“HIV in My Day”

Interview #:

Participant: Penny Bradford

IntervieweR: Rob?

R: Hi Penny.

PB: Hi Rob.

R: So, I’m going to ask you some questions as we discussed, prior to turning the power on here. And some of them at times might seem a little bit personal, maybe you feel like it’s something you’re not comfortable with, and maybe you think it’s just invasive, feel free to just say no. And make sure that you communicate that, there’s no right or wrong whether you answer a question or not.

PB: Okay.

R: Alright. So first of all, could you maybe just tell us, if you could state your name and maybe tell us how old you are and where you’re originally from, and then when you came to Victoria.

PB: Uh, my name’s Penny Bradford, I’m originally from Regina, Saskatchewan—like I was born there—I came to Victoria in nineteen-eighty-eight. And I’ve been here ever since.

R: Okay. And as far as being in Victoria, can you tell me what it was like when you first came here, just your first impression?

PB: Uhhm, there was very few skyscrapers, I guess everything was lower to the ground. And I would maybe say older, everything’s been—a lot of things have been torn down to build skyscrapers. I don’t know how many skyscrapers we got now, and there weren’t hardly any when I came to Victoria.

R: So definitely a different landscape.

PB: Yeah.

R: And what exactly, I can’t remember if you said this, but what exactly brought you to Victoria, what was your connection to it?

PB: My brother lived here. And I became homeless for a little while, and he took me.

R: So you were homeless for a little while?

PB: About a day.

R: About a day. Okay. Was there—

PB: Because I phone him right away and he said, ‘sure come on over.’

R: Alright, gotcha. So—so was—could you tell me a little bit about that, your first month or so in Victoria, what that was like. Do you remember was HIV or AIDS talked about at that time?

PB: I do remember one instance of my brother seeing it on the news about AIDS, and his remark was 'we should put them all on an island.' I do remember something before that though, because I had a blood transfusion in nineteen-eighty-two and I can remember thinking, is this safe? I didn't know. And I thought ah, you know, it couldn't happen to me. So I did have a blood transfusion, but I didn't get my HIV from there.

R: Okay. And when you heard your brother say that did you know at that time that you had HIV?

PB: No I wasn't positive, no.

R: Alright. So you do remember the feeling that you felt when you heard that from him?

PB: Uh, it didn't really mean anything to me at the time. I didn't know much about HIV or AIDS, so I didn't know if he knew what he was talking about or you know, didn't know anything.

R: Do you remember meeting people in the community here in Victoria that identified as having HIV or AIDS?

PB: After I was diagnosed I did seek people out for support, because I felt totally alone. I got HIV from my boyfriend who became my partner, and uhm, I didn't know very many other heterosexual people. We went into AIDS Vancouver Island and met some people there, but uhm my husband was more of a cowboy kind of singer, entertainer and he didn't really like being around the gay guys too much. He just kept going well they just eye me up and down, they want to take me out, I'm not going there anymore.

R: Fair enough, eh.

PB: I said, oh!

R: So your husband was your partner that you—

PB: Yeah I did marry him in ninety-three.

R: Okay. And do you remember when both of you found out that you did have HIV?

PB: I was diagnosed first in nineteen-ninety-two, March of nineteen-ninety-two. I'd been feeling tired for quite a long time, but I kind of just sloughed it off thinking oh I'm just—I'm just—I had three different jobs I was working all the time. But then I got a call, from somebody that said he'd been with—she'd been with my husband and she was diagnosed HIV and I should go get tested. And at first when I heard it I thought nope it's impossible. Not me. Can't happen. But the more tired I got, and the more it started weighing on me heavily in my mind. You know, is it or isn't it, is it or isn't it. And then I finally thought—six months and I thought, I'm just going to go test it so they can tell me I don't have it. And that didn't happen. I was quite shocked, when they said, 'yeah, you're HIV positive."

R: Do you remember, were you in a doctor's office at that time, or?

PB: Yeah, a GP. And my first reaction was, you're kidding. And I couldn't quite get that out of my mouth—you're kidding—because I thought, he wouldn't really be kidding about something like this. But it took awhile to sink in, I just sort of sat there and let it kind of take me over, take over, just flow into me kind of thing. Quite a shock.

R: And then the days following, do you remember what they looked like?

PB: Well I couldn't find my boyfriend that night, he was a drug addict. Didn't really know what I was getting into when we started living together. So that first night was very lonely. I decided to get drunk and then I thought, nah I don't feel like getting drunk and then I thought I'm going to get stoned. And so I did that, and then I came home—to an empty apartment—and being high I couldn't cry, I really wanted to cry for myself and I couldn't, so I felt really fucked up. Didn't know what to do with myself.

R: And do you remember when you saw your boyfriend for the first time after that?

PB: Yeah at breakfast the next morning. I didn't know how to—I didn't really know how to say something. But I said, here's the paper from the doctor, have a read. And uh, he was pretty sure that I got it from him, and we both became drug addicts so that's basically where I got it from. And he did eventually go get tested too. Unfortunate his family thought he got it from me, even though they knew him very well, I don't know why they thought that. He died in ninety-four and I'm still here so, lucky.

R: And at that time, neither of you knew anybody else living with it?

PB: No.

R: No.

