! You are either going to get arrested or shot. You shouldn't be here."

I thought, "Wow, this is the political part of the gay pride parade." [laughs] It was very real. It was a good slap across the face – oh yeah, right, there is still a challenge here.

BK: And do you remember hearing what was going on in terms of what the mainstream was saying about the epidemic or do remember any experiences that you had, or any information that you heard about?

P: Yea, it was all negative – all negative. It was just fear and fear mongering, and it was just... yeah. So, when I met my second first boyfriend and met all my friends there – and some of them are positive – it was their stories that would really hit home about the abandoning of the medical industry and no support. Yeah, you could go to emergency, but one friend literally got stuck in the closet. He was just stuck there for days with nobody coming in, because nobody knew what to do. You know, how do you deal with it? I think at that time they might have been thinking it might have even been air borne. I know that was when they still thought it lasted ten days on an open park bench, [laughs] which seems incredible. Yeah, it's just a lot of fear – it was a lot of don't go near you, don't get close – there was no pills, nothing. So, it was a death sentence – absolute death sentence.

BK: Yeah, we have heard a few stories of doctors in Hazmat suits in the early stages of the epidemic. If you were going to go into the room of an AIDS patient, you were going to gown head to toe. How stigmatizing must that have felt?

P: Yeah, for sure. You are not really going to put your patient at ease when you see someone in a hazmat suit. It's crazy how things have changed, I guess. I don't know – I am sure if a new disease came out now we would probably react the same. We don't really have a tendency to learn from our experiences.

BK: Yea sometimes I wonder about that – I do wonder. Do you remember how the government was responding? You mentioned Vander Zalm and the whole quarantine and island bullshit.

P: Yeah, like the lepers. Yeah, and there was – well, there wasn't any meds, I remember when the meds came out it was like, "Who's going to pay for this?" It was like \$1500, \$3000 a month, right, and who was going to pay for this? So I remember that being a bit of an issue. Yeah, I don't really remember. I just remember a lot of – maybe that's what I focus on – it was just a lot of fear in media. It was just fear, just stay away. Of course, safe sex promotion started coming out there, but that was mostly religious saying no sex was good sex. But yeah, there wasn't really much happening – it was just fear. I guess it wasn't until the late-eighties when doctors started pooling together and seeing the patterns that – you know, from all the people passing away, all the patterns coming out of that, and saying okay we are getting a direction here moving forward. But yeah, back then I just remember it being just chaotic random accusations of false facts.

BK: And if you were already feeling on edge in terms of your identity or your place in the world, having all that additional fear piling on top of your own feelings would have just been overwhelming I imagine.

P: Yeah, exactly I wasn't even positive at that time, but yeah, it was the threat. And it was kind of funny because once I did become positive I was like, "Thank god, it's over." [laughs] I didn't have to live in fear about getting it. That – I think that was the worst part about HIV was wondering when am I going to get it? When is my turn? When I became positive there was already a few drugs out there, but they were terrible, horrific drugs. They were way worse than the disease was. Like, DDI, d4T, and I forget the third drug that I was on.

BK: Maybe Crixivan? There were a few things going on but...

P: And it was like twenty-four pills at night and twenty-four pills in the morning - these ones before eating, these ones during eating, these ones after eating. So, it was like a whole day event. And the side effects were just brutal, brutal. Backpack and a change of underwear. [laughs]

BK: Yeah, horrible gut issues, right?

P: Yeah, terrible, terrible. Until they said, "Okay, the pills are doing more harm than the virus is, so we will just take you off the pills and let the virus run its course and see what happens." When they did that to me, the virus never came back for months and months and months. So, then they sent me through UBC research thing to sort of monitor why my immune system was keeping it a bay. So, they would take seven to ten vials of blood every two days for four months. I never used to mind needles. Now I hate them. [laughs] At first they said, "Wow, it's you and this guy in Germany that are reacting so well and it's really interesting and we want to find out more about it." And then they gather up information. Now, they just find out we're a dime a dozen – there's lots of people that hold off the disease without meds. But it's good research.

BK: So, you initially decided to go on meds even though you weren't necessarily sick?

P: Right, at that time it was common practice. So, as soon as you became positive you were put on these meds and then they were like, "Okay, the meds are terrible, they do more harm than the

virus,” so then they took everybody off the meds – well, most people off the meds. And then the new generation of meds came out which were so much easier.

BK: What year was that when you were first going on meds?

P: '95-'96? And I was on for a couple years – a few years. I was on them in Mexico, so I was on in '99. I guess they came off in 2000 and then went back on the new batch in about 2010, I guess. Yeah.

BK: And with those new drugs, any side effects?

P: Nothing, nothing – can't even tell, don't even know.

BK: That's pretty amazing.

P: Yeah, it's pretty sweet. Yeah, thank god. [laughs] But thank goodness for the medical industry too because there is no possible way anyone could afford these.

BK: And B.C. got on board with the idea of getting everybody on to treatment as soon as possible, I think around 2010 as well. That kind of became the...

P: That would make sense, yeah, because it was a big push. When I would go to my specialist and there was a big push, “We're all going on these meds,” which worked out good. I think one of them is the PrEP pill now.

BK: So, you said your initial reaction when you found out you were positive was mostly one of relief, in a sense?

