"HIV in my Day" – Interview #70

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Interviewee: Rodney Little Mustache (RM); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)

Ben Klassen: Hi Rodney.

Rodney Little Mustache: Hello.

BK: Thanks so much for being here and sharing your story with us today.

RM: Thank you.

BK: Just to get started, could you tell me a little bit about your connection to Vancouver?

RM: Well, first, I'd like to acknowledge the fact that we're on Musqueam territory. And I've been living here for, let's see, twenty, almost twenty-five years now. And I came out here and I just—for the first time a year before that and I just—I came out here for a party and I never left. Yeah. And, like what am I doing right now?

BK: Well just like, how did you end up here in Vancouver?

RM: Okay well, I came from a province that's really conservative. Even though the NDP are running it, it's still conservative and I—you'll find out I get very political.

BK: We like that.

RM: I moved out here because when I was in Alberta, I—being Two-Spirit and being HIV and being First Nations, that's three strikes against you. And so, when I came out here, I found that there was more acceptance of people who are Two-Spirit and also HIV positive because there was more services out here. Services that are really non-existent in Alberta for someone like me. And I got involved with the community out here and getting to know it better.

BK: And so, when you were still living in Calgary were you connecting with like the—or sorry, in Alberta—were you connecting with the Two-Spirit community there at all?

RM: Well, there was very few. Like, just like people from the surrounding reserves. Like, after the bars closed, there was no – there was no—what do you call—everybody just sort of scattered, eh? You don't hardly ever see them anymore, just online now. And it's hard to keep up with them because there's—to get back together, I think there needs to be a reunion back there, or a homecoming. And other people who are HIV positive, back then it was really—one of the reasons I left too is the policies that were in place in Alberta, like there were—they sort of prevented like HIV services organizations like HIV/AIDS service organizations just to happen. And Two-Spirit organizations, they—those are really still non-existent right now. And that's one of the reasons I want to go back when I'm done, UBC. And it's difficult right now because

there's people back there that are in the same, what do you call, situation I was in—being Two-Spirit. There's no real supports back there for them. So, that's why I want to go back there.

BK: That's great. Do you remember when you first heard about HIV? Do you remember when that was, and where you were getting information from?

RM: Okay, let's see. '86, I graduated, so '97. In '87, I read this report in Alberta about, it was a homelessness report, it was a government report. And I was going through it, and that's when it started talking about HIV. And it was talking to the street youth about what they knew about HIV, and they hard—they knew nothing about it. So, ended up—I forget the name of that report, I wish I could find it. But it was at a Friendship Centre in Pincher Creek where I used to go to school, high school. That's where I read it.

BK: And how were you reacting, I guess, to that news, to hearing about HIV for the first time?

RM: I really don't know. Like, I think I was interested to finding out—like when growing up, our father used to always tell us that you always help people when you can. And me, I was trying to decide what I was going to do with my life and then I still—it's like now I know—but at that time I wanted to help people who had, weren't in the same place I was with my family. We had a family and everything. We had a connection, everything, we lived a peaceful life. We lived away from the reserve. Well, we were on a reserve, but we lived away from everybody. Sort of isolated. But my father always gave us lessons that we should help others out when we can. That's how it worked. And ever since I—when I saw that, and it was affecting people like me, I wanted to see what I could do to help. But then I got into that party scene. I had one drink and I said, well fuck them, I'm going to have fun. [Laughs] No. Kidding.

BK: Well, and that's part of being young, too.

RM: It's too early to help somebody. So that's how it was.

BK: And as the eighties kind of progressed and turned to the nineties, were you hearing about HIV very much within your community?

RM: Well, after I left the reserve, I went to Calgary for a year, I was going to Mount Royal. And then I was starting to go to gay bars and everything. And there, holy, my life just got totally turned around, because I was starting to understand who I was and there was people like me. And the thing too there, the other thing too that really, that made me feel good about that whole being Two-Spirit there was—when I walked into the bar, there was some people from my reserve that were sitting there. And I was surprised to see them there, they both got up and they were very happy to see me. And they said, "We've been waiting for you." I said, "What?" They said, "We know—well, we knew, we've just been waiting for you to come." I said, "Oh my god, really?" They said, "Yeah." They said, "You're not alone. There's more on the reserve." And I was surprised when I heard that. Other people just hid behind their masculinities, but I didn't. I think it was for me different because I lived away from everybody else and I was just able to – what do you call – come to terms with who I am, accept who I was at the time. But there was a lot of things that happened to me before that, before I did that. And I just wrote something about

it in one of my papers for UBC. I was coming to terms with who I was when I was a child. Like was around seven, no hang on, around sixteen, I described just one—just one thing in my life, I was coming to terms with who I was, what happened to me as a child. I was trying to understand the world around me. I was trying to understand why people who love you did what – touched down there. I was understanding—I was trying to understand why a priest would do the same thing. All of that. Like trying to pull it—like trying to get it all together. And for them to—welcoming me like that, like no others on the reserve, that really surprised me. And I was glad to see that, that kind of support there. And now those guys are gone. All three of them are gone. It's sad. It really is sad. The people that were most welcoming are gone. And every now and then I think of them – I just, I could still see it in the way they were sitting in that bar. Right, I could just see it right now. They were so happy, the look on their faces.

BK: That sense of welcome and acceptance must've been so powerful for you at the time.

RM: No, they saw their princess and they bowed. No, no, just kidding. Yeah, it just felt like I belonged, I belonged with them. That's one thing I just, I realized that just saying it, it's like talking about it to you and thinking back, they were more accepting than the rest of the reserve was. At the time, my family they were—they knew but they didn't say anything. They wanted me to realize it on my own. And I ran away at such a young age, twenty-one. So I – what do you call? Going there, living in Calgary, that's when I started seeing a lot of people that were really sick and I was wondering what was going on. And that's when I found out about HIV, what it did to you. Changed your looks and everything. And like, young people, they just turned into old people overnight. So, it was kind of sad.