PB: No, I started going to AVI more, and uh, we lived out in—we lived out in Langford though it was a long way to come into town. And he passed away in ninety-four, which gave me the opportunity—I applied for housing, Wings, have you heard of Wings? Applied for Wings and got it, not in ninety-four but in ninety-six. And was able to move into town. And I—PWA at that time was about three blocks up here—and so I moved so that I could start volunteering there. I knew what I wanted to do and I wanted to get involved. And uh, on disability, I didn't really feel like working.

R: So going back to, the time you found out, that period of time do you remember what you knew about HIV and AIDS and where you learned it from and how much information your doctor gave you, did you feel like you were kind of lost and confused or what exactly where you thinking as far as knowing what you had just been told?

PB: My doctor may have given me a pamphlet for AIDS Vancouver Island, because something sent me there. And I just went through all their brochures, reading about everything I could get my hands on. And informing my family, my mom and dad, and my brothers. Yeah I can't think of anything other than that. I think at the time they referred me, my doctor probably referred me to a specialist in town, HIV specialist. And I did start seeing, I think we had three in Victoria at that time, and uhm that was kind of a strange experience. Do you want to hear about it?

R: Sure yeah.

PB: One doctor was an infectious disease specialist but he was in pediatrics. And I went into his office and he got out this book about where HIV was in the world and how many people had it and charts and graphs and all sorts of stuff, and uhm finally he said, 'okay, goodbye.' And I left and I thought, that was weird he didn't even ask me how I was feeling. So I tried him one more time and he did exactly the same thing the second time as the first. So I thought okay I need somebody else. So I tried the other two. Maybe there was only two at the time. Anyway I did try them. The second fellow uh you might have heard of him, Gesquire, oh maybe I can't say that oops. He was more—he was a good doctor but he had really terrible bedside manner. And him and I got along really good until I told him I had been a previous drug addict. And he wrote a letter to my GP and told him. And I went back to him and I said you had no right to tell him, if I wanted to tell him I would've told him myself. So I'm not seeing you anymore. And that's when I started going to Vancouver. I can't remember the doctor, David, David uh—it's gone.

R: Did you feel like at that time, many of the doctors and medical practitioners that you were working with, did you feel like maybe they themselves didn't know exactly how to respond or didn't have the knowledge to share with you.

PB: Yeah probably some of them. The second doctor I saw was very good, he gave me a physical and asked how I was feeling and everything, I thought oh we're gonna get along great. 'Til he wrote that letter to my GP, we got along pretty good.

R: And do you remember the days following, after meeting the doctors and learning the news and sharing the news with your partner, do you remember how you changed, how did your personality change, how did your behaviour change, how did you connect with people around you, how did you feel.

PB: Well most people that I told were a little you know, kind of—I don't think they really knew what to make of it. I had done baking—I'd always done baking for Christmas for family and uhm, after they found out I was HIV, I'd done this baking I sent it to them for Christmas and they sent it back and said they wouldn't eat it. And I thought well okay you're scared, you have to protect yourself, just because you don't know. I'll eat it all, extra for me. Yeah they didn't, I don't know if they took the time to inform themselves about anything. And I took the time to inform my mum and my dad. But even my dad I don't know if he didn't read the pamphlets, I gave him a kiss on the lips one time saying hello, and he thought I'd killed him. He just—he—I said dad you really think I'd do that to you? Think I'd kiss you without knowing I was killing you? Anyway I didn't say that but I felt it, I thought oh here, that's enough. You go your way and I'll go mine.

R: That must've been a very difficult time.

PB: My first marriage was more difficult than all of that, so uhm, maybe it had prepared me for the life of HIV, I don't know. But I'd gotten free from that so, everything from there was kind of up. Even though HIV was a part of it. At first I did feel very—well I thought I was dying, my first couple years. Well when my husband died I said I'm right behind you dear so we'll just buy a double grave, so I've got my grave waiting. And I'd walk down the street and I'd think, I used to walk down the street and I was HIV and didn't know it, I wonder how many of these other people are HIV and don't know it, and they're just carrying on with their regular life just like I did. But I felt alone. I felt kind of, I was afraid to talk to people to get in touch with them or get to know them better, because I figured I was dying. I thought why—why put somebody else's, you know why put me in somebody else's life like that. So I just kind of kept to myself. Except for PWA, that's when I started coming out more, in ninety-six.

R: So do you remember how long you felt like that, you couldn't connect with people because you thought what was the purpose?

PB: Oh a good four or five years I think.

R: That had to be—and again, if things start to feel uncomfortable do let me know, but I think it's good for other people to understand because if they can relate to your perspective and your experience that's great—but that time though, it must've been a very lonely time, a scary time, maybe a depressing time, is that right to assume?

PB: Uhm, after my husband died my life actually improved because I was able to get outta drugs, and I'd been on antidepressants just to live with him, so my life actually improved. Even though I—I knew there was no meds yet. But yeah I'd been a drug addict, so my second marriage was almost as hard as my first, so I don't mind being alone I'm more comfortable with myself.

R: Fair enough. Alright. So, again going to more of a personal area. Do you remember how your personal life was affected by this, your dating life, your sex life, the people that you came into close contact with, friends or lovers?