P: Yeah, and my doctor said that wouldn't be the normal reaction, but it's not uncommon, mostly because building up to it, it's so much anxiety and so much stress, I couldn't sleep at night. And at that time it would be like 3 months waiting for your test results to come back. It was just awful – it was just waiting and wondering “Did I screw up this time? Did I screw up that time?” So, once it happened – I became positive – then it was like at least I don't have to go through that waiting period anymore. That was brutal. [laughs] Yeah.

BK: I think it makes a lot of sense, actually. I think there are still people that have that perspective when they find out they are positive especially now that it doesn't mean the same thing. It doesn't mean, “Oh, I'm going to be...”

P: Death sentence. Yeah, for sure, and I guess – I don't know about now but I guess back then there were a lot of bug chasers, so I was kind of concerned – well, if I am not that upset about becoming positive...? And he's like, “No you're not a bug chaser, it's just a different way of processing.”

BK: Did you feel at the time that was still a death sentence?

P: Yeah, that was one of the reasons I quit my job and moved to Mexico. I was in love with this Mexican guy and he was still in university, so I thought why make him move to Canada if I am not going to consider moving to Mexico? So, I moved down to Mexico and what did I have to lose, right? I figured it was only a matter of time anyway. I spent my RRSP's and had a good year – it was awesome. And they had pretty good medical down there, too, and it was all free for HIV and doctors. Well, the doctors of course you had to pay for, but the HIV clinics and their doctors was all contribution – whatever you could afford, other than that it was all free.

BM: Wow, I didn't know that.

P: Yeah, Mexico is really good that way. All their medical is free – of course, it's the worst medical. And if you want really good medical you have to pay for it, but there is access to medical for everyone in the country. Same with university, education – it's all free. In select universities you go to a private one you got to pay. Yeah, it was crazy – they got a good system. I would probably prefer to stay here though. [laughs]

BK: We've got an okay system here. In terms of HIV care, I think Vancouver is a good place to be. B.C. and Ontario, I think. You said that eight years afterwards, you stepped back into the community – you started being involved in the gay community coming out a little bit more. Do you remember when that was?

P: Yeah, that would have been about '88-'89 – around then. Yeah, and I met three or four big groups of gay friends. So, one group was into the things I was – 4x4ing and motorbikes and hiking and everything, and another group was into the bars. Another group ended up being the rave crowd when the raves started up. Yeah, it was a good variety of people and I am still friends with all of them, and I met them all through one person, which was funny. But yeah, in that aspect, it was a great introduction to the gay world because there was a wide variety of people and everybody got along with each other, everyone knew each other – it was very cohesive. It was very cool. I started talking about that with some friends, saying – you know, talking about the pride and how pride changed – it's that the gay community has changed so much too. Not that it's better or worse but – but it seemed to be a lot more inclusive before. Your being in the closet is like being stuck in a room with a whole variety of people, but now we don't have to be in the room anymore. So, we are just out on the streets and you don't seem to have the same group of – you know, identity, subculture – the subculture seems to be dissipated, which is good – the acceptance of society – it's just different.

BK: Yea, I think there is a positive and a negative there, because you do lose something, right?

P: You lose something – you lose a bit of culture.

BK: But now you can be a gay man and live out in the suburbs or walk out in the streets.

P: And not have to worry about it. I had a lot of friends bashed in the '80s and the '90s in the West End – baseball bats or keys. It was crazy. I never have but fortunately I was big. [laughs] Yeah, it was crazy. So yeah, you lose that culture but then again, being accepted is a lot nicer.

BK: It's nice to be able to walk down that street without fear.

P: Yeah absolutely, and while Victoria has no central identity for the gay world like a West End is, but still with new media it's pretty accessible. I mean we had the telephone chats but now there are so many chats out there. The gay world is pretty accessible.

BK: What did the community look like? I mean you have given us a bit of an idea of that cohesion and more inclusive you said, right? But do you have any other thoughts on what the community in Vancouver looked like in the late '80s into the early '90s?

P: Yeah, filthy, filthy thing. [laughs] Yeah, like, one bar – I won't name it but it's a pretty cool bar now but back then it was multiple levels right on Davie street and downstairs it was just pornos and jerking off and old 80 – well, I thought they were old, but I'm 55 now so they might have been my age. [laughs] But yeah, it was just lecherous and slimy and dirty. Yeah, it was weird.

BK: Fun or kind of gross?

P: It was fun. It – yeah, I mean I was never really comfortable with that kind of thing but that was a multiple place and the next level would be dancing and the level after that was pool tables and, so yeah, there was always something for somebody – porno everywhere. [laughs]

BK: A bit more sexually charged, maybe, than it even is now?

P: Yeah, for sure. Of course, that's pretty well all they had, right? I mean, I remember my older friends who had come out in the late-'50s or '60s or so – sex in the parking lot and the parks or the Bay bathroom or Sears bathroom, that was the gay culture. And the clubs, it was sex in the clubs and sex in hidden places was the gay culture, and you grew old as a bachelor. [laughs] So, that was still very prominent in the '80s, and bit by bit, it just sort of dissipated until it became less that.

BK: Any sense of why that shifted?

P: Again, I think it was, you know, fighting for gay rights, but if it wasn't for being forced out of the closet and fighting for medical care and response – medical response – I don't know if that would have changed as quickly as it did. I mean it was bound to change but yeah, the HIV and having to fight for the medical and acknowledgement – and not really even acceptance, just come and help us. I think that really helped change the whole community. It cleaned it up, became more presentable, in many aspects.

