

## **“HIV in My Day”**

### **Interview #54**

**Participant: Gary Thompson**

**Interviewer: Sandy Lambert**

**SL:** So how did you end up in Vancouver?

**GT:** Well I was going to university in Regina and I became—well how would you say it—when I was younger I had no knowledge of the gay world. And when I was at university I came out. Actually it was the end of my two years and I already had a job teaching in Regina when I met someone. And he turned me onto the gay world. And I ended up coming to Vancouver shortly thereafter because the prairie Vancouver--err Regina, was way too slow for me and so I came here. I couldn't find any work so I ended up moving back to Saskatchewan to work, but within a year I found a job through the mail, uh teaching here. So I came back and settled down and taught here, in the seventies. And that was well, there's many more things that were happening in the seventies for me but let's stop at that.

**SL:** So how did you get involved in it, did you just find automatically that the gay community was your home and that's what you wanted to be with and get involved with?

**GT:** Right. I came here with the intention of meeting other people of like nature, and not just meeting sexual partners but becoming involved in relationships. And so it didn't take long for me to fall in love with somebody, and that was a wonderful experience. I ended up moving in with him, and he was a person from California who was operating—or I shouldn't say operating—who had started a hippie house, and I moved in with him, and a wide variety of others. Most of the people in the house were straight, but he and I were gay. But the relationship couldn't develop the way I wanted it to be so I ended up leaving town and moving back east.

**SL:** And how long did you stay back east for?

**GT:** Well I stayed back east for a year or two, I guess. I ended up back here again, and uh settled down again here in Vancouver and uhm, began teaching in the Catholic schools. And met another person that I became involved with, and unfortunately he died shortly thereafter and we ended up going to Bowen Island one day, and we decided to build a house there and we did, and after that was over he—he died. And I ended up moving back to Saskatchewan because on a salary from the Catholic schools I couldn't afford the bills. So I worked in teaching again in Saskatchewan for awhile and then eventually got a job in Northern B.C. And moved back to Saskatchewan to work again and finding that my long-time partner in Saskatchewan, and together we moved to Vancouver in the eighties.

**SL:** So what part of the eighties would that have been, late eighties?

**GT:** I met him in Saskatoon in nineteen-eighty-six. And it was—I was working in a small town but going to Saskatoon on the weekends and I met him there, I got a phone call from a woman on the Bella Bella reserve up Northern B.C. She that uh, she said, 'Gary I want you to come back and take my job.' She was teaching adults on the reserve, and she said 'my people like you and I want you to work there for a year.' And I said to her, well you know I'm gay, don't you? And she said, 'yes I do.' Well she said—I've said well now I've met someone, can I bring him back to the reserve? And she said, 'I think that would

be a good idea, it's really important to have people around you in this community, because we are so isolated.' So I took my partner back there and we lived there for a year. That was quite an experience. From there we moved to Edmonton for a year and we ended up back in Vancouver together, where we lived until he passed away.

**SL:** So going from like the prairies, up north, the epidemic wasn't as well known as it was in those areas as it was in Vancouver. So how did you get involved—like how did you get tested or how did you know you were HIV positive, like how did that come about?