PB: I didn't want to date. I didn't want to be remarried, I wanted to live alone by myself and just have peace and quiet. So no I, I didn't seek out a companion, I sought out friends. People that I could, you know enjoy stuff with. Dinner out, or dinner in, you know go to a movie or something. And I'm still in the same way today, I don't—nobody is getting into my apartment but me. Sorry!

R: Were many of those friends—friendships that you developed were those people also living with HIV during that time?

PB: Uhm, let me think now uh, quite a few people I've known have had HIV, and quite a few of them have passed away. And probably most of my friends that I still have are either friends I grew up with, or people I've met through PWA.

R: So the friends that you grew up with, many of them may not also have HIV?

PB: I had one close friend in school, and we still keep in touch. And she had lived in Africa for awhile, so when I told her I was HIV she understood completely, and has been supportive ever since. So that was nice.

R: Yeah, I'm sure. Can you think of anything else about your social life that changed during this time? Maybe, I don't know if you were a partier, or whether you uh—

PB: I became a partier after I got off of drugs, until I'd had enough of that too I thought—and that's why I moved from Langford, I just said I gotta get out of town. My mom said, 'apply for another Wings housing subsidy and see what happens.' And I was able to escape Langford. And so when I got my own place in town here I knew that I wasn't letting anybody in.

R: And that was what year?

PB: Ninety-six.

R: Ninety-six. Okay, and that was approximately how many years after you had found out?

PB: Four.

R: Four. Okay, so you had lived in Lang—uh, in—

PB: I lived in Langford uh, maybe a year.

R: Okay.

PB: Yes, I think a year.

R: So you had lived in Langford for a year with—knowing that you had HIV, and then prior to that—

PB: Yes, it was in my husband's mother's house, we had a basement suite.

R: And then prior to Langford where were you?

PB: Well I was staying with my brother over a year and then finally thought I need to get out on my own, so I had a few small places around town before I met my second husband. So that was, that was nice too.

R: So all the places you lived prior to Victoria, did you feel like it was harder or easier to live in some places than here or the opposite, did you feel like anywhere was—

PB: I lived in Surrey sixteen years and it was in the country, and it was very hard. It was very hard. I couldn't get out. Couldn't get out. I had three children over there and basically felt trapped the whole time.

R: So more specifically, knowing that you had HIV, did any of the places that you lived in make it easier or more difficult to live in, knowing that you had HIV?

PB: Well I didn't know I was HIV until ninety-two, and that's from when I met my second husband. And I think from—we lived in—we shared one place together and then we moved out to Langford so, with his family, his family all knew we were both HIV. So it didn't really make it difficult. Although, you're out in the country there, so it was also very isolated.

R: Alright. Is there anything about your identity that you would say was either impacted by HIV or part of your identity that changed the way you experienced HIV in comparison to somebody else. So for example, maybe your gender, your race, your sexuality, your background, your economic background, uh—anything that you can think of that you can say, yeah, because I was this it made my experience different than maybe the next person?

PB: Oh that's a tough question. Say that again? Can you phrase that for me again?

R: So anything that makes you who you are, would you say that element made your experience of living with HIV different than what you understand others to have experienced. So for example, perhaps because you are female and you knew other men who are living with HIV, would say yeah I had to go through this and they probably didn't and it's because I'm female. Or because maybe your racial makeup, you would say that I experience this that perhaps this group of people didn't experience who also have HIV, because of my racial background.

PB: I can't think of any instances. It was more the interaction I had with people after I was diagnosed, I think. Like my ex-husband, when I told him and I thought—at first I thought I may have gotten HIV from a blood transfusion, so I was afraid for my family and my kids. I had three kids over there. And I was told uhm, yeah I always knew you were a slut. That's the reaction I got from him. I thought, you're the slut and I got HIV. I would think at first I thought that HIV was something awful. But I guess I've been positive so long that it's, I've come to see it as a blessing. It's been a blessing in my life. It took me—it changed my course of life completely and took me in a whole different direction, which I never would've gone on before I don't think.

R: So going back to that question, a couple of things that you've said kind of provoked other questions in my head, you had mentioned that he had used the term slut to describe you. Did you feel like a lot of people looked at you as a female as opposed to say, you had also mentioned that you and your husband had been around a lot of gay men that had HIV, do you feel because you as a female, a lot of people looked at you differently and kind of surprised maybe, or maybe they were more condemning or maybe they were—do you remember anything being specifically associated with you being female and being different?

PB: No I can't say. When I started at PWA I didn't feel like I'd been separate out at all from anybody, although I didn't see a lot of heterosexual women around there with HIV at the time. All the guys were very open and accepting. And I made a lot of friends, for a long time.

R: Alright, you doing okay?

PB: Yep.

R: Yeah, alright. So the years to follow, can you remember how being diagnosed affected your relationships long term? So with your immediate family, your friends, did you lose friends specifically because of it that you remember, or did family start to fade off or did it make things stronger? So over a period of time.

PB: I don't think I lost any friends. My mother had come to town to help me move into one of my apartments, and that—on the day, the first day she was with me I sat her down and told her that I was ill and that I had HIV. And by the time I came home from work that day she'd already phoned the health department and found out exactly what she needed to do, what she should be afraid of, what she didn't have to be afraid of. And like right from day one it was supportive. So that was pretty nice. I can't think of any others, I didn't have a lot of friends living in Surrey or growing up.

