

“HIV in My Day” – Interview #52

January 24, 2019

Interviewee: Sherri Johnstone (SJ); Interviewer: Jackie Haywood (JH); Also present: Ben Klassen (BK)

Jackie Haywood: Thanks Sherry for coming in. Yeah, I appreciate it. So, what is your relationship to Vancouver? How long have you been here?

Sherri Johnstone: I came here when I was twenty-four after my divorce. I wanted to see the mountains and the ocean, and I was supposed to be here for two weeks. And I met a guy. I met a drug dealer, actually. And I didn't really know, there was like these balls of cocaine that he was selling. And I didn't realize that, that was in that little—I had no clue that something could be in those little plastic balls. And I ended up starting to snort cocaine with him. After coming from a — you know, having children, I didn't return home to my kids. And so it started off, I came to Vancouver and started using drugs really quickly.

JH: And what year was that?

SJ: Uh, '97. May of '97, yeah.

JH: So, you've been here ever since? Or did you go back and forth?

SJ: I went home a couple of times but I haven't been back since nineteen-four [sic]. I haven't seen my parents or anything. Twenty-two years I haven't seen my family.

JH: What province or state is home?

SJ: I'm from Windsor, Ontario. Border city. Yeah.

JH: So, when did you first learn or hear about HIV? When you were here? What...

SJ: The first few months. And I was scared, because I didn't hear anything about it in Ontario that time. And just because of sexual activity and stuff, I started getting tested every four months, because I knew it was available in Vancouver.

JH: Where did you go for testing?

SJ: The Street Nurses on Main Street.

JH: How did you hear about them? How did you know they were there and they were doing that testing?

SJ: Somebody pointed it out to me.

JH: So, the neighbourhood that you operated in, you lived in, that was the—

SJ: Main and Hastings.

JH: Main and Hastings, yeah.

SJ: I was staying at a shelter and that's how I got—I was on Granville Street in a hotel and I called about a shelter and I didn't even stay in that hotel room that night, because I was supposed to go get a bed. So, that's how I became—that's when I moved over to Powell Street.

JH: And how long did you stay in the Powell Street neighbourhood?

SJ: For twenty-two years, pretty much. Well, no—fifteen years, because I moved over here to Howe Street at McLaren when they first opened. Yeah, I moved in the day it opened, so my room has been mine.

JH: What year would that have been?

SJ: Uh, 2013.

JH: So, what was it like down around Powell Street when you were—what was it like around you?

SJ: It was really difficult, because I – you know, I was a housewife and a mum, and I was very sheltered. Like I had straight A—I was a straight A student in school. I had all my teeth. I just—I was in a different world. I walked down and Main and Hastings, and there was a woman, all she had on was a tee shirt and she had uh, straps of material around her ankles and her wrists. And I was just looking like, where am I? Is when I—I began—and everyone was asking me, “Are you looking? Are you looking?” And I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for, I was like what am I supposed to be looking for? And it was, you know, cocaine and heroin. So yeah, I got involved with injection, because of the fact that I was curious. All these people were buying these, you know—how could all these people be buying it, this stuff is probably really good. So, curiosity got the best of me.

JH: So, could you say what it was like to go from arriving in Vancouver, to injecting drugs? What was that.

SJ: It was horrible, because I didn't—you know, I came here not realizing how very vulnerable I was at that point in time. Just with uh—my husband was accused of molesting my best friend's daughter, and so I was devastated. I came out here and everything just got the best of me. Like I never experienced anything. You know, prostitution, I got involved in all that stuff, but it was very difficult for me to be in such an environment, but I was also very naïve.

JH: You were overwhelmed.

SJ: Overwhelmed, full of grief. Yeah, I was supposed to return home to my kids, and I didn't, so...

JH: Who was the—what were the circumstances around meeting your first HIV positive person, when you knew somebody was HIV positive and started meeting people?

