

## HIV in My Day – Interview 16

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

**Ben Klassen:** Just getting started talking to [name].

**P:** Mmhmm.

**BK:** How did you first get involved with the gay community or engaging in gay life?

**P:** Ancient history, oh gosh. So, I was the stereotypical terrified-to-be-gay guy in the early '80s. Grew up in Calgary in a completely conservative, oil patch, white family surrounding. Being gay was not cool and I really didn't think I was gay at all, so I actually dated women and did the usual pretending I was someone I wasn't but couldn't deal with who I was. So, my interaction with the gay community was that I was terrified of it and avoided it like it was the plague. I just couldn't deal with it, and it wasn't until I was... But all that being said, any chance I got to fantasize about a guy or think about someone I admired or actually wanted to have sex with, that was going on since I was fourteen or whenever. But in terms of actually becoming part of the gay community, I can remember it was it was like yesterday. I ran from the world, I went to law school in Toronto, and a whole lot of worlds opened up to me, because I could be a lot more free, but I didn't really explore. I didn't accept that I was gay.

And I finished law school, and went and worked overseas in Asia and Australia, and my true acceptance of who I was came at gay mardi gras in Australia in 1988. Cathartic moment, I can remember very clearly 'cause I actually went from "I hate myself" to "This is who I am," and I am okay. I don't know how this is going to work out, I am scared to death, my family is probably going to disown me, all the things you go through, but I decided there and then I was coming home a gay man. I left a straight man and I was coming home a gay man and that is how it turned out. So, I walked into a big law firm in Vancouver and didn't fit in for some odd reason - can't imagine what that was. But articling was awful, because I was a gay guy, and it was obviously evident that I was a gay guy even though I tried to hide everything. And I wasn't really part of the Vancouver scene when I first got here – honestly it overwhelmed me and intimidated me, and even though I lived in the West End and was surrounded by our community, felt like I didn't belong in it yet. So, I would tip toe in and run away, and tip toe in and run away, and did that dance for a while. It would be in 1988 when I actually said, "I am part of this whether I want to be or not."

**BK:** Even then it wasn't just a straight jump.

**P:** No, I was not – a membership in this community was a very hard deal, and I'm not different, from many hundreds or thousands of others. Accepting who I was and embracing a community that scared me in the midst of the AIDS crisis was nothing short of terrifying. So, I was pretty much a kicking and screaming homophobic guy – like, I would look at stereotypically gay men in horror. I was like, "I'm not one of you. I'm not like that." And of course it was just internalized homophobia, and get over and realize, "No, I am one of you and I belong here like

anyone else.” Just because you look more gay or are a drag queen or are a leather dude, doesn’t mean that I am any better than you. Because that was my big issue was that I felt like I didn’t belong ‘cause I was better than all these people that I felt I couldn’t relate to. Fear and arrogance were how I initially handled the gay community, but fear was the predominant reality.

**BK:** It's important that we don't just say that everyone just jumped in with both feet.

**P:** No, it wasn't, and for me, I was really terrified professionally. I could just see in the traditional law firm reality there was no way in hell that I could be who I wanted to be, or I could be myself. And I had very high hopes for who I was going to be in terms of a professional and I had very clear vision of that trajectory, and none of that happened. But that's mainly because of being diagnosed with HIV. I was diagnosed with HIV in my articling year, so my entire world, it basically shattered in that summer of '88, and everything that I thought I was gonna be, was instantly – it was just shattered, just no other way to describe it. And I was here and I hadn't really settled in yet, and I didn't really have that many friends, that's for sure. And I really couldn't – sure as hell didn't tell anyone for a while, quite a while 'cause I was just too afraid to go there. It was just a formative time in my life and I was – my gosh, I was twenty-four.

**BK:** Wow.

**P:** Yeah, 'cause I am fifty-four now and it was 1988, so it will be thirty years.

**BK:** Not something that most twenty-four-year-olds have to – well, maybe at the time, but certainly not now.

**P:** Well yeah, the bigger challenge is – we talked about a bit off camera is it wasn't just that I was twenty-four, it was that I hadn't had traditional *quote*, gay sex ever. I had never had anal intercourse one way or the other, and I didn't even really know what that was. All I knew was that I wasn't going to do that 'cause that was super high risk – it just wasn't something I was gonna get into. So, I played by – I was just so uptight and conservative and scared, I played by every rule book that had ever been written about what safe sex looked like. To say that I was out there in the community was just a joke, 'cause I was just the opposite – I was a hermit crab and terrified of engagement. All that being said, I still ended up at twenty-four diagnosed with HIV, so it's what happens sometimes. You don't always get what you ordered

**BK:** Could we unpack the diagnosis?

**P:** Wow that's a lot of baggage. So, I was a medical – I don't know how to describe it – anomaly. When I was diagnosed I didn't really have a steady GP, although I do know the guy who I went to who's office was on Robson St. I was an incredibly – if you can just imagine, I was the picture of health – I was so fit, it was absurd. I was a full-time aerobics instructor throughout law school, and while I was articling, I was still teaching a number of classes a week and fitness and health were like – I was an icon for that kind of stuff. So, I was ridiculously fit, ridiculously healthy, never got sick. And then the summer of 1988 – I remember it very well. I started having – I just started getting sick, and sick in a way that I had never been sick before in my life. And it was so classic mono sickness, the same mono stuff. One could also, in hindsight, also say it was in some

respects classic seroconversion with the sweats, the fevers, the this – the typical stuff, but it was much more severe. And when I first got sick and I was under articling pressure in a big firm, so you can imagine what that looked like. And I immediately went to the doctor, and I have to be honest, he was an absolute asshole and basically treated me like, “Well, you’re just another fag, and you’ve probably been out there fucking around.” And so, he basically said, “Let’s just have an HIV test,” and I was just like, “Um, I don’t think you are listening.”

[Brief interruption]

As I was saying, he told me he wanted to give me an HIV test. “I don’t think you are listening. I haven’t had unsafe sex of any kind,” and I’m sure he didn’t believe me, and in retrospect I can understand why. Long story short, I had a mono test and HIV test, came in a few days later: negative on both. I’m still so sick and this went on for three HIV tests, three or four mono tests, to the point where I was just starting to wonder what the hell was going on, ‘cause I didn’t have mono and I didn’t have HIV. So, it wasn’t until – and remember, this was before Google, pre- all the things that we – you guys, the millennials – take for granted. I just started to – I actually saw a newspaper article, or it might have been in a magazine somewhere, on Epstein-Barr virus, this really unusual immune virus, kind of like mono on steroids. And I’m like, “Oh my god, that’s exactly what I have. I have Epstein-Barr virus.” I had every single indicator, so I stomped into the doctor’s office and said, “I want an Epstein-Barr virus test. I’m sure that’s what I have.” And so, that’s – he took more blood, and then I went in a couple days later and – I think it’s important to say that he hadn’t told me he had taken another HIV test, so I did not know and he did not tell me he was doing that. So, I went in and said, “I have Epstein-Barr virus don’t I?” And he said, “Yes, you do, and you have HIV.” I just went, “That’s impossible.” “Well, here’s the test result.” “I didn’t even know you were having an HIV test.” “Well, I thought I would order it because I still thought that was what this was.”