R: It sounds like your relationship—that your mother's response was different from your father's response. Did uhm—you had mentioned that something, you implied that that was the end with your father, or maybe I misunderstood that part?

PB: Yeah it was later on that my father was afraid that I'd given him HIV. Or basically killed him. Not HIV, just killed him. Yeah it was a shock and I didn't know how to respond, so I didn't. So I just let him, I sort of just let him go. Go your way, I'll go mine. We were never really close anyway, he and my mother divorced when I was in primary school.

R: But this was definitely the thing that kind of ended it with the two of you?

PB: Oh well I'd—he lived in Saskatchewan so I'd still visit once in awhile. I didn't ever feel close to him.

R: How do you remember your experience with the government at that time, their response to the crisis that was going on?

PB: In nineteen-ninety-two when I was diagnosed it was uhm, we got a good social worker that helped—my husband went first, he was a sweet talker he could make a friend out of anybody. So he got on disability, and said that you know, I was out here working still and she said well come on bring her in whenever she's ready and we'll sign her up too. It was really easy in those days. As long as you had HIV you were in DB one—DB two I mean, sorry. Disability. It actually got harder after years—not for me I mean—but people applying for DB two it got harder because they had oh phase one, that took months and then phase two and that took more months. And just all the hoops you had to go through, I think it's easier today but I think also people with HIV just newly diagnosed may not be getting DB two. So in those days, I think that's why it's been a blessing for me because it's, I didn't have to go to work, I could volunteer and do anything I wanted. I didn't have any uhm, barriers to my life anymore, I could do whatever I wanted. If I had the energy, sort of thing.

R: So is it fair to say that you remember your experience and interaction and witnessing of the government to be a positive one?

PB: Then I think it was, and it still depended on who you ran into. Because I can—our worker was really good and uhm, I can remember going and looking for her one week when I had my laundry pile up in my hallway and no money to do it. And I went in and uhm, it was kind of big office, open office with chairs all around the walls and somebody behind a window over there. And so I went up to her and I said, I need money for my laundry. And she looked me up and she said, 'You're on DB-Two'—and this is for the whole room to hear-- 'you're on DB-Two, you get more money than anybody else.' And I though oh, can I just disappear right now? And so I left, I don't know if she gave me a cheque then or not I was so embarrassed. But I went back and I told my worker what had happened, well she didn't last long. So I had a really good worker, and that made all the difference. She was understanding. I think she'd been a single mother on welfare herself at one time, and she'd tell us, 'they think it's coming out of their own pocket.' And I'd think oh okay, now I understand.

R: How old were you at that time?

PB: Uh, in ninety-two I would be forty.

R: So prior to then, what had you been doing for work?

PB: Uh, I had married my first husband and had three kids and lived on a farm in Surrey. And tried to stand living with him. There's a whole time in there that's—I don't really want to get into how I moved from Surrey to—I became homeless and moved to Victoria, so no sense going into all that then.

R: So I guess the real question I'm getting at then, is when you went from your not being on disability to being on disability, did you find that there were more, was there more stigma around that than there was around having HIV, did you find that they were one in the same, was there overlap?

PB: I didn't meet any stigma from it, no. No.

R: Okay. Uhm do you remember any—just one more thing on the government thing—do you remember any politicians saying anything on camera or in public, and you remember thinking that's sitting with me in a way that you're not comfortable with?

PB: Oh I don't know if I remember.

R: And if not politicians, then maybe just the public in general. People on the street, or maybe in a café you overheard something, or maybe in a different setting?

PB: I was chair of the board of PWA in the early two-thousands, when the NDP lost the election and the liberals took over, we were very afraid that were going to be phased out and not get any money. So quite a few of the organizations got together and they came over to Victoria to talk with somebody, and it didn't go very well. I can't remember who we saw. We—and I was never in on the financing of our organization much, so I don't really know were we cut off, did we have less money or did we get more, I don't know. I can't really recall any politicians talking about HIV or AIDS. That I can think of anyway.

R: Can you remember just a someone in the streets saying something and you felt wow that's really discriminatory, and maybe they didn't know you just overheard it. Back in the early days, do you remember what the general public's reaction was and how you felt about it knowing that you were someone who is actually living with HIV?

PB: Uhm, I can't really talk about the general public because I don't know. But uhm when I moved in up the hill here I had my second brother that lived in Victoria, come visit me. And I said, well I have a hot tub do you want to come and join me in the hot tub, I didn't know if they had a hot tub or not. So we were in our bathing suits and we were just about to get in the hot tub and he said, 'so, can I get HIV from you if I sit in this hot tub with you?' And I thought—we were already sitting in the hot tub—I thought, you're a little late with that question. And I think he was just trying to make me fee uncomfortable. So I thought you're not getting in my hot tub anymore.

R: Were there, can you remember any other times maybe not directed at you but just in general, maybe in a setting or maybe a time where you've heard something and you felt like you needed to say something?

PB: Can't recall.

R: Okay, no worries. If you do while we're talking feel free to bring it back up.

PB: Something might spring in there.

