

HIV in My Day – Interview 14

December 6, 2017

Interviewee: Tony Correia (TC); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)

Ben Klassen: Just getting started this evening talking to Tony. Thanks so much for agreeing to participate in the study and for sharing your story with us, and the community, hopefully. Just to get started, we like to ask our participants when did you first start engaging in gay life or become involved in the gay community?

Tony Correia: I always knew I was gay. I came out of the closet at around eighteen, so I would have been – it would have been '86, '87 was the first time. I went to a gay bar, moved to Toronto – '87. Started going to bars and all that other stuff – went to a pride parade. And then moved to Vancouver in '89 and worked in a gay restaurant, and I've worked in gay bars.

BK: You started – where were you growing up? When you were a teenager you were...?

TC: I was in Brampton, Ontario, Canada, just about thirty minutes outside of the city. So, I would take – I would cut class and hop on a GO Bus and go to Church and Wellesley, and I'd go to Glad Day Bookstore, and I would hang out at Second Cup, and yeah... Just take it all in by myself. Never got laid or anything like that, but it was like [gasps]. As soon as I found out it was there, I had to be there. I was lucky enough that two of my best friends in high school were also gay, so we came out in, like, the parking lot of the McDonald's. And then we drove to Toronto. My – one of our friends had been out and active for a while. We hopped in his blue Mustang, drove to Living Well Café, and then we went to a gay bar, and I didn't look back.

BK: That sounds pretty good, all things considered.

TC: It was not bad. [laughs] It was not bad. It was – yeah.

BK: And what did the gay community in Toronto look like at the time? You were pretty young, so you probably have a limited snapshot in some ways, but what did the community look like as you were coming out into it?

TC: You could walk right by it without even knowing it was there. So, there was no rainbow flags on the posts. There was – you would see, like, a rainbow sticker. You had to know where you were going. There was *Xtra!* in print form at the time, so that's how you figured out where you were going. There were a handful of bars, and if you wanted to meet someone, you – like if – so, I was in the suburbs, so you would use the personal ads in the *Toronto Star* and you would exchange photos. It was all very slow and analogue at the time. [laughs] But I mean, it was weird. You didn't see guys holding hands on the street, even on Church St. at the time, and it was... I don't know. You just knew that you were there. So, the big bars when I came out were Chaps and Comrades and the 101, and, like I said, you could walk right past them and not even know they were there, except for Chaps, which had, like, a – their logo was a guy's bare ass, if I'm not mistaken. I could be completely wrong. And like, Isabella was on top of a pizza parlour, and there was a place called Showtime – or Showbiz, or something like that – which had the tea

dance, which is where you went on Sundays. And there was the Saint Charles, which was one of the older bars, and in high school that was where the butch jocks would brag about going on Halloween to beat up the fags, and stuff like that. But, yeah – that was kind of the essence of it. But my first pride parade, I remember, I was living in Toronto and I worked at, like, Yonge and Charles St., like at a little café. And the gay guy I was working with was like, “Hey, here comes the pride parade.” [laughs] And it was basically half of Yonge Street. It went from Wellesley to, I don’t know – I think Isabella. It was basically people running [laughs] – well, not that bad. But it was small and it was very tiny, and we were laughing at it. We made fun of it and we had no idea that it was going to become what it became.

BK: That’s a lot different than it is today.

TC: It is a lot different, but I will say this – and this was actually my best remembrance of any pride day. I just remember – so, we worked, we had the pride, and they had a little tiny festival on Church, and then we went to Chaps afterwards, and they had just flooded the dancefloor with white balloons. And like, to be, I don’t know – I was like nineteen, twenty – and you walk into this bar and it’s just all balloons. And it was just like walking into the ocean for the first time. It was amazing.

BK: That does sound pretty magical.

TC: It was. [laughs]

BK: You said you moved to Vancouver in ’89?

TC: Yup.

BK: So, you have this snapshot of Toronto. What did Vancouver’s gay community look like when you arrived here? Anything that stands out as different?

TC: Oh, so disappointing! So, I got here – I moved here sight unseen, and I did kind of move here to be more gay – just to kind of be more open, because I just felt like someone could see me. And in Vancouver – I come from a traditional Portuguese family, very strict Catholic, and I was worried about my lifestyle getting back to them. And I just needed a clean break. So, I got here – stayed with some friends of some friends. Flew here on the other half of a return ticket. So, back in the day, you could – before 9/11 – you could – because tickets were so expensive, you’d go in the *Toronto Star* and you’d just buy the other half of a return ticket, so that’s how I got here. And yeah. So, I just remember seeing Davie Street for the first time and just being extremely disappointed, because it was nothing like Toronto. Like, “Oh my god, what have I done? I got to get the hell out of here.” And then I discovered the beach, but I did see Doll & Penny’s, like... So, we – the guy I was staying with took me to Doll & Penny’s on my first day, I was like, “Oh my god, I have to work there. This place is just amazing.” It was like anything I’ve never seen before. And yeah. And I applied and then I had a job within a week.

BK: Wow.

TC: Yeah, I know. [laughs] Not bad, hey?

BK: Not bad at all. And what did Doll & Penny's look like? You said you were like immediately, "I have to work here." What did it look like?

TC: It was like... it was... Picture a haunted mansion if a drag queen decorated it. [laughs] So, it was lots of portraits of the queen. There was an awning and it had a half of a car and it had some drag queens on it. It had these sliding glass windows. It had big sparkling lights, so it was very showy. It was the brightest thing on the street, and then you walked in and it was just disco. And lots of booze. It was just basically an old deli that had been converted into this gay hotspot. So yeah, the front was kind of dedicated to the royal – no. It's hard to remember. Just lots of stuff on the walls, lots of chandeliers; Tiffany lamps; nothing matched. There was a balcony – it was, like, with bunting. And a fish bowl, and a television, and a stage. And like, you know, a horse on a pillar. It was just anything that you could find, throw it on the wall and it stuck there. The closest thing I would – if you've ever been to Sofie's Cosmic Café – similar to that, but...

BK: Gay.

TC: Much gayer, yeah. [laughs] Much gayer, yup. And that was where the – it was very tied to the Dogwood Monarchist Society, so they would have the victory brunch there. So, the – so, after the Empress Ball, like, that was where the Empress would come and have her celebratory brunch.

BK: What did it look like in terms of clientele or what kind of people were inside?

TC: It was everything. It was families; it was lesbians. It was one of the few places where men and women got together of all ages. It was open 24-hours, so you had, like, gay businessmen coming in for breakfast in the morning and chatting about, you know, who they slept with the night before. You had lesbians with their kids coming in. You had – I mean, they supported every team, right, so it was like – the bowlers would come in, the baseball players would come in – like, everyone came in. Sunday brunch was just packed, packed, packed – it just didn't stop. And then at night, you'd have the club kids coming in. And one of the things I often hear a lot is that it was where straight goth kids used to go. So, it was where, like – if you're kind of a freak in high school, that was where you went and that was where a lot of people... Sorry... [laughs] It was where a lot of people found themselves and it was the only place they felt comfortable, whether they were gay or straight. So, it was kind of... And I didn't know that until much, much later. And it was like, "Oh, really?" And I still have people that recognize me, that are like, "Didn't you... [laughs] serve me back in the day?" Could have kicked you out or punched you too, so I don't know – could have happened.

BK: It sounds like an interesting position to be in, in terms of how you were integrated in the community and engaging with all sorts of people in the community.

TC: Yeah, and it was usually the first place that tourists went, because it was obviously gay, right? I mean, you couldn't – I mean, there were mannequins with moustaches wearing dresses

on awning. It's like, okay, that's what it is. So yeah. So, you usually got your first pick of the litter. [laughs]

BK: Not a bad perk.

TC: Not a bad perk, yeah, exactly. [laughs] And free entry into bars, so it was good all around.

BK: You mentioned that you had a stage. Were there events there as well?

TC: Lots of AIDS fundraisers. So, they did have a stage and it was kind of – so when... The stage was kind of portable and it was kind of hidden upstairs, and you would just – it was like an attachment and you would put it over the stairs – you know, they would extend the stairs out a little bit. And there were these velvet curtains behind it, and behind the curtains was a movie screen, and they would show videos – like, someone would just put together a compendium of videos – top hits from MuchMusic at the time.

