"HIV in My Day" - Interview #56

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Interviewee: Anonymous (P); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)
Interview anonymized at participant's request

Ben Klassen: Thanks so much for being here. Really looking forward to hearing your story and your experiences of the early years of the epidemic. Just to get started, could you tell me a little bit about when you started getting involved with the gay community or engaging in gay life?

Participant: Gay community – so, I was fourteen and I ran away. I was in trouble. So, I hit the streets of Vancouver, found the West End. I knew I was gay off—from the get-go, before the age of fourteen, but I came out when I was fourteen.

BK: You came straight into the West End?

P: Yeah, I found David Street – yeah, yeah.

BK: What did it look like back then?

P: A lot smaller. A few high-rises, but nothing like you're gonna see now with False Creek, Yaletown, and Coal Harbour. And what's going on in the West End now, nothing but higher and higher and higher. But there was houses back then, it was—so it was mid-seventies, yeah, so different time. There was lots of gay clubs. Big—yeah, it was quite a huge community really for Vancouver. I mean it wasn't compared to other cities in the world, but it was pretty big. And I thought I was alone – where I grew up was just in White Rock – so when I came to Vancouver, I'm like, yes! Yeah, find my tribe. So, that's when I came to Vancouver, when I was about fourteen.

BK: Yeah, any other reflections on the gay community during those early, early years?

P: Pre-AIDS?

BK: Yeah.

P: Because that was still pre-AIDS, you see. Well it was—well, I went to some of the earliest marches, which were really protests, but that's what we call Pride now. You know, we'd start in Nelson Park and go down to Denman and that was it. And there was about two hundred of us, and people actually were afraid to be seen, so not everybody showed up with their true face. And that's when all the costuming began, right? So, it was always drag queens but—and the performers. But there was also people who literally put sacks on their faces. They had to hide because they'd get fired or kicked out of communities or churches. And yeah, so it was pretty different back then, it was more of a protest. We really had to put our foot down and say we're here and we're queer, get over it. Yeah. So, there was that. That side, you know it was very flamboyant. There was—Davie Street was very vibrant in those days. Full of drag queens and hookers and hustlers and leathermen and coffee shops. It was pretty alive. Way more alive than it

is now. Way bigger. And there was gay bars all throughout the whole city too, it wasn't just this little area that we have. It was all over. You know, they were in Yaletown and down in the East Side or over on Robson Street, Denman Street. So, there's lots of clubs.

BK: Yeah, it sounds like there was more gay spaces in some ways.

P: Lots of gay spaces. Yeah. Lots of gay space. There are no real gay spaces now, there's a couple of clubs and that's it. I guess we're trying to make Davie Street a gay space but that's impossible, because we live in a multicultural, multi-faceted community now, so it isn't even relevant. The point is to stay safe, that's why we have safe gay places, is to stay safe. [** difficult to hear through fan sound]

BK: Because, as you kind of alluded to, the homophobia was much more in your face at the time, so you needed these…

P: Oh, there was lots of hatred, you know, hate crimes were common. Common. Oh yeah, so when I came to Van, I was a hustler, and so we stood on the street corner. We were the most obvious people in the world. Standing right on a corner is—yeah, so we would have to fend off we called them fag beaters back then. Now they call it gay bashers. But there was a church, and there was a school on Broughton Street, and most of the boy hustlers stood on Broughton Street and there was a sort of a broken down picket fence, and we would keep those pickets. We'd have to stash them in case the beaters would come by in their cars and we'd have to fight them off, and scare them out of town.

BK: Oh god.

P: Yeah.

BK: So, that sounds like that was a tight-knit community too, the hustlers?

P: Yes, yes. You know. it was such a family really. You know, your moms or dads or grannies or grampas, sisters and brothers. Chosen family. Yeah, we watched out for each other. Occasionally we'd fight each other too.

BK: Like any family.