SJ: I uh – well, after I started injecting, I was involved in prostitution and I ended up getting the women on the street to inject me because I didn’t—I didn’t know how to. And so – like, I know exactly the time when I became positive and somebody did it to me on purpose.

JH: Do you want to talk about it a bit?

SJ: And I had this chick named [name] that I used to hang out with and I thought that she was my best friend. And she—I used to give her the same amount of drugs—sorry, I’m emotional—I used to give her the same amount of drugs as what I got, and she injected me and I thought I stood up and, you know, usually you get the ringer, right? That was the biggest attraction about cocaine, was the ringer that you got. And I stood up and I looked at the rig, and the rig that I gave her was brand new. And this rig was like old and barbs with blood, and so what she did was she switched rigs on me. And then when she injected me, she was like, “Ha-ha-ha, welcome to the world of AIDS.” And whether I knew that I would have it at that particular time, that was the only time that I could’ve gotten it. Because I was always so careful, you know what I mean? I mean how careful can I be when I’m giving people the needle to inject me? And so, this woman had infected like several people in the Downtown Eastside. And then somebody ended up killing her.

JH: What year was that?

SJ: In 1997. This happened in May of 1997, this incident with her. And I found out that I was positive in September. So yeah.

JH: So, did you seek out the Street Nurses to test you, or did you have physical reactions that sent you?

SJ: I was very sick in August. I mean, I was living in Brandy’s Hotel, in the summertime—this was in August—and I remember laying in bed with several blankets on me because I had the chills so bad. And I was very, very ill for about three days. I moved into a recovery house, my first recovery house in September. And I had the street nurses—or I was tested before I went into the recovery house. And I went to the recovery house, and Liz the street nurse showed up at the recovery house to give me the results. And I was like, you know, “So, what’s the verdict?” And she goes, “Sherri, sit down.” And I fell. So, I fell on my knees. So, that’s how I found out.

JH: So, what was your immediate reaction as far as how your life was going to be different, or the same?

SJ: Well, the year before, I had a really good friend – his name was [name] – and he had found out that he was positive, and he killed himself automatically. Like, he didn’t give himself a chance. He was found—like he lived next door to me, and I found him dead in his apartment. Like he kept talking about it—well, his room right—he kept talking about killing himself and I

didn't believe it, but in the morning when I knocked on his door, it was kind of strange for me. And I uh—I got the maid to open up the door and he was dead. Well, he still had the needle in his arm.

JH: Sorry.

SJ: So, it's been death. All these years surrounded by death, because I've lost so many friends.

JH: Do you think that you changed in any way your behaviour?

SJ: Oh god, yeah, I was—I don't feel like I'm normal in this society anymore. You know whatever normal is, I was such a different person, you know what I mean? And I got involved with things like prostitution, and getting high in alleys and doorways. It was so—I went from barbeques and beer with my friends in a backyard to sitting in a room with people injecting and you know, this was supposed to be a party and I was like... I remember my first time, and I'm like, I feel like I'm at a funeral. I was joking, I feel like I'm at a funeral, this to me is not a party. So, it was a whole different life.

JH: But after you knew about your diagnosis, how was your life then?

SJ: I was going to do the opposite of my friend, I was going to live. And I was like – you know, at first, I didn't think that I would have a long time to live. So, like I said, I had moved into a recovery house right before I knew because I wanted to get out. But you know, it's just been very, very difficult to, you know—I've been positive, thought like, I decided to be strong. And within my first year—I had gone back out actually, into addiction after a few months and by the following year when I first—after a year of me being positive, my viral load was up to a hundred thousand. And I got off the medication again, I went on it again, and I was—I'd do good while I was on the medication, I'd go out into addiction and not eat and different things.

JH: You mean your HIV medication?

SJ: Yeah.

JH: You were on it, you left the recovery house and you were on it and—

SJ: And then I went off it again, and then I decided that I wasn't going to go back on it because I heard that, you know, that you could—that medicines wouldn't work if you kept going off and on it. And so, I stayed off it for many years. I've only been on the meds again for about six years. But I have a strong immune system, I started using recovery houses as a way to stay healthy. So, I have always taken care of myself, I'm a big girl, people don't even realize. You know, I'd walk in a room, she's HIV? But I've always tried in some fashion to take care of myself.

