

“HIV in My Day” – Interview #92

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Interviewee: Donni Hamilton (DH); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)

Ben Klassen: So, hi Donni, thanks so much for being here over the phone at least to share some of your story with me today. I’m looking forward to hearing about your experiences. Just to get started, could you tell me a little bit about how you first started connecting with the gay community, or started engaging in gay life?

Donni Hamilton: Oh, way back. Well, when I was very much younger, I had a neighbour that decided to [inaudible 0:42] so to speak. You know back in the mixed-up day kind of thing, found it more head wires so to speak. Easier to understand than what the society and all that was trying to shovel at you, if that makes any sense, I should say. That’s kind of a funny family, they’re all strict, you gotta go by rules you gotta go by this, gotta go by that. And it was easier to understand something that I could figure out myself than to have to figure out all the rest of the rules, if that makes sense. Basically, when I was about fourteen or fifteen, I kind of got over the person that was causing that bit of grief so to speak and went on to decide what I was going to do, more or less. Try out the straight life, so to speak. Because that was, you know, always sort of brow beaten into you – gotta do this, gotta do that. But finally, after the second wife, I just said that’s it, I’ve had it. I’ve got to be me, heck with the world. The frustration reaches only a certain point.

BK: Sure. So, when was that when you finally said I’ve had it, I’m going to be myself now?

DH: I was twenty-seven, twenty-eight, about that.

BK: And what year was that roughly?

DH: Oh, that would be in the eighties, early eighties, if I remember correctly. Somewhere around there. I was basically – I volunteered for a lot of groups, different organizations and things like that. And when my second and I split up, I kind of thought, oh, she’s gonna be like gangbuster on me, because everybody’s gonna go, yeah, get out, because everyone had a bad attitude about the gay lifestyle. Or at least in Cranbrook they did. And it was quite the opposite. I had several people that were at the organizations I worked with come and say, “It’s about damn time you decided to be yourself.”

BK: Wow.

DH: I thought, oh gosh. And I—

BK: That’s amazing.

DH: Yeah, I thought it was too, because a couple of them, like the Lion’s Club and Kiwanis and whatnot, you know they’re pretty, you know sort of [inaudible 0:3:36] all their stuff and whatnot. But the two of them, two people at the organizations, the person, the one in the Cranbrook there,

said, “Finally you can relax and not be so uptight.” So, it worked out quite well. I didn’t push the lifestyle on anybody whatsoever, but if you asked me a question, you just be aware because you’re going to get an answer, kind of thing. And a lot of people would, the counsellors at different places would say, “Donni, do you mind if we send somebody over to ask you some questions?” I says, “Not a problem, send ‘em over.” Worked out actually not too bad.

BK: So, at that point, did you decide to move to like a bigger city or what?

DH: No, I stuck around in Cranbrook for a fair little while. The only reason I moved actually at that time was basically the ex was, had a what do you call it, words for screwing up the wages and all that kind of stuff. But she bankrupted the two companies that we had, and lost the house, whatnot. And everything was unfortunately still in my name. Used the wrong lawyer to sign everything over to her, and it was breach of interest or something, whatever it was, that you’re not allowed to use the same lawyer for certain things, whatnot. And I just not even thinking went ahead and did it. And she had me by the [clears throat]. And I was stuck with quite a bit of a mess. I thought, well, best thing to do is get out of sight, out of mind. And so I moved to Calgary. And interestingly enough, I wound up entering, or talked into entering an amateur strip contest, and I won that one. And a lady that I’d known for several years in Calgary, she had an agency, and she comes and, “Well, if you’re ever interested in doing stripping, let me know.” I’m going, oh [name], darling, I’d love to, but I’m really working right now. And I decided a few months down the road that it’s not a bad idea. So, I went to work for her for, by six months. And then a friend, one of the other dancers and myself went out and did freelance and did our own for about six years. And did pretty good. So, we basically met all of the, well not all, but a lot of the hotel owners, managers and all that kind of stuff that we would be, you know looking to work in. I said to [name], I said, “Well, you know, boy we can do this ourself. We know all these people, just phone ahead and book all our own appointments. We don’t have to pay the percentage of commission.” So we did, made a hell of a good time. Or had a hell of a good time. It was interesting. Well, at that time, I was certain I was never going to go back to Cranbrook, you know, to live. Because I really didn’t like the town that much, but eventually I went back. Mom was having some trouble with my stepfather, so I went back to kind of keep an eye on things there, and wound up managing one of the nightclubs. And from there, kind of things went on.

BK: So, were you connecting with, you know, a gay community at the time? Was there a gay community in Cranbrook or in Calgary?

DH: It was very underground. Very low, low key. But yeah there was quite a few actually that it even surprised me when I got back the second time how many there was. But you know, they had dances, things like that, but they were under a different assumption sort of thing, to begin with. Because the halls wouldn’t let them use the halls and other things like that because of certain, ethics I think they were called. But we got around it. And now they’re, they have – last I was back in Cranbrook, there’s quite a good-sized community and they have their Pride parade and they have their whole everything going quite smoothly. Which is really nice to hear from that town.

BK: And in Calgary, I guess there would’ve been a more sizeable gay community, hey?

DH: Oh yeah, big time. I worked at the Ranchman's South in Calgary. Well, first it was the Ranchman's South first, became that it was the Four Seasons Hotel, both manager positions that sort of fell into me. I got, actually that I got them if you know what I mean. The boss needed a new manager and I was working there just as a bartender, or a waiter rather, in the main salon. And he said to me one day, he says, "Have you ever done any managing?" I says, well, a little bit. My parents had this, had that. And he says, "Well, you're the person, you're just crazy enough to make my lounge work." And I went, "Um, [name], what are you talking about?" And he says, "Well, you've got all these ideas. We're using your ideas already for parties," you know, like a spot to dance all this kind of... "You give a kind of idea you've come up with, we've used it and it makes us money." And I go, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, the manager of the lounge part just quit, and he's going to..." He apparently moved I think back east, not back east back to his own country or whatever. And he'd taken his family back there and whatnot. So, [name], he says, "I need a new manager." And I go, "Okay, well who are you going to hire?" And he goes, "You." Oh! And he just, "And I have no problems with even thinking you're going to have any trouble in there, because you know everybody already, you've met ninety-percent of the customers and you get along superly with everybody." And I went, "Oh, okay. We'll give it a trial and see how it works." And he goes, "Hell this trial crap, you're getting a good dollar." And he says, "Have fun, go wild." Oh, you're asking – he says, "Doesn't matter, whatever you've managed to put your thumbprint on we have a great, the crowd has a great time everybody enjoys things and the bar makes nothing but money." So he said, "I've got no problems with that." I was there about two-and-a-half, three years almost. And everything went fantastic.

BK: So, a lot of the gay life at the time was kind of oriented around the bars, I guess?

DH: A lot of it, yep. There was the gay clubs in town and some of the restaurants, whatnot, that were gay-oriented. And we would, the whole community kind of thing would sort of pinpoint where they were going to be during the week kind of thing, you know what was happening here there, whenever. And then a lot of the straight clubs started – of course the drag queens, we do fantastic business for the straight clubs. An impersonator from way back. Had a lot of fun. I got dared to do it one night, and I says ah what the heck. Walked in the back, twenty minutes later I walked out with full face and costume and they're going, oh, did we have a parks department back there? They couldn't believe that I'd got all the makeup and everything all done up on myself, and it was only like, well, it was about half an hour it took me to put a face on. The other queens that were there were a little out of a joint because they said, "Well, who helped you?" Nobody. By myself. "Where'd you learn that?" I said, "I've got two sisters." And both of them, they were exact perfectionists when it came to going out somewhere. So, it was you live and learn. And they were a lot of fun too. But the best part about Calgary was it's so big of a place, you can get lost there or you can be right in the highlights. You know, your choice. It can either be one or the other, you don't have conform to any – well, most rules. But you don't have to really be a stick in the mud about this or that, you can just sort of, long as you be yourself, don't cause anybody harm or any problems. Life's worth living. Which is, I hope that's a good attitude. It's got me through sixty-three years so far.