BK: I'm sure we'll be coming back to this theme and this space because it occupied so much of your life, but, shifting gears a little, when did you first hear about HIV and AIDS, and where were you at the time?

TC: It would have been in high school, and I was probably just coming to terms with my sexuality. And I think – I think I heard about it on ABC nightly news – I just have – I don't know why, but ABC nightly news seems to ring a bell. Like, I have this distinct memory of Ted Koppel talking about this disease that was only affecting gay men. And I was Catholic, and I was like, "Oh my god, it's like they're coming together. It's God's punishment." And then, they had the virus, and I remember when the virus was on the cover of *Time* magazine, I went and I bought it to learn as much as I possibly could. And then, they would have, like, a TV movie, like *An Early Frost*. And the play *As Is* came out, so again, that was another occasion where I cut school – I bought a ticket to the Tarragon Theatre and I went to see it. And yeah...

BK: And was there an immediate sense that – what was your initial reaction to this?

TC: Dread. Absolute dread. I was – I mean, because you're like – it takes you all this energy to figure out, "Oh, I'm gay. Okay, I can't change this. I can't pray it away. This is just who I am." And then you – this thing is being transmitted. And at the time, like, no one really knew. Like no one – like, was it spit? Was it flies? Was it...? What was it? And I just thought, "Well, I'll just never have sex." And then – but you know, we went to a gay bar and you see two men kissing for the first time, and you're like, "Oh. Okay. Well, I guess I could do that." And you just kind of adapted and make promises to yourself that "I'm not going to do this or I'm not going to do that." Sometimes you don't always keep those promises though. [laughs]

BK: No, exactly. When you were in these gay spaces – the villages of Toronto and Vancouver – early on in your engagement in those communities, was there good sources of information around the epidemic that you could access, or were you mostly learning about it still from mainstream media?

TC: It would have been mostly posters. So, in Toronto, it would have been the 4-16 or 4-1-1 – I can't remember the name of the community center. Like, when I came out, I was still pretty young, so I was taking advantage of those resources. A lot of it was through pop culture. Like, movies – like, *Parting Glances*, again, *As Is*, um... There weren't many – I can't think of a big gay book at the time. Like, I can't – if there was a book – and I read a lot, so if there's a book, it doesn't really stick out. But mostly posters, a lot of hearsay... yeah. Magazines – and apparently the magazines were censored, but I don't know. I don't remember seeing chunks of text being blocked out, but that could be wrong. But at the – you know, in Ontario, specifically, they had the Ontario Censor Board, so there was no porn whatsoever – I mean, gay, straight, whatever. It was pretty strict. So...

BK: Wow. Engaging with this really dire information at the time that you're just trying to sort out your identity and come to terms with your sexuality – that would have been a huge complicating factor. Like, if that's what gay is...

TC: I know. I don't want to be it. I know, I know. But, you know, even – I remember my first blow job, giving my first blow job, and... You know, it's the first time you're having sex and – A), you're a guy. It's all you want. It's all you want from thirteen to eighteen is to have sex. And he was a hairdresser. It was awful. But nonetheless. You know, I remember putting my mouth around a dick, and I'm like, "Oh my god. Did I just give myself AIDS? What have I just done?" Even though we barely did anything. But even at that point, I would have been eighteen, and I think even at eighteen – so, I'm fifty now – I can't do the math – but at that point I knew that it was fluids. It was blood and fluids, and blow jobs were iffy.

BK: And even as there starts to be better information out there, it sometimes takes a while for that information to get to you or someone else, right?

TC: And there was no cure in sight, too. Like, I mean, I just thought this was something we were going to live with until kingdom come. So, it was always a part of – I just figured this was always going to be a part of our life. There was no – there was never a sense that anyone was trying to do anything to stop it or cure it. It was just "Too bad, so sad. Talk to you later."

BK: So, that was your sense of what was going on in mainstream, governmental, medical...?

TC: We were garbage. [laughs] And we were getting what we deserved. Never – never felt anything but. However, I will say this: my last year of high school, my cousin died of AIDS. And he – and that was another... Again, all this stuff is happening. And I had a good sense that he was gay, and at the time when he was getting really sick and losing the weight, his – the rumour, what was being told from the family was that he leukemia. And – because we were Catholic and if they said that he died of AIDS, he would not have been buried in consecrated ground, so they had to keep it on the down-low. And he was like an altar boy – the whole nine yards. And I do remember going to his funeral and seeing all these gay men – like, you could spot them because they were the only men with shoulder pads [laughs] in the church. And I was scared, and I was like, "Oh my god." That was the moment when I was like, "Oh my god. What am I...? What's happening? My life hasn't even started and I already feel like I'm at death's door." But that said, my mom after the funeral said, "No matter what, you can always come home." And it was – and

I just understood that to mean, “I know what you are. This could happen to you. Don’t be afraid.” Yeah.

BK: Wow. That’s pretty powerful, given the context.

TC: It was, given the context. Yeah.

BK: We’ve heard lots of stories about guys – well, going to funerals is a big part of this for a lot of guys, and sitting on one side of the funeral is the gay men and on the other is the family. So, it’s interesting to hear your experience of being on the other side of that, sitting with your family.

TC: But even still, I remember that... Like, even talking with another cousin, who I thought was pretty progressive because she was a hairdresser – she would have known tons of gay guys. And we were talking about our cousin – I’ll just leave his name out...

BK: Sure.

TC: ... And she was like, “Oh. Well, you know he died of AIDS, right?” Like, she was telling this like, “You know he died of AIDS, right?” And I was like, “Yeah, I kind of figured that.” And she’s like, “Yeah, I guess there was something wrong with his life that he just didn’t feel fulfilled.” And I was just like, “Is that what you think? Is that what you think this is about?” Like... [laughs] So, that was kind of startling, but I mean, she never said anything mean or derogatory about gay people.

BK: So, that was probably your first personal exposure to what AIDS looked like.

TC: Yeah.

BK: That must have been very hard.

TC: Yeah, it was shocking, ‘cause he was like – you know, my dad was always saying, “Why can’t you be more like your cousin?” And I was always thinking, “Oh my god, you have no idea.” [laughs] So yeah. It was – and it was – and I was also having a fight with my best friend – my gay best friend from high school because I just kind of disappeared from school to kind of go to the funeral. And he was like, “Oh, what’s going on?” And I told him. And we immediately buried the hatchet. And it was just kind of like this [groans], where we were just kind of – it was that – let’s take a break from the party. Let’s just be kids for a little bit.

BK: When you get to Toronto, was the epidemic starting to show up really visibly at the time?

TC: It was there. I mean, I remember seeing Casey House, which was the hospice, but I didn’t actually see... Like, I would go to – I would go to the bars and stuff like that, but I don’t remember seeing anyone who looked ill. But our body types were different too. Like, we weren’t as buff, it was okay to be a little thinner. A lot of guys were wearing makeup. Even if you weren’t like New Wave, or whatever, guys were still wearing makeup – like, they were enhancing their beards with whatever, and doing a little bit of – they looked great in the light and

then you'd get them home and you're like, "Oh my god." [laughs] There was one time – like the – like, there was one time where I went home with a guy and I saw this thing on his dick, and I didn't know what it was, and I was like, "Uh, okay... No. I'm not going to do this." And then there was another time where a guy wanted me to fuck him without a condom, and I'm like, "I just can't." Like, it was – it was kind of weird, and he... Yeah, it was awkward, because he was like, "I'm sure it's fine," and I was like, "No, I can't do that."

BK: That information about safe sex – that was very much already out there at the time?

TC: It was out there, yeah. It was. There were condoms everywhere – I mean, I remember condoms being readily available. I remember lots of posters. I mean, no one was shy about it in the bars. It wasn't like, "Oh, it's going to hurt our business." And I went to the tubs, too, quite frequently – I was quite frequently there. And there was tons of information – it was there. It wasn't – it was not hidden. You knew what you were getting into.

BK: It's not the same type of information but it's a very specific type of information that was getting out there, I guess.