R: Totally. So, earlier you had mentioned that you haven't always been comfortable talking to your neighbours and those around you, about it, do you remember the first time that you did tell someone in your community or someone that was not personally related to you, maybe a neighbour, maybe a co-worker someone or maybe like that, and what their response was?

PB: My doctor's office was very close to where I moved to, and uhm, I went in there first and talk to the nurse and I told her, she said, 'what's your story?' So I sat down and I told her my whole story. And she ended up moving into my building, so she's one of the people that know me. And very respectful, very respectful. And the other one—I have a little garden there, just a little community garden in our back lot and I enjoyed that I was out working, and this other girl I see her come out, she had her garden plot across from me. And we started chatting a little bit, and meeting out in the garden a little bit more and one day I—I must've felt safe talking to her 'cause I said, maybe she mentioned it first that she was on disability. And I said, oh I'm on disability too. And I think I told her I was HIV at that time, and we've been friends ever since. So, she had gone through a horrible accident—I won't mention her name—and was just trying to recover from it. And getting out in the garden was one of her first attempts at getting out of her apartment, I didn't know at the time. So we just hit it off together. She's very private too, she would never tell anybody on me.

R: So back in the early nineties, can you remember how did the community responded at large? Were there any kind of marches, were there any kind of events held, were there any kind of things that were sponsored by various organizations to bring awareness?

PB: I don't think I really noticed until I started volunteering at PWA. And I can't remember a lot that happened after that either, like recently after that. Yeah, I was totally unaware myself. Yeah and I can't think of anything.

R: Can you remember any time when the public acted out of fear, or perhaps even shunned people?

PB: Well that thing you could see on the news, maybe I don't—I can't even remember what it was maybe something to do with blood, people were freaked out about blood I guess. Yeah I can't even think of anything specific. Just maybe seeing things on the news in little bits here and there.

R: Sure. On the opposite end of the spectrum, did you notice anybody being compassionate in regards to HIV and those who were living with it? Anything that stuck out as being, something that made you just a little bit hopeful?

PB: Well I think I was very close to the organizations in the early, in the early or late nineties maybe. Are you specific of the early nineties did you want to know?

R: Uh, anything that comes to your mind, and if you can tag a date on there that'd be great but if not—

PB: I think I had more interactions with the agencies and getting help from there. There was big thing in the, I think it was the early two-thousands that BC PWA in Vancouver somebody had discovered a clause in the social services by-laws or policies said uhm, if you're on disability or maybe not even if on your disability, but if you are in need of disposable items uhm, you can apply to the ministry. And it was called a 'Schedule C.' So that was big for oh, I don't know how many years, I think I read about it first in the BC PWA newsletter, and it was called a 'Schedule C.' And I rushed right into AVI and said, we gotta do this, look at this, it's more money for people. And it was disposable items which, food fell into that category, any toiletries uhm supplements, haircuts. Just about anything fell in there. So all you had to do was prove that you needed these services or this money to do all this, for these things. Of course it was quite a rigmarole. Took me a year, when I first started applying for it. And you had to eventually go through—you submitted your application and they denied it. And then you had to go through a tribunal, and you had to pick people and then go in and have a speech prepared to, this is why I needed more money, and uhm my big point I made was I'd like to be a grandmother one day. I'd like to live that long, and I think these things would help me do that. Maybe that's why I'm so fortunate to have gotten along well on my DB-Two, because I won my 'Schedule-C' and I got five-hundred more dollars than everybody else a month. For years. Until I turned sixty-five, actually. So it made life really easy for me. Easier, a lot easier. No you don't get that after sixty-five, you lose that. So I was—I think because I was close to the agencies and the goings-on, I was able to access services that made my life easier.

R: So one of the services you had mentioned is PWA, and for those watching and listening, can you explain a little bit about what that is, and your first encounter was with that and how you heard about them and how you became involved?

PB: Well I heard about them out in Langford. I'd already become a member at AVI, and somebody there said I think, 'have you heard of PWA?' And I said no, what are they? Who are they? So I started, I think I started applying for a membership there and decided if I got my Wings application or subsidy, I'd move into town and I'd volunteer there. So it gave me a purpose. Something I knew I like to do. And PWA services were, well I've started—actually I started watering the plants and vacuuming, is what I did there. And they had a foodbank service, then I started reception duties, they had uh, Christmas dinners where all the members came. I met a lot of people, right? It was so nice. Uhm, I can't remember what else I did. Well, I started volunteering there every week, so, and I think I volunteered there—I did take a couple years off somewhere in between, but I don't know what years those were. But I'm back at PWA and it's been quite a—it's been twenty-six years I think? Or no, that's probably the length of time I've been positive. Ninety-six it's been twenty-two years, so I took some time off there so I've been there eighteen, nineteen years maybe. I find it very fulfilling. Because I had so many interactions with you know my DB-two, and working with people and fighting for things that I got to know the whole system. So anybody that would come in there how do I apply for DB-two? Well come on over here I can tell you all about it. So it was very fulfilling for me to know that I could go home and I'd helped somebody that day.

R: Right. And did you notice that any of your friends or family also started to get very involved with any kind of activism or volunteering, as a result of knowing that you yourself were living with HIV?

