“HIV in My Day” – Interview 46

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Interviewee: Peter Wylie (PW); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)

Ben Klassen: Just getting started talking to Peter today. Thanks so much for being here and for sharing your story with us. How did you first engage in the gay community?

Peter Wylie: I came out in Calgary, Alberta of all places. I left home at sixteen. I was always attracted to men and never asked why, just one of those things, so I never had to find myself in that sense. Yeah, I’m gay and HIV, and now that I am sixty, I am more relaxed – somewhat relaxed. But Calgary, Alberta, it just happened naturally, if that is possible, which it was so. Do you have questions that you would like to know?

BK: When was that roughly and what did the community in Calgary look like at the time?

PW: Actually, believe it or not, we had a few good clubs at the time, Parkside and Continental, and we had a gay pub under the CN Hotel in some basement with a pub. That was when beer was 25 cents a glass – we didn’t mind sharing or buying. Today it is another matter. It wasn’t hard for me to come out in Calgary. Being adopted into a white family, I have learned to take responsibilities, to be strong for yourself. I had to learn early, because like I said I was sixteen, seventeen and my mother was concerned that me being with HIV, I would pass it on to their kids by contact, which was really added pressure for me. I couch surfed, actually, no roof over my head to speak of – I mean couch surfing. I was eight feet away from being on the street, actually. Just being raised white, you just plugged along, just do what you have to do, which means I had to get a job, which was hard because I was so young. My first job was working in grocery stores as a stocker. It gave me money to buy a bachelor, rent a bachelor apartment, which was small, but I suppose if I had to do it again, I would go and live in a bachelor, because they are much larger today than they were back in the day.

I had no trouble coming out. I am more – the stress came in or the hurt came in at me being ignorant about what HIV really meant. I just decided, okay, you have a disease, Peter, rather than a virus – it was comforting to accept that word rather than virus. Oh dear. Looking back… sometimes, I just think don’t look back, but the back is always there. My experience is – my first, my… yeah. It was hard and I broke down a couple times but – which I lost it – “Why me?” sort of thing. And being HIV, I just thought, well to begin with, I thought it was a disease, but it was a death sentence as well. I am really blessed today because I am a survivor and there is so many people that I have known that weren’t so fortunate. And I didn’t know about immunity, your immune system or how it worked. But my hands were tied, and seeing people pass on, it’s – you can only wish the best for them even in the afterlife. But to lose a friend is hard because you have this – losing friends is hard because you have one less friend that you have. I always thought I was Two-Spirited – I don’t know why I thought that. I felt the feminine side of me and the masculine side of me.

Calgary was no threat to me even though it is a rednecked town today. There was tension in the air, because people walking around with sarcosis, the marks on their face, and that was not a pretty site to look at, and you had to, with your friends, look beyond that. But I'm only one person who thought that way. I think Calgary was even more… "Oh, you're gay, you're a fag, you are queer…" all the derogatory names, only through ignorance. They knew nothing about what gay meant or what being gay meant. Even though you like men, it's a lot more to it than liking men. I was strong, I am – I had to do what I had to do. I have come a long way. I'm now sixty and I think I was thirty-one, thirty-two – I don't know… HIV/AIDS, I know what to do, when to do it, and what not to do. Friends are hard to lose, one less friend you have, and I think today I can count on my hand how many friends I have that will stand by if I ask them. In that sense, it is good. That's today though. Back then in the '80s or '79 even, I moved around a lot because I didn't want – after I got a foothold for myself, having a job and paying rent, I wanted a change, so I had the balls to just pack up and leave and move over to Toronto. Had a great time, partied, but again, I was afraid to have sex with men now. I don't want to be – I thought you could pass it through saliva, which you can't – I know it's a blood transfer thing. I had a good time with myself, always being a loner. I felt safer keeping to myself rather than having people. People I've lost, people I have mourned for, and gone to their funerals. In all that time, seeing the disease afflict people was not a pretty sight. I think here we had Dr. – he went to – he videotaped the cycle of his disease. What is his name?

BK: Dr. Peter?