TC: Yeah, it was. I couldn't tell you what the posters looked like at this – I mean, they were very '80s, of course, and kind of stylized. But, it was weird because I saw one – like, I saw a poster that I used to see at one of the tubs – maybe it was even at one of the tubs. Like, I haven't – not to be puritanical, but I don't go there anymore, just because... whatever. But I think I was at one within the last decade and I recognized the poster from, like, the 80s. I was like, "Oh my god, that poster's been around for a long time." [laughs] But yeah, there was – it was there, plus all the Bruce Weber photos, and stuff like that.

BK: And as that information was getting to you, it sounds like your sexual behaviour was influenced by exposure to this information.

TC: It was. And you got more comfortable with it, too. I mean, you just kind of had to – I mean, I was shy and insecure. I had – I mean, I still have coke bottle glasses, and I was this kid who had been pretty much ignored through high school, and then I got contact lenses and started going to the gym and was getting lots of attention. I had – plus, you didn't have – you know, it's not like we had a movie that taught you how to gay date, you know what I mean? [laughs] I was eighteen and I was ripe for the picking, and, you know, I was preyed upon by some nasty men. I had some great dates – I had some... You know, it was spectrum of everything. But I didn't know what I was doing, I just – all I knew was that I could not get – like, there was no way I was going to let anyone fuck me. Like, I was like, "That's not going to happen." I figured if I just kind of kept it to oral, I should be okay, and that was kind of my guiding principle. And I never swallowed and – you know, that was all you had. And you kept a condom with you. [laughs]

BK: Having talked to other guys now, people definitely reacted to that information in different ways, so it's interesting to see in your case that your behaviour was so impacted and influenced by that information. Moving back to Vancouver, when you started working at Doll & Penny's, was the epidemic showing up here at the time, or was it still fairly under the radar for you?

TC: A little bit of both. So, it was the first time that I would look at – like, ‘cause we had customers coming in wheelchairs. So, during the day, because it was so close to St. Paul’s, the nurses would come in and that was – I mean, we gave them a discount, too – it helped. And they would come in in their uniforms, so you’d get a sense of what was actually happening. And then you had these people on disability, so you’d actually see people getting rolled in and on wheelchairs, or being helped. So, you did see it. It was definitely there. But what I didn’t know was that most of the people I worked with were infected. I had no idea. And I didn’t know until one of them died. [laughs] And I was – I had no... He looked – he was so young. He was, like, maybe twenty-three, and you don’t realize how young twenty-three is when you’re twenty, you know. And... No, actually, he got progressively sicker – that was it. And he was – when I met him, he was this lovely young man and he was just so chipper. And I adored him. I wanted to date him. I wanted to be his boyfriend. And then, as the – as the virus kind of took control, it was harder for him to work. He had to cut back on shifts or he couldn’t finish a shift, and he was getting frustrated with himself, and I kind of felt that he was mad at us for being healthy.

So yeah, that was... And then it happened and it was just so... He’d been gone for a while and it was just – and I was in Victoria with a co-worker, and then we found out – someone called up – I don’t even know how we found out. It wouldn’t have been a cellphone. Maybe he just – I can’t even remember. But yeah, we found out and... No, I remember now. So, what had happened was I was at home. I lived in the Holly Lodge, which was literally just down – up this street, and my boss called me, and she was like, “[name] died. I had to tell his best friend. Can you just come and take over his shift after I tell him?” And so... I was like, “Okay, just give me a minute.” So, I processed and then I got myself together, and then just went to the restaurant and pretended I was just having a coffee. And then my boss pulled this other waiter off the floor and she told him. But I could hear him just fall apart. And then I just got up and went to work. I did the shift... And then that was one of the few nights that we actually closed the restaurant because no one could work and no one could do it. So yeah, that was the first time.

But it was there. I mean, we had fundraisers all the time and Bill Monroe was, of course, always there doing a show. So... and we had... yeah. You could see it – it was the first time you actually saw it. And people I worked with, it was so funny because I lived so close, people would call me and say, “Hey, I have to go to this appointment.” And I never even clued into what was going. [laughs] I was so young and so daft. And what they were doing – they were going to St. Paul’s and there was some sort of – I don’t know what – they were inhaling something. I don’t know what it was. But they were like, “Hey, can you just cover behind the – cover my tables for, like, an hour, and you can keep the tips.” And I was like, “Yeah, sure, whatever.” Because I was young and I needed the money – I was having a good time. Didn’t even occur to me what was going on – I had no idea.

BK: This wasn’t a one-time incident...

TC: It got progressively worse. It just – I think we lost three people – we lost three staff members in one year.

BK: Oh my god.

TC: And you could see it in the – you could see it in the clientele. There was, I think, '90 – '89 or '90 – there was one winter where it was just awful. It was just like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And it was like, “Did you hear about...?” Or... And they would have wakes at the – they would have wakes at the café all the time, because that would be their favourite place. So, they would come in with urns, which is funny now, but it was like, “Oh my god, there’s a dead body in the café right now!” [laughs] And, yeah – so it was there. You just couldn’t forget that it was there. But – and the nurses... And I do want to say, if anything comes out of this, I just think gay white men need to know how much lesbians did for us, because they saved our asses. It was the lesbians that did all the work. They did all the heavy lifting. We were dying and they took care of us. We owe them everything.

BK: Thank you for putting that out there. Are there any things that come to mind when you think about the contributions that lesbians made, because we’ve heard this from other people, too.

TC: They were predominately the nurses on the ward. They took care of their gay buddies – so they fed them, they housed them – a lot of homecare. They were sober and they weren’t – ‘cause the thing was, a lot of gay men were basically, “Well, we’re all going to die. I may as well go out burning.” And they were kind of the – they were the voice of reason. And, you know, some of them were mothers and some of them had children, and yeah... They just – they were the parent when a lot of gay men weren’t – couldn’t even take care of themselves. But yeah, a lot of them worked in – at St. Paul’s and a lot of them were nurses. I knew a lot – not knew personally but I knew of, and they would come in in their, you know, work boots and scrubs, and yeah. I have very vivid memories of that.

BK: Gay men and lesbians haven’t always been that – haven’t always worked together, actually.

TC: No, it was pretty segregated. And I admit being – you know, I did not help, I will say. I mean, I didn’t antagonize, I didn’t stoke the fire, but basically gay men lived in the West End, gay women lived on Commercial Drive. [laughs] And that was kind of it. And we kind of mingled at places like Doll & Penny’s and at pride, but you know. I would go to the Lotus occasionally and I didn’t feel unwelcome, but I didn’t feel comfortable there, even though there were guys there, but it was – you know. And I would go to, like, Celebrities. Maybe the Dufferin – the Dufferin was probably a little more integrated. Celebrities was, meh – mostly gay guys. Yeah, there was a place called Benjamin’s, which is closed, which was along the lines of Doll & Penny’s. But yeah, other than sports and Dimpy’s and the Lotus and the Heritage Hotel – I think those were kind of the places that were – and Dufferin.

BK: I guess in one sense, there is a coming together of the community in a way that there hadn’t been.

TC: Yes. Yeah. But even then, I don’t think it was really appreciated. It was funny because it wasn’t until I was kind of researching the time myself, because I wrote a lot of letters and I kept a lot of letters, and it wasn’t until the 90’s – like, ten years, fifteen years later when I actually looked at what I had written, and I was like, “Oh, I didn’t even pick up on that.” So yeah, it was – and it was – I’m embarrassed – I was definite embarrassed that I didn’t thank more people for what they did or didn’t even recognize what they were doing. But at the same time, it was just

what you did, you know what I mean? Like, if someone was in need, you just helped them out. Like, I don't know. It wasn't an option. You just did it.

BK: So, AIDS was showing up in all sorts of different ways. There were your co-workers, which was obviously very close to home for you, but also customers might just not be there anymore, all of a sudden.