BK: And again whether or not that's a good or a bad thing is...

P: Yeah, right, good and bad for everything. Change is always good but you lose something. Every time something changes you lose something but you gain something.

BK: Were you involved in any of that activist – not necessarily marching the streets but pushing for reform or change in any respects?

P: Not so much, no. Um... I was for a little while, while I had a boyfriend who was very active - that would have been in the late-'90s though. No, I was never very much of a political person, but I always sort of thought my political stance was – since I had now become comfortable in my skin as a gay person and who I am in society in general, that I have never been in the closet since. So, wherever I go, whoever meets me, they all know I gay. And that worked the same for – like, I did twelve years working in a warehouse with 300 other employees and I had no problems telling everybody I'm gay. And they were like, "Wow, are you sure you want to tell people your gay?" I'm like, "I don't know? Shouldn't I?" I didn't really think about it. It was just sort of out and acted who I was and did the things that I like to do, and got – I know in a small bit I had a lot of people – well, there's 300 people in the warehouse. There was a lot of afraid people there, a lot of people wouldn't be in the same room with me, wouldn't touch the same equipment that I had touched. They didn't even know I was posi- - well, I wasn't positive at that time. But after a while everybody changed, everybody accepted it. I thought that's a nice kind of political contribution to just lead by example and just be a good person and everybody after a while just realizes that he's just a regular person, no big deal. I like my grunge music, I like my heavy metal, I like my 4x4s.

BK: Yeah, absolutely. Coming out – that's a political thing at a time when there is a lot of animosity towards gay people.

P: Yeah, for sure. A lot of animosity, a lot of fear, and working in warehouses don't draw a lot of compassionate people, it's rednecks, you know – that's really a bigoted thing to say. [laughs] But yeah, you know there's a style of people who like that type of work and you wouldn't assume there would be a lot of gay people in there.

BK: Kind of like a macho work culture?

P: Yeah, for sure. When I became positive, I didn't tell any of them that I was positive – that wouldn't have gone over well I wasn't about to go that far. [laughs] In fact, my doctor told me, "Take a couple of years. Don't tell anyone that you're positive. Don't tell your family or straight friends or anything. Just look after yourself and come to terms with being HIV positive." I said, "Well, why?" And he said, "Well, what happens is that they get very upset and you end up supporting them for their feelings as opposed to they should be supporting you." He said he sees it in the hospital all the time. All these people come in to see their very sick relative lying in bed and the relative ends up having to give moral support to all the people around him because they are so upset, and it's exhausting. He said, "Pull back, make sure you're good with it, and then tell people, whenever you're comfortable with it, so you can have the extra energy to support them, to support your support group..." [laughs]... which was good advice. It was very good advice, 'cause my sister fucking freaked. "How dare you put me and my kids at risk!" Yeah, she was brutal. We used to be fairly close but she doesn't handle the gay thing well at all. So, we just kind of drifted apart because of that.

But my brother – he’s a huge redneck and people are like, “Why does he live in White Horse?” It’s so he can kill things. It’s really easy – they are just outside. [laughs] But he’s awesome. You know rednecks get a bad rap – he’s very compassionate and very understanding and he’s a logical person. So, when I told him I was positive he flew down from White Horse and said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t know what HIV is.” So, he wanted to talk to my doctors – he wanted to describe exactly how the whole process works and how the pills worked and he wanted to have a good solid grasp around it, and after that it was just constant, “So how are you doing? How are your meds? How is your viral load? How is your CD4’s?” And he was totally hands off but totally supportive – wonderful.

BK: That is wonderful.

P: Same thing when I came out of the closet too. I was – my sister freaked and my brother was like, “I have no idea what it’s like to be gay,” so he came down to Vancouver – had him meet all my friends, took him to all gay bars and stuff. “If anybody touches me I am going to punch them.” [laughs] He’s just a sweet guy – he knows all my friends, everybody loves him.

BK: Yeah, I think we sometimes have an idea of how families reacted to the epidemic and to family members becoming positive, but it’s important to have some nuance there. Families might have behaved in very different ways – family members might have reacted very differently.

P: And the funny thing is, that you know, you try to second guess how family and friends will react to the whole thing, and you know, you can stress yourself out so much that it works exactly the opposite. The people you think are going to freak out become your closest allies and your biggest support, and the people that you think are actually there for you freak out. It’s interesting – you can never quite tell until you just dive in and do it, but no matter what, there is always somebody to help you whether you come out of the closet or become HIV positive. It’s a tough thing to go around and tell people but there is always people there to help you. It might not be the people you think, but they are still there. Yeah, it’s crazy.

BK: Where did you find support when you needed it, I guess? You seroconverted, you found out you were positive. Did you tell anyone at that time or did you look for support anywhere?

P: Yeah, my close gay friends, especially the ones that were already positive. Did I find any other support? Not so – oh, I joined AIDS Vancouver. What else was there? Oh my god, it was so long ago. I keep thinking Plenty of Fish but that’s not what it was called.

BK: Positive Living?

P: Positive Living? I think so – that sounds familiar, and Loving Spoonful. Yeah, I got involved with Loving Spoonful for a while and I went to AIDS Vancouver a lot – that was a good resource. And mostly just my friends, and just at that time I had already had a few friends who had been positive for like fifteen years before I became positive. So I knew that long term survivors existed and that I would be okay, so there was that hope. My brother would have been the only family member that would have supported. My parents weren’t too supportive. My sister completely opposite – she was the most hurtful one.

