

The Positive Side

A NEWSLETTER FROM POSITIVE WOMEN'S NETWORK | VOLUME 23 NUMBER 1 | JANUARY-APRIL 2015

RECOVERY, COMMUNITY, AND HIV

Mrs. Beasley (a chosen name for this interview) was diagnosed with HIV ten years ago. She shared how it's affected her life and how she looks after herself.

I was diagnosed with HIV in the fall of 2004, when I was starting treatment for addictions. I was told my diagnosis over the phone, because the doctor assumed I must already know. I didn't know, and I nearly fainted when I got the result. Right from the start it was a pretty big deal.

I've always been discontented in the fall; it's cyclical. I get off track, I'm not sure where I'm supposed to be going, I feel a need to put my life in order. Back then I would get restless and irritable, and start acting out in ways that put me in denial of my addictions. HIV became a part of that denial and uneasiness in the world. I still get angry and go through cycles of remembering and grieving and ask, "Why me?"

I got into drugs because I thought I was "hip slick, and fatally cool." Drugs were the thing to do. My mom was an alcoholic and drug addict, so I think I'm biologically predisposed to it. I've tried harm reduction, but it doesn't work for me. I'd say, "I'll just use on the weekend." But if I took that first drink, I couldn't stop.

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Heartwood gave me back my humanity without guilt and shame. They gave me choice in my treatment. Nothing was forced at all.

I used drugs and alcohol on and off for years. I'd have time clean, and then relapse. The first time I was clean for 15 months, and then I relapsed. At one time I was clean for almost seven years. I went back to school, and I was working. Then I relapsed. It went like that a few times.

I was surprised to find I didn't like how I felt when I was clean and sober. I wasn't expecting that. You have to deal with those uncomfortable feelings as well as the addiction.

I'm coming up two years' clean now and feel good. I'm on methadone, and I'd like to be totally clean, but when I cut down on my methadone dose, I realize I need it or I get cravings to use other stuff. If I have the right amount of methadone, I'm good.

When I went to Heartwood, a treatment program at BC Women's Hospital, I found it so helpful. It's more than the 12-step model. It looks at mental health, addictions, physical health, and concurrent disorders. Heartwood gave me back my humanity without guilt and shame. They gave me choice in my treatment. Nothing was forced at all.

I'm living in a place now where I don't see many people from the old days, which is good. It's hard enough to change, never mind if you have reminders of what you were like. If I do see people, I say hi and move on. I'm two years into recovery, so I'm not going to jeopardize it.

It might sound corny, but I really do stay clean by taking it one day at a time. I try to do something positive every day, whether it's a small thing like picking up some trash on the street, or something big like working on the steps from 12-step model. I have a home group meeting I go to, but I don't go to a lot of meetings anywhere else.

The cycle of using and getting clean and relapsing changed when I started getting help for HIV-related health. Being diagnosed with HIV started me getting help for my addictions. I've been lucky to have support from the MAT (Maximally Assisted Therapy) program, Bridge Housing, and Positive Outlook in getting connected to community services. I'm on HIV treatment and have been for a long time. My CD4 counts have improved a lot in the last six months since I got into stable housing. I like walking and walk a lot.

Without HIV I could still be an addict. I go to the HIV community for support—Positive Women's Network, the Dr. Peter Centre, or MAT. HIV has given me a new start, unconditionally. I get so much from the community.

I've gone on PWN retreats and the most important thing is taking the chance to go. It was scary to leave my comfort zone, but once I did it, I was in a good place. I found I had stuff in common with other women at the retreat. There was good food, and it was comfortable. I went on the retreat and did it without using, which was great.

I also went on the Positive Leadership training. That was quite a personal growth experience. I find the programs I take to teach me how to help others end up helping me be a better person too!

To anyone who's newly diagnosed, I'd say your doctor is really important. Do your best to connect with her, because she's your biggest support.

Things will be different with HIV. They won't be great overnight, but they will get better.

If you would like to share your experiences with other positive women, we would love to hear from you. You get to review your story before it appears in the newsletter, and you can use your own name or an alternative if that's most comfortable. Your story, your choice.

ON FIRE

Inflammation and your immune system

by Janet Madsen



Doctors used to think that HIV didn't do much damage to the body right away. This seemed right, given that people didn't get sick for a while, even years sometimes. Now doctors know that before CD4 counts or viral load change significantly, inflammation starts affecting the body. Treatment recommendations are moving towards "the earlier the better" in order to prevent damage that's tough to repair.

HIV slowly breaks down the immune system, killing cells the body makes to fight infections. The immune system works overtime to respond to attacks from HIV. And it's not just the immune system that's affected. HIV causes inflammation in the whole body. Imagine an engine that's never

turned off; parts of it will start to break down. The kidneys, liver, heart, and blood vessels are affected, making people vulnerable to disease.