TC: Yeah, and you didn't know what was going on. The way I described it to a friend – I was working with someone early-2000s. I moved back to – I was living in San Francisco for a bit and I ended up working in a coffee shop when I first moved back here. And someone – he was in his early-20s, and we were – it was Melriches I was working at. I was working at Melriches and the place was kind of busy that night. And he was like, “Hey, so what was the AIDS crisis like?” And I said, “Okay, look around. Now, wipe out half of those people, and that's what it was like.” And he was like, “Really?” And I was like, “Really.” It was – ‘cause there was nothing. All you had was a hope and a prayer, and some pretty cooky remedies. I mean, people were trying everything, like a combination of – I remember, like, Vitamin C, garlic, and something else – that was the regiment that everyone was kind of – over-the-counter regiment. But I have no idea what medications people were taking at the time and what was keeping them going. And it was weird just even looking back on who survived and who didn't, because you can't say – like you couldn't say, “Well, this person lived a cleaner life and made it through,” because it wasn't that. It was all sorts of things. Like, I knew people who were pretty heavy drinkers and I saw a picture of one of them now and he looks like a body builder. And you're like, cleaned up well, A), but that's not who I would have thought would survive. And even then – I had a good friend who is now a Buddhist monk – I won't mention his name. I remember him saying – we were talking about the crisis, and I don't know when it – probably like, '90-'92 – and even he was saying, “Well, you know, when the crisis hit, it was always the guys that were getting gonorrhea that got it first.” And I was like, “Dude, that's pretty harsh [laughs] to say.” Like, very judgmental. I was just like, wow. And this was a guy who, like, photographed men naked all the time. I'm like, “You're kind of slutty too.” [laughs] So, I don't know. Where do we draw the line?

BK: That's very disturbing because it's not that far off from the mainstream, conservative narrative of “you did this to yourself.”

TC: And just even hearing – like, there was a lot of little, subtle digs like that. So, I was dating a guy who was kind of – I don't know what his trip was, but he was, like, wealthier and an “A gay” – let's just call him an “A gay.” And he was talking about someone I knew who was not infected – I knew for a fact he was not infected. But he hung out at – there was a Starbucks on Denman St. where, kind of – you know where the cupcake shop is? There used to be a Starbucks and that was where the gay guys went for coffee on the way back from the beach. And he was – I don't know, we were driving by in the car and he was like, “Uh, look at those gays with...” I can't remember what he said but he was talking about someone I knew and how they were HIV, and he said, “Uh, I just don't want to be one of those people.” And I was like, “Well, this is not going to last.” But it was just subtle – it just... I don't want to call it classism, but just the discrimination within the community was – it was there. It was subtle but you heard it. And even when he had – like, when we went to the information session – and I'm not calling out – I'm going to say this with all due respect. And there was an individual there who was talking about,

“Hey, I had a great time. I was going out and dancing and...” And I ended up meeting him later at a – just by fluke – and we were talking about how we were at the same place, and he was like, “I don’t know why everyone made it sound so depressing. I was having a good time.” And I was like, “Yeah, you were dancing and other people were fighting.” Like, yeah, that is your perception, but that’s not what it was. It was everything. So, yeah, I think a lot of people were turning a blind eye to it, and while mostly the poor people, mostly the trans and the drag queens were actually fighting the good fight. And yeah... White guys have a lot to – we got some compensation to do, that’s all I have to say. Seriously, it’s – when you look back, especially in light of the culture right now... And as a white guy, as a – if I took a voice lesson, I could probably “pass” for straight more than I do – we should’ve done more.

BK: You talked about some of the negative things that were being said within the community. Is that a form of HIV stigma?

TC: Definitely a form of stigma, because I think – in retrospect, I think too it was... yeah. It was. I think there was a certain class of people that thought that they were immune to it. And just even – and again, I’m saying this with all due respect, I’m just telling you that these are the things that I heard, these are my experiences. So, I went to a fundraiser for Friends for Life back – way back in the day – and it was being held in a condominium – I don’t want to say where the condominium is because this person still lives there. And I was there with “A-gays,” not that I’m one – I just happen to know a few. And I was like, “Oh, what are we going to?” And it was – my friend said, “It’s an AIDS fundraiser for rich people.” And that was my first impression of Friends for Life, because what was happening was – and again, I’m saying this with all due respect – some of it is hearsay. The wealthier men in the community did not want to be in a waiting room with drug addicts and drag queens at St. Paul’s, and they wanted their own thing. To that point, Friends for Life has evolved. It was – it became something completely different, but even then I was like, “A fundraiser for rich people? [laughs] I’m a bartender! What am I doing here?” [laughs] So, yeah. But it was very stigmatized, definitely. And on class, too. You know, it was – I mean you could spot – I mean, you were either a waiter or you worked in an office, it felt like. I don’t know what it’s like now – I couldn’t tell you. It seems like, I don’t know, but yeah, if you were server, you were kind of a “thing.” And if you were not, you were pulling the strings.

BK: It’s important to not just fall into this overarching narrative where everybody in the community just came together and loved each other.

TC: No, no, no, no, no. There was a lot of... Even within Doll & Penny’s, I mean, there were people who were still in this community – who I just saw the other day – who were barred from the café for saying mean things about AIDS patients. Yeah, there was a lot. It was not – I mean, it was... I would say that we were definitely more supportive of each other back then. We had to be. But it was not Shangri-La. It was not, you know, where Wonder Woman came from. It was a divisive community.

BK: We can certainly come back to the topic of stigma if we feel like it, but let’s switch to something nicer. [laughs] You mentioned how drag queens and trans folks and working-class

folks were kind of at the center of some of the responses to the epidemic. What did some of those community responses look like?

TC: There were the protests themselves. I'm trying to think of one in particular, but I can't – I can't. Like, I can't think of... And it just felt like we were always protesting, but I can't – I drank a lot back then. I can't think of one in particular, but I mean – like, pride was much smaller then, so that was kind of the big opportunity to kind of get information out. There was the Dogwood Monarchists Society was [sic] very instrumental in raising money and awareness. *Angles*, so – which was this shitty little monthly – maybe, I don't know, bi-weekly – I think it was monthly. And there was a lot of people on welfare, too. Like, there wasn't a lot of work, and there was a lot of sex trade going. Again, like, people I knew were – like, people I worked with were working the streets for extra cash. So, what were they doing specifically? I'm trying to think of... I know a lot of drag queens, so, I mean, it was mostly fundraisers. For drag queens, it was, like, Miss Gay Vancouver and it was the ball. I don't know, it just felt like we had a fundraiser at Doll & Penny's every other week. I mean, we were constantly raising money for that. And there was Easter Sundays – I don't know what her sexual orientation is but I just know that – and she's not – I don't know what she does for a living, I don't know what her economic background was, but it was... You know, she was just doing this thing out of her house. There was – so, Bill Monroe's roommate – and I feel awful that I can't remember his name – so, he was the head of PWA and he started PWA. So, he was very active in kind of building a network. The government itself, I can't remember who was premier. I think – oh, it was Vander Zalm! Oh, it was Vander Zalm. How could I forget? [laughs]

BK: Oh, it sure was. [laughs]

TC: Jesus Christ. How could I forget? Yeah, I remember – yeah, they would target him quite a bit. Yeah. I honestly can't remember anything specific, but yeah. It was always them. I mean, it was always like Bill, his roommate, Easter, Amilda May [sp?] – always – Sushi Bar was always out there. Oh, Tiny – and the guy that ran The Castle – he was very instrumental, and I can't remember his name. He was very instrumental. In terms of what they did, in terms of, like, taking the fight to the man, I can't remember anything specific off the top of my head, but it was there.

BK: We've had a few people mention that they've heard second-hand that drag queens were very involved in the response, so it's interesting to hear you say first-hand that they were definitely involved in the response. "I was there."

TC: They were definitely responding. No, they were – and you know, it wasn't necessarily – it was raising money, you know. But they were effected, too. I mean, like, my friend [name], he was one of those people. He was a waiter, a sex trade worker, a drag queen. He made clothes for people. You know, it was – but it was money, because we just assumed that money was going to solve the problem. Like, "Oh, we've got to raise money." I'm just having this realization now. Like, "Oh, we'll just raise money and that will cure it, or something." I don't know. Who even knew where the money was going – well, it was going to support services, but still it was like, "We've got to keep on raising money," and yeah... Like, it just seemed like you were constantly giving a dollar to this person, another dollar to that person. But even with – and this is a bit of a

digression... Watching people – like, there was one guy. Like, he was *so* good-looking, and watching him deteriorate until he ended up on the street. And you were like, “Oh, that’s pretty harsh.” So, it was stuff like that. And that’s – sorry, I don’t know where that came from. But yeah. Yeah, it was just all about money and raising more money. Yeah.

