



The Positive Side

Positive Women's Network

www.pwn.bc.ca ○ www.pwn-wave.ca

January- March 2005

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I Can't Believe 13 Years have gone by!

by Charlotte, with Janet Madsen

HIV & Me

I am a First Nations woman born and raised in Northern BC and I'm a single mother to four children. My HIV story goes back to 1988 when a handsome man left Vancouver to visit his family in northern BC. We met and went on to see each other for about 3 years. At first we had the honeymoon stage of our relationship, but later it turned unhealthy. There was alcohol abuse, jealousy, no trust, cheating, physical abuse. Even though we had a lot of negative things in our relationship, we did have good times when we didn't mix alcohol in our relationship.

The beginning of 1991 was good because I gave birth to a baby boy on January 1. Later that year, my partner and I went out to the local pub. Like always, we started off good but it turned for the worse. We went home and the arguing started. The next thing that happened was crazy. He went to the cutlery drawer and grabbed a knife and started walking towards me pointing the knife at me. When I was drunk I wasn't scared of anything or anybody, so I said, "Go ahead, stick the knife in me." He said, "This is how much I love you," and then he stabbed himself, going into his abdomen about six inches.

While he was in the hospital, his doctor kept asking him if he had told me about his HIV status. I don't know what he said, but his doctor decided to tell my family doctor. One day I went to my doctor and he started to ask questions. Did you and your partner use protection? Did he tell you anything about his past? I didn't know why, but finally he told me, and that's when my world fell apart. The HIV antibody blood test was ordered and on December 3, 1991, I got my diagnosis: HIV-positive.

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toll-free in BC 1.866.692.3001

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I Can't Believe 13 years have gone by! continued

Right after my diagnosis, I found out that my partner knew he had the virus and didn't say anything to me or use protection. The doctor ordered the test for my baby too, but thank God all 3 tests came back negative. Now my son is a lot taller than me, 13 going on 14 years old. He is one healthy boy.

After my diagnosis, I needed to tell someone and looked for support because I was feeling alone and scared. I found an AIDS organization. Because of my reaching out and not letting my partner or anyone else get in my way, I empowered myself. In the long run this would be my main help and support with whatever came my way.

When I first told people about my HIV status, three of four I told couldn't keep it to themselves. The one person that did keep it to herself is my best friend for life. To this day she still respects my confidentiality. I really found out who my true family/ friends were and the ones who wouldn't be anymore. I'm proud to say that mostly everyone was there for me. At first they were a little scared but got over it. This is one of the reasons I believe I'm still here 13 years later: all the love and support I get.

I had to tell my kids right from the beginning. They were 13, 10, 9, and I can't remember how old my youngest was, but he knew too. It would have been too hard for me to live with myself by not telling them. I was also afraid they would hear rumors and be mad at me for not letting them know. We learned how to accept this together.

I worked in a fish plant and I told my employer about my HIV status, which was a big mistake. I almost lost my job. I turned to the AIDS organization- they helped me get my job back . But even though I got my job back, I

went through a lot of discrimination from the other employees. When the season was over the other workers asked me, "How did you hang in there? If that was me I would have quit and walked away." A lot of them said I was strong to go through with it. That made me feel good inside. I just came back from a trip back home and my cousin and I went for a car ride past the fish plant. I felt like crying thinking back on the stuff I went through.

I became an IV drug user two years after my diagnosis. Later I would binge on it. When I cleaned up from using IV drugs, I became a crack addict. I did a lot of bingeing on that too. Plus my drinking was getting out of hand. The

good thing is I've now been clean and sober for three years, with a couple of little slips. I've been to three intense Inner Healing Programs to work on my childhood traumas and issues. I've also been to counseling and a Healing Circle too. All the things I do to help myself really work.

I went public in February 1992 at an HIV/ AIDS Conference for 50 or 60 CHR's and NAADAP Workers from the many surrounding Northern Communities. I was so scared because I' m well known and didn't want people to look at me

All the things I do to help myself really work

bad. At that time HIV was known as a gay white man's disease. I received a thank you letter from the ladies that put up the Conference. I still have my first speech, the letter and comments.

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Going public was a good thing. I've been the invited guest speaker to many First Nations Communities to put a face and voice to HIV/AIDS. I've traveled within Northern BC, and Canada wide. I still do this off and on. In the beginning I used to say, "I will never see my kids graduate from high school." Now I've witnessed two of my sons graduate with one more to go. Or I'd say, "I will never see my grandchildren." Now I'm a grandmother of five with one on the way and a step grand child. I'm really proud to be a grandmother. I can see how much they look like me at a certain age: the eyes, nose, smile, my face.

