

“HIV in My Day” – Interview 27

February 20, 2018

Interviewee: Debbie (Hazel) Cardinal (DC); Interviewer: Sandy Lambert (SL); also present: Ben Klassen (BK)

Sandy Lambert: Okay, hi.

Debbie Cardinal: Hi.

SL: So, thanks for doing this interview.

DC: No worries.

SL: Maybe you would like to tell us where you come from.

DC: I come from Northern Alberta, a little reserve called Heart Lake. It's – I don't know how far from Edmonton, but it's northeast, but the reserve I live on is close to Conklin, Fort Chipewyan, so that's right up north.

SL: How did you end up in Vancouver?

DC: I ended up in Vancouver – this is all related to my HIV. Anyway, I got arrested in Kelowna for spitting on a police officer and I was really – I spit on him and I did some other stuff. However, they gave me two-and-a-half years for that and I went to the Fraser Valley in 2004, 2005, and then I got out at the end of 2007 – and the beginning of 2007. Then I went to the Island, the South Tzouhalem treatment centre, and then I came here. And it's – the first time I was ever here was when I got here, and I was on parole, and I was in a half-way house, Anderson Lodge.

SL: When were you first diagnosed?

DC: 1997.

SL: And where was that?

DC: That was in Saskatchewan – Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, I still remember.

SL: Did you stay there for a while?

DC: I knew I had it – kind of knew – and I didn't really want to go into that office that... 'Cause she was a First Nations nurse and the reserve that my kids come from are around there and I didn't want to deal with it. So, I just didn't stay and I just went to Regina – never really dealt with it until I finally got sick. And then when I got pneumonia, I was in Calgary and that's when I started – they said I had to go on meds and all this, and I just kind of blacked it out of my head. 'Cause I knew eventually I had to tell my kids, my family, and I didn't want to.

1
2 **SL:** So, you were only in Regina for a while?

3
4 **DC:** For about a year.

5
6 **SL:** And then you end up in Vancouver?

7
8 **DC:** I ended up in Kelowna to be near my kids so I could tell them. What year was that? 2005 –
9 yeah, the beginning of 2004, ‘5. So, from 1997 till then I just ignored it, tell nobody. I was just
10 scared, you know, and I would look at my, oh, is that a lesion? What should I do, what should I
11 do? And I started doing drugs, not caring. And then I came here and told my kids – I didn’t tell
12 my kids yet – wait for the story. I did not tell them, I did not tell my partner, I didn’t tell
13 anybody. And then, one of the health units called and said – I don’t know how they talked me
14 down, but they talked me down and said I needed to go to the nearest clinic, so I did. So, I went
15 to the clinic and they were really mean. They were really hoity toity, ‘cause I was in a shelter,
16 one night before just to stay, just to get my stuff started. So, I went to the clinic and the guy said,
17 “Well, you know you have HIV.” I said, “Yeah. What do we do from here?” He says, “I’ll refer
18 you to a doctor,” and that’s it. And then I tried to go back to that clinic to get extra help, ‘cause it
19 was starting to get cold and I was starting to, you know, and they refused me. So, I had to go
20 somewhere else – that is 2006, the beginning of 2005. So, they said we’ll send you to this
21 specialist doctor, some doctor in the hospital – they have an HIV clinic there. So, I started taking
22 my HIV meds then, but I was still doing drugs and just being reckless.

23
24 And I really wanted to get close to my kids ‘cause I never really was there in their lives for a
25 little while. And then I did go visit my kids and we started having a relationship, and I wanted to
26 tell then so bad. That year, the residential school money came out and my kids father took off
27 with another woman and left me with the kids and it was just totally – they were just totally
28 blindsided, because all they remember [undecipherable]... ‘Cause he was sober for a long, long
29 time and then he fell off. So, I got custody of the children and then the Ministry of Child and
30 Family Services were involved and the Friendship Centre, and I had a Native worker that would
31 come and take me around and shop, and she was really cool. However, they really wanted to tell
32 my kids – they said, “You need to tell your kids.” “Well, I will do it my way. I need an elder
33 there and I would like to have a smudge,” and that didn’t happen.