So, to make a very long medical story as short as I can, it took them – oh my gosh, I’m going to say a year-and-a-half to actually confirm that I was HIV positive, in the sense that, I was HIV positive, the diagnoses – this was a time when there were false positives. There was the medical thinking and there was some research going on the Epstein-Barr virus could mess with HIV diagnostics and that you could be getting a false positive. Because I believed firmly that it was impossible that I could be HIV positive, to the point that my blood was sent to Johns Hopkins. I had actually tracked down the two guys I had sex with during this whole time frame – they both agreed to provide blood. And I can’t remember all of the details, but I will try and focus it to the fact – at the end of the day, given the science they had at the time, they could get as close to saying it was that guy that infected you as they could at the time, but they couldn’t confirm that. Our HIV stuff – I don’t even know what the right words are – they weren’t close enough for an exact match, if that makes any sense. So, the weird part was that the guy that was probably – that infected me didn’t even know he was HIV positive, so not only did I find out it was probably him, he found out he was HIV positive.

And it was a really messed up time, that’s all I can say. And to be honest, I didn’t believe I was HIV positive for probably five years, and I still would have a test every year, and I would still believe that this was all a nightmare that was going to change. Because I hadn’t done anything wrong, I hadn’t done any of those dumb irresponsible sex acts, I hadn’t had anal sex ever. But

the theory at the end of the day was you had an incredibly almost non-existent immune system because of the Epstein-Barr virus, so your body was basically an open target for anything. And you could have gotten pneumonia, you could have gotten a variety of things, but you did have sex with another guy, just so happens that he gave you a blow job, but that was probably enough, and you kissed each other. So, then I became this weird potential poster child. And my doctor was serious about this – we actually need to think about – and the message started to... It was a message you might have – in the early '90s, there were some messages that if you had a cold or if you had mono or if you have any of this, you should not have sex ever, period. And part of that was how my blood got to Johns Hopkins, 'cause they were really worried about what was safe sex. Everyone was saying safe sex is "X", but then they were saying well safe sex is actually "X" if this, but if that – meaning you have mono or Epstein-Barr virus, or one of these other things going on, safe sex actually means something quite like no sex. And I was one of the poster kids for that reality.

All of which to say, the way I found out was devastating. All the other people I know that found out were like – they kind of expected it and they certainly knew they had done some stuff that put them at risk. But I wasn't one of those and so at the core, it took a long time to accept it – an awful long time. And I just really – I never pretended, I just I couldn't say it. I ended up having to say it all the time but in my brain somehow it compartmentalized it so that I really – it was like I couldn't believe that I was, 'cause I just... And again, this is a young – I don't know what the right word is. I just thought I wasn't one of *those* guys, which sounds incredibly arrogant, and it sounds incredibly judgemental, but I really wasn't someone who had done the things that led to HIV. And so I kept thinking somehow I was different, or somehow I – this was just a big bad joke. And I needed to come down many notches on the arrogant and judgment scale and realize that I was just like anyone else, and just a part of this disease.

But the biggest challenge wasn't just that this was all so impossible to believe, it was – again, I remember this day so well, when the doctor told me that I had HIV and I said, "This is impossible." He didn't believe me at all and he just didn't believe that I hadn't – that I wasn't telling the truth. And again, I can understand, but, I was twenty-four and I just was told I had HIV and he honestly said – I was a mess, and he just said, "So, statistically, right now you're gonna maybe live five years. You should not be working in a law firm, you should not be having that kind of stress. You should take a big look at your life and take a look at it a lot differently than you do right now," and that was sort of, I walked out of his office stupefied, wandering around the West End in a suit, 'cause I had found out at work. And I don't remember what happened the rest of the day – don't have a clue. And then I had to go back to work the next day and act like nothing was wrong. So, it was a weird time, I don't know how else to describe it. And because I wasn't connected to community and because I hadn't embraced or made a lot of friends in the community, I was extraordinarily isolated and very messed up, psychologically. I was very traumatized. I just had to put one step forward and each day just keep walking. And so, that's what I did, just kept walking.

**BK:** How did you get through that early...?

**P:** I don't, really know. I am blessed to have intelligence and I am blessed to have – I am very, very stubborn, very strong-willed – many would tell you how strong-willed, and not in the way

that is complimentary. I'm a really tough guy, and I don't mean that in a boastful way. And I was just like every young gay guy – as a youngster I was endlessly bullied and endlessly ostracised, all the things that happened to all of us at that age I think. And so, you just learn to be really tough. But in fairness, I changed my entire life. I didn't work – as soon as I finished articling, I left. I mean, not only did I not get a job in the firm, which was no surprise, but I shifted gears radically in terms of my career aspirations and my goal became find a job that is secure that has benefits, so when you get sick you will have long-term disability and short-term disability. Find a job that isn't super stressful. Understand that I was twenty-four and I was the youngest guy in my law school, and in my mind I was going to be the youngest partner in a major law firm. I was just that guy and I had very very high expectations for myself more than anything. And I had to dump them all and choose the – just a completely different path. And ended up working in a government context and it fit all the check boxes, the tick boxes for the things that I needed knowing that I was going to die by the time I was thirty and having to completely prepare for that. And that's exactly what I did – I didn't really have a choice.

So that's – and why am I here today? I have no clue. I mean, I have no idea how I'm here today. It's a mystery. It's a mystery. I think part of that is that I – because I was so healthy, when the Epstein-Barr virus – it's like mono, it just kind of goes away. When it went away, my robust health came roaring back and I – of course, there was no medication that you could take then and if you did take it, it was incredibly toxic and almost worse for you than having – not taking anything. And long story short, I didn't. I remember so clearly, I got a really great doctor who I wonder whatever happened to because he was hit by a bicycle and had to quit practicing, but he was an amazing guy. But we just kept doing all the blood work and all the parameters, and all he kept saying is, “My god you've got – your bloodwork is amazing. You have the Helper T count of four people.” ‘Cause it was normal for me to have a Helper T count between 800 and 1600 and it was pretty regular that it would be 1350 or 1200 – like, really solid numbers. And that was the case for, I don't know, six or seven years. So, I walked around the city, not taking any medication, always thinking when is the foot going to drop? When am I going to get one of the things that are the first nail in my coffin? When is that gonna happen? And whether it was a flu turning into pneumonia or a spot on my body that looked like it was turning into Kaposi's Sarcoma – whatever it was – I don't know how it never happened, it just never did.

And then by the time I needed medication and my system was starting to show signs of the virus firmly becoming resident, I had options. So, I'm an AZT guy – I took AZT for seven years and no one does that – apparently no one does that and has a liver left or has some other terrible thing that the drug caused. But again, by the time I was taking it, they realized that they couldn't give those high doses that they were giving those first sad guys. You know, it was like shooting darts at a dart board where no one knew where the middle was. So, I just – every time that I had an issue, I was blessed to just be on the curve of new medication coming in, or we now know more – and I was on the curve of, “We've done all these experiments and we need to do double therapy,” and I was on the curve where “Oh no, we have to do triple therapy,” and on the curve of protease inhibitors, and every single wave. You know, there but for men, there but for – I was on the curve and I'm still here. And I'm grateful for every day and every hour and every moment that I am because I know that I shouldn't be. And I know that thousands of other guys that used to walk these streets aren't here and they were my age, or younger, and they didn't get – they weren't on the curve, they didn't have the crazy random... I don't know why.

