

“HIV in My Day” – Interview 48

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Interviewee: Anonymous (P); Interviewer: Robert Ablenas (RA); also present: Ben Klassen (BK)

Interview anonymized at participant’s request

Robert Ablenas: Thank you for being a part of this project compiling an oral history of the early days of the AIDS epidemic in Vancouver.

Participant: You’re most welcome.

RA: Okay. Just to break the ice a bit, you actually—before the camera started rolling—said that you thought I looked familiar. So, I’m not going to say whether you’re right or wrong, but where do you think you might’ve run into me?

P: I know, I know, ‘cause I have photogenic memory. So, through the streets or a hospital or healthcare centre, or somewhere. I never forget faces, that’s why I said you look familiar.

RA: Okay, I’m just wondering what parts of—okay so, I’m—

P: Vancouver, West End somewhere. Maybe I passed you on the street.

RA: Okay, so in Vancouver, where are places you tend to go?

P: The West End.

RA: So, are we talking about grocery stores, are you talking about clubs?

P: Groceries, clubs, medical care centres, hospitals. Who knows? Somewhere.

RA: Okay, how long have you been in Vancouver?

P: Ah, that’s giving my age away. Forty-two plus years.

RA: It’s only giving your age away if that’s when you were born.

P: Well, I think I’m going to be sixty in May, so it’s called reverse psychology.

RA: What were things like when you were first in Vancouver?

P: What was it like?

RA: Yeah, say – well, you’re Two-Spirited for example, right?

P: Yes. When I first arrived to—I didn't know nobody first of all—so somehow, I made myself down to the beach. I got off the plane drunk, 'cause someone sent me a first-class ticket and ten thousand to come with me, from Toronto. So, I was only seventeen at the time, and being naïve, I didn't know what first-class was, and the stewardess came up and asked me if I wanted a drink and I went—looked strange at her. Took me a whole fifteen seconds to think about it, because you don't want to be duh, so I said, “Sure, I'll have one of those champagne.” Which were the small bottles back then in the seventies. Had about four of those, the rest were double, double rums with whatever, coke. Coke, Seven-Up, Coke back then. Yep. I'll never do that again. Because being in the air and being on the ground are two different things.

RA: Right. When you came here, were you just—what was the plan or what did you do once you got here?

P: I didn't have a plan because I didn't know Vancouver, what are the people like. I come from a small little province, Manitoba, community of Winnipeg, say a hundred gay people, or very happy people as they like to hear. So, when I walk in Toronto and I seen like ten-thousand, three different floors, go-go boys, I went I've died and gone to heaven! So that was my journey. And then I came here. And I didn't have a plan, 'cause like I said, I didn't know anybody, I didn't know the city, but somehow I found my way down to the beach. And I was so drunk at the time that I fell asleep, woke up the next day and I was as red as a beet. And—but everything I had, I had everything all intact, no one stole nothing, which I thought is great, what a nice city, to begin with. Except for my burn. Then I met friends, and started meeting people first of all. And then I just met a friend, two friends which had a two-bedroom apartment. I had one thing on my mind, they had something else on their mind, naïve as I was. And so, I moved in and stayed a month, three months free and then started paying rent and doing my own thing. And things continued on, one would go out and one would stay, going what's going on here? Little did I know, I found out later.

So, but – and then I was smoking marijuana. So, I went and bought some, not knowing who, where, should I trust them? But then I was so naïve I trusted everybody back then. So, then I bought thirty dollars worth. And of course, I know the police watched us, and picked me up and then took me down to, um, water...? Whatever—Yaletown? But then there was no tall buildings at all, it was all high grass many trees, swampy water. And took the pot away from me and told me to walk to toward the water and count to ten, then I could turn around and come back. I thought, oh, this is strange. Because I thought I'd be charged with marijuana. So, when that happened, I was like this is different. Normally, don't they arrest you. So, I did as they said, and turned around, they were gone and I went back up, came back up Davie Street. And I just went home. I said I've had enough of this one, and had a drink. And I was fine. [Laughs] And let's see. And then as the years went by, I learnt about different organizations here, not AIDS-related at the time, such as – DMS was the very first one, Dogwood Monarch Society.

RA: What years are you talking about then?

P: '75 to about '80. So, I'm familiar as myself with—but they were doing – how their, constitution by-laws and everything worked, which was very interesting for me, I was like, oh, this is nice. And then watching everybody dressed up was really different, but I was doing that in

Winnipeg. I could've got myself killed but being the daring little bitch I am, I did it anyways. But nobody every knew whether I was a girl or a guy, and still at the age of thirty, I went with my boss to Staples, and they—the lady turned to us, I had long hair, “Will that be all for you ladies today?” And we looked at one another and went, “Yes.” And she didn't even know. We walked out of the store, we looked at each other and started laughing. ‘Cause I thought—my boss goes, “Does this happen to you often?” Oh, every few often. So, yeah. Then I got into—what did I do in the eighties—oh, and then I found the GVNCS [Greater Vancouver Native Cultural Society] and then I started to learn my tradition and my cultures. ‘Cause all that was taken away from me. I'm not sure if I was adopted, trying to find out from Manitoba Vital Statistics. They won't tell you nothing now. I wanted my long-term birth certificate because it would have your mother and father's name, and if, you know, if I was a true Indian as they put it. But before I left Winnipeg, I went around the nasty parts of Winnipeg, and all I saw were drunk Indians all over the place. I'm like, I'm not like – I can't be like that. So, it sort of turned me off and made me think. But then I knew of what I was, my mother told me. And I remember that from the time I was five. She told me I was special. Oh, I was right—she was right.