On top of HIV, certain habits can contribute to chronic inflammation, affecting health overall. No surprise that smoking is a big one. Smoking not only adds to inflammation, it can increase the likelihood of other infections such as thrush and two kinds of pneumonia. Quitting may be the best thing you can do for yourself, but cutting down will make a big difference too.

The same goes for drinking and drugs. The less the better because they cause inflammation. If you can reduce your use, do. This is easier said than done,

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of course, and it can take time to make change. If you feel you're ready to give it a try, Positive Women's Network staff can help you find resources and support.

Autoimmune disorders can add to inflammation. They occur when the body mistakenly attacks its own healthy tissue. Irritable bowel syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, multiple sclerosis, and celiac disease are examples of autoimmune diseases. They all cause inflammation. Women are more likely than men to develop autoimmune disorders, especially as we age. We're still learning about how autoimmune diseases and HIV affect one another. If you know of autoimmune diseases in your family history, tell your doctor so they can be aware of your whole health picture. This goes for other diseases too.

Given the damage that HIV can cause, your doctor might suggest you start HIV treatment if you're not

already on it. Starting treatment can seem like a big deal—and it is. In “Why You Might Not Want to Start HIV Medications,” Aaron Loxton makes five points to think about before going on meds.

Number one is whether you are ready to commit to taking medication. If you take it exactly as directed, it can do wonders and extend your life. If you aren't yet able to take the medication exactly as directed, you can do more damage and limit the chances of treatment working for you. Starting treatment is a balance of benefits and challenges. Talk to others living with HIV, read treatment information on easy-to-understand websites, and make your decision when you're ready.

If you have questions about how inflammation affects your body, your doctor can help, and our staff can give you support. Manage the fire!

Note: This piece is loosely based on a section from our Pocket Guide on Aging for Women Living with HIV. If you would like a copy, contact us and we can send one to you. Organizations can request multiple copies.

For more on HIV and smoking:

<http://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/staying-healthy-with-hiv-aids/taking-care-of-yourself/smoking-tobacco-use/>

“Why You Might Not Want to Start HIV Medications” by Aaron Loxton:

<http://www.thebody.com/content/75249/why-you-might-not-want-to-start-hiv-medications.html>



CONNECTING COMMUNITY WITH OUR WOMEN'S HEALTH CARNIVAL

by Janet Madsen

Hoopla, our women's health carnival, took place on October 9 at Heritage Hall in Vancouver.

It was a great event for connecting and learning, with lots of chatter. People were able to hear about different services, and there were formal presentations to learn about new developments in women's health. We were really happy to work with Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and Options for Sexual Health BC to plan and produce the event.

We chose a carnival theme to reflect the hope and energy that women so often bring to health and family issues. A special thank you to PWN volunteer Heidi goes here. Heidi was on the planning team that decided on speakers, organizations to connect with, and the structure of the day. Heidi planned the actual look of Hoopla to make it welcoming and energetic. She dug around various stores to find decorations and brought the theme together beautifully, transforming Heritage Hall into a vibrant place to celebrate the community coming together. And she did it all with a great sense of humour.

The day was opened by Elder Roberta Price, who welcomed us all to the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people. Between hourly presentations, people networked. Over twenty organizations took part in providing on-site education, resources, and giveaways, including Battered Women's Support Services, Catherine Holman Wellness Centre, Pacific Immigrant Resource Society, Vancouver Women's Health Collective, and Vancouver & Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society.

Feedback was positive, and a number of people said they'd like to see Hoopla become an annual event.



One woman said it was the best health fair she'd attended. PWN members, service community staff and volunteers, students, and people drawn in by the decorations attended. Some stayed for a short time, while others were there all day.

Thanks to pharmaceutical company Viiv for funding, which gave us the opportunity to present Hoopla. We hope we can see you next year!

Hoopla presentations

- **Sexuality, health and human rights**
Kristen Gilbert
Options for Sexual Health
- **Ways to protect your medical privacy in the e-health era**
Micheal Vonn
BC Civil Liberties Association
- **Aging with grace: Menopause and HIV**
Dr. Mary Kestler
Oak Tree Clinic
- **We always fight back: Honouring women's resistance to violence and oppression**
Vikki Reynolds
WAWAW
- **Cyber misogyny**
Laura Track
West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund



The WAWAW team

IS IT TIME TO CHALLENGE YOURSELF?

Leadership training offers opportunity for growth

by Janet Madsen

The Positive Leadership Development Institute helps people discover and develop their strength to be leaders in their own lives and health, as well as their communities.

It's a series of courses, and although you'll be learning, there are no grades. The Leadership Institute is about realizing you can make positive change in your life. You define your "A."

