“HIV in My Day” – Interview 39

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Interviewee: Ross Pearson (RP); Interviewer: Ben Klassen (BK)

Ben Klassen: Alright, just sitting down with Ross this afternoon. Thanks so much for being here and sharing your story with us.

Ross Pearson: You’re welcome.

BK: Just to get started, we like to ask how you first became involved in the gay community or started engaging in gay life.

RP: In gay life – oh boy. That was back in Ontario. I lived in a small town – Wallaceburg, Ontario – and worked in the automobile industry, building parts for cars and stuff like that. And we used to go up – I was engaged to be married at one point and before we – a few months or six months before we walked down the aisle, I knew that it wasn’t the right thing for me. So, I started searching my life, and I would go up to London, Ontario to a gay bar there, and I met some people up there and had a good time, and realized that, yeah, this is who I am and this is the life I need to live. And I pursued that and met someone in London, saw them for a couple years – and that kind of went a little bit south. And then I met somebody else in the bar, who was from Vancouver, home visiting his parents in London, Ontario, and we got along well then. And we were writing letters back and forth, because we didn’t have the Internet at that time, so it was a bit different – sending pictures. Then I came out to visit, and as soon as I flew into the airport, and he picked me up, and we were driving down Granville St. – went over the Granville St. bridge. I saw English Bay and the mountains and the city, I thought this is Canada? I need to live here. And it was the – the day that I flew in was the Coronation Ball of 1981, and so we went to that that night and I was just amazed by the talent and the creativity of all these drag queens, and the court system, and all that stuff. Yeah, and I never looked back. Continued my life out here, got a job – and I’m still at that same job for thirty-eight years – yeah. And lots has happened since then, so…

BK: And the gay community in Vancouver must have looked a fair bit different then than in Ontario.

RP: The gay community in Vancouver, downtown in the West End, at that time was very colourful, ‘cause my partner – or the friend that I came out to see who became my partner – had a lot of friends that were drag queens, transvestites [sic], and sex changes [sic], and I come from the country, in a small town, and came into this, and I couldn’t believe how colourful and different it was to me, but normal it was to them. So – and I liked it. I thought these people were being who they want to be and who they are, and I thought it was an amazing thing. But Davie St. – like it was crazy. Lots of fun, lots of action down there. It was just – it was very gay, it was like very – it was new, right? Like after the revolution with Harvey Milk and that, in San Francisco. Yeah, it was – I thought I’m finally living the life that I was put on this earth to live, and I was very happy with the partner, and I thought now I can be me and who I am. Yeah…

BK: That’s amazing.

RP: So, unfortunately the relationship lasted two-and-a-half years and I realized what the gay community was really like. And there was a lot of promiscuity out there, and I saw that when I was out. And I knew a lot of couples in the building that I lived in, and I seen them out at Wreck Beach or whatever, and it’s like – you know, playing around and doing their stuff – and it’s like, I thought you were in a relationship. Because that was all new to me, that kind of stuff, so seeing all of that and coming from like the… I always thought that when you got married, it was ‘til death do us part, and that’s what I kind of wanted. And it was good for a while, and then I remembered, like this is not what – it’s not what it really is, and if you can live that kind of a life, that’s fine. I’ve never lived with another partner since then, and that was 1981 and ’82 and ’83, and then we parted ways, and I never ever lived with another partner since. I’ve had different roommates, did a lot of partying downtown, had fun, met a lot of nice people. And it was good, yeah. I kept my job, that was the most important thing, to have my job and be able to pay my bills and my rent and be able to live the life I want to live in Vancouver. So, that was one of the most important things for me – that kind of came first was – and then second was having fun and meeting people and learning more about the gay community and getting involved in stuff like that. And yeah, I met some nice people – it was a good experience. Lots of good memories.

BK: You’re talking a bit about sex – was the community a little more cruisier then? Did it seem like it was more sexualized or sexual?

RP: Well, the thing is if you wanted to have sex, you had to go out and look for it. You couldn’t hide behind your computer and go on all these websites and hook up with somebody that way. It was like, you had to put some effort into it, right? So, you’d go out to the bars – we always – well, what we did is we partied at home until about 10:30, you know drinking and having a few tokes and whatever – the party favours, right? And then going out and dancing, and we all loved to dance – and we always had a couple girlfriends with us, too, like females that were with us. And we had so much fun, but we always would get primed up at home, either at my place or a friend’s place – it was always different. So, we had a good group of friends. And then we’d go out to the bars and we’d go dancing all night – we’d be on the dancefloor all night. It was great. Then when Celebrities opened, that was one of the best places to dance.

BK: When did that open?

RP: I think that was around 1986, ’87, ‘cause I was in Ontario visiting at the time, and I had a roommate and he had contacted me and he says, “Oh, there’s a new bar that’s opened. You’re really going to like it. It’s big, they have a great dancefloor, and I know you like to dance.” So yeah, that was my favourite place, because you could go there, you could have fun with your friends. It didn’t have to – a lot of the other bars were very cruisy, like the Playpen South and the Shaggy Horse and Neighbours, John Barleys – so many bars – and Buddy’s, the Gandy Dancer.

BK: Way more bars, hey?

RP: They were all over the place, they were all over the place. And little niches here and there, and we used to go from one to the other with friends, and some of them wouldn’t allow women in – like, Buddy's they didn't allow – Buddy's was on the corner of Burnaby and – was it Burrard? Yeah, Burnaby and Burrard – a little bar there, and they had a downstairs and upstairs, and the women weren't allowed upstairs, although we did sneak one in once. But yeah, we had a lot of fun. But Davie St. was just so colourful. It was very gay and it was very happy, and yeah, it was a good place. Lots of nice people, lot of talented people, lot of creative people, lot of good people, you know?

BK: I don't want to switch gears too abruptly here, but when did you first hear about HIV within this picture?

RP: Well, when I first moved out here in '81, that was when all these men in San Francisco were dying and they had the purple spots on them, the Kaposi's sarcoma. And they were – these people were dying and they were burying them, and they thought that there might have been something going on, and obviously there was. And they did do tests then, but all I remember is getting kind of a little scratch or something on my arm from the doctor to see if I had a reaction to it, and that was kind of the test for it or something. Yeah, it was different, right, back then. So, after 1981, there was talk about all the stuff going on in San Francisco, and then it started hitting here. And the first person that I knew who here was 1986, and they were good friends of my partner's – we weren't together anymore but we were good friends. They both did drag and the one was – when she did drag, she looked like Queen Elizabeth, and the other one – I won't say names, right?

BK: It's totally up to you. We can either edit them out or…

RP: Because it was [name] and [name], [drag name] and [drag name]. [Name] was the bigger guy, [name] was a little French guy – cute as a button, and he would make all her dresses. And they both had very good professional jobs. And I remember… [pause] Sorry.

BK: No, of course.

RP: I remember, uh, getting in the elevator and seeing them and [name] at the time had Kaposi's sarcoma, so he was full of spots. I made a comment, I said, "Oh my god, what does the other guy look like?" Thinking that he might have got into a fight or whatever, right? They both kind of looked at me and – like, I didn't know, right? And… I felt so bad after that. And then that's when it all started – it was like one after the other, oh my god… [pause] Every week I would look in the *West Ender* newspaper and I would look at the obituaries and see who died. And I used to save them, I used to cut them out and save them. And it was just – it was horrific. I don't even – it's so hard to explain, it's so hard to… And just to tell people, like, I don't expect anybody to feel what I feel unless you were there, like if you experienced this with your friends. After [name] – [name] was the first one I knew who passed on from HIV, and it was so sad, and then… Because they had nothing – they had nothing. It was like you got HIV, you'd go to ARC, and then it would turn into AIDS, and then they died. And they would lay over there in St. Paul's hospital on the ninth or tenth floor – I can't remember what floor it was. Yeah, it was terrible. But then the building I lived – oh, what happened was, okay, I had moved out to… There was lots of things happening in the West End, so I thought okay, I'm going to move away for a while, so I moved out to Burnaby on Kingsway, closer to work. I stayed out there for ten months and I couldn't live there, I had to be back down here.

