"HIV in My Day" – Victoria Interview 8

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Interviewee: Vincent Ruttan (VR); Interviewer: Art Holbrook (AH); Also present: Bruce Budden (BB)

Art Holbrook: Now you've already done the forms, so we don't need you to do that a second time.

Vincent Ruttan: Uhm, yeah, so.

AH: So… Uh, I'm sorry about that—that screw up.

VR: That's okay, you have no idea how much I appreciate the extra per diem thingy. Because I have no propane. And I'm broke, so, yeah.

AH: Well, let's start back at the beginning here. What's your connection to Victoria?

VR: Victoria? I was born and raised in Victoria, and – well, Sooke, which is outside of Victoria, uh, small town, very, very redneck, loggers and fisherman mostly. And I left Sooke when I was eighteen and came to town. By the time I was nineteen, I was in Vancouver, at least sometimes, and travelling and being a freshly new out gay man. I was having a wonderful time. Apparently too wonderful by the time I was twenty-five. We'd heard about AIDS, sorta, a little bit, you know here and there. The gay disease, the gay cancer, all that stuff they would say. And they focused on the gay, because so many gay people were getting sick. And it scared me, but you know, nineteen, invincible, nothing's gonna happen. Uhm, so yeah, where do we go from there… We uh… I travelled around a lot, and I just assumed after awhile that yeah, I probably was infected. I wasn't at that point, until I was twenty-five. And then I… when I was twenty-five, my partner and I were living in Vancouver, and our friends were just getting sick and dropping everywhere, so much so that we were going to two or three funerals a week. And we ended up having to say, okay, this is it, that's enough, we can't do this anymore, we can't be in the middle of all this and have this happening. We were in the West End, and it was gay central, so that's where it was most obvious there was something going on. So, we moved back to Victoria, and into his father's farm, and I was tested almost immediately. I think we moved here in August—

AH: What year was that?

VR: In 1987. By November, I had been tested, but my doctor didn't give me my results for like, a year, because I didn't see her for that length of time, and she wasn't proactive to get a hold of me. So, when I finally did see her and she told me uhhm… my partner had been exposed for almost a year. God knows how but he's fine. And like, I have no clue how that happened, but I'm very grateful. He's still fine to this day, and I've never been sick, but I've been involved with PWA, AVI…

AH: How did you react to the doctor waiting a year?

VR: I tried to sue, actually. I investigated how I could possibly sue her for that, risking my partner. It was bad enough that… that… it was all just bad. I was furious, right? Because my partner didn't deserve that, he didn't need to be risked without – you know, unnecessarily, and that contributed to the fact that we couldn't—I couldn't be intimate with anybody. Just, I couldn't. Right? It was just like, oh yeah, you're gonna kill the person you love most in the world. And maybe long-term kill but it's a kill. Just, I couldn't do it. After I found out. Uhhhm… she didn't really, she wasn't here much longer than that in Victoria actually, that doctor she was gone, fairly quickly, because I made sure everybody knew. Everybody I could tell, I told. And I didn't get in trouble for it, so I'm assuming that I was in the right, and I had the right to do that. So, I did. I won't mention her name now because it's old news, it's thirty-two years ago or something, it's like whatever it doesn't matter. At that time, it really mattered.

AH: I don't think we had the sexual assault laws that we have now—

VR: No, we don't.

AH: --but you would've been unwittingly guilty of that. I mean it's crazy.

VR: I could've—I could've killed my partner. Which, although many times I may have wanted to kill him. But not in that horrifying manner, you know, people died just horrible, horrible deaths. When you say, oh, I wanna [inaudible] you want it to happen instantly and him just be gone. Not drag out for twenty years or whatever. Uhm, yeah, she – I was pretty pissed.

AH: I would guess so! So how did you learn about AIDS, what through the process of figuring out what this is all about?

VR: Well, like I said, I was young, I came out when I was like eighteen. It seemed fine at the time, I don't remember anything then, that was in 1981, or [198]2, January. And didn't really hear a lot at that point, 'cause I was in Victoria still, and it hadn't, the rumors and stuff hadn't gotten here yet. But as soon as I went to Vancouver, after I came out, I think, yeah, I was underage when I got to Vancouver. Didn't make any difference at the bars though, you get in no matter what – if you were young and cute, you're in. So, I was, I had a very good time, 'cause I was young and very cute. So, I was popular. I started to learn about it when people would be walking down the street and you'd look, and they'd be sick. There'd be like these spots all over them, like, really nasty looking purple spots, and that was the first indicator. And then people started to just talk and talk. And talk about, you know, all these gay guys are dying in San Francisco. And, it's moving around North America, and it's going to the big cities first and then it's spreading out from there. And it was just rumours and talk, and then there started to be articles in magazines like *Angles* I think it's called. And, uhm… ah, hell I can't even remember the names of them. There was a couple of papers that were gay papers, and they started to do articles about all of these gay men getting sick, and wondering what's happening, and is it transmitted sexually, or how the hell do you get it? And it just started to, you know, grow exponentially. And my partner and I were very social in the scene, we were very much out there, so we saw everyone and we knew everyone, and we would watch as they would drop, and disappear from society. And they'd be gone. Well, no, they're not dead yet, but they will be

soon. Kinda thing. By ‘84, ‘5, things were getting a little more… well, understood a little bit more, that yes it was sexually transmitted, and blood-borne and that kind of thing. But is it in your spit? Well, we don’t know. Can you get it from a blow job? We don’t know. We just don’t know.

