

"HIV in My Day"

Interview #76

Participant: Ren Bowrun

Interviewer: RB: Sandy Lambert, Ben Klassen

SL: So Ren, how did you end up in Vancouver? You're not from here, correct?

RB: No, but I was working up north in Fort Saint John, and I came here just before Expo. And basically was supposed to be a three-week vacation, and I said fire me and throw me out. I'm not coming back. Forty below is just too much. And coming here was a real—this was before AIDS so—it was really open, you know. You couldn't go anywhere without seeing sanded jeans.

SL: And what year was that?

RB: The year before Expo.

SL: Eighty-five. So, okay. How did you find—how did you get involved with the community, the gay community, or the drag community, whatever community you want?

RB: Me?

SL: Yeah.

RB: Basically uhm, Don, I used to like go see those shows, and then there was Diana Rose, who's roommate was—my roommate was her boyfriend, so it was all the time. And Denman station, so I got to raise my dog back there so I didn't really mind it was—everybody was very accommodating.

SL: And what do you think that people were like back there, were kind of people were they like?

RB: You know, and only for myself, it's basically you're going to hell because you're gay. Well I'm going to sample every fucking thing then, send me to hell, you know. And it was, this is before AIDS so it basically, it was wide open. There was no uhm, everybody was horny you know. And it happened all the time.

SL: Do you felt that you were accepted when you came to the city, in the gay community?

RB: Yes. I hadn't felt acceptance since I left my part of Acadia.

SL: And what kind of activities did you do while you were involved in the gay community?

RB: Well, I did the—remember the gay games? I did a lot of the work for that, I worked in the bars there. Ended up taking the Israeli flag around, in the uh, closing ceremonies. So, that was when I started getting involved and that's when I started meeting a comm—working through the community.

SL: So, as time goes on, I guess the AIDS epidemic started and how did that—how did you get involved with that?

RB: Well by then I'd been involved with my partner, and he had it. And I—the way myself and everybody else was behaving, I assumed I'd get it sooner or later. So I worked on that premise. And in

the beginning, nobody knew what was going on so, you know once the diagnosis came down all of a sudden you were a leper. And I mean, couldn't even get medical help. So I did a lot of taking care of my—Myron. You know uhm, basically shit, puke, the whole thing. And literally had to have a—in the end had to have a do not resuscitate, do not revive order, and get him in a wheelchair and then abandon him in emergency for him to get—you know, to die. So.

SL: So back there, there was really no support mechanisms in any way—

RB: No, it was god's curse on gay people. You know, there was a lot of fear. Ignorance and fear make a bad cocktail. It's sort of like uhm, the Shaggy Horse went down in less than two months, because everybody there almost died within that two month. I mean there weren't enough customers left to keep the bar open. And Misty's used to be like that, and Chuck's Pub.

SL: So what did you—how did you find your social, like besides being with your boyfriend at the time.

RB: My boyfriend, our friends, I mean, all at the same time became very precious. So I spent it with a lot of people I knew. I also was involved with uhm, it was called Easter Sundays and then uhm, Meals on Wheels, and now it's Vancouver Meals.

SL: The Loving Spoonful?

RB: Yeah, yeah. So I was there since Gordon House, on and then later. But as with everybody who volunteered to help, and that's where the drag shows really came in handy, because I don't really think a lot of people would've lived—have—would've lived any more comfortable lives without it. Because, I mean they would raise one drag queen that we both know that, you know, I remember her raising enough money to buy five microwaves. And that's what she did. And I was involved with Diana Rose, it was basically the same thing. So it was a lot of everything and by falling in with others, who are in my same boat.

SL: So who besides the drag community seemed to be a big part of that whole uh, beginning part of the epidemic?

RB: Well it was the only lifeline because uhm, even at that point lesbians were afraid of gay people. And like I say I remember some of the big names just, wherever you went they did every show, you know what I mean. They fundraised, and brought people microwaves so they could at least warm something up to eat. And there was one guy who had read that uhm, that if you spread photocopier liquid on your legs to get rid of the sores it would heal them. Well he basically burnt his legs, you know. So like that's what it was. You had people jumping out of apartment doors, holding a partner's hand. Got uhm several—well a lot of suicides.

