

“HIV in My Day” – Interview 60

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

Interview anonymized at participant's request

Ben Klassen: We're now on the record. Great. Well, thank you so much for being here.

Participant: My pleasure.

BK: And agreeing to share your story with us. Just to get started, can you tell me a little bit about your connection to Vancouver?

P: I moved here in March of '87, so thirty-two years ago. I was actually planning – I was working in Halifax – I had a wonderful job, I had a wonderful partner. And one of my best friends, who sat in the cubicle next to me had been to Vancouver for Expo. And she said, “I’m happy to be back in Halifax, but I realize now my home is Vancouver.” And it intrigued me. I’m like, hm. And I said, “Funny you should mention that, I’m thinking of moving to Montreal, but I have this boyfriend and this great job here.” But I think the job was coming to an end or they were going to downsize or something, just because it was a seasonal thing – we were summer tourism booking people. And so, come Fall, I forget the logistics, but for some reason I – and I knew I wanted to get out of Halifax eventually. But Vancouver was not my first choice, so that’s kind of... I still look back and I go, if it hadn’t been for her, I probably wouldn’t have ended up here, so it’s funny how you meet people who send you off in a different direction, but it was a good thing. Anyway, I ended up here. She talked me out of going to Montreal because she said, “You don’t speak French, darling. You want to be a waiter?” [Laughs] Because I worked part-time as a waiter and full-time as a tourism booking agent, and I had just finished a degree in marine biology and one year in history, Medieval History – who doesn’t want a degree in biology and Medieval History? But it was this wonderful year, and I felt I was starting to work, and it was the beginning of my adult life, and I wanted an adventure, so I chose Vancouver. But she helped me see – and we ended up moving out on the train over four days to come across the country. And she was kind enough, where she said, “We’ll get a berth,” where you sit at a – it’s like having a booth table, and we sit on each side of the table, and you have a full window and the country passes you by, and at night, the table collapses into a bed, but then there’s two bunks. But the bottom bunk has the window and the top bunk is just into the ceiling. She said, “I’ve done the trip before. I’ll give you the bottom bunk.” And I still remember, it was so hard to go to sleep, because you’re laying there and you’re level with the window, and the country is flying by – I still cry thinking about it. So, it was beautiful trip. So, we ended up – I went to Montreal for two weeks to get it out of my system, so she met me in Montreal, and I’ll always remember meeting here at the train station. And she looked at me and said, “This is it, we’re doing this.” That was March 16th, and then three days later, after three non-stop – it takes three days without stopping – I mean, they stop to pick people up. The longest stop was an hour in Winnipeg I remember, an hour and a half, and I ran down to whatever the main – we were close enough to the main intersection, Portage and Main I think, or something. And I said, “I have to go take a picture.” And we went through Regina and Calgary and Thunder Bay. And then going through the Rockies, but most of the Rockies unfortunately were at night. Yeah. And then we arrived in

Vancouver on March 19th, 1987, so that's how I ended up here. We're going to need to close that screen.

BK: I know, it's quite reflective here. [Blinds closing]

P: That's good, yeah. So, that's how I ended up here. So, when you said connection, what else did you mean?

BK: Well, what did the city look like then?

P: I thought it was smaller than I thought it would be, but it was just as beautiful. She made a point of – she said, “We’ll arrive in March for the cherry blossoms. You aren’t going to believe this,” she said, and she was right. All the things that she was so excited about, because we had very similar interests, and it means so much to me that she put that much thought into it. She wanted me to stand on the Main Street SkyTrain station facing North. She said, “I’m so excited, that’s going to be your first view. First SkyTrain station is going to be Main Street looking North.” And it’s true, it’s beautiful, because you’re overlooking the mountains, the street, the train station is on the right where you arrived. Just the detail, the planning, I’m very grateful for it, and she was one of the funniest people I ever met, so we had a blast for three days. I’m not sure but – anyways, we had a lot of laughs over the three days. [Yawns] Excuse me. What did it look like when we got here? It was Spring, the cherry blossoms were indeed out. We ended up staying in Kerrisdale, so immediately I got to see the Main Street SkyTrain – my first impression of Vancouver was the Main Street SkyTrain station. We then came through – I remember quite a bit about downtown – we must have stayed downtown that day for a bit. She wanted to show me English Bay, that was on the list – she said, “You have to go to English Bay. You don’t understand, there’s a beach downtown.” I said, “Yeah right. You mean pebbles and stuff?” “No, a white sandy beach.” Not quite white, but still, it is quite unusual and wonderful to have the beach that close, and so many of them. And we ended up in Kerrisdale, and I’ll be honest, I didn’t care for Kerrisdale. It was just – and we were in this – it was a wonderful house, but it was an apartment in a house, but it was just nice to have the space. But I immediately wanted to come check out the Gay Village – we didn’t call it the village back then, but the gay section, Davie Street, and just go sit in a restaurant or café or a bar. I immediately wanted to go, and she knew that. She said, “I’ll see that you get down to – we’ll get settled and then...” I think the first night, we just stayed in Kerrisdale, but the second night I had to go out, and she said, “And I know that you’re going to go out every night. That’s fine.” I didn’t meet anybody right away – it wasn’t – I would have been happy to but I was pretty shy, but not... I’ve been going through that a lot myself lately, because I’m having a hard time meeting people right now. And I’m thinking I used to do this okay. Why is this so hard now? But back then, we were two weeks in Kerrisdale. We arrived on the 19th and on April 1st we found an apartment in the West End. For those two weeks though, that was me getting to know my new home. And it was – I liked what I saw. I said, oh this is – I’m going to like it here. And I got a job right away, working as a waiter, where I didn’t need to speak French. [Laughs] So, working at Earl’s on top at Robson Street, and she was like, “Oh, I can’t believe you got such a good job right away.” And in hindsight – and it was quite popular back then, and in hindsight I was in over my head. It was too busy for my limited waitering skills. Anyway, I survived for a couple of months, but that first impression was good, yeah. And she was and is a very outdoorsy person, so she had brought climbing friends, so I was

introduced to rock climbing right away, which is way outside my comfort zone. We went to Squamish, we did a lot of day trips right away – we went to Horseshoe Bay, we went to Squamish, we went to Whistler, Britannia Beach, Porteau Cove – I didn’t go south much and we didn’t go east I don’t think. No, it was all Sunshine Coast, out that way, and Sea to Sky Highway. Yeah.

BK: So, you settled in the West End, initially got an apartment there. What did the West End look like?

P: She picked the apartment out and I was glad she did, because I said, “I don’t know what we’re looking at.” In hindsight, I would never do that again, I would never let somebody – I’m like I need to see it if we’re going to live there, but I didn’t want the stress of it. Now I understand – and why I didn’t – I’m not the same person. I would need to see the apartment before I moved in. Anyways, she picked a wonderful apartment. I still walk by it and look up. It was a one-bedroom, and she said, “I’ll take the bedroom and you can have the living room because you’re going to be the one coming in late.” She said, “If that’s okay.” But I think that was my idea, I offered that. We said, “How do you pick who gets...?” But I thought, no, I would actually like the living room – it’s bigger first of all. I was here more – it was an adventure, it wasn’t about settling down. She was here to settle down, I was on an adventure, so it seems like the adventure person should be in the more temporary of the configuration. So, I was quite happy. Anyways, as soon as I laid down the first time, the first night, I looked out and there was a cross on a church staring right at me. And I thought, this is going to be awkward having relations. It’s bad enough that there’s someone in the next room, but that’s what drapes are for, and I just found the humour in it. There’s no great significance in it for me, but I just thought it was kind of funny to be directly across from a church, but the cross was literally right across the street. It was the sixth story level – no, the fourth floor, fourth story level. Anyway, so yeah, that’s where we ended up. And we were here – I was here six months. After six months, I lost – I got fired from the job because I was in over my head for whatever reason, and I’m not resentful or anything, they just found out that I wasn’t ready for that kind of waitering. But I had fun, and I was eligible for EI, or it was called unemployment insurance, UI, back then, and I collected some, but because it was such a short – I was only eligible for a few months because I had only worked for a few months, but I had worked for a full year before that, so... Anyway, I decided to go back to Halifax before the – I’m not sure why I went back, actually. I just needed – she was quite upset, because then it meant she had to move, but not angry, just she was concerned. And I hadn’t – so we moved in April, so April, May, June – probably by July 1st I had decided I would go back in September. And I ended up buying a plane ticket – back then, it was pre-9/11, and I bought somebody’s unused portion of their return ticket, so it was super cheap. And I missed my friends. My friends were all still in Halifax. One had come to visit and my boyfriend was supposedly supposed – oh, he came out in June. My boyfriend came out in June and we were still technically dating. He knew that I was – I met the odd person while I was here, and I had no trouble with it. I knew that we were going to see what happened with relationship – we weren’t planning on staying together forever, but love is love, you don’t just fall out of love because you move away. But I know, in hindsight, I’m like, how did I do that? I still have a bit of guilt about doing it. It was very difficult to leave him there, and he understood, but he didn’t understand, that I needed to sort of see the world. But he came to visit in June, we had a wonderful week – we went camping in Tofino, so it was my first experience in Tofino. And I don’t know if anybody I knew was ill at

that time. I don't think so. It's unlikely, because the first of our friends died in '91 – I'm trying to think about when he became sick. He might have been. I knew he was positive, so... And I had met him in... Because that's where I was living, I was living with him when we – no, I was living with in '85, but I lived with my boyfriend in '86, and then we moved out here, so yes, and I had known then that he was positive.

BK: So, people were already getting sick in Halifax.

P: That's what I'm wondering, was anybody actually sick. No, they were positive, but they weren't sick. And my best friend, who met this positive friend of mine, who... [Pause] My best friend then became dating this friend that I had met, and I moved in with them in their apartment, and there were three of us there. And there were two other guys staying – we were never all there at the same time, but there were four of us at one point. There was another guy living in the dining room – he rented out the room to another guy, and he was positive also, so there was room for three people, but then when one of them had a boyfriend, he moved, so there was actually four of us at one point. So anyway, but two of them were positive, me and my friend moved in, not at the same time, but it ended up there was four of us for a while – yes, I'm pretty sure. But in the end, they all passed away, that's where I'm going with this. But I don't know at what point I found out they were positive – I don't want to pretend I remember the exact dates or timing of it all. But the hardest one for me, of course, was my best friend, and the fact that I had introduced him to this guy that I had met, and they hit it off. And he was a sweetheart, and he was a wonderful – he was a DJ on the radio, like a daytime DJ for an FM radio – no, he wasn't a DJ, sorry, he was the news announcer at a rock station in Halifax. And he had a really deep voice, and I always sort of – he actually wasn't effeminate, but we used to tease him anyway, because he was just the opposite of what you would – the juxtaposition. But he was so calm and he came from a really well-to-do family, and he taught me a lot about the world – he taught me a lot. And I was a bit surprised when my best friend from university, he had moved in across the hall from me at Dalhousie in residence, and we hit it off immediately because I had a stereo. I always teased him, and we knew each other were gay, and at one point, he was the first – we stayed up all night talking, probably sometime in September when we had moved in in '84, September '84. And for the course of the night, I decided this is the time to tell this person – clearly, he's gay, I thought, so I'll tell him. I'm going to tell him. He says, "Oh, that's wonderful. I'm so happy you told me." He said, "I'm not gay, but I'm so happy that you shared that." And I was mortified. I thought, what have I done? And so the evening went on – this was like two in the morning. At about four in the morning, we decided to go our separate ways. And as he's leaving, he said, "Oh, one thing about tonight – I lied, I am gay. See you in the morning." [Laughs] And I wasn't mad, I was relieved, but in hindsight, I always love telling that story. But that's the type of person he was. [Laughs] "I'm kidding. I'm gay." If he knew who I was before – like, if he had known more about me, he would not... [Laughs] It could have gone south easily. I could have just broken down – what have I done? I confessed, because it was really hard for me. It became much easier after that. [Laughs] But obviously, once you've told somebody that you're gay, it's easier to tell other people.

BK: He was the first person you told.

P: He was the first person that I'd ever told that to, and that was my response. Anyway...

BK: So, was there any connecting with the gay community in Halifax before you came...