PW: Yes, that's right, and seeing that, I saw my friends faces on him, because it was exactly the same once you are hospitalized. I found most of when my friends were hospitalized, it was palliative care – they really didn't have palliative care back in the day, but just seeing the same infection that Dr. Peter went through – the memory, the shriveling up. It's not a pretty sight and it is hard to think… I often think, "Why not me? Why them?" I think, why them, why not me – because I am a survivor, I think. Where I am blessed, it is in my genes. I believe that my being First Nations is why I don't look sixty, hopefully fifty, but I don't know. What saved me was once I found out I had HIV, I quit having sex with them. I like being around them, dance with them, party with them, but I never, never – I was afraid of getting involved. It was hard to say, back in the day, "I'm HIV." It was very hard and you had to keep it close to your chest. In all those years of trying to stay strong, it worked, but I am still – I still think of seeing your friend disintegrate basically because, it was…

You know, for me, I say it wasn't hard but it was a really redneck attitude. There was a lot, or a few people – I am not the only one to get kicked out of a home because of HIV. People were fired form their jobs. People – it's almost like it went underground in silence and I was a participant. Silence was my game, too. "Who do I talk to about this?" Friends of friends, you always know they know, but the stranger – I would be petrified to admit I was HIV because of backlash. And at one time in Calgary, there were fag beaters in Central Park – it is where gays came around. It was a nice park with benches but a lot of fag beating and if you looked like you, you looked like sicosis [sic] – I don't know the word, but the baldness, the marks on the body, the tiredness… I think where I am different is I didn't want to give up and a lot of people at the time thought it was a death sentence. They didn't want to survive after that because we didn't know what was ahead after HIV… it was AIDS, but… It is all in all in my past. Not a pretty sight, that's for sure, just because I was as burnt as my next… I am a lot more mature now and I had to think I was an idiot back then, but I was pretty naïve and pretty scared because even though I said why me, not my friends… but you can't change… Yeah, sort of lost right now.

BK: It's okay, it's a lot to talk about.

PW: You never get used to death – never, you know. First Nations, we believe that there is an afterlife, so I believe in that. Not everybody does. Death is scary – it's not natural, but it is natural. I hope I have another twenty years in me, but I – where I am blessed is I am now twenty-eight years of HIV. I don't know how but I am undetectable, but I think today from the antivirals I have been taking for a few years and haven't changed. I am happier that I am HIV non-detectable and I said to my doctor, "What does that mean?" And he said, "Well, they can't detect enough of the virus in you," which I don't understand how that is possible, being diagnosed way back then. I just don't know how that is possible. I am happy, but my happiness has come over the last ten years where I say, "Peter, relax, relax, relax." It is hard to relax, 'cause it is in the back of your mind, HIV/AIDS – what is going to happen next? And I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it because I am too scared to think about it still because it means what I saw in my friends passings, what the body goes through. Don't want to think there, don't want to go there, but it will happen eventually. I wrote a will recently saying that I be cremated and also that I have assisted suicide – doctor-assisted death is the name for that. So, I said that 'cause I don't want to go through the pain and agony. My little brain cells – sometimes I forget, but I really need to keep my memory fresh.

But boy, back then, it was put a zipper on your mouth – didn't talk about it when it happens. Even strangers I saw with sicosis [sic] – and here I thought, god buddy, you are so brave. I had to say that 'cause today if anything today came to my face, I would stop going out – that as much as I say I am okay, I am still scared in. I don't ponder on it, but I don't know – one day but not today, and I always ask for another day. Maybe that's it. My higher power gives me another day, another day, but when your friends go, you just – I don't know. Why me? Why not me? I was promiscuous. It wasn't hard sometimes to meet men because I was a pretty boy back then and I played – I played the part. Don't like to admit that but yeah meeting men were okay. Like I say, I was a bottom at the time and that is how I caught it. No condoms back in the day either. We thought we were safe and turned out no, you are not safe – you gotta use condoms. Today, now, they're so important, so now I use condoms, but back then I never used condoms – never gave it a thought actually. The day I was told I was HIV, I remember… I remember that once I got outside, I broke down and cried and thought fuck. I always thought HIV is a constant deterioration of the body system and I thought how fast…?