34
35 The morning of that day, my kids were ready to go to school and the social workers came. One
36 sat there – I can always remember, one sat there beside [name] and the other one sat there beside
37 dear [name], and he said, “Your mom has something to tell you.” My baby was twelve, my
38 youngest, and my boy was fourteen. And I said, “I’m sick, I have HIV,” and dear Michael got up
39 and said, “Oh, I knew it, I knew it. I knew you had it anyway,” and he was mad and he left. And,
40 my daughter didn’t really understand, and she says, “Mom, are you sick?” And I said, “Yeah, I
41 have HIV.” “Oh, you have that bad disease,” and she just didn’t understand. And then they left
42 and I had to deal with it. And to this day my kids won’t accept that I have HIV, because to them
43 it’s a death sentence – to them, they see it as me dying, so they don’t want to accept it. So, with
44 that I struggled really hard with them. I lost my kids and then I lost me and that’s how it
45 transpired coming to Vancouver. People around in Kelowna already knew I had HIV – the store
46 owners, ‘cause I used to shoplift – that was my income for my addiction. So, they would tell

1 every shop owner, "Be careful. She has HIV," and I didn't think they were supposed to do that.
2 And so, I had a rough time with that place and I was kicked out of every store. And I remember
3 one time they had the most wanted on TV and I had a warrant, and it said "Caution, she has..." –
4 on the TV thing - "...she has HIV." So, somebody seen it from the TV and reported me and then
5 I got picked up and then I got let out again. And then I was doing some stuff and then the cops
6 picked me up and they said, "You know, Ms. Cardinal, you are nothing but a toothless squaw..."

7
8 **SL:** [Gasp]
9

10 **DC:** "...We should take you up to Bear Creek." I remember that. I remember spitting on them – I
11 was so mad. And then he just threw me in the car and he said, "I'm gonna smack your head
12 against the wall when we get to the police station." And I didn't even have a warrant, they just
13 took me – they thought I had a warrant. And they left me in cells for a while and then they had
14 somebody come in from the health unit to give me a shot of something and it was antibiotics or
15 something like that. And they said, "Are you on meds?" The guy was really nice from the health
16 unit, he was really compassionate. Anyhow, yeah, he gave me a needle for something – I don't
17 know, and then I got out again. And then I didn't go to court, I didn't want to deal with it. I was
18 dealing with my kids and this and that and everything, and I was starting to feel sick. Like, my
19 feet were starting to hurt, 'cause I have neuropathy now on that foot – you know, the fungal stuff
20 you get. I had that and then I had shingles in the private area and they thought it was herpes. And
21 just the way they treated me was not a good thing in the emergency in Kelowna – no. And then I
22 remember going to Kelowna, just to say I'm exhausted, I'm tired, I don't feel good, I'm
23 depressed, so they stuck me in the psych ward. I remember that. They shot me up with something
24 and I fell asleep for a couple days in a padded room. And I got out and I started doing my shit
25 again, and I finally got caught. And my kids went to wherever they went to. And then they said,
26 "Oh, it would be a good idea if you guys went to a family treatment centre." I went to Nenqayni
27 in Williams Lake – it's for girls – and I couldn't say even to them in that treatment centre I had
28 HIV, 'cause after I did tell them, everybody acted different to me. And my daughter was so
29 embarrassed, she had her hoodie over her face, and I wanted to say sorry to her but it didn't work
30 out that way.

31
32 And after that, everything changed. Except for a couple people – they come up to me and hug me
33 and stuff. But I'm not done yet. After that, got out. I didn't make it. My kids went elsewhere.
34 Then I got picked up for those charges, then I got two-and-a-half years because they said the
35 police officer had to go on a two week mental health break cause he thought he was going to get
36 HIV, 'cause I spat at him right there [points to side of her head] and he didn't get... So, I got
37 two-and-a-half years. Well, I went to FVI and I have a little bit of an attitude, you know. I got
38 there and surprising – this is 2006, beginning of 2006 – anyway, for jail, not knowing anything
39 about HIV. They had nothing, nothing. And they had to educate, 'cause it's houses right – not a
40 big institute, they just put you in houses – medium, house one, house two, house three. Well, I
41 went to house one. Well, they were scared. "Is it okay if we touch the utensils? Do we have to
42 wash the utensils? Do we have to do this, do we have to do that?" And I said, "You guys,
43 really?" And I got in a big argument with one of them, and the knives are connected to the wall,
44 which made me so pissed off, I grabbed it and threatened her. And then they changed me to
45 another secure facility. And then I said, "I'm having difficulties with this. You are saying I'm the
46 only girl in the institution that has HIV? I don't think so." I said, "Do you have anything for