RA: When you got to Vancouver, did you connect with First Nations communities here? How did that work? How long did it take?

P: I first connected with them here in eighty—early eighties we'll say. And I was always enticed to wear a dress, wear make-up, whatever, but I never did 'cause—although I did before for someone, who is a past empress, bless her heart. But finally, yeah, I got brave enough to do it and I don't know, I just had that natural touch and look where nobody could even know. Did know if I was—is that a boy or a girl, is that woman or man? Because I looked like a baby. Even when I was thirty-five, I was, with long hair. And then I started shaving, what a big mistake that was. So anyways. I stayed in with them more, and I got to learn more of my culture, what Natives and Two-Spirited meant. So, I got more involved, more information, more involved [inaudible]. And before you know it, in '94, I'm gonna call him my sister, Lenore—because that's what we always called each other since we were thirteen—moved here, not together. We ran into each other and it was like her whole family I met here then. Well, I met them in Manitoba but I didn't realize the whole tribe came, put it that way. And she got me involved even more and more into GVNCS, and early eight—late eighties I believe that's when the start of the HIV started. And then peop—but they never had pills for people from '90 to seven, maybe eight even, 2000, I can't remember.

I remember – anyways, I did interim for Princess Seventeen, because she passed away, Lenore, so I took over for being interim Princess Seventeen with our Chief, Ivan. And when elections came, five people ran against me and I won hands down. So, it told me something, I gotta be good at something now. So yeah, I won that title hands down. All the rest cried, and I gulp, gulp, celebrated for the night anyways. And then it took off from there. Show part, show and lights and glamour and sparkles and whatever. During—excuse me—during that time, I'd already known a whole lotta people from Manitoba that were out here. And we all hung around when were younger – twelve, thirteen. Still coming out of the closet somewhat. We were out but in Manitoba you had to hide it or else be killed – run over, whatever. So, when we all met here finally in Vancouver, people were finding out they were HIV, but nobody had a clue what it was. Which was a very bad epidemic. Then, not so bad now. I've had—I've looked after a lot of

people. I fed a lot of people, nurtured a lot of people, look after them health-wise, loving-wise, caring. I believe I've had three people pass away while I was hugging them and they laid down, and just sort of cuddle them. I don't what was—I don't know, just sort of coming that they needed this. And I have very good, what the so-called women's intuition, you just know? I knew. And I guess that's where that all kicked in for me. And I just knew something was wrong, something wasn't right here. Still no pills yet. And that was '94.

And then I watched Lenore pass away in the hospital at St. Paul's. So, here's an interesting story, she used to drink – well, who does—lot of natives are known to drink and put their sorrows away. I went into the hospital, I'd see her everyday, and she'd go, "Baby, look what I have." And pull down her covers and she had nothing but mickey's all alongside of her. "Come on, wheel me outside. We're going for a drink." I went, "You witch!" "Never mind!" she hollered at me. But that's where we got on. So, I went out and we have about like, six mickeys. She was happy, so I thought, great she's happy. You know, something happens, pain won't be so hard on her then. And that was my thought in my head, because I didn't know what to do, doctors didn't know what to do, nurses didn't know what to do. So, the only thing I thought of was to make them comfortable, be happy, smile, and have joyous times with them. Because you never know. Tomorrow never comes, or tomorrow you never know if that person's going to be there or not. So, cherish the ones you love today, because tomorrow never comes, and you never know what's in for a surprise for you. So, I took that as a lesson, point one. And it continued on. You know, I've watched, yeah, too many people die. I watched in twelve months twenty-two people die during my reign as Princess Eighteen. So, on top of the eighty-ish shows, I went to x amount of wakes, funerals, and I still kept up my own self. Being strong, 'cause I am a strong person, small, but don't underestimate me. So, that's how that went. Next.

RA: When you're helping some of these people, providing comfort to some people, you said at the moment of passing for even some of these is this... Okay, so I'm trying to picture, is this your present self as guy, or is this you presenting yourself as woman?

P: Both.

RA: At the same time?

P: Being Two-Spirit, because we are special people in the Native culture, I can do whatever a man can do, I can do whatever a woman can do. So, that's where the Two-Spirited word comes in. We're very powerful people in the round circle, and very respected. So, having to understand the Two-Spirited meaning of the word, that's what it would be. So, I can do anything anybody can do, male or female.

RA: Okay. Within the first nations community, there's not necessarily a lot of you having to explain that within the community, how that works. But outside of the community, at the time when you're providing care, do you have any experiences that way, trying to get other people to click, to understand, your role, your abilities.