BK: Yeah, sounds like a good attitude to me. I'm just trying to remember, did you end up in Vancouver then eventually?

DH: Yeah, I was in Vancouver for a number of years. I moved out there on a—out of—actually, when I left Cranbrook, because I went back to Cranbrook the second time, and when I left the second time from Cranbrook, I went to Vancouver. And since it rains all the time out here, you can absolutely hate it, it was a month and a half before it even got a little slight drizzle. But at first, I was like, hey, I like this town. I lived right downtown. Like I never lived anymore than six or eight blocks away from where I work, for pretty good reasons at the time. If you get too tipsy you can crawl home. That was my excuse, that's not the answer. But somebody would say why do you always choose to live so close to work. I don't have to drive, I can bring my bike or I can walk. You know it's quick and easy. Plus, nine times out of ten you can get better rent if it's close because it's areas that nobody wants to. Downtown, who wants to live downtown? It was good.

BK: When did you move out to Vancouver, roughly?

DH: I think it was, oh god—thank you—'81 rings a bell, but I'm trying to remember why '81 rings a bell. Oh no, that – pardon me, '81 is when my brother died. In the eighties, uh mid-eighties, I think. I think, I think.

BK: What did the community look like here in Vancouver?

DH: In Vancouver? Not a lot of construction downtown, you had the SkyTrain was very short and simple at the time. Not like it is now. Which is actually, I find it amazing, wonderful. Go back, you don't have to worry about having a vehicle, you can go anywhere in town as long as the SkyTrain takes you. The, oh let me think now, they just built the stadium there I think, not too earlier, not too long before that. Downtown was sort of – Castle Hotel was still open, so that's however many years ago that was. Do you remember that one by any chance?

BK: That's before my time, but I've heard people talk about it for sure in these interviews. It was a bar?

DH: Yep, it was a bar, had a round fireplace in the very centre of the main room. It was the place to be downtown. Didn't matter who you were, what you were, how you were, get in here, have a beer. Welcome home, kinda thing. It was really nice bar. I worked there as well as the Shaggy Horse for—Shaggy Horse Cabaret, which is the oldest gay bar in Vancouver. It's a leather, Levi bar that one, and they were within a couple blocks of each other, one was on Richard Street and the other was on Granville. And they were fantastic places. The Castle was, you know, if you wanted to catch up with somebody, go sit there for a couple hours and they were bound to wander through, kind of thing. It was like a down home bar. Wonderful. And the Shaggy Horse was a really interesting place because it was the exact opposite what anybody would think about it. You think leather, Levi bar, it's gonna be one of those, you know cranky, kinky kind of places. But it wasn't. It was just, everybody's welcome in the door have a great time. Three-level bar, or three-level place, the whole round upstairs was an open – what do you call it – open balcony to the downstairs. And it had the dance floor and everything, it had the front part it was all a shop and sink like that. It was really actually quite neat. Too bad the fellow sold it, and then I'm not sure what it is now, if it's still open or if it's condos already.

BK: Yeah, odds are, in Vancouver, it's probably condos.

DH: Yeah, that's like the Dufferin Hotel. When I left Vancouver rather, I was night auditor at the Dufferin Hotel and I had a bit of a stress, so I went back to Cranbrook just to visit mom, and while I was there for that weekend visiting, the manager of the hotel that I'd started working in originally called me up and says, "I need a new manager. Get your ass over here." And it just sort of, "Okay, give me a couple days to go back and get my things packed." So, worked out pretty good

BK: When you came to Vancouver, did you stay pretty involved in the drag community here?

DH: Actually, when I first got to Vancouver, it was [name], well the bartenders at the Castle, his brother lived here, was in Penticton here, and they said, "When you get out here, come see us and we'll find someplace," and whatnot. He introduced me to [name] and [name] and I were together for quite a long time as partners. And he sort of introduced me around to the community and all the organizations and straight clubs and the gay clubs in the entire, all around. Which was really kind of neat because that sort of being introduced to a community through levels higher than when you first move to a community kind of thing. He was well regarded by everybody and whenever they needed something done or needed ideas or someone to get something to go, they'd call Jack and say, got a new project for you. So, we got along great, had a great time.

BK: So, you got immersed into that community pretty quickly?

DH: Yeah, I did. And then '84, '85 – '94, '95, pardon me. In '94, I was at – oh, what was it now? About maybe six-o'clock in the evening the day of the Emperor and Empress nominations every year for the Dogwood – there we go again, got that one all mixed up. Anyways, the society—

BK: The Dogwood—

DH: Dogwood Monarchist Society. And somebody that was running for the position of Emperor, they was really not liked for various reasons, who cares, at the moment anyway. And somebody says, "Oh, why don't you?" I said, um, that's right up my alley but—because being a goodwill ambassador is what they are, basically. Oh hell, why not? At ten-o'clock at night, I walked into the, oh I cannot remember—Celebrities—and the lady behind the counter was the manager of the Dogwood thing. And I says, "Mama Karen, could you sign for this please and accept my application?" She goes, "Oh my god, thank Christ, somebody's running against him." I had, I think it was five, no I forget how many, distance between then and the elections. I said I promise nobody, I'm going to be on stage all the time, I'm going to be here when you need me, but hey let's all have a good time. And I went through stages of being an add—of a con rather. The first event, I was a mime, the first week, and then the second week I went out as the porcelain clown. The third week I went out as the ring master, and last week I went out in the business suit, to do all the promo and all that kind of stuff, for shows and everything. I had a great time doing it. It was right up my alley, so to speak. And then wound up getting the highest and still to this day I think – I haven't checked for this year yet – I still hold the highest different,

highest point—uh difference between the two people running, I got the most more votes than they had in the past for an emperor.

BK: Wow, so you did okay.

DH: And had a lot of fun at the same time. Oh yep, you bet. Oh, I got a little lady pass me here. Anyway, yep and that was – March was when that all come to a head and kind of thing. Had a great time. Spent the year travelling around, doing all kinds of stuff, and the best part was I didn't have to put the regalia on and whatnot to be on stage, I could just get up there in plain old boy clothes and have fun. And did pretty good, the – a few of them would ask, “Well, why don't we see you do more shows and see you doing more front work?” I says, “You don't notice me up there?” “What do you mean?” I says, “Well, I'm the guy that's up there in jeans and a t-shirt.” “That's you?” “Yeah, get your glasses on.” “Oh, we see you just about every show.” Yes you do. I'm in the background or I'm helping out, which is part of the whole job entails. You're supposed to be a goodwill ambassador when you go out of town, and when you're in town you work your butt off to try and make things right. Or not make things right but you know make things go smoothly and all that. It's a heck of a good job too, it's a lot of fun. Volunteer mostly, it's all volunteer of course but it's a hell of a lot of fun.

BK: Just out of curiosity, was the Dogwood Monarchist Society doing any HIV-related work back then?

DH: I believe that, yes, we were. We were handing out fliers, or handing out – let me think now, that was Vancouver. Yeah, they had fliers and things, information packets and stuff like that, which were very sketchy, you know, that was back in the early days kind of thing. Not near what's being handed out now by any means of course. But you know, they had, any time we're doing a function or something like that, we do a blip on it, out to the effect and whatnot, and hand out in the audience, handing out if anybody was interested in counselling or anything like that, we'd hand out little papers, or cards rather for anyone they can contact if they need to ask questions. Which, that was sort of when my empress shoes [inaudible 23:30] the second time as being empress, and he says, “Well, we really gotta do a little something different this time.” And I said, “I'm open, what do you got on your mind?” And he said, “We have to go out there in the public and we have to be pushing these informational stuff and getting people educated on the current crisis that's happening and what's going on.” I said, “I'm all for helping out on that one, no problem at all.” You know, can you get some of the kids really had no at that time, a lot of the adults and whatever still had no idea about the topic and, well, what it entails and doesn't. So it's kind of nice to get out and get the information out. And it's amazing how many, when you're doing something like that and you – somebody come up as you're on stage still, and when you're doing a song or whatever. And when you finish the song, they'll motion you over: “Do you know where I can get a hold of this or get a hold of that?” It's like, wow, somebody's listening. That was more gratifying than actually having the crowd clap when you finish a number. Because that means that your message is getting out there and you're—and people are actually listening and want to learn. Which I think is fantastic.