JH: So, who were your supports around going in and out of recovery? Because it's not that easy to get in. Who were your supports?

SJ: DEYAS, the street nurses especially.

JH: That's the D-E-Y-A-S, the Downtown Eastside Youth something [Activities] Society?

SJ: At that time, that was the only thing that was available back in 1997. So, I would go to them when I wanted to go into recovery or detox. I started using the detox like—I started going like every month for a long time. You know, people were like just go in, eat for a few day, get some sleep, and go back out. And I did that for many years. And I haven't been in detox or recovery house now for fifteen years. However, yeah, I've always—I don't smoke, so I've never been ill with HIV, I've never had pneumonia or anything like that. I always took care of me.

JH: Did you see any medical people outside of the street nurses?

SJ: At first, I was at Oak Tree Clinic, which is one of the best clinics for women. So, that was very helpful at the time.

JH: So that would've been about nineteen—

SJ: 1997, 1998.

JH: You were at Oak Tree.

SJ: Dr. David Burge was my doctor.

JH: How long did you stick with Oak Tree?

SJ: For about five years. And then I got involved with—what is that program? Women's—women's—not Positive Outlook...

JH: Positive Women's—

SJ: Women's—up on Davie?

JH: Yes, Positive Women's Network.

SJ: That's right, I was involved with them for many years. And I did like all of the surveys, I'd go there to eat, I'd go there to do my groceries. I lived and breathed there.

JH: And then they closed.

SJ: Yeah, it was devastating for women that it closed. Because you know, in this society, HIV is mostly men, you know what I mean? So, we had this little network of women and we were all so close, and then it was dismantled, and it was very difficult for all of us.

JH: Yes, I remember that time. Did you make good friends?

SJ: Yeah, I was close to the staff too. Like Bronwyn and Maria, and you know, a lot of the women too, I still am in touch with.

JH: So, what are you doing now as far as other agencies?

SJ: Now involved with Dr. Peter Centre, I got in about five years ago.

JH: What's that like for supports for you there?

SJ: I don't like the staff there, it's very—you have fifteen staff members in this place and at time you can't find—oh, sorry—I'm an Italian so I use my hands a lot—they're not there, you know what I mean? They all seem to go into offices and stuff, but for the care, you know the day program, the food and stuff is really good. And the day programs are good, so like karaoke and art therapy and all that stuff, so that stuff is good. Just some of the staff there are not.

JH: So, leaving Positive Women or the fact that they don't exist, and not being at Oak Tree, but being at Doctor Peter is there...

SJ: It's very hard being around so many gay men.

JH: What is lacking, or what is positive about that?

SJ: There's not enough stuff for women there, there's only a group of us—there's only like about maybe about twelve women that go there. And there's all these men. I lived in a society where it was just women, prostitutes, recovery houses, so it was very hard for me to go and be around so many, so many—not just gay but men, being in an environment. And after prostitution, where I was abused, like I went through—through Robert Pickton, you know what I mean? Girls disappeared off the same corner as where I worked. You know, I got into the truck with him one time too, and I didn't go with him because he was so dirty looking that I was like no. You know, I'd have to double bag him, sorry to say, you know. And I got out and he was mad, and he kept calling me, going around the corner calling me fat piggy. But it was so difficult for me to go from such an abused state to going back into this place where men, they—some of them don't even have regard for us women, the way they talk about their sexual stuff and all that. I'm not used to hearing that kind of stuff, and it's hard after being involved with the prostitution, like I said, and the different things that has happened to me. My own experiences with guys.

JH: So, how are you holding that together?