P: No, I am who I am, and I don't care what anybody thinks. Coming from Winnipeg and growing up that way, no I really didn't care. If you don't like me, don't look at me. Don't shake

my hand. You can say hi, I'll say hi back, but if you can't accept me for who I am, then I accept you for who you are. Whether you're gay, straight, bi, straight, who cares? We're all human beings, we all bleed the same colour. As royalty say they have blue blood – okay, sure. We all bleed red, okay, end of story. That's the way, that's the way I think, that's the way I always thought. What is this blue blood? You mean certain people have blue blood? No, it's red. Did I get to your questions?

RA: I think, yeah, you did. And so, to even back up a bit, let's say it's not even caring if somebody has a negative thought, but there are gonna be some people, that's probably even my asking questions right now. I'm saying, oh, I want to understand this, so I'm not coming at this from a negative position, I'm wanting to know more about this because I don't have an opportunity to talk very often with someone Two-Spirited who is as candid and open to talking about it. So, there's good that comes out of this, and I'm just wondering if there were circumstances people would approach you and ask questions, and you have a sense they don't mean ill, but they wanna just know more. And they understand you a bit more too.

P: Oh, they understood me if they approach me, obviously. I'm very open minded and got a big mouth, and I'm not scared to use my voice. Because the voice is the most powerful thing, besides laughter, on this planet we call earth or the world. I understand there's different countries have different things – Canada has the most freedom of speech – loving, caring people. Other countries aren't so well off where they have to hid in the closet. Well, that's their choice. But it'd be nice if the whole world could just come out and we could all be happy as one. Like a war, why do we need wars today? If you can explain that to me, then I'll explain the other to you.

RA: Can you tell me a bit more about your caregiving? You've said some things already about – I would call it providing just physical and emotional comfort when somebody really needed it. I'm just wondering, just a bit more about your experiences on the caregiving side.

P: Well, I guess, I just naturally picked it up, and learnt about HIV as much as the information was out there. Because I knew a lot of our people were then had HIV, which turned into cancer, so they say. But really, it's HIV. But if they're comfortable saying it's cancer, I'm fine with that, I accept that. Because not everybody is acceptable at admitting they are HIV, or Hep C today. So, I look at both sides of the fence, and then I make my own judgements and think before I talk.

RA: What were things that you would do to be a caregiver, to help others?

P: Good questions. I don't know really, I just—women's intuition kicked in and I just learnt, like everybody else. Just like a doctor, but on my own, self-taught, and I just watched the way people passed away and it was very, very sad back then. Still is sad, so you know, for people newly diagnosed who – some doctor, quack, came out and said there over advertisement on TV, “We got a cure for HIV.” Wrong thing to say. ‘Cause we have our youth today and look at them, they're just going out and having sex whenever they want, and think they can take a one-time pill and they're cured. Well, that's not the true story, or the actual picture of it. You know, they seem to – he seemed to miss a lot of that picture that goes along with taking a pill every day or many pills every day. You know. So yeah, I had to learn. And when I—how I found out was my partner was in the hospital, St. Joseph's, and he called me crying one day and I was like what are

you—what’s wrong with you, what’s happening? Already had a bit of experience under my belt. And uI went there, took me like ten minutes, I can move fast. So, he was sitting there crying in bed and I’m going, “What’s going on? What’s happening?” And then he told me he had HIV and I went, oh no, we’ve had sex, that means I may have it. But that went through my mind in thirty seconds. ‘Till the doctor walked in and told him that he was going to die at three months or six months to live and no compassion, nothing. [inaudible] for instincts, for example, you having a son and saying I’m your doctor, you’re gonna die in three months. And then leave you there, with no explanation of what, how, when. Then my temper started boiling, my blood started boiling. So, I went—I’m not—like I said, I’m very boisterous, and I’m very vocal. So, I went after a doctor – I’m not scared of doctors, I’m not scared of nobody. Trust me, not even our so-called lawyers—liars, professional liars. No, nothing scares me after what I’ve been through in life.

So, I went after him I said, “What kind of friggen doctor are you? Don’t you have any compassion, or you know, a will to just, a little eighth of compassion to tell these people?” And he looked at me like I was dumb and that even made me madder. My blood started boiling and I just went off on him for about thirty minutes. Once I get going, you can’t shut me up, you’ll find out through the interview. Yeah, so I’ve always been very loud, vocal when I need to be. But I know when to shut my mouth, too, and know when to open it. And eventually he came home, and “You’re not done, you’re not done.” “Yes, I am.” “Oh, stop that. No, you’re not. You’re gonna live for years and years.” And took me time to convince him and he did. At the same time, I had to deal with myself now. Ravensong, where I first met my doctor – well, I met her at a hospital, not realizing she would be my doctor for next twenty-five years. To date, nineteen. It’s turned out to be a very good relationship with her. I only go into her when I’m in a lot of pain – she knows that, she knows me very well. And I don’t go see her just for, oh, I cut my finger, or I got a little [inaudible]. No, I’ll go in there for something, it’s drastic to my health. And I know I – I know how I feel or whatever, I know something’s going to happen. Yeah, she’s very understanding that way. I love my doctor; everyone should love their doctor, don’t you think? Each to their own opinion. Next.

