

I Was Here

Episode 1: Church Street with Brian Sambourne and Richard Isaac

Please Note:

These transcripts reflect a taped conversation and as such might not read as grammatically correct in every instance.

Introduction

Catherine: I Was Here was created with generous financial support from the Accessibility Project at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University. The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the storytellers and are in no way endorsed by, or representative of, the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education.

Disclaimer

Catherine: A warning to those of you who may be listening with small children, this episode features frank discussion of sexual practices.

Cold Open

Brian: And he was still full of tears, and he said to me, Brian, why me and not you? You were randy in your day. You had sexual partners. Now this sears you, when you hear, and you think to yourself, why me and not you. And I just said to him, Wayne, just luck, that's all it was.

[music]

Interview

Catherine: You are listening to I Was Here, a podcast featuring older adults who have interesting stories about, or long histories with, spaces and places in Toronto. I am your host, Catherine Dunphy.

[music]

Catherine: In this episode, I am talking to:

Brian: Brian Sambourne. I am age 66. I came out in the 1970s in the gay and lesbian community through MCC. I continued to be involved in my community and I thrive because of it.

Richard: Richard Isaac. I am 73. I am retired now. I am a retired physician.

Brian: And we've been together 33 years.

Catherine: It was a steamy summer day in 2018 when the team from I Was Here went to Church Street to visit the 519, the head and heart of Toronto's diverse LGBTQ2 community. We were so lucky to find Brian and Richard there. A former teacher and a retired doctor, this couple has been on the frontline of gay activism for 50 years. When the first Pride parade was a protest. When cops raided their bathhouses. When the AIDS Committee of Toronto began. When 20 year olds were dying from an epidemic they use to call GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency). When every queer person was living in fear and grief. The story Brian and Richard tell us is their community story. It is also their own. It is a story of loss and courage. And strength. And tenderness. And it is a story of love.

[music]

Brian: We weren't leaders. We were the henchmen. Even though I was on the Pride Committee I wasn't the leader. I was somebody who, the term I use is, in the trenches. I was a soldier. I would roll up my sleeves and go out and do what needed to be done.

Richard: We were privileged to be there at the right time and to have some skills which may have been helpful.

Richard: I came to know my sexuality early on but didn't do much of the coming out until after age 33.

Catherine: After age 33. What happened then?

Richard: What happened then? I think I made the decision that I didn't want to live alone and became involved in some organizations, such as the Out and Out Club, which was later the vehicle by which I met Brian.

Catherine: And you became very involved in the AIDS Committee of Toronto.

Richard: I spent a lot of time professionally developing my practice.

Catherine: You were their consulting physician?

Richard: No. I was a hospitalist for most of my life. I joined an organization called Gays and Lesbians in Healthcare. Things were going fairly well. In Hawaii at the time there was a prospect of same sex marriage until that was kiboshed.

Catherine: When are we talking?

Richard: We are talking the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Catherine: Wow.

Richard: Then HIV came. I remember first person I saw professionally.

Catherine: You mean as a physician?

Richard: Yes. As a physician. I saw the death certificate and it was one of these Liberace styled death certificates.

Catherine: Meaning?

Richard: It said Intractable Metabolic Acidosis. And when one looked at the background, I think it was fairly obvious that this was a gay man in downtown Toronto who died of something that we didn't know what it was at that point. Well even before HIV there was Hepatitis B and this is long before the vaccine and Hepatitis B was going to kill a whole bunch of people with complications. I was somewhat careful, one could say even paranoid, about that.

Brian: My coming out occurred when I was a student at the University of Toronto. And in 1973, in the basement of the refectory at University College, my fellow students were talking about Halloween and the event at the St. Charles Tavern. Drag queens would enter through the rear of the tavern, for safety's sake, or from the front doors, at which

point they would invite the abuse of the crowd from across the road, through taunting and throwing eggs or tomatoes or whatever they could hurl at them from across the street. The police were there but basically to prevent the crowd from spilling off the sidewalk onto Yonge Street impeding the traffic. So, when I heard that this was happening on Halloween, and that some of my fellow students were going there to see this spectacle, I was appalled. I could not believe that this barbaric practice was happening in 1973 in Toronto. So, I went among the crowd and I saw this. Later I had enough nerve to go to the St. Charles Tavern and have the odd beer.