BK: So, not only could you draw on those friends for support but also their expertise around living with HIV.

P: That's right, exactly, exactly - lifestyles and eating habits, and it was right from one side to the other side. I mean, one friend had been long term survivor and was really into health and fitness and eating well and my other friend was equally as long with HIV was eating tortilla chips and beer and just doing everything wrong, but they both surviving quite equally. So, you know, you pick and choose, and like – okay, so first of all its your attitude. Whatever you eat, whatever you do, you gotta have a good attitude – you gotta come to terms with it and maintain a positive attitude. Keep the stress low. Don't self-destroy or self-destruct.

BK: Do you remember specifically any type of support you got from an organization? Like, AIDS Vancouver – what kind of programing or services were they offering?

P: Yeah, I didn't do any counselling at all. Well, I did go I guess twice to just a general counsellor just to talk through my work, but I didn't really take that very far. And AIDS Vancouver was – I found the best support from them was a place I could literally just go to and hangout, so I had a place to be if I ever felt sort of down or out. I didn't have to go talk to anybody but I could just be in the environment and help out and do some things here and there. That was really good. I mean I had close personal friends who were positive and had fifteen years' experience, so talking to them was good. One of my older great friends was the professor of psychology at UBC, so I always talked to him – we were always bouncing ideas back and forth. So, when I became positive it was just another idea that bounced back and forth and discussed and things. I'm not a very shy person so I can pretty much just talk to anybody at anything and sometimes I walk away going, "Maybe that was a private conversation. [laughs] Maybe I shouldn't be talking so much." [laughs] So that's never been a problem. Yeah, but funny enough, family – no, just my brother. My mom and dad were – I don't think they handled it well, so they just didn't... And my sister – well, there's a few colorful expletives for her. Other support groups? Yeah, no – just friends. Yeah, friends and being part of the AIDS Vancouver thing.

BK: And Loving Spoonful?

P: Yeah, Loving Spoonful a little bit, yeah.

BK: Were you helping there or just sort of benefiting from the services they were offering?

P: Both for a while actually. I was helping there for a while and then after a period of time – like, you know... Okay, I was positive, I was in love with this Mexican, so I went down to Mexico and came back with a whole business plan and a business idea, so I went back to school and went to college for like five years. So, then I was now taking their services because I was a starving student at thirty-five and yeah. [laughs] That was nice. It was great.

BK: It's really interesting to think of all these different responses that were going on within the community addressing all sorts of different needs. AIDS Vancouver, you could go and socialize;

Loving Spoonful, you could get some food. It's pretty amazing how the community was responding.

P: Yeah, for sure, and it was pretty cool too because you kind of felt almost a little privileged because then, like, the symphony and the ballet – and, you know, plays and theatres – they would give comps to AIDS Vancouver. So, you could just put your name on the list and get tickets to the ballet or the orchestra or whatever. They would specifically give blocks of tickets to AIDS Vancouver, or at least that time they did, so they kind of exposed you to the arts and live theater – free yoga... [laughs] It's great! It's like that South Park episode – did you ever see that, where it was about AIDS? And they were like, “You can make jokes about aids – well it's like it's been 22-and-a-half years since the epidemic started which technically is the right time you can start joking about it. So, then they were going off about how Jered lost his weight from subway not because of subway but because he had assistance... AIDS. You need AIDS to lose weight. It's terrible – it's a terrible episode – it's so funny.

BK: I think I would struggle with that one.

P: I know, but it's South Park, so if they aren't doing something way off to one side it's not going to be funny at all.

BK: If you can laugh at it I can probably manage to laugh at it.

P: Yeah, for sure. It's very politically incorrect. Yeah, and that would have been in the early 2000's. Yea, what were we talking about. [laughs]

BK: Tangents are fine with me.

P: You know, one of the most supporting things that was just influenced my life was Dr. Peter and his whole newscast, because that – oh my god, that went on for, I don't know, years on the news. And he was saying it gave him extra purpose, that his life was prolonged longer than it should have been because he felt such a need to document this up until the end. And just watching him on the news every week and his own personal experiences on what he's doing today was huge. I think that was crazy influential. Apparently, they spliced them all together and made a big documentary about it a while ago. And then funny enough, my mom's church, her minister was the minister that buried Dr. Peter up island. He was the only guy that would touch Dr. Peter. And just, why wouldn't I? Logan – his name was Logan. He was the dean at the cathedral – great guy, Scottish, and yeah, he helped Dr. Peters a lot. And then he passed away and they buried him up in Duncan – some odd place.

But that was strange you know – Dr. Peter being so influential and then nobody would bury him. I think – but you know that was such a long time ago – that might be an extreme memory, but it seems to me there was a lot of issues, that nobody in the religious community would touch him because he was gay and HIV positive, and I think Logan was the only one who would do it. Yeah, crazy, crazy – and kind of a coincidence that it was my mom's minister. [laughs] She's in a good church – she's great. I'm not so religious but she is, and she's in a great church. They have a lesbian minister now.

BK: What kind of a church is that?

P: [Laughs] Oh my goodness, one of the churches of England. Anglican? I think so. There's the Scottish one and the English one and I think it's the English one because I think she grew up Presbyterian and that was a really heavy church. So, I think it was Anglican cause it's the lighter one.