RA: Well, I’m just thinking. Your partner had the bad experience at Mount Saint Joseph’s, and I don’t know if you had the same doctor or a different one at that time as well.

P: That’s—no, I didn’t have that. Doctor [name].

RA: So anyway, you ended up with a doctor with whom you are very happy with and your present health and well-being attest to the quality of the healthcare. How did you end up with that? Because you could’ve ended up with some other doctor maybe that wasn’t sympathetic, would tell you that, oh, you have three months or ten years left to live, so how did that happen?

P: I don’t know. She started her practice, I was her first patient ever. Somehow, I met her but I forgot her in the hospital. Don’t remember how, when, or where. But I ended up with her, she had a compassion for HIV people at the time, which she now specializes in many things. So, the connection was just made right away. It’s like two women getting along, or two men playing cards, drinking beer, watching football, whatever. Two women getting dressed, nail polish, hair whatever heels. I can’t explain it any better but... next.

RA: Okay.

P: Boy, I'm pushy, eh? I've done this many times.

RA: Okay. Well, I'm hoping maybe we're driving through a few back roads that maybe you haven't travelled for awhile.

P: Well, that would be your problem then, you need to travel more. I travelled lots. I learnt lots. I've done many conferences. I've been a speaker on many of them, I've done shows at many of them, almost every one I went to. A mixed crowd, not just gay, very happy people. Straight people, doesn't matter, ethnic groups, it doesn't matter to me. We all bleed the same blood, red. Basically. So, if I can accept you, then why can't you accept me? And if you don't want to, then I don't need your negativity in my life, because I like to stay positive in my thoughts, my thinking, everything I do. Because negativity brings you down, and laughter is the best medicine of all. Better than the pill. Better than any medicine you get. If you can laugh once a day and look in the mirror and tell yourself I love you, you've – that's step one. And if you can laugh during the day, even better. You'll feel much, much better. Eighty percent better. Trust me, I tried it, I had to.

RA: In your words, is that actually a part of the shows in some regard for the people attending the shows, the audience?

P: I just did it because I love entertaining. I know I'm good at it and I can draw an audience in. And I always tell them, and the girlfriends have told their husbands or boyfriend, don't bring your wallet out in front of her, 'cause once she sees those greens, orange or browns, she'll be right at 'cha. And I am. Because to me, that's a sign you're giving me a tip. So, I'm smart—if you're dumb enough to bring it out and show me, I am smart enough to go over there and grab it. And I'll grab everything. I'm not greedy. If you got your hand out and you're showing me six hundred dollars, I'll grab it and leave you there in shock. As I've done before. "She grabbed all my money!" "I told you not to put money in front of her." So yeah, I've done—and I enjoy it, it's fun. They have fun, I have fun, as long as they clap and laugh and everyone's happy, then I've been successful for the evening

RA: You've answered my question. I'm trying to picture if there's a connection between the shows or anything related to you even outside of that kind of room full of people and bringing that elsewhere where it's maybe some sort of caregiving element or something still.

P: No, because at first all they know is they've heard me speak. They've watched me. I talk to a lot of people, a lot of professionals, I had to find out information and they have no clue about what's going to be happening after dinner that night, so once they see me come out, it's like mouth-dropping. Lift the jaw, honey, lift the jaw. Put your eyes back in your head. I don't know, I just find—someone told me there's an aura about me that can draw people in, or it's my eyes. They say my eyes are such beautiful colour so—blue—and I can draw anybody in I want. You just have to smile, have fun, don't be nervous, just have fun. Have fun with your audience. And that draws them into you. Then you have them. So, you got fifty bucks? No? I'll draw you in

RA: Well, actually, you'll find out about that later.

P: Okay, I'll hold you to that.

RA: It's called the honorarium.

P: Well, I don't that as an honorarium. Anyways, go ahead. See you're laughing, right?

RA: Oh, I know, I'm trying to pict—can you describe... I think somehow I think this is relevant because it's an important part of your life, just for those who haven't seen one of your shows, no not actually re-creating the material live right now, but just describe the show a little bit so people get a sense of what that was like.

P: Okay, for example, if you can ever, or anybody can remember when Shania Twain came out in '94, her start. I picked her as—'cause she's Canadian, she's native, she's from Ontario, so perfect start. So, I learnt her songs and just became very well known as Shania Twain of Vancouver. And wherever I go, it's Shania Twain, Shania Twain. I do her good, so. And I know her good.

RA: That gives a very clear picture actually, in very few words.

P: I'm very confident in what I do, otherwise I don't do it. Because if you don't feel confident, then something's going to go wrong. Fall flat on your face. Who knows? So yeah, you have to be positive. Think positive, too many people think negativity, I believe. So, be positive and no matter what happens in life. Because there could be worse at the end of the tunnel. So, think the worst and it always comes out for the best. Always.

RA: Would you say you were a part of the drag community or you don't see that that way?

