

Grahame Robertson

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PARTICIPANT: My name's Grahame Robertson, I'm originally from a town in Fife in Scotland called Dunfermline. I lived there until 1999 which is when I moved to Manchester. Do you want to know a bit more about what I was doing in Scotland?

[00:00:19]

INTERVIEWER: Yes, please yes.

PARTICIPANT: Well the town that I was from, Dunfermline, was a dockyard town, so I didn't, the whole time I lived there, so for pretty much 30 years I didn't know anyone else who was gay. So it was quite difficult, being gay in Dunfermline, because there was nowhere to go really, I didn't know anybody, so my social life kind of involved taking the bus to Edinburgh, an awful lot, almost every day, which is quite a lengthy— it's about an hour, an hour trip. But that's where I met friends who became my kind of close group of gay friends, if you like, and that's where my social life was. I mean I slept in Dunfermline but I kind of lived in Edinburgh. I eventually moved to Edinburgh actually in 1992 to live— uh it was a houseshare with two other guys? This guy called Dougie, who liked to be called Hazell, because he was a big fan of Hazell Dean. And Doug— Hazell was actually HIV positive, he was the first I ever knew who was HIV positive. He was a real force of nature, Hazell, absolutely, just, really creative, really talented. He used to write pop songs, and record them in recording studios in Edinburgh, he was really kind of full of energy, full of life. And he kind of invited me to come and move in to the flat in Edinburgh with him, share a flat with him, and that's where my life kind of changed. Because living in a flatshare with two other gay men, in the centre of Edinburgh on the same street as a gay club, my life kind of flipped completely overnight, and had, you know, for that fucko year that we lived together, it was just, a complete turning point in my life. So that's when I kind of got the confidence to believe that, you know, there's nothing wrong with me. It was fun. You know, I could meet lots of interesting people. I learnt a lot of stuff from Hazell as well, but it was quite a short period of time at the end of the day because, it was maybe about a year? Because it was quite an intense year, we absolutely lived life to the full in that whole year, and it could never have sustained itself, and it didn't. And Hazell eventually moved in with his boyfriend, I moved back to Dunfermline, until I applied for the job in Manchester, at Healthy Gay Manchester, for communications officer, and I moved to Manchester at that point. But um. Yeah Dunfermline wasn't the best place, it still really isn't. It's moved on a bit since the 90s, but it's still not somewhere I feel, uh, gay, and LGBT person would feel particularly happy or comfortable or safe. So Manchester was like, it's like the promised land if you're an LGBT person, especially back in, sort of '98, '99, that was the whole time Queer as Folk was on telly, so it was like, everyone was kind of talking about Manchester, it was very prominent in the media and in LGBT circles. So having an opportunity to move here was an amazing one. But you know. And I'm still here, what, 17, 18 years later.

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INTERVIEWER: So could you, I kind of want to hear about— because I know you volunteered in Edinburgh, I'd like to hear about that. But before we get on to that, do you remember when you... your first memory of hearing about HIV?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, it was on TV. I mean there were— obviously living in Dunfermline, there was no access to things like gay press, so I wasn't reading about things like that, I couldn't pick up Gay Times anywhere. So it was through sort of popular media really, it was through things like TV. I remember very very clearly, an hour long or two hour long special on ITV, in— it must have been in the 80s, actually— talking specifically around HIV and AIDS. Very, very particularly focused on gay men. And I remember watching that. Although it was kind of presented in a kind of light entertainment kinda way. I remember Jimmy Somerville was singing on it, and Erasure were on it, and they were kind of dressed as a sort of light entertainment show, but they were giving out really important messages about HIV and stuff, and so on. And I remember thinking that, well, I remember thinking at the time, probably completely irrationally, "Well I'm gonna— I'm obviously gonna— that's something— I'm gonna catch it. Because obviously it's gay men who have sex that are contracting this HIV". So I was kind of convinced, "Well I suppose it's probably going to happen to me, then". So there was a lot of fear around what exactly it was, and how it would effect me, but I had sort of convinced myself, after watching that. And then follow up things like the um, "Don't die of ignorance" campaign coming through the door, kind of cemented the thought that that's probably something that I'm going to experience, something that I'm going to catch. [laughs]