Bruce Budden: Were you hearing that from doctors or nurses or the news or…?

VR: The news, the people, the people who – like the community uhm—

BB: The frontline people?

VR: Yeah, like we just… there wasn’t a lot of frontline people at that point. I mean there was just, it was just starting to develop some kind of response. By ‘87 when I tested positive, there’d been a response but still nothing anybody could do about it. You know, they’d treat people with—with—drugs that – they were just, whatever we’ll throw drugs at it, maybe one of them will work. And of course, none of them did. A lot of people died from too many drugs, or too much of one drug – people died of AZT poisoning basically, because they did way too much. It may have helped if they had taken less, but we don’t know. I mean now they’ve got the combination, so, you know, a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and it helps. But a lot of one thing is gonna kill you, apparently.

AH: Did you turn around and educate others as you began to learn about it?

VR: As I began to learn, yeah. And by… I guess, would’ve been about 1989, so I’d been positive for about two years at that point, I was a little bit involved with some of the volunteer programs, like AVI and PWA. They were just fledgling, very, very early on. And then I got a call from Saskatoon, by best friend, girlfriend, she uhh, ended up in four different hospitals in Saskatoon. They all sent her home saying, “Well you’ve got pneumonia, you’ve got this, you’ve got that,” or “There’s nothing really wrong with you. It’s just you’ve got a bad cold.” And then her boyfriend dropped her at the hospital and said, “Don’t even call me until you know what’s so fucking wrong with her.” And… then she called me and said, “Vince, I’ve got AIDS.” And I’m like, “How the hell did you get AIDS?” Right? Because, we were just friends, there was no… nothing that would – like, I couldn’t possibly have given it to her, as far as I knew. And it seems that one of her boyfriends was an IV user, and he was involved with some gay guys who were also IV users, that were positive. So, either they weren’t as careful as they thought they were or they just weren’t careful, and somebody used somebody else’s rig. And she went straight to pneumocystic pneumonia, and she was very ill, very quickly. Her son, who I was, had helped her to raise while he was in Vancouver, and we’d become very close, he was about… I guess by then he would’ve been about six or seven, something like that, yeah, and uh, after the trauma of finding out that she was positive and then finding out that she had what they called full-blown, with the pneumonia, they diagnosed her with a cancer on in her throat.

So, being that BC had the best clinic available at the time, she came back to BC, to Victoria, because we had a very good clinic here. And I took care of her and [son’s name] while she was treated for this throat cancer. I think that was in ‘91 or ‘[9]2, somewhere around there. By ‘96, she had gone back to Saskatoon, after a year and a half or so of me being the primary caregiver

for her and her son, and,about six months after the wonderful cure-all drugs came out, she died. So, we talked about me taking her son. It was decided that it would be bad to give him another parent who had a very high chance of dying before he became and adult. So… crushed me, because I wanted to do it, but I couldn't. Just couldn't do it. Couldn't do it to [name]. So, when she died, he went to her sister whose husband wanted him to be a twelve-year old – not happening, 'cause he's already grown up and been, you know, he was feeding mummy through her tube, rolling joints for mummy, getting her meds for her. She was… her arms were so thin… that I could wrap my fingers around them easily and I could spare, she looked like a bird, how their bones poke out. So, I remember one time when actually I was volunteering at PWA with my friend [name], and we got this phone call, and [child's name] had taken her last hundred dollar bill out of her wallet, and gone to the corner store and bought Pogs. You may remember Pogs, they were these round things that kids collected and they were just the rage for about a year or two. And he said he spent twenty dollars on pogs and cleaned them out, and then he's like, "Well, what do I do with the extra money?" So, he's standing in front of the apartment building giving it to people walking down the street! Mom's last money. And the landlady caught him, brought him up to [mom's name]. [Name] immediately phoned me and said, "If you don't come here and beat my child for me, I'll break my arm and I'll do it myself." And so, of course I had to come back and deal with that. The whole thing is very funny now, but he's thirty-three now, so yeah, it's a while ago. Yeah, that was funny.

My friend [name] passed away in, was it early 2000s I believe, wasn't…when was… yeah, it was early 2000s. That was traumatic for me. The two of them were the closest people that I lost. And uh, oh, back to [child's name], well he went to his aunt. His uncle beat him up a couple times, he was twelve. Then he went to his father, who was a re-born Christian, and replaced all of John's angry at God music with Bibles, and God stuff. So, [name] tried to light a bonfire in the middle of the kitchen, and it lit, so dad threw him out, he was thirteen. And he lived under the bridge, or the Surrey Skytrain station, with the heroin junkies and drug addicts. Just beyond my fathoming, I couldn't understand that. But I went to a conference with, when I was working with AVI, I went to a conference and found out that he was on the street somewhere. And I had to go and find him. Screw the conference I don't care, and I told my boss I'm going, gotta find him, he's only thirteen. So, after a day and a half, back and forth on the Skytrain dawn to dusk, the place where, safehouse for kids, messages at soup kitchens, finally I get a call from him, he's in New Westminster. Okay. So, I said, "Okay, meet me downtown. Virgin Records, we'll be there." And 'bout an hour later, I'm standing at Virgin Records and this huge kid comes walking towards me. I'm like, "[Name]? Holy shit." 'Cause I hadn't seen him in two years, and he had gone from a twelve-year-old to a fourteen-year-old, which is an amazing jump in height, apparently, and weight. And I said to John, "Are you ready to come back to Victoria with me?" And he goes, "Yeah, when are we leaving?"