So, I knew a friend that was living in the same building that I lived in and he became an assistant manager there, so he got a two-bedroom apartment and I shared the apartment with him as friends. And two months after, he was diagnosed HIV positive, and he said to me – he says, "You probably won't want to share this apartment with my anymore," and I say, "Why would you say that?" You know, he also said to me, he says, "You should go get tested." He says, "Don't be surprised of your results." And I said, "Well, I actually would be surprised about my results either way," like whether it's positive or negative, right? So, I went and got tested and it was very frightening – it was very frightening, because you had to wait. Once you got that blood drawn out of you, it's like a waiting game – it's like, oh my god, am I going to be a statistic here or whatever? Anyway, it was negative and I'm still negative to today. So, I shared the place with him and because of his situation – and he was very well-known in the gay community, he was always out partying in the bar – fun guy, right? So, all these people were being diagnosed with HIV and needed a place to live, so he was bringing them all into the building. So, the building became a place for – well, it was gay men and gay women pretty much, that building. We called get a stack of fags – stack of fags and deck of dykes on one side. And we had great Christmas lights – every year we had great Christmas lights on that building, and we won – we were in the paper once and everything for all the Christmas lights and the colourfulness of it – it was great. And I remember seeing Christmas lights once of the AIDS ribbon – you know, the red ribbon – and then beside it was a heart, a red heart, but it was broken in two – like, it was broken. So, it was like HIV/AIDS and a broken heart – it was… [pause] Oh boy, it was a broken heart. Sorry.

Yeah, after that, you'd just see – all these people that were in the building, you knew what was going to happen. Some of them were jumping over the patios and they were dying, like on the ground – they were committing suicide in their apartments. Some of the people were rejected from their family because they were gay, and then it turns out that they're HIV positive, and then their family wanted nothing, absolutely nothing to do with them because of the stigmatism. "Oh, my son's gay and he's got AIDS," and blah, blah, blah. And I remember people at work, at my job saying, "Why doesn't Ross have AIDS? All of his friends do. And they should put them all on the island somewhere." And I said, "Well, if they do, then I'm going to take care of them, I'm going with them, because I'd rather be with them than with you if you're going to be like that. And you know the funny thing is it's not funny – this is…" The one person who was making derogatory comments about it, about maybe five years ago, seven years ago, his sister was diagnosed with HIV, and I was the first person that he told – he come to and told me at work. And then he started going on about how she'd got it from doing this. I said, "It doesn't matter how she got it." I says, "She's has it and she told you because she wants your support. And if you can't give that to her, give her my phone number. I will totally give her support." I'm sure she has a good doctor now, but anyhow, she got on the medication and became undetectable.

But back to the '80s, there was just so much going on, it was just so dark. Everybody was so frightened. I used to go down to the campground Index and there was a lot of boys there from Seattle and just from all over the place had come to this great campsite that we had down there – we could camp all season, go there in May and leave in September, and pay like $100, $50 each. You put your tent there and you'd go there for the weekend. And then these boys were being diagnosed with HIV and the reactions and everything that was happening down there just turned everything around. And everybody was just so afraid, so frightened. Not only being diagnosed with HIV, it's the stigmatism, I think that was even worse behind it, because "Oh, they're all fags, and, you know, they should die," or whatever. It just was not a good time, it was not an accepted thing – like first of all, to be gay, and secondly to have this gay virus they would call it come into the community and start killing off people, right? And some people were applauding it – like, it's god's way or whatever. Well, I just – I just sat there and listened to all of that and I thought, you know what, one day you're really going to understand this. Nobody understands it now, nobody knows, everybody's afraid, nobody knows how you really get it. They obviously learned, right – people learned and did research and that. But after '86, then people just started dying like crazy, and you would see these guys walking down the street just wasting away, losing away, and you'd think, oh god, there's another one.

And then I'd look in the newspaper, like I said before, and I thought, I know him – I knew him from the building. There was over 200 people that, you know, just – it was insane. It was just one after the other. The ward in St. Paul's was people just – well, they were just lined up in their beds, laying there, wasting away and there was nothing that people could do, right? Try to keep them comfortable. Then – so, from 1986 up to 1990, I had – once my partner and myself parted ways, I met some other friends and I met this guy in our building who had a couple lady friends. So, we got to know them and we just hit it off with them, so they became part of our group, and they had a good group of gay friends, because the one woman, her brother – or her boyfriend that she was living with, his brother was gay and he had a partner. So, we got to meet him and then their friends, so I became part of that group and fit in very well. We had so much fun – oh my god, we had so much fun. That was the prime of my time in Vancouver was those years when I met those people and coming here and seeing like the lifestyle of the drag queens and the transvestites and the sex changes and the prostitution on the street – it was just all right out there, right? It was amazing.

Then after seeing all that, in 1990 a dear friend of mine started having some issues, and her and I used to do road trips – like, we did a road trip down to San Francisco and different places and camping, and stuff like that. Became very good friends. I knew her mom, I knew her dad, I knew her sister – stuff like that, so kind of my family out here, from my family back east. We had such a good time. I have so many good memories of all of that. And then she started getting sick. And we were going down to San Francisco and we were talking and she had to leave the restaurant and go out – like things were just not staying with her, like she was having challenges. And it kept going on, things were happening, and I said, "You know, you ever think about getting an HIV test?" "No." And I thought, hm. I said, "I'll get one if you do," because I was afraid, too. Like I had one and then a few years went by, and I was very careful with my sexual activity and that, but you never know – you never know, right? So anyway, she wouldn't go, and then she kept having problems. Like, she had beautiful long hair, she was a voluptuous beautiful woman who partied with us and dancing and all that stuff, and then she started getting ill, and her hair started getting very dull and falling out. And she would get it cut – before you knew it, her hair was almost shoulder-length, after a year or two, whatever.

And then she was having issues and she had to go to emergency once, and they wanted to do tests and she wouldn't take any tests, right? So, what happened in March of 1992, I believe it was, she was having problems with her eye, so she went into emergency and they checked her over and she had a detached retina. So, they wanted her to be admitted, because I think they knew – they kind of knew what was going on there, right? So, the next day, she went in – she wouldn't admit herself then, and she was with a friend and they came to my place after that visit. And then we talked and I made them dinner, and we talked and it was really sad. So, the next day… [pause] There's St. Paul's hospital. The next day, she went into the hospital and she never came out. I know… She went in. Well, actually she did come out for about a week or two and she went to stay at her parents, and then they had that AZT and the pill was so big that she couldn't even swallow it. [Pause] Oh my god, [name]. Her parents lived not too far from where I worked, so every day I would go to their place and visit after work, and just sit there and visit with her. I'd see her sitting up in her bed in her little bedroom that she was raised in and her parents were in the living room.