So, I haven't reflected on this in a long time. It's very weird for me to even be discussing it, because now of course you evolve as a human being and I love my community. I am deeply rooted in this community and by the time – I think for me, in a very ironic and fucked up way, HIV led to self-acceptance. HIV led me to telling my family I was gay, which was, I thought a big deal, but it turned out to be the smallest deal on the planet. My family was like, "You thought really we were going to disown you? Are you frigging out of your mind? Like, that's so stupid." But in your head, you internalize that everyone is going to shuffle you out, but HIV forced me to deal with me. HIV forced me to get real and forced me to stop judging people and stop categorizing them, as they did slutty things. It was almost like I need to say – oh gosh, I'm even embarrassed to say it. "Well, what did you expect? You were doing stuff, you were doing stuff that everyone told you not to do, that's just irresponsible guys," as if some arrogant part of me thought that it was about responsibility. And I just – HIV brought me down to my knees and I had to look in the mirror and say, time to get real with yourself. Time to get – you need friends, you need support, you need this community.

And I'll never forget having to tell – fuck, it's so weird to go back to this. If you can only imagine, I'm twenty-four, twenty-five, and my mouth gets dry even thinking about it, having to think about... And I mean, really think about whether you were going to date someone or god forbid have sex, or even kiss someone because that conversation had to come up. And oh my god, it was just terrifying and so I – but again, every time I had that conversation, whoever it was would say, "That's fine." So, I've been in four, three major relationships in my life. Two times, I've been married. I have never been with an HIV positive person in terms of a relationship. I'm not – and believe me, don't picture me as an angel – no, no, no. But again, how absurd is that? Because in those days, if you were HIV positive, you either did not have a partner or, if you had one, they were positive too, because guys weren't willing to take that on. That was just too scary, and I could tell you that I wouldn't have either if the shoe was on the other foot. I don't know how I've been so lucky and I'm – yeah. I'm still - I don't know, it's hard to describe. I'm just really grateful. I don't know, it's all I can tell you.

**BK:** That is pretty amazing on a lot of different fronts.

**P:** It's weird and it's humbled me, and it's brought me – that humility has really improved me as a person. And as odd as this might sound, HIV has made me a far better person. The guy that I thought I was going to become, I would be embarrassed to be right now. I would be absolutely horrified if I had become that person because I know exactly what an arrogant asshole that person would have been. And I'm so glad that in some absurdly fucked up way, that I – that all of that happened just because I'm so not the guy that I wanted to be at the end of the day. And that's not everyone gets a chance to rewrite their history, even though I didn't know that this was the book that I was a part of and I certainly didn't anticipate, or see myself in this book at all, but it's what happens.

**BK:** There's a lot to dig into more there I think in what you've said over the last few minutes but one of the things I'm curious in talking a little bit more about is how your perspective on what HIV meant kind of changed when you were diagnosed. You wouldn't have been the only person

in the gay community that was saying similar things, like this only happens to people who were promiscuous

**P:** Oh totally, oh god. I mean, of course it changed everything. It's just so hard to put it into context or words. I mean, I went from truly thinking I was above it and so responsible, and so conservative, and so, "That's never going to happen to me and none of my friends are going to have it because they are super smart and super responsible," blah, blah. Keep shoveling it, you can convince yourself of all sorts of things I guess. But it was really – so, at first it was shock, not denial but kind of, because I was told that there was a reason that this might be legitimate denial.

**BK:** Well, it was a medical impossibility.

**P:** Exactly, but the challenge of course was that no one would believe me. And until I got serious and said, "Okay, what do I need to do to convince you that I am telling the truth?" then they got really serious about it. And that is when the blood from the other guys – I said, "I've had sex with two guys in the last six months. Two guys. Do you want me to contact them? Would it help if I got you their blood?" "Yes." And so, it was just this – I mean it became very weird. All of which to say, as it started to sink in, not only did my world get a lot smaller, my first intersection point with people who were dying with AIDS started to happen. And that was me – as far as I knew, my future, and boy do I ever remember some pretty frightening moments with people who were sick. And my first real partner, he was six or seven years older than I am, and so he was six or seven years longer into HIV than I had ever been. And he had a number of friends who were dying and we were part of supporting them in whatever way you could. And believe me, those days were a lot different than now. And hospitals – oh man, it was like a war, it was like going to a warzone when you saw what these guys were dealing with. And the other thing I think is really – well, I think one of the things that had just an impact that I could never have imagined was one of my former partner's good friends was very sick and I'd never actually – no one had died yet. And then Dr. Peter came into my life and I watched his CBC – I don't know what you would call it – his interviews, his dialogues, and I was just riveted, 'cause he was me.

**BK:** I was going to say...

**P:** I still – yeah, that's still really weird for me to see, but yeah, he was me. I watched him die along with the rest of the world and I went to his funeral. I'll never forget that as long as I live, going to that funeral. And I went to the funeral with someone who was very ill with AIDS, one of our friends, and that was – boy, was that a wake-up moment, or was that ever, "This is your life. This is what's coming." And what happens? I end up on the board of Dr. Peter and I end up being at the time the only HIV positive board member. And at the time, it was at St. Paul's, right across the street and I was blessed and humbled to be part of that organization's realizing it had to expand. The need was ten or twenty times if not a hundred times what they could serve and part of the whole transformation of that organization to move into its own centre. But I was also witness to not only having to confront my own mortality every time I walked into that building and stop shaking and stop hold my own hand so that I wasn't visibly terrified every time that I visited the centre or walked in and saw people who were using the services, but I also watched the disease shift from this basically gay man's thing to, "Holy fuck, holy fuck" – it was that scary

to see and how fast it went from this to this tidal wave of, it's not a gay man's disease now, it is... And the centre going from serving gay men and everyone in the board being super gay friendly or gay and it being the gays supporting the gays – that's what it felt like. Like, we don't even fit in in this organization now, the organization's services now. Yes, there are some gay people but this is like – by the time I was off the board it was – the gay population was less than 10% probably.

And to also figure out, “Oh my god, IV drug users have totally different issues than these gay people,” and not to say the gay people weren't drug users. Not to say that at all, but they predominantly didn't come from the poverty, the abuse, the street life, the violence, the mental health – like, all of a sudden, this curve ball the size of Manhattan gets thrown at this organization, and they're supposed to deal – somehow manage to go from – to metamorphosis. This organization that was supposed to deal with this sort of silo of folk, to deal with this incredibly different silo of folk, but the only thing that intersected them both was HIV and it was profoundly challenging. But I am just in awe of what that – what people were doing and the risks that people took to service people who needed help. And amongst others, I'll never forget being the lawyer on the board and the conversations about, “We're going to open a safe injection site on our property under the radar” – they know but they don't know if you know what I mean. It was all – from what I can remember, I don't – I can't remember all the details but it was so high risk and no one knew what would happen. No one knew if people would die at the centre in the safe injection site and if they did what the hell were we – like, there were so many unanswered questions.