1 people with HIV here?” Nothing. Nothing. They didn’t even know about the meds. So, Dr.
2 Farley – he’s a black guy, for the Downtown Eastside, I remember meeting him for the first time
3 and my viral load was 30. Yeah, I didn’t even know I was that sick.

4
5 **SL:** Your CD4 count?

6
7 **DC:** Mhm, and my viral load was 1200, I still remember that. And he said, “That’s not good.”
8 And I didn’t feel good – I was underweight and I didn’t have any teeth, and I was a shell. And
9 then he came in, started me up on meds. I was sick on those meds and I had crazy ass dreams –
10 like, really frightening dreams, and it made me sick. Yeah, and it just – trying to get somebody in
11 there to talk to me about HIV took months, ‘cause I didn’t know anything about HIV. And then I
12 finally, finally went and got somebody from – I think she was from Abbotsford, Positive Living
13 Fraser Valley, and she came in and I talked to her. And we had long conversations, and I cried to
14 her about what I’m telling you, and I said I never really opened up about this. And I said this
15 place doesn’t even know anything about HIV, and I don’t even know much about HIV, ‘cause I
16 was starting to get a hump right here [touches the back of her neck]. And I asked her all these
17 questions and it went away ‘cause there is a certain med you take, I guess. I don’t know what
18 med it was but it makes you have those deposits – calcium deposits? Yeah.

19
20 **SL:** D4T.

21
22 **DC:** Well, we stopped that one quick and then I went on this other one that didn’t agree with me
23 – took me off of that one. And then they put me on another one and that one was okay until I got
24 out and I wasn’t – I was not adhering. It’s too complicated. They helped me when I left, they
25 were working with me with the HIV, and they finally got it, “Hey, there’s more women in here
26 with HIV.” And there was. And there was more women coming in with HIV, so now they were
27 making aware – Fraser Valley Institution, it took them until 2005. I mean, come on, fuck.
28 Anyway, I had many fights over eating utensils or somebody calling me out on it. I had many,
29 many fights defending myself about that, but there was some – like, even got a tattoo in jail, like
30 you were able to get tattoos in there, right? And I got a tattoo way up here. I’ll show you. [rolls
31 up sleeve; the tattoo is a heart with dates below it] It says, 1991-1993. My daughter passed away
32 – she was only two. But I got this in jail, and the girl who did it, she wasn’t even scared, and she
33 said, “Don’t listen to these people. They are just ignorant.” So, I think I paved the way for the
34 HIV thing in Fraser Valley ‘cause there was people who came in from Positive Living – no, from
35 Healing Our Spirit, who used to come and see me all the time – Evelyn Benson, is that her
36 name?

37
38 **SL:** Elizabeth.

39
40 **DC:** Elizabeth. She used to come visit me all the time and that’s how I got to know more and
41 more about HIV. And the institution got to know more about HIV and they were coming in to
42 talk about HIV and how you can’t get HIV from utensils, you can’t get HIV from sitting on a
43 toilet seat – blood to blood contact. But the frustrating thing for me was, “You guys don’t know
44 this and you are in the pen?” It’s like, where did you guys come before you came to the pen, you
45 know? And it’s just ignorance – got in many fights over that.

1 **SL:** So, you are a pioneer in activism in helping them educate in the pen.