P: Right? Yeah. But it was safer than many other places. Growing up where I grew up in White Rock, yeah, I was chased home a lot, I'd get bullied a lot. Bullied there, bullied on the street. Sometimes we'd be bullied by the police. Yeah, yeah, definitely bullied by the police. Not so much in Vancouver as much as a lot of other cities, but Vancouver's special. Pretty gentle here compared to most places, but we've [inaudible]—we've faced the same abuse and the same, yeah. For sure. But it's still a good community, it's just a little smaller and lot more spread out now. There's Jim Deva plaza, but that's not a gay space, not a queer space, even though it's got a painted rainbow and it's dedicated to Jim Deva, one of our pillars. But it's still not a gay space. I think it's more of a public drinking and smoking pot space than anything.

BK: Yeah, that sounds accurate. Yeah, there aren't tha many spaces at all that come to mind now.

P: And why is that?

BK: Oh, I don't know. Yeah, maybe part of it's the homophobia's not as intense anymore, so we don't need those spaces as much.

P: Isn't it? I think it's getting—I think it's getting bad again, I don't think it's getting better. I think we're going to enter a new conservative period, actually, it's coming up. Could get quite harsh. That's what I'm seeing coming. For now, we're kind of in a gray area still, it's like, yeah, it's – they don't want to see it. We've been too loud and proud for long enough and they're point of view, conservative people the Christian right, they've had enough of us.

BK: We certainly are seeing that happen south of the border, for example, right now.

P: You know, I think it happens in Canada all the time too, and probably just as often. But it's just not as – you just don't see it in the media, maybe we don't report it as often, I don't know. It happens every day I'm sure. I think kids in school are still being bullied now.

BK: I don't know.

P: I would think so, because there's still parents that are just crazy about it.

BK: Oh yeah.

P: They're not going to change so they raise their kids that way. And they bully someone in school, and that's where it starts.

BK: Well, let's fast forward a couple years, I guess. When did you first hear about HIV?

P: I don't remember the year, but I heard my mom mention something. "Well," she says, "[Name], there's this discovered in the United States, a gay cancer." And I just laughed at her. I was like, yeah right, another ploy to get rid of us, that's probably not true. I just went, yeah. So, that was the first I'd heard of it, but it scared me. It really did. And I don't remember what year that was. Maybe 1984, 1985. Maybe it was even earlier, I don't know, but I mean, I tested positive in 1986. That was it—there was no actual test for many years, that was right, they hadn't actually located the genome. They didn't know it. So yeah, but I had felt that I had it all those years. I've probably been positive since 1984, maybe even earlier. 1986 is when I tested, September, but I knew it. I could feel it, not in my body, but in my soul. Yeah.

BK: Before that, like before you'd been diagnosed and actually gone for a test, were you hearing people talk about it in the community at all too?

P: Yeah, and I had people dying already by that point. People were dying before I got tested. And people died often if I remember correctly. You'd hear about funerals, people I didn't know,

people I knew through friends, best friends, relatives. Yeah. You'd hear people getting thrown out, fired, people's clothes and all their belongings would be out on the street. I'd seen that twice for sure and I'd heard about it too, so it was happening more often. When I knew about it, was like are you serious, you're that afraid? Yeah.

BK: So, it sounds like it started happening very, very quickly. It went from something where your mom was telling you about this gay cancer and you kind of laughed about it, to—

P: It was fast. Yeah, it was. I never thought of it being fast, but I suppose it was. It must've happened overnight because it was just like a blossoming thing that happened. We lost a whole generation. And I survived. There was a few of us, I still have friends and we have been positive the same amount of time. There's only a few of us though, the rest of them died. Yeah. And they died really painful, shameful deaths. Because there was so much shame around it, that was the biggest part was the shame. Especially, you know, from the Christians, and maybe other types of religions but especially the Christians. It was god's revenge, so… I don't believe in god.

BK: How was the community starting to respond in those early years?

P: Apathetically. The only people that did respond were the lesbians. Yeah. They were the caregivers. Again, there's the mother, nurturing. So, it was the lesbians. No one else would have anything to do with it. Even doctors wouldn't have anything to do with it. Wow. Then there was the hazmat suits, and the tents. Then you would—I heard about – oh, what was that kid's name. In the United States. Christ. Very important, hemophiliac. I think there was just a recent series on the television about it. Damn it. Then you would hear about that, then you would—I would get a bit of hoping thinking, oh, maybe it's becoming more accepted, or understood, less feared once it's in the media and talked about. Here's a real person not a homosexual. Yeah. So, it was still, like, a gay sin thing.