The Pacific AIDS Network (PAN) coordinates the program, which is based on a similar model from the Ontario AIDS Network. Positive people study to become designated trainers, and they lead the sessions. All training-related expenses (including transportation) are covered, so attendance is free.

There are three levels of training. The introductory level "Core Leadership Training: Who Am I as A Leader?" is a weekend of self-discovery, support,

and challenge as you identify what you might need to become a leader. You'll meet a mix of positive people from around the province who are asking themselves the same thing. Although it is scheduled over a weekend, organizers make it clear it is not a retreat. You will be expected to attend all learning sessions, contribute to the group, and work hard.

Because the weekends are focused on learning and working, those who are interested in attending must submit an application form and have the support of an HIV service organization. Leadership training isn't a fit for everyone, and it might not be a fit depending on what's going in your life at the moment.

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Positive Women's Network and PAN have supported a number of women to attend the leadership weekends. We realize that leaving your regular routine, going to a new place with a group of new faces, talking about living with HIV, and exposing your hopes and dreams can be challenging. We provide help through every step of the process and after training through face-to-face, phone, and email contact:

- Encouragement and emotional support
- Assistance with training application
- Connection when phone and email are inaccessible
- Reminders about details of travel, training, childcare
- Personal crisis management
- Addictions support
- Health issues support

Is it worth the hard work? You bet. On average, 90% of participants say it gave them a higher level of confidence, 81% say they learned new things,

and 85% report deeper motivation to build their own lives. One hundred percent say it strengthened their leadership capacity, and they're exploring volunteer and job opportunities to strengthen their skills.

After core training, there are two other course options. "Bored? Get on Board" and "Communications Skills" are intermediate-level trainings for those who have completed core training. (Communications Skills is coming up in February; application deadline is January 7). There are also leadership graduate retreats and mentoring events.

The next "Core Leadership training - Who Am I as A Leader?" is scheduled for May 28 to 31. We will send out information to PWN members, so make sure we have your email or street address.

For more information, give us a call or check out the Pacific AIDS Network webpage:
<http://pacificaidsnetwork.org/programs-projects/positive-leadership-development-institute-pldi/>

HIV EDUCATION IN KELOWNA

In late October, folks in the Kelowna community participated in HIV education for frontline service workers, positive women, and their support people. Sangam from PWN and Lara from CATIE offered sessions on October 29 and 30.

Sangam travels to communities in BC once or twice a year to provide trainings. Our workshops for service providers are designed to help them understand and become more comfortable working with positive women.

HIV Foundations is an introduction to basic terms and concepts of how HIV affects the body, including transmission, the immune system, progression of HIV without treatment, and more.

HIV and Women challenges service providers to understand specific factors that put women at risk

of HIV and the reasons it can be hard for women to look after their HIV-related health needs.

One of the days in Kelowna focused on HIV and aging. Living with HIV can bring aging issues women didn't expect, such as earlier menopause, concerns about bone health, diabetes, and heart health. Women got a chance to learn together about what they might expect and share their realities in the safety of a confidential and supportive space.

Many thanks to Laurie Deleurme at Outreach Urban Health Centre and Sheila Lewis at the Ki-LowNow Friendship Society for their support, generosity, and yummy food.

If your community is interested in working with Sangam, please contact us.

WE ARE ALL MEANT TO SHINE

Healing and helping at Peer Support Training in Victoria

by Melissa Medjuck



"I got to verbalize some stuff that really made me think about how I stigmatize myself."

"I learned how to accept me for me."

"I love myself more as a result of this training."

Extending Positive Women's Network's popular Peer Support Training to women living on Vancouver Island, support workers Sangam and Melissa facilitated three days of training in Victoria in late November.

A dynamic and energetic group of nine women explored their potential and strengthened their connection, communication, and leadership skills on November 26, 27, and 28. All training-related expenses, including transportation and accommodation, were covered, which allowed three members from outside Victoria to attend.

Training topics included active listening, grounding techniques, coping with stigma, confidentiality, boundary setting, and HIV disclosure. Three community partners presented at the training. Michael Vonn, lawyer and policy director at the BC Civil Liberties Association, discussed how to support women living with HIV in regards to

HIV nondisclosure law. Kristen Kvakic, program director at AIDS Vancouver Island, spoke on trauma-informed practice. Kecia Larkin, Aboriginal HIV activist, talked about cultural competency and the creation of safe spaces. We were honoured to have Kecia open our circle on the first day and end our second day of the training with a smudging ceremony.

At the end of the training, participants shared what it had meant for them. One participant said before the training, she had felt depressed and isolated, but after the second day of training she went home and cleaned her whole house. She said she felt motivated to take charge of her life and re-engage with the HIV community.

Another participant shared that she had been dealing with a family crisis during the training. She said that the training had provided her with a safe space to focus her energy and cope in healthy ways with the stress.