Oh, but back to the diagnosis – I forgot about that – she went into the hospital, she was getting very sick, all this stuff was happening, and she kept refusing the HIV test. And finally they came in and said, "We're demanding that you have one." Not only was she HIV positive, she was full-blown AIDS, so there was absolutely nothing that they could like – they tried the AZT – she couldn't, wouldn't take it, stuff like that. So, what happened was she just got too sick at home and she ended up back in the hospital and she never came out. Every day I went up there to visit her after work, on the weekends, and then of course there's other people in there too that you knew or whatever, so you'd kind of visit them, and then even people that you didn't know, you just wanted to help them. It was just… oh [pause]… The… She just got worse. I'd go up there and play cards, take cards up there, play cards. I'd eat her dinner – I'd share her dinner with her because she didn't want to eat it all, so I'd want to share with her – or she'd share with me. You know, her parents were there every day as well and her sister. And then she just got to the point where she ended up in palliative care, and she just would lay there every day, thinner, thinner, thinner. She got the thrush in the mouth – her mouth was all white. I think she was losing her sight as well because of the detached retina. She was yellow, jaundiced. And she went from a beautiful, voluptuous woman down to a skeleton.

And I remember the last time that I seen her in the hospital, she was laying there – well, I went in there one time and she was sleeping and her eyes weren't even closed – she couldn't even close her eyes. Her eyelids were open, her eyes were rolled back, so you could see the whites, which were yellow, and that was how she slept. I think that was the worst thing that I have ever experienced in my life. She was just such a good person and to see that happen to her… I said to her at one point, "If I could trade places…" [long pause] I wanted to trade places with her so she didn't have to die. [Pause] I guess I'm still not over it – I'm not. I can't get past it. And I think that I can't get past it because of all the ridicule and the things that people say about all of that back then. It was so difficult – the hatred, and just the nasty things that were said and the stigmatism behind all of this. I… I don't know. This is – it was an experience – it was a really life learning experience – very profound, very just – I don't even know how to explain it. Anyway, she was really wasting away and I knew that she was going to die and that it was going to be soon. And I went down to that campground that one weekend – I thought I'm going to go away and kind of just get away from all of this for a day or two days, and she died and I wasn't there. And the nurse who took care of her lived in our building, and he was down there camping, and he told me that [name] had died. I just thought – well, it was very upsetting, like of course, but her pain was gone, her pain ended. She didn't have to suffer anymore. Her parents, her poor parents, just – like, I can't imagine watching my child lay in a bed like that and just waste away to nothing and there's nothing you can do. It was a horrible, horrible virus.

And after that, the group of friends that we had that I'd met through [name], the group of friends – there was one, two – there was about twelve of us and most of them died within two years. And it was just one after the other, and it was like oh my god. I didn't know which way to turn – I didn't know which way to turn, I didn't know who to talk to. My doctor of course, who had a lot of patients and lost all of his patients, so it was very difficult for him as well. It was so hard to explain. It was just such a trying time in life, right? Like, should I kill myself? Should I… I went to survivor's guilt because why didn't I get it and all these people got it and died. Why didn't I get it, you know? It was – I keep looking at St. Paul's hospital, the cross – they did so much for people, that hospital, and I guess because it's a Catholic hospital and they don't turn anyone away. And they were amazing, those people there and those nurses and doctors and everybody that took care of them, they just – it was amazing. With all the fear on how you would get it and stuff like that, they were still there to take care of these people. That says tons. We couldn't do enough for those people in that hospital that worked there.

But yeah, then after that, I tried to get on with it and it was very difficult to meet another group of people, and I just couldn't because I was so stuck in what happened, and still watching these people die. And then my roommate that I had, he eventually passed on too, but he was a different case, because he – he got really, really skinny wasting away, like just a rack of bones, but you know what, he was always able to walk to that liquor store to get himself a 12-pack of beer, and he'd come back, sit on the lawn, and he would drink, and I think that's what kept him going was the beer. And then finally he just got overcome by it and they found him in his apartment dead. At that point, we weren't sharing an apartment anymore – we were both in different ways. I think he had partners and stuff like that, so… But I think about it, I talk about it, and every time I do it I get emotional about it, because it was such a passion to try to help these people and do whatever we possibly could, right? And then we had the AIDS Walks and I would work – I worked a couple times in the tent with Sandy [Lambert] and his partner, 'cause they were very much involved in it. And I remember people sitting – like they would do the walk, and get the money, collect the money, stuff like that for research, and then after they would have speakers on stage and people were sitting out there. And this is when they had nothing for AIDS, right? And people were screaming "do something!" and "get some medication!" and do something, do more research and do whatever – like, they were very angry, right? And then the pressure was put on by all of this, and then finally they started – it seemed like that's how it happened. I don't know like, whatever happened there or how they got it, but then they came out with these medications, which was god sent – oh my god. But yeah, we used to do the AIDS Walk, did that for quite a few years – walking it, working it, and doing whatever – being involved.

It was – I just, I still haven't gotten over it. I'd really like to get past it, right? I don't know how. I just – it won't go away, and it never will, I know it won't. But even now with people – like, with the medications and they're undetectable and that – like, I met that one person and I got to know him. We met at a party out where I live and we got to know each other a bit, and he told me he was HIV positive and undetectable and he had a lot of problems at the time. And I thought… So, I kind of stuck with him and then got to kind of actually liking him, so then I did a bunch of reading on HIV, the undetectable, the cocktail, Truvada, all that stuff, right? Because I didn't really realize or really understand it, because I got away from it, I removed myself from this situation down here when I moved out to the 'burbs. I started reading up about it and then I became a little more comfortable, and more and more and more. I was still afraid – I was still afraid because I was unsure and uncertain of you know, like can this be passed on still? How safe do you have to be? And I thought – anyway, we went for it and we were together for almost three years. All good things come to an end, right? But we're still friends and – but I learned a lot, it enabled me to learn a lot more about HIV, the undetectable, the medications, and now the Truvada, the PrEP and all that stuff, right, which is amazing. Yeah. So, now I'm just kind of coasting along and – you know, in search for somebody special in my life again. You know, hopefully one day I'll find that and we can just carry on with life, so… Yeah.

BK: Undetectability changes so much. I mean, what HIV means now is so different, right?

RP: It's very different now. However, it's still there. And what scares me the most is – I talk to people at work who have kids, and I says, "If you have a kid who's an older teenager, they're engaging in sexual activity. You need to talk to them. You need to make sure they're having tests done." Because what scares me is you get these young – I kind of think the gay community is a little more educated, however, there's still – the young ones didn't see what we saw back then, so they're not really afraid. If they could have saw what we saw in that hospital with these people, it would really make you think that, you know what, I don't want to be there. What can I do to prevent this? How can we stop it? There's all kinds of things, right? Now, you have people out there – okay, so now we have PrEP. Well, you know how it works – you know, you take it every day or you take it a few before you go out and have fun, take some more tomorrow, and hopefully you're not going to be infected. But… What concerns me now is the young people, if they don't get tested and they end up HIV because they are, some of them, and if they're out there sharing their love around and not being protected, then they'll pass it on and they won't know. And through my experience with HIV back in the day, like if you come into contact with HIV and become positive, it's usually around ten years before you start seeing some AIDS-related things that go on with your body, right? Like, different infections and stuff like that. Whereas if they get infected and they get on the medication – or get tested and get on the medication – then they can prevent themselves from getting sick and prevent themselves from passing it on.

So, the education is the big thing, that is where this has to go, and it has to really go. If we want to get rid of that virus, that's – like it just – people need to be educated. It has to be serious and not just say oh, well they've got a pill I can take or whatever – well, that's not good enough. Like, I'd just – I would hate to see somebody or myself become infected now. If I did now become infected with HIV, I would think, wow, that was really stupid – like what was I thinking or how could this have happened when I went through this from 1981 until now and didn't become infected. So, I don't know what I'd do if I got it – like, I would just get on the medication I guess and live my life alright, but I'd be very mad at myself, I'd be very angry, I'd be disappointed in myself. I don't know. But I just – it's never going to go away for me, like what I've experienced. I look at it as memories, learning – memories, learning experiences about people, about helping, about sharing love, about caring, being compassionate, and just like being there to support anybody who was sick or is sick. If I ever – whenever I go out and I see somebody – like sometimes you can tell, like people that are HIV positive because they've been through the ringer and all this stuff that happened to them in the younger days before there were good medications out – I always seem to gravitate to those people. I have a – I just, I don't know, I go to them and I talk to them, and a lot of the times become friends with them. And it doesn't scare me that way. I always want to try to help and just talk to them and hear their story, and talk to them about their life, and I can share my life, and stuff like that, right? The caring – the caring for people is very important to me, I think because my mother was like that. She was a very caring, nurturing person, so whenever people would come over, right away she was up in the fridge, bringing out food, putting it on the table. You know, it didn't matter who it was, when it was, it always happened, and everybody was welcome. I just – I don't know.