**GT:** Well in nineteen-eighty-six that was when I had finished my teaching stint in Bella Bella in the high school, and I was unemployed here. And uhm, I decided on my—I had seen and heard a lot about people contracting AIDS in the early eighties and it scared me. So I thought well I better be tested and I was tested and it was positive. And I hadn't met my lover yet, at that time. And so I don't know how I got the virus, but while I was teaching in uhm—in uh Bella Bella, during the summer months I would go to the University of Oregon in the States, for summer school. And I would stop in Seattle several times and I would go to the bathhouses in Seattle. And I think that's where I got the virus, because I was quite sexually active in the bathhouses. Well I was quite sexually active all over, I guess. But that of course—that's my theory, that I became positive there. And uhm so anyways, once I—in nineteen-eighty-six when I was told I was positive I just stuck it in the back of my brain. I didn't go for counselling, I didn't—I more or less hoped for the best and tried not to get too worked up about it. And when I met my special friend in Saskatchewan, that very fall, I told him that I was positive. And we never—it didn't seem to phase him, he fell in love with me deeply. And he didn't—HIV to him he was from northern Saskatchewan and he had lived all his life in northern or Saskatoon and AIDS was never very much in the forefront in those days. It was more in the forefront in Toronto, Vancouver, Seattle—the big cities—San Francisco. But not in small-town Saskatchewan. So anyways we had a relationship where I—we had unprotected sex, and uhm, it uhm—my partner was never tested till he die—even until he died. And he didn't die of AIDS either he died of alcohol abuse. He was a native person he drank too much. But sometimes when he would get angry at me he would say, he would accuse me of sharing AIDS with him. But he was never tested to begin with, to say that he was infected or not. Anyways uhm, that—we came back here and we uhh—we continued uh—we settled into a relationship that was quite satisfying. And uhm, I didn't have any, uh how would you say it—I didn't have any physical effects of the virus 'till nineteen-ninety-seven, in other words eleven years, or longer the virus was in my body but there was nothing happening until about nineteen-ninety-seven I started to feel the effects of thrush. And I knew then oh I better do something about this. And that's when I started going to a doctor and saying I think I need medication to combat this. And that's when I started medication. And it was very fortunate for me that by then the medication had developed to the point that it was not detriment—not too hard on the body like it was to begin with. I am so grateful and so blessed to have survived the eighties without any medication, and then able to go through almost all of the nineties without medication and then to begin medication that is extremely beneficial, and made me undetectable pretty fast, so I am so blessed and I'm so lucky.

**SL:** So you got a doctor pretty fast and you went on medication. What were you seeing in the media, like there must've—there was a lot of stuff in the media, and people in the gay community were doing a lot of activism like ACT UP and that, did you have any involvement with that?

**GT:** No, I didn't. I was aware of—of what was all the different things that were being said but I tried to be as open as I could with my family and with my partner's family. And uh we were very—they were very, fairly receptive to having us come and stay with them. Although one time I remember my partner's brother wouldn't eat the meal that we prepared, because he was afraid it would be contaminated. Because this is of course—this was the state of mind in those days. People could get infected by the strangest ways, not sexual but just almost con—physical contact. I have a cousin to this day who doesn't want me in her house because she's scared I'll pass on the virus. So it is sad but yeah. I became part AIDS Vancouver and Positive Living to take a—to uhm, to take advantage of the services that they offered but I didn't volunteer to offer my services to enhance the services that were available.

**SL:** So just, you touched a bit about education still do you think we did enough education back then, to publicly, the gay community, in a holistic way?

**GT:** Well it's hard to—it's hard to lay blame to anyone. There was a lot done and a person could say there could've been a lot more done, but I think there was a lot done fairly quickly. Like for example in the—I don't know when they started it but various, especially on reserves they were having people come in from the cities and give talks about HIV and what it means. And this was very essential. And perhaps that wasn't done soon enough because HIV became and has become I can't say rampant, but quite common on Indian reserves. Bella Bella for example had several people die quite early on because they would come to Vancouver and contact—or through sexual contact would have the virus. And even when my partner and I were there in nineteen-eighty-six—or it would've been eighty-seven, eighty-eight, I guess. This person died right there on Bella Bella from AIDS and that was—I remember going to visit him, and that was—he died quickly though. There weren't drugs that—to keep them alive. And so anyways, I think that yes there could've been more done, I can't say I'm to blame but I could've perhaps as a teacher been more active in spreading the word but I didn't.

**SL:** Where did you get your information I guess, was it through BC PWA and AIDS Vancouver, is that where you got most of your resources, most of your information, and the updated medications that were coming along the pipeline as well, how did you find out about that?