You know, back in the early-'90s people were carefree, actually. Even back in the '80s, I lived in Toronto from '80 to '85, had a great time, partied hard, but I didn't want to get involved with men because I wasn't the same sort – I wasn't perfect anymore, being HIV, being labelled. I thought this is going to hang over you for the rest of your life. And being labelled, I was scared because Calgary was rednecked and if you looked gay, people would yell out of the car passing by or at night the fag beatings. So, as much as I was open and okay with it, I saw a lot of conflict – them against us sort of thing and it is them that had the upper hand. Yeah, I am HIV – I have come a long way, baby, that's for sure. We didn't have a support system for being HIV/AIDS – there was no support system, there was no men's places, like Momentum studies, or even get a support talking circle, or anything. There was none of that and so, you just move along, keep it to yourself, and don't think about the end, which sometimes I think…

I stopped drinking because of that, because meds and drinking do not go along. Again, we didn't have antivirals back in the '80s, '70s, so you just had to ride it out because there's no meds that they came out with and people died really fast because of that. And I think Vancouver was the first place I knew – Toronto in the '80s, they didn't have meds, support systems, places we could go and talk about having this virus in us. It would have made a hell of a lot of difference if I could have talked about what it meant to be HIV, the disruptions it brought to our people – disruptions, it died, it didn't disrupt them. And everybody was tight lipped. Even the gay scene, we saw but then when their friends died and my friends died they couldn't not say anything, you know? I don't – I didn't have any support. I had my friends, but with friends, you go so far with them, and my emotional baggage back then, I couldn't… Like, why bother them with my emotional baggage, or how upset I am, or how scared I am, or – you just don't lay that on people because… I don't know.

BK: So, you were really carrying this on your own – you didn't have much support at all.

PW: No, I had to upper lip – and I don't know how I did it, but I did it, I survived. I wish there was a support system back in the day, it would have made a hell of a difference. But we didn't, they didn't, society didn't. HIV/AIDS was new, a new virus. People were so scared, everybody was scared – lost jobs, kicked out of the home, like I did. There was a lot of backlash being HIV, that's what made me scared and not talk about it. But today, it is 20--, I can't believe it's 20--. '79, '80, I wasn't thinking about 2000 – in fact, I didn't think I would live that long. I just didn't think I would be living this long, and I have, and I pray to my creator to still give me the strength to carry on. I am still a loner, I still – I can count on my hand how many friends I have. There are a few, but it is nice to have friends. In some ways they are good listening boards. Today, I can mention it to them – oh god, death is not a pretty sight, I keep thinking that. I don't know. I'm happy, I am strong – I am happy that I am not dead, I am not in palliative care. At least my antivirals have been working for the last ten years. I don't question it.

But I still cry once in a while because I have lost friends to this disease, and it's like, going back is not a pretty sight – once the body breaks down, the memory goes, the hair goes, the weight goes. And going to see the hospital, your friends, and they didn't have palliative care back then, they just stuck 'em on a ward – it was so hard to go see them in that state. What made me stand by them was I thought, maybe one day when I am in that state, someone will stand by me. But my nature is to care for people and sometimes I forget about myself in caring for others. I just – it has been so long carrying this virus. Okay, I am undetectable, that is good – but still, in the back of my mind I think, I hope I go quickly. I don't want to linger on with this disease, this virus. The change today, HIV/AIDS, is a total turn around. People now say, "Okay, there is support system out there." It is a total turn around. It – '80s, '70s, they didn't have that and I think it would have been a hell of a lot better if we would have had a support system or that we could go to… I am happy today but sad some ways too. I haven't seen death for a lot of years now and I am happy that – I think I would break down if I saw…