P: Oh, most certainly I was. I was indeed.

RA: Okay. Did you see within the drag community something unique from them that was maybe, I don't know, mindful of people who were experiencing hardship, living with HIV, or possibly developing AIDS? Did you see any of that?

P: I probably seen it but paid no heed to it, because I'm there—my mind is there for one reason and that's to be an entertainer. And that's what I was—an entertainer. Pro, hopefully, yep, I can say that now, yeah. You enjoy it or you don't. You can leave or walk out, don't let the door slap your ass on the way out though. Yeah, I can draw a crowd in and draw anybody in I want. I just have a knack. I guess you need to have a knack about it and know what you're doing. Eyes here. And put it all together and boom, you have a spectacular entertainer. Thank you.

RA: Was the drag community involved in how the community was responding?

P: Drag community came to me a lot of times, that's how I got a lot of titles. People just – I'm not bragging, people just watched because I was entertaining. I wanted to make sure everybody came there to be entertained. That's why they probably paid five dollars to get in to see any of us, so they were there for a purpose as well as our purpose, and that was to entertain. Whether you're doing a show or on the floor talking, smiling, laughing, having fun. It's about having fun first, and laughing, as I always say, is the best medicine of all. And talking helps, you know, people will learn from you and you learn from them, you pick up whatever you want and take what you need, and put it in your memory banks like a computer, and away you go. And that's how, I became part of the whole community. Vancouver, Surrey, all across Canada, actually. Yep. So, I've been very lucky person so far. But yeah, I had to stay positive, no negativity. That's what kept me going and alive today. And that's why I'm here. Still.

RA: Part of that positive and no negativity is actually, I get a sense of there being a fair bit of pleasure and joy in doing this, so sounds as if that's a major part of it.

P: You're getting on my page now, yes, most certainly. It's all about having fun and joy, and having the audience enjoy what you're doing. As an entertainer, no matter who you are. Because each one of us entertain different ways, we all have our own potential, our own ways of doing it. I just found my way, it came natural, and there I was. Yeah, I love doing things.

RA: Well, it's not too much of a stretch then if you feel that happiness and joy and laughter is good for one's well-being and you're doing that inadvertently. Don't tell anybody but you're also being a caregiver by going on stage and doing that.

P: You're right, yep. Whether they know it or not. I know it. But I don't need to tell 'em, it's up to them to realize what they think in their minds. Because I can't tell someone to be positive or negative. You need to let that come to you naturally, in a positive way. And throw all the negativity in the garbage. And I've told people that. Leave the negativity – why're you carrying that garbage on your back? You don't need it. And really nobody needs negativity in their life. Should always be positive. And think positive, you'll live a very happy life. Look at me.

RA: Yep. I don't want to cut you off but I just want to catch something when you're talking throw the negativity away. So, for example, you mentioned something that happened for your partner in the hospital that was very negative. So, there are things out there where people perhaps shouldn't expect negative things, and should expect the opposite, and they don't always get it. So, maybe just a few recollections of the negatives, so we can throw that out, and then focus on the other positives aside from what you're doing, what other things you were seeing going on too. So, some of the negatives.

P: Okay, let's back up to '97. Like I said before, during the interview, I've held and looked after a lot of people. That's why I always say look in the mirror and tell yourself that you love yourself, I love you, is the most important thing. And think positive. [inaudible] in '97 after all this activity I had done for last two years, three years. But I forgot who I was, at the time. So, like a true Canadian Native, I went and got a friend and started drinking. And we had valiums. And we play valiums like caps, bottle caps, so whoever got it in the cap got a drink. And that's the way it went. Continued on, I went through seventy-five morphine—this is all within a

twelve-hour period—I don't know, forty valium, seventy-five morphine, forty-eight beer later, going to the bar, still being able to stand and be happy, yeah. Then I overdid and then I paid the price. Dearly. With my life. So, twenty—if you go back twenty-three years ago, now I was in a coma, they thought I was gonna die, had no clue where I was. Didn't even know who I was, where I was, what I was doing. And my partner just said no, not to pull the plug. But seven specialists said, “Yes, he's braindead.” And he goes, “No, she's not braindead!” Accent, she. I guess proper etiquette for them would be he-she-whatever, but I'll answer to she/her before he/him. But no, just refused it. And then a friend brought in a Native woman from Canada here, from Alberta I believe she was from. The medicine man was from The United States. He talked Cree, she translated the Cree into English as fast as they spoke. According to what I hear and I woke up to, a bloody mess. I had earth all over—red earth—that they'd used in certain spots. And medicine man said, “She's not ready to go.: And then he look at me and said, “Well, [name], you okay?”