**GT:** Well yeah I guess through that. I can remember back in the early eighties going to a meeting, and I don't know if it was at the West End Community Centre, it was just like an urgent meeting to inform the gay community of what was happening and we were informed about it but—and told to be very, you know be careful and have safe sex. But even then there wasn't enough research done even that early stage, that even—medication was not available. And the medication came about quickly, but only in the late eighties I think.

**SL:** Right, like AZT and then ninety-six that's when all the good cocktails came out.

**GT:** Right.

**SL:** Uhm, getting stuck here for a sec. Just trying to think.

**BK:** Well I'm a little bit curious about—you mentioned Bella Bella, how was the community reacting up there when you were there? You said that somebody passed away when you were there, but how was the community responding to HIV there?

**GT:** Well I find the native community to be so understanding and so open to both two-spirited people and to the problems that they have. So that when, like everybody would be open in that situation. It was wonderful to be dropped into a society, it was a small society, where everybody was accepting of the two-spirited person. Of course in the gay community, I understand that's been ongoing forever. And so when this terrible tragedy or affliction ended up in the community, the community didn't respond by ridiculing the individuals but rather by educating themselves as to what's going on and what can be done to prevent it from continuing. And so my gosh, there have been so many friends of mine from Bella Bella who have passed away since the eighties and continue to pass away, but the people in the community have educated themselves and I suppose perhaps in the schools, because I was a school teacher there myself, although it wasn't happening when I was there, they must've had the school nurse for example who would in a health class, who would emphasize the fact that safe sex has to be used in order to prevent—in order to prevent this epidemic to take lives from the community. Not just gay lives, but in the end straight lives. And uh, quite frankly I can't think of a straight person in Bella Bella who has died from AIDS but uhm, anyways.

**SL:** So there was no stigma and discrimination up in that community?

**GT:** No there wasn't.

**SL:** There are communities I've heard, like even in the city too, where there's a lot of stigma and discrimination still happening, you know? And there's also places on reserve where stigma and discrimination, but that one community Bella Bella didn't—you were accepted and you were who you were?

**GT:** Yes, and I felt that when I got there and so I never tried to hide my orientation. And when I was given the chance to take my partner back there to live with me I experienced no problems with the adult community. However, the teenagers like to ridicule. And so they would—when we were walking down the street when they were in front of us they would shout out, 'fag alert! Fag alert!' and then run. Or else they would spray-paint the trailer 'house of fags.' Because you know that—that's a teenager, he just loves to poke fun at people in general. But the adults wouldn't—or didn't follow that mentality or we would've been driven out of town.

**SL:** So back in the city there were lots and lots of deaths. Did you—were you a part of all those celebrations of life, or how did you—or were you and your partner just together and sort of set that all aside?

**GT:** No, we were part of it. Like when we started losing some of our friends and these were native people too, we would go to the memorials and we would bemoan the losses. But we would just continue to try to look on the bright side, if there is such a thing as bright side. And not let it bring us down.

**SL:** Do you think now this day and age that people have changed the way they sexually are active, or drugs, what's your belief in that? Or even back then too.

**GT:** Well I'm sure that yes, I'm sure. Like I myself I almost feel sorry for young people who have to have safe sex, it's not the best kind of sex to have it's safe sex. And so anyways, I often think about the fact that I got in—when I was young in the seventies there wasn't such a thing as AIDS and there wasn't such

a thing as safe sex. And when it came to be I found it hindered the enjoyment but—what else was I going to say? Uhm, yeah that question triggered something else and I've forgotten it now.

**SL:** Might come back to you. What about today, I mean now we have PrEP right? Do you think that is basically putting up barriers or people are still having unsafe sex, because PrEP is basically the day after pill sort of right, but then STI rates are high.

**GT:** Right. Well... It's my understanding that a person like such as myself who has been on the cocktail and is—has uhm, has the viral is undetectable, that I will not pass it on. And I find that—oh yeah the other thing was the drugs. I find that if most people who know they have AIDS and take the proper medication and become undetectable then the virus, there should be less and less transmission of the virus. Now this is what I was thinking of before, now getting to the other problem with drugs. Many—like I live in a building that McLaren Housing where everyone is HIV positive, but I would say maybe only thirty percent are gay, and the other seventy percent are straight but they got their infection through using dirty needles. So that is another sad problem we have of people ignoring the fact that uh, the needles may be contaminated with the virus, they still use them.