BK: It's good to get a little picture – we don't want to paint all religious people stigmatizing as people who were homophobic, because I am sure there were some people stepping up to the plate for us as well as a community.

P: And I think Logan was probably a trail blazer, but I also think back then it would have been pretty hard for a minister to actually stand up for the gay world and for HIV because they are in a very strict industry – a hierarchy – and you can probably do more good if you keep your views in the closet and just work at it than you can if you make your views public and get fired. And once you're fired you have lost all your access to tools and support. So, I think it has been pretty tough for all of the religious to come to terms with things such as that.

BK: So, you mentioned Dr. Peter. Looking into the '90s, where were you starting to get your information from? Your friends I guess? Does anything else come to mind? You also mentioned safe sex. When did you start to hear about that?

P: That would have been right in the '80s when the epidemic first came out. Safe sex – just do not have sex. And it was really “We have no idea what's going on. We have no idea what this is. We think it's all the gays fault. But we have no idea, so the best thing is just do not have sex.” And that got more structured and more education and pretty well the whole '90s was safe sex. Now it's all kind of gone in the pot.

BK: So, in the '90s, was it more about condom use at that point?

P: Yeah, condom use. Yeah, that was pretty well it. Asking a gay community to not have sex would be, like, pointless. [laughs] Good luck with that one! Especially because in the '50s, '60s, '70s that all we had was sex. In the '80s, '90s – one, it's changed so much. It's now about love and relationships. So, you know, when you have a minority group that's based around closeted sex and then you're not allowed to have sex, what else do you got? Well, you just keep having sex.

BK: What does it mean to be gay? It means to have sex with other men. That's the definition that...

P: That most people use even today. When really its quite different now. It's terrible to have to say, the younger generation... [laughs]

BK: I forgive you.

P: I never wanted to be one of them, but it's true. The younger generation, sex is fluid, from how I understand it. Its fluid – it's however you feel at the time, and there is no gay sex or straight sex, it's just sex. You have preferences but it's just sex. Gay and straight would be committing or desiring a lifestyle – a companionship or partnership for your future would be more of a gay lifestyle and sex is just sex. You know, I love stats, so I was looking up the difference between gay sex and straight sex, and the only example I could find was some university in Australia had compared the two and they found the only difference between gay sex and straight sex is gay guys play with their nipples – straight guys don't. Other than that, it's all the same across the board – everybody does everything.

BK: Interesting.

P: So, there is no gay sex. [laughs]

BK: And do you wonder if part of the reason that sex is, for younger people, a little fluid is partially because there is more acceptance? You don't have to commit as much from one side or the other...

P: Yeah, that's right, yeah. I know one of my nieces was very fluid with that. She's married now to a great guy, but not always. Yeah, and it wasn't anything like, "I think I'm straight. I think I'm gay." She met someone she loved and they had a relationship, then she was off to the other side. It was kind of cool – I kind of like that – I am kind of jealous actually. Yeah. Not that I ever want to be with a woman. [laughs] I'm not saying that. But you know, it's kind of neat.

BK: I think it is interesting how that seems to be shifting. Did you experience a lot of stigma or did you see a lot of stigma when you started getting involved in the gay community or around HIV, and then did you actually experience that yourself after you got your diagnosis?

P: What kind of stigma?

BK: Like, fear around HIV positive people or dislike of HIV positive people?

P: Oh yeah, lots. Oh yeah, lots and lots. I see when I am on the chats now sometimes you will come across "No HIV+" or "I'm negative, you be too." But through the '90s, I remember we didn't even really have computers – at least I didn't. I got my first computer in '99. But it was segregation: "If you're positive, do not approach me." Yeah, there was a lot of negativity surrounding it, and when I became positive, that sort of transferred it into this real essence or this feeling that I was toxic. That was probably the hardest thing to get over. The deep feeling that you're toxic and you don't want people touching you, and you don't want to express yourself sexually or affectionately. It was tough. I am not quite sure how people go through that now. There is probably still a sense of toxicity. But I am just wondering if that was based on the negativity that not just gay world but the whole world had. You don't tell people you're positive, and if you do, then you're shunned. And the gay world was close – it was inclusive, it was supportive, unless you want to have sex. [laughs] And then it was like, "Well yeah, but not with me." That was tough – yeah, that was really tough.

BK: So, it wasn't unusual to have HIV positive friends and HIV negative friends all hanging out. That was part of what the community looked like, but the line gets drawn when it comes to actual sex?

P: Yeah. for sure. And even with friends, while not as harsh as strangers it was still, "Well, you know, you don't want to have sex with this person because they are positive." But it also kind of worked in reverse too – I wouldn't have sex with a negative person or date a negative person for decades. Actually, it's only been recently – the last few years – I would consider dating someone who wasn't positive. So, it kind of works in reverse too, you know. I have had a few guys want to date me who were negative and they were totally cool with the positive thing, but I wasn't cool with them being cool with it.

BK: So, some internalized fears?

P: Yeah, thinking, "I'm toxic. I don't want to give it to somebody," you know, which I did twice. It's hard. And you know, I did give it to two people accidentally, and practicing safe sex both times. But that's a far worse feeling then actually becoming positive – way worse – it's horrific. I mean, becoming positive, my personal story was a fairly easy transition because I had a lot of friends, a lot of backups. But giving it to somebody else is just a horrific experience I never want anybody to experience. Yeah, it's terrible. I don't know if that would change now with all the meds, but yeah.