SL: So just talking about resources, how did people connect about what was out there, or what was the actual facts of, you know when you had sores and that—

RB: Well basically was a lot of word to mouth because nobody knew, and then like I say, fear was there. Because you just literally every time you go to the bar—who wasn't there, who wasn't there. And the only place that would do services for gay people then was the Anglican Church, down here just off of Davie.

SL: The one that's on Jervis?

RB: Yeah.

SL: Okay, yeah. Hmm. Uhm, did you get involved in other uh, like ACT UP and that?

RB: Well I did basically, you marched you did everything. And basically ACT UP was basically, they were desperate people, they were dying and nobody was paying attention, so they became confrontational. And I understood the ideology, but I didn't agree with the method. And uhm, it just—it kept getting more and more radical. And that opened the door for the Black Block, and once they got in there it just, everybody turned on everybody and that's why—that's when I started having trouble when all of a sudden, that I was not HIV positive became a problem. And I would have people confront me about it and, people I had worked with in all these projects who had AIDS were just livid that I didn't. And uhm, I ended up having people following me around with syringes of their blood, to inject into me. This is right after Myron died, and then uh, they broke all the windows out of the house one night, just time to go. So literally phew, all of a sudden I'm living on the street in the east end. Which was worse than AIDS.

SL: So what was the hospital, because you must've had Myron in the hospital off and on?

RB: Well this is it, I had Myron in the hospital uh once he went into a coma for six weeks, but that was the big hospital over here. And then several times here in the AIDS wing. So each time spring back, then fall further down you know what I mean. So in the end it just wasn't worth it for him, because it was very painful and you know touching him began to hurt him. You'd leave marks.

SL: And how'd you deal with that? I mean, because you must've loved this person right?

RB: I loved him. I did a lot of crying alone. I still do a lot of crying inside. I have a lot of survival guilt. But uhm, but by the grace of god go I. You know, once you love somebody you love somebody. So watching him die, and the part that really killed me was having to abandon him in emergency, with a do not resuscitate, do not revive.

SL: Why would they make you leave him there by himself?

RB: That's the only way he could get treatment in the end, to die with some amount of dignity. So when I still go and I go to the hospital and I see all our friends, I make sure their dignity's intact. Because in the beginning, AIDS patients were stripped of their dignity, you know, and treated like garbage.

SL: In those beginning days, people wore masks and full—

RB: Masks and the whole guard over the face, double gloves, and you know. When they had friends in the hospice, all they wanted to do was to be touched. And like I say, I assumed I was gonna get it and die, so.

SL: So really you weren't taking any kind of precautions like health care practitioners were, you were basically—these were your friends and loved ones?

RB: Well no this is it, and basically it wasn't 'till after Myron died that spousal rights came into, into play. And by then, his family had taken everything, and told everybody he died of cancer. So, it just, physically everything disappeared in twenty-four hours, and that was that. The only thing that ended up staying was uhm, a picture that we had in a art—in the frame store to get re-glassed. And I just completely broke.

SL: Yeah. How did he—how did he get diagnosed or what were the signs, I mean you must've seen them?

RB: Well first, it was shingles. He kept having repeated bouts of shingles. And basically through all the bloodwork, that's where found out that he has HIV. But Myron was fifteen years older than I was, so it came with the territory.

SL: Did you find you were going to a lot of celebrations of life—we didn't start call them that right away, but that became the terminology.

RB: Basically, one year I did over two hundred funerals at uhm, St. Paul's. And since then, phew, I haven't been to a funeral 'till what's his name passed, and just you know, comes back. They pile up and they're one after another after another. You feel like the song One Tin Soldier. Because you'd look around and for me I look at the buildings, and oh I remember when the guy jumped out of this one in front of the restaurant.

SL: So as time goes on, did you find that more things started to open up and more resources?

RB: Well after ACT UP and the Black Block, I left—I had to leave the west end, so I ended up in the east end. And the east end was worse off AIDS-wise than the west end was, I mean at least the west end was organized. But, these are—I'm gonna say it—these are throw-aways, these are drunken Indians, so they don't really deserve uhm, a lot of respect. And that's what really shocked me. Because I'm an Acadian, I mean we lost our freedom because we refused to—to uhm go to war with the first nations, because we bred into them. To—and it's in your face, and basically I'm realizing that just because I have a lower melanin count, but that was just horrible. And then to watch Misty's, the old Greyhound Station what was the bar next to it?