I am scared to go to palliative care here in St. Paul's. There are still people that are, I think, in there because of their immune system isn't working and palliative care means the end of your days basically. So, I am scared to visit people up there. If I was really strong, I would go up there and see if there is anyone I can talk too about HIV or get them to talk about it, make them feel – I don't know. I am not that strong. I can't go up to palliative. It is just one area I don't want to go to. Like I said, my experience of death has not been very positive – it was very hard. I cried and cried and cried and, why me why not me – yeah, I was young, insecure in a lot of ways, but you just have to do what you have to do, back in the day. You had to be strong, and I don't know how I survived that because I didn't have anything to draw from, boy oh boy. If you would have known me in my thirties, forties – good looking but a basket case in some ways. But being HIV, I count my blessings today. I keep seeing my friends faces – I see the marks. It was really traumatic to see that on people. It didn't look natural. Maybe he had chicken pox or whatever, but AIDS was certainly a hard disease to go to. Once you have AIDS – HIV is one thing, AIDS is another, and people are surviving longer today. I am not a basket case anymore. Back then, I would have just – chin up, carry on, keep your mouth shut, don't talk about me being, having a virus in my body, not being able to get it out. I just said, okay, you say it wasn't hard to accept it. I just didn't think it was fair, I don't know. Where the hell did this virus come from – I didn't know that either. I didn't know how it started. Once I found out – my GP asked, "Are you a bottom?" I said, "No." He asked, "You use condoms?" I said, "No." Who used condoms back then?

BK: So, there wasn't much information?

PW: No information, nowhere. I don't know about the information I would have needed to know, but oh it would have made a difference if I had been able to talk about it. Someone dying is really – it's hard to watch, hard to be around. And I guess a mix blessing back then, if you were HIV you went quickly. It didn't linger for years, it was months – body start breaking down, your weight goes, your hair loss, and it goes fast. And if we had the antivirals back then, a lot of people would have survived, my friends would have survived. No information at all about HIV, what it meant or what, how to define it. In fact, I didn't even – HIV, what is that? I didn't know anything about it, the disease, the virus, I just had to accept it and keep my mouth shut and carry on, and everything is going to be okay – but no, everything as not okay. Oh, I get so mad sometimes, that mad, because there should have been a support system out there. People were by the hundreds dying. But it is what it is, I guess, and I can't change the past. I don't know what my future is, but the present – I'm healthy, I am strong, I am still emotional – I am glad I am still emotional, I am glad I can cry still. I still think of my friends and that makes me cry 'cause it is just not fair – not fair at all. They went fast. And so, I was at a lot of funerals too, but I don't want to be buried – cremate me and blow me into the wind. Like I said, I don't know what my future holds with this virus, I just pray that I always ask for one more day, always.

It was a good time back in the '80s – party, party, party, but you get fucked, you get fucked, you get fucked over being fucked. Oh, it's kind of crude, but I don't know – I didn't think I deserved to be HIV either. I thought what harm was I doing? I wasn't doing any harm. It is a sunny day today and I am happy that I am alive. For how long, I don't know, but I guess if the day comes, I want assisted suicide and I think that is legal in Canada now. You need to meet certain criteria. Certainly, don't want to go through – I have these visions of the scars on people – sorcosis [sic], whatever you call it. It was hard not to stare, it wasn't a pretty sight. HIV okay, but AIDS, even today, I don't think it is a pretty sight. I am sixty now, I want to live another twenty years. I don't know if I can, I just take it day by day, and that's my saving grace is taking each day, one day at a time, to look forward, to look ahead. I don't know what's ahead – I am a caregiver today because people need that support. I didn't have it back then, but now I have it today and I would have given a tooth and nail to have that support back in the '80s or '90s, but it is what it is. And each day forward is another day of living and I am so grateful that I am alive and breathing. I can do things, I am independent. But seeing your friends pass on and die, it's not right. Why me lord, why not me lord? You don't see sarcosis [sic] today with people being affected with AIDS. Maybe in palliative, I am scared to go to palliative care. Any questions you would like to ask?

