"HIV in My Day" – Interview 42

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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 and sharing your story with us today. Just to get started, when did you first get involved in the gay community or start engaging in gay life?

Participant: That was way, way back. Let's see, I was nineteen year old, it was 1963, no 1973, yeah, that's when I moved to Toronto to finish – I was going to college and I stopped college 'cause I had a job offer in Toronto in theatre 'cause I was going to college in arts and literature, and theatre was my love. So, somebody offered me a job in Toronto, so I learned my English there and came out in Toronto, and that was in 1973. I knew right away my first experience, gay experience, I knew right away I was gay.

BK: What did the community look like at the time in Toronto?

P: At the time in Toronto it was pretty underground. I remember some of the bars, and first of all I didn't know what, that there were gay bars, first of all, it was the cast of the play, which was an all-man cast for some reason, and they invited me to a bar and it was very underground. Trying to remember the name of the bar, I know it was on Yonge Street, I am pretty sure it doesn't exist anymore. And then we went upstairs, and I saw all those guys and I said, "Oh okay, where are the girls?" Then I knew at some point what was going on, but even in those days, the guys in the bars, I remember there was no touching or no kissing, it was pretty tame and… But then it is afterwards, when I went back to my place with one of the cast member that we stop in a park and start fooling around and that is what happened. But the bars in Toronto in those days, even the others ones, I always felt uncomfortable going to the bars because I felt, well, being a young man, I remember what I felt, particularly in one of the bars called the St. Charles.

BK: Mhm.

P: You know that place?

BK: It has come up a few times.

P: I felt like I was in a meat market, you would walk through, and everybody would have eyes on you and like I just felt so uncomfortable. I was only nineteen, twenty, I was getting into my twenties and I really felt uncomfortable in that environment, so I never really liked the gay bars in Toronto at that time. I didn't stay there very long, only two years, two summers, 'cause the plays we did, like I was doing one and I had a break and then I had to find some work and another play would come along and then I decided to finish my college so I came back to Quebec and finished my college in theatre.

BK: Did you connect with the gay community there as well?

P: In Montreal?

BK: Yeah.

P: Not really because I wasn't really sure if I was gay, and I didn't want to tell my parents or my family, so I didn't really come out till maybe two years after I moved to Montreal. It was about 19-… the Olympics was 1976, so I think it was 1978, finally I came out, not to my parents or my family but I came out. I found myself a boyfriend, he was out to his family, so I would spend some time with his family. We would do a lot of things together – we would hold hands in the streets, even in those days in the '80s or late '70s, and I connected more with the community because he and I were doing stuff together like going out to bars and dance, so I connected more with the community. There was a lot of fun places in Montreal and also it was the days of protests, gay rights and so on, that was starting in Montreal. And I remember some of the raids in the bars that I used to go, I remember the protests at – what was it called? And lots of arrests, friends that got arrested there. That was part in Montreal, but again, I didn't stay there very long because I finished my college and didn't pursue theatre, because I got employed by [company]. I don't know if you want to know the story of [company], but in high school, you get career talks at the end of the year and a lot of people come over and talk about their career and if it interests you, and I remember the flight attendant coming over and I remember thinking, oh that is what I want to do. And I never thought of it until I saw ad in 1980 asking for [company] interviews for flight attendants, so I applied, got the interview, and got hired, and that is what moved me out west. So, Montreal I stayed, I came out, I stayed two years in Toronto, three years in Montreal, and then I got hired by [company], and I moved to Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver.

BK: Gradually moving west.

P: It was not by choice, because Winnipeg, on the course it was bilingual students and unilingual English students. All the bilingual were going to Winnipeg, we couldn't go to Montreal even if we wanted. All the bilingual in Winnipeg and the unilinguals in Calgary, so that is where they decide to place us, you didn't have a choice. And so after six months in Winnipeg and the winter there I said, no way, I can't stand to be here, so I put a transfer in Calgary 'cause I knew some people from Calgary, friends. I tried to go to Montreal and couldn't, so I moved to Calgary and stayed there three years, and then that was a big change in my life actually, because I became more active in the gay community at that time, when I start dating someone. I was commuting from Calgary to Vancouver, because I got laid off from [company] so I came to Vancouver to work with a friend in Vancouver, and that is when I got more involved because he was a DJ in a bar, and I would follow him and help him and do some DJ stuff for him. And I met my longest time partner, we were together for seven years and I met him in Vancouver, and that is when I got re-hired. I had to go back to Calgary and – but since we were madly in love, I would come back every weekend here. So that is when I really got – and I remember the first place I went to in Vancouver was Little Sister's, and I couldn't believe the welcome, yeah I felt welcome right away. And it was Jim Deva that was there, that is why Jim, not a friend, but a long time person I have known. But I remember going to Sister's and I was a little bit shy because I had never been to a store of that kind and Jim made me feel comfortable, safe – "If you have any questions, ask," things to do and stuff. Jim was very good. Do you want to know more about Winnipeg or Montreal?

BK: I think we are mostly interested in hearing your story as you tell it.

P: So, that is in the early '80s. I am trying to see if I am missing anything in Montreal. There was my first love, and I remember the protests and going out a lot because Montreal had a lot of bars in those days, but it was still underground but not – it was becoming, people were starting to come out because of those protests and drag queens and so on, and it was starting to come out a bit more in Montreal. Winnipeg, not much happened there – yeah, not much happened there. I spent a beautiful summer but when the winter came, I just wanted to get out of there, but the beaches in Winnipeg are beautiful, that is what I remember. And as far as I know there wasn't any gay life in Winnipeg – no, I think there was a bath in Winnipeg if I remember, which I have never been, but I believe it was and that is all they had – no bars or… And so, Calgary, I met a lot of friends which I'm still in touch with, had an affair for a long time with a straight man that was working with me. Not much happened there either. The bars in Calgary, they were fun, but there was not many, maybe three or four. When we go further, apparently something happened in Calgary that I just found out about three years ago. There is a man I have met three years ago with that I fell in love but it was no possibility because he has had a partner for twenty years, but he almost moved to Vancouver to be with me, and when he broke it up, that really hurt me. And apparently he remembers me from Calgary.