**SL:** Which is kind of hard to believe because you can get clean syringes everywhere, you can get condoms everywhere, you can get whatever you want to protect yourself anywhere, right.

**GT:** See I'm an addict, but I'm not a—I'm not an injection addict so I don't quite understand that addiction, how it overtakes you. It overtakes your uhm, your mind, your body, so that you do anything to get high just to stop the urge. And if there's anything around that will alleviate that yearning for the high then they'll use the dirty needles. And so—and also I find that uh, when I have company over and we're going to get high, and one of the other persons is uh, uses needles or injects, they don't come prepared. They don't think two minutes ahead, right? To have their clean needles in their purse or in their backpack. An addict cannot make those plans they just are un—that's the number one step in the alcoholics anonymous and also the addicts anonymous, I am an addict and my life is unmanageable. I cannot even manage my addiction. So I end up becoming HIV positive because I can't even manage to bring clean needles with me. The drugs are in front of me, someone is treating. I for example would treat people, here's some money let's get high. Oh I haven't got any needles. Or maybe they, I don't know—I ended up leaving the apartment to go to a, apparently they have needles at St. Helen's now, or rigs you should call them not needles, rigs. And I would go and get them and bring them back for this woman. Oh thank you Gary. And I'd think to myself why didn't she stock up before she came? But anyways, that is a common problem in both the sexual realm and the addiction realm. When you have the need for something be it sex or drugs and you haven't made any plans you'll get what you want even though it may be dangerous.

**SL:** Any questions?

**BK:** Where did you get support around all of this in the early years, so you got diagnosed in eighty-six, what was your support system like?

**GT:** Well, it's hard to answer that question. I'm a school teacher I have a fairly intelligent, but I'm also a Christian and a believer, a strong believer in a god who loves me. And so I get a lot of support from my own inside thoughts and beliefs and prayers, and so I relied on my own strength and the strength of god in helping me through. But I must confess that I often, how do you say it, when you put something in

your subconscious, the fact that I'm HIV positive, I put it in my subconscious right? I didn't think about it, I ignored it. And therefore I didn't need the support. In other words, it's like saying oh I've got the virus but I'm not gonna die, surely I won't die. And I didn't. I didn't have any effect from the virus. So that—I was lucky. And the luck gave me support I guess.

**SL:** I'm curious, you say, so was there any time you ended up in the hospital at all?

**GT:** Uh no.

**SL:** No.

**GT:** No, I never had any, I just don't understand how lucky I was. Like for example I belong to Doctor Peter's Centre and he died in nineteen-ninety-two, and I don't know when he got the virus but other people are—are uhm, probably much like him. They—the virus is reacts to people in different ways and some people—some people have immediate effects of the virus and go downhill fast, and Doctor Peter was one of them. When he was dying and having his story on TV, I couldn't even watch it. I didn't even watch it, I didn't want to see that I knew I was HIV positive I didn't want to watch him die in front of the TV. But he did. And so uhm, I just continued to believe or ignore the fact that I had the virus and that it wasn't going to—I wasn't going to be like Doctor Peter. And then I started seeing my friends, one friend in particular who got the virus very, very quickly. It was about nineteen-ninety-three, and Gordie—my partner and I had—well I had come back to Vancouver and decided—like I wasn't one of these people who knows I'm HIV positive and therefore wants to retire and go on welfare till I die. I continued working, in the sense that uh, you know I'm not going to be sick why bother? Why bother stop working. So I continued to work and I got a job as an unemployment insurance collections officer, and that was okay. But finally one day I thought to myself you know Gary you're going to die of AIDS someday, maybe soon. Maybe you should just retir—not retire, but take on long-term disability benefits, then uh enjoy your last few years till you die. So in ninety-ninety-three that's what I did. I said to my partner, we're going to go on a tour of the world before we die. And the tour of course was only to see our families on the prairies, and then go to Miami on the train, because I have a gay friend who lives in Miami. And we did that. And while I was gone a friend of mine was looking after my apartment, well when we got back eventually, lo and behold he was not feeling very well. And I remember—and I was stupid too—I remember going with him to St. Paul's emergency and you know, saying that I had accompanied him, and I wasn't speaking for him but supporting him. And he would say to the medical staff, I have such and such symptoms. And then they tested him and he was HIV positive and he was coming down with full-blown AIDS. And he was one of these people like Doctor Peters that hit it—got—well it was within ten months that he was skin and bones. And his family came and got him—he was from Northern Saskatchewan—and took him back to Saskatoon where he died ten months later. But I don't even think he went on any kind of medication. But that was about nineteen-ninety-five, or ninety-six that he died. So anyways uhm, I watched that and uh, and you were asking me what kind of support I got, well that certainly wasn't support but uhm, the support I got was my own faith. My own belief. And uhm, I would go to church and that would give me strength and hope too, and that's part of the reason I think that I'm here, alive today.