So, we got to Victoria, social services would not, or children and families would not allow him to stay with me. After a couple of months, we were fighting, I was with welfare, or children and families, because they wouldn't give me custody, they wouldn't let me raise him. The way he'd normally would, like I'd be like his mom, 'cause I knew how she did and I knew what her standards were. I believed I was the perfect choice. They believed that because I'd been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, that I couldn't do it because it would exacerbate my condition and bring it back. Because they couldn't say, "Because you're a fag" 'cause there's laws about

that. And they couldn't say anything about AIDS, 'cause there's discriminatory laws about that at that point too. But anorexia? No, they don't have any laws about that so, they picked that one. And [name] went into care for the next several years, resisting a hundred percent the whole time. The only time he wasn't involved with the police was when he was living at my house. So… it wasn't good for [name]. And it all ended up, he ended up paying the brunt of the price, you know, next to his mother paying the ultimate price, uhm, he uhh… yeah, he's multiplied a bit now. He's got three of his own and four steps, and uh, just seems to collect children and girlfriends. Uhm, so… I haven't seen him for a long time, we're sort of estranged at the moment. He's trying to tell me who and how I should live my life, and who I should be involved with. I'm sorry, you're the kid, I'm the grown-up, I'm the parent, I'll do what I freaking please. But whatever… Uh, he's okay. Uhm… yeah. So. Next.

AH: So—

VR: Ramble, ramble, ramble, I know.

AH: Oh no, that's a fascinating story.

VR: There's so much.

AH: So how did your—uhh, some of the stuff here, more or less talking about. What uh, impact in your relationship and the gay community?

VR: Uhm, how did it impact my relationship?

AH: Yeah, being positive.

VR: Well, my long-term relationship was [name]. We were seventeen years at the ultimate, that's how long we were together. I tested – we were about four years in when I tested positive. He assumed he was positive, so did I. Of course you are. A year, I mean nobody can get through that many chances. Do the math, chances are pretty good. But he's fine. Still fine, he doesn't have AIDS he's got Alzheimer's, but he's sixty-five now, and you know, he made it through the gauntlet without too much trauma. Intimacy? Not happening. I just couldn't. I didn't want to kill my partner, the person I love, which was a strain, and ultimately led to break-ups. And in the end, it basically had killed the relationship, but we still ended up with another twelve years or something after the positive diagnosis, which is more than most get in our community. I mean, two years is a long time in our community. So, I figure we did pretty good. He thought he was positive, I thought he was positive, he did not believe the first eight tests that he had. Said, "That's not possible, it's not possible. It's just not." And after the twelfth test and phoning Berkeley, California, I believe it is, where they were doing a lot of research, he finally understood that, no, he was negative, and he was going to stay that way, for whatever reason. Don't know why. Uhm, he was very risky after that, the whole time he was risky 'cause he – not only did he think he was already positive, but I think he wanted to be positive as well. In a way, he wanted to be, he wanted it so that I wasn't scared I was going to infect him, 'cause he was already infected. Right? But then it would've been, I did it, so now, great, wonderful you're

going to die and it's all my fault. But he's still to this day he's negative, and he's doing okay, physically, I guess.

AH: So, both of you didn't have other partners?

VR: I did… Every time we split up, you know, I'd go out and I was ten years younger than him, so I was sowing some oats, as often as I could. And I had multiple affairs in those seventeen years, but those affairs were always with positive people, never with somebody who was negative, couldn't do it. I just… I couldn't do it. But if somebody was already positive, I can't hurt them, so don't blame me, already got it. Not my fault. All of those guys I think, are now dead. I think. If there was like, one a year for seventeen years, so it was, yeah that's not a very good lover, or partner. I was a little bit out there. So… ooops.

AH: Well. Uh… so, how 'bout your activism? How much were you doing with AVI or PWA or whatever?

VR: Well I was – I wouldn't call it activism in my position because I was – I don't like to be in your face, and I'm not that aggressive, assertive kind of thing about anything. But I did help out, and when people said stupid shit that I knew to be incorrect, I would correct them immediately and with a little bit of vehemence, I think is the right word? Very energetically, I would correct them. And I would – you know, they go, well, blah blah blah, and I'd be like, "Well, you're wrong, and you're spreading the wrong information. So, if you're going to tell people stuff, tell them the right stuff. Don't tell 'em stupid stuff that is just not possible." And uh, I was with PWA, Victoria PWA, volunteered with them a lot on the Superior Street address, that's when [friend's name] and [child's name] were first here was when it was down at Superior. And then it was AVI and I run the lunch program for several years, at least it seems like several years. I also was an employee with AVI as a drop-in worker. First-line, very first-line, 'cause people would come in and sign up with me to be a member. So, I'd be the first person they saw.

AH: So, you were saying that you responded to people vehemently. What kind of people? People on the street or…?