Fortunately, in the Toronto Star, I saw an article about George Heaslop and CHAT, the Community Homophile Association of Toronto. This was a supportive group, who had their own dances on the weekend, Friday and Saturday nights, on Church Street just south of Dundas. In fact the building is still there. Amazingly, it has not been raised for a condominium. I would go down there, and they had these incredibly long steps to go to the main floor, and I use to think the stairs went up to heaven, it took me so long to get up there, with the fear factor inside of me to go up there. And so that's where I first really went up there and met my first lover Jim.

Catherine: And CHAT was really important for you and it became especially important in 1977 when Toronto was horrified, lost its innocence, appalled, however you want to say it. I am talking about the brutal murder of a 12 year old shoe shine boy, Immanuel Jacks, son of Portuguese immigrants, who was working the very rough streets of Yonge Street. He was found to have been tortured and murdered by four men and the papers made a great deal about how this was a gay sex orgy. So it put the entire community at risk because at the same time that you were coming together and giving each other support, and all of a sudden you are pariahs. What happened then?

Brian: There was a terrible backlash within Toronto. It seemed to be open season on homosexuals. Because instead of identifying the murder with pedophiles, the element that was really focused upon was the idea of the homosexual pedophile. It meant it was open season on gay men in particular.

Catherine: And this was just exacerbated when, in 1981 police, out of the blue, raided four Toronto bathhouses. More than 250 men were arrested and charged with being found in a common body house. Lives were ruined. And it was an egregious assault.

Brian: It certainly brought about a focal point of anger in the community. It brought about activism of a very strong political sense. We are going to fight back. I was not there at the bathhouses. I was never a bathhouse boy. I was not something I used. But I was aware of my friends using those facilities. And again, as you say, it was a right to

their privacy, it was consensual sex, it wasn't hurting anyone. And there was this huge amount of damage. I mean, the police went in. They pushed people into the streets with just towels on, and it was cold. They smashed the lockers. They did a huge amount of damage. It really seemed to be an overreaction to what was going on. But, it did crystalize the movement in the sense that it led to first protest march of the early 1980s, which eventually became gay pride but of course it was a protest march at the beginning.

Catherine: Were you at the protest march?

Richard: No, I wasn't. I did see the photographs of the damage. I don't know what the police were looking for in the lockers, but there was tremendous damage and a number of the bathhouses were closed. Some never reopened. And of course it did lead to that evening protest, which was an organized but evident sign of the number of people who were involved and how they were affected.

Catherine: I understand that there were estimates of 3,000 people who spontaneously gathered at Church and Wellesley and marched to 52 Division of the Toronto Police Force. Were you part of that march?

Brian: I was part of one of the marches, subsequent to the bath raids. But if I might add a little postscript here. I was living in North York at the time. I was trying to establish myself as a teacher. And one of my AIDS buddies, he didn't have AIDS at the time, he phoned me at two o'clock in the morning in tears. He had been beaten up. He was at the march. His partner Jim, my first lover, was out of town. He was crying to me and asked me if I would come to the Wellesley Hospital and help him navigate the healthcare system because he was beaten about the head and bloodied. And I agreed. And I got in a cab and I came downtown and I helped him through that night and got him back home so he could recuperate from the bashing. And I will never forget, he said to me, why are they after us like this? What have we done that is so bad? Why are being victimized like this? And it was a very traumatic experience for him as you can imagine.

Catherine: And this was the beginning of the Pride Parade. What were the people trying to say in the beginning about the Pride Parade?

Richard: You can call it a parade. You can call it a march.

Catherine: A march.

Richard: I think it has elements of both in it. What were people saying? Well, I remember seeing my first Pride march, it wasn't in Toronto, it was in San Francisco. I happened to be at a meeting there and it happened to be Gay Pride weekend. There I was with my suit and tie, little knowing that next year, I would be marching in the parade in San Francisco and marching in the parade in Toronto.