P: Oh, I had a very good single life before I met that partner. He was a DJ at a bar, the guy I ended up dating, so I ended up moving out of this wonderful apartment – we had this really, really nice apartment at the south end of Halifax which is like Kits, I guess – the equivalent of Kits. But there were a lot of Victorian homes that are converted into flats, one on the top, one on the bottom. We had the upper flat, the upstairs of the house, so you'd come up a big beautiful staircase, an open hallway that you could along, you could look down to see who was coming up the stairs. And then there were bedrooms. My bedroom was over the front door, which was wonderful, so I was at the end of the hall, but I had to walk by everybody's room and the living room to get into my bedroom, so there was no sneaking anybody into my bedroom, and many, many people, a wonderful fellow in particular – I don't know his name, it escapes me. But he had to go, and I think he must have been intoxicated, but he had to go and introduce himself to [name] and [name], to my friends, who were watching TV. And I just sat in my bedroom waiting for him, and he finally came in, and the next the morning, I heard a lot about it. Like, "Well done, dear, well done. Where did you meet this one?" And I'm like, "He's friendly, he wanted to meet you." So... I was afraid of HIV back then, for sure. It was '86, I moved – yeah, '86 – no, '85 to sometime in '86. I don't know how long my boyfriend – I think we were only living together for six months, and then I count the six months that I was out here as part of the relationship – we were together a year altogether. But I count the six months that I was out here to see if I liked it out here as part of that year. But I moved to Halifax to go to university in September of '82, and then I left university – I graduated in '85 and then I went back for '85, '86 to do Medieval History, and then I worked in '86, '87 at the tourism job. So, I had the five years. The last year, which I was with him, so the four years prior to that, I was single, I met a lot of people. And yes, I was afraid of getting HIV, and somehow, I did not get it. And of that wonderful apartment, all of us in there – mind you, two of them are partners – I was the one going out every night, I was the one having the sex life, and I didn't get it, and they all ended up getting and passing away. So, I struggled with that for a long time. It didn't cripple me, but it's always in the back of your mind – how did I survive it? I ended up getting it in '99 and I wasn't having a lot of sex then, so the irony is not – it's just goes to show you what a crapshoot it was. And my best friend, he admitted, he said, he had a hard – he was drop-dead freaking gorgeous, he went to LA to be a model after he came out here. I encouraged him – he knew he was dying, but he said, "I need to know that I at least tried this. I probably won't find work, but I want to go to say I lived that life." I said, "That's a wonderful idea. I'll miss you but I know what you mean. Go do that. That's important." But the disparity of our sex lives – I didn't feel like a tramp or anything, but it was just the sheer logic of it, the probability was lost on me. Like, how – not that I deserved it anymore – I don't think I deserved it anymore than anybody did, but just by sheer numbers. Like, how did I escape it? You end up just being grateful. Like, I survived it. I managed to not get it until after ARVs came along, and I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that, whatever probability kept me alive. It's almost like somebody rolled a dice somewhere and I won, and they didn't. That's maybe not a good way of looking at it, but it's just one of those life things. Anyway, so yeah, I met a lot of people, I had a sex life in Halifax, and I have no shame in that – I think it's important. And against all odds, I ended up falling for this DJ guy. Well, we had a big – I started – I didn't know how to navigate dating. Once I realized a lot of the guys I was meeting, some of them I started having feelings for, so I decided to start dating. Like, let's

do this, let's see what happens. Well, I had like four on the go at one point, and they started finding out about the other ones. I wasn't being honest, but I didn't know that you – I just had no idea how to navigate it. And then this DJ one, he found out that I had – he said, “Oh, that guy we saw the other day, that's not just your friend?” And I said, “Well no, we've been dating too.” And he was really hurt. There were tears, there was an argument, and then I realized, wow, I can't lose this guy, I really like him. So, it became – him finding out actually was the impetus, so we had a long talk, we were in another all-night conversation, and we ended up... I said, “I don't want to mess this up. I will end it with everybody. You're the one.” But I didn't – I never viewed it as forever, I just knew that I could fall in love with him, and that word came up. I don't remember saying it to him a lot as time went on but we did – we were in love, absolutely. But I still question if I loved him, how could I move away? How do you just pack up and go? But the need to see the world was just that strong for me. Anyway...

BK: So, when were you first hearing about HIV? Do you remember when that was and where that was?

P: Oh, I remember sitting at home on my friend's veranda, and I was reading the newspaper, and there was this gay disease thing, and I thought what the heck? And it was as I was going through university calendars. I don't know if it was in the exact same moment, but it was the same time that I was preparing to go away for university. The irony is not lost on me – here I am supposed to be excited to move away and immediately it's like somebody's going [imitates ominous music]. And I thought, oh, how poetic, I'm about to leave home and I'm already terrified, and this is what's waiting for me? And I thought, well, maybe it will go away. So, thankfully, it wasn't as – like, I think it was probably worse for people a couple years later because they knew that they were moving into absolute hell, this was big and real. But I had the luxury of thinking it might not come to anything, but I had heard about it. So, by the time I had left home, there was a gay disease, so I knew – and I'm grateful that it wasn't as bad in – like, it was '82, September '82, so people had already passed away I guess, I don't know. There was something going on – I forget what it looked like in September '82 – I know that I'd heard of it, but I don't think it even had the name AIDS yet. Anyway, so yeah, I was scared, yeah, absolutely. But not – I already lived with – I'm only now identifying how bad my anxiety has been my entire life. I knew it was bad – like it crippled me at times – but I've learned to live with it, and I've actually in the last year realized that I'm through it. It doesn't go away, you just learn to live with it, but I wouldn't be able to do this very interview. So, that was always my biggest thing. It actually distracted me from – like, HIV or whatever it was back then, yeah, it was a big deal, but just learning how to navigate the world was a much bigger problem for me, so I always had that to focus on. But still, the desire to do things always – like, anxiety will not get in the way if you want to do see the world bad enough, you will do things. And my desire to meet people and to dance – I felt like just dancing – my anxiety goes away when I dance. And intimacy – so again, I didn't go home with somebody every night just so I could lose my anxiety, but I did discover that when I did go home with people – and it's probably this way for everybody – but it just, you realize I'm not inhibited when I'm being intimate. But during the day, I can stutter away. But it goes away – the minute you make that connection with somebody, that's one of the first times I realized, wow, this is what me is – you get to see a taste of yourself. And then I found it again on the dancefloor. I'm like, wow, I really like dancing. And then there's other places too – when you're out in nature – oceans, which is how I ended up in marine biology. I remember the first time I saw the

ocean as a kid, and I remember just staring it at. I guess I was probably not a toddler but pre-school – like it was before you went to school, and you stand and you feel the water around your knees, and just looking out and going where does this end? What is this fascinating – because I grew up on ponds and brooks, because I grew up on a farm, and there was no rivers – no, we had a tidal river way over the hill, but immediately around us, we were surrounded by all of these beautiful ponds full of frogs, so at night, people used to complain about the noise of the frogs at night. I'm like, are you kidding me? It's beautiful. People pay money for this. [Laughs] People pay money for that experience to go stay in a hotel where they can hear frogs. [Mimics frogs] Anyway. How did I get off on the beach?

BK: Thinking about where you're hearing about stuff, when you got to Halifax and you were going to school, was there information out there about HIV, like more concrete information?

P: I didn't ignore it. I think it all started to – I just prayed that I didn't catch it. It wasn't actual prayer but it was – there was so little I could do about it. But I didn't hear about a lot of people getting it around me, but when I met – and this is where even the anonymity of this interview – the person that I met, this friend that I ended up moving in with and my best friend became partners with, he was the partner of the first person in Halifax to pass away. But his partner had just passed away when we met, so his ex was the first statistic in Halifax, and I just thought, wow. But the friend and I, even though we had had relations, we hadn't had the type of sex where you would catch anything – it was very... I often wonder if that saved me. That's a horrible way to look at it, but it's real, and I've been to therapy about it. And it's like – but my best friend knew what he was getting into, that's why – we make choices in life and he knew what he was getting into, and he knew that it was a risk. But love is love. And they ended up not being together but they stayed friends, and so they both passed away, but they weren't partners when each passed away. My friend went on to have two more wonderful relationships with two partners, one of whom is out here now. He had three beautiful relationships, I was happy for him. He lived till thirty. But the original friend, the one who's the partner of the first statistic in Halifax, he was fifteen years older than me, so he'd be sixteen years older than my best friend, so there was quite a disparity in their age difference, or in their age. But they were well-suited for one another, but still to this day, personality-wise, I don't see, but they... My best friend, he could have had anybody. His personality was a little annoying. [Laughs] We both knew our shortcomings – he'd tease me about my shortcomings, and I feel free saying, even though he's no longer with us. But he was – he was probably one of the best-looking – I hate saying too much about looks, but he was gorgeous. And sometimes I'd tease him, I said, "I hate going out with you. As much as you're my best friend, do you have any idea? You don't know what it's like to go out with you. People don't even see me. [Laughs] Everybody just talks to you and your eyelashes keep getting in the way." We always teased him about his eyelashes – he had huge eyelashes – we would tease him about it. "Can you come stand closer on this bright sunny day? I need some shade." [Laughs] And then another friend who became really close to us, and one of my best friends, that was one of the first things he said: "Your friend, his eyelashes." I said, "I know, right?" [Blows nose] Excuse me. But as far as being connected with HIV organizations in Halifax, I knew nothing about it. I was quite comfortable talking to my original friend in this apartment, and I asked him, "Well, what was it like to lose your partner? Are you angry?" He said, "Yeah, it's hard." I never saw him cry about it though, he was always very matter of fact like he was about everything. He was the rock – just a beautiful, well-appointed apartment, but a

modern look – good taste, just good taste. I learned a lot from him. I learned a lot. But he was – when I moved here, he was healthy, so in my mind, he was always – I didn’t get to see the worst of it. Moving out here saved me from a lot of the ugliness of losing people, and I did, however, get to see – I didn’t avoid it with my best friend. And I forget the timing of it all, like when did I find out that my best friend was now in fact positive. I remember – do we block out the conversations? Like, I have a pretty good memory of stuff, and I’m trying to just in the last year, myself, I’ve been going over the timing of a lot of stuff. I want to make sure that my memories are accurate as I go into older age. Like, am I telling the wrong stories? And if you don’t know the facts, then just admit you don’t know – like, learn to use the phrase “to the best of memory,” “to the best of my knowledge.” Like, don’t make stuff up, don’t just fill in the gaps with convenient things, just admit that that’s a gap. So yeah, I don’t remember when I found out that it was no longer just the original friend, that now my best friend – despite the obvious risk, they were partners and living together. And I asked him, I said, “Are you having unsafe sex?” And the answer was yes. And I’m like, why? And I didn’t get furious, but I was just confused. Like, why would you put yourself through that? I don’t question it, I don’t – I had to not – I think it’s important for the sake of the friendship. Sure, I could have walked away and said I can’t be friends with someone like that, but then you don’t get the friendship. You have to respect the choices your friends make, and if you think it’s too much, I guess – I don’t know, I can’t speak for other people. For me, I knew that I wanted the friendship more than – the benefit of the friendship over the... They’re your friend, you love them – so I respected his choices, I guess that’s what I’m trying to say. It’s love – logic doesn’t always prevail with love. And they were very much in love, and they almost seemed – I used to tease them, I said, “You forget that you’re,” whatever they were at the time, twenty-five and forty. I said, “You act like you’re seventy.” *The Golden Girls* was just coming out back then, and there were four of us living in the apartment and there were four Golden Girls. And I said, “I refuse to be drawn into your little Golden Girls triangle or quadrangle.” And they said, “Too late, we already call you Blanche.”

BK: So, there was some knowledge about condom use and safe sex out there during this period too?

P: I was quite happy, and I had no strong feelings about not using – like, some people were very militant, “No, it ruins it.” And it actually – it bothered me that I didn’t want to use condoms more, but I was quite happy when somebody did – well, there, I don’t have to worry about that. But I still wasn’t sure about oral sex back then. And there was no test for it back then either, or I forget how we – but then how did he know he was positive? See, a lot of this stuff... When did HIV tests come out? I don’t...

BK: I think ’85-ish.