VR: Anybody. Anybody I heard saying something that was wrong, didn't matter who it was, I didn't care. So, my – for example, my brother and his girlfriend had a child who was handicapped. He just was born with like, everything going against him. And she didn't like me being anywhere near him because of potentially I could make him even sicker. And of course, being that he was quite sick, she didn't want any complications more than he already had. And even though I knew I couldn't infect him, I had to let her know very strongly that I couldn't, and wouldn't do anything that would jeopardize my nephew. He's just a baby, I would never do anything that would jeopardize him or hurt him or potentially anything. And it took several years for her to understand that I could not make him sick. There was – my brother was also going through, at the time – I didn't tell my mum I was positive for a long time, because my brother [name]—oops sorry, scratch that—my brother ended up, same time as I tested positive or found out I was positive, he developed leukemia. So, in my mind, it was like, well, I think I got a little more time than he does, so I'm just gonna hold off on this one and I'm not going to tell her until either he dies, or he's okay. He ended up okay, he made it through the leukemia, he got a bone

marrow transplant from my brother, that was all done. And then, when we all knew he was going to be fine, which took almost a year, I finally had mum come into town, and I told her… And she was very upset, 'cause she just – ah fuck, here we go… I didn't mention this last time, she had just gone through a year of going to Toronto for six weeks, living in a little ugly scary hotel, downtown Toronto, going to the hospital everyday, taking care of my brother. She flew him back to Victoria, cost a fortune, and he was treated here again, best cancer clinic available was here. So, that all we had gone through and she had just kind of went, whew, okay, okay, I can breathe now. And I'm like, "Mom, I'm sorry, but don't breathe too much, 'cause I've got AIDS, er, HIV, and I don't know what's going to happen." And I remember her reaction was pretty bad. She was just devastated – not another one. But I couldn't tell her and add to her woes while she was in the midst of a crisis already. And I had a little bit of time in my mind, I wasn't sick yet, I hadn't developed any symptoms, so I had some time. And if I could put it off, if I got sick, well, then I guess I'm gonna have to tell her, but in the meantime, no, we're not going to tell her. So… yeah.

AH: So, what kind of response did you get from the community at large? Were there more homophobic reactions?

VR: Not to me, and not to my face, because people I think would, I think they knew that I would react a little bit… strongly. Uhm, to stupidity, that's – I just… you know, if you're going to be an idiot, you be an idiot, but I'm going to call you on your stupidity. Most people were pretty good, actually, I think everybody was good. Nobody – I don't remember any real bad reactions or – except for my sister-in-law but she has a sick child, so I kind of got that. And once she knew and found out and learned a little more, she was okay. But I would've been pretty protective of my nephew as well, so she gets a get out of jail free on that one. But pretty much the worst reactions were my actual siblings—my brothers—they were unreasonable at best. But they came around. The one with leukemia, he kinda just… he kind of got it that you get what you get and that's all that you get, and you've gotta deal with whatever hand you're given. And he also knew from being sick, what is contagious and how contagious and all that stuff, so he kind of got that. He still didn't like that I was a fag. That was never gonna change. Still hasn't changed. But you know what, I don't care, and he knows I don't care what he thinks. Who cares? Not your issue, it's my problem, and it's me.

AH: That was my next question, was it the HIV or was it your being gay that was more the—

VR: It was being gay. That was the big problem with – that was the only problem with any of them. It wasn't so much the being sick part, 'cause I never really got sick. And I've always been skinny as a rake, so that's never changed, I was never 180lbs and now gone down to 140, I was always 140, so I always looked the same. Nothing really changed. Sometimes, I was really haggard and being pulled eighteen different ways, but that was my own stuff, and taking on too much stuff, and too much volunteer and… And, I kept thinking, well, I can do it, so I'm going to do it. I can do it, so why would I not run the lunch program or why would I not work at AVI? Well, you know, I probably shouldn't've been drop-in worker at AVI, 'cause that… that was pretty tough sometimes and I ended up having to resign. Because I uh… there was a lot of drug addicts and drug use in the drop-in. Well, not in the drop-in but you know, around it, swirling around it—oh, excuse me—and uhhh, my own addictions, bad behaviour, were being pulled to the forefront when I was working there. And I slipped a few times, and I finally went you know

what, no this is not gonna work out. If I stay, I'm going to be a full-on drug user again, very quickly. Well, not very quickly… I was there for a year and a half I believe, as the drop-in worker, so that's not really, I guess, all that quickly.

By the end of it, I just – I talked to my supervisor and I asked that she uhhm, you know, let me talk to the clients at lunch time and explain why I was quitting, why I was moving on to something else, and they—they were, the clients were a little shocked, I guess, because they saw me as some kind of uhhh… a life to aspire to as a PWA, because I was in control of stuff, I knew what I was doing, I had my own apartment, I had my car, I was… you know, poster boy for successful HIV person, so they'd seen me and they were like, "But we looked up to you. How could you not be what we thought you were?" And I'm like, "I'm human, I'm human, just like you. I've got my limitations and my crutches." It didn't work, 'cause I ended up back doing drugs, but I wasn't responsible and I wasn't lying to anyone, right? As a worker, you've kind of got to lie a little bit, if you're doing drugs and running the drop-in, and they're all drug users, and you can't be holier-than-thou. You know, I'm no better than you, and if you act like you are and they find out that you're not, you pay a really big price for that. Because they will not forgive you. So, I just was honest with everybody and said I'll fade to black now thanks. And that's when I moved back to Vancouver, I went to a small college for six months. Back with [partner's name]… and then we did the final break-up, that would've been 2000.

AH: So, throughout that period you how did the – you had the AVI response and you were involved with that. How did the government respond?

VR: Uhm in regards to what? They didn't.

AH: Okay.