Catherine: And I think the verb that we are using, marching, is really important. This is not a celebration. Not yet. This is protest. These are people who are angry. It's a brave thing to do to take to the street when you are not getting protection from the police and you are proof, your friends around you are proof, that you are getting beaten.

Brian: The parade at the beginning too, well, we assembled at the Grange Park and there was a kind of festival atmosphere to it. We had had a situation where we had tables and things from different community groups and we really improvised. One or two guys brought their ironing boards in for example and set up their ironing boards to put their posters and buttons for sale. We then walked down to 52 Division and our slogan was, F you 52. And we were photographed by the police on the roof of 52 Division so that they would have a record of us, the protest marchers. I am not sure what they did with that, but at any rate they photographed us from the roof of 52 Division. It was a very small group. I think there was only maybe a couple of hundred of us in it. And that was part of my involvement from the Grange.

The next year I became involved in the Pride Committee, and I stayed on the Committee for about four or five years until the AIDS epidemic started to take friends and people that I knew. I decided that I needed to roll up my sleeves and become a caregiver in the AIDS Committee of Toronto to the men who are dying. So I left the Pride Committee.

In those days as well we had a small group running the march/parade of men and women. The parade was growing quite exponentially. We would start with 5,000 one year and be 15,000 the next. So we were having a problem with logistics. In particular, when the parade was in its infancy, we would bring sandwiches and lemonade and we would sell it or give it away for community service. But it was becoming too large and I said to Kyle, I am not schlepping with egg salad sandwiches anymore. We have more important things to do as in organizing the march.

I had been to San Francisco, as Richard had as well, and I saw there their gay festivals. They had invited so many entrepreneurs to come into the parade to sell their wares and provide support to their community. They were selling corn on the cob, hotdogs, cold drinks. I suggested to the group that we had to emulate this particular model. And it was

divisive because it there was a political march behind it. It had its roots in that anger from the bathhouse raids, and yet we had to recognize that we could not be providing services for the group unless we became somewhat capitalistic. Unless we invited entrepreneurs and other business folks to come in and provide what we could not do. For example, one of the big bills we had in the beginning had to do with toilets. The cost of the portable toilets I remember was \$11,000. We had no funding from the city. We had no funding from the province. Nowhere did we have any funding. We relied on bins in which people gave donations, but that wasn't enough. And we tried to sell things as well, but we couldn't organize and sell items ourselves. And so this is how we had this divisive discussion about bringing in this idea of a more capitalist slant to the day. And it remains contentious to this day because many people think that the Pride Parade is far too corporate. But I have always contended, right from my early days on the committee, how do you pay for the day? If you don't have their input and their money, you simply could not put on the parade. And so slowly and gradually, began the idea that people would pay to have floats and tables to provide a financial kick-back to pay for the day.

Catherine: Interesting. This is basically the growth of the pride march/parade in the '80s.

Brian: That's correct.

Catherine: And now it is the second largest gay pride parade in the world?

Brian: So we are told, yes.

Catherine: And it's worth many millions. But at the same time. You refer to this as the elephant in the room. Because at the same time there was a gay fun day at the University of Toronto where there was a speaker who came and delivered a little bit of a message. Do you want to talk about that?

Brian: That's correct. That is the lawyer in our community, Harvey Hamburg. Some background. We didn't immediately locate to Church Street for the Pride Events. As I said, we started at the Grange, and we also went to the University of Toronto, King College Circle outside of University College. And this particular year, I believe it was 1983, Harvey Hamburg was invited to give the keynote speech. He sounded the warning that was coming from Larry Kramer in New York, and the gay men's health crisis there in New York, that there was an epidemic occurring and we had to change our ways. In other words, we had to become far more conscious of what we were doing sexually. Now this was a pariah for many people in the gay and lesbian community because our revolution was in part a sexual revolution. In other words, we gained our

freedom, our sense of self, our sense of determination to fight for human rights, in our freedom to have sex as we wished. And so to then scale this back was very contentious. We had the Body Politic for example.

Catherine: This was the local newspaper, the Body Politic?

