“HIV in My Day” – Interview 44

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Interviewee: Joe Leung (JL); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)

Ben Klassen: Great. Just sitting down this afternoon with Joe. Thanks for being here and for agreeing to share your story with us. Just to get started, when did you first get involved with the gay community or start engaging with gay life?

Joe Leung: Oh, 1984, ‘5, yep. I was like seventeen, and I played in the gay volleyball league. So, I lied about my age, supposed to be nineteen but I said I was nineteen so… I was only eighteen so…

BK: And that was here in Vancouver?

JL: Yeah.

BK: What did the community look like at the time, back in the early eighties?

JL: There was no—there was only a small youth group, and the sports teams were starting to form and there was, um, no gay community. Maybe after the Gay Games in ’90, after we had more sports and groups.

BK: So, there wasn’t as much of a community at that time, in the early eighties?

JL: No, there was bars, but I didn’t go. Like, I didn’t drink but I know that back then there was like a bar scene. In the early seventies, eighties there was a bar scene, and maybe the bathhouse scene, but I wasn’t into that.

BK: Just because you didn’t like drinking?

JL: Nope.

BK: Interesting. Any other thoughts on what the community looked like when you were coming out?

JL: Sorry, it was, um, mostly all white men. Though, yeah, I see like after the Gay Games, Vancouver, I see a lot more non gay white people coming out.

BK: So, was it kind of challenging coming out into the community as someone who wasn’t white at the time?

JL: Not really, I have some—I met some friend—I met some people before. I play—I met some people before I played volleyball, and they welcomed me. There was like couple—couple non-white people there, so lots of like white and Asian couples.

BK: So, it wasn't too bad?

JL: Nope.

BK: And when did you first hear about HIV? Do you remember when that was?

JL: In high school, 198- - I think grade eight, 1981. I heard that—I heard there was a gay cancer somewhere in the States so I was… I was – I was grade—grade eight and I knew I was gay but I didn't want to come out yet. So, in 1981, I saw the news and uhm…

BK: How did that make you feel when you were first hearing about that? How did you kind of respond to that?

JL: I was scared at first, maybe, because if I was to come out—if I was to come out I might get infected.

BK: So, kind of scared you into the closet kind of thing, or…?

JL: Yeah, it scared me back in the closet until grade, um, eleven.

BK: And when you started engaging in the community in those early years, was there more information out there in the community as well?

JL: Yeah, there were – there was a doctor who plays volleyball and every time—every week he'd bring free condoms and free lube. And he always every week tell people to play safe or…

BK: So, safe sex was something that people were talking about a lot? And that was influencing people's behaviours?

JL: Yep.

BK: Interesting. Were there any other sources of information that you used in the eighties? Besides the news?

JL: I joined the Gay and Lesbian Youth Group in '90, '96 after grade twelve. There was like a gay and lesbian centre on Seymour Street. And I called the hotline. Because I—like every time I meet someone, day after I call them to see if I have safe sex or not. So, I was quite concerned about what I did with a guy the night before.

BK: So, that was something that was like influencing your behaviour. How did HIV start to kind of show up within the community? What did that look like?

JL: I seen like uhm, there were lot more—there was lots of gay men who were having—their—the—the sentence of being positive. Lots of gay men dying after a month of being diagnosed.

BK: And that was happening a lot?

JL: Yeah, because I had volleyball every week, we hear someone dying or someone—so it was sort of scary for me.

BK: Yeah. No kidding. Did you see how the medical system was kind of responding to the epidemic in the early years?

JL: Um, not really. I didn't get involved with the gay commu—the ASO until I was diagnosed in '97, though I was not involved with medical, but I see people dying. Or I'd been going to their celebrat-celebrati—their funerals a lot.

BK: And when you got diagnosed, which ASOs did you get involved with?

JL: Actually, I didn't. I was – I moved out of town for about six months. So, I was in Fifteen Mile, but then—so nineties, '98, I came back to Vancouver, and I went to AIDs Vancouver. Oh wait, yeah. And Positive Living, BCPWA. I went, yeah, after I was diagnosed, I was lucky to find doctor right away. I was told that I was HIV positive in the walk-in clinic, so there were lots of stuff—there was lots of stuff in the room that I could've harmed myself, but I didn't. So, I called first doctor on the list, and he got—he came—he let me see him the next day, so…

BK: And he got you hooked up with some support or…?

JL: Yeah, some support, and when I was diagnosed, I call my friends and they all came that night and we made a plan—we made plans of what we would do the day after. So, we did that. We went to all the AIDS Vancouver and Positive Living. And get my doctor to get me to see Doctor Montaner.

BK: And did you start treatment pretty quickly, or was that not something that you did initially?

JL: I didn't start right away because I thought I was healthy. But I started in ninety… 2001.

BK: So. you said that you got involved a little bit with AIDS Vancouver and PWA.

JL: Yep.

BK: What were those organizations doing at the time?

JL: AIDS Vancouver was probably for the groceries and getting on welfare, they—they—disability. And Positive Living was for positive members to get support. Like, I went to their weekly groups. And I got some services from someone from – there was a peer counsellor. So, I met this person, so whenever I want to talk, I see her so it helped me out a bit.

BK: So, it was like more of the peer or emotional kind of support?

JL: Yeah. Social support. And that helped a lot.

BK: Did you see how the government was responding to the epidemic at all, or any memories of how that was working at the time?

JL: I remember seeing a—that the then Premier Vander Zalm wanted to lock up all the positive people in the island. And I saw a picture of a member—a member—lying down in front of Lillian, his wife.