BK: Well, the wonderful thing is if you're undetectable, you can't – that's what all the science seems to say. Undetectable is untransmittable, right?

P: Yeah, for sure. And with the PrEP pill, you know, being one of the retroviral pills, I think it would be pretty difficult to get it while you're on PrEP. But even still, who can afford an \$1100 prescription a month? How do people pay for that, anyways? A rhetorical question, I guess.

BK: Some people have good insurance. That's part of it. But it's a huge topic of discussion right now in the community.

P: I'm afraid that it's a false sense of security I don't really – like, for the HIV it may work great – if I am taking my meds and I am zero transmission. If you're on PrEP, you're not going to be able to receive it. That sounds great, but that might be a false sense of security. I mean look at syphilis or Hep C – but syphilis, it's everywhere, right? It's brutal and PrEP isn't going to stop that. So, that's what I mean by false sense of security. It's like, "Look, I'm safe now. I can have bareback sex." Warts – yeah. [laughs]

BK: I think that's one of the biggest challenges that the community is working through now is that these new things open up so many opportunities for relationships and for sex, but then there's all these other things to...

P: Yeah, for sure.

BK: When did you get over that feeling of toxicity?

P: Yeah, probably years – I would say... Well, I have been positive for, what – twenty years now? I would say the last five years, I started to stop thinking about being toxic and I think that's because of – kind of about when the new generation of drugs came out that work so wonderfully. And if they failed, then there's a whole slew of drugs beside it that you can go to. So, it kind of took the whole death is imminent away from the stigma and I think that's when the whole toxicity feeling drifted away, which is around the same time I considered dating someone who was negative too. Until then it was like, "No, no forget it." And I think that feeling of toxicity stayed for about 15 years period. Yeah, it may have not ate away at me like it did at first – like, for the first five, eight years, yeah, it was pretty prominent. As soon as I would think of HIV, it would be being toxic was my first thought, my first response. Now I only think about it when I am in conversation with somebody.

BK: Well, hopefully I am not making you feel toxic. That would be not in line with my intentions.

P: [laughs] Not at all! Yeah, yeah, no – but since then, I have had some straight friends that fell into the drugs scene a little too heavy and came out HIV positive, or other gay friends who became HIV positive, and that's the thing I start out with is asking, "How do you feel about feeling like you might be toxic?" And they are like, "That's exactly how I feel." So – so, you know, I used a lot of my own personal pain to be as supportive as I can for people who are new, like my friends who were supportive of me when I became positive.

BK: That's pretty amazing.

P: It's pass-it-downs, you know?

BK: What advice do you have for folks who are newly diagnosed? We are seeing younger gay guys still getting HIV. What would you say to not even just younger guys but people who are newly diagnosed as someone who has been living with this for a long time now?

P: Yeah. I would probably really play it down now, yeah: "Oh, it really makes no difference in my life" – which it has. [laughs] And you know, don't worry about sex, don't worry about love and affection and touching people, because those were the biggest things for me. So, those would be the things I would bring up with someone first because those are what hit me hardest. Just not worry about that feeling of toxic, or that feeling of not worthy or not able to love somebody or hold somebody. Yeah, I think that most people are pretty aware that it's an easier thing to live with now. I mean it's just not that hard to live with anymore – I hate to say it. I would prefer not to be positive but it's pretty easy to live with. Take two pills at night and that's it.

BK: Yeah, it's a pretty amazing contrast to 1995 or even 1998.

P: Yeah, for sure. It's crazy and two pills to – two pills with the PrEP one is technically three pills but that's a lot better than the handful of pills I was taking twenty years earlier, which were gross. Oh yeah, one of them had to be chewed too – that was DDI that was gross. They were huge horse pills.

BK: Oh, I have heard about those. People used to put them in the blender.

P: Yeah, or you would mash them all up and drink them with water. I was getting tired of all that, so I would just pop them in and chew them all up. Yea it was gross. [laughs] Yeah, advice to young folks – or rather, newly positive. Yeah, just take time to get used to it first of all – really own it. And that’s another thing – like, just life in general it’s – if you got something going on, you got two choices: either it can run your life, or you can run its life. So, when you become positive you got a choice: either you can let it run your life and it can take you down, or you can take control over it and understand it. What does it mean? Are you really toxic? No not really. No, it’s just an inert feeling you can get over. But yeah – take time – get used to it, own it.

BK: Get your hands on lots of information.

P: Yeah, for sure – really understand it and own it as more of a spiritual, personal thing. “This is something that I have and I can control it,” and then go out and look for love like you would normally.

BK: I think that’s good advice.

P: [laughs] I hope so!

BK: How do you think the epidemic – we talked about this a bit already – changed the community or shaped the community, if you feel it did at all?

P: Yeah, absolutely. I would say it made it more cohesive and it brought people out of the closet. We touched about that but yeah, I really think it was fundamental on the growth of the gay community and acceptance, and it had to happen. People were dying all the time and you needed medical care, and the only way you could get it was to demand it. To demand it you came out of the closet. So, I think it really helped the community a lot. And you know, with drag queens and things, they were always sort of outside the gay community – they were always sort of shunned and laughed at. It’s like, that is the gay community. The drag queen community – and they were influential a great deal for getting equality and getting HIV the medical attention it needed. It’s like, they were the flag bearers at the front of the parade demanding all these and we were just groups coming out of the closet walking behind them. And it seems to me they sort of led the fight – were the drag queens, which was pretty cool. But I don’t think they would have had it any other way. [laughs]

BK: Do you have any specific – can you remember anything in particular that drag queens were doing?