Brian: Yes. This was the local gay paper. And again they were struggling with it themselves, but they were not necessarily urging the caution that someone like Harvey Hamburg was. We didn't know how the virus was transmitted. We didn't know if it was a virus. We didn't know how the disease was transmitted.

Catherine: The word you used was epidemic, which is a very fearful word. The name at the time was GRID.

Brian: Yes.

All: Which stood for Gay Related Immune Deficiency.

Richard and Brian: Yes.

Richard: We were not sure what it was or what that cause was. I think at the time I thought it must be a virus because if it were a bacteria or a yeast, we would see it under the microscope, and we didn't. But there were all sorts of other theories about immune deficiency and the role of poppers and lifestyle. And unfortunately the statistics started to rise very quickly. Some people worried because of newspaper articles. Every day there was something in the newspaper. And the projections would be that in you know 10-20 years, 100% of the population would have HIV because the early uptake on the graph was so marked.

Catherine: How could you live with this? The fear? Everyday.

Brian: We changed our sexual behaviour. At least, some of us did. In essence, I suppose we went back into a closet. A closet of cautionary sex. By 1993 I lost Wayne and then his partner Jim, and my first lover back in the '70s, we lost him in 1994. It seemed like you were yelling in the wind sometimes because there was a belief that we didn't know where this disease was coming from and we are simply going to go on as we always have. And certain pivotal events like Rock Hudson getting AIDS in October of '85, these were things that suddenly brought it to the forefront.

Catherine: Well, he died of AIDS then. Yes.

Brian: He did. It became a worldwide issue about his death and the fact that this disease had a face that almost everyone knew. So it was a very pivotal event. By '85, I was involved with the AIDS Committee of Toronto which was at Church and Wellesley, above the Colonel Sanders store there in the small, little, tiny offices in which we were trying to get our act together to formulate a buddy system. Richard was on the Board of Directors with ACT and I was in the trenches with the guys.

Richard: I had to personally deal with this as well. I told you I was concerned of Hepatitis B and as a healthcare practitioner you are exposed to needle sticks and whatnot. Then the vaccine came out for Hepatitis B, but it was made from pooled plasma and we didn't know whether the HIV was there or not. So I had to make the decision of do I take the vaccine or not, risking HIV but protecting from Hepatitis B. I got some information from the group called AFRO that I was associated with, that's the American Association of Physicians for Human Rights and it's now called GLAMA: Gay and Lesbian Medical Association. So I had access to information that supposedly the preparation of the Hepatitis B vaccine would kill any virus. So I made the decision. I took the vaccine for Hepatitis B. One wishes that there were a vaccine for HIV back then, but a whole generation of gay men in this city and on this continent were wiped out.

Catherine: When did they find something that helped?

Richard: Well, first was identifying the virus.

Catherine: Yeah.

Richard: Because it was called a syndrome.

Catherine: It was called the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. The 's' was very important because I think that signified that nobody really knew what the heck it was.

Richard: Well, that's the definition of a syndrome. Now we do know what the viral agent is. So we shouldn't be talking about it as a syndrome now. I like to use the phrase HIV disease or HIV caused disease.

Catherine: But at the time when this choice that you just described that you had to make, I mean, you were literally making a life or death choice as to whether or not you took this.

Richard: Potential. Yeah. I had good advice and it turned out retrospectively to be fortuitous.

Catherine: But this is where you both became, where the ACT, the AIDS Committee of Toronto Act became, probably one of the most important and influential groups in any city anywhere, I think, in terms of the work it was doing. Now Brian you're talking about how you became an AIDS buddy and that was through ACT.

Brian: That's correct. My first buddy, Norman Saint Agnes did not live long. And at that particular time in the hospital, he couldn't get his meals delivered into the room. There was such a huge fear that his meals would be left outside his room. People were gowned up as if they were on a moonwalk.

Catherine: And when you say people you mean medical staff.