BK: So, when there were these other…

P: Yes, well, it still is to this day.

BK: Was the safe sex information, for instance, getting out there at that time?

P: No, it was fear sex that came out at the beginning. Fear sex. So, the only sex was no sex, or safe sex they called it. So, only mutual masturbation, kissing. They didn't—actually, they weren't even sure it was in saliva at the beginning. So, there was no—no, there was no organized help for safe sex in the beginning. Nothing. Just don't have sex.

BK: Which isn't super useful or realistic.

P: It's not realistic. It's not realistic in a society, but especially queers who are really much more promiscuous. Well, maybe not much more, but have had to be. But I think it kind of—I think the leather community got blamed for it, to tell you the truth. They also blamed the fog machine in the discos. They banned poppers because then they thought it was maybe the poppers. You see

where it was what is causing this gay death, cancer, the Kaposi sarcoma the pneumocystis. So yeah, it was the fog machine, it was the poppers.

BK: The gay lifestyle.

P: Then we even started to think that it was in the drugs, that it was in the cocaine or in the MDA. Then it was a plot, so it was – yeah there was—first it was god's plot, then it was a government plot then a secret society plot. Yeah. To exterminate homosexuality.

BK: Wow.

P: Yeah. Well, actually they've—I read something—they've actually found out why people are gay. It actually helps the population growth. The growth of population. Because it—in families there's a gay boy, there's a sister, or there's a gay boy, a straight boy. So, it was somehow worked out that in the family tree, that if one gay—if one was gay it actually helped out the siblings to produce more children. So, in the long run, it's helpful to population. Ironic, isn't it?

BK: Yeah, I hadn't heard that before. It's interesting.

P: Yeah, they've discovered. Or I guess that's—they figured that's why, through their research. The gay gene.

BK: So, you mentioned that the leather community was kind of being blamed for some of this. Was that happening here in Vancouver specifically too?

P: Nope, worldwide. And then they closed the steam baths. That would stop it. Just close the steam baths.

BK: Do you remember that being discussed here in Vancouver?

P: No, it never happened here in Vancouver, it happened in San Francisco, New York. But it didn't happen here. But it didn't stop sex clubs from happening, so what's the point, right?

BK: And we know that in some contexts, like safe sex information was being shared at bathhouses, so they were actually important education spaces.

P: It started—it did eventually pop up, yeah. And it popped up with ACT UP. Yeah, I marched with ACT UP in San Francisco. For sure I was part of ACT UP, not heavily, just a bit. I helped out. Wasn't one of the ones that threw blood or - [laughs] that was amazing. I forgot about the blood throwing. I don't even remember where that was. There was a couple of people in Vancouver—John Kozachenko, yeah, he comes to mind.

BK: He comes to a lot of people's minds, yeah.

P: Poz Cause. Yeah, he's amazing. He used to go on a rampage—he's still on a rampage! He's so political, or anti-political. He's a fun guy. Yeah, so early education. There was no rimming or

fucking without a condom. Oral sex was they didn't know, so they said it's up to you, we don't know. Kissing, probably okay.

BK: So, eventually information started to get out there?

P: I had a boyfriend. All we ever had was safe sex. Yeah. No, no, no, twice we didn't. But he didn't convert. So. That was interesting. He actually broke up with me though because he said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with someone. I was gonna die, right? So yeah, right, I wouldn't be around for his old age. Fucker. But that was pretty mild compared to what people—you know, like they got thrown out of their apartments, they got excommunicated, they got thrown of out families, fired. Yeah.

BK: The stigma was just immense at the time, I imagine?

P: Yeah.

BK: Did that start—because I know you've kind of alluded to that being within the community too, that intense stigma towards HIV positive guys—did that start to change at all over time?

P: You mean in the queer community? The discrimination or fear?

BK: Yeah.

P: Did it go away? No, it hasn't gone away. No, I was just talking to a guy online on an app this morning. He was like, "Oh, I'm ready to get with you." I'm like, "Oh yeah, yeah, great, sure, let's do that." And he says, "Oh, but you're poz! No way, Jesus! Oh my god!" This is his words on the text. I'm like, yeah, yeah, fuck off. So, it's still – no, it hasn't gone away either, there's still a lot of ignorance in the gay community. They need to get more of that "U=U" out there and really campaign it, because it's going to help save peoples. Not their lives but it's going to save their sanity, anyways.