2
3 **DC:** Fraser Valley, and now they have a whole bunch of education – people come and talk, now
4 they have people from Positive Living doing prison outreach. And I didn't think it was me that
5 started it but I had to 'cause I wouldn't take their shit. Sorry, but they were all white girls. And I
6 got out, went to South Tzouhalem – they really helped me. "Debbie, put something up on your
7 board to remind you to take your meds every day." It worked for a while, and then I got out and I
8 went to a halfway house. I didn't adhere but I always used to run to Healing Our Spirit – that is,
9 when it was open – and talking to Elizabeth, or whatever her name is, and all the other people
10 who used to work there. They were really good to me, I felt really comfortable. I didn't know
11 where else to go, 'cause they were Native, right? And then they finally introduced me, 'cause I
12 wasn't adhering and I was on the run and I was sick and blah, blah, blah. Then I finally... off
13 parole. I was like – I was really messed up, 'cause I didn't know where to go. The only place I
14 knew was Healing Our Spirit, and they finally said, "You need to go get a doctor." And I was
15 like, "What doctor? Where do I go?" And I'm scared when it comes to that stuff. I'm okay with
16 everything else, like talking about my life, doing this, but going there and talking about HIV...
17 'Cause I still had the knowledge of HIV that it's gonna kill you and it was pounded into my head
18 that it was a dirty disease – like, "How could you do that to your kids?" I got a lot of that from
19 the social workers, right? "How could you do that to your kids? Didn't you know that it was
20 going to affect them?" My reserve didn't even want to have anything to do with me. I didn't
21 even go back for mother's funeral – that was last September. And then my family just kinda said
22 we want nothing to do. And then I found out a couple of years later that two of my nephews died
23 from HIV and I bet they never said anything to anybody. They were young kids – they were
24 young.

25
26 And then I went to IDC just by chance and I sorta met the social worker there. Mary was the
27 social worker back then at the old office back then, and we talked and she goes, "Do you have a
28 doctor?" And I said, "No." And that's how it got started and I got introduced to Dr. Susan
29 Ackland. Her and I got along and then I went to Tracey Morris, and ever since then – it's been
30 about eleven years, ten years now – she's been my doctor. And I trust her – took five years
31 though. Took a long time to get trust and to get on that adherence and to believe in the
32 medication and not to be scared and not to be judgemental over people, 'cause I was judgemental
33 about people, I will be honest with you. Yeah, it was bad. But then I – you know, it was an
34 addiction for a long, long time. I didn't take care of myself. And then the year 20- - I forget. I
35 know it was after the Olympics – '11? I got really sick. I didn't think pneumonia would hit me, I
36 wasn't taking – not in my life. But then I just started feeling these crushing pains here, right?
37 And I ignored it and I kept on partying and ignoring it and the crushing and I kept on partying
38 and partying and drinking and partying. The Yale was like – five years ago, six years ago, seven
39 years ago, or something like that – I was at the Yale with my friend upstairs, and I got up and I
40 felt so dizzy. And of course, I had a shot of bourbon and a hoot of crack, and then he took me to
41 Grade A, gave me ten bucks and said, "You gotta go to the hospital."

42
43 And I had a beer and I slowly came up to the hospital there, walking up slow. And I sat there and
44 I said, "I'm really sick," I didn't feel good. "I've got this crushing pain, I can hardly breathe."
45 And they took my thing and they said, right away, and they gave me morphine. And I was in the
46 hospital for two-and-a-half months. I don't remember the first week. They gave me – they had to

1 stick a tube in me right here [points to her back] to drain, 'cause I had a collapsed lung. And I
2 don't remember nothing, I don't remember anything. And that is when I started with the help.
3 And now I got into Dr. Peter Centre, but I was still using and abusing and not adhering. It took
4 me a long time to adhere to my meds – like, I can't explain it. I wish I was close to my family – I
5 wish I was with my family – I always see them on Facebook, right? And they disowned me and
6 I'm the youngest.

7
8 **SL:** Let me just pause for just a sec. So, who do you think of as family now? Who do you think
9 is your community?