The Gay Games helped though – I will say the Gay Games helped raise awareness. And it was probably the first time in B.C. where I felt like we were actually treated like human beings. And I remember things – I noticed the change in everything – in how people gay people were treated and in how seriously the epidemic was being treated. I was reading an editorial in *The Province* and this woman was having a hard time. She was struggling with watching the Gay Games happen, and she was talking with her friend and they were behind two men that were holding hands. And she was like, “I just don’t know how I feel about two men holding hands,” or “I don’t know how I feel about my kids seeing two men holding hands.” And her friend was like, “Would you rather see them fighting?” And I was like... It worked. I was just like, “Oh, this is going to change.” So, that was the first glimmer of hope, I think.

BK: Because it was just such a big gay event?

TC: You got to see what the world was going to be like. It was like – like, the Gay Games were like what today looks like, with not as many gay people. But it was like, “Oh, we’re not freaks,” and I felt like a fre-... Like, even though I was out and I had a decent life, or whatever, I still felt like a freak. I mean, you know, I always looked over my shoulder. I just felt like, “Oh, this could end at any minute.” So yeah. You were constantly being reminded that you are the “other” and we are the chosen ones. So...

BK: In the midst of this horrible, horrible epidemic, it was this kind of party – excitement.

TC: And everyone descended and it was amazing. I mean, they filled up – the opening ceremonies filled up B.C. Place. And it was glorious. It was perfect. It was amazing. We should do it again. [laughs] Now.

BK: I’d like to see that, yeah.

TC: It was great, and you got to see sports that you never saw. And people went to it.

BK: Were you involved or did you have a sense of what ASOs were doing at the time locally?

TC: I’m sorry?

BK: Were involved in what...

TC: AIDS service providers?

BK: Yeah, AIDS organizations.

TC: I wasn't directly. I was mostly donating. Yeah, I didn't test positive until the late-'90s, so I didn't have to use them. Yeah, so I didn't have a lot of... The only thing – I mean, I went to see people at St. Paul's and stuff like that, but...

BK: Like friends and colleagues?

TC: Yeah. So – god, I feel bad that I can't remember what – I guess it was the tenth floor [of St. Paul's] or whatever where – that's where you went.

BK: So, you found yourself... Well, I don't want to put words in your mouth. Did you find yourself in a caregiving role in any of those instances?

TC: Yeah, you helped out with money, because a lot of people that were doing the caregivers were roommates and – I didn't have any roommates, so I would pitch in where I could. So, I'd look after people and I'd visit them in the hospital. I'd go with them to appointments when they needed me to. I'd lend money. I would take people out for lunch when they were broke. And just have a good time, you know what I mean? Because all you could do was – sometimes all you could do was smoke a joint or take some mushrooms, and just not think about it. [laughs]

BK: And if you were HIV positive and you were experiencing a lot of stigma in the community, just having somebody that you could be with and socialize with, and not have that be the front-of-mind thing, would be kind of nice, I imagine.

TC: Yeah, it would. But they would – I mean, people would go to Doll & Penny's for that. And like I said – even Little Sister's was kind of a spot. You know, it was – you could go there and hangout and nobody would kick you out. Yeah, I don't even know where PWA was at the time, but I never actually – you know, I didn't need the services, so... And I guess the Centre was another place where you would go?

BK: You mentioned in Toronto you were engaging with some of the information that was being put out there by AIDS service organizations. Was that something that continued in Vancouver?

TC: Yeah, definitely. So, we had – in Doll & Penny's we had a whole wall just dedicated to HIV information, and it was basically PWA's wall, if I'm not mistaken. And *Angles* – always had the latest, so they would give you the updates of what's going on and what they heard. And Little Sister's was a good resource, because they had the magazines. And of course, Dr. Peter on CBC. You know, everyone watched that – you watched that. It was just kind of like – I know, it was like *Riverdale*, but not... Well, no, that's not true. Yeah, you'd just watch the stuff. And then there was *Gayblevision* – and so, there was – I couldn't tell you a specific episode. But I watched Dr. Peter regularly. It was engaging, 'cause, you know, you felt like you were going through it.

But even my first boyfriend in Vancouver – he was a go-go dancer – I mean, he tested positive like two weeks after I started dating him, and it was – that was kind of crazy. And he was telling me the information that his doctor gave him, and it didn't last. It was too hard, it was too much, I was too young. And he was also on drugs, which didn't help. But – and it just didn't click. But, you know, it was hard, 'cause it was like, "Oh, I can't dump him." [laughs] And I'm just being

honest but it was just kind of like you're in this situation where it's not going well to start and then he tells you, "I just tested positive." So, you comfort him. And then you're getting this second-hand information from the doctor, because this was the first person I had slept with who I knew was positive. And you want to be there for them, but at the same time, it's like, "I'm too... This is not going to work." So yeah. I don't even know how – oh... yeah... Yeah... And I accidentally "outed" his HIV status by accident. It was awful. It was just awful, 'cause basically we were sitting around after work and somebody talked about, "Oh, I heard so-and-so's positive. You should be careful." And I confirmed it without realizing I confirmed it, and then it got back to him and then – considering we didn't have cellphones, it was amazing how fast news got around, that's all I can say. And he flipped out. I thought he was going to hit me. And then we both just started crying, and then it was over. That doesn't answer the question of the information, but it was... But, you know, again, you had to remember we were so young – we were twenty. Like, when I think – you know, I have nephews and nieces in their twenties, and I'm like, "Oh my god, we were dealing with a plague!" How did we...? It's amazing that there's any of us left, that's all I can say. [laughs]

BK: Yeah, how did we even make it through?

TC: I don't know. I don't know.

BK: That's one of the big questions, because it is incredible that as a community we were able to navigate this. Not to say that there wasn't a tremendous amount of loss and not to say that we came out stronger necessarily than before, but we made it through.

TC: We did. No, we were definitely stronger than before. We are definitely a resilient community and, whatever people say about us, we're stronger than any straight white man, with all due respect. [laughs]

BK: Your role at Doll & Penny's – did that ever border on being a caregiver, even just in that space?

TC: Yeah, it did. You had to show compassion without being overt about it, 'cause no one wanted – everyone knew what was going on. No one wanted your pity, so you had to treat them as if they weren't eighty pounds – as if they could, you know – that they didn't need help cutting their food. You just – you just knew what to do. I don't know, it's hard to describe, but they were – a lot of them would just come there and it was the only normal thing that they did sometimes. Like, a lot of them would come in at a certain time and it was – they knew they were dying, and that was the hardest part is that they knew it was coming. So, you just did what you could and then, sometimes they'd say, "Tony, I don't have any money." And I'm like... "I'll just use the D&D fund," or whatever. Or they would tell you, "Well, I don't have any money and I'm hungry," and you'd just do it. You had to. And it wasn't my money, I didn't care – fuck it all. The place was making a million dollars a year – it was like, they could spare it. But I do remember a co-worker, and it was the night of the ball. The ball, back in the day when it was at the Commodore Ballroom, was amazing. It was – it was just so cool. And I was working the bar after the ball, and everyone was coming in. And one of my colleagues, he was kind of at the end, and there he was in drag and he was thin as a rake. I don't know. He just looked so thin and he

was standing there waiting with everyone, and he could have skipped the line and just sat anywhere. And I was like, “[name], what are you doing here? Like, you could... You know... privileges.” And he was like, “I figure this is my last ball and I just kind of want to experience it like everyone else.” And it was – you know, it was one of those moments where it was like, “God, I can’t believe you just said that,” but at the same time it was like, “Good for you. Hopefully this won’t be the last one.” And it was. You know, it totally was.

But yeah, I mean, they were looking for an escape and you had to give it to them. And it’s what we did, you know. Sometimes – even if it was just to treat them like a person – you know, sometimes you had to reprimand them because they were getting out of hand and it was a wild place, and you had to keep them in line. But even in terms of – I remember I was... And again, I was very young and I didn’t know who – I didn’t know what... I just worked in a place, right? I didn’t realize that – I couldn’t see what I looked like to everyone else. And I was having lunch with Bill Monroe one time and I made a joke about unprotected sex – I can’t remember what the joke was. And he was like, “You can’t make those jokes, because whether you realize it or not, people look to you and you have to – you have to toe the line.” I can’t remember what he said, but it was just kind of like, “Oh.” It was the polite dress-down, and it was like, “Oh, okay. I’ll do that then.” [laughs] So, it was – yeah.