P: Was it ’85? Ish, yeah. That’s when I moved into the apartment, the fun apartment. It was the first place after residence, because I met my best friend in residence, and then in the meantime, he was dating this other friend that I had. My best friend moved in first to this fabulous apartment, because we had a [indecipherable] nearby – and to get us out of residence, I said, “Well, I’m going back to do Medieval History. What are you going to do?” And he had dropped out against my – that was the only time he disappointed me, he dropped out of Dalhousie, he didn’t want to do commerce, and I get it now – I get it very quickly. His interests in life are not

commerce-related, they're all – well, he wanted to be an actor eventually, a model or an actor, and he thought it was too – he tried the practical route going into university, and I think to please his parents maybe. It's hard to tell your parents you want to be a model or an actor, so he thought I guess he'd do business. But he didn't like it – I could tell that he wasn't interested in it. I said, "You're even less interested in..." I loved school, I still love learning. I wasn't particularly good at it sometimes, but anyway. But knowledge of condoms, yeah, for sure, but I personally didn't have a preference, but I look back and who I am now is very different from who I was then. I would do things differently for sure – I would have had less unsafe sex, even though I survived. I mean, you don't know you're going to survive, but how – it didn't – I didn't lie awake at night worrying about. I thought if I get it, I get it. But I didn't have fatalistic outlook on life. I always had long-term dreams. My ability to look way ahead in life never stopped, although I used to think – I remember thinking that – and it had nothing to do with HIV, I said, "I'll probably only live to be forty-five or fifty." And I don't know where that came from, and that was before – but I think it was just being a kid, you can't imagine being older than fifty. What does that look like? I probably won't make it that far. I'm past it now, I've sailed past, but anyway... I don't think – I had that thought process. I remember thinking that wasn't healthy and I shouldn't think that way, but it was always at the back of my mind.

BK: And what about in Vancouver? Were you aware of what was going on in terms of HIV in Vancouver?

P: I was oblivious – not oblivious. No, I was definitely aware that there was still – but again, I wasn't connected with any of the social organizations. I don't know what was going on with PWA back then, there was definitely PWA. I did have guilt – and this came up in therapy a few years ago – I developed guilt somewhere about ten or fifteen years ago about not being involved in the activism around finding a drug, like the AIDS activists that did such a good job. I just saw a wonderful film, *120BPM*, on the AIDS crisis and how – it actually reframed some of my really vague thoughts on the whole thing anyway, because I didn't know enough about it, mostly from anxiety. But I couldn't have done anything, but I just wish I could have participated more, but my type of personality back then – even now, I would be hard-pressed – I couldn't protest anything. It's not in me – I cower from those moments. But I could have been backroom support, like stuffing envelopes or something – I could have done... Definitely, and I would do it now, but back then, no.

BK: Were you aware of that activism going on in Vancouver?

P: I was very – not locally, but globally, and I was glad – and I was grateful, extremely grateful. I noticed I always paid attention, no matter how difficult it was to watch – I liked knowing that something was being done. Well, people were desperate and people were frustrated, and then you start hearing about that there might be some drugs being made – why isn't it being tested? And the movie made mention of that, that "I'm willing to be a subject. Please, I'm dying. Give me a chance to test this drug." But of course there's – my experience with the medical system now, I'm appreciative of the fact that – I don't know how it works, but it's just not that easy. There's red tape that has to be gone through, and I'm grateful that we don't have a system where we're all treated like guinea pigs – that has its flaws, obviously. So, there's a balance in it all, but if you're the one with it, I'd have a completely – if it was me, I'm sure I would have been quite

happy to – “Test me too, I’m willing to be the guinea pig,” if I had been dying at that time. Anyway, no, I was aware, for sure. But locally, I managed to – and I think it was probably out of preservation of mind. It would have upset me – I’m very sensitive to stuff, and it probably would have upset me. I don’t know, I’m not sure why I didn’t get more involved in it. But when I came back the second time, I met a guy right away, and I was head over heels, like just instantly knew that this guy was going to be – I thought if he likes me as much as I like him, this is it, this is the one. And he did, and we hit it off, and I moved in with him within nine days of meeting him. I gave up my apartment that I had – I just got it, I hadn’t even moved in. And the day that I was supposed to move in, I gave my notice. [Laughs] I said, “I’ll give thirty days. Thank you for the keys, I’m moving. I’ve met somebody.” I told the landlord, “I’ve met somebody, I’m moving in with my gay lover.” I was at that point, at that comfort level. And we were really happy for a while, and again, we weren’t worried. We had safe sex for the first six months probably and then we had a lot of conversations about it, and we said, well, we both appear to be healthy. Do we want – and we had made a conscious decision to stop using condoms, and that was the first time I really remember being so serious about it, and there was a process involved.

BK: And had you both taken the test at that time?

P: We both got tested and that was the everything, that was the key, and we were negative. And then that’s when I was like, oh – that’s when I knew I’d survived up to that point. I was having little outside – I wasn’t completely faithful to him. I was faithful emotionally, but I was having oral sex with other people on a few – but maybe two or three times, I think. I can’t remember – I’ve been trying to correct that memory, but I’m having a hard time with it. And I assumed that he was doing the same, but I was the being the passive one, I was the one, I felt, was more at risk, so I was always more on his case. I said, I’m not worry about getting it, although – no, I am worried about getting it because I’m the bottom or whatever. And I said, I’m more at-risk, and so actually – yeah, it was probably why I wasn’t more worried about me, but I was concerned that he was somehow going to pick it up and then give it to me. But we did get tested and I was grateful for that, and I was actually surprised to find out that I was negative. I was not surprised to hear that he – because he had just come out. He had had a girlfriend for five years, which I was extremely comfortable with – oh good, he’s not been on the market for the last five years. So, it seemed logically for me – and I wanted him to be comfortable. I think it was my idea to get tested. I said, “Maybe if we get tested, we know we’re starting with a clean slate.” So yeah, of course we’d be okay with not having condoms, and it was wonderful.

BK: Was it the first time you had taken the test?

P: Yes, it was the only time. I took it that one time, and then the next time I took it, it was ’99, and I found out I was positive, so... But we had been apart for five years by then, so I don’t know when the test was, but it probably would have been ’89, and that was still a horrible – ’87 through ’96 were just horrible years for it, obviously. So, for me to test negative in ’89, that was a huge – actually, just thinking about that now, that must have been a huge relief for me, because everything I had done up till then, it was now negated, or you know, I had survived it up to that point. But by the time I found out I was negative, one of my friends – because he was positive when I met him, and then... It was probably around the same time that my best friend found out he was positive. I don’t know the time – like, the disparity in our status, I don’t know at what

point it became – because I know I had guilt around it for quite a while. Like, that’s when I realized – we were in two different cities. He was in Halifax, had a new partner, and found out that he was – I forget. I’m probably going to correct all these memories, because the partner that he was with is now here, and we’re really good friends, and I introduced him to him too. Two of his three partners, he met through me. So, even though one is the one he ended up – I don’t have guilt around that. I had a bit to begin with, but that’s out of my hands – I’m not god. It’s like, I can’t – and he made the choice to date him, but I’m happy I introduced people. Anyway...

BK: How was the community responding in Vancouver just generally. Not necessarily organizationally, but just from what you saw.

P: I wasn’t – we kept our... My partner that I got tested with – the second partner, I only had two – the first one, the DJ, was the Halifax one. Oh, so, when I went back to Halifax, that relationship ended the day I got back. We just decided that – he decided [laughs] – and I’m okay with it. I gave him a hard time, I said, “If you had told me yesterday, I wouldn’t have come back.” That’s a lie, I know that, and I think part of me was just trying to guilt him or something. Like, how did you let me fly back and then you tell me when I get here? But we still stayed friends and that was important to me. So, I stayed in Halifax for a year, but immediately, after I got back to Halifax, I knew I was coming back. I did the same thing that my friend had done. She said, “Sometimes you have to go back to know where your true home is,” and as soon as I arrived, and the relationship was no longer there – I did get a really good job at a hotel as banquet waiter. And ended up – we worked through the winter – I arrived back in Halifax in September, got a job right away as a banquet waiter, and come Spring – and found my own apartment that was very similar to the apartment where we had all lived, where my two friends were now living. And they must have – I don’t think both of them were sick at that time – well, neither one was sick, but one was positive for sure, but we were now neighbours, lived a couple neighbourhoods away. But I found almost the identical apartment, and I lived in the same bloody room, over the front door, and I was so happy to find this apartment. And then I found two new roommates to move in – we were all banquet waiters, so three banquet waiters move in, and one was a theology student and the other one was a spoiled little rich girl from just outside of Halifax, and we had our arguments, but it was – we were an eclectic... And I met – that’s the year that I met my second best friend, who also ended up passing away, but not HIV, but he was the friend that – he changed the course of my life drastically, because he was just excruciatingly smart, and we were not interested in one another from the get-go, we just met out of mutual... We laughed, he loved that I loved Abba, he had just finished a degree in journalism, and he hit it off amazingly with my two roommates. And my best friend, original best friend, was now busy with his partner, and they were off in married life, and I was seeing less of him, so here’s this new friend, but here was this whole other side to gay life. It’s like, oh, you can be smart and gay, and you don’t have to – because I was being a bit of a floozy or whatever. I was playing up the wrong things, and he showed me that there’s a whole – don’t lose your intellectual side. He didn’t say it out loud – well, he might have even done that, but it was a wonderful influence for me – I’m super grateful for him. And he and I would have had lots of conversations about HIV, because that’s what we did – we talked about the difficult things, whereas my original best friend, he was not comfortable with talking about a lot of stuff, and once he became positive, I didn’t like talking – I just thought this is a downer. So, I had an outlet through the second friend, second best friend, and that was – he changed my life. It’s – yeah, he grounded me, he centred

me, and he ended up moving – when I came back the second time, because as soon as I – I got this wonderful job, and the banquet job, when Spring came at the hotel, they said, oh, we’re opening up the restaurant again for the summer which is on the boardwalk in Halifax on the ocean, on the harbour. And I applied for a job as a waiter, even after my ill-fated experience at Earl’s on Top in Vancouver, but they loved that. They said, “Oh, you’ve been a waiter in Vancouver at Earl’s?” And she had heard of it. And I got the job, and she was this – and I told her, “Well, I actually got fired.” And she said, “Don’t worry. You’ve got what it takes. I’ve watched you.” And she worked with me, and I remember one day, I was having a good day, she happened to have lunch in my section, and I kept walking past her, and she pulled me over, and she said, “Do you realize what’s happened here?” And I thought she was going to give me shit. She said, “You’ve become a really good waiter.” And I almost cried. I’m like, wow, thank you, but it was her that did it. She was – she taught me – she said, “You always stop. Don’t walk past your tables without saying... Every time you walk past them is an opportunity to check in, even if it’s just mentally, even if you’re not stopping to talk to them.” She said, “Don’t ever ignore. You’ve got six tables, they’re always in your periphery. You just keep an eye on them, they’re your folks. You’ve got the brain for it.” She played up the right things and she made me a better waiter. It was a wonderful summer, but I was meeting a few people, but I was – at some point, I forget at what point, I realized I was definitely going back. I was still talking to my original friend – she and I had moved out on the train – and I told her, I said, “Guess what, I’m coming back. But here’s how I’m going to do it...” How do I do this? Oh, let’s apply to go to school, so I applied to BCIT, and I got accepted, and I got a student loan again, so there was my – I said, now I have a reason to get out there, so it was just a matter of buying a plane ticket and then tying up loose ends. And I waited for the restaurant to close, or almost close, and I said, “Well, come September, we won’t be busy anymore, and I’ll move back.” So, September 1st, ’88, I moved back, and my mother to this day, she always goes, “You think you moved to Vancouver in March of ’87, but you came back. I remember September 1st.” It’s kind of sad, because she’s... I said, “Really? I don’t think of it – that’s not the day I saw my Main Street SkyTrain view. That’s the day, when I saw those mountains for the first time.” So, of course for me, that’s the day. She said, “No, September 1st. That’s the day you left and never came back.” Oh, mother, don’t say it that way. Now I know where I get my melodrama side from. I said, “Do you have any idea what it’s like to hear your mother say that?” I try to educate her on some of these things. Imagine your mother said that to you? How would you feel? Come on. You’re tugging at my heart strings here. Now, having said that, my mother and I, we’re best friends – well, not best friends, but we’re really close. We talk a couple times a day on the phone. [Yawns] Excuse me.