SJ: Well, I have a boyfriend, but we're not sexual, we've never been. He's also a bisexual guy, and me and him like—I just stick to him like glue, it's so co-dependent, you know. But I go there with him and I just mostly pay attention to our thing, sitting at the same table together. It's very cliquey. Everywhere you go, little, you know little areas. But the food is great, the cooking staff are wonderful, the nurses are great. Overall, it's not a bad experience, I've adjusted in over a time of five years being around all the guys, and some of them are my friends now.

JH: Alright. Do you see any other agencies around town for various things?

SJ: IDC, I go there for my care. I go to Coast even though I'm not a member, I go there with my boyfriend, he's a member.

JH: Down on Seymour?

SJ: Down on Seymour. The Gathering Place. Yeah, I like living in the West End. It's not so crazy and chaotic, and I feel I just have a little bit of normalcy back into my life. I have a cat who I've had for—she's going to be ten. And I got her down on Main and Hastings and at the time I was in full-fledged addiction and this little kitten saved my life. Because I had responsibility again, and I do very, very well you know with taking care of her. So, I've kind of gotten away from all the stuff I did. Out of prostitution for fifteen years now. So.

JH: Do you ever go back into that neighbourhood for anything?

SJ: I do, sometimes, you know, I'm still an occasional user. So, I'll go down there and just go and buy my drugs and then go home. But I don't stay there. My best friend just passed away, [name], of cancer. She's my best friend down there for twenty-five years. So, I used to go and visit her as well and now I—I just go down there for briefly, I can't handle it down there anymore. It's a whole different generation down there. Because of the crystal meth, everybody's so angry, and it's very hostile down there so I don't really like being in that environment.

JH: So, how about relating to family, are there are any outreach beyond your community?

SJ: No, I have a talking relationship with my mom. And I remember—I'm still very upset that when I told her that I was HIV, that was in 1997, the first—I know that it wasn't done maliciously, but she was like, "So, if you come home for a visit, where are you going to use the washroom?" And I still have that in my mind, like how could a mother say that to her own child. You know? But over the years, I began to understand it more, like why, it's just that back home, the place that I'm from, this lifestyle here is so different.

JH: So, there's still a lot of stigma and ignorance?

SJ: Oh yeah. My dad won't even talk to me. I used to be really close to my father, and you know, he won't get on the phone with me, won't talk to me. I'll always say to my mom, give dad a hug for me. But yeah, it's very hard. I have a brother who's a police officer and we've never gotten along. As kids, he came four years after and we don't get along at all. He just—he can't stand me, he hates me. Yeah, so it's very hard, the family thing.

JH: So, it sounds like Vancouver is a safe place. It sounds like you have made a lot of comfort and safety for yourself.

SJ: But I still want to go home. I still have that in me, that just everyday I think about going home because I don't want to—I have so much guilt in my life, you know, so much shame that I want to go home to be with my fam—to be with my parents before they die. My dad is seventy-four now, my mom is seventy-one and so I haven't seen them in twenty-two years, and there's

that longing to want to go back and live in Windsor. Although it would be very difficult because I am a different person now, they're very close-minded over there. It's very hard.

JH: What would your advice be to young women that, let's say, come from Ontario and come to Vancouver and as far as their health and HIV.

SJ: You know, I have tried—I worked at the needle exchange for fifteen years, I was a peer, handing out needles and getting a stipend after work. Twenty-eight dollars, right? And I did it to be able to talk to women, because I didn't want—I didn't want women to go through the same thing as I did. And if I could save one person, one woman or a guy, from going down the road that I've gone down, you know what I mean, it would be so blissful to be able to help. And I have talked to women, you know as being a peer, I go beyond just handing them needles. Sometimes they'll come to the window and you know be crying, or something. And I will spend time with them talking about my life and letting them know my experiences. And trying to get them to go into recovery and try to get them to go back home. So, I've always had—I'm so messed up in my own life that I could never be like a counsellor or whatever, but that would be my calling if any, is to work with women because I just—especially women because of my own personal experiences.

JH: It sounds like the Positive Women's Network folding is a real loss, a real gap for positive women.

