

The Positive Side

A NEWSLETTER FROM POSITIVE WOMEN'S NETWORK | VOLUME 24 NUMBER 2 | MAY-AUGUST 2016

WE HAVE A WINNER!

Sangam received the Innovative Policy, Programs and Services Award at the AccolAIDS Gala, hosted by Positive Living BC.

This award acknowledges HIV-specific services that demonstrate a unique, progressive, empowering and creative approach to health promotion.



Sangam has been a support worker and educator at Positive Women's Network since 1998, offering respectful care to women living with HIV in communities throughout BC. She has provided support at over 30 wellness retreats for women living with HIV. She has also facilitated hundreds of shame-free and no-nonsense workshops on HIV and hepatitis C for service providers, helping to clear up misconceptions and reduce stigma.

As well, Sangam has mentored community members, including staff at Positive Women's Network and YouthCO, and presented on HIV-related topics at multiple conferences.

Sangam is amazing, and we are so fortunate to have her around!

A PROVEN MODEL OF SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Skill Development Weekend focused on HIV, the law, and consent

by Melissa Medjuck



“I’ve been isolating and now I feel such gratitude for PWN as I have met new friends and reconnected with old friends.”

This was one of the responses from women who attended the Skill Development Weekend at Loon Lake on April 15 to 17. Twenty-two women took part in this memorable weekend, which empowered women from all over BC to form new connections and to create new informal support networks in their immediate area.

New knowledge

Like every retreat, the Skill Development Weekend had a few workshops that were mandatory. These required workshops encouraged women to engage with their peers and centred on HIV education, self-care, and self-awareness.

“Every time I come here I learn new things about HIV that I didn’t know before,” said one woman after Dr. Melanie Murray and Nurse Evelyn from Oak Tree Clinic presented a session on HIV and aging.

Micheal Vonn, a lawyer with the B.C. Civil Liberties Association, delivered a workshop on HIV non-disclosure law. The majority of participants were not aware of the law before the workshop, which had a deep impact. It increased women’s understanding about how a person living with HIV can be prosecuted, convicted, and sent to prison for not disclosing their status before having sex. (We have a series of new resources on disclosure and the law if you want more information.)

A workshop by professional “sexplainer” Marnie Goldenberg focused on consent and showed women that boundary setting is a way of caring for themselves. “The workshop helped empower me, I have new ideas about how not to give my energy away,” said one woman.

Self-care and gratitude

In addition to educational activities, every retreat participant received a 15-minute massage from a bodywork practitioner. PWN’s hope is that the self-care skills women acquire throughout the weekend endure when they return home.

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"I will bring home feelings of joy, happiness, love, restfulness, and a better respect for myself," said one woman. "I plan to take better care of myself after the retreat."

On Saturday in the late afternoon, our whole group gathered together in a large circle where we were joined by nine members of the Wildflower Women of Turtle Island Drum Group, a program of Battered Women's Support Services Indigenous Women's Program. They brought drums and other instruments for retreat participants to use and taught us several songs.

"One of the most sacred things that we have are our songs, because they have so many meanings," explained Carol Kellman, Aboriginal nurse practice lead and one of the members of the drum group. "Each woman in that group carries a song. When we're at a gathering, it's their job to explain the meaning of the song, and how that song came to the group and what the intention is behind the song. So it instills pride and it also shows non-Indigenous people the depth and breadth of the culture, and the strength and resiliency of the women."

The group ended with a gratitude song, during which each person had a turn to say something they were grateful for.

"I am grateful for my whole voice, this retreat experience, and my fellow sisters living with HIV," said one woman.

Physical, emotional, spiritual growth

A dynamic and energetic group of women explored self-care, shared knowledge and skills, and made new connections. The feedback PWN received from all participants clearly outlines the importance and relevance of this model of support and education for women living with HIV.

"I've learned so much and grown so much this weekend. I am physically, emotionally and spiritually refreshed from this weekend and I plan to stay strong, I have goals in mind now: to stay connected, to look after myself and my health," said one woman.

Many thanks to all the women who made it so special and to our funders for making it possible. Thanks also to Christina Chant, who came as the nurse to offer medical assistance and support to women, and social work practicum students Charisse and Katrina, who also attended.

Some of the things women said about the weekend

"I love to see the diversity of the women who have HIV."

"Some of the women who live in Vancouver told me about all the different resources I have access to and could benefit from."

"I learned so much about HIV. I took the time to sit, talk, and listen to what others had to say."