BK: Yeah. That is such an important message to get out there.

P: Yeah. Especially now when you—when you wanna get people on the PrEP if they're gonna be sexually active and barebacking. Someone could tell you they're negative – they could be lying. They could've—the test could've been wrong, there's false positives, there's false negatives. So, damn it. This is brilliant that the PrEP is working. So no, the stigma's here today, not as much, but it's still here. So, I—you know, the guys in our own community who are ignorant to the truth or you know won't educate themselves because they're afraid to even go near the subject, some of them. Yeah.

BK: So, was there support available to you during these early years?

P: AIDS Vancouver, yep. I don't know what year that—see, when I tested positive, AIDS Vancouver was already—already had its foothold in Vancouver. So, that was awesome. I didn't go around at first, because I was kind of scared to sort of be seen going into the building, because

of the stigma. I didn't necessarily want everybody knowing I was positive. So, there was support, there was AIDS Vancouver, and then, what's it called? Meals on Wheels, what hell was that? Vancouver meals project started later on. But still, I was volunteering with AIDS Vancouver. Did it a bit of groceries, peer support, worked at the grocery, bread. Oh yeah, so I did some food delivery.

BK: So, you got pretty involved there?

P: Yeah.

BK: What other kinds of support did they have at AIDS Vancouver besides that? I mean that sounds like a lot already.

P: Tickets! To plays and stuff like that. No, but the food bank was there, there was clothing, there was information. Lots of information, like a library of information on AIDS, so that was good. And yeah, the coffee shop, peer support, nutritional support too. They actually got us advocacy. I mean, that was the big one for me was getting advocacy through AIDS Vancouver to get on full disability. Because back then, everyone went on disability. In the early days. It's like game over, go on disability. And we would get extra money than the usual allowance that they gave to people on welfare. So, there was some dignity there. So yeah, there was support, Vancouver's very good that way, but again it's like I said, it all started from the lesbian community. That's where the support began. It really did.

BK: Yeah, which I've—

P: And grandmas with marijuana cookies.

BK: Really?

P: Yes!

BK: I did not know that.

P: Very important. I forget her name, I wish I could—couldn't really keep it on file anyways I guess, but damn, the marijuana lady. The cookie lady. She's gone now. And that's why compassion clubs and this whole – the whole cannabis dispensary that's flourishing today. it started with that, caring for AIDS patients. Feed them cookies. Yeah. They made us eat, we were wasting. We—I wasn't—people were wasting, so they had to eat, but cannabis made them eat. Who'd a thunk it? It made them feel well, who'd a thunk it, yeah? They just feel better so… Yeah. I use a lot of pot. I mean, I always have but you know, it's so good for us. It really is.

BK: Thinking about that connection between the gay and lesbian communities, were those communities that were working together a lot before HIV?

P: Sure, I mean at dances you know, and in the clubs because again it was a community and we all came together back then. So divided now. It is, isn't it? You know, you got trans community,

you got bear community, you got leather, you got lesbian. Faction after faction. We used to just all party in the same club.

BK: All be sitting next to each other and…?

P: I don't see lesbians anymore. I know lesbians, I see them regularly, but I don't see them in, you know, the club. There's no club. That's kind of a sad thing for me to see go away is the nightclubs. To me, heaven is a nightclub. Oh yeah.

BK: Especially probably back in the seventies or early eighties?

P: Well, the music was great then, but it's better now, I think. A little bit of techno, I'm listening to nowadays, but god damn disco was good.

BK: And the vibrancy of the community at that time, too, right? That would've filtered into the club.

P: And it was new, it was all new, it was just blossoming, you know. The nightclubs, disco. It was amazing.

BK: Did you get involved at all at the PWA Society or Coalition?

P: Uhm, just like AIDS Walks and like I said the grocery delivery, but mind you, that was AIDS Vancouver. People say—it was the same building, PWA Society and AIDS Vancouver. Same building. Just the home deliveries.