SL: [inaudible]

RB: Okay that one and two across. Basically what was happening down there is, there'd be a beer bucket, and when a first nations ordered a beer that's where it came from. Everybody's leftover beer. And it was sort of like, business. That's how you did business. Inequality just sort of set me more and more into my own little shell. I lived uh, I think three months on the street, in the east end. So I get to know a lot of these people. And you know, addiction is addiction but, they were nice, there were good people. There were assholes, but you know, their humanity was there, they were generous to a fault. And that's what I found about the east end is you know, if you didn't have anything, somebody would always have something for you to eat or whatever. So it was a different kind of care. But when it comes to healthcare, it was very hard to access. Because of the postal code, you weren't allowed any uhm, barbiturates, uhm opioids. You couldn't even get t-threes, so, just because of your postal code.

SL: Was Vancouver Native Health around back then?

RB: The name doesn't ring. Because this was before twenty-sixteen, where basically the colonial attitude was stronger, and more so than—like I said I got to see divisions in ways I hadn't seen in Montreal or Toronto. It was cut and dry.

SL: So you came back to the west end, did you find a change in the west end in peoples—

RB: The west end when I came back to it—it took me twelve years to get my housing—but when I came back to it, it was like walking through the hometown after it had been burned down. You know, you know these places, you have reminisces, but the faces have all changed and now you have a—a population that has no uhm, idea of what went before them. This little s-o-b was beaking off at Mariah, and you know, Mariah raised a lot of money. And I just basically had enough and just stood up I said you know, she made it safe for you to suck dick and not get tanned to your chicklets. So shut up! I just [grunt]. But the irony is I end up comparing it. When I first came here, there was a family sort of order to all of it, you know what I mean? There were elders, they were respected, there were dirty old men, they were laughed at. There was always a level of security because we had to have security. I mean, do you remember the grocery store before No-Frills?

SL: Mmhmm.

RB: Well they lost their business because they—when a guy came in who was being beaten up because he was gay, and they refused to call emergency. This guy got clobbered. You know that's when the gay community basically came out and just basically say, money talks and bullshit walks. So all of a sudden everybody's shopping everywhere else, so their business died. I think it sent out a direct point to the rest of the community. You know if you're going to live off of us, you're going to support us. And across from where I lived with Myron, was Aaron Webster and his partner, who I got to know him very well and after he was murdered, the whole community on lockdown sort of thing. Stunned how brutal and basically, six Christians afraid of a gay man in the middle of a park in the middle of the night. What the fuck were you doing there. But what that did is I found that uh, literally that's where the term put a brick in your purse comes from. Because everybody had enough weight in their purses. And there's an Indian one you and I know both know, you didn't fuck with her. But I never had any problems with her. She sort of knew that I come from the same stock, so no. But I you know, sit down we have coffee after the bars and these car loads of people would come through and either sulk, or insult one or the other. And after Aaron was killed, I remember you know, basically the bait was some prissy old queen walking down and then as soon as she'd turn down the alley, all of these guys would get out of their car to go beat her up. And all of a sudden, you know you get half a dozen or more, and they'd just get a queen beaten real hard. And then to find out a lot of that is a lot of the guys who came back with their friends, who'd been there the day before for their blowjobs. So that kind of said everything. And it also kind of set into action the cops couldn't ignore it anymore. I mean, it's not our issue, it's not our issue. Well it's in your face right now.

SL: And that's when shame the johns sort of got imposed, wasn't it?

RB: Again?

SL: Shame the johns.

RB: Yeah, yeah. That's when, like I say, things really began to change. And it was ugly in the beginning. Because I remember sitting across from the cops and just hating them. You know, you're the reason why sort of thing. And it took a lot time to build up respect but, they have my respect, and I think they have the gay community's respect because they've been very tactful.

SL: Do you find back then it was more community? People supported each other?

RB: Well I think back then it was more community, because we had no resources, and we literally had to depend on our friends and you know, trap line. I mean, you see the levels, the pots of soup that I cook, that would be gone in a day because it'd all be shipped off to someone who has nothing. And vice versa.