BK: So, ’88 is when you came back permanently?

P: And I knew it was going to be permanent, yeah. But I hoped to dive into education. This second friend that I met, this second close friend, had instilled this. I’m like, oh, I’m not done with my... I had already done three years of marine biology, one year of medieval history – didn’t finish the medieval history, because I had this wonderful job twice, and plus I’d come out here the first time for the six months, but I was only two credits short. Why didn’t I go back to Dal and just finish? Because I would have loved to have had a BA in history as well as the BSc in biology, even though they’re – not because they’re useful together, but just for the purposes of finishing it. I don’t like starting something that you don’t finish. Anyways, I did a year of arts, but it was so important, I wanted to live the life of an art student for a year. I’d seen arts students

and I envied it, and I now have tremendous respect for arts students, because I thought, oh it's a breeze. The amount of reading I was given, I thought it was impossible to finish. Was this some weird life lesson they were trying to teach you? How do the very minimum to get through or something. I said, what am I supposed to be learning from this? It's impossible for me to read this much. So, I ended up dropping two courses – even if I had finished all my courses, I would have still been one credit short, but I ended up dropping two half courses. I made it through, my marks were very – like, I was a C-student in arts whereas I was a B-student or B+ maybe in marine biology – no, a B, I was a B-student in marine biology. I had a couple A's but I also had a couple C's in really important courses. It was hard because I was considered gifted as a kid, elementary school especially. High school, I finish ninth in my class out of a hundred students, so that's good, I was happy with that. But I came from an elementary school where I was a child prodigy almost. There were two of us – we were – I remember endless conversations where our parents – parent-teacher meetings, my mother would come out, she would say, "They don't know what to do with you. You're a year-and-a-half ahead in math. They can't give you any more math. They want you to skip a year." And me and my friend, without talking to one another, both went to school the next day, and I said, "I said no." And he said, "Good, so did I." And I said, "What was your reason?" And I forget what he said, but it wasn't the same as mine. I said, "Mine was..." Even though they weren't my friends, I said, "I don't want to be with a whole bunch of new people." That's anxiety. You finally found a comfort level with these people, that even though you're not close, you know them, so to go outside of that and have to start all over again, no. I said I want to go through school with the same group of people, even though it was only grade one and grade four – they asked twice for us to skip. So, that was – that's turned out to be very grounding for me later in life, just knowing that I at least once was smart, because it bothers me that I struggled with university. But just, it was my learning style, that's all, and I didn't commit the time that was – but I loved studying. I picked Dalhousie on purpose because it's the closest Canada has to an Ivy League school – McGill, Dalhousie, U of T, UBC. I mean, they've got that classic campus look. I wanted to study geography, I was really good at geography, applied to St. Mary's, got a scholarship, and in the end I said, "I'm going to turn it down and go to Dalhousie." I applied to Dalhousie at the last minute. And I said, this marine biology program, it looks really nice, and it's the ocean, and I love the ocean. And I said, I'm going to follow my heart instead of my head. That had a huge impact on me later in life, because now I kind of get it. And I like the fact that it may not be financially lucrative, but it makes me feel good that that's what I do – I will follow my heart over my head. But from an HIV point of view, it almost killed me. I was not being – I know that's a shift in conversation, but it's not good logic when it comes to HIV. I should have been more careful. Anyways, back to the schooling, I finished the year of arts, got the job. I'm confusing myself now. Anyway, what was the original question?

BK: I think I was asking about how the gay community was responding here in Vancouver. Like, what you were seeing in terms of how the gay community was dealing with this.

P: Right, I just like giving you as much background, but anyway, that's fine. So yeah, I'm now – I've come back to Vancouver, I've now met a partner – like I said, within a month, I met this guy, and nine days later, I gave notice [laughs] on my own apartment. We moved in together six weeks after we met, and there was never a moment's doubt for either one of us. And within six months, I think we – so that was December '88 we moved in together – December 1, '88. So

sometime in '89, we got tested, and that would be the only conversation we had around HIV, and then once we had done that, I stopped thinking about it personally, like from a health point of view. But it was still a huge impact on my life, because back in Halifax, I had these two friends who were now – one was not sick, but one, we were worried about him, because he was older, and he had already lost his partner, so it was just a matter of time. We were like, when are we going to get the news that he's starting to get sick, so it was like we were just waiting for this. It's very ominous. You knew what was coming. Even though we didn't know the exact timeline – I don't think we knew back then that it was a ten- to fifteen-year period, but we were starting to figure this out, because this was – and it turned out to be almost exact. It was almost exactly ten years, because '89. The original person ended up – he must have been sick by the time I got tested, because he ended up passing away in November of '91, and at that same time, I was now – my partner and I, unfortunately, got mixed up in doing too many drugs at night and partying. And yet, we were still happy in our relationship, but I was – and I recognize it now but I couldn't recognize it at the time – I couldn't understand how he was able to get up the next morning and carry on, and I had such a hard time with it. And I tried to use more drugs – it was cocaine, and it was doing me in because cocaine and copious amounts of alcohol. And I could handle it physically, but emotionally it was tearing me apart. And I knew that I wanted it too much, so I knew there was a problem, and that bugged me. I hated the fact that something had this amount of power over me, and I remember telling my second friend about it, the smart one. Not that the other one wasn't smart, but the one that got me thinking that it's okay to be smart and gay, my second best friend. I remember I had a couple conversations, I said, "I think I've got a drug problem." I didn't call it that back then, but I remember talking to him about it. "But I love this guy and I don't know what to do." He was moving out here at that point, and another friend had already come out, so there was now – I had two of my – and the first friend that moved out, I haven't even mentioned yet, and he's still here, he's still alive. But he didn't live with us, but he was one of my original close friends, and he was – we're not close now, but I still consider him a very good friend. Just because we're not close now, we've drifted apart, we have different lives, but he was crucial in those years, and he survived. And he was with me through – he and I had a wake for my best friend and his close friend when he passed away in '96, we had the wake at his place, so we were obviously still connected. And he's the one who told me, he had to phone me at work and tell me that my friend – our friend – was indeed gone. But we were waiting for the call, and he phoned me, and he said, "Do you want to know now?" And I said, "Yeah, tell me now." March of '96. And he said, "He's gone. He died this morning." So, it was tough, but he had moved home in November of '95, back to the Maritimes. And the last three months were just horrible. I gave up trying to talk to him because he didn't know who I was. He had dementia really bad, and it was horrible for his mother. I had only met her once, but she was a really sweet woman, and no parent should ever have to go through what she went through. I still struggle with that. Like, I just can't imagine my mother having to go through that, and I constantly remind my mother how lucky we both are. You know, how many of my friends' mothers would kill for what you have? Not trying to get off the hook on anything, but I try to make people realize – I'm incredibly grateful for my life, so I guess I try to get other people to at least that in their own lives. Like, no matter how bad things are, just count your blessings. Sometimes it's just as simple as shifting your point of view. Like, instead of looking at what you don't have, look at what you do have – instead of looking at your shortcomings, look at your blessings, and maybe it's easier to deal with your shortcomings or what you don't have. The struggles become a little bit easier if you're grateful for what you do have – I guess that's a better way of saying it. Anyway, moving

back here, '88, got tested in '89, lost the first friend in the Fall of '91, and at that time, I was – that was the darkest winter. And I don't know tie-in the drug use around HIV. I don't think – the drug use would have happened anyway. Maybe it made it easier because it distracted me. And it wasn't as though – I was still able to maintain – I thought like I was maintaining a friendship. It didn't impact me – I ended up having trouble with other substances later, and I'm so grateful that I didn't have the same substances back then, because other substances rendered me – it affected my communication level. And I'm just so grateful that I didn't have that problem back then, because I was still able to – even in whatever state I was in, I could still maintain communication. It might not have been optimal, but it was still possible, and that's hugely important for me, especially when you're dealing with the amount of anxiety that I have. Anyway... And when the first friend passed away in '91, my best friend who was – they were no longer partners, but he knew at the time that he was sick, I remember that. He knew he was positive, he wasn't sick. He didn't get sick until – I don't actually remember him being sick-sick, he was just being treated. He was clearly losing weight, and he got a terrible haircut right before he passed away, and I look at the pictures, and he's gaunt, and he's got really short hair, and I'm like, why did you cut your hair? It was for a practical point of view, you just don't want to deal with your hair anymore. But he had had beautiful hair, but he cut it all off before he died. It wasn't his best look, even if he had been healthy, and I sometimes would get hung up on the hair cut. And I'm like, why did he cut his hair? And then I remember because he was sick and he didn't want to deal with hair. Hair is the last of your worries. And it makes infinite sense, but it's just my own shallowness sometimes appalls me. That's a therapy issue.

BK: Did you find yourself in a caregiving capacity with him at all?

P: In a what?

BK: In a caregiving role?

P: As much as I could. I didn't know how to navigate it, because I didn't want – I always tried to – I wanted to be the person who brought him, that reminded him about the wonder of life. I knew I didn't want to talk to him too much about it, but I also didn't want to avoid it. I didn't want to be this person that he – I said, "You have me to talk about it, but I'd rather be your escape from the drudgery of dealing with all of this. You can tell me about the side-effects of all the drugs you're taking and how you feel." I said, "If that makes you feel better." And he had other people. I don't know who he was connected with medically. I know his doctor that treated him to the best of her ability, when I found out I was positive, I changed my doctor to go to her out of symbolism, and she said, "Why are you interested in coming to my practice?" And I said, "Because you were my friend's doctor and you couldn't save him, but I know that you can save me because we have ARVs now. Do you mind if I change practices?" And she said, "No." And that still means so much to me. Yeah. It's a tough one, because I said, "I know – I heard your name so much and you meant so much to him. It means a lot to me that you'll... This is going to have a good outcome, we know that already. It's just a matter of when I take the ARVs." And in '99, I didn't want to start right away, because they still didn't know what the side effects were going to be, and it was a quality of life balance question. Do I take them right way? Because they were still, even what I ended up taking in 2004, they were like brutal – it was like, yikes. Anyway, yeah, '88, '89... I'm just circling back to that question about...

BK: How the gay community here in Vancouver was responding.

P: So, HIV wasn't... Like I say, I had a wonderful partner, and whether drugs or no drugs, we were basically faithful, and I didn't worry that he was going to give me HIV – I actually didn't, even then I didn't worry about it. I knew that he was fooling around a bit on the side, and I knew that I was, but I don't know, I just thought that we were going to be okay. And we were – when we broke up, we were both negative. But in – we lasted till May of '93, and then I stayed living with him for another year-and-a-half – wow. No, it was May of '94 that I moved out – yeah, May '94. Another year I stayed there – I don't remember it being May, I thought it was the Fall. Anyway, it's not important. But HIV, just because of the original friend that passed away in November '91, HIV was always this big thing, but it didn't keep me from living my life. Plus, I had other issues, my anxiety and my drug use, and just maintaining a good relationship with my boyfriend, the partner, the long – well, it was five years. But for me, that was supposed to be, I went in thinking you're the one I'm going to grow old with – I thought I knew. And I don't fault him now. I put him – we put each other through hell the year after we broke up, May '93 to May '94 was a very rough year for everyone. The original friend was gone back east, my best friend had moved out here and he was starting to get sick and he was being treated at St. Paul's and through a private practice here on Davie St. I ended up going to see her at Spectrum, but when she was his doctor, she had a private practice on Davie. I never went with him to the doctor. As far as – I'm trying to think how much... I wasn't aware of HIV services or anything, but HIV was a huge part of my life, because all my friends, other than my partner and two other good friends didn't have it – but I just felt like I knew a lot of people with it, and I had the impression that everyone – everyone connected with that original apartment back in Halifax, and all of the roommates had it. By the time – while I was living with my partner out here and having this great relationship and not working, I had struggled to find work, and I couldn't understand why. I wasn't the same person – a lot of it was the partying. In hindsight, it was a lot of guilt around it and guilt over the disparity in who I was. The person that I presented to the world was no longer – it didn't look – I mean, I looked fine. I look at pictures and even other acquaintances over the years, they say, "You two were famous, you know? You and your partner, for a lot of the people who were going out to the bars in those days, you were..." And I was very aware, I said I don't want to be caught up in that. I don't want to place unrealistic importance – you are just people at a bar. And not to say anything negative about people who do that, live that life, but you get caught up – it's easy to get caught up in it, and you place an unrealistic expectation, or you think you're illogically important. You place an illogical sense of importance on who you were. "Oh, I'm pretty special because I'm in a bar and a lot of people hit on me." It can be very dangerous. But I was – it was easy for me, because I had this beautiful boyfriend and I felt like – I said, "We're each other's trophy boyfriends," and I was okay with that, and it was good for more ego. And to this day, it helps me, because I lived that life once, and it allowed me to get it out of my system, I always say. And then I had this other smart friend. It was a connection to my college life. By the time we met, he had just finished his journalism and I had just finished my Medieval History year, but we met right after we both finished. And then when he moved out here, and he had met... I phoned him one night in Halifax, and he said, "I met this wonderful guy." And it turns out they had met when he had passed through Vancouver, so my smart friend in Halifax had met what turned out to be my future boyfriend who I thought I was going to be with forever. They already knew each other, and I just felt that was the most wonderful thing – well, it's meant