BK: And most of the people that you were seeing that were getting sick, they were within the gay community in Calgary?

RM: Yep, a lot in the gay community. And then, oh my god, the papers how they would—I would watch the news a lot, and then I saw what was going in the US with the Republicans, how they treated it. I saw that movie, *An Early Frost*, have you ever seen? If you ever get a chance watch that movie. There was also *And The Band Played On,* how it all started. And those movies like, sitting there watching them, I sort of—they could've done something about it years ago. And seeing it, what it did to people. And a lot of people that I met back then, they're all gone. A lot of the friends that I had in Calgary are gone too. And one of the things that I'm really thankful for them for is that they always saw potential in me. They saw me going further than what I was doing then. And I think they'd all be happy with what I'm doing at UBC. Still speaking up, being a little nuisance to everybody. Well yeah, I made—I make them laugh and like, one of the ladies at UBC, I get after the council sometimes, of students, because they're not thinking right, and what they're doing is they're causing problems for other students, and they don't see that. And then I tell them that I go in there and get mad. This one young lady, she says—what does she say again? She says, "I like it when you're mad." She said, "You come out as really angry but then at the end of your thing, you make them laugh. You give them the bad news and then you give them the good news after."

But it's just like, I learned that from living with these people in Calgary. Their life—our lives are really hard. There was no supports at home, and it's still hard to find that support at home, partly

because of what the government does. Right now, the government only gives on-reserve people, health centres, $500 a year to deal with HIV/AIDS. And that is so wrong. So, and the chiefs and councils, they're not backing it. And growing up in a place like that, it was very straight and religious – Mormon and Catholic have dominance. And it's—after like, well watching and looking at it from the outside, I see how wrong it is now. They're—they totally got rid of, what do you call, our own traditions, our own values, and replaced them with their own. Which is very sad. And what I learned from those people sitting at the bar was that they were the true essence of what it meant to be Piikani. They accepted me for who I was, they were happy, they enjoyed my company, all that. They were just—I'll never forget that. Very—holy, you're right it does come up.

BK: And there were a lot of Indigenous guys in the gay community in Calgary?

RM: Two! No. [laughter] Well I mean, they were—oh yeah, there was one thing that really bothered me. There was people on the reserve, they were healthy, and then all of a sudden a few months later they were sick. Their families never said anything. And after looking back, it was just more or less, I know why now. And I respect their confidentiality, but they didn't have—nowadays for me, I don't want to be that type of person where they're gonna hide it. But then I'm still learning right now there's places in Alberta or in the prairie provinces that morgues won't touch a person who died of HIV. They burn that body right away. Some reserves won't even bury the body, they have to burn it. And that bothers the hell out of me, it really does. So that's why I get very vocal. I just, I don't know, it just—when I heard that story. If you ever get a chance, look up *Promising Practices*. I did a—well, just look me up online, you'll see a lot of things I've done. I've been very active over the last thirty years. Really active when it comes to HIV, and helping getting rid of that stigma and discrimination. It'd be funny if the reason why that stigma and discrimination happens is because of me being real loud. Yeah, really. But looking at them, it's like more or less like the way they accepted me and the way they made me feel is what other organizations out here did for me. And that's why one of the reasons I came out here. And the First Nations out here, the way they do that, I love that, I really do.
BK: So, you were seeing people with HIV in Calgary. Were you getting information about how it was transmitted, and how to prevent getting HIV?

RM: Yep.

BK: So, there was like, information about safe sex out there?

RM: Yep, there was a lot of it. And for me… I'll tell you this whole story, okay?

BK: Sure.

RM: Okay, so what happened was, after I came out here, I met a person on the street there where all those hustlers were. I went down there, I met somebody, and I started seeing him. And then what happened was we came out here for a trip, and then I got into the scene out here, doing a lot of crazy things. And then when I went back to Alberta, somehow I knew I was HIV positive. I just had that feeling. And then I finally went to get tested, and then I found out. For years I blamed myself for it, because of what I did out here. But when I got back to Alberta a lot

of people told me that it was my fault, it was his fault. That's why I got it. I carried that around with me for a long time. So that one day, I finally let that go and forgave him after just recently I saw his name on that AIDS wall down there. And I said woah, it sort of blew me away. And I always felt sorry for what I did to him, but after I saw that, I felt I hope he forgives me for the pain I caused him. And for the last—while living here—after we moved back to Calgary—well, we both came out here, but then I got into the scene again, we drifted apart. And then after that we—we never talked after that until I saw his name. But in that gap, there was a whole lot of mess going on. So, what happened after that, when we got here and then I went back and then I found out. When I found out that day, I went to the clinic in Calgary, and they told me that – it was a room like this. There was a doctor, and me, and a nurse. The doctor said, "We have some news for you. You tested positive for the HIV virus." I said, "Oh wow, really?" The doctor said, "We'll leave you alone for a few minutes, and we'll come back to let you deal with it." For thirty minutes I sat in that room alone. I didn't know what to do. I was just looking around, just thinking. They come back in like, just sort of, "Okay, well, if you have no questions…" [inaudible]. They gave me AIDS Calgary's number. So, oh, okay. And I was really—I was shocked when that happened.

And so, that was when I started questioning it, like what's going on behind it, the politics and the treatment. And so, I started getting—well, I started doing some volunteer work for AIDS Calgary, and then meeting more people. And then after that, I came out here, and that's when I really got involved in it, and I started speaking up about what was going on in terms of care, treatment, and support. When they talk about the care, treatment, and support, they never really talk about the isolation. Like, in my recent paper for—I said UBC takes care a lot of things about the mind, it strengthens your mind for when you leave, and your body it makes you—your eating habits change in order to go to UBC every day. Then your—your spirit is being strengthened to leave, but then it never takes care of the heart because they don't talk about the emotional. And that's what's going on, I feel that a lot of times you get these papers and they're all very, what do you call—they're from up here, they're not from down here. And that's what I'm trying to bring out there. Because I sit in those classes, and when they talk about things like that in the histories, they never talk about that, about the spirituality as well. So, I'm very vocal. And I got that from all these years of sitting here listening to and talking about those care and treatment and support issues. Can I get some more?