SL: So the bar scene has changed lately, within the last few years, everything's online. How do you feel about that?

RB: Well, I think it breeds—it breeds ignorance. You know and I mean I know exactly what you mean, because you go in Sunday and you look and half the people are doing this, and basically they're on Grindr trying to oh he's six metres away, but I don't want to talk to him, you know what I mean? It just—ahhhh! But what's it's done is it's killing the art of conversation, you know, and all of a sudden you realize that education is going down, the level of conversation is going down, the vocabulary is going down. And the piss me off factor goes right through the roof, because they're so—they don't work in a team. It's me-me-me-me, where when we were in the middle of the crisis, it was us-us-us-us. And that's the part I miss, and it's sort of like these kids uhm, who live on the—on you know, the net, perhaps they're getting their needs met, I don't know. But it's not really grooming them for social conversation, because they can't move beyond their cliques. And that's where—uh when there was a structured community, you know the elders and all that, that's where that came into play. And now it's not there, and basically uhm, there's this little clique, they're all to themselves, they don't go out about it. And then there's this clique, you know it's back to the leather queens don't like the drag queens because the drag queens don't like the trannies [inaudible]. You know? It's sort of we're back to that again.

SL: Yeah. With the youth today that are on PrEP, uhm what's your beliefs, what's your thoughts behind that?

RB: PrEP's not a silver bullet, you know. And it's not—okay, it's not AIDS but I was reading an article about one person who was on PrEP that got it. But right now you have to deal with the, you know the old regulars gonorrhea and syphilis, anal warts and, it just sort of—there are still risks. And you know, just having a pill that says there are no risks, is really uhm, gives a false sense of security. And it's just not uhm, let's say low conversation skills, you know getting to know people, people skills are missing. If it's on the net and a hundred and forty-four characters [inaudible]. But then you start talking about, looking from my perspective, living through an epidemic and now watching another one come, in the form of uhm—uhm fentanyl, you know it just—kids if you don't get wise, you're gonna get kickin. And I guess that—that's my, when I say I'm piss me off, it's not at the kid it's just sort of like, if 'a' happens, 'b' happens, 'c' happens then 'd's gonna happen. That's exactly what happened before. You know, so the expression those who don't learn from the past are condemned to repeat it. Well they won't listen, they have no community outside of that little clique, and we both know those little cliques don't survive long. Especially when they're under pressure. Like I say, right now with the mental health down here and I'm seeing exactly the same things unfold in the beginning, and now it just, everybody is overwhelmed. This'll be, in a year and this so far this year, we've gone through three sets of staff. It just burns people out because it's just too much. But we had to do it with AIDS and deal with the body fluids and trying to keep them in their homes for as long as you could. There was a lot of throwing them out, if the landlord could get the upper hand, didn't want any AIDS people in their building.

SL: But back then we also had such a big string of friends that we would take shifts as well. It's like I'm tired, I need some sleep, I need rest, whereas it's not—

RB: Your friends became your social network and their friends became part of that social network. So we all came together for an ugly cause, and right now it—you see the divisions again. And what's really funny is whether you call it gay, lesbian, first nations, when you start breaking them all down what you're really doing is creating a little wedge that all want to go their own way, but when they're focused things get done.

SL: Well that's the thing they put 'em in their silos, because if you put 'em in silos they're not that strong. You put 'em all together then—

RB: Yes, the people united should never be divided. And like I say, ACT UP in the beginning was sort of a lift up, because you know, we honestly felt that we were going down so you know if you're going to die, cops gonna kill me? So, get out there. But the more militant it got, and then when I say, Black Box infused, they drove as many wedges as possible. It's sort of like in the end when—I remember the cocktail first came out and they had some success, that's when a lot of the fundraisers who'd been raising for years, just picked up and left. You know I wasn't the only one, just—you step away. And that's what I found happened with a lot of people, because now that I'm back into the west end, on occasion I get to see a lot of those old queens that I used to know, and those were the good old days. Well, that's what we called it, the good old days. But you don't want to live in the past, but when the present looks like the fucking past. Because that's what's happening. And no it's not my problem. It is your problem. So I'm just going to be—I think what I walked away with is basically it's better to be pro-active than reactive. Because we were always running to catch up when we were dealing with HIV here, and just literally to be able to treat like a person. So, it uhm, it's come a way, it's still got a ways to go. And I don't know what to make of the younger kids, I mean some of them are really nice and there generalities isn't really good neither, but there just seems to be so many of them who are—they're not acquainted with the same world I'm acquainted with, and it just sort of—I'm before the net, most of them are after the net. So we have two different realities. And I don't—I crave conversation but you know I don't really enjoy the same conversation in half an hour all over and over and over again.