"I'm getting older and have to stay current with HIV info. This weekend helped me to do that."

"I need to educate myself more to be able to disclose so I can not be ostracized by people who are ignorant."

"I learned that having HIV I can still live a healthy, happy lifestyle without drugs and alcohol."

"PWN support staff, they really do care. It's not just their job and they're not on a regular career path. That's the love."

"Melissa and Sangam and other staff share and provide us with information and guidance, and we learn new things every retreat."

"PWN is such an awesome WOMEN-only organization, why are there not more?"



BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH YOGA

by Monique Desroches

When we experience a traumatic event, the language part of our brains turn off, which is why we so often have a hard time putting words to what happened.

We store the memory regardless of the availability of language. More often than not, those chronic pains we experience may be trauma stored in the body.

Yoga is one way to access these memories and process them without having to rely on language.

One very basic definition of yoga is linking breath with movement while paying attention. Yoga is a mindful practice and has a lot in common with meditation. It could be said that yoga is meditation in motion.

Meditation is the art of paying attention without judgement.

It can be done while you're still or moving about. Many people find a quiet walk in the woods beneficial, and some people prefer to sit on a cushion. Whatever your physical stance, it is the state of your mind that determines whether you are meditating.

Yoga and meditation can assist in building a more resilient nervous system and developing tools to access during stressful times.

Books of interest

- *Waking the Tiger*, by Dr. Peter Levine
- *The Body Keeps Score*, by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk
- *Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body*, by David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper
- *Trauma Sensitive Yoga in Therapy*, by David Emerson
- *Radical Acceptance*, Tara Brach
- *Rising Strong*, by Dr. Brené Brown
- *When the Body Says No*, by Dr. Gabor Maté

Websites

- Do Yoga With Me (free yoga)
- Dharma Seed (free guided meditations)
- DIY Dharma (free talks and guided meditations)

Apps (iOS & Android)

- Daily Yoga
- Simply Yoga
- Prana Breath
- Insight Timer
- Headspace
- Calm

WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV TALK ABOUT VIOLENCE AND CRIMINALIZATION

Several PWN members teamed up in March to present on HIV non-disclosure criminalization at Positive Living BC's Positive Gathering.

Their goal was to discuss connections between disclosure, criminalization, HIV, and gendered violence, as well as create a place where women could share their experiences.



Val and Flo were among the women delivering the presentation.

The dangers of disclosure

- Rejection
- Shaming
- Blame
- Lack of confidentiality
- Ostracism by community
- Loss of financial support, shelter, child custody
- Threats and blackmail
- Verbal abuse
- Physical violence
- Rape
- Death

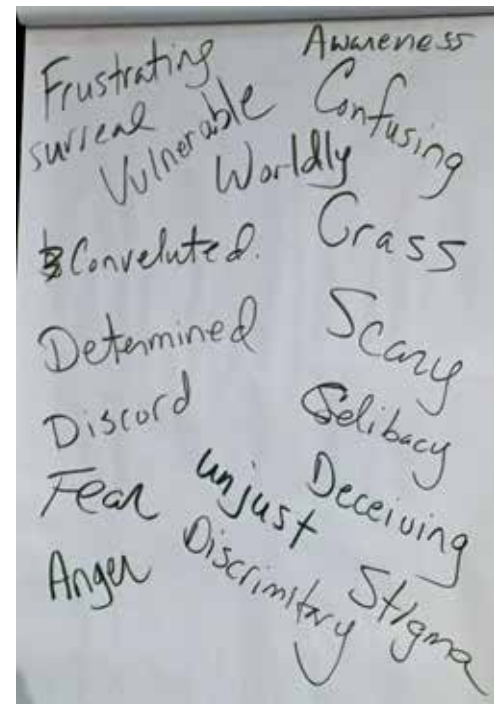


Abusers use HIV as another tool of control.

The presentation used a PowerPoint put together by Erin Seatter and Melissa Medjuck at Positive Women's Network.

Our view on criminalization

- No evidence exists that the criminal law helps prevent HIV transmission.
- Criminalization drives people away from public health initiatives, such as HIV testing, treatment, counselling, and support.
- Every person is responsible for their sexual health. Criminalization gives people a false sense of security when it comes to sex.
- Criminalization puts vulnerable women, such as those in abusive relationships, living in poverty, without citizenship status, and so on, at increased risk of violence, arrest, and prosecution.
- Criminalization deters women from reporting violence because the perpetrator could counter with nondisclosure allegations.
- Criminalization perpetuates HIV stigma and adds another layer of oppression to women living under discriminatory and violent systems.
- Criminalization deters women from accessing healthcare because women do not trust their healthcare provider.