P: Oh yeah, all the benefits and all the – it seems to me Loving Spoonful was started by a good portion of drag queens, I think. But yeah, benefits – if the drag queens hadn’t sort of started with benefits they were certainly involved with getting attention and money and support – everything from drag bingo, which is so much fun – and yeah, everything at bars. Yeah, it was always the drag queens at the head, at the lead. I don’t know many actual functions the drag queens started

but they were certainly there all the time for anything – pretty influential, greatly respectable too. And I loved them too because, you know, back in the ‘80s when there was a lot of gay bashing, you would hang around the drag queens because they might have been heckled but you didn’t fight a drag queen. They would just take off that stiletto and bash you with it. [laughs] So, I always stuck close to the drag queens. Some six-foot guy in heels is... [laughs]

BK: Yeah, maybe not a good target to pick.

P: Yeah, you don’t pick on the drag queens. [laughs] They will take you down. Well, thank goodness you don’t need that anymore, right? Well, not that you don’t need it but it’s not as important. We aren’t looking around every corner and over our shoulder every time – who’s going to be behind us?

BK: Yeah, there is a lot less fear. You still hear about things once in a while but it’s not all the time like it used to be.

P: Yeah, for sure. But it’s interesting because even with this conversation, because you’re doing a retrospect on HIV and AIDS, but the HIV and AIDS thing is kind of drifting away and crystal meth is now kind of the biggest issue with the gay world. Not just the gay world but like – wow, I would probably say without statistics meth is probably screwing up our society more than HIV did. Probably more people are dying – I would be interested to know if more people are dying from Crystal Meth than HIV did. And certainly, now that fentanyl is involved with it, it’s brutal. One begins to clear up and it’s just replaced with something else.

BK: I wonder if we have learned anything from HIV and AID – from the crisis and how we responded to it as a community. Would any of that be useful in an instance like fentanyl and the opioid crisis that’s going on right now.

P: Yeah.

BK: Any thoughts on – maybe not that specifically but – lessons we might have learned as a community?

P: It’s interesting because when HIV first came out, nobody knew what to do. You want to be involved, you want to be helpful and supportive, but what? How? With who? For what? And that’s kind of how I think the drug problem is in the gay world right now. Well, how do you stop people from doing drugs to protect them from fentanyl. Who’s selling this stuff? Who are the people doing it? Why are they doing? Like so many drug problems, it’s not just people on the streets, it’s just common everyday people with everyday jobs. Like, back in the day when coke was the big problem, it was lawyers and doctors who were the big cokeheads. That’s a blanket statement. [laughs] But it’s not people on the streets, it’s your next-door neighbor. So, how do we learn from our HIV experiences and apply that to the crystal and fentanyl situation? I don’t know – where do you even start? Yeah, it’s a tough one. Yeah, I don’t know – that’s almost beyond me.

BK: It's a bit of an abstract concept – how can we take lessons we learn from one thing and apply it to something else?

P: Well, I know when I went back to college, we had to do a report on drugs and society. So, I did all this research and I came across the Frankfurt Accord which I guess was in Europe. And Frankfurt, the whole area was just destroyed by drugs. So, this is how the red light districts all came to life. So, they legalized all the soft drugs and put a heavier crime on all the hard drugs. Since the soft drugs were all legal, they took all the policing money from that and applied it to policing hard drugs. And then how they dealt with their own problems – they figured that the reason people get addicted to drugs is because of social integration failure, in the sense that you just don't fit in – you don't feel worthy, you don't fit in, there is no place for you and you fall into addiction, whether its shopping for shoes, going to the gym, doing drugs, drinking – you know. So, that legalized soft drugs, put more policing on hard drugs, and promoted stronger community and building a sense of community, and their drug problems all dropped and their crime rates all dropped. So, we kind of began to follow that with safe injection sites and things. It's like, "Okay, let's make the transmission of disease less by safe injection sites," and I think we were supposed to build up more community, but it doesn't seem to be making much of a difference. But it certainly worked in Frankfurt.

BK: It's a colossal problem right now and I certainly don't have the solution either.

P: For sure. So, maybe that's how we get drugs out of our own community – we start building that social connection, that social awareness, that sense that we do belong and there is a place for you. The gay world was really hit hard with that until we came out of the closet – a sense of less-than worthy – lots of drug and alcohol abuse.

BK: So, I asked you a little bit about any advice you had for long-term survivors but any advice you might have on the health care provision side of this or HIV prevention side of the equation? I guess, how we can either prevent HIV or how we can treat HIV in a better way?

P: Yeah... Attitude – I think it's mostly attitude and healthy living – good positive attitude – not – you know, quite often we all have problems with self-doubt. Just look at yourself in the mirror and think, well I am a good person today and eating right – you know, eating healthy. I'm not a big vitamins person – you know eat fresh food, stop eating processed food. I was in the cooking industry for awhile and it was like, every time we process a piece of food you lose a piece of nutrition and it's valuable and you have to supplement it. So, eat fresh fruits, fresh vegetables and a balanced a meal – it's so cliché but it's so true, and that just gives you energy and focus. And just make sure you always think that, "No matter what everyone else thinks, I am good person." [laughs] But yeah, really, a good positive attitude and that will boost your immune system for anything – you won't get sick and if you do get sick your immune system works a lot better. But we are fading away from proper eating. The bigger our cities and the more pressure we get from society, the less we eat right, and the less exercise we do. It's crazy...