SL: I heard that yesterday, or just the day before.

RB: And you go verbatim on them and they're right shocked, and then they're oh be honest, and when you're really honest with them you've really offended them because you've, you know popped a delusion. So.

SL: Any questions Ben?

BK: Well did you have support available to you as a caregiver during this time at all?

RB: Nope, nope, nobody did.

BK: That's an immense role to be carrying on your own.

RB: Oh, I still carry. Yeah I... it is what it is. I don't think anybody gets through life without be damaged. It is what it is. It's a hole in my heart that I've learned to live with, but every now and then it just—it overcomes me. Yeah. Or—and especially holidays, you know when—like gay pride, I remember when gay pride was a lot of fun. Now it's a lot of politics. And shutting down the streets and all that and then, you have to pay for everything. That isn't how it works. You know then all of a sudden—it's good business, don't get me wrong, I mean the city makes a lot of money off of it—it's just all of a sudden

right now, you pay for everything. The bottle of water was a dollar before gay pride, and two-fifty after. So everybody's out gouging. You know it becomes a freak show. So I don't do that, I mean now since I've been—my god it's a year tomorrow—since I've had my gastric bypass, so I've really changed a lot. And the whole idea of going and spending an afternoon in there, you know I just, nah. Nah. You know I don't have the bail money. I'm a very direct person. And when they love me they love me, but when they hate me—whoo. So that's it, I--'a' I am sarcastic, 'b' I do use double-entendres, and 'c' don't say 'be honest with me' and then the next question you know, you're honest with them and their nose is right out of joint because you've blown up their fantasy. You've seen through the bar face. And life's too short now. It's direct and like I say, you save your best insults for the family. It's true. So anymore questions?

BK: Well anything else you wanted to say about how the drag community was responding to the epidemic? Because we haven't heard that much about that, and I would love to hear a little bit more.

RB: Well all of a sudden Mariah start uhm, doing show after show after show, and so did Diana Rose and uhm the one from Newfoundland?

SL: Miss Adrian?

RB: Yeah Miss Adrian, and Veni, Venus, you know? They were all working and there were some new faces, some new talent out too, but a lot of them I don't remember what happened to them. But they were out all the time. Like I say, it was—you went out to a fundraiser, you didn't go out for a beer. You know what I mean? If it meant a twenty-dollar tip to—as you're being performed, well that twenty-dollar tip ended up going to them and they in turn gave it to—towards like I say, the big thing was uhm, microwaves. And I mean there were shows from oh god, the Gandy Dancer, Denman Station, Numbers—

SL: Faces.

RB: Mmhm, even Misty. Misty had the native one all the time. Misty's. That was interesting got to uh, be the bouncer there a couple of times. But it just, you know, it's really interesting because if you think about it, out of all the bars that really was truthful to uhm, to the gay community that was Denman Station and like, Hamburger Mary's and Dollar Pennies, which is now uh—which is now—but I mean, they stayed true to the community. Where right now you've got most of the bars are owned by straight companies, and you're just a process thing. I remember when Celebrities was a place to go, now it's a place to avoid. And same with Numbers. And uhm, let's face it between the Junction, which is a good drag bar, and Pumpjack, you know, you're not supporting anything but your own—

SL: Do you recall when basically all the different leagues started, like the bowling league, and the softball league.