The discussion in the session prompted these responses.

Changing HIV criminalization laws will take time, and it's essential that women's voices are part of the power behind this. Thank you to everyone who took part.

GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE FOR TRANS WOMEN

by Charisse Knowlan

Trans women, like all women, are unique, extraordinary, and diverse.

While all trans folk face incredible stigma and barriers—leading to an increased risk of HIV, poverty, social isolation, violence, and suicide—trans women face the additional challenges of sexism and misogyny.

In light of these obstacles, trans women deserve resources tailored to their needs. It is essential to provide safe and accessible support and care for trans women.

Positive Women's Network (PWN) has always been inclusive of trans women, even in the face of mainstream discrimination against trans folk. We will support any woman living with HIV or hepatitis C to make the best decisions for themselves.

Here are some other organizations and programs that support trans people.

A standout national resource is **PFLAG**, which provides support, education, and resources to anyone experiencing issues regarding gender or sexual orientation. It has local chapters in many cities and towns across Canada.

Trans Rights BC is a website with human rights information for trans and gender-diverse individuals across British Columbia.

The **Transgender Health Information Program (THiP)** is a BC-wide information hub supported by the health authorities. If you want to know about hormones, gender-affirming surgery and care, support groups, sexual and reproductive health care, and where to find essential service providers, you can go to THiP. The program also provides info on how to come out, change your identification, and manage practical self-care issues such as hair removal and changes to speech.

For trans folk who are new to Canada and have left their home countries fleeing persecution related to gender, sexual identity, or HIV+ status, **Qmunity** offers a drop-in support group to refugees facilitated in multiple languages. As well, **MOSAIC** offers support groups and counselling groups to immigrants seeking support,



connection, and engagement with their new trans community in the Lower Mainland.

Vancouver Coastal Health provides trans-specific health care to individuals living in the Greater Vancouver area that does not require a referral. This includes hormone therapy, surgical care planning, referral, and post-operative wound care. Specialty care can be accessed at **Three Bridges Community Centre** and **Raven Song Community Centre**.

There is also the **Catherine White Holman Wellness Centre**, which aims to provide low-barrier care and support in Vancouver.

VCH's **Prism Service** is also an excellent link and directory for referral to trans-inclusive resources including housing, shelters, education, and health care.

Trans Vancouver Island keeps a list of trans-friendly services on the island.

The **Provincial Health Services Authority** is looking for ways to strengthen and expand health care for trans people in BC. A committee has identified areas for improvement including community and peer support services, primary care access and consultation, health care provider education, and provision of gender-affirming surgery closer to home.

Trans resources are increasingly available in BC, but we still have a lot of work ahead of us.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED AS A PRACTICUM STUDENT

by Charisse Knowlan

For the past several months, I have had the greatest honour of spending my time as a practicum student at Positive Women's Network. The time spent here was filled with learning, engaging, building relationships, laughing, crying and feeling my heart fill with love and compassion through the relationships I've built with every single woman warrior I've had the privilege of meeting. I have made mistakes, found a greater sense of humility, and been supported in my learning process.

I have come to truly understand what strength is and to recognize the incredible power and resilience within each and every woman I've met. The members at PWN have been my greatest educators, my most patient supporters, and my most honest critics. I will be forever grateful to each and every one of them. Every member at PWN is a victor, a woman standing strong in the face of many challenges, and a woman being truthful about her pain and reaching out for the sisterhood that will support her. You have taught me to be humble, to be curious, and to be honest. You have taught me to find strength in the roars just as much as in the tears over coffee. You

have shown me that HIV is just one aspect of your life, a life filled with so much more.

Going forward, I will take what I have learned from this experience and from all of you amazing women, staff and members, and I will work my hardest to make this world safer for all of us. I will educate about the misconceptions regarding HIV, I will be an ally, and I will be a vocal supporter. I have learned that as a social worker, I won't be the only one having something to offer—you have much more to offer and teach me, and it is relationships that are the most important. You have overcome obstacles and you offer knowledge, love, experience, humour, kindness, and wisdom. You've taught me how to live my life with grace, how to be resilient, how to ask for what I need, and how to be vulnerable.