BK: Small world.

P: Apparently, we cruised each other – that was working a lot in Calgary, because that is where we met. Do you know Calgary?

BK: Not well.

P: There was a shopping centre downtown, it was Eaton's and it was the Devonian Garden, it was covered, and there was a lot of cruising there. It was unbelievable, the washroom were always busy, busy, busy. Apparently, that is where we would have met, I was cruising at the Devonian Garden, but I didn't remember – that is a little aside.

BK: It is an interesting aside.

P: That was Calgary. Then I came to Vancouver to work with my friend. He was working at a bar called John Barley's, and that was a lot of fun, that is where I met my ex – I was almost going to say his name, I don't want to say his name. We had some great times 'cause it was the time of poppers, and dancing and getting wild, drugs and so on, and party late and that was in '83, '84, '85, and so on. Then, I commuted for about six months before I got my final transfer to Vancouver. We lived separately though, we never lived together, but we lived two blocks apart, so it was easy spending time with him or him with me. That is it.

BK: What did Vancouver's gay community look like in those days?

P: It was a lot more fun than it is these days. When I moved here, and even before I moved here, I remember I was having stop-overs in Vancouver, I would come to party, The Central – yeah,

The Central, I think. And well, everybody was going to The Royal and then going to The Central after and then after that the Gandy Dancer or the Play Pen South. I mean there was a lot of bars, there was at least a dozen bars in those days, and people were a lot of fun, people were outgoing. So, I remember meeting a lot of people, and through my ex also, 'cause he knew a lot of people here in Vancouver, and so did his friends and because I was with the bar scene from John Barley's, my friend being a DJ there, so I got to be introduced to a lot of the bar owners. So, I knew a lot of people in the bar community and so, no it was a lot of fun, it was a good time. A lot more bars than there is now and all the bars were a lot of fun. I found out the bar – maybe because I am getting older, but even that… sometimes I go to bars outside Vancouver and they are a lot more fun than here. Here, I find people very impersonal and cliquey, and it is hard to – as if you travel, I like to travel in Europe, and over there it is so easy to meet people, but compared to here, not so much, so… But in those days, I have to say in the early '80s, the bars were a lot of fun. And then I guess with the AIDS epidemic that started, it started going down because then some of people I knew, or have met, started dying and we were all wondering what happened to such and such. "Oh, he died?" Oh. So, they were – I wouldn't say dropping like flies, but a lot of people we knew, me and my ex, were passing away, so that made a difference, and the bars were not as fun after that. But we still keep going because both him and I loved dancing, loved going out, so we would go out most of the time on the weekend. Sometimes we had parties at home, and yeah that is about it. So, I would say until the mid '80s but then it started declining and it got worse in the '90s, much worse. Bars started closing, people wouldn't go out.

BK: Do you remember when you first heard about HIV or AIDS?

P: It was in the mid '80s when some people were dying and we didn't know what they died of, and then we found out it was AIDS. So, I'd say probably in the mid '80s, '84 probably, a year after I met my ex. And also I heard later that – I don't know if you know the story of Patient Zero?

BK: Yeah.

P: Well, he was [a company] flight attendant. I had never flown with him, and I inquired with [company], you know, who was he, so that is about when I heard. And I think I found out about him in '86, '87, I think, so I knew a little bit more about AIDS after that. I knew more also because my doctor and actually that was an interesting point, because when he diagnosed me in '89, he thought I would have been infected in '85, but he never asked me to get tested and that's – but he said I could have had the symptoms much earlier on. So, I said, oh, okay, but then in '89 I am the one who decided to have the test and then I got diagnosed and I decided to because I start feeling myself – like you know, there was something wrong with my body. And not only that, my ex and I were not monogamous, so we have had threesomes and he had some sex, I had some sex on the side, and himself on his side. So, I thought it would be a good idea to get tested and got tested and tested positive. So, it is funny because it didn't hit me that hard, because for me, life, we are all born to die, so I said okay, I will die someday, and so if it is that, it is that, and if it is something else, it is something else. So, for me the death really didn't – dying didn't really hit me, but it was to tell people and tell my partner at that time. I said, oh god, how am I

going to tell him? And it was just before Christmas, it was November – oh, what a bad time to tell everyone. I didn't want to hide it, because actually my family…

Well, I will just go back a bit. My family, I finally told then I was gay. My parents passed away, my mom in 1981 and my dad a couple years earlier. So, I think I told my family a few years after that, I think after I moved to Vancouver and had a partner, I had to let them know – I have a partner and we are having sex. So, I told the rest of my family, and I have a big family, I have three brothers and eight sisters. So, I told them all, and that was just before Christmas, which was not a good idea to tell them just before Christmas, but I couldn't hide it. I had to let them know what was going on and I told my partner, and my partner was quite devastated, but he got tested and he was tested negative, and he is still negative to this day. I have always hated him for that. I keep telling him I hate you for that, not being positive, but I tell him that as a joke – he knows that. We are good friends now, very good friends, but it was kind of funny that he was not, and he has had unprotected sex, we had unprotected sex for many years and he was still negative. That was the hardest part, the fact that I knew that I had been diagnosed with HIV did not bother me too much. Like I said, for me, death will come one day or another, and if that is my path to die of AIDS, I will die of AIDS, and if not, I will die of a heart attack or get hit by a bus – who knows how people go? So, that didn't bother me, it was telling people that. And then my employer also, because I knew if I don't tell my employer and I was feeling sick, and I started feeling sick in the early '90s – '92, '93 – yeah, I stopped working in '94, I took a leave of absence because I started feeling sick. And you can't hide, also, your employer, when you take so many days off, going for tests or doctor's appointments, and not feeling good to go to work… And the job I was doing was not an easy job, it was a hard job, so that was the hardest part for me to tell people, my ex, my family, my friends also, and my employer. For me it is very important that they know because I came out to everyone in the mid '80s when I had my relationship. I told everybody at work knew. First of all, when I told, them they were surprised. "You are gay?" Yeah.