VR: For the most part, the government didn't respond well to anything. They wouldn't let me have my son which would've been right around… 2000? Jeez, yeah, I guess it was just—just… no [friend's name] died in '96, yeah, I guess it would've been around… sometime '99, '98, '99 that [child's name] ended up with me… twelve, fourteen. '98. The government wouldn't let me have [child's name] so they blamed the anorexia, but really it was about the HIV and the fact that I was gay. It wasn't about the anorexia. It was find a reason not to let him have the kid. So, the government reacted in my mind badly, the one person he should've been with was me. That was something he could grasp, something he could hold onto, like an anchor from the past of somebody who knew his mom and loved her very much, and, you know, it could've been a really good thing for him and for me. 'Cause it could've brought me down to earth again and you know I could'a maybe—

AH: Responsibility does that to people.

VR: Yeah it does, but if you have no responsibilities and you have nothing but your own crap to deal with all the time, then you just go right back to your old ways of dealing with it which is not usually a good place.

BB: I'm curious about the role of your HIV, the diagnosis in dealing with – what kind of role that played in your addiction? And the levels you went to with that?

VR: Hmm, yeah, that's a… they are related very closely, I think, uhm… Didn't really care 'cause I was gonna just get sick and die, so what's the difference anyway? And it's my go-to reaction for extreme stress, is to get obliterated and not have to worry about it for five minutes…

BB: Did you have addiction issues prior to the HIV?

VR: Yes.

BB: Did the addiction issues lead to getting HIV?

VR: No.

BB: No, okay.

VR: I didn't call it addiction at the time, but I married my dealer, so I didn't have to pay for the drugs.

BB: Oh, okay. [laughter]

AH: A sly move.

VR: Yeah, cut the middle man and go right to the source. I'm very practical that way. But he was only a dealer for another year and a half or two years, but it was fun, we had a great time and he was, made a lot of money, like a lot of money. So, we spent it all. You know, a weekend would be fifteen-hundred dollars for our entertainment. And that's not drugs, 'cause the drugs were free. That's uh, alcohol, cabs, tickets to parties, donations to the PWA society and you know, this fledgling AIDS societies that were coming up, they got a lot of it. A lot of our friends were sick, so one of the very few things that we could actually do about it—

BB: That's interesting that it was a [inaudible] and some of it was paid for with drug money, I find that very interesting.

VR: Well, you know, we were doing well and our friends were dying and we had the extra money, so there was a lot of it went to the Imperial Court in Vancouver. The drag queens, the drag shows, and it was all party-party-party-party, we were still having fun in '84 and '[8]5, a lot of fun. Things kind of petered out by the end of '96, or '86, sorry, and then it was just weird. I mean there was hardly anywhere worth going, some of the gay bars were being bought up by straight people. "Oh yeah, we'll leave it." Yeah right, you're gonna leave it gay. It's not gay anymore. You don't know how to make a gay bar work so it's not gonna happen. Yeah, and at the time it was trendy for straight people to go to gay bars, it was very trendy, and to have a gay friend, was very, very trendy. It was like, if you don't have a gay friend, you're nobody. Very strange.

AH: I just thought I had a friend. I didn't realize I was being trendy.

VR: Yeah.

BB: Oh, I had girls all the time be like, "Oh, you're gay?" And they would ask like—

VR: Let's be best friends!

BB: "We're best friends now!" Like, in five minutes. Like, no honey, I don't know you.

VR: I pick you, you get to be my token fag. Fuck off.

BB: Exactly.

AH: So, how did the gay community respond to the epidemic?

VR: They're the only ones who did respond in the beginning, because it was our people facing the brunt of it all. There was a home care society—VARCS—in Victoria, Vancouver had them but I don't really know what they were, there was Red Ribbon, the meal society that brought meals to people. The community at large reacted hugely, and the lesbian community, oddly, was one of the driving forces. They were very, very much into—we don't normally get along, the gay and lesbian communities aren't really close, at all—but the lesbians were like, that's our other half, that's the other yin to my yang, we gotta do something, we can't just let them all die. So, they responded very strongly. There was a lot of lesbians on boards of the societies, working, a lot of social workers that are lesbians. So, they'd end up applying at AVI or PWA or whatever, it was oddly, I think there were more lesbians at some point than there were gay men working at these societies, and it was just kind of like, hmm, that's kind of weird. But they responded very fast. And they were just like, like bull dykes. They just get in there and they just take care of it. Some of the stuff that happened through the whole crisis was hugely empowering, it was inspiring, the reaction of a lot of the gay community was just like, wow. I think, at least from where I was sitting, it looked to me like, wow, this is really – if there's going to be anything cool come of it, this is one of those things. This is a very cool thing. Uhmm, yeah—

AH: Well, how you perceive societal attitudes, is that one of the things that's come out of it? I think is it more acceptance of gay people now than there was?

VR: Oh, hugely more, hugely more. I mean nowadays, you say "I'm gay" and they're like, "So what? Isn't everybody?" I find we're much more accepting because so many families were affected. Not just the gay person – their siblings, their mother, their father, their aunts, their uncles, their grandparents, all of these people were touched by it. And a lot of them were motivated to volunteer and help – if they couldn't do that, they'd send money to like donations. The rednecks of the world? Well, they're rednecks – what do you want? A lot of those came around too, a lot of the really staunchly anti-gay people did come around. You know and they, "I don't know any gay people," and I'd be like, yes, you do, and I'd be like there's like five people that I know that you know that are gay. So yeah, you do know gay people. And then the shell would start to crack a little bit. And then they'd open up a little bit more. They still were

rednecks, but they were slightly enlightened rednecks. It's hard to stop thinking in a thought pattern that you've been trained in your entire life to do, but they tried, which is all we can ask.