**SL:** So speaking about faith and it brings up is your voice right, and having that inner voice. And say there was a time when you didn't have your voice, who would you want to speak for you?

**GT:** Who would I want to speak for me if I were to get sick, you mean?

**SL:** Mmhmm.

**GT:** Well, my partner has died. I have some friends, but I have one friend in particular that I'm very close to. And I met her in the seventies, she was a—or is—a Catholic nun who was teaching in the old [unclear] prisons, so she's pretty knowledgeable. All her, I think all of her students were heroin addicts and she's seen it all, and she introduced me to one of her students who was a transsexual. And uh, who died of AIDS eventually. But anyway she's the perfect, I'm so blessed to have someone like that but she is also quite a bit older than me, and she won't last forever. And as far as my family are concerned, they would support me too and look after me but they're very far away, in Saskatchewan. So uhm... I don't know what else, I have the staff at Doctor Peter's centre are very respectful of me, but as far as having oh what do you call it—someone who looks after—to have some name written down to take care of my wishes, I don't have that.

**SL:** Your benefactor. Which would be a benefactor or whatever.

**BK:** You also mentioned briefly that you got—you eventually started going to AIDS Vancouver and PWA, when was that?

**GT:** Uhm, let's see that was probably uhm very early, about in the early nineties. And uh, so I volunteered with them for awhile, I did income tax for members. And used the food bank and used the advocates, there was one advocate that was very, very helpful in get the help—helping my doctor getting approval for disability tax credit. So they uh, AIDS Vancouver and Positive Living have been extremely beneficial to myself over the years.

**BK:** Was that a source of social support at all for you too, like were you meeting friends or getting support in that sense there?

**GT:** I suppose so, yes. We would go to the workshops and the dinners. Yeah definitely social. Because that is a support, that is a powerful support is meeting others who are in the same situation.

**BK:** And you talked about Bella Bella and how accepting it was there, what was the mainstream response like here in Vancouver, do you recall what that looked like?

**GT:** Not really, I mean uhm my contact was pretty well always in the gay world and although when I was still working I was fairly open, especially when I decided to quit work I made it known to my colleagues that I was HIV positive and—but they were well educated and they were—it didn't seem to—didn't seem to phase them. But a funny thing comes to mind is when my partner and I were walking down Davie Street one day, we had left one of the gay bars, it was late at night and we were holding hands. And four men—I'll say from Surrey—come running over and slug me in the breast, or in the chest I should say. And knocked me over and I'm out cold. You faggots! Faggots! So they were not concerned about being gay—I mean being HIV positive—but rather being gay. That was worse, that was the worst crime of all. So as far as me I had never had any really traumatic, negative response for being gay—or being HIV positive.