BK: Oh, absolutely, yeah, and really contributing to the community, which is amazing.

DH: That's – when I was fourteen, there's another reason fourteen when I kind of, sort of doing ordinarily whatever my step-father kicked me out because I was half an hour late on my curfew. My five brothers and two sisters, none of them got home before midnight, but I was supposed to be home by ten. He got all blustery and kicked me out, so I—out I went. Two weeks later, he comes over to where I'm staying and says, "You gotta move home, your mom's—I can't handle your mom anymore. She's giving me a hard time." My only comment was, "You kicked me out once, asshole. Get out of my house now." So I know that sounded—might sound a little rough but he unfortunately punched a hole through my front door, and when you did that I was kind of pissed off, I smacked his arm not realizing I broke his arm accidentally. And he pulls his arm out goes out to his truck and sat there staring at the door. I phoned my mom right away and says, "Mom, safe house now," which was the signal whenever he was in a bad mood or really drunk we'd—any of us kids would phone her and tell her "safe house" which meant she goes to my brother's two doors down and there's a room down there he can't get into. She stays there until he's okay. So, told her what happened, and she says, "What's he doing?" I said, he's staring at me. He hasn't moved the truck but get go, go-go-go, because when he gets home, I don't know what's going to happen. I guess he went home and my brothers took him to the hospital and got his arm set. Came home, he didn't drink for almost two months. So, the entire family was totally shocked.

BK: So, you actually had a positive impact?

DH: Oh yeah. I thought, oh, it's going to be—you know, he's going to take it out on everybody else, and I'm not there on the spot to protect my sisters right now, but god help me, if he touches them. But he was the opposite, he quit drinking – for two months, he never touched a drop. He was like almost a totally different person. Which we all thought like, maybe you should've done that ten years ago. I'm going, no, I don't think I could've handled it ten years ago, I'd have been so scared.

BK: Yeah.

DH: But it worked.

BK: So, when did you first hear about HIV? Do you remember when that was roughly?

DH: Oh, first heard about it was, oh, late seventies, I think. Early eighties. Yeah, and then it was just I think around about that era, I think. And that was just word of mouth and nobody really knew much about it, nobody really knew what to expect and when you ask questions it was—even the doctor I had at the time, he says, "Not my department. You have to go to a specialist for that." But it's like, okay? And then found out years later that was the topic that you just didn't discuss with him because apparently one of his brothers had gotten sick, and he was all fired to not have to talk about none of it. Can't blame the poor man. But he was a great doctor though, awesome doctor.

BK: So, there's just kind of these word of mouth, kind of rumblings of some type of sickness or disease back in the early eighties?

DH: Yeah it was, one was the saying that was quoted back to me was it's the same as syphilis – you get it, your croak, is how it was put to me. It's like, no, it can't be that bad. Is there more you can learn about it? The person I was talking to said, "I have no idea" And then I of course—you have a clue the little S.O.B. I can be—I just started asking him questions about, well, how do you know about it and what about? I guess I asked all the right questions because they got answered. All he'd heard was word of mouth about it, and there's people dying. So you know, I said, well okay, before you say that too quickly, perhaps we should get—approach it a different way that you've heard about it and it appears that people are dying, but I'd sure like to learn more. Would be a better way to say it to people. And he went, "Yeah?" I said you wouldn't put the panic attack on people. And he says, "Well, is that what happened to you?" And I said, "Yeah, you kind of gave me a bit of a panic attack when you first came out with it because, okay, how do you get it, what do you do with it, how do you get rid of it?" And he's actually, from what I've seen over the years, he works for different organizations and he's quite amazing at the way he approaches things. Like when he was first starting out and doing the volunteering, he would so gung-ho about this is the way it's gotta be, and through years of this and that and all that, now he's extremely copacetic, I should say, to whatever's going on. Now let's figure out how to understand this to start with, and what we can do about it. And if you need any help with anything, he says there's people he talks to—he's a counsellor now—but all the people he counsels whatnot, he says I don't care what time of day or night, there's the number, call me. He's really done working out good.

BK: So, it must've been scary when you first heard about it and didn't really know how it was transmitted or what it really was.

DH: Um, it was a bit scary to hear about and all that, but then at the same time. my attitude was well, I'm—when I found out how you get it and all that kind of stuff—I was using safe sex long before anybody else insisted on it. No condom, no go, kind of thing. So, I wasn't really too worried. I was concerned that you know there's other ways of catching it, of course, but I wasn't overly worried about myself. I was more worried about other people that didn't understand about it and that, you know how you can get them to understand more so they know what to watch for kind of thing. Which is—that's a bigger job than tending bar. That's a pretty good job to try and get the public to firstly listen to you, and secondly pay attention to it, you know, on their own accord. Like, you can't force it, you can't force anybody to do anything or say anything or think anything. But I find reverse psychology works marvelous. You can convince somebody that it's their idea quicker than you can tell 'em this is what you gotta do. And once they can, people think it's—oh! This is an idea, hey, I just thought about that, I wonder if I should do something. And then actions happen quick. Which I found that in business that managed to think like that, that my staff all know that you can't piss him off, he's okay if he gets upset, it's not at you, it's because a machine broke or something and he'll be in there up to his elbows fixing it. My staff used to love working for me.

BK: Did you say that you were already using condoms before you'd heard about HIV?

DH: Yep.

BK: Interesting.

DH: Yeah, only because I got two brothers that both got, what do you call it, case of the clap as they called it. And I thought, nope, I'm not going to bother with that, because they went through hell. One wouldn't admit, you know to anything, that he had anything, and didn't bother to do anything for awhile. And course that's not—when you pick that up, you gotta get rid of it. So easy to get rid of, that's the part that, you know, but people didn't understand a whole lot about things, they don't really understand that it's not as bad as you think. You know, do you understand what I mean by that, kind of?

BK: Yeah.

DH: Nothing is as bad as the world might think it is. I used to say that to customers sometimes if they're, you know, they're in the middle of an argument, and I go, "Oh, come on guys, nothing's as bad as the world thinks it is. Come on, have a drink" And by the time they've sat down and talked for five minutes, they're over their fight, they're having a great time. You'd be surprised what you can do with a smile and a pat on the back.

BK: I just think that's interesting because I think a lot of the other guys that we've talked to had no idea about how to even use condoms before HIV, and so it was a very big behaviour change for them to have to start using them.

DH: Yeah, I can sure understand that.

BK: For you, that was something that you were already doing.

DH: Yeah, there was something just in my own mind, I plan to be a hundred-and-five years old before I croak, so nothing like this is going to get in my way. I know that might sound – at the time, that might've sounded kind of corny, but look at all the people that are a hundred years old now with their birthdays. A-hem. My doctors keep telling me I'm too damn stubborn to croak, so I'll be okay. And they got a point, I guess.

BK: So, as the years progressed a little bit, where were you getting information about HIV, or was there information out there that you were accessing?

DH: A lot of the information that was open that the public could get easy access to wasn't really that easy. In Cranbrook it was almost impossible. In Calgary, every clinic you went to or every whatever had stuff there, but you had to ask for, some of them you had to ask for across the counter, to get the proper pamphlets and things like that. Why that was at the time, I really don't understand, but something to do with security is what it was explained to me at one time. My comment was don't you think security would mean that they can get this so they know what's going on? That things are safer that way. And they just said, "Well, they don't understand why that's the way it's gotta be, but the health board said that's the way they had to present." I said, okay, no problem. You know how the medical thing can sometimes not make any sense. But mostly since it was it was available, you just had to make sure that you asked. Because it wasn't really presented right away. Do you know, you go to say one of the clinics, now you go to one of the clinics and they've got it right on the wall. They're answering questions 24/7, any number of

calls to make, any number of phone numbers to call to get questions and stuff. And it's really do an active job in trying to educate the public, it's just really good. But originally it was a little difficult to—some of the nurses and doctors weren't even, weren't willing to give out information quickly unless you really—you almost pester them to get them to answer the questions. And then they would finally say, okay this is all we know, or this is all I know, and that's better than nothing. At least that gave the person that's asking a little bit of an idea you know, what's going on.