AH: So, how did the community, the gay community deal with the burden of care and support? What did you see there?

VR: Well, Victoria had VARCS, which was the Victoria AIDS Respite Care Society. Uhm, while I was taking care of [friend's name], I used VARCS a couple times, and I went to respite myself. Because it was just overwhelming. Because I was potentially sick too, and I'd be dealing with [name], and I'd be thinking in the back of my head when am I going to be like this? What's going to happen to me that I'm going to be in her place? Which is very, uhm, upsetting. Arguing with myself that I have to do this, I have no choice but to take care of [name], I have to do this, but I don't really want to. And then I'd have guilt for that, 'cause you know, the reason I didn't want to was because it was a reflection of me—a future reflection. And then I didn't – I didn't want to look at it, I didn't want to see it, I didn't want this, I just didn't, no. I didn't want to turn it around to me, but I did, because you do what you have to do, when in crisis mode you deal with a crisis.

AH: Can you elaborate on your experience with VARCS?

VR: With VARCS? Well, with VARCS I didn't have them come to [name]—actually [name] did have some VARCS people come once or twice or something, she did. I think that was actually when I was in respite. But VARCS reacted with whatever you needed, you just need to ask. Big problem was getting people to ask. [Name] was like "No, no, no, I'll do it myself, I don't want some stranger in my house." And a lot of people I think reacted similar. You know, it was good to see that they were available, and that that in itself created a safety valve, and a pressure release. Just knowing that if you have to, it can be done. But the respite care was huge for me, because I would just be overwhelmed by it all and just not taking care of myself. Like, my house is a disaster but hers is spotless, and it's because I keep it that way. My house is disaster 'cause when I leave her place and I literally – we were apart, one apartment apart, it was my door open and her door was right beside me. So, I would leave her place, go back to my place, smoke a joint, have a drink, and just try and, you know, decompress a little bit, and collapse. And it was mostly emotional stuff, of course, it wasn't physical, it was emotional bankrupt—no, that's not the word—overload is more like it. Yeah, overload. Trying to figure out how to do it all and make her not see that I'm losing it. And I'm being overwhelmed and I'm not really able to do all of this myself, and VARCS would've been really helpful if she would let them in the house, but she wouldn't.

So, I did stay at respite care. There's—I can't remember the name, but he was a great guy, little weird old fag, and all I had to do was get up, and go to bed when I wanted to, and come and go as I wanted to, and the food was always there, I didn't have to worry about cooking it. I didn't have to worry about it, it was not my problem, it was all done for me. And I believe I stayed there two or three times, a week at a time, but I was still in Victoria, so I was only fifteen blocks from my house, so if I had to be back home immediately, I could be, not a problem, so that was okay. And VARCS, they helped a lot. So yeah, they did, they earned their grant money, that's for sure. Red Ribbon did well too because we, with [name] we used a lot of them, we had a stockpile

of food in the freezer just in case I couldn't make it back to make supper. Or I was in Vancouver or I was in respite care. One time I went to Vancouver, VARCS was supposed to be able to take care of them, and they were able to, [name], I guess it was part me, part [name], but she had just had treatment for her lung, her throat cancer and we waited five days or something and it seemed fine, everything seemed fine, and uh, I'm like, okay, "Do you think I can go and just do forty-eight hours in Vancouver and relax and have fun for a little while and be gay, in Vancouver?" And she was like, "Yep, no problem, no problem." I don't think I was gone for seven hours and I got a call that she was back in the hospital. And I'm just like, oh, for fuck's sakes, I can't even relax, and at the point it was the after the last ferry, so I couldn't even get on the ferry and come back right away. But you know, it put the kibosh on my weekend in Vancouver, that's for sure. Uh, and I was on the first ferry back, so, I didn't try that again. So… yeah.

BB: You definitely come across as the caretaker type of person.

VR: It's very unfortunate for me, but yeah, I am the caretaker.

BB: It can make you, I would say, emotionally deficit?

VR: Yeah, I have to start again because I have to now go out—

BB: Please take care of yourself.

VR: Well that's not happening for I hope, at least a year or two. My mother has a type of leukemia. It's a type that apparently older people get, and it can be treated if you get the right type of medications, for ten to fifteen years, you take meds and you're fine. They're not working. They were for a little while but they're not now. So, I have to uproot my life again and go live at my mother's for—

AH: Is she here in Victoria?

VR: She's in Sooke, which is just outside of Victoria here. And I have to take care of my mom while she likely dies. I'm having problems with that one too, as of course anybody would, but yeah, I end up being the one who steps in and takes care of people. Last year, it was my ex who had developed Alzheimer's, and I got a call from his sister, he had been living with her here in Victoria, then she did something and he took it as an attack, a physical attack on him, so he was afraid of her now. So, he's going back to Vancouver which he can't do because he's got Alzheimer's, and he can't remember what's what. Where he put his wallet and where he put his keys and where he put his money and all of that stuff. I'm like alright, alright, alright, I'll go and pack up his house, we got four months to pack the house up, get ready for him to have one last summer in Vancouver, and then come back here to Victoria, to live with his sister. That was my summer last year, which brought out every evil addiction I ever had. It was the most devastating thing I've ever done in my life, even beyond [friend's name]. He was an accountant, book-keeper, now, the first indication of something was wrong, was I visited in—it would've been… where are we now, we're in [20]18? I visited him, about 2014, I went to Vancouver for Pride, I believe it was Pride. And [ex's name] was like, "Vince, can you look at my bank statement and tell me how much money I've got in my bank?" And I'm like, "You're a book-keeper, you can't

read your statement?" And besides that, seventeen years together, you wouldn't even let me see the bank statement, let alone, you know. And I'm thinking, something's wrong. So, so wrong. So, I read it for him, we enjoyed our Pride week, I went back to Victoria, called his sister. What the hell's going on? And that was the first indication that he had Alzheimer's, that we noticed. So… then last year it was take care of him, this year is take care of my mom, and uhh, I don't know. It's gonna be a tough year. A really tough year. 2017, '18 and now '19 are looking like total wash-outs for me, and I'm just not happy about that at all. They've been very trying.