SJ: Oh, it was huge. I just remember sitting there the last day that it was open, everybody crying. And like how could they take away something like that when it was so needed? There's nothing else like it, you know what I mean? Like just for women to gather and to feel safe and to talk about our experiences. It's awful. Like why would the government do that?

JH: What could Vancouver do to make it better, or safer?

SJ: Put about ten cops on every block that there's drug dealers. Send them all home, let them go home. I know that sounds racist, but a lot of these Latino guys—I've been involved with Latino guys for like twenty-something years, and everybody down there that's selling those drugs, it's poison. Like it's not even cocaine anymore. I would say to beef up the cops for one thing, and to put more places like Dr. Peter in place. But I don't believe in this whatchamacallit, the uhh, you know, playing safe. What is that called?

Ben Klassen: Like safe sex?

SJ: Like uh-hm---

JH: Like getting pills before.

BK: Harm reduction?

SJ: Harm reduction. I don't believe in that anymore. I really don't. Because it's just helping people use more. Like, back in the day, we would only get like fifteen rigs a week and that was

it. And you had to bring back point for point, and people have gotten so bad leaving their needles around all over the place and whatever, I don't think that it helps bringing in all those needles because everything being so available makes it easier for them to use. That's my own experience, I found that to be true. But this is just my opinion, I'm sure it's different for most people.

JH: Well that's what we want, your opinion.

SJ: But you know, I don't think it's such an epidemic with the needles, I'm glad that they have Insite there, or on-site that's very good. But the needles, handing out the needles and doing all that stuff—you know, there's people walking around in the alleys—like me—giving them right away, like they don't have to go work for it, they don't have to go look for rigs. It's just an overabundance. That money should be put into the opposite, more recovery. More things for people to get healthy. Not just handing them rigs. You know, it's like giving somebody a gun and just saying, "Here you go, use it."

JH: When you were going to recovery homes and organizations, the fact that you were HIV positive, how did that—how was that with the other people that were there?

SJ: That weren't HIV or...?

JH: Yeah, how was it?

SJ: I became—like in 1998, I stood up in a room full of addicts and a meeting and said that I was HIV positive. And that was to allow myself to breathe, not to be scared and I just—I'm so—I've been so open with it that being around other people, I don't care what they think. Like I've become kind of just—I know that I'm HIV positive and I live and breathe it everyday and there's nobody—I get hurt more if you call me a fat pig than saying anything about my HIV status. It's a condition now, it's not—

JH: So, in the care that you sought, the fact that you were HIV positive was not a deterrent? You weren't turned away, here in the city?

SJ: Yeah, I just – because you know there's an overabundance of people with HIV that we just, you know, I see people on the street that I know are HIV and it's just like there's a network between all of us, you know what I mean? So, it's common ground, we're there to support one another and people's ignorance don't—it doesn't—today it's a condition, it's not an epidemic so much today.

JH: So, the change from 1997 to today?

SJ: It's amazing because like I said I didn't think that I would be positive for twenty-two years and not even be put in the hospital one time. Like that's—you know, I have twenty-two years of life that I didn't think that I would have.

JH: So, the fear that might have been in 1997, you feel it's not—

SJ: Yeah, I thought that I was going to die. I thought that I had a little bit of time, and back then the doctors were not so supportive, you know what I mean. Like I went back to Ontario and the doctor said, “Well, be prepared. You’re gonna die soon.” And I was devastated when he said that to me. Like this is how different it is in Ontario compared to here. And people telling you that, it wears you down. My fear was so big, and I had hepatitis C as well, so it was like, oh my god, I’m a walking bomb, you know, like something’s gonna happen. And my hepatitis C went away in the worst year of my addiction when I was thirty-seven. I’m fifty-two now. And it went away, just cleared. One day I went and got bloodwork done and it was gone. And it was the worst year ever.

JH: So, you have your housing, you have good friends, you have your cat, you have Doctor Peter.

SJ: Yeah, I have support here.

JH: So, is there anything positive about being HIV positive in your life? What’s a positive effect might be?