Thank you to all the staff and members for allowing me into your space, for being so gracious and welcoming, and for being endlessly patient. You are each the living, breathing spirit of the power of women and the embodiment of strength, and I will always carry this with me.

by Katrina Nieburh

I am so incredibly thankful for the time I have spent here at PWN. The amount of knowledge, experience and insight I have gained from the many women I have come into contact with has changed my life.

When I began my practicum seven months ago, I was really unsure of what to expect. Now if someone were to ask me now what the most meaningful part of my practicum was, I would certainly say the members! The privilege of sitting around the lunch table chatting with you all has been so wonderful. I want to thank you for letting me into your lives and sharing your amazing stories with me. I had no idea that the women I would meet would inspire me like they have, and I am so grateful that they did.

I hope to take a piece of all of you with me as I leave PWN. Your strength, humour and resiliency are things I will never forget. I am so humbled by this amazing experience.

What I have learned could be summed up in saying I have learned about character. Strength of character, difference in character, the many aspects of one's character, and constantly learning about a person's character (including my own) have all been so valuable in my learning here. Everyone I have encountered has been a part of that learning, and for that I thank you.

I want to thank the staff at PWN for making this experience additionally meaningful. Your care for each other and for this organization makes you one of the most supportive staff teams I have ever encountered.

Thanks to Charisse for being my rock throughout this entire experience. And finally, thanks to Melissa, you have been an instrumental part of my learning this year. I cannot thank you enough for your consistent support, encouragement and patient listening ear.

Events and announcements

Changes at PWN: An announcement from the executive director

Positive Women's Network is going through program changes due to funding cuts. Some staff will be leaving due to these cuts.

We will be starting a new Intervention Program and ending the current Support Program. An Intervention Program Assistant will start in May, and an Indigenous Women's Services Advocate will begin in June. We will be adding staff to the Intervention Program as we figure out the needs of the new program.

Here's how this will affect members over the next few months.

Now and ongoing: Our lunch program, grocery program, and lunch and learn education sessions are ongoing. You can still connect with us over the phone, in person, or through email.

In process: We're hiring an Indigenous Women's Services Advocate to join the PWN team. This is a partnership project with Red Road HIV/AIDS Network. You can find the job posting on the PWN website.

In the coming months: We'll be collecting information to use in developing the Intervention Program and will contact you for feedback. How can we best serve women? Your thoughts will help us with this answer. We're moving services in new directions and want to keep you informed as well as hear your thoughts.

Feel free to call for more information in the meantime.

Donna Tennant
Executive Director

Peer Navigator Positions

This summer we will be developing women-focused peer navigator jobs at PWN. We'll be talking with members and community partners about the new roles, and hope to hire for these part-time positions in the fall. We expect these positions will include work in PWN and the community. We will share job requirements and application information as it becomes available.



This year we're looking at intersections in care for women living with HIV and hepatitis C, with presentations by Gina McGowan, BC Ministry of Health; Dr. Alexandra King, Lu'ma Medical Centre; Dr. Neora Pick, Oak Tree Clinic; Deb Schmitz and Erica, Pacific Hepatitis C Network; and Sally Lin and Claudette, CHIWOS research team.

May 19, 2016, 11:00 to 3:00 p.m.
Blue Horizon Hotel, Vancouver, BC

Stigma Awareness Event

The Afro-Canadian Positive Network BC is holding a stigma awareness event on Friday, June 3, 2016. It will take place in Surrey at 13450-104 Avenue from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Lunch and refreshments will be provided, and all genders are welcome! Please RSVP to reserve your spot: pwn@pwn.bc.ca or 604-692-3000.

PEER SUPPORT GROUP DATES

PWN (for Indigenous women) 11:30 a.m. - 1:30 pm	Vancouver Women's Health Collective 5-7 pm	Oak Tree Clinic 11-1 pm	Positive Haven 1:30-3:30 pm
May 6	May 18	May 20	May 23
June 10	June 15	June 17	June 20
July 15	July 20	July 22	July 25

All-group outing on Wednesday, August 17!

All group meetings occur monthly and include lunch or dinner. For child care or more information on upcoming dates, call Jane Cameron at Oak Tree Clinic: 604-875-3755.

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*Challenging
health inequities
for women living
with HIV and hepatitis C.*

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Thanks to our supporters!

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 The exclusive pharmaceutical sponsor of SpringBoard.

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 Contributes to our portable housing subsidies and food program.

 Funds empowerment retreats.

 Supports our peer mentorship program.

 Funder for our women’s health carnival.

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