And so, I remember all of this and, you know? You just keep putting one step in front of the other and every time I took another step it was like, “I'm still here. I'm still here. Fuck. Okay, I can help now, I can do stuff, I can – I'm not gonna die today. I'm still here.” And so, throughout my thirties, my life became – I'd do anything for charity, and I became really... I'm going to self-identify in an embarrassing way – I did – so again, I was super fit and I did stupid things about – for charity, like get in the shower at the Odyssey for shower power, do underwear model fashion shows. Oh my god, when I look at it now, I just want to curl up in a fetal and die. But how I basically embraced helping was doing whatever I could to raise money for some of these causes. And then realizing that I could actually be on the board, which I'm telling you, that was a – to even know that they even wanted me, that's – that made me speechless, 'cause I didn't value much of what I was, 'cause I was really just didn't see the value in myself at that time. I was a survivor, that was all I was. But to be able to contribute in a broader way was pretty awesome, pretty humbling. And yeah, so you know, eventually I just started to stop noticing I was walking and stop wondering when is – when am I gonna go, when is the shoe gonna drop?

And just when I – just when everything was perfect – I was madly, madly in love with a wonderful human being who is a police officer in the city and we had an amazing life. We had been together for quite a long time by then – ten years? And it's funny – and then I got diagnosed with stage four non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, so I was thirty-nine – thirty-nine? Thirty-nine, forty, yeah, and so I went from having this charmed life that everyone envied with this wonderful person that everyone loved, and we were just – we were called “law and order.” That may age me. That was a TV show you may not remember. So, everyone in the community called us “Law and Order,” and we loved it. We were like that's who we are. It was so cool – I mean, I was with



a gay cop – how cool is that? It was really something, but unfortunately life – that was it for me. I was pretty much – it was a very bad couple of years. I wasn't supposed to live and they still don't know why I'm still here, but I lived to watch my entire life disintegrate. So, I feel like if there is a god, and she's one bitch of a person, she just keeps wanting to teach me to be humble and to keep learning and to keep growing. And so, I remember very clearly that I was very sick, I won't kid you. So, I was on an isolation room for quite a number of weeks cause I had Chemo and I had no immune system, but I was dying and I weighed 116 pounds being fed by a tube. The whole family coming and visiting, the will being redone, and basically saying goodbye to everyone.

And I had a deal with my husband and it was "Can I have my shoes, please?" And that was our deal, that he would unhook me from everything and we would walk out of St. Paul's and he would take me home and I would die the way I wanted to. And everything was ready and we had – I'd squirreled away so much morphine and so many other things that were gonna make that really easy. I asked for my shoes on a Thursday after the doctors had been in that day. They thought they could do surgery 'cause it was a problem in my colon that they just couldn't fix and I was going septic cause my colon was leaking and they couldn't do surgery cause it was too close to organs and I would die. So, basically it was the end for me as far as I was concerned, so on a Thursday I said, "I want my shoes." And he said, "No," he needed the weekend. And he'd been acting extraordinarily weird for quite a while. I just thought it was stress. I mean your husband is dying, it must have been fricken awful. I didn't have time to pay attention to what was going on in his life but just Thursday I never got my shoes. He said he needed the weekend and I gave him that – I said, "Okay, fine." Monday again – this is – it's really weird for me to speak about this because it's so surreal.

So, Monday, the guy who diagnosed my cancer, which was in my colon even though it was lymphoma, passed by my hospital room – completely not supposed to be there – and looked in and said, "What the hell is going on?" Suffice it to say a couple hours later, he came in with a whole surgery team and said, "We were wrong. The guy who diagnosed the source of your colon cancer tells us we are two feet off and we can do surgery. The reality is you weigh 116 pounds, you have absolutely no immune system, you have just had what was your last chemo..." I needed more chemo but I couldn't take it anymore. "...And we can do surgery tomorrow. There's a 90% chance you won't make it but there's a 10% chance you will." And my husband didn't come back that day except very late that night on Monday night and he was acting really, really, really weird. I had surgery for him and there's no – I can't describe it any other way. I had surgery for him. But I woke up and the surgery was successful and that was not what I expected was going to happen. And long and story short, if I had been told by god, "Okay my friend, you have a choice: although everyone is telling you, and they are right, you will not live if you have this surgery, you will live, but your life is gone. Everything that you think you are – you thought HIV kicked you in the ass? This is nothing. This is round two and it's way worse."

So, suffice it to say that I woke up to find out that my husband, who was a Downtown Eastside beat cop, was addicted to meth and other special substances and he drained all our bank accounts. He had stolen money from family members, he had – he'd done an awful lot of terrible stuff, and he had seroconverted to HIV, and he was crazy. And he – when I got out of the hospital and started to honestly recover, he was crazy, he was dangerous, and I had to kick him

out of our home when I weighed 123 pounds and go and get a family lawyer and get him out of my life, which was the hardest thing I have ever done. And I had no choice, 'cause I wouldn't have lived – I really wouldn't have lived. He wouldn't have killed me but the stress of living around him would have killed me, I was so vulnerable. So, there I was, you know, alive, wishing I was dead – mad that I never got my shoes. Started to write a book called “Can I Have My Shoes, Please?” – have never had the courage to finish it – and had to start a new life from scratch and redefine everything I thought that was important again. You think you're – who was I at the time? I was a happily married, solid, great life, family, friends. I just, you know – I had it all, that's how it felt. I was just so happy – man, I was a happy guy then.

So, all of which to say, I'm still here and I'm still walking. And just when you think it can't possibly – you are never going to recover and you are never going to be the same and your body will never heal and your mind will never be able to not feel traumatized or feel angry or bitter or resentful – think again, 'cause you never know what is coming around the corner. And for me, as I healed and began to accept that I was here – and not wanting to commit suicide, 'cause I really didn't want to be alive, I really didn't want to be alive, 'cause it wasn't worth it – I met the most amazing human I've been around and he's been in my life ever since. So, that's almost eleven years ago. We met ten years ago and now I'm where I am. I'm back to grateful that I am still here and amazed that god is such a bitch and then at the same time gives amazing grace and gifts when she decides you are ready to learn and constantly humbled by what I think I know and don't really have a clue.

And HIV has changed so much that I don't talk about it much. It's just so normal now and it's so – it's never irrelevant, but it's sort of like eating cornflakes every day – you just eat it, you take your medication every day. And what I find – there's not very many people that are in my world that are still here, and so sometimes it's – I feel like this old dude who has this sense of responsibility to kick a lot of people's heads into reality when they are acting like HIV is nothing. I used to get so frustrated with people that would just not care, and there was a time when – is it called a chaser? Like, young guys who want to seroconvert 'cause it's just way easier than... I don't understand any of that. Taking these medications and having this disease – and there are so many things that people don't realize what it does to you. And they just assume it's medication, it's just about the meds. Wow, that's a pretty small portion of what HIV means when you have it. Every time you have a cut, every time you have a bleeding nose, every time you touch someone else who is bleeding 'cause you are putting on a Band-Aid, you are terrified that something, you know... So, I think it's – and I'm babbling a bit, I'm sorry. I've struggled with the remarkable advances we've made in HIV management, if you want to call it that. I don't want to sound – oh boy, I don't want to sound like a prick, but I am almost pissed off that they have the capacity to give people drugs that will allow them to be remarkably sexually active and act as if it's 1972 again, 'cause it's not.