Brian: Medical staff with gowns to the ninth degree. And there was such a huge fear factor. He couldn't get his wastebasket emptied and everyone came in and interacted with him with layers of latex. So he didn't even have that particular human interaction. We had to gown up and mask up when we were going in. So Norman was my first AIDS buddy. And he did not last long. And then Neil Bellamy was my second buddy. A delightful chap. Neil was an air steward and just absolutely lovely. He was again like Norman just a man in his twenties dying far too soon. I'll never forget when he was in Toronto General. He liked chocolate and he liked classical music and I would go in and bring in CDs to play him. And I brought him once a chocolate teddy bear and he insisted that he feed me. And even though I was a little concerned about any bacterial transmission I let him do it because I knew that it was his way of giving me something back. So he would break off the ear of the teddy bear and shake as he put it into my mouth. And he was the most wonderful young man. He eventually, because his parents were in London Ontario, he was moved there to an AIDS ward in London Ontario. And I would go down by train to see him and he and another fellow they were the only two patients in this particular ward and the other boy Todd was dying of AIDS as well. At that time Neil was not near death. He was a couple of months from death but it was clear that Todd was dying and I went to his bedside and of course his relatives had decorated the area for Christmas. It was Christmas and he was basically alone and I saw such terror in his eyes and he was gasping for breath and he couldn't breathe because of the mucus in his mouth. So I would go down the hall and ask the nurses to come in please suction him out. But I could see in his eyes such a terror that he knew the end was very near.

I would get back on the five o'clock train from London to Toronto and I found out later that he died that night and that his family happened to come there to his bedside. When Neil would die a few weeks after that we came to London for his funeral. Richard and I had on our lapels our AIDS Committee of Toronto buttons. We were asked to remove them by the family because the family had basically said that Neil had died of cancer. Again the stigma was so strong that you couldn't say that he died of AIDS. Well, you didn't even know if funeral directors would take you if they knew that you died of AIDS. So we had to remove them, and we did out of courtesy to the family at that particular time. But the postscript to that is incredible that the mother would eventually become involved in AIDS work herself in London, Ontario. So she would evolve to the point of acceptance. In other words, to say, OK I have to accept that my son has died of AIDS and I too will become involved in fighting this epidemic.

Richard: The tremendous loss of community members especially amongst the healthcare professionals was evident. I remember visiting one young physician who in fact told me that he received his diagnosis and his fellowship the same year and he was in Toronto General in a single room, isolated, unfortunately with his food outside. We had to bring the food in to help him. But so much of the energy which might have been focused in better times in political development in what one can call gay liberation or so was focused on HIV. A number of the caregivers were lost. So many more of them were burned out by the needs which they attempted to meet. A number of the physicians had specific HIV practices and did a very caring job. So many volunteers like Brian also worked hard, and in fact Brian, I guess I can say, burned out at one point from the care of his HIV patients.

Catherine: The thing is you were living and working within fear and ignorance. From a medical point of view, you didn't know then certainly what we know now.

Brian: Just to comment on the fear factor one of my AIDS buddies Randy, absolutely a dear chap. Again a very young man only in his in his late twenties dying of AIDS. And he had wanted to see the Scarborough Bluffs. So I took him out one summer afternoon to show him the Scarborough Bluffs. We walked about and then we stopped at my mother's place in Scarborough because she's an absolutely wonderful baker and she made wonderful homemade cookies which were phenomenal. And we stopped there for cookies and tea and my mother knew I was involved with the AIDS Committee of Toronto and she was very fearful that I was going to contract the disease as well, even though I tried to reassure her. My mother said to me, if you get the disease you will bring nothing but shame to this family. Hard to hear from your mother. My mother is a compassionate woman. But nevertheless the fear that you mentioned was so widespread. Families were completely infected by it as well, so the infection isn't just

with the patient, it's societal, with the people, as well as, with the caregivers. The fear of contamination. I had my friends come from New Brunswick. And they had they given birth to Tim. And when I went to visit them in Scarborough Shirley said, you cannot touch our child. You cannot pick the baby up. I want you to stand across the room because your involvement with the AIDS epidemic, I'm too fearful of what you're bringing here to my child. So I could not be near the baby. I had to look across the room at him. I was not allowed to hold him. So this is the extent of the fear that we're talking about. It was very pervasive. It was an epidemic in and of itself.