That's the good part of my story – well, that's a large part of my story. There's so many other things in there that… I'm trying to think of things and there's just so many that… But the loss in the community, the loss, the talent – it was amazing. Like the Balls back then – the Coronation Balls back then [laughs], they were big and grand, like they were amazing. I haven't been to one in a long time now, and I went to one in maybe the late-'90s, and I thought, oh, this is not like it used to be. And they were talking about past empresses, because all those court systems used to come up – you've probably seen that – you've been there and whatever. And now they don't come up, they're not there. Like Dianna Rose – went to her funeral and then the next year when she was empress and stepping down, she wasn't there, so they had a rose and it was her brother or something that was up there, right? So, a lot of that talent, a lot of those shows – I should go to a ball actually and see what it's like now. Maybe I'll go to one next year. I thought about going to one this year, but I get – I just think, you know what – I don't even know what I think anymore, to be honest with you. I just try – I go to work, I work a lot. I work my full-time job and now I have a part-time job to fill in the time, just to keep my mind busy and be around people, you know, happy people, fun people – my part-time job is like that.

BK: Was that community, the drag community, particularly hard-hit in Vancouver?

RP: It seemed to be, yeah. Lots of those old drag queens back then, yeah. And talent – oh my god, they were so talented, and to watch them put a dress together or their gowns together, and then go shopping with them to buy their tiaras and all their jewels and stuff like that – go to the ball in Calgary and different places. I don't know what the scene is like now because I haven't been in it for a long time. I left Vancouver and moved into the 'burbs in 2002 and I didn't even come down here for two years after that – didn't come down once. And then I came down once and I was walking through the West End, my old stomping grounds and that, and it was the same but it felt really different. Like, I would walk down the street and know nobody, and before in '80s, you'd walk down the street and know everybody. I remember Expo 86, when they had Expo 86 down here, and my aunt and uncle came out and all these people that were there were saying, "Hi, Ross." He says, "Man, you know so many people." I said, "Yeah, we have a pretty vibrant community here." Now I come down here and I know nobody – it's changed so much, right?

That's what happens though – cities change, progress, and you know, high rises go up, little buildings go down – it changes the dynamics and the charm of it all. But one good thing about it is I was here in the prime – 1981 to – well, for ten years was amazing. Like, even after HIV hit, there was still fun times in there, but there was a lot of sad times as well. But those were very memorable and impressionable years for me – the gay community, the gay lifestyle, the different people, how they behaved, the fun that we had, the love – the love that was there was amazing. It was just a fun time. There was never – I don't think I've ever seen a fight in a gay bar – it was always just fun – fun, fun, fun. And then at the end of the night, of course, everybody – 'cause you didn't have the Internet then – everybody's running around looking for someone to take home, and it's like, well, where were you in the middle of the night? We could have danced all night, right, and had some fun. But that's just the way it worked back then.

BK: I wish I could have seen the community back then because it does sound very vibrant.

RP: We had so much fun. It was just so much alive, and it was out there – like, you saw all the different walks of gay life – the dress, like the different drags, like the leather drag and the drag queens, and just the little tiny shorts – just all that stuff that's gay, that fashion that came out through all the gay people. Yeah, it was – Davie St. was gay, yeah, very gay. And the same with San Francisco too, right, which I didn't get down to until after all of that hit and went down to the Castro and it was still fun. I went down to the Castro fair once, had a great time – went with a group of people and had a great time. Drank too much the first night, so kind of hungover the next day, but we still had fun. I haven't been back there since – well, maybe once, but yeah – I'm not into the gay scene anymore. You know, like I said, I'm in the 'burbs, I work a lot. I have a couple friends that I see and – like, I don't even know what it's like down here anymore with the bars. Last gay pride last year I was down here for the parade – or two years ago – I was here last year but the year before I was with my partner at that time, and then we went into the bars and I always felt – I like it, but I feel kind of intimidated in the bars. I don't know, it's – but give me a couple of drinks and then I start having fun, yeah.

BK: I think that's the way it tends to work.

RP: Yeah, and then I like dancing and stuff like that. It was fun but… They actually asked me if I was coming down this year for the parade and the festivities. I'll probably go to the parade because I like to watch that even though it's getting very political now. Back in the day, it was short and sweet – it was gay, it was about being gay and getting liberated and stuff like that. Now it's very political and it goes on and on and on with everybody that wants to be seen in the gay parade. So, still good – it's nice that everything else is out there, but I sometimes think that it's lost its real meaning.

BK: Well, I have a few things that I definitely want to go back to and touch on if that's okay with you. You were talking about how you had this partner much later who was undetectable, and so you did a lot of reading about what that meant and what that meant for you. Where were you getting information earlier in the epidemic? Were there good sources of information out there?

RP: Like, in the '80s? Without the Internet?

BK: Yeah, without the Internet.

RP: It was just articles that you would read, things that people would tell you, what doctors told you. It was mostly the media, stuff like that, because it was big and it was talked about a lot, because you'd get these stars – you know, Rock Hudson and stuff like that – Liberace. And that's when it really kind of hit home. And then – oh, and then you have the bisexual people who were out with – well, they'd go out and play with the boys and end up HIV positive and then take it to their girlfriend. So, then it got into the straight community and they really had no place to turn for knowledge except to the gay community, which was quite interesting because when they came to the gay community, that opened up – that changed the stigmatism, from the gay plague to a sexual virus, an STI, or however you want to put it – I don't know. But the information back then was very minimal, right? Like all we knew was what we were getting from the news when they were doing their research and the medications that were coming out, and stuff like that. Yeah, I never really – yeah, that was the news. And then once they found the drugs to make these people, the HIV people undetectable – like, I knew that that – when did that happen? What year? Do you know?

BK: Well, '96 is the year that kind of gets underlined for that reason – the cocktail emerges, but as you said of course, it's a longer story than that, because the first few drugs that came out, the first few cocktails were really, really hard on people.

RP: Well yeah, and they grew all these fat things – the buffalo hump, which Sandy had fought and got covered to pay for, and he did a lot of advocating – yeah. But yeah, once I moved out of the city, then I kind of got away from it all and started just kind of bike riding, fishing, working – stuff like that and getting into that kind of a lifestyle. Because, well, I thought my friends are gone – they've all died – most of them, and it was very difficult to get into a new clique and then I didn't want to – I was afraid to meet a new clique or a new group of people and have them all die on me again. I just thought I can't go through this again. And people die all the time from all different kinds of things, so you're going to lose people all the time, but it was… I was in a very dark place with my mind and I got depressed and took lots of counselling – I took whatever I could get. I thought I'm going to dump my load on you and I'm going to let you carry it around. I'm going to walk away feeling empty or that it's gone, what I needed to talk about, so I did lots of that. And they had survivor's guilt set up at St. Paul's, survivor's guilt counselling for people who were feeling guilty because they were still alive, so I went to some of that.