BK: And then beyond AIDS Vancouver, like what was your other support like? Did you rely on your chosen family like you said earlier?

P: Oh, okay, well my family was very supportive. I was lucky there too. So, full love and no fear. It was awesome. I lived with my mom. Like I told you, I came out when I was fourteen, I told her first. And then I had to tell her I was HIV positive, and she was like, oh no. Poor girl, she was just so sad. But my mom and dad were split, so I told him sort of later on and he was okay with it too. He wasn't afraid or—I'm lucky, I came from a good, open-minded solid and caring family. Yeah, for sure, lucky there. So, I got support from my family. Doctor. I had Brian Willoughby right from the start, before AIDS. And then he became my—he was pretty much the first AIDS doctor, I think. And I just stuck with him for the whole time. He's like gone now, he's retired. But yeah Spectrum Health still goes on, that was his start. Yeah, so what else kind of support did I have? I think I started to come out and be more open about it. My partner's family accepted me, so yeah, my partner's friends accepted me. So, I got—even though my partner didn't want to be with me forever, we actually stayed together as friends, living together in the same house for many years. So, I had his support too. So, personally, I had a lot of support, yeah, I'm very lucky. I wonder if support had a lot to do with people staying alive, don't you think?

BK: I imagine that must've had something to do with it.

P: Well, if people around you want you to stay alive, yeah, I think that that would only help give us the energy to stay alive. For sure. I remember taking massive doses of vitamin C at one point. Because I'd read that massive doses of vitamin C were really doing the trick, so I was like, ah, like overdosing to the point, yeah. Not good for the bowels. It was supposed to push it to the bowels, so you'd be taking about twenty-thousand milligrams a day.

BK: That sounds like a lot.

P: Yeah, I was taking about twenty-thousand a day. So, I'd take five thousand at a time. Maybe that worked, I don't know. But I had a lot of support [inaudible] vitamin C. Gosh, and I've been really hard on myself too, come to think of it. I've put my body through an awful lot of changes. I've come from drug addiction into sobriety, back to drug addiction. Relapsing and sobriety for many years. So, they're very hard on my body, you know, it's still here.

BK: And what else did you do to look after your health during this period?

P: I don't know… Lots of laughter, just good energy, and I never dwelled on it, I never really thought about it. I think I probably avoided it really at some point. Out of fear, you know, just don't even want to talk about it, it scares me. I could feel uncomfortable. But mostly I think it was my attitude, and the attitude around me. The support I had, and lucky genetics. Yeah.

BK: Did you ever end up getting sick at all or…?

P: You know what, I never started taking any drugs until I was positive, tested in 1986. It was probably earlier I got it, somewhere between '82 and '84 probably. I don't think I took drugs until '99, because until then, my numbers were fine. There was no increase in viral load, when they got the viral load on the info stuff, T-cells would be normal. But then in 1999, they took a dip and there was show- – there was a bit of a viral load and a bit of dip in my helper cells. So, decided to go on drugs, to go on the meds. The meds they had back when I started, they'd already improved, so I [inaudible] saw people take AZT and die and—but I also saw them take AZT and didn't die, so… The first drug I took was AZT. It was a trio, three – it was AZT, 3TC, and nevirapine. So, I took that. Then I was on methadone at some point after that and I started getting heavy withdrawals for some reason. So, it was proved that the nevirapine was expediating the opiate out of my body, so the methadone wasn't working.

BK: Oh god.

P: It was horrible. It was really bad stuff. Thank god I'm off methadone. That's been a few years too. So where was I going with that. Ugh, it wasn't about the methadone was it.

BK: Just about the treatment.

P: What was I just saying?

BK: You were talking about the treatment—

P: The nevirapine. So, the nevirapine, right. The first drug was AZT. It didn't kill me, but it didn't work. So, they put me on another drug. [inaudible] And eventually I got onto the Atripla, this was the one pill. And it, ugh, had a horrible effect, it sort of made me crazy. Like depressed and weird thoughts. Yeah. And it also caused the the virus—the hep c, because I got hep c, so it caused a spike in the numbers.

BK: I didn't know that had that interaction.