BK: When you told them that you were HIV positive, that was fine, at work?

P: It was fine at work. Actually, my supervisor, she was very understanding. She was the one who suggested to me, "[Name], you should take a leave of absence. Take care of your health and you can come back when you are ready." I guess she must have seen – and it is funny because I didn't know any other employees, now I do – employees that were HIV positive, I was not the only one. So, she must have seen some others that were HIV positive, so my supervisor was very understanding. She was the one who suggested I take a sick leave. I did in '94, and took care of my health. It worked for a while but then in the late '90s I started getting really sick, but then I was lucky to have good doctors around me and finding the good medication for me. One of them was Dr. Montaner, and my previous doctor, he doesn't practice any more. My employer, no problem, I didn't have any problem going on disability, it was okay.

BK: Telling your friends was an okay process as well? There must have been a lot of stigma at the time.

P: Yes, and no, not from my friends. It was really, after I told – the first person I told was my ex and then I told all my family, all eleven of them. And my friends after that, it didn't seem that

hard to know. I mean I don't have, I didn't scream it to everyone, but I had very few friends, and some are in Montreal and some in Calgary, and I told them and they seemed to be okay with it. They didn't seem to have any stigma about it, they understood, and I didn't have any problems with friends actually. My friends were very understanding, it is kind of nice. That is when you see you have true friends, but I am trying to think of any of my friends who had a problem with it. Even straight friends, girls – I used to live with a girl in Calgary, even her, and we were close, she had no problem, she understood and gave me a hug and said, "Take care of yourself." And we kept in touch, still do. I am trying to see any friends that I have told, I can't see anyone who had any problem with it, which was not the case… My ex, he is okay, he was sad, but we broke up a year after, so it wasn't working anymore. And then my family, well my family is another story. I consider myself an orphan, like no family at all because my sisters and brothers, out of twelve kids I am the only one who is gay and I don't think they ever understood me being gay – still, some don't. Even the in-laws, like husbands of sisters and so on, and they still make jokes, so they have never understood. When I told them I was positive, their attitude changed a bit. Some of them came to see me here in Vancouver when I was sick in the late '90s – I was hospitalized for a while at St. Paul's and they came over and they were a little more understanding at that time, but they still never accepted my lifestyle and being gay. They still thought it was something wrong and something that would pass. It won't pass, I am forty. Anyway – but yeah, my family didn't take it as good. I don't keep in touch with them anymore, not much.

BK: That is challenging.

P: Well, that is what happens in big family. I think I would have, if my mom would still be living, I probably would have told her and she would have been accepting. Actually, there was – I think my mom knew, and my dad apparently – oh god, my family is such a… I don't know if I want to go there. I think my mom knew because there was a time when I was in Toronto during that all-male cast, after that, one of the guys was from Quebec and he was playing in Toronto, he came back and I said, oh, I will come and visit my parents. And so, we came over and, so he stayed one night at our place, and my mom offered us the bedroom, the double bed. I said, "No, [name] can sleep in my bed. I will sleep on the couch." And she said, "No, no, no, sleep in the bed." And I said, "No, I don't think so." And him and I were not having anything together, but I thought she knew something or she felt something. And my mom and dad were not – after twelve kids – actually my mom had fourteen kids, she lost two. After fourteen kids, my mom and dad separated and my dad was seeing another woman, and during that time that he was seeing that woman – herself, she had a son and a daughter. Her daughter was a lesbian, her son was married, but I slept with her son in Montreal, we met on the street and he came over to my place – that is a long story. So, and my dad apparently, when my dad passed away and I met that woman, 'cause I wanted to meet her because I was curious about her son, too, I asked her did my dad know. She said, "Yeah, your dad knew," and she said, "He would have loved you," because he loved her daughter that was lesbian, he loved her dearly. So, I think my parents knew about me, probably because I was the one different in the family, but I think my mom and dad would have been more acceptable, than my brothers and sisters. Anyway, I don't know why I started talking about that.

BK: Some of these side stories are always interesting.

P: Reminisce.

BK: Yeah. Before you got diagnosed were you starting to encounter more information about HIV?

P: Not really, actually – a little bit, but not much. There was not much. Everything we, everything I heard, was mostly on the news, and from the community but not so much, there was not much information out in the mid '80s, it started later. I am trying to remember, the first vigil, I think it started after that first vigil. There was a first vigil organized, and I remember going to it – that is before I was diagnosed, and going to it and information seemed to come out after that. Like, there was more information out there and I think that is when AIDS Vancouver started or Positive Living, those are the years that those organizations started, but otherwise there wasn't much information going out. And I was mostly watching it from the US, because I have friends in San Francisco and LA, so I would get information from them, but not here in Vancouver. I can't remember much information coming out here in the mid '80s, probably started in the late '80s that we start seeing pamphlets and so on. And I can't even remember when condom boxes started to appear, I can't remember. But it is funny because in the mid '80s, which was surprising, the bathhouse in San Francisco – and not only in San Francisco, but in LA and NY – all closed but here they stayed open. And even then I can't remember, I have never been a big bathhouse person, but I can't even remember having information in the bathhouse, which is different now. You get all kinds of information now, not only on HIV but on drugs and so on, which is good, but I can't remember in those days.