**BK:** But certainly there was a lot of homophobia during back in that period, as you were saying?

**GT:** Yes, yes. And there probably still is, but it's—as time goes by it gets less and less as we see in the—as we see things change within the school system and within the community of youth.

**BK:** You have this uh, this very rich history in terms of the perspective you have on Vancouver, for instance having snapshots of it in the seventies, and the eighties all the way to the present. So how has HIV changed the gay community?

**GT:** Well I—I—the community has probably become more enlightened in as far as what the important things to consider in HIV transmission. Uhm, however, and this is just my personal opinion, I think the community is not quite as joyful as it was when I was young. Uh, there doesn't seem to be the number of sociable places to meet like there was in the seventies and the eighties, and I think that one of the reasons to that is the internet, the young people rely heavily on communicating through the internet. And I think that I think is a unfortunate—unfortunate uhm, an unfortunate—well the internet is wonderful but it can have negative effects on society. And it can make people more isolated instead of more social and people can communicate and text without even knowing—without even meeting people but they eventually meet and they realize oh you're not my type after all. I'd rather go to a social event and meet them in person. So in that sense the community is missing wonderful experiences of socializing in the old days, that was evident in the old days.

**BK:** A little bit less vibrant than it used to be?

**GT:** Yes.

**BK:** Did it HIV play a role in any of those changes?

**GT:** Oh no doubt. It has and will continue to—to do so. Now I understand that there very close to getting a—developing a, I don't know if you call it a vaccine or a cure for AIDS and it will certainly help a lot, whether it will bring back the—bring back the old days I don't know. We can only hope.

**SL:** Can we talk about the old days, because I was brought up in the old days too. Do you think there was more community in the seventies and eighties than there is now?

**GT:** I think so, yes, like I said there was—the people in the gay community are more isolated, and that of course is due to a variety of reasons but internet being one of them and AIDS being another so there's not—perhaps not as much social activities that we had in the old days.

**SL:** So the other part—does that not fear you a little bit that there is not that community of social intervention?

**GT:** Well it saddens me, it saddens me that people are—who are now twenty-two are going to grow up in a different world that is less social and more uhm—more reliant on the individual than it used to be.

**BK:** Advice for young folks that didn't live through this period, you know based on some of these things that we're talking about?

**GT:** Well, I guess my advice would be to participate. Participate. Participate in any kind of event that is offered, whether it be square dancing or uhm I don't know, there's—whether it be bars, they may not like to drink but they still could go to the bar and socialize. And so uhm, that would be the number one bit of advice is participate and become active in the community, in any way you can. Whether it be volunteering, that's a wonderful way of meeting people, volunteering and helping out your brothers and sisters. When I was volunteering to do income tax I met a lot of people that way, and I met one person in particular who we ended up becoming close friends with and uhm, he died of AIDS too but I would



never have met him had I not been in this position of meeting him through volunteer work. So that's a good way of meeting, and of course in Positive Living there's always a need for volunteers. And AIDS Vancouver too I guess.

**BK:** I think we've probably asked most of the questions we were gonna ask, so is there anything you were hoping to share with us that you haven't shared or something you were hoping we would ask about that we haven't asked about yet?

**GT:** Uh not really, you've made me really think about my own uh—my own—all the blessings that I've had in my adult, in the latter part of my adult life. I was, let's see nineteen-eighty-six would've been how many years ago now, almost forty—thirty-five years, well I was thirty-five years old then, and now I'm seventy-one and so I've learned so much and I was so fortunate to have my youth untarnished in my twenties, to have the opportunity to—to—to satisfy my desires without anyone telling me to put a rubber on, that I can't say how lucky I have been and I am so sorry that those in their twenties now did not have the experience that I had. However, so much has been learned, so much has been—has been developed and researched that by the time the people who are twenty-two now are thirty-five, the whole uhm, the whole gay world will probably be different and the HIV problems will not be as dramatic as they have been.

**BK:** Anything else?

**GT:** No I think that's good.

**SL:** Thank you.