RB: No, I was all out of here by then, and basically I—enough is enough, I mean I literally had a nervous breakdown, and it just—honestly after Myron died, and the windows were broken, his family came and took everything. I broke. You know I just, put on my warmest clothes and just kept walking until I ended up at Main Street and Hastings. And the only thing that got me off the street is I had my dog then. You know I had to take care of him, and I think if I didn't have him to take care of, I would've gotten into the drugs, or felt as lost. But the dog just sort of kept me mentally intact, to a functioning level anyway. But no it just—there's just no way to reconcile with myself what I'd lived through. It just was so—I ended up with a small group later on, of war vets with survival guilt, and I think that was the first time 'a' that I

had a name for it and 'b' that I'm not the only person who feels like this. You know, could I have done something better, why them not me. I was looking forward to dying. My husband, all my friends were dead. Surviving was no gift. Because you, like I say, I look I'm in rooms in the hospital and I can remember something that hits me back from ten years ago. The smell of flowers? Disgusting. But no, the drag shows went on and on and on, and you know, as the older gay men who had money started to pass, they start leaving money to uhm, groups to help the gay community. And I think that's what happened with a lot of them because when they died, a lot of their—a lot of their money ended up coming to the community in very helpful and very positive ways. But for every one like that, I mean there were ten or fifteen who were fighting the landlord because the landlord was trying to evict them because they had HIV and I remember when Easter Sundays turned into Vancouver Meals, we did a fundraiser at the old armory. And that night we raised a hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars. And it sort of—that was the [breathy sound] the engines start going. And we just, like I say after a while you're volunteered out, you're emotionally drained, and you just have no reference to normal. What I've taken away from that now is basically, when we get together have a lot of fun, I enjoy it, but when I'm home I also enjoy my own company, and I enjoy silence. Because sometimes it's—it's just too much. You're not supposed to live your life in the past, but when you see this coming and you know, it's not the gift of second sight it's just being able to think, well this is happening now, it's going to happen. Remember how coke was just a little recreation drug, and then boom, right about the time AIDS hit you know, people were going down. Either as a form of suicide or they just didn't care anymore. That was the drug of choice.

BK: And the drag community has changed a lot, I imagine?

RB: It has, and many have passed, but there are several who are still around, that they still do shows. But they're not—and I haven't seen any, because I just don't feel uhm—I don't want to. And I just—it brings back a lot of fond memories, but it also touches a lot of—and I learned sarcasm from—from drag queens. It's hard. It's funny, I was out for the first time in three years ago, it was first time I saw Mariah without Mariah. And basically the give-away was the lips and the voice. Are you in show business? No then get your fucking feet off my stage. That was my introduction to my first drag show. Okay.

SL: Yeah I saw her come back, and she's like, oh girl, I see the north was really good for you. You've eaten a lot. She goes, oh yes dear.

RB: Well this is it, we're all a little more weight-ly. I just lost half of myself and I'm still weight-ly. But no, there are good drag queens, I hear Carlotta's really good. So, it's a business and basically back then, you could blur the line. There were ways of tucking—these guys knew how to tuck in such a way that when you first looked, you assume you're looking at a vagina. That used to just freak people right out. Because you had to be careful who you told you were gay, because it could backfire where you work, or your social circle. So that's where Denman Station I found was a great place to break the water, because it was inclusive. It was the first bar that I'd been too that was inclusive. They had to put on extra security when the lesbians were there, but it was inclusive.

SL: I know that they still do uhm, bingo for Friends for Life and that, but there's not a lot of that happening anymore?

RB: No it basically, again, you don't have the volunteers to keep it going anymore. Because if you volunteer you have to be part of the community, if you have to be part of the community, you have to have a social responsibility. A hundred-and-forty-four characters is a hell of a lot easier.

BK: And what was uh, the Vancouver Meal Society, or Easter Sundays, what were they doing exactly? When you were involved there.

RB: Well Easter Sundays was set up in when—or Easter Sundays was basically at Gordon House, and every Sunday we'd make meals for people with AIDS. That's—it started that simply, and then from that it became uhm, Meals on Wheels, and then that's when I was there too. Just before it changed into Vancouver Meals, I was gone by then. Uh, I'm a chef, so cooking was my way, and it still is my way of dealing with a lot of things. It made me—it was nice to share. And a lot of these people, I knew them personally. And back then when you knew somebody personally it was basically his friend, and his friend, and his friend but they all hang together and they're, you know. It was a—there was a whole dynamic happening, and you actually still get to see it when you're around a bunch of older guys at the bar. It's the pitcher of the beer goes on, and everybody has something from it. And then the next person buys the next pitcher. Whereas right now it's just sort of, it's basically pitcher goes onto the table, they drink it and they walk away. You know? Right?