BK: Yep, I'll stop this for a second.

[19-03-01-RM end]; [19-03-01-RM2 begin]

BK: We'll get back to it.

RM: Okay, so since moving out here about twenty years ago, well just over twenty years ago. After the five years I got here, I started getting involved with the community out here. I started working at, it was called the Pacific AIDS Resource Centre part, and my desk was like this one here. And when people came in, they saw me first through the whole building. And I was always trying to be happy. And the first person they saw was an Indigenous person. So, I made them feel good and everything. And what happened was a lot of those people, when they saw me working there, they asked me to, about this—to run for this organization's board of directors, to get

involved. So, I went and I started listening, and then I became a member and that, and then I ran for the board. The first time I ever did that because they encouraged me to, I got voted in right away and then I became the vice-president right away. And then I never did anything like that before, so what I did was—they gave me training and what I used was my own experience of dealing with the issues that were brought forward. I didn't understand the law and the policy part behind it until years later. But I started speaking up more, I started going to conferences and listening to other people. And what really surprised me was, one organization, the Canadian—CAAN, Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network—they, and Healing Our Spirit when they had their, what do you call it, their groups, their conferences. What you saw on the news, what you heard in the news, and like some of the like – it totally changed your looks. And what I saw was that there was a lot of sickness, there was a lot of death, there was a lot of—it looked sad. But then when you got a lot of First Nations in a room together to discuss it, a lot of them were Two-Spirit. Oh my god, you walk in that room and it's filled with life. It is. It's filled with life. They're not always, "Ah!" like that, like some people. But they're full of life. And they're not letting that disease get to them.

I've seen some—not to be mean or anything—but I've seen some non-First Nations people, and the way they are, and I'm not putting down the way they're dealing with it, but it's more, it's not—I don't want them to feel bad, because when you walk into a room, it's a totally different thing. I think it's just our upbringings. But when you go to a First Nations room, and I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought the non-natives up, but when you go into a room like that, there's life in there. And then although we may all be different, we all share a common background. We've all—some of us had abuse, we come from abusive backgrounds. And that doesn't, like, seem to get to them. They deal with it, we smudge, we share our stories. I found a bigger family across Canada. And this one time I went to this conference in Yellowknife—or Whitehorse—and I met this young person there, and he was always clinging to us—like me and a friend went up there—and he was always clinging to us. And he said, "I look up to you guys, because you guys are my elders and you guys are my mentors." I was surprised he said that, because I was still something like thirty. And he was, but he was younger. To this day we're really good friends. I call him almost everyday, we text each other. He lives in Toronto. And there are stories I hear now about people who leave their—who have no choice but to leave. They're either tossed away from the reserve because of their what do you call, their HIV status or because the fact that they're Two-Spirit. And they can't go back home. And that's not what it was for me.

So, moving like—when I was involved here I started speaking up more, and then getting involved in community, and then I'm just trying to understand it more and then becoming an advocate, and very vocal against policy. One person – I tell them at UBC, I said—I still bring it up—I said there's policymakers there that are not doing a good job. They're high-paid, they're highly paid. Like, just recently I had to bring it up at UBC. I said you guys are making mistakes, and you guys are academics and you guys are being paid top-dollar, and you guys are making mistakes, because you're not listening to us. You have to listen to us if you guys are wanting to get anywhere. And that's what I seen in the past few years, those politicians in Ottawa and Victoria, they make policies for us. And that's why I started speaking up. I was listening to what others say, and I listened to what they said, and then I read what they prepared, and then I had to agree with the ones that spoke up about it. Because these people are making policies without listening to people. And that's what I would like to get into. So, after I got involved, like, I had

relationships on and off all through that time, a lot of relationships. And so, a friend of mine, I met him just up here, there's a bar, it was like a booze can [inaudible] – a friend of mine introduced me that night, and since that night until today we become really close friends. And we started, we were in a—were an item before, but now it's just more or less respect each other, we know each other. Just recently my mother adopted him. And what I've been—like since he's been in my life, he's learned more about HIV, he's learned more about the First Nations, and he's become a real ally. And he's always caring for me and everything. He cares enough to bring two bottles of champagne except for last night. Oh, not champagne, chardonnay. So anyway, he's always there. And that one day my mother told me she said, "You're lonely at times, why not him?" He was sleeping on the couch. I said, "No, no, no, that's grandma." We call each other grandma. And we don't use it in a way where it's, what do you call, disrespectful. It's a way of respecting each other. Because our ages, they were about the same. We're almost the same age. And it's just like, we've become very close.

And that's the kind of supports that are needed in some of these service organizations. And I mentioned this place called Healing Our Spirit before. There was an organization, for twenty years I helped to bring it to where it was up here, by always speaking up and being asked to do interviews, and speak on behalf of the organization, and I did. So, I helped elevate it. But then, people living with HIV got control of it and they totally ruined it for everybody. Because now there's—when you look around now, there's no real place for First Nations HIV/AIDS services. And a lot of those people have been asking me, I did it before, I wrote those, what do you call, by-laws and constitution for a separate organization. And I still have to do that, I started it, but I get so busy at UBC and it's draining writing all that out. So, they still want me to do it. And I think I'll work on it before like summer, just to get it over and done with. So, dealing with that organization and going to different conferences, I learned more about how to help myself and how to help people, and listened more to people, getting involved in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous side of it. And it's been a real learning experience for me, and I've taken all that with me to UBC. And I've become very vocal out there, and sometimes the students don't like it, but then they see how upset I can be with them. And the reason I get upset is, one, they're not listening, two, they're not doing their homework, and three, they're thinking their way is right. Last year when I ran for the president of the AMS, I brought all these issues up. Like, the very first day I got into UBC, and actually let's start the story before that.