BK: I do like the idea of trying to maintain a positive outlook and you're certainly not the first person – the first long term survivor – that we have talked to that has really emphasized that. So, that seems to be a bit of a theme.

P: Well that is a good point. That is – yeah, when I became positive, all of a sudden life was a little bit nicer. You cherish life a little bit more, and I don't think that's just positive. Anyone who has gone through cancer I am sure comes out the same way. I think you just appreciate things a little bit better. You slow down – you take time to enjoy things. I guess, I wouldn't be limited to sick people, but I certainly think it makes a big difference. Just enjoy the little things. We have so much outside pressure. Yeah, it's crazy – our society is crazy. And green – cover yourself with green. [laughs]

BK: I think I am out of my formal questions, but we want to leave some space for you to share anything you didn't get a chance to, or if there are any aspects of your story or your experience that you wanted to share. Take a moment to think about it if anything comes to mind.

P: Gee, I don't know. I think we kind of covered everything – yeah. As serious as you have to take everything, don't take everything so seriously. [laughs] And educate – you know, I think that's what helped me a lot was not just going with a sense of doom and toxicity but actually learning about it. I learned that from my brother because each time I had a significant thing to tell him, the first thing he did was fly down and say, "Educate me, because I have no idea what you're talking about." That's the best thing – just educate yourself. And google searches are crazy – they don't necessarily give you the right answer – they give you the most recent answer. So yeah – real understanding of what's happening.

BK: Do you find yourself sometimes taking on that role now as a long-term survivor?

P: On educating people? I always have. Oh my god, that's part of trying to get me to stop talking. [laughs] Yeah, and I like that – I like that. You know, I'm probably not involved in the community as much as I should – the general community or the gay community – but it's nice to come across people in terrible times and it's nice to help people. It's nice to give them advice. Oh my god, yeah, you get older and you build up all this experience, then you end up being that "Oh, well you know, back in the '80s..." [laughs] It's so true – you end up being all the cliché stuff, but you end up with a lot of personal experience. "How did you get through it?" you know. You can sort of second guess what that person's thinking before they actually say it because you have gone through it, and so you can almost guide their conversation because you know what the ultimate concern is, kind of before they do. So, you can help them come to terms with that, without being a know-it-all or a "This is what your problem is." Let them self-realize.

BK: I think the reality is, if you're a twenty-year-old guy in the gay community today, chances are you don't really know what it was like in the '80s or '90s. I mean, you have no clue. And so, you do know a lot because you went through that right?

P: Yeah, it's true. Just our comparison on gay pride – it used to be so political and so serious and so needed and this year I was watching and going, "Oh my god, I'm so bored." It feels like it goes on for six hours, with, you know, TD bank, and then another business would go by and – yeah, it's different. And there is knowledge and wealth in everything – like, it works in reverse too. I don't really know what new culture is about – new social culture, that's like thirty years younger than I am. What do people think about now? I remember when I was twenty, thinking,

“Oh my god, my parents are so ancient and so out of touch,” because they were like the nuclear family from the ‘50’s where the mother was very doting and the father just sat there with the newspaper and everybody had martini’s. [laughs] And I grew up in the ‘60s and ‘70s – it was all hippies and drugs, love, rock and roll. Yeah, completely different from what my parents grew up with, and the generations after me are completely different environment now too.

BK: I think the hope is that we can learn things from each other, across that generational divide.

P: Yeah, so true.

BK: But then having those kinds of conversations is often challenging. There’s not a lot of spaces as a community where we can have those kinds of conversations.

P: Yeah, no, I think that’s right – there is not a lot of that conversation. But yeah – and like, I have always been the kind of person who wanted to engage and learn from other people and I get very inquisitive and want to explore things. Even at a young age I was like that. So, I was always sitting down with the older generation and would say, “So what was it like?” and their stories are completely different. Being gay in the ‘50s and ‘60s – brutal – it was crazy. Growing old alone was the best thing you could hope for. Yeah, things to learn, which is interesting because, like you know, when I came out of the closet, there was that cohesion in the gay world, and... I was talking to a friend not too long ago – I don’t have any young friends. When I was young, I had old friends and they died of old age years ago. So, I would have been in my twenties or thirties and they would have been in their sixties, and we were great friends for years, and they just passed off ‘cause they were just old. But I don’t see that now. I don’t have any young friends now, so it’s... And I have no idea how to meet young people, where before you only had the bars in the ‘80s and ‘90s – there was lots of bars, so it was easy to be social. But now it’s all the computer and you get like two sentences of a chat and you sort of move on to the next person.

BK: Yea, I wonder why that generational thing isn’t there anymore. It’s strange to me.

P: Yeah, for sure.

BK: Anything else? Any final thoughts?

P: I can’t really think of anything else. Yeah, no. It’s – yeah, it’s all intertwined with each other – the gay community, the HIV thing, coming out to the straight world – yeah, one led to the other. Which one? I don’t know – all of them. Yeah, it’s pretty cool.

BK: Well, thank you so much for sharing your story with us. We really appreciate it.

P: Yeah, for sure. I hope it helps somehow.