BK: Well I mean, free beer.

RB: Yeah well, so much for manners.

SL: It was Easter that started that whole Friends for Life that's—

RB: Yeah she just—

SL: She campaigned, and then she became empress and then she started Easter's.

RB: And basically because she was bigger than life. You know and god bless her soul, she was just one of the nicest ladies I've ever met. But god could she be ironed. Well you had to be, right? To just—enough was enough when that girl said, there was no but. But I heard that by doing that she got her vision out, and her legacy is Vancouver Meals, and it's a good legacy to have. And now they're all professional, they're not just a bunch of people, volunteers getting together to cook for them. It's all professionally done, so no chance of infections and things like that. That's the one thing when we were cooking for them, we really had to be careful. I was constantly washing hands, constantly keeping the place—because if you gave them anything, you'd kill them. Not to put any pressure on you.

BK: Were those meals mostly going to folks in west end at the time?

RB: Well this is it, Gordon House is the community house west end. So most of these people would come up from the Denman Street area and they'd come down from up behind Davie Street, and like I say, you would see the same people there that you'd known a couple of weeks earlier, and they're looking like hell. And for some people it was really quick. And others it was lingering. And the quick ones were the lucky ones, you know, all things considering the ones who fought for life had a miserable life. Had a miserable life. But, the will to live right? Now there's assisted suicide, then there wasn't. I know several people who just—put my pills on the counter, go for a walk around the block, come back the pills are gone the glass of water's half done. I feel tired.

SL: Or make a nice milkshake.

RB: So, and then we could be charged with murder. But fuck it, free room and board. [laughter] That's my way of coping.

BK: It's come up a lot, black humour—

RB: Yeah well what I said, it's my way of coping because I cried my tears. And not that I won't cry more, it just now it's a piece of history so I'm just remembering it. But like I say for me, it's also when I look to the future, I'm looking at it's going to be that way again. Because this being welfare Wednesday, we had the ambulance you know, half a dozen times and a guy set his suite on fire. So, had the fire department too. Mardi gras. But that's how it started before so.

BK: I won't ask too many questions more because I feel like we've covered a lot, but it must—what was it like being in a relationship where one of you was HIV positive and the other one was HIV negative in those early years?

RB: Well in the first two years of my relationship with Myron, he was constantly you can go out and see other guys, you can go out and see other guys. Well I just wasn't geared that way. So we finally figure that out, and basically I knew he had AIDS going in. And the way everything was going, I assumed I'd get it quicker, and every four months I'd go get tested. And it'd come back negative, come back negative. And you couldn't tell anybody. It was like a secret life. I remember one time when I came out—I was getting tested at the community centre, the gay community centre—and he gave me the form that says HIV negative. And they said it and there was a group of people there, and the guy who'd done the test he said to me, 'I wouldn't brag about it.' That was the reverse discrimination. So there was a lot of twists and turns through it all. Some people rose to the occasion, and some didn't.

BK: But was there a lot of stigma towards HIV positive people within the gay community at that time?

RB: Well yeah, because at that time in the beginning, nobody knew anything so they didn't know if it was, you could breath in on somebody, you know so—and in the end just sort of like well we're all gonna die, so. And that's where I think that taking the positive route that I took was my saving grace, because I just refused to be washed along with the tides, you know? I'm pro-active not reactive. Don't like being reactive because it has ugly consequences with most people. It's going to happen how I choose to handle it, is how I choose to handle it. And I'll choose to handle it what's best for me, not for—I think I've done my giving. Not that I'll stop but I just, I might get my bills paid.

SL: How would you tell the younger, or the people coming out now that it's okay to uhm, be with a person that's positive, right? Because it seems to be a little bit ignorance out there, right now.

RB: Yeah that's what I'm finding too, that ignorance is coming back. We've gone from knowing everything about it, to being willfully ignorant. And there is—I put that willfully in, because these kids don't want to know. So I mean they pre-judge and you know, when we were all young and stupid—you had to be young and stupid to get old and wise—so we were young and stupid too, but we're talking about dude, learn from my mistakes. And they weren't that long ago.

BK: And the difference is the information's out there now, it wasn't there in the eighties.