So, years ago, about twelve years ago, I had a person in my life. I was working at Healing Our Spirit. Actually, I was a board member there, when I was working there. I was at a meeting all day, and I met this person through a friend of mine. He said he was on top of a building, he had binoculars with the person he was with, and he saw me coming up the street and he asked that guy, "Who's that right there?" He said, "That's Rodney." And then, later on we got—they were still together and then somehow we ended up together. And I didn't understand what happened. So, he went back to Toronto, then he came back, and the very first night he came back, he disappeared at the bar with somebody, he didn't get back until the next day. I didn't think nothing of it. And so, all that time I was being pl—he spent time with me, treated me really nice, but we never had sex once. And I didn't understand it, but then I was falling for him and I thought I respected that for him, because he was still young. Then the day I turned thirty, what he—no hang on, it was thirty, or thirty-five, I think it was—I went to work and he kept texting me, and he said he was going to have so much fun, getting ready for the party. Around two

o'clock the texts end, and there was nothing from him, it was just silence. I said, "Hello, where are you?" "On my way back." I got home, my windows were open, and everything that had value was gone. He took everything. I had about $400 worth of coins that were rolled up in my closet, he took those. I had a letter written by—at therapy, I went to BC Male Survivors for therapy for seven-and-a-half years, at the end of it I had to write a letter to myself and open it when the time came. He opened that letter and read it. And he—I don't know it just, that really hurt?

And since then my life just kind of went downhill, because it broke my heart, it really did. After—what is it, last year, I finally wrote to him and I said, "I'll forgive you, but I'll never forget what you did. And one day I'll write about it, and expose you for the fraud you are. Because I hope that what happens to me never happens to your daughter." So, when he left, my life went a different way than I ever thought it would. I ended up—I started doing meth. This one person came over and—well, I did it before, I just tried it once, and then kept me up all night. For two nights and then a friend of mine—oh, I met just one person, he walked in—he came in and that was one of the biggest mistakes I ever made, was inviting him into my life, because ever since then my life just—he's there and he's always causing problems one way or another. And it went really crazy. And this is the first time I'm really getting public that I did meth—well, I kind of still am, at times. And when that happened, like that really caused a lot of problems in my life. I ended up living with him and then—to understand what he was going through at times, I thought I was hep C but I—with the things I did. And so, one day he asked me, he said,"Do you want to share…"—he had a syringe, said, "Are you hep C positive?" I said, "I'm not sure." So. what happened was he injected me, I fell in the bed, I was, woah, it was a different sensation. And then after he did that, he left, said, "I'll be back later." Said what? "I'll be back later."

So—and then two weeks after that, I ended up in the hospital. I was really sick. And I called work and said, "I don't think I'll be in, I have to go the hospital right now." I ended up in the hospital for two weeks. My weight went down and everything, oh my god it was terrible, the pain I felt. My mother came, my sister came, to be with me. And after that, I went to what do you call – I stayed there for awhile and then after that I went to – I was in there for another two weeks with meningitis. Two weeks after that, I went with meningitis. I was lying in the hospital again and I was in pain, so much pain. The first night I got there in that pain, I – what do you call, I—they gave me so much morphine. The doctor walks in and he says, "I'm Dr. Montessori." And I said, "What? Mount me slowly?" So, and later on I was—they put me in a room in 10-C, and I was lying there just in pain. The doctor walks in he says, "Hi there, again, I'm doctor Montessori." And I said, wait a minute, I thought about it, I said, "I'm really sorry," I apologized to him. "They gave me too much downstairs morphine." He said, "It's okay." But then I had spinal taps and I was in so much pain. So, what happened was I ended up, when I was lying there, I was looking towards my friend, like talking to him, and I was falling asleep. And he looks up and he goes, "Oh my god." And I turned around and my mom's standing there, she came back, for another two weeks. She stayed for three.

So, after that I went back home for about a month, because I had to regain my weight somehow. I was half the size I am right now. Then what happened was they brought me on trips to the US. One weekend I went with my sisters and her daughters, and I'll always remember the trip that was when Coldplay came out with that something—I forget what it's called—anyway, I always remember playing on the radio, it just came out that weekend. And every time we went on a

different road, these flashbacks came, and it happened the whole weekend. Every road and every turn we took, memories just popped back into my head, it was so overwhelming. Then when I got back, I had to sleep for about two—a day, just to try to process everything. So, I stayed there and went for walks in the hills, then the next week we went out for another—my mom brought me down, the same thing happened, because she took a different route. And all these memories started coming back, and I was trying to process them, because every time we took like a—every mile had a memory for me, about my childhood. And that was very hard, like it was painful being in the hospital, but it was painful for all those memories coming back. Although they were good, but it was just all at once.

So, I came back here and I started all over again. And a year after that—hang on—I was homeless. I didn't have a place to live. So, I ended up in the Downtown Eastside living in one of those SROs. And for a year down there, or I think it was eight months, it was a life-changing experience. Before all of this happened, I used to like dress really nice, like I always used to go to stores get some really nice clothes. And then I always used to read *Vanity Fair*. Non-stop, I had a whole stack of them. You ever seen that *Sex & the City?* Carrie had *Vogue*, I had *Vanity Fair.* That's how much I had. And then, I met somebody and I had to get rid of them and we had a real bad relationship. He was very abusive to me. So, what happened was—this was before I ended up in the Downtown Eastside—we lived together and then, I just couldn't take it anymore, because he was being so mean. He never hit me or anything, he never did, he always used to just—it was verbal. So we – when was it? We had a falling out and then I ended up in the Downtown Eastside. And then that's when my eyes were opened. And like, when I was working, I always sat on the side of the desk where I thought I knew about other people's lives, but living that life, I really didn't. So, I learned a lot down there and I'm thankful that my eyes were opened down there. And then I, what do you call it, I started volunteering with people down there. So—and it felt really good doing that.