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

PW: I heard about it once I was diagnosed, but no, there was no information out there about this virus, what it meant, or what to expect. So no, back in the '80s there was no… I hear it because once I had it and then I saw my friends have it, but once my friends had it, they were white and they went quickly, so quickly – within a month. That is how fast it can be, ravage a body. But no, I heard it only because I was HIV and my friends were HIV. I think everybody was too scared to talk about it, the repercussions of talking about being HIV back then. You got – well, people turn their backs on you, but once I heard… The first time I heard was – it has been so long. I didn't hear about it until I was infected. I didn't know what to expect when my friends died. Oh, that is such a – I don't know. Two-Spirit, we believe we will be reincarnated into another life and I hope my friends are happier, or not happier but have moved on after death. But if I heard about it, if I had heard about it earlier in the '80s, '90s, it would have had a little more confidence in me, 'cause I was insecure 'cause I thought, fuck, I have this disease, this virus. What is going to happen? If there was a support system back then, it would have been a saving grace just to let go of that baggage. I just can't – people went so quickly. It was like, here – San Francisco is another city that got ravaged early. Today is a good day. I am relatively fair, sane and all that. So, that is my story, a collage of incidences that happened in my life that back then I couldn't really talk about it a lot of the times. I cried myself to sleep because I was so scared, and thought, oh… And I was young and my friends were young. Like, I just – it's not fair. They are young, they still have a whole life – once they got it, HIV/AIDS, it was downhill. Just so many people died so early in their age, my friends included, so I don't know what else to say about that.

BK: When did you get to Vancouver?

PW: I first came her in Expo '86 and went back from Toronto to here, and made good money, and worked at BC Pavilion as a waiter at '86. And I've moved to Hawaii after that for a few years. My blessing is I can blend in societies where the white is not always present. Being white in Hawaii, the dark skin, the Philippines, the dark skin, so it was nice that I could blend in somewhere, 'cause I didn't want to stand out – well, today I do. Did not stand out then, that is for sure. I just take a deep sigh – it's okay, Peter. Everything is going to be okay, and everything is okay – a little hard 'cause my companion is failing. But just, I am thinking – fuck, now this person's going to go and I am going to be… He has got like Parkinson's disease and he wants to stay at home as long as he can and I want him to stay at home as long as he can, but I am afraid he's going to die, 'cause it is deterioration. He is not getting better. I am getting tired of people dying on me. You just don't accept something like that. Life is not always fair but I wish I had had that back then. Life wasn't fair, life was hard on me because it wasn't…

That is why I left Calgary, because it is a redneck town. Even though I came out there, I was still living at home, sneaking out to the gay bars. And I lived in suburbia and I had six siblings, and today unfortunately, my mother has passed on, but she never did accept that, she was the one that said, "I want you out," once I had HIV. "You have to go." You know, I totally believe back then, if I was their blood, they would have given me support, some support, but here was no emo-… If you are born of the blood, there is a connection automatically, between mother and child. I didn't have that. My dad was a blessing. He said, "Leave the boy alone." She was afraid of being – of me being gay – she didn't know anything about it, she didn't think it was macho. I thought, fuck you, god rest her soul, but she was hard on me. I don't know why but she wasn't hard on her kids. And if anybody left home back then, it was to go to University, but I was way too young, and I don't know how I survived. I got a job, that is how I survived. Count my blessings today.

BK: Sounds like there was a tremendous amount of stigma back then.

PW: There was. People didn't want to talk about it. And people had this image of – it scared them. "Oh, he has AIDS. He is going to pass it on. Don't touch him." It was ignorance because nobody knew much about it, the virus. I didn't know much about it – I knew I had it and I thought keep your mouth shut and carry on. But when your friends are part of your life cycle, it is another matter. I still give them a thought today and I still sometimes cry because they were so young – twenty, thirty. I just can't believe how fast they went, how fast – a lot of people died. A lot. So, I wasn't the only one affected by it – it was out there, but you didn't want to talk about it. They were scared and people would shun you – literally, "Fuck off, don't come near me." Ignorance, that is what stigma was.

BK: Was that in the gay community as well?

PW: That is a good question. I would say, yes. We being gay, we never talked about it, never brought it up as a conversation. I think personalities today – no, there was ignorance on the whole area and people couldn't get beyond the physical appearance. What you looked like mattered. Stigma is a good word – there was plenty of that, and a gay thing too. 'Cause we were kind of uptight with ourselves as well, uptight about this disease. It was a new disease – nobody wanted it, nobody wanted to talk about it, until we started dying from it… then you had to talk about it, you couldn't escape that.