I know my sons are proud of me. The three older ones don't tell me but they tell other people. My youngest and I always talk about how he happy he is that I'm still here and how proud he is of me for the speaking I do.

When I hit the ten-year mark, I said to my family and friends, "I'm going to do something really big." Next thing you know I received a call from my good friend who asked if I was interested in filming my story for a CTV documentary called "Positive Women." I planned a dinner so my family could celebrate my 10 years with me. I was also given an award by my Tsimshian Nation in the summer of 2002: "Outstanding Achievement within our Nation" for the HIV/AIDS awareness I do. Now I can't believe 13 years have gone by.

I am blessed to be on no medication. This year I've gotten sick because of stress, but nothing too serious and I always get over it. I visit Oak Tree Clinic regularly.

I have so many stories of negative and positive things that have happened to me. When I was writing, I recognized I had a lot of fear. My fear was always doubt and afraid of a negative reaction. I don't actually like to tell my negative stories now: I like to focus on the positive things in my life!



*Charlotte on her 13 year anniversary,
December 3, 2004*

In closing I would like to leave you with positive affirmations that help me when I need them.

- Face your fears and let the CREATOR guide you.
- If you can't see the bright side, polish up the dull side.
- The best way out is through.
- Effort only releases its rewards after a person refuses to quit.
- You gain STRENGTH, experience and confidence by every experience where you really STOP to look fear in the face... You must do the things you cannot do.

All my relations,
Charlotte

Anniversaries: Rage and Hope

Whether you remember the dates of important events in your life, they are in you. How are you coping?

It's a new year, the anniversary of beginnings. According to the calendar, on January 1 we start again. But every one of us has her own calendar of anniversaries as well, unique to our own individual lives. Some of the anniversaries are happy. Some are better forgotten: sexual abuse, rape, being beaten up by a lover, getting infected with HIV, getting diagnosed with HIV. Many women remember the day they were diagnosed, and it becomes a measure as life splits in half: before HIV and after HIV.

Whether you remember the dates of your anniversaries or not, they are in you. You may not realize it, but on some level, your mind and body remember. These important events in your life shape you. They can make you rage for reasons you don't understand, especially when you don't know exactly what happened. Maybe you were too young to have words for violence or the fear you experienced. Or instead of anger, maybe you feel sad and overwhelmed. You tell yourself that whatever happened was your own fault. It's not.

You're not alone if you sometimes feel overwhelmed by things in your life. And you're not alone in wanting to change things



that make you feel this way. How do you cope? Different ways of coping can be:

- talking about your feelings
- having sex
- overeating / not eating
- using drugs or alcohol
- running away
- withdrawing from others

Everyone copes in different ways at different times. No matter what your method, here's the important question: is it working for you?

If you want to heal, how do you do it?

Healing is a process, but not an ending, because stuff will always come up. For example, you work really hard at understanding your feelings about your HIV diagnosis. You talk to friends, maybe a counsellor. Eventually, you feel you can accept it and come to think you can live

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with it, however difficult it may be. It doesn't take over your thoughts every moment of the day. You realize you aren't going to die tomorrow and can in fact live a healthy life with HIV. Then you run into the person that you're sure infected you. You feel angry, helpless; feeling the reality of your diagnosis all over again as if you just learned it.

This is totally normal. Like the seasons, life moves in cycles. So does change. And so does healing. This is what anniversaries are about. If you were diagnosed in the spring, and you spend a year numbing out, don't be surprised if the anniversary of your diagnosis sets you off. Even if you spent that first year working really, really hard to accept the change in your life, don't be surprised to find the anniversary of it still hits you hard. Working on healing can feel like you are moving two steps forward and then one step back. You're doing great and then wham! you feel like you have to start all over again.

Every time you try to face up to something that causes you pain, you are taking a step towards healing. You take a step towards making whatever hurt you not play such a big part in your life. It won't go away- what happened to you is your life. Healing does not make things go away. But you can change how you deal with it and cope.

Anniversaries like the new year are obvious times to think about what we want to change in our lives. Although what we want to change may make us rage that it is in our life at all, the motivation for change can give us hope. Like leaves uncurling on tree branches in the spring, we can come alive again. Anger and sadness can guide us. Hope can get us there.

**Like the seasons,
life moves in
cycles.**

So does change.

**And so does
healing.**

Updates and Events

Quick Calendar (go to www.pwn.bc.ca for details)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Drop-in Closed	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30 Lunch 12-2 Foodbank 12-2	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30 (Closed on Cheque Issue Wednesdays)	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30 Yoga: 11-12 Lunch : 12-2 Taking A Break support group: 6PM Call ahead for dates	Drop-in open 11:30-3:30

Welcome to PWN!