And then when I went back to Alberta that year, a year after I got out for being—had meningitis, I went back again for having it again. So, I went back home for another month. And so, one night, we're sitting there, my mom is—it was like two-thirty in the morning. Everybody's in bed, it was a quiet, crystal—a quiet winter night outside. It was so white. You ever see the nights there, they're beautiful. So, we're sitting there, and I was watching, what do you call, *Family Guy*. And there's one episode where they have to—Peter and those guys—they have to go through all these – they break into Fort Knox, they're trying to get the gold. They have to go through all these gates and everything. The last thing they do, they go to a door and they have to answer a question. And the question was, what's the un-sexiest male name ever? And he's sitting there, and he goes, "Keith." She and I just burst out laughing. My middle name is Keith. So, I went in there and I told her—told her, "No wonder I'm not getting laid." And I said, "What are you doing?" She said she's doing her homework. She just graduated from the—oh, she's going to the University of Calgary, getting her degree in social work. So, what happened was I was sitting there, and she said, "Here look at this, do something for me." I said—she said, "Answer this question." She said, "I already did, but answer this question. I want you to answer it in your own words." And she said, "It's about homelessness. Answer it. I want to see how you do on it. I'll give you twenty minutes to do it and I'll be back, okay?" So, I sat there and I read it, and it talked about people who are homeless.

And what I did was I drew on the experience that I got when I ended up in the Downtown Eastside. I met so many people down there who were First Nations, youth. I was surprised with the youth when they came up to me and started talking to me at this homeless shelter. They started asking me questions, they started sharing their stories with me. And I asked a friend of mine, said what do I do there, I don't know what they're doing. They said, "Rodney, they see you as their elder. Listen to them, they need an elder in their lives." To this day I still talk to those youth. So, that was an eye-opening experience for me, ever being treated like that. So, I put that in the paper, and I put some other things as well, and what policies were wrong from what I saw. And then after—twenty minutes later, she came back and she said—she read it—she said, "Oh my god, Rodney." She said, "This is really good. It's coherent and it flows. You know your subject, you know what's being talked about. You state your—you did answer the question, but in a different way." She said, "This a fourth-year university question, it's time for you to go." So she said, '"So, you have a choice, you go back—you can go back to Vancouver, but you either get a job, or you go to university. I'm not going to help you until you do." So, I came back here, and I got involved. That's how I started university. And I take all the lessons that I've learned over the last twenty-three years—well thirty years—and I use them everyday out there. When I'm dealing with things out there. There's a whole lot more I want to tell you, but you won't have enough time. And I don't have enough time. I gotta check my phone real quick now.

BK: Do you want me to stop this?

RM: Yeah, please.

[end 19-03-01-RM2]; [start 19-03-01-RM3]

RM: One of the most—it's difficult, when I was learning about HIV and AIDS and working out here, one of the things that I saw was, people, they're very strong. They're very strong. And then all of a sudden you see their lives, they they get—they're—they lose that strength. It's either here or physically. And me, I've always tried to remain the same person through this whole thing. I never really let it get me down, I never—I use it for help, like to help me get funding. I use that as a tool for me to get funding, like disability. But there are times those professionals, they don't see it that way. I almost left my doctor because for three years I brought him a form from UBC to sign for me to get disability funding. UBC considers it, what do you call it, HIV a disability. The academics feel like that, the government feels like that, it's a disability. But when I bring it to him he won't, he'll never sign it. I said—and the same reason he always comes up with: "You're too healthy." Every time I give it to him to sign it, my bloodwork still shows undetectable. I've been undetectable for a long time. And my—like the body of a normal person. But the mind of a child. No. [Laughs] A horny little boy. Or girl. So anyway, he won't sign it. And I said why? And then I said, "You know what, three years in a row, you keep saying no." I said, "I don't think I could see you anymore." And I tried to get—he asked—he surprised me last week, or two weeks ago by his nurse called me, said, "He's going to fill out your report—those forms for you." I said really? "But he wants to talk to you about it first." And he—I went to talk to many people, and I guess all those people called him. And they advocated for me?

But that's something that, I agree with him, that I'm healthy. My life, it's changed being out there, especially in the last three years. Like, doing drugs is there, but chardonnay's up here now.

And it's more or less that, it's—those are still kind of people that I have a problem with. This one time—there was a doctor from Alberta. Alberta didn't want to fund HIV. They were very, what do you call, they were very stingy with all that oil money or whatever they did. Before with, what do you call—they didn't want to fund doctors for HIV. They were fighting for it. And there was a doctor from Alberta, and I got up and I asked him a question in front of everybody. He was giving a report and everything. I said thank you for that report. And I told him who I was and where I was from. I said, doctors—or "People are supposed to listen to their doctors, that's correct?" He goes, "Yes." They—"We have to listen to them or we can be called incompetent or something." He said, "Yes." "Well then, why isn't the government of Alberta and why aren't you doctors doing that to the government in Alberta?" I said, "They're not listening to us, they're not hearing what we're saying about our lives. Why aren't they listening to us about this?" And he didn't know how to answer that. He said, "Well…" Oh my god. Everybody in that room, after I asked that, they all clapped. Because sitting there like—that inspiration I get from other people. it's like hearing it on TV and then trying to think like what my dad always taught me was to use common sense when you're dealing with issues from the outside. So that's what I've been trying to do.

And those—that kind of thinking comes up when I'm at UBC. And again, using the skills that I learned in the HIV community and the Two-Spirit community, speaking up and not being quiet. That's what a lot of students are doing out there. And then learning about the true history and things like that. If you ever get the chance, read *The Inconvenient Indian*, Thomas King. And *Where White Men Fear to Tread,* Russel Means. Read those two books. Especially that Russell Means, it'll—wow. Those two books kind of influenced what I've been learning at UBC. Before I went there, although I knew about the HIV community, I thought I knew about the First Nations community, until I got there, I started connecting the dots on a lot of things. And then it's all becoming clearer to me. And the lessons I learned in the HIV community, they elevate that voice that I have, and that strength that I've gotten from those rooms. Indigenous and non-Indigenous, dealing with them. And what people see that, on the outside they always elected me to a lot of boards. And I always got on. That election last year was the first election I lost. The first election I lost. And I thought, there's seventeen-hundred people that I have to sleep with. So, and I found out recently that their policies are violating the law, their election policy. So, if I had—and it's regarding the amount of time that you're able to campaign—if I had an extra week, and there was an extra week, but they only did it for two, I would've been president out there last year. And that bothers the hell out of me. They're calling it a violation of the law, but no one's being called to court. No one's being brought before the judge, no investigation, no inquiry. Tonight, that's why I'm going there, I'm going to be addressing that, because all those candidates are going to be there. To see why they're not—why they wouldn't call for an investigation or an inquiry. Because if a law violation helps us in the HIV/AIDs community, or 'cause you know how people don't tell other people they're HIV positive, they're taken to court. An Indigenous person is taken to court for a law violation right away. Why not a school official? Why are they above the law? It seems like they're making themselves above the law. That's what I'm going to be addressing tonight.