And it was through— that was the starting point to learn more about it. And it was round about that time that I got a car, so it became easier for me to drive through to Edinburgh, and there was a bookshop in Edinburgh called West & Wilde, and I used to go through there every Thursday after work 'cause it was late closing, and that's when I would buy LGBT— well, gay books, magazines, local flyers and so on, and kind of starting, you know, educating myself a bit more on what it all was about. And kind of realised that, actually it's something that I don't necessarily have to acquire, it's not something I'm gonna catch if I'm careful, so, I kind of took a really— interest then, in how those messages were being delivered to gay men. 'Cause my initial reaction was one of fear, and I didn't think that was the right way, really, for the information to be passed on. So I kind of got involved with some local LGBT— gay men's health, in particular, in Edinburgh, and that was round about the time that Hazell got quite ill. Although I wasn't seeing him as much, he was admitted to a palliative care centre called Mauston[?] [00:06:36] House in Edinburgh and he got very very ill, and died in... '93, he actually died in '93. Actually no I take that back, he died in '96, sorry, it was '96. And I only found out after the event, and the family didn't want anyone to go to the funeral, and so on. So that kind of really, pushed me into further trying to do something about this. And trying to get involved in some way to kind of reconcile what'd happened with Hazell, and the stigma that was still so apparent.

So I became a volunteer at Mauston House, not long after Hazell had died. And that was for a charity called... What were they called? Waverly Care, they were called. So I did a sort of intense, intensive three week training course with them in Edinburgh, which was, it brought out so much emotion. That's when I finally confronted the fact

that I couldn't go to Hazell's funeral, and so on, and so, it was a really punch in the gut learning experience about how HIV affects people.

So I worked at reception, at Mauston House for about six months, got to know a lot of the guys that were staying there, got to know a lot of the staff that were there. Loved every minute of it. I mean it was a real trek to do that volunteer work, because it was outside Edinburgh city centre, and I still lived in Dunfermline which was across the bridge, so you know, I was going to Mauston House after work and not getting home until near midnight. But I loved every second of it, I loved every second of it. And that's what led me into volunteering at Gay Men's Health in Edinburgh, who are specifically a charity into gay and bisexual men around HIV prevention and campaign work. I saw an advert actually, I found out about them as well— after the news, after the local news on TV, they often gave five minutes to local groups to kind of promote their work, and Gay Men's Health had a five minute slot on television, which again I thought was quite impressive that they'd given so much time to a gay charity to talk about their work, so I contacted them straight away. I met with Bruce, their volunteer manager, a couple of days later, and he presented me with a folder of volunteer job roles, and there was a couple that I wanted to do. One was a safer sex squaddie, which was basically going out into the scene venues in Edinburgh every Saturday dressed as a soldier, with camouflage makeup and the full outfit, and the backpack, which we used to fill with condoms and hand out to guys in the bars. It was a really— the safer sex squaddies were really popular but it was a lot of fun, it was a group, it was a great way to meet guys as well, I'm not gonna lie, it was a really great way to meet men. And it was so much— just a lot of fun.

But that led me then, they were looking for someone to develop a little community fanzine, which I was really keen to do, because I've always had an interest in graphic design, and I've always been a magazine junkie. So I kind of leapt at the chance to do that. And they had really cool kinda design software on their computers there. So we developed this little eight page fanzine called "Spurt", me and another volunteer called James, who now works for LGBT Youth Scotland. And it was basically a very very sex positive magazine, full of coarse language, you know, fairly risqué imagery, just kind of spoke in the language that gay men, to us, seemed to be talking to each other about sex. It was a real celebration of sex. And we managed to do three of those before the Church of Scotland caught wind of it, and then the Sun caught wind of it, and obviously they were not happy about it. And rather than put the funding to Gay Men's Health in any kind of jeopardy, we decided to stop doing it, which was a real shame, but obviously, we have to make sure that we're not jeopardising the future of an important charity.

It was very popular, the staff and the chief executive, everyone at Gay Men's Health loved it. The community really responded well to it, but we had to stop it, which was a real shame. And that's when I saw the job in the Pink Paper for a similar role, a paid role, for Healthy Gay Manchester for common communications officer, which I applied for, and got. Which I was over the moon about, absolutely over the moon.

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INTERVIEWER: So could you tell us a little bit about that then, like—

PARTICIPANT: The role at Healthy Gay Manchester?