BK: Did your Indigenous identity impact your experience of the epidemic in any way?

PW: Yes, I wasn't raised Aboriginal or First Nations and my parents never encouraged me to go that route. Okay, I'm different, I am not the same colour, but I am just as strong as my brothers and sisters – never went to university though. Being Indigenous, I believe my higher power is my saving grace, and genetically – I think it is in the genes. Aboriginals, I don't know if it is true or not, but I think that we are a stronger breed, genetically, because I have had this disease for almost thirty years. And I just think, okay, I have come a long way. I am not as insecure and there are services out there today that I have actually noticed that I wouldn't mind being part of. I thought coming here – I thought, Peter, maybe don't talk to anybody about how you feel about death, what it looked like, how you feel. It is good to know that there are support systems out there, 'cause I didn't know that there were that many out there. This is the first time I am talking about it. I have always been alone and kept to myself about it. I didn't talk about it when I was diagnosed – I was just still afraid to talk about it because it just meant a death sentence and people saw it that way and it was just in your face. Between '85 to '94, so many people went. So, I think, genetically, I am from a stronger pool as far as longevity, I would like to think.

I don't know if that is true, but to be Indigenous… I don't really know what that means, because I have never really partook. But I can say that today I have been to a few sweats, and the way they interpret – well, it is an honour to go through that because they make a covering and a fire pit and hot rocks and you pour water over them and you say – for me, I just say I am alive. And it is very – that system, they thought it was you are going into your mother's room, that is what the covering is about, and with the rocks, there are grandfather rock and grandmother rock, there are those associations with the rocks. And you walk out and you feel delirious because it is so hot, but you feel good – feels great. So, I have been to a couple of ceremonies like that, but I have never been to a pow wow. I don't have any Native friends, I don't know why that is. When I buy my pot on the Eastside, when I go there and I see my kind, my brothers or whatever doing not so good, I just think, Peter, you are just so lucky. I don't know how lucky, but I feel lucky that I am alive today. But seeing it on the Eastside, it is drug-addicted and it is First Nations always to get hit when it is introduced to them. I don't want to be that type of Native or Aboriginal. I am proud that I am I am not the same as everybody else. But I wish back in the day there was – the Calgary stampede had six nations and they parade in the parade and they camp in the camping grounds in the stadium and built a tee pee, had the horses – it was quite something. But being Indigenous, it just means to me that I am different and I'm – I have more energy in me, some ways. Feels good to be different. I am glad I am not white, forgive me.

Even though there is sometimes a difference, I think the difference for me is that I have a few blessings blessing me and I don't know what to say with Indigenous 'cause I have never been raised that way. I know I am Indigenous, of course, but being adopted like I was, you didn't see a lot of Natives in white suburbia – you just didn't see that. They lived on big reserves back in Alberta. I went to reserve once and I was biking to home once and it was trashed and the parents were in the living room drinking and I thought this type of Native is not me and I don't want to be on reserve, god forbid. Open door policy on the reserve if you haven't been there. But I knew what I didn't want to be, being Aboriginal – I didn't want to be like them, drunks. It is hard for me 'cause they are representing my race. People see this side and they say, "Oh, those Natives." There is still a – I won't say a stigma, but there is still a difference between being white and being Aboriginal and sometimes a tension going along with it. I think they see drunken Indians on the Eastside and you just accept it that it is just the way they are. So, sometimes I am not fighting, but I can see that. You take someone on the Eastside – I can say – they would say, that is where they are. No, I just plow on and thank god I am alive today. I really am thankful.

BK: Do you have any recollections of what the medical response looked like early on?

PW: I never – once I was diagnosed that was it. I can't answer that.

BK: If your story doesn't relate to that, that is totally fine, but when you were diagnosed was your doctor gentle or understanding?