And yesterday it came up in one of our courses. You look at, what do you call, Canada, the US, Israel, and England. All their leaders are having problems right now. And all of it is based on money, all those problems are based on money. And what I've been learning at these HIV/AIDS

conferences over the years and listening to the elders talk, is that there's change coming. It's a spiritual awakening. And things that don't have a spiritual basis are—based, they're all going to fail. And so, what I've been doing out there at UBC is when people are, they're talking about different courses, professors I bring it up. And what I know of spirituality is what I'm trying to bring them. And I said, you guys are offering up some things about the history but when you're—like I'm in anthropology—said when you're talking about the history, you're not talking about the spirituality. And that's what a lot of these anthropologists did. They never talked about the spirituality. They looked at us, they're calling it shamanism – it's wrong, it's medicine man. They're calling it witchcraft – it's not witchcraft or sorcery, it's called medicine. And you guys are translating it and you guys are making us think it's right, or it's wrong. And so every chance I get I speak up like that. And it's something that—did you guys do a smudge for this when you guys started?

BK: We didn't, no.

RM: You guys should do that. I really think you should. Bring in an elder. You have an elder on your committee?

BK: I think he would probably be an elder, but I would have to clarify that. He's certainly been around in the HIV world for a long time.

RM: [Name]?

BK: Not [name], but somebody else.

RM: [Name]?

BK: Somebody else that's been around for a long time.

RM: Sandy [Lambert]?

BK: Yes, Sandy, yes.

RM: Tell him to smudge with you guys. Seriously, tell him that—in order for this to succeed, smudge. Smudge for this whole project because again, I feel that if it were to have that spiritual basis, it will go farther than you think. Because one thing—and I bring it up there—an elder taught me this, she said, "Always bring it up. Always stress the fact that you're on unceded territory. And follow the traditions of that territory, and things—you'll have a different outcome if you do." Sandy—one of the things that brings up, Sandy, there was about—when this whole HIV started, in Alberta and regarding the policies, there was a lot of us—well, look at that thing right there. Let's say that's Alberta right there, and all the darker coloured people on that thing right there, they're all HIV, they all had to leave. There's only one person in Alberta who's HIV now okay, that one person in the centre. All of us that surround that thing right there, we're educated, we're living longer, and we were accepted into communities that are not our own. We were discarded from our own communities. And the government discarded us, they were happy to give us bus tickets out of the province. So, we learned – we learned the laws, we learned

policies, and we learned how to do things. And we learned to survive on our own without their help. Now, it's time for all of those people to go back and give back to the policies or to come up with new policies for them. And that's what I've been doing. Like, there's a thing called the Drum Project, Sandy and I are a part of. About bringing HIV, how to make a community prepared for a person coming back who's HIV. And again, it's like using those—like what the teachings that I got here from First Nations, that really helped me. Yeah, honest Indian.

BK: Here in Vancouver, did you experience a lot of discrimination as an Indigenous guy within the gay community or within the HIV world?

RM: Not really. Not really. Except for landlords, holy. Fuckers. They are, oh my god, they are – they can be so judgemental. Just one look at you. And not to be mean or anything, but Asian landlords are like that. A few times when I was looking for a place on the east side, I went to these homes and they were Asian, they—oh my god, it just, it's difficult to deal with them. But then I realized, they don't know the history. Just recently at UBC, these students from China—one of them still contacts me—he asked me in archeology what UBC was like. So, I decided to bring him and two others for a tour of UBC, and I brought them to certain places, and I brought them to the First Nations house of learning where they have lunches every Tuesday. And I said, "Do you guys know about residential schools?" They said, "No." So before lunch, I said, "Well, read this"—I showed them this one place called Indigenous foundations. I made them read—I said, "Read this whole thing." It was all about residential schools. And there's three of them, they're all reading it. And then one of them stopped and said, "The government tried to kill you?" Keep reading it. And then at the end of it, oh my god, they closed it, and that one young lady, she started crying. I said, "What's wrong, are you okay? I shouldn't have showed you." She said, "They tried to kill you all." I said, "Yes." And said, "For what? Out there, the land." And she said—and they asked me, "Are they still doing it?" And I said, "Well, not outright but in a way they are, they're taking our children now." Like the child welfare policies, a big discussion's happening right now about that. That's what they're—I said that's what they're doing right now. And they didn't know about it. I said, "You guys never learned about this in China?" They said, "Nope." I said, "You guys have to do reports?" They said, "Yes." "Who gets those reports?" "They go all the way up to the premier." He takes a select few and he learns.

Recently, the president, or the premier there said that in order for China to get anywhere in the world, they have to learn about the world and the world has to learn about them. And so, when I heard that, I told them, "Well, make sure you write about the residential schools, take that Indigenous foundations course and learn about the history." And that's one thing I want to fight for, is to get a course like that offered as a requirement for all student to take in order to graduate. Some academics don't want that, because there'd be too much and they'd have to design it in a way in certain, what do you call, what do you call like disciplines like business or science and all that, but they shouldn't just leave it the way it is. And it'll teach people a lot of things. And include HIV and AIDS in that. Because when I took that course, I learned a lot. So, when I told them that, after they left, they—that young lady, I said, "Are you okay?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "It's not your fault." And she—they surprised me, they all apologized to me. I said—I didn't know what to say, I said thank you. And to this day they're still writing to me, see how I'm doing. They still want to get together with me. And I'm really stress—like trying to get them

to report back to the premier about the things that happened here, because I don't think that premier knows. A lot of people there don't know. And that surprises me, like they should know.