But it's, now it's quite a bit different. I find it—I work at Penticton Harm Reduction Society, in Penticton here. There's four of us that got the branch started here, a few years back and it's turned into a really good organization because we hand out the kits, and we hand out the naloxone kits, and we hand out the information that's all over the place and do it all in a volunteer way. And very nicely, no confrontations whatsoever if we can avoid it. And it works wonderful. The clinics in Penticton here are fantastic. You go there and they have the naloxone kits there, if anybody needs them, they're handed out to them, which is really nice. The drugstores all have them, some of the other stores have them as well that we've furnished them with them, because it's been quite an overdose crisis here the last year and the year before. Kind of hit you in the side of the head with it that after awhile I got tired of counting, that I know personally. It kind of hardens you after a little while, I have to admit. You really expect to hear something and you go, oh my god. And I'm the opposite. I look around and go, okay, where's my bag. How far away is it and can I get there in time. Which in quite a few cases, that's been a godsend, that I don't panic until afterwards. One of the security or safety measures I've instilled in myself. Need something to get done, calm down, do it. Then worry about it. And that works for me.

BK: It's just interesting to think about how – I mean the overdose crisis right now is just crazy, but in some ways it echoes the HIV epidemic when so many folks in these communities were also passing away, right?

DH: That's right, yep. Big time. I noticed on the news, it was either I think it was in the newspaper come to think of it, that Penticton has finally over the years come up in the standing of the most overdoses in a certain length of time. And it's like, that's not something—nothing to be proud of. You know just the way it was presented and it was the newspaper here, they listed the cities and whatnot that are with a high number of overdoses. And Penticton's ranked I think in number third or something. The third highest. Which is, that's pretty darn high. What really that you're looking at it, and I could just like, mum looks at me and she says, "What's the matter? Your face just went white." I said, "I'm just reading the damn news again mum." You know, it kind of got the chuckle back into me, but that's pretty scary.

BK: Yes, it is. So, how was the gay community starting to respond to this back in the eighties?

DH: Some were – well, it's kind of hard to explain because some were so stiff upper lip and stood backbone things about it, you know that whole attitude was, oh, can't possibly be happening, it's impossible. And others were oh god, look out, don't come near me – you know, that kind of an attitude. But overall, they started to come around as soon as we got more information out, and back then it was word of mouth mostly, because you couldn't, like I say,

you couldn't really go anywhere and get much information unless you stood there and begged for it, so to speak. They're – a lot of them, there were so many people that were passing and so quickly that it was—it was a bit shocking because it sort of, woah, where'd this come from and holy cow, it's going so fast. But it, you know, like anything, you fall off a horse, you get back on. You can tell I'm a cowboy, can't you? And many horses I've fallen off of. Yeah, but it's – I've always had the attitude with myself personally that if there's something I don't understand, look it up, read about it, search it out, find it out. That's been how I've kind of survived throughout my life. You know, there's nothing that, if I don't understand it, I'll find out how to – I'm not very computer-y, but I'll get on that damn thing and I'll figure it out. I just have to figure out how to get the right windows and the right apps and stuff to figure out what I'm trying to figure out. And in a lot of cases it works to my benefit. In some cases, it works to my definite benefit. Because you find out too much about something, it's like oh my god. Then you want to turn back time about ten years ago, okay that whole thing can start over again. Not personally, but you know, as far as the whatever you're trying to look up, and you're going if they'd have known about it ten years ago, this wouldn't be happening. Which makes sense if you sort of think about it, but try to explain that to somebody, they look at you and go, you're nuts! Yes, I've been trying to tell you that for years and now I'm trying to prove it now. You know, it's just, humour has been one of my best escapes. Things get too serious, I put a little humour into it, lighten the air around things and go from there.

BK: Yeah, that's come up quite often actually, the use of humour as like a way of coping with the epidemic.

DH: Mhm. In Penticton here, when there was a panic, was it last year I think, all of a sudden it was all over the news, and all over this, that, and the other thing, what was happening. And we were still—the harm reduction crew and all that—we were still not, had access to things to hand out. The kits and hand out, you know, to get to the ones that needed to know about things. You know, like I wander around all over town kinda thing, and anywhere since I've lived here, I just go into different areas just to check 'em out. And I'm inquisitive as hell, I want to know things about everything. So, it becomes an advantage sometimes. Here it hit the town like woah. Right. like that was two this week, that was three yesterday, holy crap. Sort of the whole town sort of went into a mini shock, for awhile there. And then all a sudden it's—then the public, they wanna learn real fast. You know, there's a lot of people that wanted to know about things. Do you have any idea about this, have any idea about that? I always carry a pamphlet in my pocket – “Well, here's the only information we have at the moment, but the minute we get more, I'll let you know.”

But the nice thing about now, today anyways, is that the people aren't getting infected and passing away like before. There's medications and stuff that extend things forever basically. That's the best part about it. And once people understand that it's not a crime to go get checked out – a lot of times people were going, well, I don't want to go do that because that puts a, that tags me. And it's like no, no you don't—had to explain to them, no, the reason you're getting checked out is to know you're safe and from now on you can remain safe. “Oh. Is that what that's about?” Had that answer a few times. But most of the time, it's—the topic itself is calmed down, but every time you go someplace it's, oh, did you hear so and so. Oh no. It's sort of—there's a few that – I tend to be a little, I don't mean standoffish, but I sort of put the emotions on

hold when somebody's talking, and let it sort of filter in and go, okay, and before I open my mouth, I think, okay, be careful what you say. Because it could be bad, it could be not be good, if you say something really nice it could be the wrong thing that they want to hear, if you say something really nasty it could be the one thing they want to hear. Do you understand what I mean by that? And now, so you gotta sort of judge how the person is taking the fact that their best friend just died and go easy, go slow, or do you know the big cuddle and go everything's gonna be okay. And I've learned over the years that surely the most diplomatic way of doing things is sometimes to stop, take a breath, and then you can succeed. It works.

BK: So, did you find yourself looking after or caring for any friends at the time, back in the eighties and nineties?

DH: Yes and no. I didn't know the first two that I was helping, I thought I was just helping with shopping, and odds and ends, errands for the one. And then when I realized that, oh, you're in the hospital now. And three days later he passed away. I was like, "What exactly did he have?" And then the nurse told me, it's like, oh crap, I didn't know that. I thought he said something about a cancer. And I just took it at that, I didn't ask questions, I didn't you know, push the fact. Did the best I could under the circumstances. Every time I went over there, it was like, it's just gotta be big smile, and you know we're having a good time. Oh, don't. I'll get that. Oh, don't worry about that, I'll get it in a minute. If he needed something done, I'd do it as quickly as I could. And just to make it easier, because he was not really quite in moving around shape. The second one I was helping out, after about six months, he finally told me what was going on and it was like well, and he says, "If you don't want to come over anymore, I understand." It's like, "Oh bullshit, I'm sorry. What do you mean I don't want to come over? I'll be over here more often, make darn sure you're okay. If you need anything, you have my number, call anytime." So, we got along wonderfully. So, he was more relieved that I knew exactly what was going on, and so he didn't have to hide nothing, which was fantastic. You know, we were just friends, that was it. You know, if there's any whatever, I'm more than happy to help out. So, he lasted for two years. Yeah, it was almost two years that he lasted and then finally passed away. At least he didn't have to worry and tiptoe when he was around me. Whatever was on his mind, he could say it. So that was good.

BK: Yeah, because I guess HIV positive people at the time were probably quite scared to tell people that they were HIV positive.