And that's when I popped out of it and shocked the capoots out of everybody. I'm sure they had to go home and change their pants. And I just started pul—“What the fuck is all this shit”—started pulling needles, intravenous out. “What the hell are you doing to me?” And I thought he'd put me in the crazy house. I didn't know because I just came out of a coma, a month and a half, two months maybe, something like that. So yeah, so I had to re-nurture myself. So, taking the experience I learnt from the early nineties, brought it back into my life. So, I had to be very positive if I wanted to get better. I never did it again, mildly, but not within that time period. To shut my body down. So, I probably weighed about a hundred-forty then, by the time I got to the hospital I was ballooned to about three-hundred-and-fifty, three-seventy-five. Yeah, imagine this tiny little body, I looked like what do you call that, in the air? Big balloon. And I went out there and said, “I think there's something wrong.” “Yeah, you need to get to the hospital.” I was rushed in, put on life supports, intravenous, whatever they had to do, I don't know. Two months I didn't know nothing about my life. Because I was, as I said I was in a coma. Yeah. That was a life learning experience on its own. But look at me today. I can make you smile. I can make Ben smile. Agree?

RA: A little more work on Ben maybe.

P: But you're better – he's not doing the interview, you are. I'll get to Ben later. I'm not finished.

RA: Okay.

P: So anyways, do you want to take it from the hospital? Anyways, I got out, couldn't eat nothing. They tried to get me to eat, couldn't eat nothing. The only thing I could keep down, and I never drank, was pop. But trying to find that right pop for me to stomach. Coke of all things. I tried Seven-Up figuring that would be easy to digest. Nope, that came up as fast as it went down so... And Coke, that was just like, what is going on? So, the doctor told me just keep on doing it, then [name], something's happening, chemically-wise in your body or whatever. So, I drank pop for three months. Yeah gross, eh? And then I tried a grill cheese sandwich half one day, and it took me a little to get it down, because trying to swallow then was difficult, but I managed. And then I just thought, well, if I can get half down, imagine what else I can get down. So, I just kept

trying and trying. Negativity versus positivity. And here I am, positive yet. And happy. Need more detail?

RA: That is ample detail. Just wondering about other positivity, even outside of that event, and maybe you seeing it for others, done by others? And as you seeing people helping others within the community?

P: I just had a knack about me, women's intuition with my experience. You learn, and put it all together and watch, listen, see. And mother nature just takes over your body and you do what you have to do. Friend or no friend. Or just someone off the street, you know. Or I could know, I knew. You know, if they have HIV. You didn't have to tell me, I knew, just by looking in your eyes. Yeah, I'm very good at picking up things like that. And I'm mostly never wrong. I can't be wrong.

RA: Uhhh, let's see...

P: Next.

RA: You've talked about how your identity affected your experience of the epidemic. You, yourself are Two-Spirited, gives you the possibility of helping others in a particular way that maybe wouldn't be possible for some others—

P: It is impossible for others to know.

RA: So, I should remove the maybe, right?

P: Yes, I would say, for them. Yes, maybe they – for me, I just know. I don't know, something just tells me. I feel that. I don't know, I just feel it with inside them. You look at their eye—I've learned to look at the eyes, the colours, the eye colours and how they react. Movements, language, body language. Everything. And if you can't tell then, that'd be awfully negative or doom. So yeah, that's how I've learnt, with all the experience put together including myself in the hospital. So yep, I got a good knack for that, so whether they're drunk, druggies, whatever. You can tell. You just know. I know. So, you can't lie to me. And if you do, I'll get it out of you. In a nice possible positive way, without you knowing. And then go, oh no, what did I do? It's alright. It's our secret.

RA: Have you ever helped others overcome their negativity?

P: That is a work of art, truly is. Sometimes people who are negative are so down on themselves, life, life itself. It's hard to get them out of that no matter what you say. You can talk to them for twenty-four hours and they'll still walk away being that negative person. But it gives 'em a thought to remember, what we just talked about. Now what are your options? You have three options here, I don't need to tell you, you know, after we talked. But I'm always around and I'm there so, I'm always available to anyone I talk to. Because negativity is the number one death killer. Whether they like to admit it or not. Depression. Goes into depression and then you can go downhill real fast. Real fast. So, I try to lift them up or bring them up or do what I need to do.

RA: I'm going to give you a chance—

Ben Klassen: Sure.

RA: --and I'm going to, I just want to—I have notes on things to ask and I just want to think if I've missed some things. I don't think so, but now we'll give Ben a shot.

BK: We haven't talked much about Healing Our Spirit yet.

P: Oh yes, so busy talking about other things. Yeah, I lived a—I kept very busy, I've always been busy all my life. I've worked since I was fifteen. I was beat up at the age of fourteen. Crawled away from home. Broken legs. This body has never looked so good for my age, sixty. Reverse psychology if you wish. I enjoy it, it's positive thinking. I got involved with Healing Our Spirit, being a Native organization, the only one in City of Vancouver at the time. A lot of friends were going there to get help, or seek help, and whatever. Because nobody really understood, I don't even think the executive director really knew what he was doing at times. I learned from watching, listening, and whatever. And then I became secretary, for I think five years. Treasurer, oh gosh, three, four years. President, three times in a row. So, I've done a lot of good work. I believe I have. And I've had to put up with a lot of b-s. Because then, people all they wanted was money, money, money. So, you have to make the difference in call, is it money you're after or your health? What's more important to you? Or just go out and we give you money and take you out on a credit card and let you get drunk? That's negativity to me. So, being positive, I wanna know everything. You come to me for help, okay, number one, sit down let's chat for a while. Tell me your story, and I'll take it from there. Why do you need help? Are you not getting enough money, is that why? Is it because of sickness, your health? So, there's many things that play a factor in someone's body. Or mind. Back to negativity and positivity again. It's all on how you think. I believe. My option, my choice. You can't take it away from me.