And, I find it very frustrating to see people I know taking – it's called PrEP, right? And that's not what I think it was intended for. Yet it's now being seen as just the panacea – it's easy, I can do whatever the hell I want. And ah man, it bugs the shit out of me, 'cause I just don't have a right to judge, but so many people died and so many people aren't here to shake the shoulders of those people who aren't listening and share with them what it was really like and that this isn't a cold that you take Tylenol called PrEP for. This can change – this changes your entire life and it's just

very difficult to – as amazing as it is to see how lucky we are, it comes in some cases at a cost, which is part, I’m sure, of what you guys are studying is how has this whole medical advancement altered our behaviour and our attitude about... It’s almost like, “Oh, we forgot there is syphilis or gonorrhoea or so many other things that safe sex prevents.” And now it’s like a candy store. “I can take PrEP and do whatever the heck I want,” and, wow, that is just so hard to get my mind wrapped around – really hard to get my mind wrapped around. But what can you – what am I supposed to say except it is hard to wrap my mind around it. I try to – if anyone wants to listen, I’m happy to share with them a different perspective, but I’m not sure that a lot of young people are interested in the stories of an old guy like me who came from a totally different generation and a totally different world when it came to HIV. And because it is completely different and because they have the right to have the access to all of these things we didn’t, and thank god for it... It’s just difficult to see what, ultimately, I still believe is irresponsible behaviour because it still leading to outbreaks of X, Y and Z. They may not be HIV now, but every time I go to my doctor’s office, there is another computer screen saying there is another outbreak of gonorrhoea. And I wonder if we were all still so afraid of HIV and we were having much safer sex if this would still be happening. I wonder, you know, if it would. I don’t know.

**BK:** I think that’s a big motivator for our project is to think of some ways to stimulate some cross-generational dialogue.

**P:** Right.

**BK:** HIV does mean a completely different thing to most people today than it did thirty years ago, or even twenty years ago.

**P:** Totally.

**BK:** So, how do we actually get these people talking to each other, listening to each other?

**P:** It’s a tough one. I think I told you there’s not much that I don’t feel I’m blessed to be doing and one of the things that I would tell young people – and I’m saying young people. Believe me, some of the people I know on PrEP are my age – I really shouldn’t say young people – *people*. There’s things that HIV has barred me from doing and would bar them from doing today and it bars me from doing things today, because there are places I have wanted to work, opportunities that have landed in my lap to do some pretty remarkable things in places other than Canada – and I’m married to an American, so I’m talking also about the United States – that I can’t do. So, I can’t go and work in the Middle East – I can go for a six-week contract but I can’t go and work there. Some people would say, “Well, why the hell would you want to do that?” Well, the point is you don’t get to choose, you can’t. I’ve spent a lot – I have a massive passion for Africa and spent quite a lot of time on the continent - and today I help run a safari company in East Africa, and that sounds very strange but it’s just another immense blessing in my life – but I can’t go and live there even though I would be there tomorrow if I could. And it’s just not possible, so there’s doors that shut firmly with HIV. And to be honest, when I first started seeing my current jewel of a husband, we talked about the possibility of living in America as well as Canada, and the HIV thing is still like a real issue in the sense that once they know you are HIV positive in America,

you never know what the hell that is going to look like, and if that's right now, it doesn't look very pretty.

So, there are so many things I would like people – whether they listen or not is irrelevant, but just giving them the information to make them really think about. Is the sex that powerful that you are willing to close off your life to all kinds of potential opportunities that you would never even know today that could be in your hand tomorrow and you won't be able to hold them? And it's not just job opportunities, it's travel, it's experiences. It sounds really weird but do you ever want to have kids, 'cause that's not going to happen. And it's really sad when someone says we'd do anything if you'd be our sperm donor and you can't. And you can't give blood and you can't do some of the things that everyone gets to do, and it's just the way it is. But it's totally preventable and it pisses me off – it's totally preventable, and ah man, it just it's such a drag, such a drag.

**BK:** Are there things that could be done on the medical, prevention, healthcare provision side of the equation?

**P:** I don't have any solutions there. I think you have to – whatever works. My experience is that people will be inspired by someone or something that they can relate to, the “what's in it for me?” reality. And if people can see the value in the “what's in it for me?” equation and it impacts them enough that they'll shake up – shake their head a bit and see the world through a potentially different lens, then I think you have a window of opportunity. But it sure has to be a positive message, it has to be inspiring. It can't be a “don't be stupid” and it can't be a motherly “nah, nah, nah” judgemental thing, even though I've sounded like that part of this interview. I think it has to be relatable to whatever age of person. Let's not kid ourselves, younger people respond differently and are motivated differently than older people, and their formats for inspiration come in a different form of technology than others do, and you kind of have to embrace that and sort of say well, what would be inspirational for this particular sector or segment of the population that you want to, that need this message or that you believe would be inspired by this message, and what would inspire them?

You know, it's funny – so, I have – I also have the incredible honour and privilege of having written a book on workplace bullying and I kind of feel like I have been to the ring of how many fights and like, and just keep getting into another ring and having to fight like hell to stay alive. But all of which to say, I speak a lot on workplace bullying and I do it all over the place, and I'm constantly astonished as to why someone would want to listen to me speaking about this, but what I've realized is they listen because I tell the story differently, and they listen because I'm vulnerable and I show it, and I speak truth and experience, and I talk about things that are real, not... And so, I find that that has taught me that when I say to inspire people to act, to inspire people to change, to inspire people to spend a nanosecond of their incredibly busy lives and information overloaded lives to listen, I think they need to feel like it's real and it has to resonate for them. And I think that your sort of little golden key into their psyche is what would allow them to feel.

[Brief interruption]

**BK:** So much of it is about telling a real story, and there is power in storytelling and in relating one's story. And your story is – from what you've said, it's pretty amazing on a lot of different levels, and so that is something that would resonate with a lot of people.

**P:** I'm feeling awkward because the absolute last thing on earth that I feel I am anything is amazing. Maybe the story is amazing – it probably is pretty weird, it certainly is unique. I guess I am comfortable with you saying the story is amazing, but I immediately get uncomfortable when you make me feel incredibly narcissistic. And those words don't work for me and I think part of it – I lived the only way that I could and knew nothing most of the time, just put one foot in front of the other, wondering and fully expecting one day there wouldn't be a foot... A lot of people – after I got through cancer and my life fell apart and I didn't want to be on the planet at all and had quite a lot of psychiatric care and really – there were days when I really thought I should just get my shoes if you know what I mean. And I just think – there but for the grace, that's all I can say. You just – if you can somehow just get through that moment somehow, just not think about next week or next month, just try to be today and you can somehow get through almost anything. It's just – and my story is nothing compared to – think of the new immigrant from Syria coming into this country every week. Think of the trauma. I mean, minor rich white person trauma, and I'm very aware of that. I respect their stories a hell of a lot more than I respect mine. And I'm aware that PTSD is PTSD and being diagnosed with acute PTSD is what it is and having to struggle with that is what it is. It's all the same stuff, it's just a different perspective. I don't really know what I'm saying right now except I don't think I'm amazing, I really don't. I just think I'm lucky to be here. Just grateful to be here.