BK: Were people talking about safe sex at all?

P: I wasn't, no – I can't remember. I wasn't talking about safe sex because me and my partner never did and if we had affairs, or threesomes, we never did have condoms, and that was in the mid '80s, late '80s. And here in Vancouver, I don't think – like I said, I can't remember, I am really trying hard to remember if condom boxes were in the bars in those days, but I don't think they were, so people were not talking about safe sex, and people were still practicing unprotected sex. Yeah, I think the safe sex came later, like in the '90s, but not in the '80s. In the '80s, I don't think so, I can't remember hearing about safe sex advertisements, or in the '80s, I can't – I'm not sure, it might have but I can't remember. For me, it was not – safe sex was not something on my – how would I say this nicely…

BK: You don't have to say it nicely.

P: Well, it was not on my agenda, safe sex, because for me… yeah. And having a partner, even if we were not monogamous. And we both agreed, also, that's what we want to do.

BK: Well, I think in order for safe sex, that idea to be getting out there, information would have to be getting out there, so if you weren't aware of much information or didn't see much information coming out, then how would you even know about it?

P: I think I started seeing it in the early ‘90s, and even that – yeah, because I broke up with my ex in 1989, the year after I found out, a year-and-a-half – ’90, ’91, around there. Then I was having – yeah, I was starting to have safe sex, so using condoms, so that’s why… Like I said, it might have started in the late ‘80s, but I was not aware and I was not, you know, looking at those because for me it was not on my mind, because being in a relationship. But in the early ‘90s, I remember the safe sex advertisements and so on.

BK: You mentioned the candlelight vigil. Were you aware of any community responses that were going on in those earlier years, in the ‘80s?

P: Early ‘80s, no. Not early ‘80s. Like I said, probably in the late ‘80s, mid to late ‘80s, and I can’t remember if it was the first candlelight, but it was the first time I went, ‘cause our friends were starting, like I said, to die left and right, and not only me but my ex, so we decide to go to a vigil, and it was in the late ‘80s. Yeah, communities were there but… yeah.

BK: So, following your diagnosis, did you start to connect with some of the organizations that were around?

P: Yeah, well as soon as I stopped working, then I had all the time and I was feeling good, so I decided to volunteer and connect with AIDS Vancouver, Positive Living, there was meals on wheels – well, it was Loving Spoonful – yeah, all those organizations. And I started getting more involved with the community, you know, like gay pride – what else was there? There was all kinds of stuff. Out on Screen, you know, all kinds of things, so I was always involved in something and trying to find the most information I could get. Yeah, after my diagnosis and when I started my disability, then I started connecting a lot more with the community and the organizations. I’m trying to see if I forget any, but probably I do.

BK: What kind of work were those organizations doing at the time?

P: Volunteering, just helping people around, and actually I stopped volunteering at Positive Living because I was tired of the abuse I was getting from other people like me coming to us for services. They were screaming at you and calling you names, and so on, and I said to myself, why do I have to listen to that when I’m in the same boat as they are and trying to help them? I said, I don’t need that. That’s when I stopped and that was two or three years – three years after, so I stopped volunteering, but I kept myself in touch with the organization, but it was nothing peer-oriented, it was just helping around at either reception or whatever. Actually, the first one was a fun one at a group… Yeah, now I remember, I had a nice group of people – can’t remember the office now – and we were doing – what was it called? Oh yeah, that’s what people were screaming at us, because we were giving meal vouchers, handing out meal vouchers, so you had to have so many hours before you could get a voucher, and some people were coming and just… If you didn’t write your hours, sorry, but you can’t… Yeah, I remember those days, but anyway, that’s passed.

BK: And AIDS Vancouver, what were they doing at the time?

P: AIDS Vancouver was mainly awareness, so I was just helping there in the library and connecting with them, so it was very little – yeah, very little I was doing there. It was mainly at Positive Living, but AIDS Vancouver was the awareness, the flyers, helping distribute the flyers, or help them passing them around, putting them in the bars, and the condoms, and so on – so, stuff like that. Because again, like I said earlier, I knew a lot of the bar owners, they knew me, so I was a good ambassador. Like, I knew them so they knew me, we could talk, and often they would end up also maybe giving donations. So, it was fun, so I did that for three years, Pos-… It was that building on Seymour that Positive Living and AIDS Vancouver were together, but it was mainly Positive Living. AIDS Vancouver was just outreach, mainly.

BK: It sounds like you certainly kept busy – Loving Spoonful too.

P: Yeah, I did. And like I said, I joined Out on Screens, so I was going to movies. Yeah, I was doing a sports – I joined a sports league, softball, and I was very involved with fundraising for them, and the fundraising was always also going towards HIV/AIDS programs, so that was a lot of fun. In those days, I was very involved. I had a lot more time and I was not travelling as much, so I was more at home, and I need to keep myself busy – I've always been a busy person, so I can't sit at home and do nothing – I have to do something. And then I went back recently to Positive Living and left again after three or four years, because of some disagreement with staff there, but anyway.

BK: I imagine the organization changed a lot, hey?

P: It has changed a lot. For me, Positive Living and AIDS Vancouver, it needs – what I find, personally, is that some of the old people like me, they need to go. Those organizations need some fresh blood, fresh ideas, young people, that's my personal opinion. I mean, they're the ones now who need to take care of – you know, it's not me that has to dictate what to do, and some of the ideas are not – some of the ideas for me are archaic. I had a lot of disagreement with what I was doing and other things that were organized. Like, for me, the AIDS Walk is no longer relevant. We have to find something other than an AIDS Walk – people don't walk anymore. People roller blade or the skateboard or they bike, so AIDS Walk is passe and they need to have something else. And I don't know, just get some young people and get some ideas out. But I find the old guard needs to go at those organizations, but that's my personal opinion, but I don't think I'm the only one. I've talked to other people about it and they feel the same way. And maybe that's why the young people are not interested in going to those organizations because it's too old, too passe, too – so they don't want to get involved with those organizations. I don't know. What do you think?