AH: Is there any kind of respite available for you?

VR: For me for that?

AH: Yeah, you're the one that's wearing out.

VR: No… I'm the one who's wearing out, I'm the one who's going bankrupt, I'm the one who… needs help. Doesn't look like I'm going to be getting any, anywhere. So. The only – well, the only possible thing is, and I hate to say it out loud, but I will likely end up staying after my mom goes into care, I'll end up staying at her trailer, likely, until it sells. So that's about the only thing I won't have to worry about.

AH: You'll still have a roof over your head?

VR: I'll still have a roof over my head for a few months after she passes or goes into care. That's about the only thing. If I'm really lucky, my siblings will say, "You know what, Vince, just keep the trailer, and when you go, we'll sell it and divide it up. We'll keep it in everybody's name until such time." That would be perfect for me. That would be something I would really… they don't ever have to put it in my name, just let me live in it until such a time as we sell it or I die, whichever comes first. Hopefully it'll be I die, because I don't plan on going anywhere for a long time. But yeah, next year somebody else will be sick or something will happen. I mean, I'm fifty-five now and it just seems every year something happens and it's like holy shit, people are getting worse and worse and worse, and people are getting sicker. And people that I've always, I don't feel any older than twenty still, unless I try and move or lift something. But in my head, I'm still twenty. But no, no I'm not, I'm falling apart.

AH: So, looking more broadly, your experience of these things, how has the community changed? I mean a lot of people must be experiencing things similar to what you're experiencing?

VR: The community-at-large?

AH: The gay community.

VR: I don't have a lot of interaction with the gay community anymore. I don't go out to the bars, 'cause I don't want to feel a hundred years old. When I walk in the door of the bar, that's how I feel. Like holy shit, are you out of diapers yet?

BB: [inaudible] twelve.

VR: Yeah, exactly. So, the only time I go out socially, there was a men's dinner group here in Victoria and went to that as often as I could. It's gotten the kibosh put on that because the guy who runs it is HIV and I believe he's a little sicker than maybe he wants anyone to know and can't do it anymore. So, that really sucks. Because once every two months, I knew I could go out and have a dinner and there'd be a whole bunch of gay guys around. Whether I spoke to them or not, I'd see them, you know, I could hear them talking and having their conversations and bitching about drag queens, and it's just like, oh, I know all these conversations. But as an older gay person, it's not going good. I've recently split with my soul-mate because he drives me insane. We've been friends since we were eighteen, and we've been lovers since I was forty-three, or we were forty-three. And on and off, but he identifies as straight, which he's not, by the way. But yeah it's… I don't know, the community at-large, I don't have much interactions, I just try and get my own life, day-to-day stuff.

AH: So, what about the broader community, not just the gay community?

VR: What about 'em?

AH: Have you seen changes in their attitudes in their--?

VR: People – you just tell somebody you're HIV now and ninety-percent of them are like, yeah so what, big deal. Although, I did rip a strip off somebody last week, I think it was after the first interview. I walked outside to this lounge that we go to one View Street, two days a week in the afternoon, it's sort of, gay friendly. So, me and a group of friends will usually try and gather up there and have an afternoon of almost what like it used to be, and we're outside, and we're smoking a joint, no they're smoking a joint, and one of them goes, "Hey, did you want some?" And I go, "Sure," and I walk over, and this other guy goes, "Well, unless you got like AIDS or something." And I'm like, "Pardon me?" And he's like, "Well, I don't want to catch anything?" And I said, "You got this old and you don't know that you can't get fucking AIDS from a joint? Are you stupid?" And he's like, "What do you mean? What do you mean?" And I'm like, "Are you fucking stupid? It's 2019 and you still think you can get it from a joint?" "Oh, how the hell would I know?" And I'm like, "You don't know, you're an idiot for not finding out, how the hell did you get this old." Right? And oh yeah, it was just like, that's the type of person that just irritates the hell out of me. I'm like really, that is so basic. So totally basic. Like don't you think a few other people would have it if you could get it from a joint. It would spread like wildfire. 'Cause you always share joints, always.

AH: So, how's your perspective on AIDS and prevention changed?

VR: In the general public? Yes, it's changed to, well, prevention? I mean, the gay community is getting so lax it's ridiculous, it just – I heard last week that forty-five people were diagnosed in Victoria last year or something, and I'm like, how in the hell does that happen, exactly? And people just – oh, the drugs are, if you get it you just take the drugs you're fine. No, you're not. It's still… [yelling at the dog] I lost my train of thought there—

AH: How many people have gotten it, HIV.