Richard: One has to also honour the selfless heroism of so many caregivers, including the pastoral care community. There were many funerals which were highly unusual. I remember one in which there was a paper cardboard type of coffin on which we wrote things with magic markers. There were lots of balloons. There were lots of congregations that held special services.

Brian: I must give credit to Brent Hawkes of MCC. My Involvement in MCC goes back to the 1970s where I assisted in organizing dances at the church and at different picnics and what have you. I was fairly involved in the church. I was also the MCC representative on the early Pride Committee. And Brett Hawkes was extremely good in terms of coming to the bedsides of my AIDS buddies.

Something too that we haven't spoken about is that two of my buddies committed suicide because they could not face the wasting away, the tremendous pain, the sores, the bedsores, the dementia, all of these other secondary diseases that came with AIDS. It was like a hurricane of other health issues around it as you were dying. George for example went into the garage and closed the garage door. He got into the front seat of his car and turned on the engine. Sean Dani, whose funeral with the cardboard box Richard alluded to, was one of my boyfriends from the 1970s. He was buried in a cardboard box. And we wrote messages on the cardboard box to him as he was taken to his graveside with Louis Armstrong singing wonderful world. Sean had stockpiled pills until the point that he could take his own life because just the fact of facing the end, when we had seen the wasting away, the complete emaciation of the body, was something that some of them could not face. And I don't blame them for what they did. I mean, I just can't. Some may say it was cowardice but really they were facing such a terrible end. We all want to die in a way that we are free of pain, free of suffering. And this seemed to be such a monumental suffering that for them the way out was suicide.

Richard: There was such an emotional burden on those who remained alive. Why them? Why not me? And there's no answer to that. There's also the feeling that if only the drugs had come around sooner, then this person would still be alive.

Catherine: There's that too. And certainly with the advent of the drugs you could see the light at the end of the tunnel. And perhaps was that the moment where the gay and lesbian community in Toronto began to sort of take a deep breath, throw your shoulders back and say, I think we might be able to make it after all?

Richard: I wouldn't agree with that because initially we just had AZT and we were giving it on such a strict regimen. We were making some people sick by the drug use. The combination triple therapy is only more recently become available and now you know it's not curative yet. There may be one in the world cure in Germany but it's certainly a manageable chronic disease now.

Brian: And some of the men with AIDS they were having what were called AIDS parties. In other words, they were coming together with all of their medications. They were throwing them, because remember not everyone was on the same medication, into a big bowl and they were taking this and that and everything else to see if it improved their health in any way. So there was really such a darkness about the disease that they were just, as Richard was saying, sort of reaching for any kind of straw that they could to give them an extended life.

Catherine: I'm trying to figure out. Do you have any idea when the turning point to an extent began? When you felt that there were some hope? When people could live with AIDS? And when the medicine caught up so that there were some things you can take to live better, if not even symptom free, to a certain extent? When did that happen? When did you start to get your joy back?

Richard: It was probably with the implementation of HART: highly active antiretroviral.

Catherine: And when was that?

Richard: About 10 years ago.

Catherine: Just 10 years ago?

Richard: Yeah. Right.

Brian: I have to disagree here. There was a drug combination that came in the later '90s.

Catherine: That's what I thought.

Richard: Yeah.

Brian: It came in the later '90s where AZT was a part of it. At first the drug combination was too severe on the men, and the doctors soon learned that they could cut the dosage, which would prevent the drug from replicating. So this was a key fact. I think it was about '96. I know because I was really angry because my first lover died in '94, and I thought to myself, if only Jim had lived a little bit longer he could have taken advantage of the drug combination and he could have gone on. Because really he was only on AZT and that wasn't doing it. In fact when he was on the AIDS ward in '93, this is the fifth floor of the Wellesley Hospital, there were a number of men there who had AIDS. And I just want to give credit to the healthcare workers who gave me carte blanche to come into the Wellesley Hospital, and Toronto General, whatever hospital I was at when I was looking after the guys, and they said come in anytime, you go into the store rooms, if they want juice, if they need this, you come in and you do that.