to be. And our mothers were born two days apart – our mothers were born the same year, the same month, two days apart. And he and I ourselves were only three months apart in age. Some of the similarities, the coincidence just kept piling up, and I said, “This has to mean something.” I don’t believe in astrology, but there’s too much going on here. I said, “But the number one thing that speaks for the hope for our future is how much we care for each other.” And we just – to this day, nobody’s laughed at my jokes more than he does. Anyway... But I try... You don’t want HIV to rule your life, even back then, before... The whole time I was with him and losing [friend’s name] – my best friend hadn’t passed away yet. And when my best friend and my partner met, they also became really good friends, and he stayed with us for a while, but then he got his own place, and then he went to L.A. to try to be a model – that was one of his last things. And then I think he also went home back to the Maritimes in that space of ’89 to ’94. For me, those years were consumed with my relationship, so all of this went on in the periphery of my life. It was losing the original friend, which we knew was coming at one point. I felt it came very quickly – I thought where was the illness part for me? Part of it was my own detachment from it, but also I think it was just he didn’t fail quickly, but I just thought – I thought he’d last longer than he did. But there was no hope in ’91. There was no – we were a long way’s off from anything. Now, by the time the second, my best friend was going through his illness, he didn’t get sick until ’94, ’95, when there was already talk of trials, and all these wonderful things were coming, and I just kept saying... And he was – not a chain smoker, but he smoked a lot, and I got to the point where I said, “I need to ask you a question. Are you willing to at least stop smoking? I sense that something is coming.” Not sense it, I mean you could hear it in the news, but we had heard – I actually was surprised, even the announcement, I still remember somebody on the news saying, “Major breakthrough in the fight against AIDS.” And I thought, “Oh, we’ll see what this one does.” Because we had heard a couple little things, because we were desperate, everybody was – not just us, not just the gay community, the whole world, because it was now starting to creep out into heterosexual. We were all looking for some hope. But I did think it would be a big thing when we finally heard there was a breakthrough, medically. But by that actual announcement – my best friend passed away in March of ’96, he wasn’t here. But it turned out to be August or something of that year, and it’s forever – that was just like, I can’t believe this, he just passed away. But it would have had to come two years prior in order for it to – in some ways, I was grateful that at least he was already gone, because it would have been horrible if he had known about it but it already would have been too late. That would have bugged me, but it’s not about me – I thought, oh, that would be frustrating to know that you’re too far gone for something that possibly could save you. And there’s a whole subset of people out there that that was their reality. But then there’s also the people that have been saved, the first group of people that they realized, wow, they’re not dying anymore, their viral load is dropping. That was amazing – that was amazing. And I was waiting for something like that, personally, because I wanted to get tested again. I still don’t know when I seroconverted. I wish I could go back and talk to my old job – I had a job just before my best friend passed away in the Fall of ’95, I got a really good job at another hotel downtown, in a Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 5:00 capacity, one of the only jobs in a hotel that has Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 5:00, but it was in the purchasing department in the wine cellar – I was in charge of all the beverages, most of which was wine – wine, beer, and bottled water, but the majority of it was wine – 70 to 80% of it was wine. And that ended up changing my life. I ended up staying sixteen years, so that was a big deal. And what’s buoyed me through those years, especially those early years, but I put them through hell, because when I just started the job, I had just broken up with my partner, and I knew I needed to

find my own way in life. I had a wonderful summer job right after we broke up, because I knew I had to, so I went back to waiting tables and slowly started to ween myself off the drugs because I could no longer afford them. And he and I had already found a life again, but once we found a life without the drugs, that's when he decided that he was ready to move on, and in hindsight I get it, but at the time, I told him, "You've ripped my heart out. You promised me that we'd stay together forever." I get it now, I get it. And we managed to be friends, we managed to salvage, in the year after he told me that he wanted to break up. By the time I moved out, we were friends, and that is one of my greatest accomplishments. Even though we don't talk anymore – another one, we've managed to drift apart, but we just grew apart. I still love him dearly, but he's out there somewhere – not here, he's in another city now. Knowing that we salvaged a friendship out of that is hugely important to me.

BK: So, you kind of waited to hear about ARVs and waited to hear that they were effective before you decided, okay, I'm going to go get tested again.

P: Yeah, and I'd been at the job for a while, and life was going good. Oh, and the year – I was hit by a car in '98 just down the street here, and punctured my femoral artery, which turned out to be a big deal. I didn't know that – still to this day, I'm not huge human anatomy person, I was a marine... [Laughs] But I'm aware that circulation is required to keep us going. Yeah, at the corner of – right down here – Davie and Granville. But sitting at the traffic light when I got hit was a police car as a witness and saviour. She or he, well them – there was two of them – I forget actually. I forget exactly who they were, but they saw that the ambulance was there quickly and got me and stayed with me at St. Paul's, and I had to phone my at that point ex, and I remember him saying, "It was one of the hardest days." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because you were talking a mile a minute. I was part embarrassed, part concerned, but you were in a state of panic – you'd just been hit by a car." And they pumped me full of whatever – I think it was morphine or something, but apparently, I wouldn't shut up. And I remember some people laughing – I don't remember what I talked about, I can't step outside of myself. But that was – the reason I bring it up is that it was one of the things that got me thinking, I wonder what – all that blood. So yeah, in February – so that was July '98. February '99 is when I decided to get tested, and I told my ex I was going to do it, and we had been apart for five years by then, and I had had a fair bit of unsafe sex. But – and I had discovered a new substance which got me – at that point, it was actually a good thing because it rid me of cocaine. I no longer wanted cocaine, I hated cocaine. The coming down took me to this horrible emotional place, and it didn't impact my friends the same way. I was the only person that would sit in a room full of people doing a substance, and while they started being chatty, I went inward, and that always troubled me. And only when I did a recovery program years later did I start to make sense of it. Some people, about ten to fifteen percent – I forget what the stats are, but there's a small percentage of people that react exactly counterintuitively to stimulants, and I'm one of them, absolutely. I don't need a medical diagnosis, I know that I'm one of them. I go inward instead of blah, blah – I do talk, but it's more of an inward experience, totally. But it also – and it impacted my communication skills, which when you have anxiety is not a good thing, you already struggle with communication. So, to be doing something that you actually get enjoyment out of but at some time, if you let it go awry or astray, it can impact you to the point where you can't communicate – I'm still trying to figure it out in hindsight, now that I don't use substances. I'm trying to see what impact it had on me, and I can't tell you exactly. I'm still fleshing out what it did. That's one of the reasons why I

was able to come here, because I think I'm in a good place where I can start talking about some of these things, because I'm making sense of it now that I don't have a fog from substances in my life, so it's a good time to be talking about all of this. So yeah, I decided to get tested. I actually thought I would be negative, but I wasn't surprised – the doctor was more surprised than I was, because he actually – I remember his line, and it was in the building next to us, thankfully, facing the other way. His office, although sunny outside, they all face a courtyard over there, and I remember going in, and I looked across the courtyard. It was Friday afternoon at 4:30, and I looked across the courtyard, and the lights in his office were off, and there was no secretary, and I thought, "I'm coming to get the results of my test, where is he?" And he's sitting in the dark in his office, and I was just like, why doesn't he just play a drum – bum, bum, bum-bum, your life is over. [Laughs] Even though we knew there were ARVs at this point – it's '99. And I sit down, he just looks at me, he goes, "I wish I had better news to tell you." And I just went, "Oh, okay. Well, what are we going to do about this?" And that's so not me. I was just very – all of a sudden, my practical mind kicked into gear. I didn't break down, I didn't cry – I just, I thought, okay, what are we going to do about this? How do we fix this? This isn't ruining me. I made it this long, and I'd already lost two people – possibly the two other peripheral people in this apartment that I keep talking about, this wonderful apartment – in some ways, I just – well, it reeks of sadness because they all died. They were just friends or roommates and one was – I replaced one, so he was never actually there at the same time, but he was always coming over after I moved in, and I actually had a bit of a crush on him, and we ended up hooking up a few times. And it wasn't him that I got it from either, because I ended being tested negative in the meantime after I met him, and I told my partner about him. I said, "Oh, actually, one of the guys in that house, I ended up sleeping with, and he was positive." But I just had a sense that I didn't have it. I just sensed that I don't have it, but by '99 that had somewhat gone away. Now, I'm not saying – of course I didn't know, you can't sense if you have it or not, but I don't know, by '99 I was starting think, well, if I haven't got it by now, I might not get it. But at least I wasn't shocked. I'm still grateful that it didn't knock the wind out of me. Of course, you want to be able to deal with it from a practical point of view. This is major, I have to deal with this. And within two days – so, I thanked the doctor, and I hadn't been going to him for a lot of things, just the odd sickness. There was a couple things. I have – this just came up in the last week, I'm ridiculously – for somebody who remembers everything, I remember nothing about my medical history. Is it an anxiety thing? Like, once it's done, you just want to forget about it? And I literally forget about it. Facebook reminded me the other day that I had bronchitis five years ago, because it sent me a note – "Here's a memory to look back on..." And I said, "Grateful to be over my first ever official bout of bronchitis." I have no memory of it whatsoever, so I don't know what my brain does with this things. They're not that traumatic, but they're just unpleasant, and it's time wasted for me. Time sitting at home recovering from something is time wasted. I love to be out exploring the world and observing, so time sitting at home, it just seems like a hideous waste of time, but it's necessary because that's how our bodies work. Anyway, I'm really happy with the way I handled the diagnosis. I didn't get upset. I'm not saying that would have been a bad thing. If I had had an emotional breakdown, fine. You need to express – I've always said don't hold stuff in. I grew up in a family where we weren't really bad at it – there were arguments and stuff, talking about extended family too, but the Maritimes in general, I always tease them, it's the capital of "let's not talk about it." Brush stuff under the rug and don't talk about stuff. But in a way, that saved me, because I never felt guilty about being gay, I just thought, oh, you just don't talk about it. Nobody talks about it. It's not bad, it's just we're