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Research has shown that when women describe depression, they talk about their lives as women, consumed by domestic practices and governed by the needs of others. In contrast, recovery from depression involves personal transformation, where women attend to their own needs. The participant feedback from the Peer Support Training demonstrates how it can serve as a catalyst for personal transformation, beginning a healing journey and recovery from depression.

A critical element of this healing journey is the creation of a safe space in which women feel open to sharing and learning. When asked what they felt grateful for, several participants said “the safe space we have created together.” Many discussed the formation of a family among the participants. All participants said that they planned to keep in touch with the others. The training enables participants to form new connections and to create new informal support networks in their immediate area.

On evaluations, when asked what they learned more about, women frequently responded, “Myself.” Self-awareness and readiness to engage as a peer mentors were emphasized throughout the training. Peer Support Training graduates may not necessarily be ready to provide support. Some women decide that they need to concentrate on further developing their skills and self-awareness

until they feel stable and ready to provide support to others. Others allow the training to inform and enhance the peer support work they do formally and informally in their local communities.

One participant reported that after the training, she planned to apply to volunteer at a local transition house. Another participant who lives in a rural community up-island stated she planned to start offering support to women living with HIV through her local HIV organization.

During the closing round, one participant, an activist and long-term HIV survivor, recited Marianne Williamson’s poem, “Our Deepest Fear,” which she knew by heart. Despite the daily lived realities that many of the participants face, including violence, poverty, sexism, racism, colonialism, HIV stigma, depression, isolation, addiction, and housing instability, these women came together to learn about supporting others.

We look forward to seeing the ways in which this incredible group of women bravely lights the way for a more compassionate future through the support they offer to other women living with HIV.

The training was funded through the Vancouver Foundation. Staff with AIDS Vancouver Island and Vancouver Island Persons with AIDS Society assisted with promotion.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

– Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love*

Events and Announcements



Beat the holiday blues

Mark your new calendar! We are hosting our annual Beat the January Blues lunch on Tuesday, January 20. This will be our post-holiday member lunch and volunteer appreciation event. Please note that we're in a different room this year, as the restaurant is being renovated.

Where: Century Plaza Hotel (Burrard Ballroom)
1015 Burrard Street

Time: 12 to 2 p.m.

Please RSVP to pwn@pwn.bc.ca or 604-692-3000.

Practicum students

Kelsey Haeberle and Ruby Bissett, third-year Bachelor of Social Work students from the University of British Columbia, are joining the PWN team for their practicums from October 2014 until April 2015.

Core Leadership Training

The Pacific AIDS Network is offering Core Leadership Training May 28 to 31. Please see the article on leadership training in this newsletter and think about whether you'd like to apply. We will send out application forms to members, so please make sure we have your street address or email.

A big thank-you to our holiday supporters

Thank you to everyone in our community who has given time, money, donations, and gifts to the PWN Support Program during the holiday season. Special thanks to Trigger and GirlGig Productions for raising money at your December event for our holiday and housing subsidy programs; and for all the goodies you collected for our post-holiday lunch! Thanks also to Urban Fare (Yaletown location, Christina Patterson, Assistant Store Manager) for donating reusable cloth grocery bags for our holiday grocery for women and children living with and affected by HIV.

2015 PEER SUPPORT GROUP DATES

PWN group 11:30-1:30 pm	VWHC Group 5-7 pm	Oak Tree Group 11-1 pm	Positive Haven 1:30-3:30 pm
Jan. 9	Jan. 14	Jan. 16	Jan. 19
Feb. 6	Feb. 11	Feb. 13	Feb. 16
Mar. 13	Mar. 18	Mar. 20	Mar. 23
Apr. 10	Apr. 15	Apr. 17	Apr. 20

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 Positive Women’s Network
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Challenging HIV.
Changing women’s lives.

administration

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Erin Seatter | Resource Coordinator

support

Bronwyn Barrett | Support Program Coordinator
Sangam | Support Worker/Educator
Melissa Medjuck | Support Worker/Retreat Coordinator
Valerie Van Cleef | Support and Outreach Worker

connect with us

Thanks to our supporters!

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-  **abbvie** The exclusive pharmaceutical sponsor of SpringBoard.
-  **GILEAD** Supports educational workshops
-  **janssen** Sponsors lunch learning opportunities.
-  **MAC AIDS FUND** Contributes to our support and outreach programs.
-  **MERCK** Supports educational opportunities.
-  **RBC** Sponsors our Peer Mentorship Training.
-  **SPRING STREET FOUNDATION** Contributes to our portable housing subsidies and food program.
-  **SHOPPERS DRUG MART** Funds our Empowerment Retreat.
-  **vancouver foundation** Supports our Peer Mentorship Program.
-  **ViiV Healthcare** Funder for our women’s health carnival.

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