**BK:** This is certainly breaking up the flow of the conversation but I want to go back to the late-80s and early-90s. You indicated that there was a period of denial after diagnosis but eventually you started moving into the community. So, what did that look like for you?

**P:** It was coming to terms with me as a gay guy first and foremost and then a gay guy with HIV that just added a layer of impossibility onto an already difficult task. But you know, that was a very – as traumatizing and sad and horrific as that time was, it was also a time of extraordinary courage, extraordinary caring and outreach and support and love and bravery. I – so remember, I had a friend who took a long time to pass, and I mean months to finally – for AIDS to finally take him out. And you know, the remarkable people that came to his care, whether it was at St. Paul's in the facility itself – and this was still a time when everyone was, "*Fuck*," you know, very frightened and for good reason. But oddly enough, I think a lot of guys that did this – like, for me, it was so surreal. I felt comfortable brushing his hair, or he had terrible sores on his body 'cause he would scratch himself to the point of bleeding and he would often get – his whole body was sore. But he allowed – by the grace of just a human being near another human being, he would allow me to touch him, and I think I was good with that 'cause I was HIV positive already and so I think it was – there was no... It was real, there's no hesitation here – "I am your brother, I am your friend, I am with you in this time." But by – I was nothing compared to some of the – like, the things that people did, the things that drag queens did, the things the people on the street... It was a time of remarkable – this juxtaposition of grief, helplessness, vulnerability, and anger, and motivating and inspiration to push this issue forward, and hope. It was a really weird balancing act between the two.

And every time someone would die, and you would hear it in the weirdest places and the weirdest moments, and I would stop myself in my tracks and be like, “Oh my god, you’re kidding?” So many people I didn’t even know were sick and the next time I would hear about them they were dying or they were dead, and it just would take my breath away – it takes my breath away now. When I was young I thought, “Oh, I will never know anyone with AIDS. Why would I? Like, why would I?” And now, what’s interesting is it’s almost like that’s what it’s like now. And what I mean by that is it’s normal to know someone who is HIV positive – it’s like knowing someone who is, I don’t know, black, a Muslim, Asian. It’s like part of the melting pot. We’ve all got someone in our lives who’s got HIV but it’s not normal to know someone who’s got AIDS. Isn’t that – I thought that when I was twenty-years-old, “I’ll never know someone that has AIDS,” and now I’m fifty-five-years-old and it’s almost like, wow, do I know anyone with AIDS right now? I’d say the answer is no. Do I know many people with HIV? Yes, of course I do, but they are living, they look like me, they lead very normal lives, and my god are we lucky. So, isn’t that such a bizarre shift of our whole lives were traumatized by AIDS – like, I mean traumatized. I mean, you really can’t imagine what Davie looked like in 1991 and it was such a frightening time. People were afraid to touch each other. People were afraid to – I mean, to go from that total sexual world of the ‘80s and the ‘70s where sex was just – god, I wish I’d been able to participate in that. It looked like so much fun, but I never got to. And for people that have and who are still here, my god, it’s like a time of bliss, a time of innocence, and now that’s so changed. But I still think, unfortunately, there’s a segment of our community that thinks it is the ‘70s again and that freaks me out. I don’t really know how to figure that one out.

**BK:** Maybe it is.

**P:** Exactly, and who am I to say that that’s bad?

**BK:** But it’s all very new still.

**P:** It is all very new and I do have concerns about that. I feel like a hypocrite ‘cause here I am saying “Act responsibly because taking these meds sucks and it can change your life in many ways that you don’t think about until it’s too late,” and yet here I am taking these meds every day and my life is marvellous and I am healthy as hell and most of the things I do and are important to me aren’t ruled by the fact that I have HIV. But there certainly are many things that have been and I have had to come to terms with it, but do I still have a fantastic life and have HIV and have taken meds for a long time? Yes. So, that sounds like – “Look at you. You’re telling me not to – to take action to not get HIV but you have it and you are totally fine, so you are the poster child for why I should be on PrEP and why I should be out there doing whatever the heck I want. ‘Cause look at you.” I am aware of that contradiction, if you want to – that I’m – some people could say, “You are so full of shit, ‘cause you are telling me to do what hasn’t seemed to be a problem for you at all.” And that is really weird ‘cause of course they don’t know the whole story. Well, they might now.

**BK:** Going back to the earlier period, did you seek out support from any organizations at that time?

**P:** That's a great question. The honest response to that is that I should have but I was too afraid to. I just – that would have – for me, that would have made me feel like it's all real. I couldn't go there for quite a number of years and the – ironically, the only way I ended up getting that support – but it wasn't through the front door, it was through the board door. And that, I didn't – I wasn't seeking that support, it found me. I didn't know how much I still needed to learn, how much I needed to come to terms with everything. I had put so many floors of cement over my grief and my situation that I just held my head up and kept going. And I don't think I – I just felt – I was constantly asked, "Do you want to go see PWA?" at the time. And the only time I ever sought support and was – it's so stupid, I'm sounding like such a fool – was when I had cancer and then it was totally okay. Then it was totally okay to go to the Diamond Centre or to the cancer agency or to wherever it was at and get support because I had cancer and this is – when you have cancer, the whole world is cheering for you and the whole world is supporting you and the whole world is ready to help you. And cancer is random – cancer strikes whoever, wherever, whenever. HIV, not so much, especially the... So, HIV meant the whole world is afraid of you, the whole world is judging you, you got this because you were stupid and irresponsible, so it isn't random – at least that was the general feeling that I had. And so, you were isolated and you were – so, it was such a totally different experience, having had HIV and feeling incredibly alone and alien to the world and then having cancer and feeling like, wow, this is what it's like to have a support network. Even though the one – even though I did have one when I found out I had HIV, I just couldn't access it 'cause I wasn't ready.

**BK:** Was that mostly about stigma?

**P:** Yeah, 100%, but this is my shit, I'm accountable for that, and no organization didn't serve me. I chose to be unable to access them due to my own crap and I could have had all the support that I wanted, I'm sure, I just wasn't ready.

**BK:** You mentioned your perception that in the mainstream if you got AIDS it was your fault - it wasn't like cancer. Was that something that was a pretty pervasive [at the time]?

**P:** Oh yeah, 100%. You – even within our community we would do that. God, I remember both sides of that fence. I remember guys who had HIV and AIDS who said, "What was I thinking? I mean, I deserve this." I actually am thinking of a particular individual right now and I remember him saying, "Well, I was a total slut. Like, this is no surprise." Well, can you imagine saying that with cancer? I mean, I was a total – what? Sun worshipper, maybe – that would be the only.

**BK:** Smoking, I can think of.

**P:** Exactly, maybe that. And maybe that is the same kind of thinking: if you are smoker and you are taking well-informed, very serious risk and doing it anyway, when something happens that is a result of that risk. And when it comes to actually happen, you can see how people would say, "Well yeah, what do you think?" So, with HIV, it was exactly the same. If you have that much fun sex, unsafe sex, well at some point and time the roulette wheel is going to hit your number. So, I think it was absolutely a "you deserve this." I'm not meaning that in a "you're a terrible person sort of way." Consequences of choices or of behaviour is what I mean by that. So yes, I think it was very common.