BK: That's a loaded question.

P: Are you involved in those organizations?

BK: I'm not, no.

P: But you're doing something else. But for me, it was time to move from there. I think I had done my work in the community and then I was – like I said, I got more involved in sports with

softball and fundraising, and Out on Screens, starting to be a donor, things like that. And then I started travelling, because I was still having benefits, travelling benefits, so I started travelling also. But then I got sick in the late '90s and I got hospitalized, so that kind of changed my whole perspective, but '98 is not in the…

BK: We can definitely talk about it anyways. It sounds like it's part of your story.

P: Well, it's part of my story because I had never been hospitalized and I was really sick. They thought I would be dying, that's why family came over, some of my family – three of my sisters came over, because I was in St. Paul's for a month, I was in – how do you say that? I was in isolation so nobody could come to see me, until I was able to finally get visitors and be able to walk, because I had lost complete movement, and they did not know what was wrong with me. But finally, Dr. Montaner and my ex-doctor, Dr. Maynard, they were both great doctors, they were able to find me a good combination. It took Montaner two or three times to find out what would work for me and get me back on the track. But yeah, it was a tough experience. I can't remember much of that month. I remember a little bit after, 'cause that's when my sister came over, 'cause I was in a wheelchair, I couldn't walk for a while, and I can remember her pushing me, and I hated it. Every time I'd hit a bump on the sidewalk, you know, it would hurt. Then I was walking with a walker for a while, and then a cane for a year, but then everything got back in the early 2000 and then my medication started working well, Montaner changed it again to another medication. I've been on the same medication now since 2004, which has been a long time and it's working well. He's made a few minor changes to it over the years, but now I'm fine and healthy again. So, I think I owe a lot to my two doctors. Montaner I see – you probably know Dr. Julio.

BK: Not really.

P: You've heard?

BK: Yes.

P: To me, he's a god. I know a lot of people don't like him, but to me, I think he saved my life and I remember seeing him so many times, and being so comforting and so caring. And same with my family doctor. Not often a family doctor will come to see you in the hospital and my family doctor came to see me a few times, so I was in good care. And I was lucky also that I knew a nurse at St. Paul's who took care of me personally – he was a friend of mine and a nurse at St. Paul's, so I had very good care. So, that was pretty good. And again, my friends were very supportive after I was sick, but I had lost a lot of weight, I was totally changed and weak. But then, look at me now – I'm fine. I'm more active also then – well, I wouldn't say as active as I used to be, because now I've got a lot of aches and pains as I'm getting older, but no, it hasn't changed my lifestyle. Like I said, I've always been an active person, and the medication's working well for me. I'd love to have an easier medication regiment, but there's none for me because for someone who's been – and I don't know if you've heard that – but someone who's been on medication for so long… Like, I started medication – actually yeah, I started medication in 1992 with AZT only and did that for three years, and then went to – I can't remember – I think

it was DDA or DDI, I can't remember, those drugs are gone. I mean, they're not gone, but you don't do them anymore. So, you know, I was lucky to get a good combination with the doctor.

I was going to say something else – I'll say it. To me it's – you know, with all the friends that have passed away, and I've had people I've dated, actually three I've dated have passed away. I said to you earlier, for me death is nobody chooses the time you go – I've always believed that. I had – how can I say that? I'm not – I was born Catholic but I'm not religious. I believe in a god or something exists. To me, life, you're born to die, so in the meantime, you have to do the best you can, and to me it's to help others and help yourself. Help yourself first and help others. In that period of time, you don't choose or you don't decide yourself when you die. And I know now with assisted suicide, people choose to die, but for me it's… it's not your decision – if you're going to go, you're going to go. And when I think some of my friends that died young and so on, well it's their time to go. I never did let it affect me and that's why I'm probably a survivor – I think I'm a survivor because I never let it affect me so much, because I know how death can really – the grieving process and so on. And for me, it's always been like quick – okay, pass away, have a celebration of life or a memorial, and then life goes on. So, I tried not to dwell so much on things like that. For example, I'll take my ex who's long passed away a couple years ago, well, he's still effected by it. And I keep telling him, it was her time. She was sick and you had a good time with her, and he said yes, and I said, "Be happy that she's gone and you're left to remember all the things she brought you."

So, that's how I think I've been a survivor is to not let death… Even my parents, you know, when they passed away, I remember and I thank them today for everything that they gave me. Born, being gay – I'm happy to be gay, I'm glad, there's no other life I would have chosen, it's me, and so on and so on. So, when they passed away, for me, it was – especially my mom, I was very close with my mom. It was hard but I said I'm really thankful of what they've given me, what they've gone through also to get me to where I am, because both of my parents worked hard in their life to raise twelve kids, and I've always been appreciative of that. And my mom, to have had fourteen pregnancies, oh my god, that's hard on a woman. I've never had a baby, but I'm sure it's hard on a woman to have a pregnancy and to have fourteen of them one after the other, oh my god, Mom was very courageous. So, I've always been appreciative that I've been born, and that's why when they died I was thankful of what they gave me. I said, it's good, it's their time to go, even if they died very young. I would have liked to spend more time, and it's the same with the friends that passed away. I would have loved to spend more time, I think about them often – I think about them very often actually, even today, and I say, oh god, it would be nice if so-and-so would be here, it would be nice if so-and-so would be here, but they're gone. So, that's the hard part, but I don't – I try not to dwell because I have to keep on going, my life needs to keep on going.