PB: No I think most of the people I got to know were already coming in or members of all those agencies, either agencies or all agencies. I'd sign everybody up for everything. You want to get a member of PWA? Sure. Well let's get you a member at AVI. And how about Positive Living BC, and who else you interested in, we'll sign you up.

R: Can you reflect on some times or examples or some stories of when, during all this time when you originally found out all the way to the early two-thousands, when you were yourself helping a loved one, a friend who was struggling? And how did that look, and what was your account of it?

PB: I can't recall helping a loved one.

R: You had mentioned you were caregiving for your husband?

PB: Yes, he passed away in ninety-four, before any of the meds came out. He'd probably had AIDS when I met him, but he didn't know. I did—I think before we had intimate relations I'd asked him if he'd been tested and he said yes, and he was clean, or clear or whatever the word was then. And once I was diagnosed we sent him for, I sent him to get tested. And he said that he'd always thought that he'd been tested because he had sev—he'd been a lumberjack, and he'd had seven back surgeries and just figured they'd tested him along the way somewhere. And they hadn't.

R: So building up to the time when it was getting more serious for him, what did your role look like?

PB: Well it wasn't a good time because we were still both drug addicts. Uhm, the longer we lived together the worse it was. I was—when he died—I was quite addicted to cocaine. But also saw it as an opportunity to get clean myself, to get my life back. Because I'd lost it again, I lost in my first marriage, lost it in my second marriage, lost it to cocaine. And I guess that makes me a—that's why I don't let anybody in now. I'm safe, I'm clean, I'll let in who I want. So I do have friends and I do like to go out and enjoy time together, that's enough for me.

R: Were you his sole care provider?

PB: Pretty well, yeah. He didn't get very sick, I think he caught pneumonia. Sat on the couch for two weeks, I couldn't get him to go to bed, he didn't want to eat. Called the doctor and I said something—you know I don't know what's going on but I can't move him off the couch. He's not awake or asleep, his eyes are closed, I don't know what's happening. So the doctor came actually the night before he died.

And uhm, I was in denial. I didn't think he was dying. And then the next morning he was on the floor. So it—the time he was really sick wasn't any time at all. He made me promise not to send him to the hospital in the end, but I've thought, well if he had pneumonia he could'a probably fixed it. But we were such in our drug habit that I wanted out. I wanted free. And I was in denial.

R: And you were the one that found him?

PB: Yeah.

R: Do you remember what your response was?

PB: Well I heard him crying out and I'd gone to—I'd been up with him most of the night and finally got exhausted and went to bed. And I woke up hearing this voice crying out, so I got up and I came out to our living room and he was on the floor. And I said what are you doing on the floor? And I think he said I don't know, he just sort of—I dunno. And he was basically dead weight then, I tried to lift him back up onto the couch and it was impossible. And so his mother lived upstairs so I called her right away, I said ahhhh come down, come down. And when she got down she said, 'well let's call an ambulance.' I said he didn't want me to send him to the hospital. But we did anyway, and they pronounced him—the ambulance came and uhm, they sent two ambulances and one ambulance didn't have the equipment needed to work on him. And I'd gotten him far enough that his body was on the floor but his head was up against the couch like this. And they pulled his feet and his head literally bounced off the floor. And I kind of went oh no. And I said you know, if he's dead, if he's gone leave him because he's got AIDS. And they said, we'll we can't do anything to him all the equipment's in the other ambulance. And my mother-in-law could see that I was panicking by that time and she said, 'why don't you go get dressed so you can go with them to the hospital.' I was just blubbering and crying and I thought yeah that's a good idea, go get dressed. Anyway, the coroner was eventually called and he did pass away at home. So he would've been happy about that.

R: In the days following do you remember the response from people around you?

PB: I had people come from—a lot of relatives, my mother flew in, everybody came to help it was wonderful, it was—my house was full. And people were bringing food and stuff. And we had—we had the service and uh, I could—people, my social worker actually came to the funeral and she'd seen me days later and said, 'I heard somebody saying at the funeral that you were taking it all quite well.' And it hadn't really dawned on me what was going on. I mean I could see everything happening but it didn't really—when everybody left and went home that's when it set in, and I kind of went I'm all alone here, this is very strange and unusual and hard. But uhm, it was my time to get clean so I had work to do.

R: So since then, how would you say your life and your focus on your own diagnosis with HIV has changed, uhm did you find that you were focused more on yourself and healing and planning for the future, or did you find that you were starting to relate to people again, how long did it take after he passed away?

PB: Well a lot of the people that I knew out in Langford were all alcoholics, that's how I got into drinking. Uhm, can you say that again? Can you ask me again, because I went off on a—

R: When you—in the early days when you were diagnosed, you said that you started to isolate yourself and you were focused a lot on him initially there, and then when he passed away do you remember how your own personal life started to change and did you start—how long it was before you started to reach out to people and engage with people again?