DH: Big time. They were—most of them were literally, they'd rather cut a hand off than tell somebody. Which is understandable back then because they didn't really know the, everything basically. And yes, people were passing away quite a lot, and yeah, they had a right to be scared, and a lot of them, their families disowned them. Which personally, I can't – I got no sympathy for the ones who disown somebody, because they have no idea what they're doing to that person, for starters. Or if they do, they're the meanest people I've ever run across. That takes a bad situations and times it by a hundred.

BK: Yeah, it meant that a lot of HIV positive folks were quite isolated and alone, right?

DH: Yep. Back then, when the cocktail or I guess whatever it was called, that the pills or whatever, made people either really, really sick or kept them, made them, level kind of thing. And a lot of them were scared to take it because they didn't want to be one of the ones that got sick. And they're sort of, well you know, it's there to help, you gotta kind of remember that part. And if you get really sick, they do have ways of kind of levelling you out on that. And you know, I always—I looked into it and thought, oh god, you know that's, some people, the metabolism just can't handle the pills they were giving them, because I can understand now fully, because I've got my metabolism now that don't understand a lot of things either. So, I can understand that one completely. But most of the time it sort of goes good.

BK: Was there—

DH: Sorry?

BK: I was just going to ask was there a lot of stigma about HIV in the community back then?

DH: Yes, there was actually. You were afraid, or a lot of people were afraid to say that yes they were, because nobody would have much to do with them in the beginning. And then when the information started getting out, it was like, oh well okay, it's not as bad as they thought, and then finally people now are going wait a minute. These people have had it for many, many years and they're still doing okay. So, the attitudes come around quite a bit to the better.

BK: And how was kind of mainstream society responding back then? So, people outside of the community?

DH: Oh, mainstream society was very touchy, very [inaudible 53:17], very be real careful. Be cautious of how you approach the topic, or when it's approached how you try to get, you know, introduce information to them without offending their – what do you call it – standards or principles or whatever. You know, without having to say, look, listen, this is what it is. You can't do that. I'm saying to myself you can't do that to them because they're going to look at you and go, screw off, kind of thing. But if you say, “Well, sir or ma'am, there is a lot of information out on the topic. If you'd like, I can most certainly bring it over for you and help you out to figure it out and what's going on.” You get the old adage, you get whatever it is with a spoonful of honey than a bottle of vinegar. If that makes a whole lot of sense, it does too. But from the society now are asking the gay community for help in a lot of things, to do with information to do with once again drag queens are become more and more popular back again, or again rather because when we put on shows and things like that, it's usually quite a festive attitude, the bar always makes money. Or the clubs always make money, or whatever. Wherever we're doing whatever, they make good money, and everything goes over really well. So, the whole attitude of the world has kind of changed on a lot of things, which is so nice to see.

BK: Yeah, I imagine it must've been a much more homophobic society back in the eighties and nineties too

DH: Oh yeah. Not so much—I've been extremely lucky myself. I'm never without an answer, somebody asks a question or fires a—or fires a—when I'm on stage and somebody fires

something nasty at me, like a comment or whatever, I immediately turn it around, and think, I'm—I used to be so quick at thoughts, I could snap an answer back so fast it would make their head spin. But it wouldn't be a nasty answer, it'd be something very, very down to earth and feet on the ground kind of thing. And I would—I wouldn't ridicule them for asking or being nasty, I'd just go, "Oh, you clearly have a question. Please ask me after for a drink, I'll answer all your questions, my friend." And that just the hecklers up right quick, because they'd think, oh, maybe he's that person up there on the stage isn't quite as crazy as he looks. So yeah.

BK: And any thoughts about how the government was responding back then?

DH: Oh, there's my opinion and there's one that has been presented to us. My opinion is not very darn well. Because there's a lot of things that could've been done or could've been more, done better, or more – through the health services, stuff like that, the government could've said okay, we'll authorize this or we'll say yes to that or present us with this and we'll get on it. But it was just kind of shoved under the carpet for awhile, as far as governments. But then that the bureaucracy, is that the right word for government? They tend to take three steps backwards and only one forward most of the time anyway. So, you kind of expect it from them. You can tell I'm not a politician, can't you.

BK: So, it was kind of slow, the government response?

DH: Yeah, kind of slow, and mind you, although it also depended on which government person, official or otherwise that you spoke to. Some of them were hand over fist trying to help and others were just "next week," "call me in a month," that kind of thing. So, it was a bit disheartening for some that were trying to learn things and understand. But other than that, they're much better now. They're not quite so closed-minded I guess is the right word for it. A lot of the new people they're working with, different organizations and various sundry departments have been affected by the topic and have taken the time to try and understand and are trying really hard to get things introduced that can help. Which is fantastic.

BK: How about HIV organizations. Were you aware of what organizations were forming or what they were doing in Vancouver or Calgary back then?

DH: Basically, I knew there was organizations that were forming and whatnot, but where to find them, I wasn't really back then in the eighties, I wasn't so swift at looking things up as far, in the cities because I get lost easily for starters. Not anymore, but back then I used to get somewhere and I go where the hell am I now. Just got a note under the table one sec. Oh dear. Oh, okay yep. Speaking which, that was [name], the head of the harm reduction society just slipped me a note to come see her before I leave here, so that's kind of nice. Anyways, where was I again?

BK: Just talking about HIV organizations back then.

DH: Most of them were, or there was a couple of them that came to mind, one of them was a foodbank for the patients and whatnot. That one, Est—Easter rather, she's past Empress, Emperor rather. She formed the organization that helped feed some of the patients that couldn't get out and things and just supplied stuff for them and whatnot, so I volunteered for that a little

bit. After I got moved back to Vancouver, or down in Vancouver, I volunteered with her quite a bit. Other than that, there was other ones that if you really dug around you could find out where they were. Like I say, the doctors a lot of the times were a bit standoffish in the beginning – not so much anymore, thank goodness. There are still one or two doctors that don't – for the HIV patients, they won't, sorry, not on my list, no more. Which unfortunately is their decision. They just won't take the time to figure things out and know what to do. And instead of saying, I don't understand and could you please see somebody else about that topic, they just strike them off their list altogether, which is not really fair to the patient. But most patients are—like it's getting now where most of them are, any of the ones that reinfections or what do you call it, the ones that first find out there's places here that you can go, same day, and boom you're right in the mix. You'll get all the information you want and all of the, anything that – the medical people can—to make sure especially can come up with a good idea to help you out, they'll send you that idea right quick, they're fantastic.

BK: So, that foodbank, that was Loving Spoonful?

DH: That's right, Loving Spoonful.

BK: And they were just providing meals to HIV positive folks?

DH: Yep. And they'd, the meals plus anything on the side of your, when you got your meals delivered, if you needed something or advice or something, they'd try it out, try to help out, you know answer the questions and help out as best they could. Easter is one of the nicest ladies I've ever met. She is unbelievably patient, and doesn't matter what the problem is, we'll figure it out, don't worry, we'll get to it and we'll get to it as quick as we can. And she'll sit down and go okay, now how do we do this? She's an awesome lady.

BK: Do you know if she's still around these days?

DH: Last I heard she was down in the States again. But she still has ties to Vancouver or had ties. It's been a couple years since I've been back to Vancouver, actually three years. My empress passed away, we had cabaret performers for her twenty-year anniversary of her being an empress, and she passed away two months before the coronation that we were supposed to be at. And I kind of didn't hear about it until the day before, oh, she'd be in Vancouver for coronation, or that year's coronation for the new election thing, and it threw me into a tailspin, because holy cow. But yeah, Easter, she's – last I heard she pops up whenever she can and she's still something to do with Loving Spoonfuls, as far as I know. I think, I haven't heard anything to differ, so... Being in Penticton is sort of out of the way. I think here, and it's in the dead centre I think, excuse the expression.

BK: No sure, you're not quite as in the loop as you would be in Vancouver perhaps.