10
11 **DC:** My community is probably – would be the community here, like the West End community,
12 'cause I live in the West End, I live in Mole End. Dr. Peter's, PLS, you guys, all the good ones,
13 Vancouver Native health – I am in a drumming – I drum. I smudge people's places. I am a peer
14 facilitator now. I've been sober since September 24th, 2014, and that took a long, long, long time.
15 And how I got sober is one day I walked into IDC and I looked at this thing on the wall. It said,
16 "if you need help with drugs and alcohol, do this study." And I did the study and it's naltrexone?
17 'Cause alcoholism is genetic. It stops the cravings and the effects drinking – and it sure does.
18 And yeah I haven't drank or smoked that crack stuff – I smoke weed. My children are better
19 educated now, but they still don't want to talk about it – they still don't want me talking about
20 HIV, 'cause I imagine how hard, how tough it was for them growing up hearing other people.
21 'Cause I'm assuming when they used to go the parties and all that, "Oh, look at that HIV. She's
22 probably gross," 'cause it would probably affect my kids, 'cause they know mom has HIV. I just
23 know how teenagers are. So, it affected them a lot and it still does today. I can't mention, you
24 know that – 'cause I wanna start doing – you know when you die, preparation – what do you call
25 that? To make a will, a living will, and where I wanna go and if I want to be cremated or if I
26 want to stay here or go back to Saskatchewan, 'cause you never know. And my kids don't want
27 me to – they don't want to have nothing.

28
29 So, you know, I wish there was something for grown up kids where they can just sit with us
30 mothers that have lost kids, and I know many mothers that are going through the same things. I
31 am with their kids and it's really hard 'cause you have this enormous guilt – this enormous guilt. I
32 do anyway, and you just want to do everything right for your kids, and it gets exhausting. My
33 daughter, she's twenty-five and she's never got tested, however her boyfriend is HIV and has
34 been HIV for a while and she won't get tested. She's scared. I said, "You gotta," and she is
35 living on the street, she's sleeping outside, she's doing fentanyl – both of them are heavily into it.
36 And she just won't go, and I tried it, "You have to go," 'cause she is so skinny and she gets sick
37 all the time and it's just so bad, so hard to watch.

38
39 So, now I'm here. I mean, it was tough going at it, from '97 to 2000. I didn't say anything to
40 anybody. I wanted to. Sometimes I would slip up, right, and then I remember one time I took my
41 friend up here – I had a boyfriend. I didn't tell him I had HIV and I said I gotta go see my cancer
42 doctor 'cause I really loved this guy and I took him upstairs and I see the HIV centre. And I said,
43 "We gotta turn back, we gotta turn this way. Why don't you wait for me downstairs?" And then I
44 finally told him and of course he left and went back to Mount Currie and I haven't been in a
45 relationship since. And it's been five years. I mean, I still have little flings and stuff with other
46 people, with guys with HIV, but those guys always have baggage. So, I haven't been in a

1 relationship since. I'm in a relationship with me. But now, my health is undetectable – my CD4
2 for some reason will never ever get up to 200 'cause of something I don't know. My CD4 is 150
3 and the doctor said, "Well sometimes it just – that's the way it is," I don't know. So, I'm good. I
4 did the Hep C treatment and cleared Hep C and now life is okay. You know, you need – the
5 Ministry of Child and Family should just get a life and go and get practiced or get taught about
6 HIV more, 'cause I hope they don't do that anymore – force you to tell your kids.

7
8 **SL:** So, more expansion on education is required out there.

9
10 **DC:** Yeah, because every time – for me, I know a couple girls who have HIV and had babies and
11 they really wanted their babies, but they got taken away. At the women's hospital, you know, my
12 niece was there and then my other good friend was there and she had HIV and she had her baby
13 at five months and her baby was just tiny, so I used to go visit her. I used to go visit here and I
14 used to feel for the women 'cause they were so strung out and all they wanted to do is just hold
15 their babies. I think that is just the hardest thing and what we need – what we really need for
16 women, for mothers, is to maybe one day have a camp for the mothers and for our children or
17 grown children and sit around in a circle and see how they feel and tell us so we can tell them.
18 It's a lot for them 'cause they don't know when you are going to get sick – "Are you okay,
19 Mom? Do you need this, do you need that?" That is what I want to see is a grandma house 'cause
20 I'm a kokum and I just love my little grandson – his name is Cleo Howard. He is everything to
21 me – everything, everything. You know, and he loves me and he kisses me and I just want to
22 protect him from the bad things. I want to be there to see him graduate, I want good things 'cause
23 it's hard being a mom with HIV, 'cause you're the matriarch. I'm the matriarch in my family and
24 I know I can never go back home which is sad 'cause sometimes I do want to go back and see
25 my aunties, but that's never going to happen. So, I have to accept it. My family is my
26 community, you know, and I am happy with that.