PB: Okay that's where the drinking came in, yeah. I got clean off of drugs, and the apartment that I'd had with him, we'd both been on welfare. So together with our welfare cheques we could afford the rent but after he died my whole cheque went to our rent I had no money for food or anything, so I had to let out half my apartment. And it had gone to somebody that had been his friend, that had become friends with me that we knew, and she really a needed a place but she was an alcoholic. So I kind of went, there's no drugs and there's no smoking in the house, and there's no alcohol. Well that didn't last long. Everybody that seemed to come over were drinkers, and I got into drinking too much, it was awful. And my mother came out one Christmas and said, 'how do you live like this?' I said I have no money, I have no way else to get by. And that's when she said, 'you applied for that housing subsidy when Michael died, why don't you try again?' So I did. And she got everybody she knew to write a letter, how bad it was for Penny living at this place, right? But I wrote my own letter and I said they're drinking here, they're smoking. I need a place of my own or I'm never going to make it, my health is going to go downhill. And a housing subsidy came up. So I kind of left her behind there. I don't know if I could call her a friend, well we were friends. But she's got some bad habits too, and we weren't really good living together. It was all my stuff and she'd be ruining it, and I couldn't—couldn't—didn't want that. Uhm, don't know if there's some of that I missed out or not. I think when I moved into town I was able to get rid of the alcohol too. And that's when I started volunteering. So life got better, much better.

R: So from the mid-nineties, to the early two-thousands, and then even to say present day, how would you say that Victoria as a whole has changed and been impacted by HIV? Is there anything you would say that's noticeably different?

PB: Well as a heterosexual woman there wasn't—I didn't meet a lot of other heterosexual women, I've met mostly gay guys. And I think for HIV in this town for them there's been remarkable changes, but it didn't really affect my life too much.

R: Could you elaborate on that a little bit? Like what kind of changes did you notice?

PB: Well they'd tell me stories of awful things that had happened in town, or uhm trying to meet a fellow to get a partner, or just meet a friend and all the barriers that were there for them, and just how hard it was.

R: Would you say that it was hard for you as well but just in a different way? Perhaps as you had mentioned you had chosen not to engage in any kind of relationships from that point on, do you think it was just a different kind of difficult for you, or that there actually was a different stigma that was involved with being a gay man versus a heterosexual woman, both of whom were living with HIV?

PB: Yes I think so. Some people I guess can think of heterosexual women with HIV as promiscuous, that can be one thing. But uh, I think in the heterosexual world the gay guys are picked on. You know it just can be ruthless, some of the stories I've heard in town, even on the news uh getting beat up just because they're gay. They might've had HIV too I don't know.

R: Did you personally hear of stories, that people were bullied or harassed?

PB: Yep. Yeah.

R: Can you tell us any of those?

PB: Well there was a few gay bars in town and people coming out late at night and trying to go home, some were beaten up, some mercifully beaten up, just horrible. There's a number of people too in town that are HIV that are addicted to drugs, or alcohol or both. I think it was more of a scene for the gay guys, having the gay bars in town it was more of a place that they could go to meet people of their own likeness.

R: Did you feel a comradery with them, even though you weren't a gay man?

PB: Yeah. Yeah, I didn't ever feel excluded.

R: So, as a whole, would you say that—and this a very broad, and general question—but would you say that since HIV came on the scene and people began to learn more and more about it, would you say that it impacted Victoria in a positive or a negative sense? And I say that because I'm also remember that you said that you yourself view it as a blessing for your own life. So, how would you interpret it as a whole for the city? And maybe you could care to elaborate on that.

PB: Gee that's a tough one, I don't know if I could speak on that. I kind of felt like I was just a little bit of a part of it, because I don't go out a lot I guess. I try to go to meetings, I try to go to information sessions that are happening in town, and that probably connects me with people more. There was a time when I was chair of the board, that I did have an ear on a lot of things that was going on in town, I got invited to a lot of meetings. Quite often I was—I was being the only HIV positive person sitting at the table, and so I'd feel my responsibility to enlighten them on a few things. Like they'd be talking about health issues and I'd say, well if a HIV person's on disability do you know that they're getting three-hundred-and-twenty-five dollars a month for rent, and how do you think that affects their life? I'd just sort of throw these things out to them. Or, I don't know if you know, but this is going on. I don't know if it was welcomed or not.

R: So going all the way back to the beginning of our time, together here tonight, you had mentioned there was a moment when I believe it was your brother, who was watching TV. And he had made a response, he had made a comment to what he had seen on TV, regarding HIV. And then you also mentioned your feelings, and what you thought about what he had said, can you remind me of what you had said your response was?

PB: Well I didn't know much about HIV or AIDS at that time, I don't remember thinking here or there. It occurred to me after I was HIV positive, remembering that he had said that, and sharing it with other people talking about the same sort of issues. And I think a lot of people did feel like that in those days, that was like nineteen-eighty-nine kind of thing—

R: So about thirty years?

PB: Yeah. Yeah. I think a lot of people thought that they should—it was mainly around AIDS right—they mostly thought they should be put on islands. People with AIDS should be put on islands.

R: So thinking back to that time thirty years ago, and thinking about today, if the same setting were put into place, a family member, a loved one were watching TV and they were responding in the same way to what they saw on television, what do you think your response would be and how would it be different—how would it differ from then to now, and how has it evolved?