**BK:** But a case like yours kind of makes that rationale fall apart.

**P:** That might be true but it doesn't matter.

**BK:** You were still...

**P:** I'm still HIV positive, I'm still – and that's again what the whole Dr. Peter thing finally allowed me to self-accept. Look at all these people here. Look at all these people who had every kind of avenue, every kind of walk of life, every kind of – that was the difference when the Dr. Perter Centre shifted to a completely different community, 'cause it was all of a sudden all of us. It wasn't just the gay folk, it was all of us – it was people from every walk of life. It didn't matter who you were or whether you had been... I remember there was a guy who had been a famous stock broker, and everything from what you expect – prostitutes to people who lived in poverty and were First Nations and ended up in the street. But then there were all these other people. So, it was – so, this sounds really odd perhaps, but it was kind of like cancer where the randomness and the "it's not your fault" became more of an equalizer, if that makes sense, than in the early days when it was, this is a gay man's disease and only a gay man's disease and you guys are doing really stupid things and you ought to know better.

**BK:** When did you start getting involved with the Dr. Peter Centre?

**P:** My dates will be slightly off, but it would have been in the early 2000s, and I would have been probably 2000 and 2007, because I was the vice-president when I got cancer and it was expected that I would become the president, but I got taken out because of the cancer. That would have been 2007. I think I was there seven years. It's on my CV somewhere

**BK:** In that organization, what did that shift in services end up looking like?

**P:** You cannot imagine the transformation. Like I said, just imagine the environment. When I first started connecting there, it was women and men who were very, very, very gay-friendly or gay, volunteering – that was the folk right, and the people that they were serving were gay. And then it started to shift to Downtown Eastside folk, or people who had the Downtown Eastside experience. That doesn't mean that there weren't some gay people there but it really became an IV drug user diagnosis. And so, can you imagine? It went from people who became HIV positive through sex, to people who became HIV positive exclusively because of drug use. Wow, we are talking very different worlds and very different – when you are at the stage when you are injecting drugs and sharing needles, that stage of drug taking is a pretty serious level of drug taking when you are at that point. It was just such a different world. And the mental health issues – I mean, god, it was such a sweet and loving and gentle and close place to people with unbelievable mental health issues, and people were high all the time, and that was okay. The whole idea was just be here, we'll serve you – we won't judge you, we'll just serve you. Well, my god, can you imagine how crazy that could get? 'Cause it was absolutely common toward the end of the time I was there and I'm sure it is the same now but I can't say for sure, that drug use is absolutely normal.



So, you're dealing with the trauma of the Downtown Eastside – I am isolating it to that neighbourhood and that's not fair but I am using it as an example, but the traumas that people have experienced coming from there is so radically different from the traumas that most gay men who got HIV had experienced. And so, even just making people – finding ways for people to get along was not easy. The drug users were uncomfortable with the gays and vice versa, so it was like, holy shit, now we have to figure out how to make people okay with each other. So, it became, "You're one of those drug users. You stay away from me." "Well, you're a fag, so stay away from me." It was really profoundly bizarre, 'cause the marker was, hey, we are all here because we have AIDS and HIV, but human nature is what it is. And for me it was like living my former life because I saw myself in the gay men who were having trouble relating to the drug user men, and feeling like I'm not one of you, I do not belong here, I do not fit in here, take me out of this nightmare that I'm not supposed to be in. Which is kind of how I felt when I seroconverted – "No, no, *no*, you got this all wrong, this is not me. I'm no 'them.'" And so, it was sort of full circle – like, wow, here we are. It was the first time I had really been out like that, out in terms of, "Yup, I have HIV." That was very, very – that was a big step in my evolution as a human being with HIV and coming to the point where I was still uncomfortable, but being able to express that. And even today, you see that I'm still – there's still a part of me that is uncomfortable with it.

**BK:** Absolutely, and that is entirely understandable.

**P:** It is but it – you know, we all have our self-acceptance challenges, and for me, I'm still not ready to get on that mountain top and scream, "I have HIV," but I am very proud of who I am. It's just that I don't need to scream that out too loudly. It's just about being afraid really, so it's still there and I'm – this is another thing I tell young people: you don't – you have to think about what it would be like to stand up in front of a crowd of people and say, "I have HIV." What would that be like? That's what you are going to end up having to think about and right now if you don't have HIV, you don't have to think about that. You don't have to think about filling out those forms at your new job, you don't have to think about what it will be like if they found out at work, you don't have to think about what it would be like if you were, I don't know, hanging out with your friends and you had a fall and you cut your arm and there was blood everywhere. You don't have to think about that if you don't have HIV, but trust me, if you have HIV, you are terrified of that ever happening, and when it happens – 'cause it's happened to me – you are so freaked out, it's not funny. So, these are some of the things I would say to people. Here's some of the reality that HIV brings to your world that may not matter right now, but let me tell you, it will change your life in ways that you never might have thought of. Every time you go to the dentist, every time you go to a new medical, you go to chiro, you go to massage therapist – every time you've got to self-declare, "Hi, I got HIV."

**BK:** And the way criminalization works, every time you have sex as well.

**P:** Are you ready for that? And I think it's extraordinarily short-sighted, but I also think that sex is an incredibly powerful driver for all of us, and we like to live in the moment, especially when we are young. We like to think we are invincible and none of that matters and we're all gonna be good, but yeah, how many of us really understand if we are going to have any kind of sex with anybody when you have HIV, you need to disclose that? How hot is that? Man, that is hot.

Doesn't that give you a boner? [sarcasm] That may be your inspiration, I don't know. I don't know.

**BK:** The stigma is not gone.

**P:** The stigma is not gone. Go to the Middle East, go to Africa, go to Russia, go to the United States and tell me that the stigma is not gone. So, you know, go to Alberta, go to a hospital in a small town in Alberta, and you tell me the stigma's not gone. So yeah, life – it's a long life to live with HIV and if you really don't have to, I wouldn't recommend it. It's a long life.

**BK:** How has this changed your relationship to the gay community, if it has?

**P:** Oh, sure, it has. Double-edged sword for sure. Part of it is because I had to deal with it – that's a really hard question. I am trying to think of an articulate way to express my thoughts. Well, it humbled me, because I needed the love and support of the gay community when I sure as hell didn't think I would need it that way. It wasn't just about friends, silly fun and going out and having drinks and whatever. Look, again, I am and will never attest to have been an angel – so, I mean, I also lived through the days of the rave parties and the white party in Palm Springs and all the coloured parties – they all had a colour associated for one reason or another – black party, white party, black and blue Montreal. I have done all those really fun, crazy events that involved copious amounts of substances. And again, it was so different because we could experiment with what we thought were soft drugs and not potentially die, and today you try something and you could die – like, you could die. We've had – the irony is that we've had friends die recently – normal – like, could be you, could be me – and so it's like such a different time.