VR: Yeah, right. I'm just like, ugh, and their attitude is literally they can just take a pill and be fine. Well no, it doesn't work with everybody, there's still a sizeable percentage that in my mind it doesn't work at all. The side effects can be devastating, almost worse than the illness—almost. And it's just, why would you go there anyway? You know, why would you expose yourself to that kind of thing? People take PrEP now – well, for the longest time I didn't know what they were talking about PrEP, prevention by taking medications, the same ones I take basically, which are toxic. You know it's just like, what, you know I guess you're going to take this minor risk compared to the other risk, that you might have a bad reaction to the drugs but then what if you get infected, you can't take those drugs because you've been taking them all along, and they obviously don't work for you. But yeah, it's like, oh yeah, we'll be fine. No, you know it's not just HIV positive, it's HIV and the medications, the sickness, the thrush, the lack of appetite, the side effects of the drugs, it's not just another walk in the park. It could potentially be horrible still. So why would you—

AH: It's not like an Aspirin tablet.

VR: Yeah, not very many people, like, react to Aspirin. But Trimavir or whatever it's – Truvada, yeah, some people react rather violently to it. It just doesn't go down well. So yeah, I shake my head sometimes and kind of go what the hell, you people are idiots.

AH: So, in your dealings with the professional community, the medical professional community, first of all, what was that like?

VR: Um, pretty good. Yeah, I don't remember any rude doctors or nurses that were standoffish or anything like that, so their reaction was good. My doctor, I went to see Julio Montaner it was almost immediately, it was very quickly. I saw [doctor's name] in Victoria twice I think, maybe three times, and I was just like no, no, no, no, no. And I got an appointment with Julio, and that's the guy you want to see – if you're gonna have a doctor in BC, you go to him. Hell, anywhere in Canada, if you can get an appointment with him you take it, and you make it happen. But he did very well by me. You know, not the greatest bedside manner, he's a little gruff and cut and dry and he's just science-science-science. But he got in another doctor to take, pull up the slack from him when he started, he was I think it was President of the World AIDS Society, or organized the WHO, or somebody, it was a huge position and he didn't have time to be a doctor anymore, for quite a while. So, he brought in Sylvia Giriami, which I always say wrong, sorry Sylvia if you see this, and she was my old my GP, but disappeared because well, I didn't know it, but she went back to school to specialize in HIV. And then I went oh, oh okay, yeah, I'll see her, because we already had a rapport. You know, I didn't have to worry about anything, we knew each other. So, she's still my doctor. I need to make an appointment and go see her soon, it's been about a year since I saw her. I think so, something like that. Oh yeah, it must've been. Last time I saw her was when I was actually taking care of Steven, which would've been—yeah. We've been back here over a year now. Time to go see her.

AH: Would you have any advice for the medical community?

VR: About the HIV reaction?

AH: Yeah, how you deal with it.

VR: Not at this point… Because I think they pretty much got it figured, for the most part. I could be wrong, but for me, they seem to be doing okay. They're not in your face, but they don't let things slide either, they'll contact you, if there's a way they'll contact you and say, "We need to see each other and we need to deal with this." The medical community, my GP is here in Victoria and he is one the lead doctors at Cool-Aid, which is the street outreach place, and they—people go why do you go there? Well, because he knows what I'm dealing with. He knows all about it, and they don't judge you about anything there. Although I still feel judged, I know they're not, it's me judging me. But Victoria's done very well as far as the response in the medical community. They've educated each other. AVI has been instrumental in making presentations, new information, make sure they get it, if they don't already have it, make sure they get it. I think Victoria's done very well for a backwards community and a very old English stuffy attitude towards most things in life. They've kind of had to get over that, and move on, grow a little.

AH: Do you have any advice for future generations, aside from moving on and growing a little?

VR: For future generations?

AH: Yeah, for people that might be exposed.

VR: What are you, an idiot? If they get exposed and they've gotta deal with it, well… do your own research, make sure you know what the up and coming drugs are, what the treatments are. Don't leave it up to your doctor, they're not gods, figure it out yourself, have an informed conversation with the doctor, don't just assume he's going to be able to fix it. Because what might work for Joe over there might not work for you, and you just be proactive. If you end up positive, get involved with your medical care. Don't just assume the doctor's gonna know it all and fix it, because they have a lot of patients, there's a lot of diseases out there, and how the heck are you supposed to keep up with all of them? You know, some information may slip by them, it's possible, it's even likely, so you gotta be proactive, right? And try and behave yourself socially, a little bit. But, don't – you're not dead yet, as well, you're not even really sick, probably. So, it's not the end of the world, it's just a really steep learning curve.

AH: Is there anything else that you can think of?

VR: I don't think so. I think we've pretty much touched base on everything so far.

AH: What do you attribute the fact that you have lived so long with this disease? Anything that you can think of, or was most of it dumb luck?

VR: Unfortunately, I think most of it is dumb luck, and getting a great set of genes from my parents. Yeah, dumb luck pretty much explains it. 'Cause everybody else died – in my mind I should've been gone a long time ago, but I'm not. And for a long time, I thought I was here for a

reason, and there's been several over the years that would explain that, like taking my son [name] on and taking care of his mom while she died and all that. Also, I've – people have come up to me and said, "I'm glad you said that, that day, remember you said that." And to me, I'm like, alright, okay, I changed something, I enlightened somebody, right? And yeah, a few people have come up and said, "I remember that and it made a difference."

AH: Oh, that's good.

VR: But I'm still here and I'm still not sick, so apparently I still got something else to do. I'm not in any great hurry to get it finished, because I guess then I'm done too, right? So, we just keep plodding along and see how it goes.

AH: Well, thank you, thank you for your patience in coming in a second time.

VR: No problem.