But the information was very minimal – it was only what the doctors told you or in the newspapers or the news, right? And then when '96, when I heard wind of this medication or the cocktail that they were taking did make the people undetectable and they were surviving. But then some of the people had all the – what do you call that? Facial dysplasia or whatever? They would get the, you know – the fat would grow in places that it is not usually growing, right? And that doesn't go away unless you have liposuction, and then you can get rid of some of that. But I heard about the undectable, I didn't really understand it because I wasn't involved with anybody – like, I was out of the scene, right? And then when I met that one person, then that's when I really started learning a lot. I went back into it, I thought, okay. It's funny, that person lived in the same building that I lived in for twenty years, so it was kind of like going home. Yeah, and in one of the same units but a different floor, so it's like, okay, this is – there's a sign here. Something's up, like what's going on, right? So, I'm glad that it happened, I'm glad I had that relationship, because I learned a lot, I educated myself on it more then, and did tons of reading on the Internet about undetectable and all the research studies that they did – I spent hours reading. Whenever I was at home, I had the laptop on my lap and I was reading about that, because of my situation. I wanted to make sure I was in a safe spot – what I could do, what I couldn't do, stuff like that. Yeah, it all worked out.

I remember, we would have sex and then I would think, okay, did I get it? Did I get it? And then I'd get tested and then I'd be freaking out, right, and be thinking – I was still scared, but then I finally got over all of that, realizing that, you know what, this is really working. Yeah, the medication is really working – and I didn't take PrEP or nothing like that, but just him being undetectable and us practicing safer sex, that it worked. And then I got more comfortable with it, so – not comfortable enough to jeopardize myself, just kind of… But you know, back in the day, what I did when I would meet people or have sex, I would always treat everyone as being HIV positive, including myself, whether I knew or not, because that is just what I did. Instead of thinking, oh, are they or aren't they? I would just think, oh well, it's there, so I know what I can do and what I can't do, and that's how I lived it. And that's what I told people too – I said just treat everybody as being HIV and knowing what you have to do to prevent yourself from becoming infected.

BK: So, that just meant wearing condoms all the time?

RP: Or not even doing that kind of stuff, right? But definitely condoms if you ever got into the heavy stuff or the fun stuff – whatever you want to call it. Some people call it heavy, some people call it fun. Whatever, it's all good.

BK: It's an interesting thing to talk about a little bit because I think we have a very specific idea of what safer sex looks like in the present, but I think there was probably other strategies that people used to avoid getting HIV or avoid transmitting HIV.

RP: I even asked my doctor once would I not have the receptor cell to get HIV? Because there's those – there was a study they did on prostitutes in Africa – you probably know about that, right? And they were having unprotected sex with all these people and they weren't getting HIV. And they tested them and checked them and apparently they don't have the cell – the receptor cell that takes that virus in. And I don't know if they have a way of testing for that or whatever, 'cause I know that back in the day, I was with people who were HIV positive – like, I found out after, right? But then I always went back to think about what did we do? And it was all pretty safe. But you know, you're drinking, might be a little bit high, you get into the heat of passion, and then things can just happen. And that's where you really have to have your thinker on, because is it really worth it? And now – now with the PrEP and the undetectable, people think – a lot of people think it's a free for all, and then what happens is all these other STIs go on the rise, like syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea.

BK: There's a poster that says it right there. [Syphilis is on the rise]

RP: Oh, okay, yeah. There's the other things and people forget about that, right? Yeah so… I try to be very selective but you can never be too sure, and you treat everybody as being infected or with something and then you can – you know, then you just play safe.

BK: Do you remember when you started hearing about safe sex or safer sex?

RP: 1981.

BK: It was already being talked about at the time?

RP: Well, when they were wondering why these guys were dying in San Francisco, right? I was with a partner at the time but I didn't know – like I thought about it after, I didn't know if he was HIV positive or not. He did end up being Hepatitis C – found out later – but I didn't get it, thank god. He found that out after we had parted ways and we were still… So, I remember going to the hospital – I was with him when he went to see the doctor and they told him that, then of course I bought a book – that's what we did, we bought books, and we'd read up on this stuff, the information that they had on it. Not so much HIV but the other things.

BK: How was the community in general responding, again thinking about the '80s? Do you recall – well, you mentioned the AIDS Walks, for instance. Any other responses stand out to you?

RP: I think they did a lot of fundraising things at the bars, the courts systems and that, and everybody was very supportive of everybody. Like, nobody would judge people in the community, right? We weren't there to judge the people, we were here to help them. I know there's still people out there that judge for several reasons, but that's not my job, to judge. My job is to help and to help people and to be an asset to the community, wherever I am, and enjoy my life that was given to me. My sister always said to me, you know, "You're still here because God has a plan for you." I was raised Catholic, I'm not religious, I'm more a Buddha kind of guy. And she was very Catholic and she just passed away last year, bless her soul. She always said to me, "God has a plan for you, whether it's to go out and tell your story or to go and help people, or just to explain it to people, but there's something there for you." I remember when I was at the STI clinic on 12th Avenue by the Vancouver General Hospital and I went to get tested there. And I was talking to this one nurse and I was telling her my story about all the people and all the stuff that I knew, or what's happening around me. And she says to me, "Would you be interested in going to the schools with me and talking to the students?" And said, "Yes," I says, "But no." I says, "I can't do that right now." I would love to have done that, but because of all of the stigmatism that was still out there, I was afraid.

Could I do it now? Probably. I can talk to anybody about it now very openly. I don't care what they think. If they think bad or they want to judge me, whatever, I don't care what they think – it doesn't matter to me. What matters to me is getting that message out there and trying to make people realize that your kids and you need to understand this. You need to know, and they need to know, and you need to be accepting of them. If something happens to them or they do become HIV positive, you need to be there for them and support them. It's not something that they wanted to get, it's not something that they went out to get – it happened. So, it's like, you need to support them. Like, if somebody gets cancer or whatever, you're there to support them, you're there to help them, right? And HIV is no different. It's something that people get and now there's this great medication that these people have come up with, which is amazing and it's helped a lot. But I think people – people still die from it, but it's a lot longer life – they live a normal life and they will probably live longer than I will. And I've seen that, right, where people with HIV, I know some that have had it for over thirty years and they are alive and well. And somebody's diagnosed with cancer and they die in a year or less. So…

BK: Is the stigma still out there, do you think?

RP: It is. I told two women today at work – they were speaking their language, they're European – and they were complaining about something. And I said, "You're supposed to speak English in the workplace" – I was just kidding with them, because they're friends of mine. "Oh, you don't want to know what I'm saying – I'm swearing and that." And I said, "Well then I do want to know – I want to hear about this," right. But then I said to my one friend, I says to her – they were both there – I says, "I have an interview to go to today." I said, "I've talked to you about it before." And I said, "It's about the HIV/AIDS in the '80s and '90s." And I said, "I'm going to tell my story and everything that happened." And the one women, she goes, "Wow." She just – her hair was standing up on her arms. She says, "Oh my god." Another friend of mine said to me, "That's very brave." I says, "Well, whatever it is, it's something that I need to do. I've been wanting to do this for so long." But now's the time – you guys are doing this – it's awesome. Thank you for doing it.

BK: Thank you so much for sharing it with us.