BK: You were in a position of authority or power – or influence, I think.

TC: And I was healthy. I mean, I worked out a lot. I mean, I was a healthy, young, gay man who lifted a lot of weights and spent a lot of time at the gym taking care of his body and his looks, and stuff like that.

BK: Because the bars – the institutions in the West End – these restaurants and bars and clubs were major sources of information for people, but also socializing and all these things. So, you did have a lot of influence in a way, right?

TC: Yeah, I had no idea.

BK: You mentioned a little bit about mainstream responses to the epidemic. Do remember anything in particular about what that looked like in terms of what was going on outside of the community, and maybe what was being said from outside the community?

TC: Um... I remember going home not long after Magic Johnson was diagnosed. And my sister’s – someone said something really stupid, and that was the first time I said something to my family about like, “You guys have no idea what you’re talking about.” So, there was that – so, people didn’t understand the difference between HIV and AIDS. They didn’t realize that this [HIV] means you’re carrying; this [AIDS] means you’re very sick. There was the famous Benetton ad – so, there was that. There was, again, the TV movie *An Early Frost*. There was *Long-Time Companion*, which was kind of the first time that it was in a mainstream movie, or that straight people went to go to the movie. There were people like Sandra Bernhard. Like, Sandra Bernhard – I don’t know if you’re familiar with her, but she was a comedian. She was a gal-pal of Madonna. But she was really – and she was queer. And I would go back and listen to “Without You, I’m Nothing” – you’ll probably have to Google half her references, but you

should listen to it. She was kind of at the forefront. There was Madonna – there was Madonna and her campaign. There was Salt-N-Pepa and their little MTV campaign.

Mainstream... It would have been in things like *Vanity Fair* – you would have seen stuff like that in *Vanity Fair*. There was Rock Hudson and that was huge, and that was – yeah, that was kind of like – I mean, he was the first big one to go and it was the first actual discussion of transmission about – because he had that kiss with Linda Evans on *Dynasty*. [laughs] And there was some concern about whether he transmitted it to her. And then there was *Entertainment Weekly* – I remember vividly *Entertainment Weekly* did a spread on all the people that died of AIDS – all the people in Hollywood that died of AIDS, and it was pretty expansive. And this was early '90s and even then – so, that was around the time when *Beauty and the Beast*, the animated version, came out, and the composer died – or the lyricist died. And yeah, when he – oh, this is the first person that's won an Oscar that's died of AIDS, and you're like, "Shit, yeah. Totally." And then of course the red ribbon campaign. So yeah, it was there, but it was very liberal and very, you know – I mean, you wouldn't see Mulroney wearing a red ribbon. I mean, if Brian Mulroney talked about HIV, I don't remember it coming out of his mouth. I know Vander Zalm was pretty hostile – can't point to anything specifically. What else was there? Mainstream... The Dr. Peter.

BK: That was big too because it wasn't just – it was CBC.

TC: It was national. Everyone saw it. Yeah, those were kind of the big things. And MTV and MuchMusic, I mean I can't – MTV in the States definitely was promoting safe sex, just in terms of – you know, even heterosexual, because it wasn't straight. But I do remember when *And the Band Played On* hit the bestseller list and it was a book of – like, I remember that being discussed in the mainstream media, and Randy Shilts being interviewed on television. And also, I mean, even those – 'cause *Torch Song Trilogy* came out, and it was, you know, in the midst of this horrible crisis, was like the first real gay play, because before that it was just *Boys in the Band* – a play that I like. But nonetheless, that was kind of, you know, the ashamed gay and then you had this beautiful play by Harvey Fierstein. And then not long after *La Cage aux Folles* came out, which celebrated everything. And I actually just read a – I read a biography about Allan Carr, who produced *La Cage aux Folles*, and *Grease*, and *Can't Stop the Music*, and he – so, he produced *La Cage aux Folles*, which is about drag queens and whatever. And basically, the play was doing amazing – it was selling out and then it was like World AIDS Day and ABC News was doing "man on the street" interviews in front of the theatre where *La Cage aux Folles* was playing, and it closed shortly thereafter, 'cause people just started to put the two together. So, it was – and it was weird, I'd never even – you know, until I'd read it, it was like, "Oh, I didn't even think about that," 'cause it was huge. And even – I don't know if you've heard of a movie called *Can't Stop the Music* with the Village People. [laughs] It's terrible but you should see it. And it was – there's a scene in that, and it's something that I've just been researching – but there's a scene where a leatherman, he's auditioning to become one of the Village People. And the leatherman gets up on the piano and starts singing "Danny Boy" – that's his audition piece. That movie came out in 1980 and "Danny Boy" is a lamentful song, and I was like, "Oh, how curious." The leatherman was singing "Danny Boy," this Irish thing in the gayest movie ever. And then, right after, it was just like, boom. So yeah.

BK: Foreshadowing or something.

TC: It was. No, it was totally. It was eerie to see it. And Caitlyn Jenner is in it, too. It's a terrible movie [laughs], it's hard to watch, but just watch it. [laughs]

BK: I might just do that. That sounds like it has a lot of pieces I'll enjoy. You weren't positive at the time, but did you have a sense of – I mean, you were seeing nurses and healthcare providers coming into Doll & Penny's. Did you have a sense of what the medical response looked like in any way, shape, or form?

TC: I didn't have any specifics. I mean, I knew of AZT, but I also knew it wasn't working. There were a lot of crackpots. There was a lot of snake oil salesmen coming through town. There was – like I said, I just remember they were inhaling this mist and it was like a weekly treatment. Yeah, the combination of garlic – garlic tablets and vitamin C and something else – it was crazy, but people swore by it. But at the same time, everyone was still smoking and drinking – like, everyone was like puff, puff, puff. And then even just discussing it with my doctor was – you know, because you would just have the – you know, you would talk about it with your doctor. I'm like, "Oh, okay, well, how do I get it?" Because I was scared. So, he was like, "Well, what are you doing?" And he was like, "Okay, well that's pretty safe." And you have to remember too that the test took forever – it was two to three weeks – and when you were waiting for that, it was – it was stressful, it was really freaking stressful. Because it wasn't like, oh, you can prick your finger and poof. It was intense. And the first time I went, I went and got the test, waited the two weeks, go to get my results. My doctor isn't there – he's on vacation – and the substitute is like, "What are you here for?" I'm like, "Oh, I'm here to get my HIV test results." He's like, "Oh my god." He's like, "Okay." And then he's like, "Phew, it's negative." [laughs] And we were both like [sighs] – for both our sake. And that was just, like, over there. [laughs]

BK: If that wasn't in your job description, if you weren't working with gay men a lot, it would have been a tough job.

TC: But it was also too – like, I remember my first doctor. You know, because you were like, "Oh, I have to talk about sex," and he was straight. And I was like, "Okay, well..." And I remember asking him, "Okay, I'm gay and we're going to have these conversations. Like, how are you with this?" And he was like, "Relax, I'm fine. Don't worry about it." So yeah. Because you didn't know who to trust.

BK: And you had to have those conversations and you had to have them explicitly because...

TC: You did. Or else, I'm out the door. [laughs]

BK: Your life depended on those discussions.

TC: Totally.

BK: Because getting HIV testing at the time was very complicated for a lot of people, not just in terms of the duration of the time, but also the rationale of whether you would do it or not.

TC: Yeah. They psyched you up. Like, it wasn't like, "Okay, we're going to sit down and we're going to tell you what's going to happen." Like, there's a little counselling session before and then you did it, you know. And people didn't always go back for their results, so...

BK: I think some people had this idea – what good comes from me knowing this? There's nothing I can do to stop it, you know?