P: Yes. Those are pretty mild because there is all kinds of reactions that people would get. Like a humpback, a huge belly, a thickening neck, wasting. Horrible things. And I didn't have to take any of those drugs and go through what those people went through. I actually felt—you know, I would often feel, not guilty, but almost guilty. Like, shouldn't I have gone with the rest of them? Yeah. Felt odd. You don't imagine that, right? Feeling a little odd that you should've gone when somebody died. 10-C, the tenth floor of the hospital, my god, that was a death sent—that was scary as hell. I would visit my friends in there, and they would move from 10-C up to 10-D, and then once they got to 10-D, that was game over. That was their last stay in the hospital before they would die.

BK: It was kind of like hospice care in 10-D or…?

P: More so. It was hospice. Palliative.

BK: So, did you find yourself in like the caregiving role to those friends? I mean, I think visiting them in the hospital is a form of caregiving in a way.

P: One. Yeah. Yeah, he died in 10-D. Well, I would help him at home, and I would help him here, too. But usually just bring him weed here. At home, I would help bring him groceries and visit him when no one else would. I wasn't his only pal, but no one else would visit him. They were afraid of him. Yeah, he was nuts. Like, he literally went nuts in the end because of the drugs and the brain just got so affected from HIV. He just was—lost reality. He really did. Just became nuts. I still loved him. [Name]. Yeah, yeah, he's a good guy. Thought he was a pilot. Yeah. You're just gonna take me on this plane. Yeah. Poor guy. But when was that? You know, that was long time ago and it was—that was 2003 he died. What am I saying, 2003? No, it was 1999, because it was before—it was '99 he died. So weird.

BK: Well, what did that early medical response look like? You talked about the hazmat suits.

P: I would only see that in the news and on TV, I never saw that in the hospital, because I never had to visit anybody at the hospital that—at that point, because that was when no one knew anything. But that scared me, personally, thinking I was going to go through that because I have this disease that leads to that tent in that—and I just thought how scared I'd be and how alone I would be and how unaccepted I would be. I think my fear of being hated by other people was the biggest issue. Yeah, to not be touched or couldn't be in the same space even with someone who was HIV, because what if it was airborne? What if it was in spit? So, it would be in the – you know, someone sneezed. That was scary. I would feel fear that right in my—in my cells this weird kind of a fear that I had about it. I can never explain that. I've never had that fear around

anything else. The fear—like even the – I mean, I know I'm going to die, but the fear of dying from AIDS was the worst death anyone could ever possibly face. Because it was the discrimination, the fear, and the hatred was just this, like pushing you off the edge of a cliff. That's what it felt like. All that stuff was just pushing you closer to the edge. And that it was going to happen to me too. God it was scary. Seriously. So, I guess I could—I can relate to other people's fear too – we're only human. We don't want to get something, go through that. And if we can blame someone else for it, then that's human too. "Oh, it must be the gays." Then the gays blame themselves – "Oh, it must be the leathermen. It's the promiscuous gays, they've caused this." Yeah. That's I think why it was the leather, the leather scene got it the most. Very promiscuous. So they—you know, they probably did spread it, but not knowingly. Yeah. The community's celebrating sex, right? It's like something they love and beauty, an incredible thing. But not with AIDS now. It became shameful. Yeah.

BK: Did some of that fear around spreading the virus, did that diminish as more information became available to you about how it actually is spread?

P: Eventually. But it's still not there today. I don't think the—I think there is enough education out there, you just have to look. It's just people. They can't help themselves, they don't want to look. They have to face themselves. So, in the early days, yeah, there was info, but it was slowly getting out. It really was slowly getting out. I think fear overrode the actual facts, you know, because it just did. Even I—in my soul I knew that AIDS was something that you couldn't get that easily, because it was just something I felt. So, I knew it couldn't be in saliva, so I knew kissing was safe, so I would have what others would probably consider unsafe sex at the time, but I had safe sex for years. Yeah. And I'm not sure how I contract HIV, but I don't think it was sexually. I think I caught it sharing a needle in San Francisco when I was a teenager. So, I was probably eighteen in my guesstimate, because yeah, come San Francisco, yeah, sharing a needle, yeah.

BK: Did you go back and forth a fair bit between San Francisco and Vancouver?