And when I ran for the, what do you call, I've been very open about who I am, about being HIV positive. And a person that ran for politics out here, he said, "Is that your identity." I said, "Well, that's who I feel, that's who I am, it's a part of me." So, I don't care if I identify as that or Two-Spirit. And I always include HIV as when I identify myself, doesn't like—at a conference or something. And then he—so, what is it, when this person, he was recently charged. He was at that meeting when we first met, too. And for twenty years, that person was my mentor, and that really hurt. He was charged with sex for underage people. So that—that came up a lot. And to this day, like, he did things to me as well, and I couldn't talk about until that day it happened. I finally sat down with other people, it was one other person I told him what he did to me, and how he made me feel. How I couldn't say anything because he helped me get scholarships, he helped me get my apartment, he gave me a job for every summer. And now I'm applying for another job there, but I was able to speak up and tell people what he did. And I couldn't sue him or anything, because he had so much power. And it's still—I still have to be very careful talking to people who knew him as well. Because I don't know how much power he still has now, it's hard to say. But recently I was told to be careful about what I'm saying. I said, "Why?" They said, "You might get hurt." Said, "Well, if I'm hurt, that means I'm telling the truth then." So, all this, what you're seeing right now is a person who came from Alberta from a conservative background – well not me. And I had a Catholic upbringing, and going to those schools, I had a conservative upbringing, learning. But now it's totally changed. Being HIV positive, a lot of times people, they don't like it, or they hate dealing with me, become a friend of mine. Like a good friend who can be a real bitch at times, just like me. And again, learning from the Two-Spirit community. So, what else?

BK: What was Healing Our Spirit doing during those years that you were involved? What kind of support were they providing to Indigenous folks?

RM: One of the things that they were doing is I helped them—I wrote a homelessness project for them. And they were just, like, going out to the community and offering education for people living with—to communities. And that's how I feel right now that should happen – academics won't like this – is that for them to take a step back and let us come with our own education and our own lived experience to educate people. They would offer support, they had a legal team there, they had all these supports in different areas, prisons. But it sort of dwindled when powers changed, like conservative to liberal, they sort of dwindled the money. And it offered those supports. And that homelessness project, it was to educate people about homelessness. Every now and then you give a little presentation to them. But it was also a meal program for them, a daily meal for them, they had a place to go. A lot of them were – a lot of people who showed up were HIV positive. And I was glad that I was able to give back to the community in that way. And when those people living with HIV got control of that organization, I really stood up. I was very vocal about it. No government—there's several, there's three of us that are still trying to work on it, to bring those people to justice, because nobody was. And in the upcoming election, I can finally talk about it, and bring it up to politicians. Because politicians knew about it, they did nothing about it. They didn't ask, they didn't ask us more questions, they did one meeting with us to talk about it. They heard about us, they said we'll see what we can do. They said they

couldn't do nothing, because it was a—they kept brushing it off to a different level of government. And oh my gosh. And it's up to you as a membership to take care of it. We can't do anything because we don't have contact information for everybody, and sometimes those membership they gave up on it. They let them get away with it. And to me, I read this one book, another book called *Bad Medicine*, John Reilly.

BK: Putting together a reading list here.

RM: At the end of that book he states, he quotes Edmund Burke, "in order for evil to thrive, good men nothing." And that stuck with me ever since I read that book. And that's the kind of, that's my kind of, like, my motto in life. Well, for that project paper I wrote this past week, I said be good to mother earth and, something like that – oh, I forget it. So anyway, when I read that, I thought of what those people did at Healing Our Spirit. The person, the one, that executive director, he's working at the casino right now. And to publicly shame him, I would love to do it but a friend of mine works there too. I've known him for so many years. And what other people did, they're able to walk around, they're able to work at an AIDS organization, like volunteer. And we tried to bring it up to them, but nothing's being done about it. Other AIDS organizations won't support us – well, they support us, but not as much as to get rid of them from working there. So, the election's coming up. And this is, to me seeing them get away with it is the wrong message that – like just recently, what I said about the election out at UBC, how they've been violating the law, nothing's being done about it. So, a lot of laws that, a lot of circumstances like in the HIV/AIDS community, and at UBC, they're not addressing these issues. Nobody's calling for an investigation or inquiry, or anything like that. Things come up. This person that got arrested about having sex with underage children, there, a big part of it was him asking us to be silent about it.

A few years ago, last year, one of the people that was on the board of that Healing Our Spirit, he got a hold of—he called me, he said I have—he was at the place where all the boxes were stored, they were gonna throw them away. I told him—he was saying, "I'm going to grab some"—I said, "Well, grab anything that says 'financial.'" He did, and he brought them to my place, I started going through those papers. Oh my god, what I saw in them! Taxpayers should be bitching about this. Nobody isn't. I saw things in there that would make you sick about how they spent the society funds. In one night, that executive director spent—he went to the bank machine about three times, or four times that night, he pulled out about eight-hundred-dollars. Back and forth. He was buying drinks for people at the bar. On society money. And, tow-trucks, things like that, the society paid for them, for all of it. And that's why it bothers the hell out of me. And when you try to talk about this to non-Native people, they go, "Oh, it's an Indian problem." No it's not, it's your problem, you're a taxpayer, you paid, those are your funds right there. And nobody's bringing it up. So, when the election comes, I am going to be bringing it up again. It's about time, just a final stand for this, because we were silenced by somebody and we should not have been. We should have been encouraged by him, he should've been helping us. But no, we weren't. So, I think it's time for that to happen now.