DH: That's quite correct, yeah. Part of that, I do a lot of volunteer work here, and we've had a couple of drag shows here that turned out to be absolute smashers. They were fantastic. The bar that we had it here, he expected a very small, minimal crowd, so he only brought in minimum staff. Opened the doors at eight and by quarter to nine he called all of his staff, like everyone one of 'em, "Get in here, we need you." We packed the place solid.

BK: So, you've stayed quite involved in that community?

DH: Oh yeah, yep.

BK: That's great.

DH: I do. I try to, I do any of the [inaudible 1:04:57] that we can get for fundraisers, stuff like that. Sometimes the old Rusty Lee goes in, sometimes [inaudible] goes in, sometimes Donni goes in. So, depends on what's going on whether, what face goes on. And always have a good time. Some of the bars out here, because when I go out in character, they hand me a gazillion bunch of flyers, tell them there's a dollar off the first drink if they being this flyer with them and yep, I'll go out for two three hours and just have a great time, passing out these goofy fliers.

BK: Do you remember activism happening around HIV back then?

DH: Activism, like good or bad?

BK: Like people responding to HIV by maybe protests or getting out into the streets?

DH: I do. And at the time, I was very put out so to speak with how, how daffy can these people be without really come up and saying well nuts. Does that make any sense? I couldn't understand why they're being so adamant about putting on a protest because the—the whatever's going on and they're putting on such a fuss when what they should be doing is going to the government and saying, you know putting in petitions for, okay, let's get it done, let's solve this, whatever. That kind of thing was happening a little bit. You don't really hear too much about it, at that time you didn't hear much until after the fact, of course. You know, there'd be something, a protest happening, and two days later it'd get in the newspaper finally. It sort of made you think, well gee, that was kind of dumb to do that or kind of silly, or gee that was kind of nice, you know sort of hit and miss.

BK: So, your impression was maybe that some of that was maybe not necessary, or maybe over the top?

DH: Most of them would be not necessarily considered not necessary, but it's considered, or I thought it was, maybe it was just a little bit too star-spangled and bannerized and gone about not quite as all there was it could've been. Because you know, you get a lot of those, say three or four people out of a hundred that are the trouble makers so to speak, if there's something they'll work at it, and work at it, and work at it until they get six or eight more people. And they'll work at it, and work at it, till they get another dozen people, and then that dozen people are all yelling one thing and the rest are all yelling what they want everybody to know kind of thing. So, it's a mix up. Which is really too bad. Well, that's what protesting's all about too, you know, they have that at every protest. Doesn't matter what it's about. But a little disheartening when it sort of defeats the purpose of what these people were first starting out to try to bring attention to. I'm not one to back down from going to a protest or going to a march or something like that, you know a worthwhile one that, you know, other people are ignoring something and but they don't have to ignore it. We'll go there, we'll do whatever nonviolent. One of my biggest ones is

nonviolent, because I can't stand violence. Put up with it too many years growing up. But there's a lot of things that you can do without getting into trouble, or without causing a major catastrophe that gets the public to know what's going on and gets them asking what can we do to help.

BK: So, there were other political things that one could do besides protests that you think might've been more helpful?

DH: Yep. There's a lot things that people can do without causing a fuss, or without raising anything, without, well, privately or as a small group themselves, do it without all that kerfuffle so to speak. And they probably get more done than the ones that, because at the protest and stuff, like I said, there's always one or two that cause a disturbance. And everyone takes that—understands that whole crowd as a disturbance. Which is really too bad because then they write you off and ignore. Which is really too bad, because if you're out there trying to make a really good point or doing something that's really, really good and you get a few people that spoil it, and it's like that one apple in the barrel kind of thing. It takes a little bit to pull it out of the dumpster than it did to start out fresh.

BK: Overall, how do you think the epidemic changed the gay community?

DH: Which one? Which epidemic? There's been a couple.

BK: Yeah, thinking about HIV still.

DH: Yeah, made it more aware. And finally got people thinking, got people going, okay, we have to be more careful, we have to watch out for what's going on and protect ourselves. Make sure that you're okay and that you're, you know, sort of looked after kind of thing and don't go out to cause somebody else harm. I've heard over the years how many that have been infected have gone out knowing that they're still infectious and have gone out and slept with as many as they can in a short period of time, just because they're so mad about being ill themselves that they're taking it out on everybody else. Which is really not good. That's kind of scary. And yet there's others that, they've heard about it, they learned about it, they've figured it out, they've got in their minds, the best knowledge they can get sort of whatever, and they're doing the best they can to help keep it under control, like protecting themselves and making sure that others are a little bit aware of how to...

BK: So, it made the community a little bit more cautious or careful, you think?

DH: Yep, oh yep. I'd say about eighty percent are more cautious and more careful, for the very reason that they don't want to wind up like those first bunch, way back when. It was put to me like that one time by – I off-handily made a comment about how do you feel about da-da-da and it was like, oh, wrong thing to say, because it just all of a sudden, the backbone went straight and his hands went down the side of his chair. And said, this is what I think, and this is how it works. And I'm going, oh, then you've got it all—you guys are ready. He gave me all the right answers. It was really good. And he says, and then goes, "Is that wrong?" I said, "Oh, hell no, that's right.

You went under, you looked into, you dug up what you needed to know and you're being very cautious yourself." So that's basically, you know, that's gone down the right path.

BK: And how has your perspective on HIV changed over time? You know, thinking about what HIV meant in the early 1980s and what it means now, how has that changed?

DH: Basically, it has changed quite a bit. Originally it was – it scared me. But then I've always, when something scares me, I always straighten the backbone and go, okay, now how do I get out of here to start with, and start understanding how to work around or work with. Whatever the situation is, not just HIV, but with anything, I try to look at dead on. Bad wording. Sorry. Look at it face first sort of thing. And kind of, okay, now this is what's going on, this is what needs, this is what I can do, this is what I can't do. And go for it. Now, because I had a doctor that when I was first diagnosed, to my amazement at the time, or when I was diagnosed or when I picked it up, it was a total accident, my lover, myself, we'd been—he was full-blown to begin with. Or not full-blown, he just had HIV. And we were extremely cautious. You know, like, both of us at the time were needle users. Thank goodness that's over and done with. And we always marked ours, and in the middle of goofing around one night, we reached to grab and poked, and looked at each other and both of us said, "Oh shit." Exact words. Both of us at the same time said it and just went hey, nothing we can do about it, let's not panic right now because the world goes round. And he looks and goes, "You're not mad?" I go, "No, I'm not mad. We made a mistake. That's not your fault, not my fault, you know we just grabbed the wrong ones." And they were clearly marked. Like, he was really upset that that happened, and I said, "Don't worry. There's a chance it might not come to me. If it does, I'll deal with it. Don't worry."

Now I look at the whole, the word itself HIV is, doesn't have that kick out, or reach out and smack you in the head effect to me now. It's sort of, that's something that I'm helping to get the information out with, I'm helping to—I'm doing something to help. It might be little things, it might be sometimes big things. But I'm trying very hard to get others to know and to be careful and cautious and whatnot, and if it happens, hey, I'm not turning my back on you, I'm not even going the other direction. If you need help, let me know. So yeah, it's changed quite a bit. I don't back away from nothing. Or very, very seldom ever back away from anything. Because I'm a, what do you call it, a realist is it? I try to rationalize why somebody's doing this or why that's doing that, or why this is that. And okay now, the—when it's considering the other person, I try to put myself in their mind, going okay, this is why they're thinking that, this is how they understand it, and that's why they're being that way. So okay, we'll go just a little step farther and keep a stiff upper lip and use humour. Humour works wonderful. It's an amazing thing, you can get more—and I just sort of, you know kinda, work it into you know helping out or doing something good or kind of is there anything I can do to help you with that. And nine times out of ten, it's a good answer. There's the occasional time it's not, but nothing you can do about that.

BK: When was it that you were diagnosed?

DH: Actually, Colleen and I were just trying to figure that out. At least twenty-six years ago that I know of, that I'm sure of.

BK: So that was like the early nineties, I guess?