BK: Oh, like an activist or…?

JL: Yep.

BK: How did that make you feel—that activism?

JL: That was when—before I was diagnosed, and I was thinking that I'm glad someone out there who fought for the rights.

BK: But you didn't get involved in that type of activism or anything like that?

JL: No.

BK: Was there a—I mean that seems kind of like homophobia, the whole idea of sending people to the island?

JL: Exactly, yeah.

BK: Was that pretty common at the time?

JL: Well they, yeah—I think the Premier, he was a Conservative, so he was not all there.

BK: And do you remember, was there a lot of stigma in the eighties around HIV?

JL: That it was a gay man's disease and all gay men deserved to die. So, it wasn't that good.

BK: Did any of that stigma exist within the gay community as well? Like towards HIV positive people?

JL: I don't—I think it's like, now, lots of gay men who are not positive, they are scared of people who are positive, but it's like now it's like back then.

BK: Has the stigma changed a lot?

JL: No, it's still happening, I think.

BK: Any thoughts on how the public responded to the epidemic, so outside of the gay community?

JL: I knew—I knew my mom—my mom and dad would've been upset if I came out too early. And they seen I might die because of what was happening, so I didn't come out until grade – '90, not '90, '89.

BK: And how was coming out for you? Was that a big challenge?

JL: Yeah, I could go out, I had a curfew I was like, back then. So after one night I just—I met a guy and I hung out with him and the next day I went home and I packed all my bags and I ran away from home, because—because my brother and sister were not being nice to me and I didn't feel safe. So, I ran away from home. Moved to west—the West End with a guy, which was a mistake, but it helped me get out there.

BK: So, that's how you started to get connected to some people, other people in the gay community?

JL: Yeah.

BK: How has your perspective on HIV changed over time? So, thinking about what HIV maybe meant in the eighties and what HIV means to you now and in the present.

JL: I think it helped save my life because in—before I was diagnosed, I was out every night and I had to have sex every night. So, when I was diagnosed in '97, I changed my lifestyle. I was more aware of my health. My health and so I didn't have to have sex every night. I was sort of like choosy, not choosy but not—I was planning for the right time to have sex again.

BK: So, you changed a lot of your behaviour kind of afterwards, and focused more on your health?

JL: Yep.

BK: How do you think the epidemic changed the gay community in Vancouver?

JL: I think the—when—like the early sixties, early seventies, there was lot more big community here, and there were like lots of bars and stuff. And now there's like maybe less bars but more—more community outside of the West End, like New West, and Surrey and Burnaby. I think it's still like a line between gay men who are now positive and negative men.

BK: So, there's still some—

JL: Uh, stigma.

BK: And thinking about the community kind of broadening to be outside of the West End, do you think HIV played a role in that?

JL: I think probably the rent, the rent here.

BK: Yeah, it's not a cheap place to live, that's for sure.

JL: Nope. Nope.

BK: So, you started using some of the services at some of these ASOs. Did you ever get involved in volunteering with any of these organizations?

JL: Yes.

BK: So, what kind of work did you do there?

JL: I started with the AIDS Vancouver grocery, so I've been there for—I been there for over thirty years, volunteering with the grocery. And I joined Pos—Positive Living, I volunteer there. And this is my tenth year on the Board of Positive Living. So, I give back to them because they helped me a lot.

BK: Has that organization changed a lot in the years that you've been there?

JL: Positive Living's not—it's not gay anymore, it's more diverse people. And the grocery's more – it's a mixture of people.

BK: And you didn't get involved with any of those organizations before your diagnosis, right? Just wanted to clarify that. Do you have any advice for health care professionals based on your experience as a long-term survivor?

JL: I think, um, the person who gave me my diagnosis, he was new, but I think right now, now all doctor—all the doctors, all nurses are trained to how to deal with people who are positive. And I think they should probably take more time with a patient instead of giving them—instead of rushing them—instead of seeing them one after the other. Let the patient have more time with doctor.

BK: And do you have any advice for future generations who may not have experienced the epidemic? So, for instance younger gay men, or people who are maybe newly diagnosed?

JL: Um, love yourself and get help, start treatment, play safe, and find good friends and a group to help you out.

BK: Is that where you kind of got most of your support from in those early years, from a group of friends?

JL: Yeah, my friends.

BK: Is there anything else that I haven't had a chance to ask you or that you want to expand upon in regards to your story or your experiences?

JL: Well, I think because I'm also a gay Asian and I'm positive, that I have a double stigma with the gay community. And a lot of gay men out there know me because I'm the Asian poster boy. At first, I was not happy with that but then—but then a lot of Asian people saw my poster and they all came out with that help, so I felt glad that I was out there to help them.

BK: So, you kind of played an advocacy role as a figure in that sense?

JL: Yeah.

BK: Do you feel like race is still a big issue in the gay community?

JL: Yeah. Especially in the gay apps, like some people say, "No Asians, please." So, I find that really quite racist.

BK: Absolutely. And did that—pardon me—did that impact your experience of the epidemic at all?

JL: Not really because—not really because I—I didn't let that stop me from being gay and being happy and finding someone.

BK: You kind of overlooked—or you moved past that.

JL: Yeah, because in my view it's a person's—it's a person's bad luck if they don't want to get to know me better.

BK: Well. thank you for sharing that. Anything else that you wanted to touch on that we haven't had a chance to ask you, or expand upon?

JL: No.

BK: Well then, I think I'll just say thank you again, and thanks for sharing your story with us.

JL: Sorry about my stutter, I was embarrassed.

BK: Oh no, don't worry. I'm just going to stop these recordings for now.