PW: No, my GP was *da, da, da*, but there was no emotional connections. My GP today, I can talk to, but the GP back then was like, "This is what it is. Here is where you are and you are just going to have to live with it." No compassion, no support. I mean, people were just – that was back in the day. The kept everything close to their chest. Once it was out, people saw people with AIDS, I think people were scared back then – I don't want to be like them. Being gay was – in Calgary it was there but not there, sort of. We had a nice little pub and some good dance clubs, so it was present. And I jumped into that scene, never looked back – no regret… well, no regrets.

BK: Any memories of governmental responses early on?

PW: I have a story there. I had a breakdown in '82 in Toronto, so much that I was depressed and was put in Foothills Hospital in the psych ward, and it really didn't do much. But there was times when I was hard on myself, having a nervous breakdown. I was just depressed and they put me in the psych ward for observation. I am sort of lost what to say now.

BK: That is okay. Were you aware of any community responses that were going on around the epidemic?

PW: No, there was no people saying, "Here we are, this is where we are." There was no – none of that. My friends weren't part of that – if there was, I wasn't aware of it. There was no activism in the '80s, '90s.

BK: How do you think the epidemic changed the gay community as a whole?

PW: I think today the support for people like myself who are HIV – and it is not so scary to talk about, you know, not that people accept it. It's just part of the fabric – yeah, I think today it's like night and day form when I first came out and the support now, today. I wish all these were back then and none of this – no marches, no calling out what HIV/AIDS is about, no activism at all. And today it is different. People talk about it and it's not so bad talking about it, and people are more aware about it today. They didn't play the head in the sand, but I am glad that there are choices out there that I can go to, which I will take on if… yeah.

BK: And so, you didn't get involved with any organizations, like PWA?

PW: No, no, I keep to myself. To be honest, I didn't know much about how many choices I had. AIDS Vancouver was around for a long time, but I never got involved in these organizations, Why, I don't – yeah, I don't know why. But I still keep to myself and accept it, and it would be nice once in a while to talk about it, that's for sure, but I don't have time to think about it today. This is being over-thinked, dissected, and I just… I am lost.

BK: Has the epidemic changed the community in any other way?

PW: There is support, there is activism, there are AIDS… My doctor, Sestak, was one of the first pioneers going to conferences on HIV/AIDS, and I guess that was around – I was with him twenty years, fifteen years. I have been so lucky to have a GP. God forbid having to use walk in clinics – push this, take this – no real compassion for what you are going through, so that's… No, today it is another ball game. People are different, they are aware of it, and it isn't so bad being aware of it. Being aware of it that they aren't so uptight about it – if you are HIV, okay. It is still a virus people still don't understand – emotional baggage that goes with it for one, and the experience around it for another. I am just glad that there are now organizations I can turn to and say this is my story. This is the first time I have ever talked about it, with you. It isn't easy to talk about it with just anybody. I wouldn't put that on anybody, my emotional baggage, but I am glad your organization is out there. Maked me feel a little bit more relaxed with myself knowing that people are aware of it.

Being gay is not such a bad thing. Back in the day, being gay – "Oh, you must get HIV/AIDS," and a total turn around today. People are not accepting, but they are aware of it and there isn't so much derogatory towards it. People were so uptight back then, and we had no support system, so we went through what we went through. But a lot of people didn't make it and a lot of people died – too many in my books. I guess I am thankful today for my life, that I am alive. In some ways, let's celebrate that. I can't think about being HIV – I know I use condoms, that is part of it now. The support systems are great to talk about it, but outside of these systems, I don't think people talk about HIV/AIDS. I don't hear about it, people talking about… I mean with these organizations, it is part of it, but I think in the general populations, people don't talk about HIV or what it means. Well, of course they know what it means – it is sort of when HIV… it is sort of like… I don't know.

BK: Maybe still some stigma around HIV.

PW: There is, to be honest. I don't want to say that, because there is. I don't know whether it – I, the societies, has is aware of what is going on. It still sometimes – it's not redneck, but you don't talk about it, you don't bring it up in general conversations. And people don't want to hear about it sometimes, not all. But I think if I go out in suburbia and tell I'm HIV, I think – I don't know. I would be scared to sort of do that because it's suburbia, has a certain mindset of its own and to say, "Oh, I am HIV," that would be a pebble in a pond. Lots of ripples from that one.