RP: People – it needs to be out there, people need to know that it's still there and it's not something to brush away. Like, my kids will never get it, or whatever. Well, you know what? Look at my one friend at work where his sister got it and he was one of the biggest hypocrites about it and the nasty things that were said by him and a few other people, right? Now he has gay friends in the building he lives in in Burnaby. And I asked him, I says, "How's your sister doing?" He's retired now, he doesn't work there anymore – but I said, "How's your sister doing?" He says, "Oh, she's good. It's all gone now." And I says, "Well, the medication is working well." I said, "They've got her on a good medication. It's not gone, it won't go away, but it will be undetectable, and she won't be able to pass it on to anybody, hopefully." And then I – after that we didn't really discuss it anymore, then he retired, so… It can happen to anybody – it's not a prejudiced virus, it will go into anybody. I just think about it and I could just sit here and cry and cry and cry, and I really try to hold that in, right? But what a life experience it was. You know, it was very unfortunate to lose all these talented people, creative people, loving people, beautiful people – amazing. To lose it all… Yeah. But thanks to those people who did all the research and were able to come up with something for this – yeah, thank you for sure. And you know, maybe one day they'll find a cure – who knows? I'm sure they're working hard at it, and then something else will come. That's usually how it works – get rid of something, something else takes its place.

I'm going to move back to Ontario one day and when I move back I'm going to go back with a lot of knowledge on life and stories that I'll be able to share with people – small town that have no idea what this is all about. There was one woman in my hometown and my brother was dating her sister, living with her sister, and they were older than me. They had a son that lived out here and he became HIV positive and had AIDS, and my brother told me about him – or my brother's girlfriend. And I said, "Well, where is he?" And he was in a place on Arbutus – you know, it's one of the hospitals or… I don't know if it was palliative care or whatever. So, I got all the information and I started to go visit him and got to know him. So, I went there quite a bit to visit him, and I remember he had a – did he have a dove or something in his room? His bird with him, right? He was a nice young guy and he eventually passed away because it was a time when they couldn't fix it. And his mother came out and I picked her up and made her breakfast, and got to know her a little bit more, and assured her that, you know, don't hate your son for this – like don't think that way, don't think those thoughts. You know, it's something that happened – it's unfortunate and hopefully one day they'll be able to fix that, right? That was another kind of friendship I made. Yeah.

BK: It sounds like you found yourself in that kind of caregiving role on a lot of occasions.

RP: I know. You know, I wish I had been in the medical field – I wish I had went that way, instead of a [job]. But I guess because of all the school and the education you had to get, we didn't have the resources when I was younger, so I just kind of went and got jobs and worked. But I know a lot about – I do a lot of reading on medical issues. Like, if I have any medical issues or whatever, I like to read up on it and read other people's stories on things like that. The caregiving – if somebody's sick, I want to make them better, definitely.

BK: And just being there for them, like you said earlier.

RP: Doing whatever I have to do to help them out. It's caring for them, cooking for them, you know, sometimes financially helping them – anything to try to make them comfortable and try to get them better. And when they do get better, I feel so good about it. Yeah, it makes me happy to see them get better.

BK: Thinking on a larger scale, how did this change the community? Did it bring the community together in some ways? There's also a lot of loss there, so…

RP: It put a lot of fear into the community, I think. There was a lot of fear of how do you get it? Who has it? How do I not get it? But the community did become tighter and they became very supportive amongst each other like we said earlier, and started doing things and being proactive. You know, like doing the AIDS Walk, doing the fundraising, protesting things – stuff like that. Like, the things at the border. On December 1st, World AIDS Day – stuff like that. But for our community, it broke a lot of people's hearts… That was… [pause] That was the biggest thing, the heartbreak and the pain and the suffering, and trying to be strong through it all. But I think it kind of made me stronger as person – as I sit here and cry, right? Like it's…

BK: I don't think tears are a mark of weakness.

RP: But you know, I read something or heard something the other day that if you're still crying about something or if it still upsets you like that, you haven't got over it yet. So, I'm not quite sure how to get over that part – like, where I can sit and talk about it and talk about it without getting emotional, because it would probably be like someone that was in the World War. Like, my father, whatever – and whatever they did there and all that stuff must come back to them, and how they would get depressed or emotional or screwed-up – whatever. I don't know if that's a good thing to compare it to, but it's kind of… I think it's made everybody stronger down here and I think what else it has done is brought more acceptance into the gay world, because it's not a gay virus and once it started getting into people who were having sex, whether you were straight, gay – I don't know why people even have to put a title on that, but it's a sexual thing, or it has to get into your blood – the intravenous drug users or whatever. It just – I think it just brought people closer together, communities and – 'cause people want to help. I think that's just kind of a natural human thing, that people want to help. Like, even if you're working with somebody and you can't stand them, and whatever, and you're pissed off at them, and they get hurt or somebody does something to them to hurt them and you see that, your back gets up – you get defensive, you want to help, right? It's just the – it's just a sense. You know what I mean? Kind of… I keep looking at that hospital [St. Paul's].

BK: Yeah, we didn't plan that, but…

RP: It's okay, it's perfect, it's perfect. Lots of good things happened in that hospital. I still go there to see doctors, specialists or whatever. A lot of good care in that place. And sitting on that garden that's up there, we sat out there on many nights, we'd bring friends out there in a wheelchair. I had another friend that was part of that group who ended up in Vancouver General, and my friend – his buddy calls me and says, "If you want to see [name], you should go up and see him because this will be his last night." So, I go into the hospital, and [name], being the jovial guy that he always was, sitting up in bed. His mom's there, another friend is there who passed on as well not too long after. He's sitting up in his bed and he looked like a skeleton – he had absolutely no meat – he had his skeleton and skin over top. And he was partying. It was his last night, he was on morphine on demand, and he took advantage of that. So, he partied until he couldn't party anymore – I guess whenever he wanted a little pump of morphine – they probably had it so he could only get so much – but by the morning, he had passed away. So, I got to see him the last night.
And then going to his memorial – well, they just had a small thing for the family and us friends, and it was in a backyard on the – was it the Capilano River or the… What's the other river on the North Shore? Seymour – Seymour River. And we were at a guest spot at one of their friends' backyard and put the ashes in there and threw a bunch of flowers in, and it all just went downstream, right? Very emotional for the parents. I felt so bad for his mother and sister, and just… And they probably had a small thing because of what people think and the stigmatism, so they just kept it with the family and I don't even know if other people knew he had AIDS and died. You know, one thing about my friend [other name] though, they had – she was cremated, of course – everybody's cremated, or were then, I don't know what they do now. And they had a celebration of life on a funeral home on Kingsway and it was all family, relatives, and that, so it was a known fact that [name] had AIDS. And everybody was very supportive, so that was nice to see. It was very difficult, but everybody was very supportive – all the family, the uncles, and all that sort of stuff.

People need to understand that if you judge people like that or judge what's happening to people in a situation that it might happen to you or somebody that you know or somebody really close to you – your family, your kids, your grandkids, or whatever. That's why not only do you need to educate yourself but you need to keep your kids educated as well. Be very open about it – talk about it, talk about what's going on, and don't be like back in the '30s and '40s where they didn't talk about sex – like nobody had sex, right? There were things going on back then too. So, people just need to be more open and accepting of it, and I think that will help a lot, if people would just talk about it. Like that woman today saying, "Oh" – and I understood her, because she's not familiar with it, she's afraid of it, and just old-fashioned, you know what I mean? And probably knows nobody who has ever had it, you know what I mean? Because there are still people out there like that that have never been touched by it – not very many. Whether it be a cousin, an aunt, an uncle, or a brother, sister, father, mother – whatever, right? But there are some people that haven't been touched, but not a lot. Like, even – so now she knows, well, because of me, then I can tell her my story and then she's in touch kind of thing, and it gives her something to think about, right?

BK: Were you were aware of what any of the local organizations were doing in terms of their responses to the epidemic in the '80s and into the '90s?

RP: Yes and no, because – well, I know through Sandy [Lambert]. Sandy was very much involved through that. He was a very big advocate and did a hell of a job. Like, all the things that he did and he fought – that man knows how to fight his battles when it comes to HIV/AIDS. Like, he is a winner when it comes to that, yeah. He's done a lot of good things for the community – a lot of people don't know that, but he's worked very hard at it.