So, all of which to say, how did it affect my relationship to the gay community? Well, it brought me into it that's for sure. It made me stop judging. I thought I was better than a lot of people. Again, I reiterate I am so glad I am not the person I thought I was going to be. God, he would have been a bastard and I am so glad he is not around. So, it humbled me, it taught me an awful lot about just loving people as they are and that unconditional nature of compassion. Boy, that's a word that I learned, and I still have lots of learning to go on that. And yeah, our community was obliterated in some respects, and yet, like anything, out of the ashes rises a phoenix. And we are better as a community – we've evolved, we've come not just miles, but we are talking distances unimaginable in terms of our evolution and access to rights and privileges that we could never have dreamed of. And I think HIV was such a galvanizer for so many of the things that came afterwards. And it was like, damn it, no, we deserve this too, and we deserve to be treated like humans like everyone else too, and we deserve to be able to get married, and we deserve to have pensions that our partners had too, and so on and so on. And I think HIV was a lightning rod for a lot of activism that would never have probably have happened and look where we are now in that respect. So, we are very lucky I think.

**BK:** Did it then in a sense make the community – I don't want to say stronger because that doesn't...

**P:** It unified and it cut across the reasons that people were separated from one another whether it was socioeconomic, or whether it was race, or age or money or what have you – it cut all those to

shreds and it made everyone part of one thing. And it didn't really matter who or what or where you came from, it unified the community in a way that I don't think it was before. Again, I am probably – I came around to intersecting with the community when AIDS was alive and well. I just think it turned the community on its head and in many respects made it better, which seems absurd, but I think we are better because we've had to get through an incredibly difficult era and come out the other end. And look, just the evolution of our community astonishes me. We went from truly feeling that we had to live in a community together because if we didn't we would die, and truly thinking that we were vulnerable if we walked outside of our community, and our lives were at risk and our health was at risk, and the only people that would care for us was our own tribe. So, that incredible tribal thing to, well, it doesn't really matter where we live, and we can bravely go hand-in-hand, wedding rings on if we choose to, children in hand if we choose to, and live in places we could never have imagined, and be happy and be accepted and be part of a different tribe.

And I know people of my age reflect back and say we've lost our sense of community, and my response to that is we got what we asked for. We wanted to be able to live wherever we wanted, we wanted to be able to be who we wanted to be, we wanted to be able to have kids, to get married, to live the life that others got, and we can now. And so, maybe that means there isn't a gay bar on every corner of the West End or maybe it means that the West End is more diversified, but isn't that the gift? Like, aren't we fricken lucky that we get to live that way if we want to? I definitely understand people who feel like it is a loss, that our community – there's no core. Like, Davie street, that centre of it all is so different now. And well, we also don't need those places because we have this thing called the Internet which has been beyond belief metamorphosis that no one could have predicted. You don't need a place to meet people anymore that's a physical place and that changed the whole reason why people would gather. If you wanted to get laid, you had to go somewhere to do it. Usually it was a coffee shop, or a bar, or a restaurant, or a park, you had to – to meet someone, I guess, is the better phrase. To get laid you could go anywhere. But now you don't have to do anything of that nature. You can order in – it's like chow mien. So, it's just a different world, right, and I don't fight it, I just embrace it. I go, yeah so, what isn't changing? I'd like to know the answer to that.

**BK:** I think I am just about out of the main questions that I was planning to ask. I guess one question that I did have is how did you look after your health when you found out that you were positive? You weren't on treatment initially, and a lot of people chose not to...

**P:** The odd thing is I didn't ever have to, because like mono the Epstein-Barr virus was like three months and then it was honestly like a light going off – it stopped and nothing. So, all the symptoms – nothing. So, I went from really weak and really fragile and night sweats and losing weight and just feeling like I had the flu from hell – you've had mono so you can relate – no energy, all of the stuff, t's just mono on steroids – to totally healthy. And as I said, my bloodwork was always crazy good, so what did I do? I did what I was told. Have your blood taken every three months. You had to – like you do now, you had to go in and see your doctor, you couldn't get your results online like you can now. I know what my bloodwork is like before I go and see my doctor and that's great – it's an awesome thing. I just did what I was told to do and as much as that... The doctor who diagnosed me was the biggest dick from hell as far as his compassionate care perspective. Ironically, his message was right: take care of yourself in a way

that you are not doing right now. Change your goals, change your objectives, change your career path to one that is more sane, less stressful – those kinds of things. That’s pretty much what I did. I chose to gear down the aspiration.

**BK:** Cut back on stress.

**P:** Yup, big time. And look, I don’t have a reason, I don’t know why I am here. If I did, god, I would be Orpah. Like shit, I would be so lucky if there was – if I had that moment where I chorus of angels said, “Hey, you’re here because you’re supposed to do whatever.” Man, that would be a lot easier than how it really is. And you know, I have another friend – you’ve interviewed him. He and I share the same sort of realities. We are sort of like, we’re still here and no one else is – god, that... I don’t want to think about that for too long ‘cause it makes me feel like I should be doing something powerful and important and I’m not. And it gives me the sense of, oh my god, you are not doing enough with your life ‘cause you owe it to the world ‘cause you are still here to do something profound, and that is a really overwhelming sense of responsibility that I can’t own. I don’t know what that would be. Like I said, I’ve had no Orpah moment where I’ve said oh okay, I’m on the world to do this and boom it’s all there, it’s all laid out. No, that’s not happened to me. I’m not mad at that, it’s just not happened, so I just – like I said, step, step, step, that’s all I do. I don’t know if anyone does anything different. I don’t know.

**BK:** I don’t know if anyone can do anything more profound than that in a moment of true crisis. What else are you supposed to do?

**P:** Yeah, I didn’t – they don’t give you a book on that, you know. I don’t even know – you don’t get a book on it.

**BK:** Is there anything that you wanted to discuss that we haven’t had a chance to talk about yet?

**P:** I don’t think so, no. I mean, if you got a solution to how you – if you come up with a plan of action for how you think that those who might – who could use inspiration to not take risks that they don’t have to, and you think that someone like me and the others like me can be a tool for that or a vessel for that message, I am all in ‘cause that... To know that you had an impact so that someone could make an informed decision to not have this thing that you have would be more meaningful than anything. Just to know that it – that you saved someone from this thing that they don’t need and they can prevent, that would be cool. That would be great. So, I guess that’s – that would be something I would love to be able to do. Maybe that is what this is for, but I think this won’t be the – let’s be more articulate, [name]. I have a feeling that whatever it is, it has to be more - not this. It has to be more intimate, it has to be something a little bit different. I don’t know how to say it in any other way that makes sense.

**BK:** Hopefully this can be a springboard to something else. That’s what we’re hoping.

**P:** That is what I’m trying to say, and very badly.

**BK:** That’s what we are hoping.

**P:** Well, I'm in if that is something that we can be part of cause that might be the Orpah moment – maybe that's the "Aha, there it is!" You never know. So, for all I know, Ben, this is the commencement of a whole new – a cataclysm – wow, now I really know what I'm going to do with my life.

**BK:** I wish.

**P:** You might. You never know right, you never know what you are involved with. But thank you even just being interested in all of this. When you are in your own shoes it isn't interesting at all – it's just your life.

**BK:** It's really a privilege for me, so thank you so much.

**P:** It's my pleasure.