P: Yeah, I used to go to San Francisco, LA, Seattle. But I liked San Francisco.

BK: Because of its vibrant gay scene or…?

P: Yes. Yes. Well, also, I really like the geography. I like the hills, I like the bay. It's a lot like Vancouver in a way. The bay, yeah, it's beautiful. The ocean. Market Street, Polk Street, Castro, for sure.

BK: What are your memories around how the government was responding?

P: The government. Weird you say that because I have no idea what the government thought of it. I don't think the government ever said anything about it as a government. They've never even to this day said anything about it. Except to spread the fear. The media does anyway, that's not the government. So, maybe—government. Nothing from the government. Except in the early days I guess, the government, I say the provincial government. You know, remember I mentioned that they had advocates at AIDS Vancouver getting us benefits from welfare that

people are getting extra for diapers, Imodium, and water and vitamins and we got that through the government. Eventually. But only eventually because they denied every one of us any benefits. Yeah, so not any benefits. They would—if you decided to quit welfare, just live your life on your welfare you could, but that was $325 a month. So, we had to survive, and you can't do that on $325 a month, even then. But back then rent was cheap and stuff like that. So, the government was very—they just looked the other way. So there, that was the government—their reaction, they just looked the other way and said no, no and no. So, we had advocates – again, lesbians fought for us and got our rights and got us extra money. It was called schedule-C. I still have that grandfathered in my disability. Yeah. To this day, and that's how I get my meds paid for. And that's how I got rid of hepatitis C, which I just cleared two years ago now.

BK: Yeah, it's a bit of an intense process isn't it?

P: Well, you can't live with two. You can live with AIDS now, but you can't live with AIDS if you have hep C. So – but I got rid of hep C. Yeah. Sometimes I think I'm one of the luckiest people in the world. Beat HIV, drug addiction, and hep C. Those are huge things to conquer. I am so grateful, man.

BK: No kidding. That's incredible.

P: Yeah.

BK: So, you also mentioned ACT UP a little bit earlier. Do you remember anything like that happening in Vancouver?

P: Yeah. Nothing specifically though – I'm having a mental blank about ACT UP in Vancouver. John Kozachenko. I think he went into like court rooms or something into offices and well, yeah, they would like spray fake blood and protest. Now, I thought that was pretty awesome. I, in my gut, wanted to join them but I was afraid to. Because I didn't want to be out there, yeah? I wasn't that out about being positive, let alone being gay. I was definitely out, but not that out. That was, like, scary out. So, I wasn't going to be acting up except when I went to San Francisco. In San Francisco just marches, yeah, protests. And with—I went in the parade one year with ACT UP. There was two ACT UPS, there was ACT UP Golden Gate and ACT UP San Francisco. One was a bit more hard-core. So yeah ACT UP was awesome, so they did a lot of—so it was lesbians and ACT UP. ACT UP for sure was awesome, in San Francisco and New York. Even Vancouver.

BK: Do you remember what they were advocating for or what they were protesting?

P: Meds. We want medication, we want testing. Testing. It was big on testing. It was big on – yeah, there was no test yet. So, ACT UP was before there was even a test, a genome that they could search. But in Vancouver, I don't know much. I should've asked John before I came over.

BK: It's not a quiz. We're just asking for your perspect—

P: But I would love to—now I need – I know, it's like what the hell did you do John? I can't remember. There's just so much time and so much has happened since them.

BK: We just need to get him in for an interview eventually too.

P: He hasn't come in yet?

BK: No, but we're working on it.

P: I'll tell him about the study then.

BK: We've been in contact but give him a reminder if you want.

P: Ah, a kick in the ass.

BK: Yeah, we'd love to talk to him.

P: No, he's gonna have the stories for you. He's gonna have the stories that you're after. Man, John. Yeah, I'll remind him.

BK: I mean, you have the stories that we're after too. We're looking at…

P: Yeah, but he's got some really fine tuned stories.

BK: Well, we really wanna hear like these more personal stories too.

P: True.

BK: Just trying to see what else I've missed here. Well, we talked about how different the gay community is now—like the queer community—compared to when you were coming out into it in the seventies and the eighties. What role did HIV play in changing that? Do you think it did play a role in changing the way the community is or looks?