BK: We got to interview him a while back too, so it was really great for us to capture his story as well.

RP: Yeah, it's a story he has. He's a fighter, my sister, even though we're not talking right now, but maybe one day we will again, I hope. Things happen right, but you never forget and you never stop loving them. Oh boy. Up and down. Good cleanser.

BK: Hopefully that's what it provides. I know I have a couple more questions but I want to make sure I'm not missing anything big here, and certainly feel free to jump in if anything springs to mind. I guess one of the questions we always like to ask near the end is whether you have any advice for younger folks today, and I know we've already talked about this a little bit – or people who are newly diagnosed, or just younger gay guys for instance, younger people out in the community. As someone who's lived through this – anything else you want to add around that?

RP: Just be aware that it's out there and be careful – you know, do the things to protect yourself, and get tested – that's the first, right there. Get tested. And then go from there. And if you want to take PrEP or whatever, then take that too to help yourself. But be careful. Yeah. And get educated. Go back in the records – there's videos, there's films, right? Watch those. Because I know my friend, we watched one on Netflix. I said, "I want you to see this." And he says, "Oh my god, I'm lucky." I said, "Yeah, you are. That could be you, because now with your medication, like you can live your life and still have your challenges, however you're not going to go like that." But he didn't realize that, right, because he didn't know. And that's what – these young people need to see that. They need to be aware of what it did and what the community did to fight for their rights, to fight for them to do more research, and to find a remedy – not quite a cure but a good thing to slow all of this down. And they even closed the ward at the hospital –

that was big news when they did that because nobody with HIV was getting sick. Amazing. They've come a long ways – it took a little bit of time but they've come a long ways. Thank you, people – you're amazing. But just be careful, be aware, be educated, don't be silly. And you know, if you're going to go out and get high and drunk and that, just be aware of the heat of passion and what you're doing.

BK: I think I'm probably for the most part done with my more formal questions, but we certainly want to leave some space for you to add anything. Take a moment to think about anything that you wanted to share that we maybe didn't ask about or that we haven't had a chance to talk about yet.

RP: I remember another guy, too, in the building that I lived in – I remember quite a few of them and these are specific stories that I became friends with these people. And the one guy, he had the Kaposi's sarcoma – yeah, the purple spots, and he had it on his nose… That's not what's on my nose, that's just actinic keratosis that was nitrogened off, right, so those scabs will go away in a few days. Anyway, and he would go and get injections in his nose and then he'd come back and sit on the lawn, he'd tell us about it. It was very painful for him but they tried anything to prevent all of this from going, but there was just no stopping it, it seemed, in those days. Then there was another guy, he was a fisherman – he loved fishing. He always went up to the Squamish River and he would go fly-fishing for steelhead – he never kept them, catch and release. And a friend of mine had given me this tie-flying vice and all these feathers and the stings and the glue, and I remember going down to give it to him. I don't know if he ever tied his own flies, but I wasn't tying flies, so it was like – I remember that because I was looking in a store and I saw this tie-flying kit and I was like, oh, I remember I gave that to him. And then another one was very much – big guy, beautiful man, beautiful personality, and he was involved in the gay community and that, and he was HIV positive. And he would – he ended up getting into research as well. I'm not sure if he's still around or not – I haven't seen him for years. \

There's just so many things and so many stories that have happened that – this is only a little, tiny piece of it, of everything that I've just talked about, because there's just so much. I have photos of – I have photo albums, I liked to take pictures, right? So, I had all these photos of all these people who died. And after I moved out to the 'burbs in Tsawwassen, I had this box, a couple boxes in my locker and they were all the photo albums. So, I got brave one day and I took them out and I took them up to my apartment and I started going through them. I got through a few of the books and I had to put it away. I thought, oh my god, most of these people in here are gone. And they're all party pictures, they're all fun pictures, and they're all pictures that I'd really like to share. I thought about it – I didn't go through them yet, it's just pictures of fun times, and it could show people the good times that we used to have, and these beautiful vibrant people, and what happened to them. It can happen to you if you're not careful, and that's what the young people need to know. But lots of photos.

I wish I would have kept all the obituaries that I cut out of the paper, but a few years after I was in Tsawwassen and I opened the thing up, and I saw all these, and I thought, you know what, I think it's time, so I tossed them all. I wish I would have kept them, but I didn't. Every week I would cut them out, put them in a little box, 'cause I thought one day it's going to be history, right, and it is now – it's history. And you guys are doing this fantastic thing of all these interviews with people and getting information. I wish it would have happened a little bit sooner because the last probably five years, we've lost a lot of older queens and there could have been some really good stories there. Not only that but I also think that if anybody's listening – well, you will be – that all the history and the gay community, all the drag queens, all the gowns, all the tiaras, if we could find them and get them together and do up some kind of little museum for it, I think that would be a great thing. But a lot of that stuff is gone now. So, just in memory of the '80s or the '90s, something for people to reflect back on. Like, they have the wall down there – is that still down there by the beach?

BK: Oh yeah.

RP: I went down there and I sat in front of that with my cousin – oh boy – and bawled my eyes out and I wasn't expecting that to happen, and I just said to my cousin, "What can I say? This is happening, this is what it does to me," right? And I remember my roommate that I told you about earlier that would go to the beer store, and I remember him talking about that wall. He said, "Oh my god, they're putting a wall up and they're going to have all the names that have passed on from AIDS." And he was so happy about that, he was so happy about that, and I imagine his name is on it now. But I go down there, and you'll see a flower put into these different names, and you go there and you can spend hours just reading the names and thinking, oh my god, and then coming across the name of someone that you knew. Stuff like that – stuff like that really touches me. You know, to think that they would actually put something like that up – it just – for me, it just means that they care and they want to make people aware, you know. And yeah. It – you need to keep doing what you're doing – you need to keep interviewing people, you need to get a story together, do a documentary or whatever on this. I think it's very important. If people could see that, I think they could go back and just realize, like holy shit, did that really happen? You know, yeah it did – it really did happen. And all us guys down here were right in the middle of it and we weren't running away – couldn't run away. Like people even said that to me, "Oh, you should leave there." And I says, "No, I can't. We're in the middle of a crisis. I can't leave. No, no. I'd rather go down with them than leave. I can't go."

BK: These were people that you loved and cared about.

RP: They were my family, they were my extended family, and very loving people, and just – they cared. You know, we all kind of took care of each other and we had fun and good times. A lot of good memories, lots of good memories, and I'm really glad that I have them. I'm not glad that all of this happened, but I'm… I'm glad that I could be a part of it, to help, but I'm not glad that it happened – don't get me wrong there, I'm not happy about that. But to be part of it and experience this, it just shows you how sacred and tender and fragile life can be. Don't take it for granted. It's a gift that was given to you – you have to enjoy it, you have to treat your body well, and be kind to people – be kind. Peace and love. The two most important words to me are love, first, and then peace, and they kind of go together. Those are my two words, I love those two words, and I love that peace sign, even though it's from the '70s. I'll be on walking on a beach, I'll put a big circle, and then I'll put a peace sign in it, when the tide's out, right? And hopefully lots of people see it before the tide comes in to wash it away. I know… [long pause] I'm glad you did this today.

BK: We're very glad that you're here sharing your story with us – really appreciate it. I know it's a very challenging process but as you were just saying, I think it's also so important for us to remember, and remember these people that the community lost.