In fact when Wayne was dying in Toronto General I came in at 10 o'clock in the morning. He was crying. He'd lost control of himself. And I said to Wayne, just a minute. I'm going to glove up and get the mop and the pail and clean up the mess. And then I'm going to get you into fresh diapers. So I put on gloves on, and he started to cry, and he said to me. And this is the Wayne I had the argument with back in the early '80s about going to the bathhouse. And he said to me, so this is what you do. All the years you've been involved since '85. Now I'm finally seeing what you've been doing all these years. I said, yes Wayne, and it's no big deal. I'm going to clean you up. And so I cleaned him up and I got him into bed and he was still full of tears and he said to me, Brian, why me and not you? You were randy in your day. You had sexual partners. Now this sears you when you hear, and you think to yourself, why me and not you. And I just said to him, Wayne, just luck. That's all it was.

So again, we looked after him. He was able to die at home, a peaceful death, in April. But then the hope as you mentioned came in about '96/97. And I was mad at a deaf God that didn't seem to hear my prayer. That didn't seem to matter that I was there at their bedside trying to feed these guys and keep them alive when I couldn't because there was a deaf God. It seemed like nobody heard us. And it was a while before the drug combination came in and started saving the men and then the turnabout happened.

The last of my AIDS buddies were at Casey House in 2000. Joe Monaco and Alan was dying there and they were well looked after. I was tired and I picked up regular pneumonia from them and at that time the doctors said to me, Brian it's time to stop. It's

time to pull back. You've been doing it for 15 years. Let this end. And so I stopped at that time. And then I changed direction to a much more kind of life giving situation with the AIDS Committee of Toronto and I started working on Fashion Cares as a volunteer. And that was a lot of fun. It was a lot of work, but it was more of a celebratory fundraising event. And I was just one of the henchmen putting things together blowing up balloons, and moving tables, and putting down tablecloths.

Catherine: But I think you needed that. Your community needed that. Fashion Cares was a huge fundraising party. It was fashion and fun, and it was probably a reaction to the decades of what you have been through. It was your way of coming out and saying, look we're here. What other lessons or messages do you think the people in the gay community have taken from that terrible decade or two that you suffered through and soldiered through?

Richard: In the meantime, while all this was going on, the AIDS Committee was trying to get information out. And we spent a lot of time speaking to small groups trying to allay the fears that the office workers had, or the union had. We gave these little speaks which I guess were helpful but we couldn't give the answers. We could say how we knew the disease was transmitted and, more important, how it's not transmitted. What's safe. What's risky.

Catherine: Yeah.

Richard: And then there was the provincial AIDS Committee which was trying to coordinate the care. There was the wonderful care that was given at Casey House.

Catherine: Casey House was Canada's first permanent residence for people with HIV. It was started by June Callwood. She was a journalist and activist whose youngest son was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident on Highway 401. And that was probably the thing she was proudest of. She had a lot to be proud of. So Casey House was the beginning of recognition that this is a disease and that you need a place to be. It was a house that spared no expense. There were lots of beautiful things in that home and it was very deliberate. And that was again a rite of passage in terms of what you guys have been through. I think Casey House was symbolic of your coming out of it, and also Fashion Cares, this rollicking fundraiser event. I'm saying, but I'd love you to either agree or not, it seemed as though you were all coming together and saying, maybe we've made it. We've come through. We're together on this.

Brian: Yes, it was a collective effort. And you mentioned the lessons that we learned. One of the things we learned in the epidemic was that I am my brothers or sisters

keeper. In other words, if we would wish a society that cares for us in a humane way then we too should roll up our sleeves and be part of that solution and getting back to humanity whenever we can. Because we all want a good death. A good leave taking in which we support each other and in which there's somebody there to hold our hand. In which there's somebody there to empty our pot if we need to relieve ourselves. It is to give us dignity at the end of our lives. I think that was certainly one of the lessons and there were so many organizations and so many men and women who were in fact doing that, to provide a good end to others. Once we got past the fear of the transmission, once we knew it was not easy to get the disease unless there was a blood to blood contact, unless there was semen to one of your cavities in your body, it got better. And I have to say that I don't think our human rights such as gay marriage could have come about with the epidemic in full force. I think once the epidemic became a chronic disease it became manageable and we were no longer seen as pariahs or leper carriers. That's when these other rights were able to come about. But the disease had to be managed before we could then direct our efforts elsewhere to things like equality and marriage and adoption. And that had to be under control before those other forces within our community could then say OK, now we can shift and look at something else in terms of forwarding our human rights.