SJ: I used to be very close-minded, and uh—about everything. We used to sit in the bar and make fun of prostitutes. And I went home and I sat at a table with the same people and they were still laughing about it and I was defending it. So, if anything I became the person that—the strong version of Sherri, you know what I mean? I’m always smiling, I’m always encouraging people, I’m always giving people compliments. And you know, life has twists. I got my children back in my life. My daughter is not too happy with me. I have two children, a boy and a girl, and they’re a year apart. And I left them, my daughter still feels abandoned. And my son came out to see me. I didn’t even know he was coming. I was living downtown and all of a sudden staff were like, “Your son is here.” And I’m like, “What? My son is here?” And my legs were so wobbly but when I seen him, you know? He was eighteen months when he went away, and I met him when he was twenty-four. And so, you know, I got my kids in my life, I’m grateful that I have my mom on the phone, I’m just who—who I guess was meant to be. I believe that our walks of life are kind of pre-determined before we’re even born, you know, this is the way that we’re gonna, and it’s inevitable whatever walk and you might as well adjust to it and just—my mom says that I’m the strongest person that she knows. You know, and I’m like, wow. I envy her life and she envies mine, because she’s been only with my father all her life and she’s never had any experiences that I’ve had.

JH: Have you taken any leadership or activism roles, because I hear a lot of strength from you.

SJ: Yeah, well like I said, I worked at the needle exchange. I’m a writer, I’m in *Megaphone* a lot. I write about my experiences in hopes that people will pick up on something in it. Always a positive message. I’m not always in a good mood, however most of the time I am. I’m human, right. I’ve accepted myself. I don’t like that I’m so heavy. I thought, wow, this is a chance for me to get skinny when I found out I was HIV and I’ve always been big. So, that’s the one thing that I don’t like about me, but I am who I am. So, and this is the one thing that I’m glad, I still miss the old Sherri, you know what I mean? I still have bits and pieces of her obviously. I had a good

upbringing so I think it's—a lot of people didn't even have a chance, you know, they've been come from abuse, such abuse stages. I was in recovery once and this girl was talking about how her brother was put on a burner, when she was being sexually molested and the boy came in trying to help her, and the father put him on a fucking burner. And I went to the bathroom and I cried, and I thought, how could I possibly think that my life was so bad when I had good parents. My father worked, we were like not medium class even, we didn't have a lot of money, but we had a good family. And so, some people didn't even have a chance with the way they live today because of the abuse state that they've had all their lives. So, I've become more open-minded, which is the biggest thing that I've brought into my life. Which is so necessary for everybody to have.

JH: That's great. Now before we wind up or I ask you if there are other things you want to add, what do you say to the medical community?

SJ: I think they're doing good, I think they've come a long way. I wish that a cure would come, but I don't think it's ever going to happen because there's too many people living off of it and I think—this is what HIV people think—is that there is something available but they don't want to give it to us.

JH: Oh, I can't understand what you—could you say a little bit more about that? I didn't understand.

SJ: There's too many—everybody now is living off of the HIV, they got jobs, all the things that have anything to do with HIV, so why would they bring in a cure because then all these people would lose their jobs. You know what I mean? So, it's like this is the way we think about it, it's a little bit of paranoia, you know what I mean. However, it just makes you wonder. And the same thing with cancer, like everybody has jobs around it and different things. You know, I wish to god that for both things, or anything that things would come up but I don't think we're going to see it, I'm going to see it in my lifetime.

JH: What do you see as the future of being an HIV positive person?

SJ: I don't know. I don't really think that this world is going to be around much longer with the global warming and the—how people are today, there's so many mean people out there. So, the state—from being a kid in the seventies and how things were back there, but all this high technology and plugging into the earth and that all stuff. I don't think that this world is going to take much more. So, I'm hoping though that it will get better and I hope one day that there will be a cure.

JH: Another thing that I want to know, do you know if there's any action about women asking for more services?