BK: Do you have any advice for future generations?

PW: Use a condom, talk about it. I didn't know there were so many agencies out there, but if there is, get out and talk about it, or find a support system if you can. I think today people are still lonely, people carrying this disease. My advice is use the support system that is out there if you can and be responsible sexually.

BK: Any advice for people that might be newly diagnosed?

PW: That's a good one. Don't think it's a death sentence – it is not a death sentence – yes and no. If you are young and you are HIV positive, seek out support. Support is everything – it can make you or break you, so yeah – and again, use condoms. That's a no brainer on that one. Don't think you are the only one if you are diagnosed. You are not the only one, there are a lot of people out there that are diagnosed. And I can't say what my advice… but I would just say seek out the support. But I would say that times are different today, actually go out and find support and not be scared. It's hard to say not be scared because it is scary sometimes. It is a big H, a big I, and big V. So, try not to be scared and use the support system out there if you can, that is my advice.

BK: Great, I think that is the end of my formal questions. We always like to ask at the end if there is anything that you wanted to discuss that we didn't cover in our questions or if there was anything that you wanted to expand upon?

PW: To be honest, no. One area is family because I was kicked out early. It would be nice to talk more about the family, and what I went through with them. Like I said, my mother was always hard on me and we would argue like cat and dog. But family is important, and if you have that support from your family, you have got it made actually. Family is everything. Family is where it starts and expands, and acceptance is a big thing. People aren't as scared to talk about it and just enjoy life for what it is, take responsibilities, be safe, and keep your head up. I can't be – don't be scared because it can be scary, even today. If you are young today I think, I don't hear too many straight people having AIDS, it's always in the gay scene I still think. You don't… I lost my train of thought.

BK: We do know that young gay guys are still disproportionately getting HIV.

PW: Yes, that's true, but it's not as many, the difference, and people aren't dying a month from – one, two months from now. There are antivirals out there. For me, I have been on for a good ten, fifteen years now – saved my butt, I think. I don't know how it is possible that I am undetectable, I just don't know how that works.

BK: It is pretty amazing.

PW: It is, and you don't think it is a death sentence anymore. Back in the day, I couldn't look to the future 'cause I didn't have a future. And now I look ahead and I want to actually jump into some of these community support organizations, 'cause I didn't avoid them, but I didn't go to any of them. I know AIDS Vancouver had an office here and at Davie and Bute they have an HIV upstairs in the… there is a building up…

BK: I think that is where Qmunity is now.

PW: But I never jumped into any of these organizations – why, I don't know. I didn't seek them out. But now that I know that they are out there, I just might turn around and say, talk about it or be a part of something with this whole thought of being HIV. If I can make a difference, being part of something like this, I feel a lot more relaxed knowing I participated in an organization around this disease. I will look a couple of them up. I mean, I see one – general HIV support resources – I know that Positive Living, I might go to, but I am just glad there is agencies out there giving the support. Times have turned around totally from the '80s, '90s – it is like night and day. Today, I wouldn't talk about it with anybody but you can talk about it, and I didn't have that back then, I couldn’t talk to anybody about it. There were gay clubs and gay bars, but I didn’t know of any support systems back then. I was pretty scared in a lot of ways. Not having your future, that is what I was scared about. I didn’t have a future, I didn’t dare look ahead. Stay the status quo, keep your head up, and do your own thing. Just, I am alive today and I am so thankful. A long road that’s for sure, for me, and that is why some of these agencies I wouldn’t mind looking up.

BK: Unless you have anything else to add – you are welcome to take a moment to think about that – but if not, thank you so much for sharing your story for us and contributing to this project.

PW: Like I said, if it can help, then I am not so scared of being part of it and I appreciate you listening to me, and having someone listening to you about this disease and the effects from it, so I thank you for being there for me.

BK: It is my pleasure.

PW: And I am not used to it, but I am glad that you are not the only one I can turn to.