P: So, first of all, a generation died. So, there was a lot of money probably, so it would be part of it, so a lot of uhm, pillars in our society that had the gay spaces. So, like there was a lack of population, it sort of dwindled at the same time, so I think that the population, the lack of funding, the lack of funds, I mean. Because a lot of the space holders moved on themselves. So, HIV definitely, definitely had a role in the community's dispersal for sure. First of all, the population. That's what you would first notice. Decline in population. And then just the bars started disappearing very quickly. Did it have anything to do with AIDS that the bars closed though, I don't know. Curious. Maybe because of the population they're—I don't know why bars closed.

BK: A lot of people think that that has something to do with the apps too.

P: But apps weren't—it's not even ten years. The decline in the community was well before that. I'd say the decline in the community was by 198-—by 1990, it was over, for sure. Yeah. There was one, two bars—three, yeah no. It was over by 1999, for sure—or 1990. So, the seventies, eighties were like ra-ra-ra-ra-rah, and then AIDS made it shut up for awhile. It went away, died. Went into different directions too, so I think AIDS actually scattered people in other directions too. People started using drugs. That's actually also what's wrong with the community. And that's more so what's going on now, but I'd say that is a result of HIV.

BK: Yeah, like in what sense?

P: Okay, we've always taken drugs in the gay community. We've always taken coke or MDA or acid or mushrooms or pot and alcohol and partied, whoop, whoop, whoop. But those behaviours just sort of got worse. [inaudible] the health decline was a result of the hatred, fear, and discrimination, also the poverty. So, people use drugs to get over it, to medicate and so that also happened. Yeah. And then there was another surge in HIV because of the drug use, so it became less of a gay populate issue, and it became a straight, drug-users, First Nation, youth. And now it's just dreadful as hell.

BK: Were you still involved with AIDS Vancouver when that transition was happening, from mostly gay men to Indigenous folks and—

P: Yeah, yeah. And it was hard for the gays to see at least. Well, it wasn't mostly hard, but it was—it was sort of the first time you saw gays and really hard-core addicts together in the same house, and that was AIDS Vancouver. Positive Living.

BK: And that caused some—

P: Because at the beginning, it was just gay men. And then all of a sudden drug addicts, women started—and everyone. So, it changed everything again, yeah. Another surge in HIV. It was hard for the gay guys, I know, at first – there was a lot of them complaining.

BK: But eventually that organization was kind of able to incorporate those other groups?

P: In fact, it kind of made it a bigger family, when you really think about it. And more support as a result of it too, more fine-tuning type, you know, speciality support groups. People with concurrent disorders and severe mental health. Mobility issues. So, the family got a lot larger. And then finally PrEP.

BK: Yeah that's amazing, PrEP. And being available for free now.

P: Yeah, yeah, it's inexcusable.

BK: Yeah, that and undetectability, it's changing the way a lot of people think about HIV. To an extreme extent. One hopes.

P: Well, the CDC says it works, then what excuse is there to not be getting on PrEP if you have unsafe sex. Or any sex, with anyone that's not a regular partner, I guess. So. Golly.

BK: So, I think I'm basically out of questions. What advice do you have for, let's say future generations of gay men or maybe people that are newly diagnosed. I realize they are two different groups, but what advice do you have based on your experience as a long-term survivor?

P: Well, I don't want to downplay it, it's a very serious thing, but it just doesn't seem serious with PrEP and the meds we have today anymore. Uhm, what advice do I have who are newly diagnosed you mean?

BK: Sure.

P: Or just anyone who's gay or…?

BK: Maybe we can—I realize they're different groups.

P: Someone newly diagnosed then?

BK: Yeah, let's go with that.

P: Don't hide. Seek the help that you need. That would be it. It's pretty plain and simple, don't hide. Nothing to fear.

BK: I think that's kind of all I have for you in terms of formal questions. Was there anything that you had wanted to bring to this conversation that I didn't ask about or anything you wanted to expand upon?

P: Not really. I hadn't really given it much thought. I thought it was going to be much different than this actually, so I never thought about it. I think you covered everything.

BK: Well then, I'll just leave it there and say thank you. I really appreciate you being here and sharing all of this with us.

P: My pleasure.