RB: Well this is it, I mean this is willful ignorance. Because you know, with—I lived with a positive man for ten years. Knowing—and then there was no protection. That was it. So, how can you—it's like no I don't blame, it's not that I don't like black people I just don't date black people, you know it's not like you don't like Indians I just don't date Indians. It's the same shit, different pile. You're being a bigot and you're justifying it. You know if you don't have the balls enough to treat the person that you're supposed to be in love with as an equal, you know, stick to your hundred-and-forty-four characters.

BK: But choosing to love a partner at that time who was HIV positive, I mean that's a pretty radical rejection of stigma in a lot of ways, to say I love this person I'm going to be with them regardless of all this fear and hysteria.

RB: Well this is it, and basically like I say he was fifteen years older than I was. And he was a tailor, and five-foot-two, and just the funniest little guy going with an English wit. And you know he was just a—he was five-foot-two but he would walk into the room and he was six-foot-four, sort of thing. He was very good at what he did, he worked with [inaudible] furs, did lots of costumes. And I mean that's where I got all my costumes, is he'd be making costumes. One year I went as the count of Monte Cristo, and Halloween, whispering all these things in friends ears that they had shared with me, it's just why don't you stick around while the mask comes off. So I mean he always made costumes for us and basically he made my—made the jacket and all that, that we did the fundraiser with. And we had an argument about sitting down, he knows I sit down, so he made a cummerbund with steel stays in it. You're not sitting down. I don't have to say it but I got the last word right.

SL: It's like the bustiers. The bustiers are made of bone, you sit like this all night, because you can't bend. Yeah you sit like this all night.

RB: Oh yeah, I know. The things we laugh at. [inaudible] Sorry that's why I come. It's the only way to survive it all, I mean you have to find the lighter end to it. I've done my crying, it's not that like I say it's all over, but life goes on and right now, for me I've had gastric bypass surgery a year ago. So I've gone from three-hundred-and-twenty pounds to just under two-hundred pounds, in a year. So that's the one thing I find change, as long as you keep going out of the routine change is very good. That's where this comes into it, it just sort of, it's exactly what I thought when Sandy first approached me on this, is sort of like I'm speaking for, you know those who didn't make it. Shine a light on, our community was our worst hour but it brought out the best in most of us. Because a lot of people didn't think they did a lot, but a lot people doing a little helped a lot. Because nobody else was helping, and I remember it wasn't, are you going to the bar. You know when you meet people in the street are you going to the bar tonight, it was basically have you eaten today, you eaten today? So that was Davie Street then.

SL: Yeah, more hands make little work

RB: And basically it also gave you people to commiserate with, which was very—you know when I put the bar face on, you become the character, the life of the party the whole thing, but you come home, you take the makeup off and you're still flat-assed. It's part of the coping skills. And like I say, it's happening yet again but this time the community is just so fragmented. And I think as soon as St. Paul's disappears from here, most of the history will disappear with it. And that would be a large part of the AIDS epidemic, and a gay community, and the relationship that was formed in St. Paul's.

SL: Especially the old structure there.

RB: I used to hate the hospice ward. And they used to call us, because I had the dog then. I had a little miniature pincher, ten pounds. And uhm, I really loved him. And they used to call us for certain people, and they'd say, 'Ren, the rattle's begun.' So basically I'd be walking up from Burrard and Jervis with the dog, and basically sit there with the person, but the dog could get in between all the wires and that, and just give them peace. And that's how a lot of people I know went. And when the dog died, I just cried for days. So, we all did what we had to do. And what I found out, is that basically it's good to be unique, so vive la difference. Be who you are. And that's what the gay community brought out, is basically be who you are, explore yourself. And we had a lot less labels, you were gay, you were straight, you were bi-sexual, you were a lesbian, or you were androgynous. That was it. So it's kind of hard to make twenty-four groupings out of that.

BK: We've covered everything. Is there anything that you wanted to add before we wrap up, or anything else you thought we'd ask about that we haven't covered yet?

RB: No, not really, just uhm, I'll probably think of something later on but that's life.

BK: We can always chat again if you think we need to.

RB: Well I have to clear it first. The perils of Sandy.

BK: Well if you don't have anything to add for now, I just wanted to say thank you Ren, and well stop the recording.