And again, with that new society, we're right now—a couple of years ago, I was working at CAAN [Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network]—we were given a chance to have a caucus here in BC. I got everybody together, I organized the whole thing, got people here. And then I wrote a

report for it. And when we presented it to everybody at the conference, instead of me giving it, I met in the corner with all the APHA's, and the CEO at the time looked really concerned. "What are you doing?" I said, "Nothing, I'm getting ready to give my report." So, when they called me up, I asked all of them to stand up behind me, and I presented that report as a collective. I didn't take ownership of it, I said it belongs to all of us. Sandy was up there reading it with me, and the statement that we made. After that, everybody—there was like two hundred people in that whole room—they all got up and started clapping. A person that I invited from the university was there. When I got back to the table he was crying. I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "You really inspired me, Rodney." He said, "What you did up there, by not claiming it as your own, including everybody," he said, "that's the kind of leadership we need. You see, you don't do it for yourself, you're doing it for them." He said, "You really did inspire me." And when I got to university, one day I told him about running for the AMS. He said, "Hh good, you're gonna be like the Bernie Sanders of UBC politics." Oh my god, because some of those students are younger, they could be my children, and that's what freaks me out.

BK: How did you look after your health during those early years?

RM: Chardonnay. [Laughs]

BK: Sure.

RM: No, I took care of myself, like eating healthy. I take care of myself, like I walk a lot. I walk a lot. And one other thing too is for a long time I never touched pot, I didn't want people to smoke pot around me. But when I lost all that weight from hep C and meningitis, it was those medicine balls that got to me, that made me gain my weight. Now I'm just like, semi-pothead. It was doing things like that that changed my life. And every now and then, it helps me sleep, I get a good enough sleep. And reading. And just remaining who I am is what got me through it all. Like always remembering that I'm thinking from here, and here, and my body and everything. And it's that, believing in a creator and forgetting about what I learned about that religion – some people, I call them a recovering Catholic. And just being me. And those strengths, I'm all of it, I've been putting in a statement to give to UBC. I'm writing a statement about all the injustices that I've seen. So, in the past year. And try to do it in a way that I come off as not attacking them, but pointing it out to them. This is the kind of message you're sending to other students. And, well the students that want to come in. I fought for First Nations to be a part of that student government. I got, finally after one-hundred-and-fifty-one years, they have a Indigenous community within the student government out there. I fought for that. When I presented all this information during the election, I stood alone. There was no Native people behind me. And now, they have that committee, they kind of took it away from me. And they took it in a way that I don't want to go. I don't blame them, I blame the system that's in control now. Because I just do, it's not a traditional system.

I included – what I include in the by-laws when I wrote them is to include definitions of who First Nations, Metis, and all that was. Because they're—students who run those student governments, they don't know those definitions, it's to help them. Also, to include like grandmother, parent, and to give, like, the different levels of university a title like that, to honour all the ages, because we're not all the same age there. The ones that come in are the children,

they're sons and daughters, and then you have the aunts and uncles, and then you have the grandparents. And that's how I see it. I made it a living, breathing document, but nope, they tore it all apart. And it made sense because it was—for me, when I thought of them, I was thinking about what I've learned the whole time about HIV, it did help me. And going to these conferences, thinking about what they do, it really made me understand like, there are good lessons that come from living with this disease, and I use them everyday. But some people don't see it that way, they're too educated in their own way. They've turned from—I realized that I grew up on a reserve with a lot of issues, like, oh my god, my sister wants me to write a story, and I'm not telling you everything here, you know that. Because she wants me to write a book, and I talked to a creative writing teacher and she said that—my sister said, "You have a story, it needs to be told." That's why I didn't go in depth here, I'm saving it.

BK: You're saving the good bits.

RM: Yeah, the very good bits. I told grandma, I'm writing a book and I'm going to name names. You have four chapters. But again, it's like, it made me who I am it made me a strong person. A lot of times, like, I wasn't able to be truthful about who I was, and thank you for letting me do that.

BK: Thank you so much for sharing with us.

RM: No thank you.

BK: We're deeply appreciative of you sharing all of this with us. Did you ever start on meds or treatment of any kind?

RM: Yep.

BK: Well, when did that enter the equation?

RM: I started in Calgary, and then I continued here. When I was hep C, or when I got meningitis, I didn't take them for a long time, that they said is how I got meningitis. And I haven't taken it for the past month, and I feel alive. When I was hep C, oh my god, when I started taking that Harvoni, I decided to take a walk up Grouse Mountain, on the other side not that grind thing, there's a road there. And then, I walked up there alone and I could actually feel that stuff in my body, I started feeling something different. Two days later, I started university. Woah. It was a good way to start it then, six months after I found out I was not hep C positive anymore. But it can be a real bitch taking them, I went from eight pills a day to two. Two pills a day. Every morning. Which reminds me, I have to go get some. So but, they were okay, I never really had bad effects or anything from them.

BK: And now you're undetectable, you said.

RM: Yeah really, holy. The medication is like, although they're making a lot of money, they still keep me alive.

BK: Maybe just by way of wrapping up, maybe there will be a couple other things that come up still, but one of the questions we always like to ask near the end is just what advice you might have as a long-term survivor, as an elder, who's been living with HIV for a long time.

RM: Elder.

BK: I mean in the HIV world you are, right? What advice do you have for younger folks who might not have lived through this time?

RM: Don't let it change you, continue to have fun. Seriously, continue to have fun. Yes, you're living with a—people live with cancer, they're out there having fun. Elderly people are out there, not as elderly as me, they're out there having fun. Do not forget to have fun in life. You're at school, do your homework but have fun, don't get bogged down with serious things in life. But always remember to say thank you to creator, or god, whoever. That's how I get through my day. Every night before I go to bed, if I'm not with a man, I say something, thank you. Not for not being with a man, but you know what I mean, I look up and I just say thank you for the day. Today, good or bad, I always say thank you, because I learned something, I made people laugh or I had a good day. And thank you. Can you turn it off so I can put these on now?

BK: Sure, I'll just say thank you again and then we can stop this for now.