polite, we don't talk about it, so there was never any shame about it, so that was wonderful. So, with diagnosis, I don't remember much else about that appointment other than we agreed to speak in a week or two, and immediately, as soon as I left, I thought, I'm not going to go back. I wish, and I still struggle with this to this day, I wish I had gone back once to talk to the doctor and say, "Look, I'm going to change doctors. It's nothing personal." I wanted to do things that – immediately I thought of my best friend's doctor and I thought, well, I'm going to clearly need a doctor that – I didn't dislike this doctor at all, I quite liked him, but I just thought I actually kind of want a woman doctor. I don't know why. I thought I don't know how much time I'm going to spend with doctors now, but I own this life immediately. I immediately switched my life, I said my life is now my number one priority. And I had been at this wonderful job for three years, where initially I had plans of moving up through the – I was very aware of the management ladder in the hotel, and I thought, oh, I would totally be into – I am good at what I do and I was told that I'm good at what I do, and I thought, oh, management is definitely on my plate someday. Once I get my personal stuff together – my lifestyle is not conducive to being a management trainee right now – like, I have to start going out every night, and I did eventually, because I worked at 8:00 in the morning, and eventually that got changed to 6:00 by my own doing. But that was long after I stopped going out dancing every night, but I had a hard time making that transition, because I love dancing so much, and it wasn't the drinking and the partying and the meeting people, it was the dancing that I missed. And I thought, how do I incorporate my love of dancing every night with my going to work every morning, and eventually you have to let common sense prevail and say the dancing is going to have to be a treat once in a while. One of the best things I did after the diagnosis, two or three days later – again, this was all very methodical and without much thought, but it's so who I am. I bought a bottle of wine and I took a pad of paper, a blank journal, and I went to Stanley Park, my favourite spot – actually, the same spot I had gone when my friend had passed away, and at the same time that they were having a service back east, I had my own service here, not knowing what their service was like. And I had an hour of taped songs on my Walkman, and I had my own service with a bottle of wine. I went to the exact same spot with a bottle of wine, and I remember drinking about half a bottle of wine, and at the end of it – at a certain point, I said, here's the deal, HIV, you're now my roommate. I'm not going to hate you. I said, I refuse to hate you. I don't think that's healthy given that you're inside my body, so we're going to get along famously, but I'm always going to be trying to get you to move out. [Laughs] Don't take it personally. Let's get to know each other to facilitate you going off and leaving my body somehow. I forget the exact wording, and that meant a lot to me, and then I dumped the rest of the wine out, and then oddly enough, a few days later, felt guilty, thought, I wonder if I killed the grass where I dumped the wine out. But it meant a lot. I dumped the rest of the wine out because I had gotten what I needed out of the experience. And that was lifechanging for me, that day. I didn't hate it. I said, I'm not going to – I can't – this can't be about negative energy. I will go forth positively. And I think that may be one of the reasons that I've survived so well. But I knew that was what – I had feedback, I'm not just making it up, but people would tell me, "Your care-free, your life is wonderful attitude is refreshing and also very annoying sometimes," my friends would say. And some of it came from concern – they're concerned that you're not based in reality. If only they could have seen – I can see it hindsight, but I couldn't explain it well enough back at the time, but with the level of anxiety that I have, you are forever rooted in reality, so I think it was just the way that I expressed myself. But I wished that people had been able to figure out, no, no, no, trust me, I'm based in reality, but this is the way that I express

myself. But a lot of times it didn't feel genuine just because you're not used to talking to a lot of people. You have that you're comfortable talking to, and you talk endlessly to them, but that's how I get to see who I am, that's how I found out who I was as a person, because I didn't talk a lot as a kid. Anyway... [Coughs] Excuse me. Yeah, so the diagnosis, and having that – I called it a ceremony, but whatever it was that day, that was pivotal. But it couldn't have been – well, no, we have warm winters here – there was no snow or anything. But maybe it wasn't right away, maybe it wasn't a few days after, it may have been a few months, but Spring is a month away from February, so it wasn't that long after. And I had my job. My job meant the world to me, and I was starting to think of travelling, because we had wonderful perks of travelling, and I think that was the same year – yes – I decided to apply for credit cards, and I needed financial independence, because I had depended on my boyfriend for years, even though I had had a life before that, but it had been on student loans. So, I went from my parents to student loans to a boyfriend, and I thought, you've never lived on your own, so you're actually making a bit of a success of this, let's apply for these things called credit cards. I applied for eight, I remember the exact number, because I got all eight, and in hindsight, they should never have given me eight, because you don't have established credit. But I asked later, because I ended up having to declare bankruptcy years later, and I said, "How did they give me eight credit cards?" She said, "How did you ever get eight credit cards?" I said, "Well, I applied for them all at once." And she goes, "Stop right there. That's how you got them. I'm appalled that they didn't figure it out, because if you did it all the same time..." She said, "You didn't do it fraudulently or anything, but they didn't have time to figure out that the other ones were giving you one. You should only have had one." [Laughs] And I said, "Yeah, I get it now. I didn't think I'd get any." To me, that's how my brain works – oh, let's apply for as many as possible just to increase the odds of getting one. I said, "I didn't expect to get them all." To my credit, I said, I put them away and didn't even think about them for the longest time, so it wasn't a big deal. And that's what actually saved me in the bankruptcy interview, she said, "Yes, I can see that. The date of issuing for the card, you had them for years or months at least before you even used them, so you clearly didn't do it just for the purposes of getting free money or something. You still managed to screw it up quite well..." She didn't say it that way. Yeah, anyway, that's nothing to do with this, but... That's where my life was at that time, and dealing with – it wasn't tied into becoming positive. I'm trying to think what my mindset was like. The millennium, Y2K was a big thing. Now, I remember a couple things I did just coming into that new years. I was at the point where I was going – instead of going out every night, and I had a job now, I was going to the raves – like, long-weekend events, because that's when I could still have fun. And I made a conscious choice, I said, well, it's the end of the year. Life has changed for me drastically this year, '99, the end of the century ironically, but I'm now positive. I don't want to spend it at the bar, so we went to a house party and we watched fireworks over English Bay at a penthouse on English Bay, and listening to everybody else, and we all stood on the balconies cheering, but it was cold, it was a miserable night. But it wasn't that miserable, but the rain let up long enough – I forget the exact weather, so I'm not going to pretend I know. But I remember – the experience that I wanted, I got. I thought, I want to hear other people cheering, I want there to be the bond of just standing on a balcony, because we had enough of the fireworks, the Celebration of Light – oddly, did they not start in '96? Are we over the – do we need '99 for this?

BK: Yeah, I think it's relevant. In terms of your diagnosis, it's certainly relevant.

P: It just occurred to me, wait a minute, we're talking about '99 here.

BK: We're mostly talking before '96, but this is still relevant. It's relevant in the sense that one of our questions is about how your perceptions of HIV have changed. Back in the '80s, it was kind of a death sentence. Now you're diagnosed in '99...

P: I would never have done – I probably would not have done the test if the death sentence thing, I would have waited until I got sick probably if we hadn't discovered ARVs. I didn't have – I felt okay getting tested, because a positive diagnosis now wasn't a death sentence, so that's probably one of the reasons why I didn't freak out when I found out. But it was still – I was worried about the impact – I'll be honest, I thought, wow, this is really going to impact my social life. And I didn't – and yeah, part of it was sex. Like, obviously it's going to be really hard to get a partner now. But I didn't think it would be the end of the world, because we were so used to it by '99, and people were surviving. But we didn't know how – we didn't know how well, but we knew people were surviving. But it wasn't that long – it was August '96 to February '99 is only two-and-a-half years, it's not that long. In hindsight, the way I think now, I'm thinking I would have waited longer. So, I'm happy... I'm happy that I did when I did it.

BK: And then you waited a few years before you actually went on ARVs.

P: Yeah, but I also stopped having sex for a big chunk of that time too, not on purpose. [Laughs] It wasn't – I'll be honest, it wasn't out of fear of giving somebody HIV just because some of my own particular practices in having sex, I knew I wasn't probably at-risk of giving it to somebody. I wasn't the top ever, so I thought, well, that [indecipherable], and mostly it was oral sex, so performing oral sex was considered a low-risk activity, even for somebody... We know now – I don't know what the science is exactly, but I always say that it's impossible. I think the CDC says, no, technically it's possible, scientifically it's possible, there's just no known cases or almost no cases of it being transmitted through oral sex. So, that's what kept me going through those years, but then in '04, yeah, my doctor said, "Look, it's really time for you to consider taking the ARVs. Your CD4 count is – you're sitting at 300. You're one bout of pneumonia away from getting really sick." She said, "If you get sick all of a sudden, I'm worried that your CD4 count – you seem to have leveled off at 300. That's really low." And in hindsight, woah, because I was at 7s and 8s there for a while and then I dropped to 300 and it was just staying there. She said, "This isn't good. Your body seems to be telling us something. I really want you to start." So, I negotiated, almost. I said, "Well, I can't do this with work." And she said, "Well, we'll sign you off work. I'll sign you off on a three-month stress leave." And that, I really needed it at that point, and it was – with the options of two other three-month terms, that's how short-term disability works, in three-month chunks up to a maximum of nine months. And I still to this day don't understand why – it wasn't just my employer, you get the sense that employers take it personally or something, that you're leaving. Like, what is wrong with us? You want to leave us? And I got mad at them one day and I said, "Stop pulling. Stop taking it personally. Honestly, it has nothing to do with you." And then my boss actually apologized to me afterward, after I came back from the first one. He said, "I had no idea that you were sick." And I said, "Well, first of all, let me correct that – I wasn't sick. I didn't want to get sick, so I started taking the drugs, but I know what you mean. You didn't know I was positive." And from then on, I actually started telling people, and I was proud – I proudly – and my best friend and I, my

current best friend, were talking about it the other night, and he said, “I always wondered why you considered yourself to be the poster girl of telling people that you’re positive.” I had this wonderful job and it was all this corporate networking, and really intelligent people and caring and wonderful people. My hotel had a particular knack for hiring these amazing, wonderful people. You knew – if somebody got a job there, you knew they were a good person. They just had a knack for hiring the best. Anyway, so I loved telling people. I felt that finally I get to be part of an HIV education. Like, look at me. See, I’m normal. And people have told me, have said to me over the years, “I like how you’re very upfront that not only you’re gay but you’re positive.” And then another guy I met, a gay guy I met at work, he pulled me aside and he said, “I’m positive too, just so you know.” And he was a manager and I wasn’t a manager. So, that’s the impact it had on my work though, I told them right away, I said, “I will never apply for management because of my HIV status,” because they expected a nine-and-a-half-hour day, and I said, “I’m not judging you in any way, shape, or form. I’m not doing six nine-and-a-half-hour days a week and maintaining my health status. I just can’t see it.” Then my anxiety level – it’s too much. I can’t marry my job, I can’t. And not that other people did, but for me, yeah, it was totally the right decision, and it also gave me the freedom of knowing that my job was my job, so this was the endgame. Now, at one point, I did briefly consider – and I liked going through the process. There was this wonderful manager – they rotated their managers through their other hotels, and this wonderful woman came through, and I told her, took her aside one day – I noticed one of her assistant manager positions was coming up, and that’s how you get in, you apply for assistant manager and then you begin the training process, and it takes a couple of years, and then you are expected to travel, they’ll post you somewhere in the world at a couple different locations, and then maybe you’ll come back and maybe not. You might start moving up through wherever you relocate to, but there will be relocation. So, I knew that if I applied, I would end up moving, and I actually didn’t want to move – I love it here. But I did – which was counterintuitive for more original reason for getting here, to see the world kind of thing. Anyway, I pulled her aside one day and I said, “Would you be interested if I applied for the job? I’m not asking you to go to bat for me, but do you think it’s...” And she said, “Yeah, absolutely.” She was very tactful about it. We weren’t buddy-buddies or anything, but we did see eye-to-eye, and she got my personality and she knew my lifestyle – I partied a bit. I said, “I have baggage, I’ve got stuff that’s going on. If it gets in the way, I would bow out, or I may not even end up applying.” And in the end, that was what the decision was made, but I was always grateful for her and I having those few conversations, because at least I considered it. And it wasn’t something that was ignored or I just said I’m not good enough – no, I knew I was good enough. And I made a wise decision – I just thought it’s probably not the best move for me at this point in time, and given where I was – I still partied on long weekends and stuff, and I didn’t have it down to the science that it should... There was a balance that I could have created that was a better balance, and I hadn’t achieved it yet. And in the end, I never did, I ended up leaving, because I wasn’t partying too much, but I was just tired all the time, and I blamed it on partying. In hindsight, it wasn’t – I’m still tired all the time and I don’t party – it was just fatigue. Fatigue got the best of me in the end. Now, whether that’s a result of HIV – but that’s how HIV has impacted my life. So, in the end, it created – and I hear it a lot. And my first mental health tie-in, because I finally asked the wonderful people at St. Paul’s, where I ended up after twelve years at Spectrum with the original doctor that I went to after the diagnosis in ’99, I switched doctors to my best friend’s [doctor] just out of pure emotion – there’s no logic to it, it’s just the meaning of it, the poignancy of it. We’ll continue the work that you and my best friend were doing. There