And what they gave me, no matter if it's my parents or my friends, whatever they brought me made me who I am today, which I think is a good person. I'm not sure, but I consider myself a good person and if somebody doesn't, well, too bad. No, that's why death for me has always been something that – it has to be – you have to move on, it has to be something that will bring you life. You're born to die and then you give life to others, so that's how I take it. So, it's never – the death of my friends has never really affected me, but it was hard to see everyone dying, it was hard because I said how come I'm still alive? Again, I kept on saying, well, it's not my time

and I have to go on and move on to other things and help others, and in the meantime, like when I say helping others, I've done a lot of reach out. That again, we're not talking about the early '90s but in the 2000s I was an instructor for tai chi, so I took tai chi too, and so people would – for better health and so on. And then I went back to Positive Living, all kinds of – and the YMCA, the healthy heart program, helping others doing exercise, getting a better life and so on. So, I've always tried to help others, which has helped me dealing with all that stuff. Am I talking too much?

BK: No, the whole goal is to get you to talk a lot. Certainly, other people's stories, it was easy to – there's just so much loss and so much death that it really brought a lot of people down.

P: Like, I said – you said for other people there was a lot of death. In the mid-'80s, especially late '80s, early '90s, to the mid-'90s, they were falling left and right. Yeah, it was pretty bad. But it's never really put me down. I've always said life goes on, but for others, yeah, it could have been hard. For me it wasn't really hard.

BK: What were the responses from the mainstream, so outside of the gay community, what did the responses to the epidemic look like if you remember any of that?

P: I can't remember really. I can't remember really what was the response from the larger – no, I can't. I don't think I've ever paid attention. I'm trying to remember if there was anything that was, but nothing really… And here in Vancouver, I don't think it – I don't think it was a big stigma here in Vancouver compared to other cities maybe, like maybe in the States. But here in Vancouver, I can't remember any – no stigma from the general public or media or… I'm trying hard to remember and I can't remember.

BK: So, your impression is that maybe there was less fear or less homophobia than in some other contexts?

P: Yeah, I think so. And Vancouver's always been a more liberal city than any other city I've known, except in Europe. But in Canada and the US, Vancouver is probably the most liberal, even more than Montreal. Montreal is becoming – well, now Montreal is becoming very conservative, so conservative it's not funny. But anyway, that's politics. But Vancouver's always fine – I don't know, maybe it's a hippy, the West Coast, CP movement in the '70s, and I've always found Vancouver very relaxing, very open-minded. I've never had any problem here in Vancouver. And I guess in those days, there was so many bars – I think there was a dozen bars to go to and the gay life was more… I've never seen any problems. Like I said, I can't remember about the media or the general public commenting on the AIDS epidemic or – yeah, I can't remember that.

BK: Do you have any recollections of how the government was responding?

P: Yeah – well, some of it, yeah. They were not supportive at first and then it was hard for the organizations, like Positive Living and AIDS Vancouver, I think it was hard to get money from them and it was hard to get medication approved, and even up to this day… Well, not so much, but you know, it's a very slow process when they have to approve drugs and sometimes it's a

matter of life and death, so maybe that's why so many people died – I don't know. Maybe there were some drugs that would have – I don't know about that one. Yeah, I wouldn't say the – I'm trying to remember who was in power in those days, in the '80s and I can't remember – '80s and '90s. Yeah, I can't remember, because it would depend if the power was on the left or on the right, and I can't remember who was. If they would have been on the left, they would have been a little bit more responsive than if they were more conservative, but I can't remember who was in power in those days. But as far as – I mean, I know that there were a lot of protests. I never participated in any government protests. I know that there was some, but I can't remember participating in any of those protests. And I remember the ACT UP movement starting, but that – that was not – well, it was government but it was also the big pharmaceutical companies, and government, to do more. Yeah, that's the only thing I remember as far as government or… yeah, not much more.

BK: Great, thank you. And medical responses? I guess your first interaction with the medical response was probably when you were diagnosed or were you engaging with or aware of what was going on with healthcare and HIV in those earlier days.

P: In the earlier days, no, but when I got diagnosed, yes. My doctor informed me a lot and that's when I started getting more information and the information was available, and like I said, in those days being with my partner, like for me, safe sex was not on the agenda. But yeah, for me, the medical… the medical community has been tremendous for me personally and to a lot of my friends actually later on in the mid-'80s or late '80s. Here, we were very lucky in Vancouver to have the BC Centre for Excellence and I think it made a big difference. Like I said, Montaner probably saved my life. As far as I remember, when I was hospitalized the staff was great, but then I had kind of a private nurse who was my friend, and I had good care. No, I think the medical service here has been tremendous, and like I said, we're lucky we have the BC Centre for Excellence. And I remember even those days when I was seeing people in the old palliative care wing which was in the old building – I've seen so many friends die – even the staff there was just unbelievable, and there was a lot of volunteers, also. I remember a lot of volunteers spending hours there. So, no, I think the medical service, yeah, it was great. I think it's still great.

BK: It certainly seems to be on the cutting edge of research advances still, Vancouver.

P: Yeah, exactly. Like, I said, we're lucky to have the BC Centre for Excellence, and I think a lot of – how can I say that? A lot of things started here in Vancouver, like research and so on and so on, and it's still going on – like, you guys are still doing research and it's still great. So, I think you need that. Yeah, I think the medical services has been great here. And I don't know what it was in the early '80s, but even in the late '80s when I was seeing friends, and the early '90s, I was seeing friends, even the medical staff there when I would go and see, the medical staff were tremendous. I've never seen anybody – they were not stigmatized, they were just caring. It was good to see. Yeah, lucky. We have good services – underpaid but…

BK: How has the meaning of HIV or your perspective on HIV changed over time, looking towards the present?