Richard: AIDS also brought a face to this disease and that face was somebody that you may have been related to; son, uncle, whatever, or the next door neighbor, or the film star that you all knew about. So in one sense that brought gay sexuality to the forefront. To people who never thought about it or never knew anybody who was gay or at least they said they didn't. They now knew someone.

Catherine: So now here you are both now involved with gay groups that cater to seniors needs.

Brian: That's correct. We're enjoying the seniors group for example that's at the 519 Community Church Street Center. We go to Sprint. We go to the Sunshine Center.

Catherine: What's Sprint?

Brian: Sprint is the North York group that has outreach to different social groups. They may look at new immigrants for example and provide English lessons. Whatever the need is. And one of their outreach programs is to the gay and lesbian and trans community. And so they have wonderful events for us. So sometimes we go to a film for example, this past week at the 519 we had a creative writing exercise, which I really had a lot of fun with since I do a bit of writing myself. I'm involved with a gay man's writing group and we meet on Sundays and we continue to be involved in the community. So

it's certainly a joy to see that our preoccupation now is more with issues around aging and not with AIDS. So there is a sense of a new kind of renaissance within our community. And you now have a new generation of young people who know nothing really about AIDS. Even though there's still a transmission of HIV going on, I don't want to minimize that because there's no cure for the disease and there are still risks within our community, but there are other reasons to dance again, you know, and have a good time and celebrate.

[music]

Closing

Catherine: Special thanks to today's storytellers: Brian and Richard. Stay tuned. After the credits Brian and Richard are going to tell us how they got together.

Catherine: If you enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe and leave us a review on iTunes. We're relying on listeners like you to tell your friends about these stories. You can also listen to and download the podcast, as well as, transcripts from our podcasts website: ryerson.ca/ce/IWASHERE. On our website you'll find a portrait series of each storyteller. These photos were taken by the talented Toronto-based photographer Jessica Blaine Smith.

Credits

Catherine: Time for the credits. Project supervisor: Darren Cooper. Audio Engineer and Producer: Matt Rideout. Coordinator and Producer: Melanie Santarossa. Our theme music was also created by Matt Rideout.

Finally, a very special thank you to Programs for 50+ and Community Engagement at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University, who supported us in our endeavor to give these storytellers a much needed platform and audience. I'm Catherine Dunphy and on behalf of all the storytellers thanks for listening to I Was Here.

[music]

Last Words

Brian: You want to tell them about how you wonderfully seduced me?

Catherine: [laughs]

Richard: Well, what would I say? We went up Grouse Mountain and I was trying to get Brian to try the various Flora berries and things that you pick there. He was somewhat reticent. Subsequently we went back to my hotel room. And Brian will tell you the rest of that.

Brian: We went back to his hotel room. He invited me for tea and I said, sure I love tea let's go back. And we went back and then Richard very convincingly said let's step out into the balcony and look at Grouse Mountain in lights where we hiked today. So we went out to the balcony of his hotel room and he slipped his arm around my waist and gave me a squeeze and then I knew that he was interested in me. Because I had always said to my gay uncle, look how I dress. I'm wearing a tight tank top. I'm wearing cutoff shorts. He's a gay doctor. He's not going to want somebody who looks like this. He's going to want to have somebody who is respectable. And lo and behold he surprised me. And so we fell between the sheets and then in the morning he asked an incredible question which was, well would you like to continue this in Toronto when we return. And I of course said yes. So that was August of 1985 and this August we're at 33 years.

Richard: And I want to assure you that Brian has always been respectable.

Brian: [laughs]

Brian: I don't know about that.