[00:11:19]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, at Healthy Gay Manchester—

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, um I mean it was a communications officer role, it was very much about communicating to gay men about Healthy Gay Manchester's messaging, which back then, was pretty much exclusively around HIV prevention. So it was a chance to produce printed resources, posters, campaigns. The role was specifically— one of the specific parts of the role was to produce a community newsletter magazine, which was something that happened about a year, year and a half or so, or maybe two years after I took post? We produced a lot of campaign materials in that first couple of years that I was at Healthy Gay Manchester, um, and it was just the perfect job. I mean working every single day with gay and bisexual men, going out around the Village meeting bar owners, meeting guys in the bars, I mean the big thing for me was that gay and bisexual men were absolutely involved every step of the way in the messaging. So, that kind of changed the way that information about HIV and AIDS was communicated to gay men, because they were actively involved in things like modelling, writing the resources, designing the resources as well in some cases, helping us put on events. So there was a real, really strong, really really strong community feeling back then, sort of '99, 2000 in Manchester around gay and bisexual men kind of working together to inform each other, and look after each other. And it was so exciting to be a part of that.

We produced all sorts of campaign materials in those first couple of years. We produced— I remember producing, it was kind of the forerunner I guess of the magazine that we ended up doing. It was an eight page magazine called "In Control", and it was all about confidence, assertiveness, and negotiation, I remember it was called the CAN campaign, confidence, assertiveness, negotiation. And it was all about empowering gay men to have the sex that they wanted, and not to put up with sex they were unhappy with. So it was giving them the language and the skills and the motivation to celebrate their sexuality, be aware of the risks, but overall kind of just enjoy their sexuality and experiment with it, and not be ashamed and not feel like they have to keep it a secret or hide it. And also getting gay men to talk to each other about sex as well which is a huge part of prevention, HIV prevention work, because people tend not to talk about the sex that they were having. So there was a whole kind of push back then to get guys to talk about the sex that they were having, the sex that they wanted, and also about the sex that they were not enjoying. So that was the kind of first major campaign I think I got involved with, and it was, the imagery was all based around video games. So it was like, video game controllers. So it was basically saying, "You're in control, it's up to you how you manipulate and manoeuvre your way through your sex life", so we did lots of imagery around video game controllers and we did a photoshoot in my bedroom, in Salford in the flatshare that I was um, I was living in Salford at the time. So we, you know, we had a couple of guys from the community, we just took some pictures, did this kind of photo strip, again getting local guys involved. And that was kind of the forerunner for the magazine that we later launched when we became the Lesbian and Gay Foundation in 2000, LGF.

So yeah, lots and lots of really kind of, ground level work at Healthy Gay Manchester, it was very much about engaging one to one with gay and bisexual men. And actively seeking their involvement, asking them what they wanted, and—because I think at the beginning, with campaign messaging, it was more, it was a lot about telling guys what to do. It was like, "You must wear a condom", you know, "If you're not taking responsibility then, you should be ashamed", that was kind of what was coming from outside I think of LGBT charities. I think the difference with Healthy Gay Manchester was, they were giving information, the full range of information, in a way that was palatable and easy to understand, and saying to gay men, "Well you've got the information now, it's up to you how you use it", you know, "You've got the information then, act on it or don't, but at the end of the day it's your responsibility". And that was a huge shift in how gay men were communicated to through sexual health campaigns. I think HGM and later LGF were a big part of changing that, how the message was delivered. So it became less about preaching and more about education, and peer education as well. We were always really really keen that gay men educated other gay men. Not necessarily staff, HGM, but members of the community were educating each other. So it was a really empowering, really exciting time, being at HGM.

And that then developed into producing Out in Greater Manchester magazine, which we started in 2000, sort of the main focus was again health, sexual health promotion. And again celebrating LGBT lives, because when we became LGF, we kind of obviously opened up our client base, if you like, to include lesbians, gay men, bisexual men, trans people as well. So, that then became Out North West, in 2003, and I kind of edited and designed that magazine for 16, 15 years? So that we eventually produced 121 issues by the end of it. So that was a huge lesson in developing campaigns and talking to the LGBT community. And again it was all very much community focused, and getting volunteers in to write stuff for us, design stuff for us, take pictures for us, to model for us. So that's something I'm hugely, hugely proud of producing. And I'm so glad to see that they've still got all the covers on the wall of the office of LGBT Foundation. So yeah, that was a huge part of, kind of my contribution while I worked at LGF, and then later, LGBT Foundation.

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INTERVIEWER: That's really, that's really fascinating. I was just gonna ask how, in a way, your professional and personal lives kind of linked in the sense of like, I guess, sometimes I've asked people about how they personally then negotiated the kinds of sex that they wanted, or how they responded to kind of safer sex kind of messaging, and your sense of maybe people around you, and whether people took things on board, or if there was a change during those years as a response to how the message was kind of received in a way, and maybe how you figured within that yourself, kind of thing.