DH: Yeah. '96, I think it was. '94, '95. I stepped down as Emperor in '95 and moved back here to Penticton '96. So, it was '96, '97, I think. Somewheres around back then. But I was extremely lucky with my doctor, he referred me to Dr. Friesen in uh—Friesen?—yeah, the one in Kelowna. [Another voice in the background] Oh no not yet, no. Thank you. And he put me on – because I was also diagnosed with hep C, and before that couple of, well, little while before that, I had hep A, B, and C all at the same time, which they overlapped each other kind of thing. And my doctor said, “Why are you still breathing?” I’m going well. Just because my partner had to carry me in here because I couldn’t walk. But the one in Kelowna here, he says we want to get you onto the hep C treatment, because you’ve had it for ever and ever, but we gotta start you on this other, the cocktail. I can’t remember the name of the drugs that he used, but there was three of them in a package anyway. To get your body used to this, and then we’ll put you onto the cure for hep C. I said okay, no problem. So, I was very lucky, because at the very beginning I was put onto the batch of the keep me normal pills I call them. And doctor Partridge in Keremeos, he says, “Well, it either makes you really, really sick, or you fly by and do okay.” And I said, “Oh, gosh.” But he looks at me and he goes, “Well, we’re never sure whether to give you an Aspirin or a Tylenol or maybe a painkiller or give you a placebo.” You know, laughing, he says, “We never know what you’re going to be allergic to.” I said, “Well, we’ll try it. If it doesn’t work, we’ll figure something else out.” But it did the opposite to making me sick, I was just going, I consumed all the energy in the world, I was doing great. So, they had me on that long enough to stabilize me so to speak. And I went onto the hep C and instead of putting me on the original short course that, I can’t remember the name of it now, start with a ‘p.’ Anyway, he put me on it, he doubled the time to make sure that it took effect. And sure enough, got rid of it, not problem at all. I’ve been extremely lucky with doctors.

BK: And so, you said you didn’t really have any side effects on those drugs, the HIV drugs?

DH: No, the only side effect I had was – what the heck was it now I had? Oh, I had—I got what’s it called now, that staph infection. The really bad staph infection, what’s it called now? MRSA, I think it is. I got that at the hospital here years earlier, and I you know, if I get an infection or something or a cut or a bruise, I’ve gotta to be really careful if it gets infected. That kicks up a storm and I’m down for a week. So, they gave me this antibiotic, a really, really ultra strong one, it’s the only kind that works for that thing, that stuff. And I took it the first night, and the next, before I took the third pill the next morning, I looked in the mirror and went oh my god, this face looks like a bag of mush. So., I went straight to the hospital, and apparently I was allergic to the antibiotic.

BK: Oh my.

DH: Yeah, that’s about what they said too. “Oh my god” was the first—like the girl at the front desk, she’s, “Oh my god, hang on.” Out comes—I said, well I don’t— “Shut up and sit down, sir.” And they’re firing questions at me, and I goes, all I did was take the antibiotics and the one guy said, “Which one was it?” And I told him. He goes “Oh crap. There’s several people that it’s too strong for them. We’ll have to get you something else to take it’s place. But don’t you go anywhere, we’re not letting you out of here.” That’s the only time that, any reaction whatsoever, to the HIV medicine. I had to stop taking the blue one, I think it, no the orange one, during the

time I was taking the HIV, or the hep C course, because it would've reacted with the one in my stomach. So, I only took the one for that length of time, or didn't take the one for the length of time when I was doing the hep C. Other than that, no problem.

BK: And so, you had good support from doctors, which is great.

DH: Most of them. Well, there was one doctor that I had a little trouble with, but we got over that. At least hope she did. Other than that, no, most of them are really, really good.

BK: That's great. Did you seek out support from any organizations then, like any HIV organizations in Kelowna or in the Okanagan?

DH: Living Positive, I went through Colleen here, I got in touch with them and went to a few meetings here and did a retreat to Loon Lake two years ago I think it was. I think it's two years ago now. Spent a week up there. The whole idea was to relax, don't give a darn about the world there's no cell phone up here, there's no people to bother you, just come up, they got all kind of courses you can do, all kinds of stuff while you're there. Have fun. It was a fantastic week. I got a little bit too stressed out here, so they, two people here says you better—Colleen was one of them—"You better go on a break." So, I did. Applied for it the next day, got a call back saying, "Well, we're leaving next week. Are you available?" I said well you betcha. Them and the Living Positive is in Kelowna now I think, they had an office here, but I think it's only in Kelowna now, can't remember. Every now and again I get a contact with them and we sort of chat back and forth and see if there's anything new and updating. What else? Just with the clinic here through Colleen and the harm reduction society, we're sort of, with the harm reduction we're sort of out there doing the same thing as the rest are. We're, you know like how mini counsellors as we go out doing our cleanups and helping out and stuff.

BK: Like peer support kind of stuff?

DH: Yep, very much so. If anybody's having trouble we go to deliver something to them, or if we go to check, go by and check certain bad ones, I check in and make sure they're okay, if they need anything, if there's something they need answers to or whatever. I'll jot it down and say okay I'll be back today or tomorrow and let you know. And I do the best I can to find out what they need or what they're looking for. And it works pretty good.

BK: That's great. Yeah, that's really great. That's an amazing thing to be involved in.

DH: I kind of, I've volunteered with a lot of things over my whole lifespan and if there's something that needs doing or whatever, call me anytime, because I'm available. The last six months I've slowed down a little bit, because I got a little, had a little turn of a thing a year, not this November but last November my kidneys shut down on me. Colleen was the one that found me, she came to my apartment and she was helping me get ready to move to a new place, and she came over my place because she hadn't heard from me, and found me kind of barely able to speak or talk or walk. I'd already been, apparently, they figured about forty-eight hours already passed out. And when she rang the buzzer that sort of jolted me awake, but I couldn't get to the buzzer to answer the door, because I couldn't even get up high enough to hit the switch. She took

me to the hospital and they did their magic. Boy oh boy, they couldn't believe how fast I bounced back. They said if Colleen would've found me and hour later, they said you'd have probably passed away already. That's how bad of shape I was in. So, good thing Collen, she just had a funny feeling something was wrong and she came over.

BK: Geez.

DH: Oh, she's a lifesaver. That's not the first time she's done that for me. In other situations, she's literally saved my life.

BK: That's great. Yeah, we've heard a lot about the supports that are available to folks in Vancouver and Victoria, but we know a lot less about other parts of BC, so it's really encouraging to hear that you have so much support available to you there.

DH: There is. And it's – what's nice about it too is it's never judgmental, which is, that's the key thing right there. And it's never demanding. The help's here if anybody wants it, or if they want to know about it, it's here and immediately looked after. They'll immediately, you know, stop and go, okay, what do you need or what can we help you with. Which is really good, they're just awesome.

BK: So, one of the questions we always ask closer to the end of the interview is just if you have any advice for younger generations of folks who didn't live through this period of the epidemic, based on your experience living through this time?

DH: The ones who didn't live through all the original stuff you mean?

BK: Yeah, like younger folks today, maybe in the gay community, who didn't live through this and might not know that much about the epidemic.

DH: My first word of advice or whatever would be, be cautious. Be careful. And for heaven sakes, remember you have a life to live, don't let anybody influence you. In other words, just because somebody else says don't worry, don't worry, that usually, to me that's a key to sit back and go, well, perhaps I'll be a little bit more careful than I was going to be. Another one, if you need to know something, ask. Don't feel shy or don't feel embarrassed that you have to or you're going to ask questions, or you're looking for someone to get information from. Don't ever feel embarrassed that you need information. Because that's – information that can also helps you, but it also helps someone that you can possibly help as well. Most of the people that I've come across in the last couple years have been pretty much, they're already onto the safe sex idea, they're okay with that, no problem. They're a little put off with a couple of the tests that they have to go for. But it's like, well, it's the only way that you know that you're okay and it sort of takes you what like fifteen minutes. It could be worse. You could be going in for stitches instead. And most of them get a laugh on that one, they go, yeah, you're right there. Most of the ones I've run across here in Penticton have been really good. They're—what's the word for it—they ask questions without making it embarrassingly obvious that they don't – that they don't know that the answer is and they want to know. A lot of younger generation so to speak is, they like to

know about a lot of things and they make no bones about I don't care if you don't like me, wanting to know things, but I'd like to know. That kind of an attitude, which is really good.