27
28 **SL:** I guess you already said you would like a grandmother's house where you could educate
29 your children.

30
31 **DC:** Bring them all in and just be grandmas or moms and play with your kids and have that
32 moment.

33
34 **SL:** Let me ask you this question: do you think it is important to have an Indigenous organization
35 again?

36
37 **DC:** Yes, yes, exactly. I was so pissed off when Healing Our Spirit left. I mean, for me, that was
38 my – the only contact, the only knowledge that I had and it was really good for me. And then we
39 lost it and there was people that were pissed off – I was pissed off. I'm still pissed off and we
40 need an organization like that again, you know. Native Health is good, okay – I don't like the
41 area... I do not. But having our own clinic, our own doctors, own nurses, own secretaries – I'd
42 love it, I'd love it. I'd apply for a job there. That's what we need is our own – you know, our
43 own thing. You know that All-Nations space that is in St. Paul's, when it first opened? I'm the
44 own who first opened it. I helped them to pen it from the ground up. When they had their grand
45 opening, I sat there and talked with CTV, Global, and CBC to open it up and I thought that wow,
46 this is a roman catholic hospital, you know. They've come a long way. I would like to see more

1 of that for our people who have come a long way and need to heal. They should have a really
2 nice place to come to. I really want to see that in the future and a lot more of these oral histories
3 that you guys are doing, 'cause it is very important that you hear this. And I'm glad you took
4 time to listen to my story. Man, it's been a long time.

5
6 **SL:** Thank you for sharing.
7

8 **DC:** I need to get it out about the kid thing 'cause it really bothered me for the longest time. I
9 don't talk to very many people about that time and about ignoring it for such a long time and
10 being reckless and, you know... God only knows if I gave it to somebody, I just...

11
12 **SL:** But that is part of our history. It is part of our historical trauma that we carry with us from
13 the residential schools to the sixties scoop and it's all interconnected.
14

15 **DC:** Yeah, I know that. It sucks.
16

17 **SL:** It does.
18

19 **DC:** You know, my kids are the other generation – the one that have felt the effects. And I am
20 not a good parent, same with dad. So, he suffered too and it's going to take a long time – seven
21 generations they say. So, I'm glad I'm here and I'm glad I'm telling my story. Thank you so
22 much.
23

24 **SL:** Thank you. Do you have any questions? [To Ben]
25

26 **DC:** It was good, it was okay? It's all I can remember. Some has gone off my memory.
27

28 **Ben Klassen:** The one question I was just curious about was how much were you aware of HIV
29 before your diagnosis.
30

31 **DC:** Oh, I was aware of it, I was aware of it. I knew 'cause I was having unprotected sex and
32 back then we didn't have needles like...
33

34 **SL:** Exchange?
35

36 **DC:** Yeah, or not too many knowledges about condoms. I think I got it by using needles and I
37 didn't have any – like, I knew about it but I just... 'Cause when you are in that moment, you just
38 don't care.
39

40 **SL:** You think you are invincible.
41

42 **DC:** Yeah. I said no, I'll never get – and then, you know, just – I got it. I kinda knew I would
43 though, just kinda, and it wasn't a big surprise either when they said yes, 'cause I already kinda
44 knew 'cause I was starting to feel sick. And I had it for such a long time. Yeah, it's
45 embarrassing, 'cause being an Indian, being Native and a woman and all that kinda stuff really
46 plays a big part in survival, 'cause you are always in survival mode. "What? You are an Indian

1 and you are HIV and your kids are taken away? Get out.” That is what used to happen back then.
2 I can still remember those days – fucking feel like shit and I would go use and feel even more
3 worse. Yeah, I think some days I was trying to kill myself just to not have it.
4

5 **SL:** Having no pain.
6

7 **DC:** No pain, ‘cause I was scared. All I knew was gay guys dying and stuff like that, and my
8 brother, he passed away from it. And I never wanted to admit it, but now things have changed
9 and I’m glad they are changing. I hope they still keep on changing. So, that’s my story. Is it a
10 good story? Is it okay?
11

12 **SL:** It is an amazing story and thank you so much for sharing it.
13

14 **DC:** I’m glad I got it out.