PB: I still see myself as an educator if I can, and it depends who I'm trying to educate though. My children have their kids—my grandchildren. So I let them, if they want to talk about it they can talk to their kids about it, because I was there when they were born. And then I had all these medicines going on, and they kind of have dealt with it a piece at a time. So I'm not sure where we ended up with that, if they know I have HIV now because my oldest grandson started college. So I'm not sure what they've told him, and I haven't asked him what they've told him. But if I can educate people—like I had a massage the other day so I educated my massage therapist too. I said, do you know that if a person's been on their meds and their viral load is zero, that they're untransmittable and undetectable. Or the other way around but, and she said, 'oh, that's nice to know.' I thought oh good. So people want to know, and I think it's uhm—I think that's the best news that's happened in a long time, right? Spread it around, you don't have to be afraid of me anymore. And that kind of—that kind of affected me too, because I thought, I don't have to feel like I'm running poison in my body that can kill somebody, anymore.

R: And recently then, and this talking about today, Canada has even started to adopt some polices and put in place that we are acknowledging that same thing, if a person's undetected then yes, which is exactly what you're saying. How do you feel today, and today in comparison to back then, as far as feeling like you stand out or that you could be discriminated against or feeling as though people whisper behind your back, do you feel like it's a lot better, a little better, do you feel in comparison to back then?

PB: Well I didn't tell many people back then so I didn't really feel that there was whispering going behind my back. The biggest turmoil was in my own head and I'd go through scenarios oh what happens if you get run over by a car and you're bleeding, how are you going to handle that, or what happens if you're on a bike and you have an accident, how are you going to handle that. When I was chair of the board, most of my board was males, and so I went to them one day at the board meeting, and I said to them, how do you all feel about your blood, being outside of your body? How do you feel about that? And they all kind of went yeah, it's [grumbling] you know like that. Don't like that feeling, don't want that scenario. And I said well how about what do you think if you had, if you were a woman and you had a period once a week every month and you saw all this blood coming out of your body? And they kind of went, oh that's awful! And I thought, yeah it is awful. So I could—I could tell them some things that they would've never thought of, and they could tell me things that I'd never thought of.

R: Do you feel like your response to seeing your own blood outside of your body, whether it's from a cut or whatever it may be from, is your response different now than it was back then?

PB: Yeah, yeah I don't feel like I could kill anybody anymore. I always felt like my blood was toxic, and I always worried about seeing it out of my body whether I had a cut or—I was over at my daughter-in-laws one time, I think it was in the summer and we were sewing. And I'd lugged my sewing machine over in my suitcase to help her do this. And as we were putting these pins in this cloth, she said, 'do you think you've ever pricked yourself with one of these pins?' And I thought I don't know, it's possible. 'Well if you pricked yourself with one these pins is it possible that I could catch HIV or hep C from you, from one of these pins if I pricked myself?' And I—I was kind of oh that's overloaded. I said maybe, possibly, knowing that I'd just said the wrong thing. Two seconds later she pricked herself and all chaos broke loose. But she called my son, 'we're going to the hospital right now, I gotta get a' you know, and it was a whole freak out. I ended up calling my mother and saying oh my god I think I gave my daughter-in-law HIV. Even though I was trying to okay, get back to reality or what really happened, is this possible?

And I thought no, it's not possible. And I even thought that case of pins were brand new, I hadn't used them before so that occurred to me. She had told people at the hospital that she'd been pricked with a needle, so she was there for hours until she said no, it was stick pin for sewing. And they went oh go home. So that was my closest reality to giving somebody HIV, it was scary.

R: So there's a lot more education to do still, even today, if you could say anything to physicians or politicians, what would you like them to know?

PB: Well I think this news about undetectable and untransmittable is the best news that we've had in a long time. Besides the medications that is, I've seen one commercial on TV that said that information, and it was from the states. I haven't seen one commercial in Canada on that yet. So somebody needs to say something, why isn't—that is really good news, why isn't it out there more? That's the sad part of it. Telling people they should just go get tested I don't think is enough information. Tell them why. It's so important. Because we want to stop this.

R: Right, do you have any advice for future generations that have not experience the epidemic in the way that you have, that were perhaps not alive in the eighties or the nineties, anything that you'd want to pass onto them, any feelings any experiences any knowledge, anything at all that you would like to leave with them? So that when they're viewing this or listening to this, it impacts their lives?

PB: I think if they find themselves in a position of something scary they need to find some support for themselves, whatever it may be. There's lots of illnesses out there, it's another reason I feel totally lucky I'm still healthy at sixty-six. Even being HIV I'm still healthy. There's so many people dying of cancer, there's—I mean that's another reason why I feel lucky, there's so many worse things out there now. I mean HIV was a scare, a bad scare at one time, but there's medicine now. When the medicines came out I was very skeptical, having AZT, you know and all the messages that were around AZT at the time. I thought oh they're just trying to shut us up and kill us, I'm not taking that stuff. But after awhile I kind of went, yeah well maybe this is a good idea. Thank goodness. Yeah get help if that's what you need, find some support. Any messages, uh, hmm. Be kind to yourself. I don't know.

R: Sounds like practical advice.

PB: Yeah it's one I'm still learning.

R: Yeah one that probably everyone else could learn from. Is there anything else that you wanted to discuss tonight that maybe I didn't touch base on, or anything that you would like to bring to the forefront so that future generations could learn from it?

PB: I'm sorry, I can't think of anything else.

R: That's totally okay, I think we've covered a lot.

PB: I think we have too.

R: Well thank you very much.

PB: You're welcome.