PARTICIPANT: On a personal level? Being involved in this kind of work for so long, gave me confidence. It made me a more confident person, in terms of my sex life, and in terms of my social life. It opened up a lot of door for me, I mean, it opened doors to relationships, friendships, and I know that had I been living in Dunfermline those last 15, 16 years, my life would have been completely different. So yeah, I mean it gave me a huge amount of confidence.

In terms of, the kind of wider community, they were never— the community were never, and still are not, afraid of telling you when you're doing something wrong, and I think that's really important. And there were missteps along the way, so you have to listen to that and you have to take those on board. People are more likely to complain than to compliment, and that's absolutely fine. If we were going along and producing the magazine and we were getting, not much feedback in terms of, "That's fantastic" that was fine with me because nobody was reading it and going, "That's outrageous and that's wrong", so, I took some comfort from the fact that we didn't get a huge amount of negative feedback. And saying that, we were at the forefront of a lot of campaigns, as a magazine, I remember one specifically around condom thickness. And there was a huge kind of— well, we now kind of see as a myth that because anal sex is seen as a more... I don't know what the word is, a more forceful act that gay men needed to have thicker condoms. And all the evidence, all the science kind of proved that's not actually the case. You don't have to wear a thicker condom because you're having anal sex. The condoms are tested to beyond the limits of anybody's, you know, strength, when it comes to using a condom. So we were kind of instrumental in putting together a campaign to kind of, again I think it's almost to normalise gay sex again, there's nothing different, it's sex, it's no different from straight sex, you don't have to have a specific, different type of condom. So we started to offer, we started putting the condom packs, just regular strength condoms, and there was a huge amount of backlash initially, about that, we had lots of guys contacting us saying, "Well I need to have strong condoms", and there was a lot of self... people were thinking that we were kind of putting them down in a way? It was like, "Well I need extra— you're telling me that I'm not very good at sex", or it's, "Why do I not need these extra strength condoms", and "I do need them", and it was like we were almost telling them that they might be doing it wrong, or I don't know. But, there was just lot of feedback from guys that were obviously incensed that we would do this. And it took a good year or so for people to come round to it, and now obviously, it's the normal, the condom packs for the last ten years or so have been standard, standard strength condoms, there's been no, there's been no fallout or no accidents, as far as I'm aware because of that. So that was quite a big campaign that we did get a lot of flak for, a lot of feedback from but, through education, and perseverance, and it became the norm and people are happy with that now.

Obviously because we were a regular— a frequent publication, every month, at one point we were a monthly magazine, we were able to give people information that was fairly up to date. Again this was before, probably before the internet was widely available, obviously now people can get all this information from their smart phones and so on, but for a good part of four or five years of Out North West's life, we were giving information that gay and bisexual men and perhaps the wider community weren't getting anywhere else. So we were able to tell people about the rises in syphilis figures in Manchester, for example, which then resulted in the "Spreads easily" campaign, because the amount of syphilis infections in Manchester were going through the roof. We were able to tell people about that, respond to it, give them information, produce a campaign, in a very short space of time and on very short notice. So, it really fulfilled its purpose in terms of getting information out, really important information out to the LGBT community, in a way that nobody else was really doing. Especially at a local level, you could pick up Gay Times and Attitude and get the national picture, but we were really kind of instrumental in getting the

local picture out to, you know, the second biggest LGBT scene in the country. And we were able to, you know that was, when we became Out North West we kind of... um, expanded the distribution to Blackpool, Liverpool, Cumbria, and so on as well, so we were able to get the word out across the north west. So for that kind of five or six years where Out North West was at its peak, I think we did some fantastic work in educating the community about HIV, sexual health, political stuff as well, social stuff. We became kind of a catch all magazine at one point before returning back to sort of our community roots in the latter stages of its life.

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INTERVIEWER: I was gonna ask, because you must have quite a good perspective on how, in a way, kind of technologies have changed. So you talked a little bit about condoms, but I'm thinking as well about, kind of testing, and about... treatment, and then maybe, things like PEP, and now obviously with PrEP. Could you say a little bit about how things have changed or not changed over your period of involvement in sexual health work?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. Well, during the period that I've been in this line of work, it's changed immeasurably. Testing, for example, used to be— you know, it wasn't as easy as it is to get tested now. Obviously there are drop-in clinics at LGBT Foundation, there are, I think gay and bisexual men aren't as apprehensive as they once were about getting tested, there's actually some pride in it now? I think maybe 10, 15 years ago there was reticence, there was embarrassment, and there was, you know— I think if we'd had the clinic 15 years ago at LGF, for example, people might have felt uncomfortable about going into an LGBT badged building for fear of stigma. Whereas I think now, in my experience especially over the last three or four years, gay men are actually quite proud of the fact that they get tested regularly. I'll have guys say to me regularly, "I was tested three months ago, I'm getting tested next week", and that's all a real change in dialogue from when we were initially telling guys that it was important to be tested. So that's been a real journey, that's taken a long time as well. There was a lot of education that needed to be done there about why it was a positive thing to be tested, so I think, yeah.