P: Well, it changed – the only way it changed is – and it's funny, you only mentioned HIV, 'cause there's HIV positive and HIV negative, and now it's – there's a term undetectable and all kinds of stuff. So, for me it has changed, and nobody talks about AIDS anymore, so you're HIV and that's it. Myself, now I just, when people ask me about it, I say I'm HIV, but I don't say positive or negative, I just say HIV undetectable when people ask me. So, it is different from those days, and like I said, in those days it was AIDS – I don't think HIV was not much in our vocabulary, it was mainly AIDS in those days. And then when the medications started, we got HIV positive, then negative, and now there's so many terms. But yeah, it has changed. So, now I'm considering myself HIV undetectable.

BK: Which is in a lot of ways pretty amazing, undetectability and all that.

P: Yeah. I mean, I decide to do undetectable for one reason because over – after my hospitalization in '98, and then after Montaner – so, I think it was 2002 or 2004 when I started that – 2004 when I started that new medication. There have been some blips – you know what blips are, right? So, you become detectable, but just at the border. And my family doctor now, she says, "Don't worry, it's not even worth mentioning." But I'm still considered positive, detectable, and Montaner would say the opposite, but my family doctor said, oh, don't worry. That's why I decide if my blood test comes positive, I'll say I'm detectable, and then undetectable, so I don't say positive-negative anymore, I don't like for some reason positive and negative. So, most of the time I'm undetectable, like I think I've had blips twice or three times, and the last one was recently, about a year ago.

BK: Another larger question here: how do you think the epidemic changed the community here in Vancouver if it did at all?

P: Hm, that's a good question – it's a loaded question… I don't know. At some point, I thought that the epidemic separated the community – HIV negative, HIV positive. And that's what I thought for a long time – there was a lot of rejection from one another. And then I start realizing, well okay, we all have – how do you say that? We are all allowed to choose, right? So, you cannot put someone down because of his choice or his preference, saying physically a person would like dark hair or blonde, or tall or short – it's their choice, right? So, when I saw that, because at first, I thought that's rejection – you know, why are you rejecting me because I'm positive? Then I said, uh, it's your choice, I have to accept that. So then, personally, it didn't bother me so much, but I think there was two times – like positive and negative and there was some rejection. I'm not sure if it did exist or not, but today, I don't see it. Well, it's funny, now we have PrEP and we have PEP, and so on, and people are undetectable, so maybe not so much today, but in those days – I would say mid-'90s, I thought there was two separate gay communities, a positive and a negative, and they were not helping and they would not get close to each other. But again, I think one organization that changed that also, personally – HIM, Health Initiative for Men, when they started, I think that changed also, which is a good thing because it's Health Initiative Men, period. So, it's not positive or negative or whoever you are, so I think that changed that, the stigma, and I think it's been good to have Health Initiative for Men. Was that your question?

BK: Yeah, around how the epidemic changed the community in any ways.

P: Yeah, I can't think of any other way. I mean, they're so supportive, those organizations. I'm not sure if they donate as much as they used to. I know that the AIDS Walk, people are not donating as much as they used to, they're having trouble raising funds, so I think there's less – probably less money given to those organizations. Otherwise, I don't see that much has changed – yeah, I don't see that much change. But I think what made a difference is the medical – like I said the BC Centre for Excellence has been excellent for us in Vancouver, and then I'd say HIM for me was very important when I first heard of HIM. Like, all my friends I'd send to HIM, like get tested there or get information there. And I knew someone who worked there, you probably know him – [name]. Yeah, good friend of mine. So, I thought HIM was an excellent service, and actually the precursor of HIM, I volunteered for them for a while, Gayway – I don't know if you've heard…

BK: Yeah, I've heard of them…

P: That's right, I forgot about Gayway. I volunteered there and that's where I did something with [name] for a year, a survey on drug use and so on in gay men, but anyway. So, HIM has been very important for me because I've used their services, I've recommended them, and yeah. So, the community, yeah, has changed for the better, I think. I really believe – I don't know how many surveys I've been on – like, like an HIV and brain survey, an HIV and lung survey, Momentum, this, then any surveys or any – what would you call it?

BK: This is like an interview, right?

P: I know, but what do you call – research. Yeah, any research, I'm all for it. I believe in that, I like to read stats, I look for stats even though some people say, nah, stats – no, because people do research and it's there. Between the medical service, HIM has been very important in the community as a change, and organizations like this, surveys and research have been tremendous here.

BK: And on the flip side, you also mentioned earlier in our conversation that maybe the community's lost a bit of its excitement or vibrancy.

P: Well yeah, but that's because of the Internet, but that's everywhere, everywhere you go. Vancouver has been affected more because probably – yeah, I don't know why, because now you can count on one hand how many bars you have when you used to have a dozen, but then I go to Montreal, I go back to Montreal, it's the same thing, you don't see anyone in the bars. Everyone meets on the Internet. I go to Europe, people meet on the Internet or Apps, so everyone has a phone, and even in Morocco, and they don't have any gay bars over there, but they meet on the Internet. So yeah, the Internet has not done well, so the community has changed. I think maybe the older people – I think, for me, I admit I go on the Internet, but I like to go out once in a while. I like to go to coffee shops, and I like to go walk and so on, but you don't see that anymore, not as much. I mean, you still see it but not as much.

BK: I'm almost out of questions, I have a couple more questions. Do you have any advice for healthcare providers based on your experiences as a long-term survivor in the present?