was a part of him there. It meant a lot to me. And she signed me off on my two stress leaves from work – I ended up taking one to start the ARVs, which did work. I’m off on two different things here. Anyway. [Pause] She signed me off on the two stress leaves, but I after I finally left the job in 2010, I immediately changed doctors, just for a variety of reasons – I just felt it was time for a change. And I had already gone to St. Paul’s for some mental health check-ins, and I liked what I saw, and there was thing called IDC at St. Paul’s which specialized in HIV, which also Spectrum did, but I just liked the setup a little better. And I said, “Would you consider taking me on as a patient?” And they said, “Absolutely. We’re taking a few more.” They already had a pretty full compliment, but it’s not impossible to get in, but it’s not right away, so I stayed over at Spectrum for a while, and did tell her I was leaving, but the appointment where I – I never did say goodbye officially, but I did at least make the appointment, but it turned out to be – it was a Friday afternoon at 4:30 again by coincidence, the appointment where I was going to go to say goodbye to my doctor at Spectrum after twelve wonderful years, and say, “You did save me. The ARVs did work.” Oh, and when I took the ARVs, it wasn’t a competition, but I dropped to undetectable within two months, which was considered a big deal at the time. She said, “You’re responding really well.” I said, “Numbers-wise, yes, but I’m crapping my pants everywhere. When does this stop?” And I had many accidents in public, and it was horrifying, and it just became a way of life. You knew that once a month, you were going to defecate in your pants and have to get home as fast as possible. There were moments of humour in it all – a dog followed me for a half a block one day, kept smelling me, and I was like go, shoo, shoo. And I thought what is he following me for? And then I thought, of course, he thinks I’ve got food or something. And then I was like, where is his owner? My god. In hindsight, I laugh about it so much, and even at the time I found it mildly funny, but I was getting mildly annoyed. And he was such a cute dog. [Laughs] And I did say one day that will make a good story, and it did, but it’s not a great dinner table story – the time I defecated in my pants, but the purposes of this, hey, it’s great. But I longed for – and I don’t know how long I was on that set of ARVs, but I didn’t even ask, but they said, “There’s a new drug that’s come out. Would you be interested in trying – there’s a trial for it. And there’s a blood test you have to take to see if you can tolerate the pill.” And I said, “Sure.” But within a couple of days, I heard back and they said, “Yeah, you qualify. Would you be willing to try these new drugs?” And within two weeks, I said, wow, my bowel movements are back to normal, so that was lifechanging, and I’m still on the same set of drugs – we haven’t changed them since. So, I’ve only had two rounds of treatment – the original ten-pill combination, which we did manage to change that one once just from ten pills to five pills – I forget how that worked, but it was basically the same set of pills in a different form, so it went from ten pills a day to five pills, but it was still twice a day. Now, it’s just one pill the morning. I went from ten to five to one. And when I started taking that one pill, I thought this to me is the end of – because I have to take it till death – well, as far as we know, unless they find a cure or something – whatever, I don’t hold my breath on that. I’m fifty-four. But to me, here was this one pill that had no side-effects, and yeah, I thought, wow. Now, that’s the medical side of it. I thought, medically this seems like the end of the road. I’ve found something that’s like perfect. What more can you ask for? One pill a day with no side-effects, but I guess there are other – like, an injection maybe where you go in twice a year, or lay in a suntanning bed and... Whatever different unusual wonderful ways there are to administer the drugs, but I thought I’m quite happy to take a pill a day. I did say to my doctor at Spectrum, because she asked me one day, “You seem hesitant about taking the drugs.” And I said, “I worry that I’ll fuck it up.” And one of the best things she ever did for me, she leaned over and she put her hand on my knee, and she said,

“I know you’ll do the right thing.” And at the time, I thought how do I use that? But it puts power in yourself, it gives you the confidence. I told her years later, “Thank you for that. That was a gift. That was a piece of my puzzle. You gave me the power, and I didn’t find it daunting. I thought my anxiety would be my enemy when it came to taking the drugs, that I’d be too anxious and fuck it up, and fear... But you actually, you do – I did the right thing. I did forget a few at the beginning, but very quickly, you adapt to it. And then when the one pill a day came, it was a piece of cake. I think with the ten pills a day, knowing that you were going to have bowel movement issues, it does something subconsciously where it’s easier to forget even though – you’d think holding ten pills in your hand creates more of a visual – like, do you remember doing that? No. I keep track of it on my calendar now, just even in the last two years, I’ve started keeping track on my calendar, because I’ve struggled with perfection my whole life, and that became an issue in itself. I just thought, well, now I’ve got to be perfect on this, but that’s something you should be perfect on is taking your medication. But I’m proud to say that in the last year that I think I’ve missed three days, and one was just last month. And I’m just like, how does this happen? But I just kept putting it off because I have another pill – I’ve had to start taking a heartburn medication and I can no longer take my HIV pill first thing in the morning, because you have to take the heartburn pill first thing in the morning before you eat anything, and then you have to take two hours before you take the HIV, and sometimes I’ll forget because I’m out and about. But it’s a good thing, because it means I’m busy and doing stuff. If I was home all day, it would be no problem, I would take it two hours later, but sometimes I’m not home and I don’t like carrying pills with me, because I worry about losing them. Anyway, that’s where I am now. So, medically, it’s not a big a thing, but the impact it had on me was balancing the sex life, and for years, I didn’t – it wasn’t a problem. Like I say, I was proud to point out at work that, hey, I’m the guy with HIV, and look how healthy I am. And people would say – people told me verbally, they said, “You made a difference in my outlook on HIV, and it’s comforting and I worry about it less, because I know you and a couple other people here at work that have it that are coping well with it. That’s wonderful.” And that makes you feel a little better about – like, finally I was able to contribute something to the cause. And that’s about the same – I pinpointed it a couple of years ago that I did struggle with and odd amount of guilt over not helping – like, I’m alive because people chained themselves to fences and crashed meetings and threw the red paint on paper, just whatever, all the stuff they did.

But at the time I never questioned this, I never thought, ‘Oh god, that’s so embarrassing. Like oh thank god somebody’s doing something.’ And I was proud and I used to say that being gay was ... it taught us so much at a very early age just by the mere fact that you had this thing to deal with. Like you look at a lot of people and you think why don’t they just deal with their stuff? And I used to think that gay people, I thought we must be, mental health wise, we must be doing okay, because we are given something from puberty that is something to deal with. Now I’ve since changed my mind about that. It’s like gay people are just as messed up as other people and that’s wonderful, the sense of equality of it all. It’s not a get out of jail free card for mental health. And that was just naïve of me to think such a thing. But it was a noble thought, it was very noble that just by being gay you’re better put together. But it was inaccurate and unfair to the people that suffered with mental health. And that anxiety is mental health, that’s a mental health issue. So it was a little ironic, given that I was somebody ... but see, because I’m so happy and well-meaning, I never considered it a mental health issue, per se. I do now, but just from a statistical point of view. From an emotional level I’ve just been incredibly happy my whole life.

I've had a lot to deal with, I've had the wind knocked out of me. But ironically, losing people was not the hardest thing to deal with. The hardest thing to deal with was when my partner told me that he didn't want to date me anymore, because he had such an impact on my life. On a personal and sexual, like he completely ticked off all the boxes, so to not have that going forward was harder for me to deal with. And I still struggle with that, like why did that impact me more? There's good points and bad points. It makes me a little shallow in some ways maybe, but then it makes me I think that I handle death a little too well sometimes. And I'm constantly checking in with my mental health people, like making sure I'm okay with this. Do I not handle death well? Do I handle it too well? Do I dwell ... what I struggle with right now is am I still too caught up in my past? Does my past hold me back? I don't think it does, in fact, I think it's important, that's why I jumped at the chance to do this study. I'm not a person to just forget the past and keep moving forward, I'm constantly processing and seeing how my past has formed who I am today.

But this year more than ever, I'm constantly—as I walk around, I'm just flashing the numbers 2 – 0 – 1 – 9 in front of me, thinking this year more than ever, I'm looking to the future. And that's a wonderful thing. It's a wonderful place to have got to. I don't think HIV ruined my life, it's just something I had to deal with. HIV ruined my friends' lives, it took them, it took their lives. That was a hard thing, and then the smart friend—I had many smart friends, but one particularly—because he ended up—and I still don't know what happened here—either overdosed or he killed himself. And that's one of the hardest things I've ever had to deal with. But... it's a tough one, after losing someone to HIV I immediately, something else I did important with him. I forgave him instantly. I had to. And in hindsight, it could have really messed me up if I hadn't, because some days I try to get angry at him, and I just can't. I don't know. He told me one day, he said, 'I'm dealing with something that I'll never tell you, I'm never going to tell you what it is.' He said 'I know what you're like, don't even ask.' And I thought, I've never seen him like this, what the hell is going on?' He said 'I'm dealing with something' and he said 'I worry about it sometimes.' And I'll always wonder, were the two things connected? It caused a bit of angst with a couple friends I had left. Because we were all close, I thought, and one friend knew about it for a year more and didn't tell me that he was gone. He said, 'I didn't think you could handle it' and that was hugely insulting for me. I just said, 'What do you mean you think I couldn't handle it? Our freaking friend died and you didn't tell me.' I had to find out on Google. I looked up his name one night and I found his obituary. Not how you want to find out. But you know what, I don't hate my other friend for not telling me. He was wrong, but I don't hate him for it. that's not who I am. That's not.

Anyway, that's a big piece of my puzzle. Not puzzle, it's a big part of my story was losing him. Because he was my ... it's not related to HIV, but it's still part of my personal story. And it impacted me. And I think losing him was in some ways ... but I had already lost him in that we had lost touch and I didn't know, I knew something was wrong, I actually thought he got mixed up in drugs a bit. And he quit his wonderful job as a journalist and he went into tourism or something, I don't know what he was doing. And he left Vancouver, and I just couldn't ... he was hard to read before, but he became impossible to read and he just said—he didn't have a partner, I'm not even aware that he ever, I think he had one somewhere else for a little while, I don't know. But I didn't know any of his other friends, so I didn't know how to touch base to find out what happened. And I've never verified what happened and I'm happy with what I

know. But part of me thinks I probably should find out a bit more information. That was a tough one, that was a tough one. Anyway.

Now going forward with HIV, I've stopped telling everybody that I'm positive. A few years back, I realized and was appalled after I started connecting with all the agencies around town and just a couple people I met in my personal life that had horrible opinions about HIV. And I met a couple of closeted men that were for whatever reason were still closeted, but also were just angry. One of them actually said to me, he said, 'HIV, you guys ruined it. Everything.' He said gay guys ruined everything. Wow, how are you in my life, number one. He'd no longer—but we were just an acquaintance. But you immediately want to educate someone, and maybe I just am lucky that I had avoided meeting people like this. I always met really open minded people that understood. I've never felt that HIV was a negative thing, pardon the pun, but. It's certainly not something I brag about, but I brag about how I have handled it, I just thought ... I've incorporated it into my life as I promised myself that day in Stanley Park. I said I will never hate you, and I haven't, and I still don't. And even after the last couple years, I now live in HIV positive housing. I moved into the housing society that caters to HIV positive people. So every time you enter the front door, you're announcing—you're disclosing your status. And a large number of people know what that building is. One guy I was home with one night, being intimate, he said, 'What is this place?' And I didn't tell him. I've had enough bad experiences in the past year, I'm not telling another person. But it also begged the question—we weren't having sex where I thought it was an issue. And I'm also undetectable now. But I chose not to tell him. That's the only part I struggle with now, is the disclosure part. But the irony in it is not lost on me, because I used to tell everybody, to the point where my friends said, 'Why do you tell people, like you just casually meet somebody and you blurt out that you're positive.' And I said, 'Well number one, people know when they meet me. Like I don't like to appear that I'm hiding it.' I said, 'I'm not bragging about it obviously, but I don't want to appear that I'm hiding it.' But I started hiding it the past few years and that really really got to me. And it took a toll on my mental health, and in the last year so much so that I actually stopped doing substances. The cost/benefit analysis. I took a recovery program back after I quit my job, because these are the things that I wanted to do. Recovery program was on my bucket list. And not because I wanted to stop, but because I wanted the knowledge base around it. I said, 'I don't know the science behind addiction. I need to know if I'm an addict.' In the end I decided—and with the help—I'm not an addict. I just stopped one day; I stopped all the other stuff that I've ever done. But I can be a heavy drug user. And that's troubling in itself. Anyways, that's a whole other ball of wax.