SJ: It's never gonna happen.

JH: What about Oak Tree?

SJ: I mean they got Oak Tree, thank god. But I don't think we're gonna see again another PWN. I hope to god that it does because women's needs in HIV are different than men's needs. You know it's totally different, we're more on an emotional—women are more emotional and they need different things than men.

JH: Talk more about that.

SJ: It's just how we're rigged, you know what I mean? We're just two separate species pretty much, and we're more—I don't know, I don't know what it's like to be a man, so I really don't know what I'm saying, but there is a difference and there needs to be more stuff for women. Because you got all these little—you got all these programs for men, like here and other places that is geared just to men. And whatchamacallit at AIDS Vancouver, they're trying to separate the men from the women. Like, you don't get Polly & Esther's anymore up on the men's floor, there's a floor now for women so they're kind of trying to separate us because men—there are men too that don't want to be around women, and there's women that don't want to be around men.

JH: I think you mean Positive Living, right? That they have Polly & Esther's if that's what you're talking about.

SJ: Yeah.

JH: Oh, I didn't realize that.

SJ: So, I don't know, I think that's where it's going because they're separating everything. But there needs to be another space like PWN for sure, because it has saved many women, you know, truly. I mean without that, I don't know where I would've went, because you know, when I was HIV—when I first found out, I needed somewhere to go. And for me, being in such a beautiful place, meeting those women and being in such a safe place was really one of the things that was needed for me, or I could've went in a different direction. You know what I mean? It's really imperative that there's something like that available. And for men too, I'm not a man-basher by any means or whatever, but we both need something that's geared just for us. But it's good that we have Dr. Peter Centre where it's together too. But it's been like my life turned around like the way I was, I think about that contrast, you know of me being a teenager, I wouldn't even go out with a boy who smokes, you know what I mean. So, it's kind of strange how my life ended up, but I kind of embrace it now because it's what I have. There's nobody else that's going to take care of me but me. In the end, I have to make decisions for myself. I've been on my own since I was sixteen years old. I left home and when I wanted to go back, my parents wouldn't let me come back, and I was working as a prostitute on the streets when I was sixteen. And a police constable, [name] out there in Windsor—or in Toronto, I had run away to Toronto—called him and said, “Your daughter is working on the streets.” And they wouldn't even take me home, so I've been on my own since I was sixteen. And I think that's what's made me take care of me is because I was gonna live or I was gonna die, and I chose to live. So, I gotta do the best with what I have, so to speak.

JH: Is there anything else that you can think of right now that you'd like to say or that you'd like us to know about your journey, or what's going on in Vancouver, what could've happened?

SJ: I just wish that people didn't have to go through those experiences that I've gone through, like the bad parts. I wish that life was much more simple but it's not, it's very complicated, and it goes by the choices that you make. So, I allowed that woman to give me that rig, I trusted her but you know, she—I never thought in a million years that somebody that I thought was my best friend would do that to me. And I just wish that people's experiences weren't so harsh. But life is what it is, and so you just gotta push through it. I have a lot of emotional damage, however I'm working with it.

JH: Through Dr. Peter?

SJ: Through Dr. Peter's, through being me. This wouldn't happen in Windsor, Ontario. If I was HIV in Windsor, Ontario I would've been screwed, you know what I mean? So, the good part is that I'm living in this place. I'm so far from home, and that's the worst thing, however I'm in a place where people help take care of people with HIV. You know, back in Windsor, I want to go back there but there's nothing back there for people. So, as much as I want to go home, it's just a pipe dream, so to speak.

JH: Okay.

SJ: But this is a good place. Vancouver is very open-minded and very generous with their—with the government allowances and different things. For being in such a rich city, we're not doing too bad. There's a lot of things available. All those places—there's nothing downtown twenty-seven years ago, and now there is. It's like full of societies that help people. And a lot of it comes from people wanting to make a difference, and I think that that is paramount to the whole thing, is people's love and compassion.

JH: Great.

SJ: I told you I had a story.