Welcome to **Allison Ducharme**, the new Support Worker. Allison is replacing Stacie while she is on maternity leave. Come say hello!

Happy New Year! Come see us

... starting January 4th. Upcoming closures for BC Benefits Cheque Issue Day are: January 19, February 23 and March 23.

Check event details by visiting the **Calendar of Events on-line**. Cruise our newly revamped website while you are at it: www.pwn.bc.ca

Taking a Break

The TAB support group runs most Thursdays. Call Sangam (604.692.3006) for dates.

Newsletter Changes This year the newsletter is moving to a quarterly schedule. We would like to get a sense of whether it's time for other changes as well. What does the Newsletter mean to you? What would you like to see? What parts of it do you read? What do you pass over? Let us know: in person, over the phone (1.866.692-3001), or by e-mail (pwn@pwn.bc.ca).

January Feast If you're in Vancouver, come one, come all to the January celebration of...you! Instead of a holiday lunch in the usual December craziness, we will be welcoming members to a relaxed gathering in January, when not as much is going on. Join us at Balthazar (1215 Bidwell Street in Vancouver) on January 18 to eat great food and see good friends. Please RSVP to Bronwyn (604.692.3008) by January 11. Are you an out-of-towner who might be around? Please join us if you can!

Updates and Events

Foodbank

The Foodbank is open Tuesdays, and there is no pick up on any other day. The foodbank is closed the day before cheque issue (January 18, February 22, March 22).

Yoga classes

Yoga Outreach is offering free classes to members on Thursdays from 11-12 starting again on January 20. The classes take place in Room 103. Join afterwards for lunch.



Surf WAVE... (www.pwn-wave.ca)

If you haven't visited our Women and AIDS Virtual Education (WAVE) website in a while, you might want to check out new developments: new information on Disclosure and HIV & Mothering. Soon to come: sections about HIV & Violence and Microbicides. What would YOU like to see? Let us know: pwn@pwn.bc.ca or 1.866.692.3001.

Who Wants a Retreat?

If the experience of past retreats is true, everyone enjoys a retreat. This year there are some new choices on the horizon.

PWN is having two member retreats this year. The first retreat will be February 25-27 at Lake Cowichan on Vancouver Island. Priority will be given to members living on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. The second will be in May (dates to be determined) on Bowen Island. Watch for details. Let us know if your mailing address is changing so you don't miss out!

A new kind of retreat will be sponsored by BCPWA this year. In October, the retreat team of **BCPWA is launching SeroSupportive, a retreat for serodiscordant couples** (one HIV-infected and one not). The aim of this 3-night/4-day retreat is to strengthen and affirm living as a serodiscordant couple. Those who are interested *must register by February 11* for an orientation session on February 18. To register for the orientation session, call 604.893.2213 or contact serosupportive@bcpwa.org. BCPWA members and their partners will be interviewed and then selected by late spring. Limited space is available.

Do you have something you want to share with other members? Deadline for submissions to the next newsletter is March 11.

Connect with Us!

in person

#614-1033 Davie Street, Vancouver
(between Burrard and Thurlow)

by mail

1033 Davie Street, Suite 614
Vancouver, BC V6E 1M7

by phone

604.692.3000 (local)
1.866.692.3001 (toll-free in BC)

by fax

604.684.3126

by email

pwn@pwn.bc.ca

online

www.pwn.bc.ca
www.pwn-wave.ca

support program

Bronwyn Barrett - Support Program Coordinator -
604.692.3008- bronwynb@pwn.bc.ca

Sangam - Support Worker- 604.692.3006 -
sangamg@pwn.bc.ca

Allison Ducharme- Support Worker- 604.692.3005-
allisond@pwn.bc.ca

Cara Moody - Oak Tree Outreach Worker -
604.692.3007 - caram@pwn.bc.ca

communications and education

Janet Madsen - Communications Coordinator -
604.692.3009- janetm@pwn.bc.ca

Jeannie Lowe - Resource Coordinator -
604.692.3011 - jeanniel@pwn.bc.ca

Bronwen Tigar - Young Women's Prevention Coordinator -
bronwent@youthco.org

administration

Marcie Summers - Executive Director - 604.692.3010
- marcies@pwn.bc.ca

L' Hirondelle Financial Services - Bookkeeping -
604.692.3000



**Positive Women's
Network**

Positive Women's Network supports women living with HIV/AIDS to make informed choices about their health. We provide safe access to HIV/AIDS-related support, advocacy and education/prevention to women and their communities throughout British Columbia, Canada.

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The information provided herein cannot replace the information provided by a medical professional.

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Unless otherwise noted, all materials in this newsletter are written by Janet Madsen, Communications Coordinator (janetm@pwn.bc.ca)

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