BK: So, what were they doing, what was Healing Our Spirit doing in terms of programming or in terms of the support that they were offering?

P: They offered supports such as helping people move, help with mat-furniture, their health, getting 'em help to a doctor, taking them to a doctor, taking them to an appointment. Whatever. If you needed something, storage, we'll be there. You just had to come and tell us. But explain everything first. So, remember when you come, you better be ninety-nine-percent nine, right? Because it – yeah, I was good at that, so I had that knack. Because a lot of them lied about what they really wanted, so when you get down to the nitty gritty, you want it for alcohol dear, don't you? You know what, here's twenty bucks, go have a drink and then come back. And I bet your story will change. And they do. So, we supported them in what they needed. Had a conference once a year, went on outings, camping trips, maybe for a weekend, whatever. Just to get them out of the city, away from concrete and back into their original bush sort of territory, if you want to call it that way. Yeah. And that was for the better of their health. And you had to make your mind up what you were doing. Yeah, a lot of negativity was happening at these things. But you turn it around, and turn around the tables on them, next thing you know, they're up dancing and

having fun. So, if they're doing that, I've succeeded. As long as I make one person happy in the room, I've done my job. If I make two happy, better. If the whole crowd walks out, I've been very successful. And I didn't even have to go to professional school to learn that. I learnt it on my own. Mind you, I did take four classes on speaker's bureau, to get onto it. But it didn't take me long, two classes was all. I've got a big mouth anyways, right? You'll admit it. I do. I do. I've used other words.

RA: So, speaker's corner, how did that work, where did you go, who were the audiences?

P: Could be any audience, you walked into a strange audience. So, it's up to you to change. You know what you're up against already, or hopefully you know, or you're gonna learn within the first two conferences of speaking. Which I did. I was very... somewhat shy. Although I'd been around a lot of people, but to tell your personal story and then get it out of people. But at the same time, being positive. Laughter. Do it in a laughter way where they can laugh as well with or at you, even if you make fun of yourself. That's okay. Because as long as you know you can walk out of that room and still laugh, and be happy, shake hands give a kiss, a hug. Whatever it takes. You've been successful. One hundred percent. Next.

RA: I'm thinking speaker's bureau and doing a show kind of overlap a little bit.

P: Oh, I overlap a lot of things in my life, so I just – you learn to do it. That's all there is to it. Live or die.

RA: Did ever have any—to ignore negativity then—did you have any really pleasant surprises doing speaker's bureau?

P: No. No. Maybe the first time, I was very shy, because I thought, oh my god, there's a thousand people here. It's different than doing a show and talking to people. Much different. Two different categories. Two different things. Two different programs. Two different departments. However, you want to look at it, but they are two different things. And yeah, I'm very good at overlapping everything. Because I know what I have to do and what I don't have to do. So, I learned very fast at a young age. So-called young age.

RA: When you were doing speaker's bureau, do you know how many—were other people doing speaker's bureau elsewhere for Healing Our Spirit as well?

P: I think there was only maybe three of us. Two that started off, they didn't really enjoy it, I guess. I don't know. Somehow, I got my foot in the door. And that's all I had to do was get my foot in the door and let my big mouth go. And remember to laugh. And then sometimes I'd be requested by tribe bands here, all over Canada. They know I'm not shy now. But if you would've been there for the first one, she's never gonna make it. Here I am. Thirty-five some years later, I'm on top of the roof. And that's where I intend to stay. You gotta make people laugh. Have fun. It's all about laughter in life. Just imagine if you walked around with a frown on your face every day, would you be happy looking at yourself? So, you answered your own—my own question—yourself, so it's better to look in the mirror and say, I love you, don't be shy. Either love yourself and if you don't love yourself then you have a problem. You need to learn how to

adopt and say, I love you. You are a good person. You're going to do good things today. And then laugh. Even if it's at yourself. Who cares? Who cares who's watching? It's about yourself. And yourself insides. And what you think. Not what other people think, because they really don't give a shit. Sorry. They really don't care what you think, what they – you know, it's about you, you, you, you. Just like when I was sick, it was about me, me, me, me. My wants, my needs. So yeah, you gotta think about yourself because if you don't think about yourself, you're gonna forget. You're gone. You may as well say goodbye.

RA: That is good advice and I would say caring advice. And that's to pretty much anybody you would meet. I'm wondering if there's any advice that you would give that might be unique from your experience. We've been asking people what advice would they give to other generations, or healthcare people, or politicians, whoever, based on their living through and supporting others or surviving the epidemic. You could look at the question that way—what advice do you have for anybody else? You could also look at what advice you have maybe just by your seeing the world as two-spirited, in general, with respect to—actually it should be with respect to anything in the world where people have impact on others.