TC: Exactly. That was pretty much it. Like I said, there was... I didn't think we'd be here where we are today. As a bit of a digression – and this is kind of, I was out in – I was in San Francisco when – I guess '94 – I can't remember which year it was, but I was working in a gay bar in San Francisco. And I remember *The New York Times* called the bar and said, "How do you feel that there were no obituaries in *The Bay Area Reporter*." And I was like, "What?" And it was the first time – that first time when there were no obituaries. And I was like, "I'm literally hearing this from you. Let me go grab the paper." And it was. It was like, I – I couldn't believe it. I was like... "Wow." I never thought I would see the day – never, ever, ever thought I'd see the day. I just thought we'd be dealing with this forever. But I do worry that, in light of what's happening in the south and some of the things I'm starting to see here in Canada that it would not take much to go back to those grim days, so we have to be very careful... Sorry. [laughs]

BK: That's a really – I think that's accurate, too. And there's probably going to be some other health issue that comes down the pipeline eventually, right?

TC: And then what?

BK: What was it like to hear that news when you were in San Francisco that, "Hey, this actually looks like it has an ending?"

TC: So many emotions. It was – it was that whole thing that you thought about people who had just died two weeks before, and if they had just held on... You know, it was just like the margin of error was so close, and it was – and that was the thing. It was like, god! I mean, I remember – and it was a relief but not – skeptical though. It was like, "No, this can't be real." 'Cause it wasn't a cure and it's still not a cure. But it was – it was nice. But at that point, too, part of the reason I moved to San Francisco was I feel like I had a little bit of PTSD. So, I'd been working in this gay bar and I'd just – you know, I'd seen everything and I was, like, twenty-three. And I'd just see – it was like living through the Civil War. It was death, death, death, death – like, every time you turned around, someone was dying. And I went down to San Francisco with a buddy and we were sitting at Café Flore – there was a mural and it said "Life." And I was like – and I didn't even realize the cloud that was over my head. And two months later, me and my buddy just moved to San Francisco. We were like, "Fuck this, I'm getting the fuck out of dodge." Because they were in the process of recovering – like, they'd – whatever we had, they'd had a hundred times worse. And it really did feel like the phoenix coming – the phoenix and the fire... You know what I mean – you know the analogy – we've all seen Harry Potter. But it did and I needed it, and I just left and I didn't look back until 2003.

BK: Was that a form of burnout?

TC: Definitely a form of burnout, ‘cause it was – it was everywhere. It was... It was just everywhere and I was – I’m an approachable person, so people tell me their problems, and you know, there were days when I was like, “God, I don’t even have my rent and I’m, like, dealing with a life and death situation.” And I’m like... what do you say, you know? How do you tell someone that it’s going to be okay when deep down you know it’s not? So yeah. And even like – I had to go back to Toronto in ’94 to take care of a friend in his apartment, and it was awful. I mean – you know, he – there was this one point where we were in the hospital and he was talking about having sex again. And you’re like – and all I was thinking was, “[name], you’re not – you’re not getting out of this hospital.” Like, you can’t say that. And you’re like, “Yeah... [mumbles]” And you just – I read a lot of *Vanity Fair* to people because the articles were long and they often dealt with O.J. or celebrities or whatever. But that was my kind of go-to – like, I had a subscription to *Vanity Fair*, so while they were lying down I’d just read the cover story, and that usually seemed to get people through. But yeah, that was the thing – it was... And what was crazy, too, was – the thing about death is that people end up on death’s door, and you think, “Oh my god, this is it.” And then there’s always this recovery – it’s kind of crazy. They always come back and then it’s like nothing happened, and then they die. And I saw that with a lot of people. And I’ve been in the room with people when they died, and everyone talks about that “whoosh” of their spirit going through, and I’ve never experienced that. And it’s like, “Am I doing it wrong? [laughs] Did they just not want to whoosh through me?” But there are these patterns or things you see, and it’s a privilege to be with someone in that last moment. I don’t know what to say. It’s scary as fuck, but... I don’t know. It was a lot, again.

BK: I really can’t fathom it. You’d been through it enough by that point to know what the pattern was which was that people got sick and they don’t get better, and they die in not nice ways.

TC: Peaceful though. And it was interesting how the doctors had subtle ways of communicating that “We’re going to put this person out of their misery because they’re in a lot of a pain.” It was very subtle, because they couldn’t do it at the time. You know, it was usually with morphine. Yeah, there was a lot of compassion, a lot of confusion, and yeah. I mean, I remember – oh... I remember when my friend was in ICU and we were waiting – they wanted to take him off ICU – I can’t remember, but he had stated, “I don’t want to be on a life support system.” And his parents were coming and he didn’t like his parents, and the doctors were like, “We have to wait for – we can’t do anything until the parents come.” And my friend was like, “Fuck this, these aren’t his last wishes,” and she was going to pull the apparatus off him. The thing is, those apparatus go down, so if you pull it out, you could take out his throat. And I was the only one in the room, and I was like, “[name], no!” This thing is happening and you have to restrain this woman who has completely lost her mind, and it was like, “Holy shit.” And again, I’m twenty-four. [laughs] I don’t even know what the question was anymore. [laughs]

BK: To be honest, the questions aren’t nearly as important as – we’re just trying to find ways to prompt your story. I always think about how young the people who were dying were, but also how young – I don’t think as much about how young these people were who were thrust into these roles of responsibility, too. It’s not what you’re supposed to be doing when you’re twenty-four.

TC: And I have to admit, like, I look at – you know, millennials or whatever – kids in their twenties and they’re on their phones, and they’re all dressed to the nines. And I’m like, “Man, you guys have it *good*.” [laughs] ‘Cause that was not my scenario. It was like, doom and gloom. But I guess – I don’t know – I guess it’s not that much better.

BK: Oh, I think it’s a lot better. And it’s better because people in the community stuck together and got through this, right?

TC: But you know, at the same time, I was at a – kind of on that note, I was at a house party and there was a lot of young people there. And this guy was talking about getting married at twenty-seven, and you know. He was talking about love at first sight and they met on the dancefloor, and they got married not long after – whirlwind romance story. And me and my buddy who’s also in his fifties, we went for a drink afterwards, and I was like, “God, you know. It’s like they have no idea, and... You know, we went through all this shit.” And my friend said, “That was our job – to make it better.” [laughs] And I was like, “Oh, okay. Yeah, you’re right.” That was our role to play; you’re going to have a role to play; everyone’s going to have a role to play, so...

BK: It would be nice if that role were more acknowledged from time-to-time.

TC: [Laughs] Whatever. As long as people don’t forget, and that it could happen again very easily.

BK: Yeah. How did you get through this on a personal level? I know we talked about, like, “Oh my god, it’s crazy how the community got through this,” and it is crazy. But where did that personal resiliency come from? Where did you draw from? I guess moving to San Francisco was one solution in a sense.

TC: Good friends, you know. Oscar parties. [laughs] Games of UNO. Drank a lot. I had a good support network – I had an excellent support network. I mean, it was – you know, Doll & Penny’s was my family. I mean, those were – I mean, I worked with people of all different ages. I felt loved. I never felt unloved. Yeah, it was those people. They looked out for me – they totally looked out for me, and they knew I was young. You know, they would talk to me like a parent or a sibling and sometimes I’d “pooh-pooh” them, but in the end they were most often correct, so yeah. In terms of getting involved, you know, I swam – I did a little swimming. I played water polo for a bit and went to the beach. I knew a lot of people, even though it didn’t seem like it at the time. It’s weird because, you know, I’ll have visitors – like, family will come to visit and I’ll walk down Davie and people will say hello. And it’s like, “You know everyone.” And I’m like, “I don’t know. I wouldn’t say that, but I say hello to a lot of people.” Yeah, there was definitely a support network – not structured by any stretch, but yeah, mostly people that you worked with. I mean, even the Holly Lodge was kind of fun. Like, it was – the Holly Lodge was this happening place with lots of young people and you’d chat in the elevator, you’d have sex in the stairwell – it was great. It was good times. [laughs] And it was small, too. I mean, like – ‘cause the gay community was like, pretty much Denman to Burrard – it wasn’t huge. So, you pretty much saw everyone. You know, it wasn’t as big as it is today, because people tended to go east instead of west, and a lot people that went west didn’t stay long.

BK: How did this change the community in a larger sense? You mentioned earlier about the epidemic making the community stronger in some senses, or the community emerging from the epidemic stronger.