And I think technology's probably got something to do with that. Obviously there was the first rise, in terms of like print campaigns and poster campaigns and so on. But I think now, it's easy for guys to check when the next clinic is. Because like I said, information that we were giving out on a monthly basis is now available on a second by second basis in guys' pockets on their phones, so. I think technology's had a lot to do with that journey in terms of giving guys confidence to get tested.

I think an organisation like LGF and LGBT Foundation's always embraced technology, we used to sort of use as best we could. I mean, in the early days of mobile phones, we were encouraging guys to text us things. And again, this is something that sounds archaic now, but you know, when people were first starting to get mobile phones, we were asking guys to text us stuff. Or we were setting up text groups so we could get information out to people via text message, and this was— again it wasn't being really widely used, so, I kind of really believe that the LGBT community in general really embraces technology, and uses tech— has always used technology in a way to kind of, to benefit them. Whether that's through dating, trying

to find sex, trying to find a relationship, setting up online groups and forums and so forth. I think the LGBT community's always embraced technology, and will always find ways to use it in a social capacity, which I think then is filtered out to general society. I think we can take some pride in the fact that we'll take technology and make it work on a human level. We've always done that.

So yeah I think, I think if Out North West were to exist now, it would be a very different magazine, we would have to have a very different focus, it probably wouldn't have as much news and so on and so on because as I say guys are getting it in much easier and quicker ways. And I think Out North West came to a very natural end because of technology. It didn't end because there wasn't really a need for it, there was definitely a need for the information, I think the need for how that information was presented changed. So, I wasn't surprised when Out North West came to an end and I wasn't particularly upset, 'cause we could see it coming, because you know, we'd reduced the page count, we reduced the frequency, people were getting their information in different ways, so it became— it came to a very natural end. And again that's got a lot to do with technology, you know, it's a huge part of it.

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INTERVIEWER: Ok. So, that's really great. We're coming to the end—

PARTICIPANT: It's a bit windy, isn't it. [laughs]

[00:29:23]

INTERVIEWER: I know, I tried stuffing tissues down the side, but I think—

PARTICIPANT: I know. Is it coming through, the noise?

[00:29:30]

INTERVIEWER: A little bit, but um, we'll just have to make due. So yeah, we're coming to the end of the interview, um is there anything else you'd like to add that maybe you haven't touched on, anything else you'd like to say?

PARTICIPANT: Um... I think I'd like to sort of, maybe end a little bit about what I kind of wish would... some wishes if you like?

[00:29:58]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: Because I spoke earlier about that real cohesive feeling of community, and I think that we're beginning to— I think we're losing it, at the moment I think. Because as a gay male community, a gay and bisexual male community we're losing it. I don't think we talk to each other about these things as much as we once did. I don't believe there's enough share— well, it's fantastic that this has happened, I don't believe that there's enough sharing of history, and I worry that we

are gonna forget the fight— the battles that we fought, and the fights that we had, and the people that we lost, and that scares me. And all that means is it's gonna become cyclical, and something else might happen, we might have another epidemic, and we won't have learnt from what's happened in the past. So I have a worry, especially the last couple of years, that gay and bisexual men's stories are being lost, and are not being told, and are being forgotten, and that worries me. That worries me because I've seen where that can lead. So my wish would be that we kind of try and take back a little of that passion that we had as a community even 10, 15 years ago. Try and find that spark again and look at ways of how we can look after each other again, because I don't think we look after each other as much as we should. And I think, that's the downside of technology. Having easy access to, you know, "the nearest guy is three feet away" is fantastic, but it takes away a lot of the work and effort that goes into creating meaningful relationships and meaningful dialogue and I think we're losing that as a community. So I don't know what the answer is, but I'd love to see us try and recapture some of that, you know, the spirit of looking out for each other, and being generally... generally kind of caring for each other. Because I think that's— this might be rose tinted spectacles, but my perspective from that period of time is that we did do that, and we did look out for each other, and it's a shame, and it's horrible, that it took something like HIV and AIDS to do that, and if a positive thing came out of that whole period, it is that for that period of time we became very tight-knit, very close, very protective of each other, and I think we need to get that back, I really do.

[00:32:21] End of transcript.