P: Let's put it this way. We have politicians, whom are supposed to be politicians. And they're learning too. They're the best liars in the world. Second to them are lawyers. They're the best professional liars in the world. That's how they win cases, they know the words to say, the things to say. Just like a doctor knows what to say to their patient at the right time. Politicians don't listen, they really don't listen. Otherwise we wouldn't be in this epidemic that we're in today, if they would've sat down and listened. So, I think when I hear them on the news, and what if it was your child, and your child was dying of HIV. Let's switch shoes for a moment, or chairs, whatever you want. How would you feel? That's your own blood dying in front of you. You're gonna tell me you're not going to care? Liar. And that's what I think about politicians. It takes 'em years and years and years, or for something to happen to one of their children in order to affect the family, and then down the line it goes. Then they do something about it. By that time, it's already too late, because by then the epidemic's already started.

And our youth today are very innocent. Their small little human minds are still wondering, interested and, what about the birds and the bees, what do you do? And take it from there. It's all one-hundred-percent natural. Best advice I can give, talk. Get advice, talk about it, be positive, or try to be positive. Because if you're a little negative, I can turn that around real fast for you. So it's something else I've learned to do. But you've gotta have compassion as well and show that person the compassion you have for them. If they're gonna tear up, maybe they want to see little tear drops. I can cry, I'm an actress. It's true, once you reach that experience, you do whatever you can to help that person. Because you don't want that human being to die either. Because that could be your friend, that could be your brother, that could be your sister, it could be your mother, it could be your father, it could be your grandparents. None of us know. Some do, some of us don't. So, talk, ask questions. Don't be afraid. Because you can only get a proper answer or seek the proper answer you're looking for to self-satisfy yourself. And if you can get on that journey, you're on a positive road to healing. Speechless both of you. Ben, come on, help.

BK: Did you get involved with any other organizations that were involved with HIV?

P: Uh, CATIE, I was on the board there for a year. Oh god, I've been involved with a lot of things that overlapped. Travelled eight months out of the year, out of a suitcase, hotel. Thinking, what's my home look like? Just grab a key, open the hotel door and there's my home for next four days or whatever. So, it was—playing. Like an actor or an actress, you get on a plane, check into a hotel, you do your thing, you get on, check out, hop on the next plane, onto the next city. So, what's the difference between us or an actor or an actress? Nothing really. It's work that has to be done. That has to be done. Somebody has to do it. If not, just sits on the shelf, gets dusty. Just like a politician, let it get dust first, or let it happen to your family. And then tell me, how do you feel? And if you can tell me how you feel, then good. And if you can't, then go back to the drawing board. Because it doesn't take a dummy to figure it out really. Or you just have that special knack, like I have, I don't know. I can't explain that, I just—women's intuition. When you get butterflies in your stomach you know something's happening. And I don't listen to nobody. I listen to their story. As far as politics, I'm the wrong one to talk to. I love politics, mind you. But you better be ready for my questions because I have a lot of questions for you. A doctor as well.

RA: Speaking of doctors, and not listening to anybody, you had someone who was saying, you should shut down the life support for this guy, right, so that was a doctor saying that.

P: Seven specialists. Can you imagine?

RA: Okay, so now afterwards, you do have a doctor.

P: Yes.

RA: And you listen to the doctor, right?

P: Interesting thing you bring that up. I was her first patient, but as she always says, I was her first patient, but her worst patient. Negative/positive, depending on how you want to look at it. I don't listen to her. Okay, people think you gotta take a pill on this time that time or that hour that minute. And they follow that. That's ridiculous. How can you live a life on a timer? No, you live your life, take the pills. Long as you get 'em in you, you're fine. And eat, drink. Coffee, tea, tea's good for you at night, it's relaxing for some people. You want to have a can a beer, go ahead if it makes you relax and helps you sleep. It's all within yourself how you feel as a person at the end of the day.

RA: Okay.

P: So, I drink a two-four every night. [Laughs] No, I don't.

BK: So, one of the questions we also tend to ask at the end is just how your perspective on HIV has changed over time. So, thinking from the eighties and early nineties when HIV was kind of death sentence, towards the present, how has it changed?

P: We've—HIV community has come a long way. More people are educated about HIV than they were in late eighties, early nineties. Even doctors. Helped working in administration as I do,

I read a lot, very interested in what's going on. And body, the mind. That all comes together in one round circle. Just like a round dance. It's a circle. A vicious one maybe at times, but it's up to you to make it positive. But we've come a long way. That information's been put out there. But you take the good and the bad and what do you come up with, it's up to you. Only you decide. You have that decision. Not me. You make it for yourself. And be sure, positive. And laugh.

BK: Anything to add that we didn't touch on?

RA: Didn't ask?

P: No, I think everything's been covered. I left you stunned, mouth, jaws open. So, I've done my job. So, that makes me happy. See, I can still smile leave it from start to beginning.

RA: I don't know a few hours later I might think of another question.

P: Go ahead, you said, I have all the time in the world, and I've got nowhere to go.