TC: We became a political force and became a voting block. And we became heard, especially in City Hall, and finally in the province. And we became respected, thanks in large part to St. Paul's. I think the epidemic brought Vancouver into the twentieth century. I think this was kind of a hickey town when I got here – it was pretty hickey. And I don't recognize Vancouver now from what I saw. And we cultivated a generation of leaders and activists. Like, I look at people at your age and the things that you're doing, and how you're organizing. And we didn't have that – like, people just kind of figured it out as they went along. So yeah. We've had some failures. I mean, it was sad to see Friends for Life kind of – who knows what happened – I don't know. But I think we learn to evolve, too. Like, even watching PWA becoming BC – I don't even know what it's called, that's how good things are – BC Positive Living, sorry. And how things kind of kept up with the times and how, you know – Easter Sundays is basically Loving Spoonful and how it's not just HIV, and now it's like, oh, this isn't just this problem. This is – we're speaking to a larger problem in general – not always heard, not always recognized, but just in...

You know, I worked for *Xtra* for a little bit and I've interviewed people, and even then there was a learning experience about how things have changed and how we have... You know, we're helping women – not to the extent that we probably should but... yeah. I think we grew up, and we can still have fun and we can still – you know, people can still go to a party but they can still own a condo, if they bought at the right time. But yeah, I just think it makes us more sensitive. And even as a person, you know – 'cause I'm getting older and I find myself even becoming more conservative, and sometimes I say things that my friends are like, "Oh, I can't believe you just said that." Yet, at the same time, I listen and I will change my opinion. I'm like, "Oh, yeah. I'm wrong. I'm totally wrong," and I have something to compare it to. So yeah, I'm – I can't speak for everyone in the community, but I'm definitely more empathetic and I can definitely see things from multiple points of view. And I think that's kind of one of the lasting legacies of it. And I think I appreciate drag queens way more than I did before, because I didn't when I was eighteen, nineteen. [laughs]

BK: Drag queens and trans folks have been at the center of almost all major gay historical moments, and yet we don't tend to give them their due.

TC: We just don't give them their due. And it's interesting, you know, when I was home back in May, all my sister wanted to talk about was Caitlyn Jenner, because it was the only trans person she knew, and she just couldn't believe... Because believe me, in 1976, Caitlyn Jenner was very attractive. [laughs] And, you know – and we had a great discussion about that. I was like, "Well, Caitlyn's probably not the person you want to – not probably the lesson you want to learn." But yeah, it was a door opening. But getting back to that point with drag queens and trans people – and lesbians! Like, seriously man, lesbians – it was – you know, it was... I don't know. I just wish we were better to each other, and not like it was openly hostile, but I just wish we'd mingled more. But even – like, I was on a softball team a couple years ago and there were no women on the team, and I was like, "Seriously, there's no women on this fucking team? This is

bullshit.” And even my experience that year was like – like, that was the last team I played with. I’m like, “Fuck this. If this is what it is, then screw that. No, I’m not playing.” [laughs]

BK: The gay male community can be a little bit sexist.

TC: Totally, totally. [laughs]

BK: How has the meaning of HIV changed for you over time? At Doll & Penny’s in the late-80s, early-90s, you were seeing many people dying from HIV and AIDS. What does it mean to you moving towards the present?

TC: Well, obviously it’s not a death sentence. It is a – I’m sorry, can you repeat the question one more time?

BK: How has the meaning of HIV changed for you?

TC: So, now it is – to me, it is – it still has a stigma. It’s not as bad. I have felt that even the stigma changed since 2003. I still feel that some people have – in this community – have a long way to go. I don’t feel that it’s as segregated. At the same time, I do feel that – I don’t know. I was reading online – I’m not a big online reader, but I read a profile that was like, “I’m clean and STD-free.” And I was like, “Really? People are still saying this?” So yeah, I would say that I am more – I think HIV is a form of enlightenment and I think if you can kind of grasp what it means in terms of our failings as a society and our strengths as a community, and our relationships with people who are ever-so-slightly different – differences that you cannot see – you are a better person for it – for getting to know it and for getting to understand it. Because the one thing – it’s the whole thing of – I’m HIV and a lot of people, when I tell them that, people are stunned, because people have a perception of what HIV looks like and what it means. And it was weird, my sister was just diagnosed with cancer and I was like – she was the first person I told when I got the results, and I was like, “Hey, remember like twenty years ago when I tested HIV? It’s literally the least of my problems right now.” So yeah, I – sorry, I’m not answering the question.

It is – HIV is... I just believe it is a form of enlightenment – I don’t know how else to describe it. It is like understanding the mysteries of humanity and – and I think if you can look beyond the virus and see what it means, again, as to who we are as people and how we treat each other, I think you’re better off. I think you’re going to be a better person – a better friend, a better lover, a better family member, a better member of the community – because it’s not just one thing. It’s not just compassion. HIV and AIDS happened for a reason: it was a failing of government; it was a failing of acceptance; it was a failing of just wanting to listen – and religion – sorry. But I’m going home to Toronto tomorrow and everyone’s like, “Oh, can you pray for this person?” I’m like, “I will send good thoughts, but I will not pray.” [laughs] So yeah, it is... And everything that you see right now – every time you hear Trump speak is how we got to where we were. And make no mistake about it: if something happens, we’re fucked. [laughs] Maybe not up here – I mean, whatever – Trudeau is Trudeau, but... But even still, like – you know, I know a lot of public health nurses, and I didn’t understand the fentanyl crisis until my friend was like – who is a public health nurse – and he was like, “Tony, it’s the new AIDS.” And as soon as he said that, I was like, “Oh my god, I had no idea.” And you know, someone I know who was in town was

talking about doing some MDA, and I was like, “Dude, you know fentanyl affects rich white guys too. We’ve been down this route. You should know better.” [laughs] Yeah.

BK: I think there is an interesting parallel with the fentanyl crisis and thinking about how some of this is very much socially-related. Marginalized groups being affected by health challenges.

TC: Everyone thinks it’s just – it is a carbon copy, because the only people that we talk about are the lowest common denominator, but you know, the yoga teacher was a perfect example of someone who succumbed to it. People are dying – you know, middle class people are dying of it, they’re just not putting it in the obituaries, and that’s exactly what HIV was like back in the ‘80s.

BK: I think I’m just about out of my main questions. One of the questions we like to ask near the end is if you have any advice for future generations of gay men – younger gay men – or newly diagnosed folks. Lessons learned from the epidemic, I guess.

TC: Newly diagnosed guys... No sudden changes. If you’re smoking, keep smoking. [laughs] If you’re drinking, keep drinking. You’ll figure it out – deep breaths. Deep breaths go a long way. Look to your friends. Be good to each other. Just remember, it could always be you. And don’t take anything for granted – anything can be taken away from you. Rights are just a signature on a piece of paper and all it takes is someone else to sign a different piece of paper. So, rights are not god given and they’re not – there is nothing in the world that says we have a right to do anything, so keep that in mind. That’s pretty much – I don’t know. Be good to each other. And laugh a lot. [laughs] And don’t do too many drugs. Do everything in moderation, go to school. [laughs] Get a good job.

BK: These are all good things to know.

TC: Things your mom would tell you. [laughs]

BK: I think that’s it for my formal questions, but we always like to leave some space to ask if you have anything that you wanted to talk about that we didn’t ask about or things that you thought we’d ask.

TC: There was one thing. There was also a lot of suicides. Like – so, there were people blowing their heads off when they got diagnosed. And that was kind of the only thing that we didn’t talk about. Like, I do remember someone, like, “Oh, [name] put a gun to – like, found out he was HIV and put a gun to his mouth.” And just even – yeah, that was kind of the big one. And just how even people were trying to convince you into having unsafe sex. And it was – there was one person in particular who I remember wanted to have unprotected sex, and I was like, “No, no, no, no, no, this is not happening.” And he was HIV – I mean, I didn’t know for a fact, but it was chilling after I found out. I was like, “Oh, Jesus.” Because, you know, with just the right amount of alcohol, it could have gone the other way easily. But yeah, it was – yeah, that’s kind of the big ones. I think you got the [laughs] – the tent pole stories.

BK: You’ve given us a lot of richness to work with here, really. So, unless you have anything else to add, I just want to thank you again.

TC: No problem. Thanks for doing this. This is great. I'm really glad.

[End of interview, 1:50:35]

[28 hours so far]