P: I'd say keep up the good work. I don't see where they get it from, even today. I don't know if it's like that for everyone. I'm lucky because my clinic is at IDC, so I don't know how other gay clinics work. I've tried Spectrum, actually for a while, and I didn't have good service there, I wasn't impressed. But when I went to IDC, everything is there, and that's when I started getting into a lot of research. And I'll say keep the good work, because I think the staff does tremendous work, and for me, the two underpaid jobs are nursing and teaching, so these guys work hard for what they do and they're underpaid. And teachers are the same, to educate our kids and underpaid. But no, keep up the good work. I hope we still get some caring people joining the nursing and medical system, because I have no complaints about the medical system here, no complaints at all. Maybe sometimes you have to wait a little longer, but still, it's part of it.

BK: One of the other things we're hoping to do with this project is to generate some inter-generational discussion because we feel like there's not a lot of conversation that happens between long-term survivors and younger gay men for instance. So, do you have any advice for future generations who did not experience the epidemic in the earlier stages like you did?

P: Uh, not really. I know a lot of young people, I know a lot of young men, women, and to me they keep me alive and lively because of their youth and their energy, so I'd say to the younger generation just keep doing what you're doing at your best. All the ones I know, they are. You know, you have one life to live, and just live it at the fullest. Yeah, I think the younger generation is doing well. I don't see any problem or any wrongdoing from the young generation. And I know the younger generation, they won't live, you know, what we went through – well, who knows? Maybe something else will happen, but hopefully not, but you know, it's not going to be the same. No, I think, yeah, I'm very supportive of the young men and women, gay men and gay women today – I'm very, very proud. And I know a lot of them, and like I said, they keep me – they're probably the people that have kept me alive also, because I'm young at heart, right? Surprisingly, I am surrounded by a lot of young people, even when I had volunteering and part-time jobs, and so on, yeah, I've been surrounded by young people and it's keeping me very alive. I like that. I find that sometimes people my age and my generation and that went through a lot of things that I went through, and I see some of them are sicker than I am, and I'm surprised again that I'm healthier than other people from my generation that are survivors that are sicker than I am or not as well physically. But we all have different bodies, so we all have different genes, but I'm lucky. And sometimes I feel like I don't have any connections with them anymore, 'cause they're – how can I say? They're too passive, like they like to sit and watch TV or they're not active, and I'm an active person, like I have to move. So, that's why I don't connect with them, I connect more with the younger people, but yeah. Actually, most of my friends now, now some of them are gone, most of my friends are younger than me – not by much, some of them, but some are in their thirties and even twenties, mid-twenties, I have friends in their twenties, and I get along fine. And we go out and we have dinner – it keeps my alive. Yeah, I like that. So no, I have very good hope in the young generation.

BK: That's encouraging to hear.

P: As long as they don't go too much on the Internet. You know, electronic is not – because that's what I'm scared about, electronics in the young generation, because I see that – I don't

know if you saw that – I saw that with my younger sister at one point and some of my nephews and nieces and they use and they don't know how to spell anymore. I did arts and literature in school, so for me, you need to be able to compose and it has to be proper, but you know, I find that young kids now don't know how to spell, don't know how to write, and it's all short abbreviations, and I'm like what the hell are you talking about? I say, what is this word? That's the only thing, but otherwise I have big hopes as long as the electronics don't take over.

BK: That's good for us to hear that because I think a lot of the other folks we've talked to have articulated that they don't feel very connected to younger generations.

P: Really?

BK: Yeah, so it's great for us to hear.

P: I'm surprised. I'm surprised, because that's what makes me alive. Thinking of the younger ones, like even their twenties, like they keep me going – it's so much fun to be around them. And that's probably why I love kids, babies, I like them to be around because they're so innocent, so lively. I'm a big kid, myself, so I like to play, I like to have fun. I'm surprised to hear that, that the older generations are not hopeful.

BK: Not necessarily not hopeful but not feeling super…

P: They're not connecting.

BK: …There's not a lot of conversations going on.

P: No, true, there isn't. I mean, in the gay community, there isn't. You see that – I saw that at Positive Living in the second round – when was it? – three years ago. Yeah, you don't see that much, but like I said, I find that if you want to have an intergeneration conversation or connection, you need to be – I think the older generation – I hate saying the older generation, people my age let's say, and the survivors or not survivors, like gay men… They need to forget that they're old and stop – okay, to me, I see a lot of them, like every day I go by Pumpjack, they're there every day. Well, I'm sorry but that's not my life, to have a drink every day. Or I see them, "Oh no, I don't want to go out. I want to watch TV or something." Well, you have to be active, if you want to connect, you have to get out of your shell. And if they don't want to get out of their shell, then that's their problem. I don't think it's the younger generation, 'cause I think the younger generation don't have any problem, I haven't seen it. I think it's the older generation that has a problem, except me. [Laughs] I won't say except me, but I'd say most of my friends like that, they don't want to do anything. I say, why do I associate with them? Like, for years I've tried to find a gym partner my age, my friends – no one wants to go to the gym. I say, why not? It's good – cardio, exercise, weights. They don't want to, so you're left alone, and then try to find a younger a guy. Well, younger guys don't want to go work out with somebody – which I understand. But anyway, I don't have any problems with the younger generation. I think they're doing fine, they're great and smart – I find a lot of them are actually very, very smart, and I feel that they, no matter what the field is, that they're very smart, educated. I've got good hope.

BK: I don't really have a lot of other questions but we always like to end by asking if there's anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't had a chance to cover yet or anything that you'd like to expand upon. And you're welcome to take a moment to think about that.

P: Yeah, I'll have to. Nothing coming to mind right now…. It's funny, the only thing that comes to mind is I want to thank my mom and dad… Sorry. Yeah, when I talk about things like that, I always come back to my mom and dad. So, thanks Mom, thanks Dad.

BK: Thanks for sharing that with me.

P: Thank you.

BK: I'll probably stop the recording.

P: Yup.