BK: But there's still that stigma about HIV out there--

P: --Oh totally.

BK: --But that's what you were articulating the moment I noticed that the medical stuff, that's not really a problem.

P: No, it's not the medical, and I'm eternally grateful that the universe, if it had to give me HIV, it didn't give me any of the medical stuff. Although I do struggle a bit now with neuropathy. I have a lot of health issues, just ironically in the last 6 months since I've stopped using substances. But I kind of thought I might be getting some physical problems and I thought, this is

a really good time to start using, at least for a while. So I'm on a really long break. I haven't said I've stopped, I've just gone on a really long break. But I'll never go back to these. Never ever. It's just silly now at this point. And I've always said, I don't want to grow old being a frequent recreational user. I don't mind once a couple times a year but not a couple times a month. That's not my life anymore. Anyway, and stigma around drug use still. is people ... and I'm tired of explaining it. Anyway, that's a whole other conversation, but its ... you find the balance in everything, people, and I had the balance wrong for a while. I'll be honest, I didn't get it. And I could have. And that's when my smart friend that I miss so much, I always thought he had the balance right. And a couple other friends, one died of a heart attack, but I always thought he had a wonderful work-life-play balance. And I'm envious, but it can happen, it doesn't have to rule your life. No one part of your life should rule, like find the balance in all of it. And it's easier said than done, obviously. But it requires intention and compassion and love of yourself. And love for other people. Anyway.

But yeah, the last couple of years, I've really had to struggle with HIV stigma. And that, it made me angry. It made me really really really angry. After all that I've been through, I said the fact that we're still talking about HIV and finally even if, what was it, 2017? That science signed off on that undetectable is finally—thank you, that's the reaction I expect from people. And even in the positive community sometimes, I think that they're so used to being crapped on that even they don't seem that happy, and I'm like, that's big, you don't get that, that's big. And you almost want to get a t-shirt made and wear it around going like, first of all. And last night I wanted to go to a lecture at SFU on disclosure and in the end I was too tired to go. I also thought it was at SFU downtown and then I read the notice at the last minute and I'm like, oh, SFU Burnaby. Much beautiful but a little—and somebody, they were going to pay for the cab there, the day program I go to. “No we'll pay for the cab!” And I said, ‘No, that's not the problem. I'm tired, 6 o'clock is almost my bedtime, I'm old.’ So I said if there's a podcast I'm happy to listen to it later.

Anyway, but so on AIDS day last year, I don't know what was actually said, I have to do my research, but I want to find out more about disclosure and where we are at with that now. I was comfortable starting, I thought, ‘Okay, I think for peace of mind I have to tell people from now on.’ I was quite happy just because of the nature of what I was doing, but now it's more the--not militant, but it's more the just I'm telling people. I'm not leaving any gray area anymore. Those days are done. Now I haven't had any practice, for whatever reason, I've stopped – I'm not interested in intimacy right now, but that's a whole other separate issue. It's not related to HIV, it's related to other issues in my life. So I haven't had a chance to put it back into practice, like what's the impact of the HIV on my life going forward? The answer to that, good question that I've created myself—the answer is more than I wished it was. I wished it was less. And I assumed it would be less when I left my job, I wouldn't have been as comfortable leaving my job if I thought I was going to struggle with HIV in a few years. And my status, and disclosing it to people. And I do think whatever the changes they made to the law in 2012, I think they were well-intentioned, but they mucked it up for a lot of people. And just creating the—they made it blurry. That was my sense of it. Now I don't know the exact legal interpretation and I probably should know it better, but it bugged me that I needed to know it better. Of all the things I have to start worrying about now. It became obvious that we couldn't depend on people's good nature, and that's not logical I guess, but there's always going to be bad people or—people who have

bad moments, I don't think there are bad people, that's my own way of looking at the world. We're all good people but some of us have bad moments. And people chose to use HIV as a weapon. And that ruined it for a lot of people, that ruined it for the rest of us for a while. I think we're in a better place now, I don't know the interpretation of what happened back in the fall, so. Anyway...

BK: Certainly getting that message U=U out there, that would go a long way—

P: --when I heard that campaign, why... I think that's a wonderful campaign, it should be on the side of buses. People should be asking me questions about it. 'What is U=U?' But I don't want to leave the non-undetectable behind, we'll help them get to = undetectable. That's the goal. It's not a game changer anymore. Undetectable, it's like living with—it doesn't have an impact on your sex life, period. But people don't get that yet. I have to go to the bathroom again soon, do we get to take a break again or?

BK: We can either take a break or we can wrap up, because I think I've asked kind of all the questions I had kind of outlined--

P: --Really? Okay. Really? Wow. I talked that much.

BK: Well you've covered a lot of ground. We've kind of gone from 1982 to the present, so.

P: Well let me think then. Well, let's wrap up, but I just want to see if I've left out anything how it impacted me. And through those years and also, I just want to make sure my friends get their story. That's the hard part, and I still struggle with that, but that's a therapy issue for me. I survived and they didn't. That's sort of the headline that you attach to your past life. Or not my past life, it's my life. It's the headline I've attached to it. Incorrectly sometimes. And it was just when I finally corrected it a few years ago, because I kept telling everybody 'all of my friends died and I survived, oh poor me.' That was basically what I was putting out there. And then I said, if you—first of all, the friends, well the one that didn't tell me that the other one had killed himself, or OD-ed, whatever it was, he's still alive. But I said, 'Oh it was actually a roommate situation.' But we were all close friends and three of us were incredibly close. The other two, one I replaced roommate wise and the other one was one that lived in the dining room area, but it was still a bedroom. But he didn't live there all the time, I forget the particulars of that case. Anyways, those two over the years I found out just through the grapevine that they had both passed away. The last one was just once I—the one that I replaced that I had a bit of a crush on, I asked about him at one of the service organizations that I started using once I left my job. And HIV was one of the reasons that I was able to go on disability, like it's not a disability in itself but it's one of the boxes that if you tick off enough boxes, you qualify for disability. But my anxiety was the big one. Severe anxiety, HIV ... drug addiction is not a reason to go off on disability, but I was at the time I was applying for the application, I wasn't sure of my status on drug addiction. I'm not a drug addict, I can clearly walk away from it, but I don't, anyways, that's a separate issue. How did I get off on disability...

BK: You were talking about your friends in Halifax.

P: Thank you. I want to make sure that... I still struggle with the fact that, well and there are some that survived with me. That I don't give them enough credit, so I stopped telling that story. I stopped saying my friends all died. My friends didn't all die, my roommates died. Of the four—there were 5 of us there at one time, there was a 4 person house, and even the guy that I replaced roommate-wise that was constantly in our lives, he would still come over and watch TV with everybody, and it felt like the five of us. Even though he lived across the street or down the street at one point. Anyway, he lived nearby. But he and the original friend were best friends. They were buddies and I liked that. I liked that he had—and I knew that the one that moved out that I replaced, I knew that the original one—that's why we didn't talk about a lot of the HIV stuff, because I knew that they had each other. And he knew the original, the partner that had been the first person in Halifax that died. So I didn't ... I liked being the escape from HIV-centric world. I liked being the sunshine in people's lives. But I lived and they didn't. And that's not something I struggle with, I try to be proud of it. Maybe I did put sunshine in people's lives, and there's nothing wrong with thinking that. And, yeah. And that's what I'll say about my friends I guess.

That's, yeah. Maybe I put sunshine in their lives. And none of them were angry that I was negative, I know that. I asked them, I said 'Are you okay with the fact that I...?' My best friend and I had many conversations about it, and I told them, I said, I feel horrible that I was the promiscuous one and you just had a couple partners and you ended up getting it and I didn't, at this point. Because he died thinking and knowing I was negative when he died, so it wasn't thinking, it was knowledge for both of us at that time. Our reality was that I was negative. So I was negative when he died. And I'm okay with that, that's... and in a weird way maybe, it honours that I eventually got to live with it and survived. And I always say that I carry 5 souls. But there's people—and it's not lost on me, especially living in a building full of HIV people, that's one of the best things I said when I moved in, I said it's nice knowing you live in a building where—and I don't mean this in a macabre way—but there's people that lost a lot more people than I died. There's people that—well when people said they lost dozens of people I always used to get mad, I'll be honest. It's horrible of me, but I'd say how could you possibly know that many people? Well they weren't close friends, but they still knew people, and they were acquaintances. And I'm not faulting people for being popular, but I just thought, I can't have that many close friends. And in the end, I did know a lot of people. The end of year notice in '96, the red ribbon they used to put on Xtra West with the names, I remember reading down the list of names to find my friends name. And I couldn't even finish the people the first day, I kept finding all these other names of people that I knew. And then in the end one of them was my boss that had hired me in a really dark time when my partner and I had just broken up and he had the gay bookstore here on Davie St. called Return to Sender. And his name was on there, and that was tough. I didn't even think he was sick. So I lost... and yeah.

And there's also a possibility that I may have been positive when my best friend passed away, because I can't remember when these four days of horrible illness were. But I'm pretty sure it was after he passed away, because otherwise it would have been in the first—because I got hired in October of '95, he passed away 6 months later. But I was living in the place where I was living when I found out that he died, that was the same place where I seroconverted. So it, because there were only 4 days of my life that I was so sick I didn't know what was going to... and in hindsight, they say, that's when you seroconverted. Because I don't get sick. And that was, I mean apparently, but even when I had the—Facebook told me I had bronchitis five years

ago, but I'm not bedridden. I just remember that was the sickest I've ever been, and I've had some pretty icky stuff, just like flu-wise and I had chickenpox and measles when I was a kid and all that stuff. But this kind of sickness was just, ugh. And it was four days when I couldn't get out of bed. And anyways, I'm pretty sure that's when I seroconverted. But it was '95 or '96. So I was positive for a while, but again, I always ... I'm okay with that. I'm glad—I wish I had gone on ARV sooner, but I wasn't sure of the side effects, so. But I don't worry that I gave it to anybody, because of the practices that I had. But I wish—I wonder what it did to my peace of mind around it. It became instantly easier once you found out you're undetectable. Even though it wasn't common knowledge, I knew there's no way I can give this to people. And you even heard people like Stephen Lewis, who was on shows talking about ... I forget what they were talking about, but they were like if everybody in the world took ARVS, we could eliminate, statistically speaking, you could eliminate it. And that was my mindset at the time. And I thought, so hearing this wonderful person say this, I thought, 'Oh, well I'm not crazy, that's what I've been thinking.' If everybody became undetectable then we don't have to worry about it anymore. It's the same as a cure. So anyway, or it's the equivalent. Anyway, I'm oversimplifying but not really, anyway that's... Okay. I think that's it. I don't know, I can't think of anything. Just want to make sure I honour my friends. Something like this, that's the impact it had on me. But I never became, it never caused me to be unhappy. Temporarily unhappy, but my outlook on life has gotten better not worse. So, it's not life ending, it's just life changing. Yeah, for me anyway. I can't think of anything flowery to end this with.

BK: I think that's a reasonably positive note to end on.

P: I know, it is, it is. But I just know. That it more speaks to who I am, I like to have that one, you know ... I just am glad a few months ago I said you have to stop trying to speak in final draft [laughing]. And that's exactly what I was trying to do! Allow yourself to speak in rough draft. [laughing] Nobody speaks in final draft. A few people are particularly good public speakers—ironically that's where I ended my life, even with anxiety. That's why I've been struggling with my teeth lately, I called my dentist, said 'You don't understand, I want to get into public speaking.' I said if for no other reason than to accomplish, it's a bucket list thing. It's important to me because that to me will be the ultimate conquering of anxiety, to speak publicly. And my friends, my close friends used to laugh, they said, 'It's just so hard to imagine you with anxiety. I said, 'I know, because you guys don't see it! But that's an honour of how special you are. You are not the kryptonite, but you're the elixir. You are the magic that takes away my anxiety. It's the beauty of friends.' I'm still angry with HIV I guess, but not therapy angry, like I don't need—but it will always be this thing that took away my friends. Of course you're angry. But you make a weird peace with it. And I'm just—in the end, I'm incredibly incredibly grateful for my life. I get to grow old, so I guess that's a good place to end. I get to grow old, and I'm grateful for the life I had, and I'm grateful for the life I will have. So. okay.

BK: Thank you so much.

P: Thank you. Phew.