RP: And to tell you, you know, for you to hear this from all these people, too. It's important for you too so you can actually feel it and kind of maybe – I don't know. You can't put yourself there but… yeah. Be kind, love, you know, peace. Why can't we have that? That's how I try to live my life and that's how I want to live my life – nature, all the things that were given to us out there that don't cost anything – maybe a little fertilizer. That was all given to us, that's what it's about. If we treat it right, it will treat us right. And that includes your body, you know, what you do with it, what you put in it, what you put out of it – it's very important. Because at the end of the day, you know, we're all going home, we're going to relax, and hopefully feel good about what you did that day, and you're not stressed about getting in a fight with somebody or whatever – you know what I mean? And if you're kind and just nice and peaceful, then you can go home and feel that way. Like Ellen says, be kind to one another – that is so true. Be kind. If somebody needs help, help them, no matter what. Even if you're fighting with them, you don't like them or whatever, if they need help, help them – it's good for you, not just for them, right?

BK: I think those are good words to live by. Anything else you want to add before we end for now? I'm sure when you go home, there will be all sorts of other stories that probably come up and we can certainly talk again at some point.

RP: I'd love to, yeah. Thinking…

BK: Feel free to take a moment.

RP: Yeah, when I look at that hospital – and they're tearing it down too – that's unfortunate but I guess something that has to be done. There was a lot of care given out of that place, and the people – like, imagine if you're a nurse or a doctor and you're of all these people and the illness and all of that – and how do you get it? But you know what, they were still there. That was their job. They were dedicated to these people and helping and caring for them no matter what. They didn't seem to be afraid of getting HIV – you know, I'm sure if they got pricked with a needle or something like that, there was some of that that happened too, but they still went back to care for those people. Bless their souls, man. Kind people – that's kindness. It's a job, it's their job, but doing stuff like that is being kind as well.

BK: Some of them definitely went above and beyond. It wasn't just a job for some of those folks.

RP: And still, even some of the nurses and doctors out there, there's the same thing, they go above and beyond. I have great doctors here in Vancouver, I have a great doctor at Spectrum Health, Kimberly, and she's amazing. She took over from Brian Willoughby, who was an amazing doctor – that guy helped me through so much. Oh my god, I was so sad when he was leaving. I said, "You can't leave. What am I going to do without you?" "Oh, I have a good replacement." And then she worked with him for a year or whatever, and she's so nice. I feel blessed to have her as a doctor – she hooks me up with the dermatologist to get all this stuff done and other doctors that I had to see. Getting older, you know – things happen to your body and you want to keep in tune so you can keep going, right? Yeah, we have good doctors here, good medical system.

BK: That certainly seems to be part of the story is that in a lot of ways we're very lucky to be where we are in terms of the medical response.

RP: We have the best, we have the best. Like that clinic – oh, that's another thing, the clinic Spectrum Health. All those doctors, they specialize in HIV it seems, and when… It was probably in the '90s more so, and you would see all these guys there that were HIV positive, and some of them were so – I didn't recognize them, who they were. And one was a chiropractor of mine, and he's sitting there, and he recognized me but I didn't recognize him. And I guess my name was called and I didn't hear it, and he says, "Oh, Ross, it's your turn. Go ahead." And as soon as he spoke, I looked at him and I thought, oh my god, it's you. It was my chiropractor that I hadn't seen for a long time, but he was pretty ill. And so, maybe he got the medicine in time and maybe he's still around – I have no idea, but he was another good doctor – took care of everybody. But to see these people in there – and I used to tell people – you know, I went to the doctor, and there's five or six doctors in there, so – you've probably been in there, right?

BK: I haven't, no.

RP: No. So, they have the nice waiting room – it's very nice, well-done, it's very comfortable. I would see these people in there, and back in those days, there was a lot of people sitting there and they all looked so sad and so sick, and some were blind, and just what it did to them. I was sitting there and I was thinking, oh my god, it's so sad. But those doctors were all there to take care of them. Yeah, good doctors. And you don't see it as much now, so I don't know if a lot of them have passed on or if they moved away, but when I go in there now, I see mostly, you know, healthy kind of looking people, yeah. So, unless it's just a timing thing – I don't know but they've come a long way.

BK: A long way from the really in-your-face Kaposi's sarcoma and the wasting – you don't see that anymore, at least not in the same way, I'm sure.

RP: No. And the – what do they call that, when they get the fat? Facial dysplasia or…? I forget what they called it – there was a word for it. I don't know, you don't see much of that either unless they had it from before and they're still around, right? Yeah, it's amazing, but what a journey. What a journey – I did not expect this when I moved to Vancouver, this beautiful city, amazingly beautiful city. It rains too much here in the wintertime and when I first moved here, it rained and rained and rained all summer, and I was like, oh my god, what did I do? I was ready to move home, but I stuck it out. And like I said, I started my job May 29th, 1981 and I'm still there, so I retire next year and the year after. And then just kind of chill and do something that is different and… It would be interesting to get into something like this, like research or whatever, but I have to look into how to do that.

BK: I think most of these projects tend to have community members on the projects, peer researchers and stuff, so I don't exactly know how you get into those roles myself, but there's always a need for people like that.

RP: If I lived downtown, it would probably be easier, but now that I'm out in the country – well, it used to be in the country, it's not anymore – changed a lot. You know, like I said with all those photographs that I have, I would certainly be willing to share them and – so, those are other things too, right – faces of AIDS. Make people aware that – look, this is a normal, beautiful person. You're a normal beautiful person. This could happen if you're not aware. Although, it's not going to happen like it did before, but still, there still is that stigmatism – I still think there is that stigmatism. Like, if somebody in a heterosexual environment said, "Oh, I got HIV or I'm HIV positive," I'm sure there'd be some people that would be – even though you're undetectable, they're not going to get it from you – there would still be those certain individuals that would judge it, and only because of fear, I think. The fear of the unknown, they're not educated, that's what I kind of think. Or they just have their mind, their way of thinking, and they're not open to anything else in the world – they're in their own little world and that's where they want to stay. That's fine but don't judge people. Like I said, it could happen to somebody in your family.

BK: Anything else or should we stop this for now?

RP: Um… I just – I really do, like everybody else, wish and hope and pray that someday they find a cure and they can eradicate this. And if they do, that people need to behave in a certain way. Like, that doesn't mean that you can just go out there and be crazy, right – you know what I mean? Let's go out there and be crazy and a free for all, because something else could happen, and we don't want that. It would be nice if people could get into relationships too where they're monogamous relationships and that kind of thing, but then everybody's different, everybody likes different kinds of relationships, and I'm not judging for that either. I know what I kind of want and maybe that's why I'm still single. I don't know. But someday.

BK: I'm sure there's other people out there that are interested in that as well – I mean, absolutely.

RP: Other than that, we live in a great city – Vancouver is beautiful, it's the most beautiful city in Canada. It's probably one of the most beautiful cities I've ever been in, period, and there's a lot of great people here, we have a great medical system, we have a lot of great support, and they've come a long way. Because people care – people care and they want to make it better, and what a hell of a job they did – it's amazing.

BK: Your life is part of that story, too, part of that caring response, right?

RP: Very interesting.

BK: Well, thank you so much again for sharing all of this with us.

RP: You're welcome

BK: And if anything else comes up, we can certainly chat again at some point.

RP: Yeah. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time – I wanted to talk about it and even being videoed is even better, right, because they get to see you, they get to see the emotion, and what's really going on.

BK: There is something so powerful about people telling their stories in their own words and seeing them tell their story. That's really powerful.

RP: Yeah, I agree. It's – when I watch stories on TV or somebody telling a story, I can get emotional so easy it seems these days, and I think it all stems back to that. And I'm okay with that, I'm okay with that. To be able to have those feelings and those emotions I think is a good thing. I'd really like to get past this though and I'll find my way, and maybe somebody who sees this might have ideas or suggestions, right? Who knows?

BK: Well, unless you have anything else to add, I'll probably just stop the recording for now if that's okay with you.

RP: Yeah, I think we're good for now.

BK: Great.