BK: I think we've kind of covered most of my specific questions. We always like to leave some time at the end just to ask if there's anything that I haven't asked about or that you maybe wanted to expand upon in regards to your journey with HIV. Just wanted to make sure that you had a chance to add anything that you might want to add before we stop the recording.

DH: Maybe one or two. The first thing that – first, learning about HIV, I was a bit scared, you know like, 'cause it's something that when you hear about something, you sit back and go, wow. Oh boy, I was diagnosed, I was that kicked into a whole different ball game altogether. It didn't really scare me, because it's like I'll be fine, I will live through this and I will do whatever I can to keep my head above the dirt. I would suggest to people that, learn as much as you can. And myself, I've always done that anyways. I don't know something, I'd like to know about it and I do it as inconspicuously as I possibly can to learn things. I would suggest to anyone in the community, straight or gay, doesn't matter which one, never be put off by the fact that these one are not gonna answer your questions or those ones there are gonna ridicule you or those ones, there's, hey there's the helpful group, check with them. Because you only live once, so to speak, your life is your own. And you can do more even—if you're diagnosed with it, you can still do a lot more than the world even thinks. There are some people that I know that have been diagnosed that have gone on to be absolute pillars of the community, in their area. And it's—originally people were standoffish about it because what is going to happen if someone finds out. Now it's the medicines and stuff that's available now, is fantastic. It's not a death sentence anymore. It's not considered a death sentence anymore, it's considered as a minor blip, so to speak. A controllable one, but a minor blip.

Granted there are cases are it's more than a blip and so fast it just makes my head spin. A good example is about four months ago, a friend in Kelowna went in, was diagnosed, three and half months later he passed away. That's how fast it hit him, how hard he got hit with it. Like, it just took over his body and didn't matter what the doctors tried to help him with, it just reacted and they couldn't take it. Things like that, you know it sort of—be cautious, to anyone. Get checked out, don't be embarrassed by having it or you know going and getting a blood test to find out what's going on. It's all in a day's due. And you'll feel much better once you've been checked out, because it was a no vote. Nope, you're okay and keep going. It makes you feel better. And if it's a yes vote, what that does, yeah, it might be a little bit overwhelming to begin with, but at the same time, you're forewarned. You know that you have to be careful, or careful-er, and you know that now you have to start taking some medicines and things like that. It's—don't back away from it. Whatever you can do that's available, go for it. And apply for it and whatnot, because it's well worth the little bit of stress it's going to cause. And I say little bit of stress very gently, because some people it causes an extreme amount of stress, which is – that's harder to watch or harder to try and help out with. Because that's not, you never know exactly what to, that needs help with. Does that make sense?

BK: Yeah.

DH: I'm usually pretty good at reading people, working in the service industry for so many years now, so read colours around people. Accidentally found out about that one, it works too. And I can kind of see a situation happening, or something when—last bar I worked at as manager, I'd walk into the room from, you know, just come in and I'd look around the room and I'd find my doorman and go, okay, table one, seventeen, twenty-one and maybe, maybe table three. Watch those. Because that's our trouble spots for the night. And my doormen at first they'd say, "What are you talking about?" And I'd say, "Never mind, keep an eye on those ones, from a distance, but if something happens just go it at very cautious." A few times it's been because they've been armed and things like that, but I just sort of pick colours around the table didn't look right. If that makes any sense, I don't know if it does or not. And nine times out of ten, I've been dead right. I've been bang on the tables that I've suggested. The end of the night they come to me and say would you quit coming inside and warning us so soon, or not soon enough rather. "Come in early and warn us." So yeah, most of the time, everything's good.

BK: Has the stigma around HIV gone away or diminished?

DH: To a degree. To a degree. Mind you, I'm still – well, I got over it a long time ago, for a long time I was getting over the gay stigma. Just being gay alone at one point was taboo. And that was what I had when I finally said the hell with it, I'll be – you know, after that I said, the second one when I left her, it was like I'm going to be me. If the world doesn't like it, I'm really sorry. I'll make an apology right now, but I'm not going try and hurt nobody and I'm not going to try and cause anybody harm, in fact I'm going out of my way to do good things and if you can't handle that, I'm really sorry sir, or ma'am. I'll try to do better. But yeah, the stigma right now, it's not nearly, not nearly even a quarter of what it was. But yeah it's gotten much, much better.

BK: That's encouraging.

DH: Yeah. Which is nice. Because even people that I've known and met and who are so rigid in their ideas and their mindset are softening and they're coming around and going, that's [inaudible 1:39:15]. I heard the other day that [inaudible] and their whole attitude is sort of mushrooming into something really good, instead of something really sour. Which is, that's nice to see. People you least expect that are gonna have a nice word about something usually have the best words. They wind up having the nicest things. They come around to a total different attitude once they get a little information and once they learn things. You know, that's fantastic.

BK: Anything else you wanted to add before we stop the recording?

DH: Just that basically I'm myself, I'm doing fantastic, I've had extremely good luck, literally, with everything. And I'm still, I've been told I have to slow down a bunch because of various reasons, but I still like to volunteer a lot and help out wherever I can. Most of the organizations in this town or in several others, if they got something that they need help with, I do get a call and if you have time, "Can you come help us?" It's yep, no problem. It's—I'm open to just about any – like with Colleen here, any of the little groups she's running and any of the stuff she's got going, just call and I'll be there like glue. And a lot of the other things. I don't do near as what I used to, by any means. I'd like to be doing a lot more, but you know, you are old now again, get a little tired now and then. But I'm still available for a lot of things, and if there's anybody that

needs any help, I'm on the hope that they know or they can find out that I am still available and if anybody needs emergency help or anything like that, my number's on the book and it's all around the place, so call me anytime. Which I—I don't know, I've been told that's not good for me and it's like, well yeah, it gets a little busy now and again, but hey, if somebody needs help and there's nobody around, come and get me. Which is good.

Other than that, I compliment the doctors and nurses and whatnot that I've come across, and some of the ones that I've seen across the floor and things like that in the hospital when I'm visiting somebody. They are really good at their jobs. Most of them. Like I say, one or two that's a little standoffish, but heck, that's in any organization or business that happens, so you can't really—the rest of them are fantastic. I only just got our new hospital opened here in Penticton by the way. Yeah, it opened in fact the day that – the hospital opened two days before my mum had fallen out of bed and broke her wrist and cracked ribs, and put herself out of commission. So, she was in the hospital and the day they opened the new wing they put her into the new wing, the new tower. And then two days later dismissed her, told her to go home. But she got to be in the new hospital. And it is nice. They can't be the—the fellow that they dedicated the tower to, he passed away seven or eight, seven days I think it was after the opening of the new wing. He passed away. So, he managed to stay on board until the hospital was opened and then he passed away from I think it was a cancer, I cannot remember what it was but he was really sick. But he held on until the place opened. He donated two-and-a-half-million dollars towards the hospital and the building. So, he did pretty good.

BK: Wow.

DH: Other than that, the whole Okanagan valley is pretty good. Doesn't matter where you go, even Kelowna there—Kelowna can be pretty iffy, at times but that's because it's cotton picking busy. The hospital there is—you almost have to have a directory when you go in there to go to the right place. But they are so busy, I don't know how they keep up. But they are doing a pretty fair job of keeping up. Other than that, that's about it, I think. All the people, all the volunteers and all across BC and all around Canada and that, that are helping out and doing things that are helping get the information out and things like that. I congratulate them and I wish them all well.

BK: Great. Well, thanks so much Donni for sharing all of this with me, really appreciate you taking the time to do this. I'm going to just stop the recording now, if that's okay with you.

DH: Okay yep.