

Hormoz Ahmadzadeh

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PARTICIPANT: My name is Hormoz, I am 57 years old. I grew up in Iran until I was 15, and came over to the UK for education. I went to boarding school for two years, first two years, still in the North West, near Ormskirk. I then have lived in Manchester ever since. I love Manchester and I'm really pleased to be here, it really feels like home to me now. So I did all my studies here, I went to college North Trafford College to do A levels. Manchester Polytechnic as it was known as at that point, and did a degree in electrical and electronic engineering and was an engineer for five years, and then went on to business development for many years in the electronics industry. And then I really wanted to do something different, and got involved with personal development training and became a personal development coach. In the last nearly 10 years now, that's what I've done, and I now run a social enterprise working with marginalised people together with my colleague Jane Cordell, and that's been going on for five years, and it's very much the kind of work that I've wanted to do for a long long time, which is very different to the engineering work that I initially started with. So that's me, I think.

[00:01:57]

INTERVIEWER: Ok, I should have mentioned, sorry it's my fault, if you wouldn't mind talking me to—

PARTICIPANT: To you, yeah I was wondering—

[00:02:06]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I have a spiel but somehow that got left out of the spiel.

PARTICIPANT: Do you want me to start again?

[00:02:11]

INTERVIEWER: It's ok, we've got— it's fine.

PARTICIPANT: Because I'm going to look at you now, from now on.

[00:02:19]

INTERVIEWER: Um, ok. Could you tell me a little bit more about boarding school, or coming to the UK, or your memories of Iran? And also maybe when you were first aware that— yeah, that kind of thing.

PARTICIPANT: First aware of sexuality?

[00:02:41]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. Um, well growing up in Iran was— I have very fond memories of. You know, it was a very loving family situation, great schooling, you know, a great lifestyle. And the main reason to come over here was to, as I said for education. In terms of the experiences initially, it was difficult being in boarding school initially coming from a different culture, and they hadn't experienced many foreign students at this particular boarding school, so it was alienating initially, and then I got into it. Personally I think I made an effort to build the bridges and it went quite well in the second year.

You asked me about my feelings, because of sexuality. I think they were there from a very early age. You know, you might not call it sexual, but there's kind of attractions. But I remember, you know, before I came over, and during the period I was here, just feeling as if there was this strange kind of attraction. [small laugh] I don't know why I'm calling it strange, but it was strange at the time, because I had no role models, I had no kind of inclination that there were other people who were in similar situations, apart from what seemed to be people who were really looked down upon, and the kind of— almost like a pervert type idea, that you're a pervert if you are interested in the same sex. So it was a very very tough time, in terms of coming to terms or trying to come to terms with that. So there were cultural pressures as well as other social pressures, as well as familial pressures that meant that I felt like I could never come to terms with it, that I was, you know, quite alone in this. And I didn't know at that point where to look to— where I could go with it. It was tough when I was trying to come to terms with it.

[00:05:25]

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any particular memories of being at boarding school? Anything that stands out for you?

PARTICIPANT: Um... ooh. [laughs] I think ultimate what stands out for me is the friends I made, really, and how, especially as I said, by the second year, I felt good there. That I was being accepted. It took a while for others to accept me, it felt, and that was partly to do with myself I suppose, partly thinking, "I'm a bit different here". But yes, I made some really good friends. The other memories I have was the... also thinking, some of these rules that are there are there for no reason, you know? The strict kind of rules, that's the kind of thing that I remember as well. But also the standard of education was very good, so I look back and think, well that was lucky that I could have that base at that point.

So, on the whole, I look at it as quite a good period even though there were difficulties in terms of being away from home, being away from family, loved one, etcetera. And initially feeling isolated, but then making some good friends.

[00:06:58]

INTERVIEWER: Hormoz, can I just pause there, sorry, one of the mics has—

[audio cut]

If you could just, just cause the audio cut out, could you just say again— we were talking about your memories of boarding school and you were saying that you were quite lucky because you found some friends, and could you say a little bit more about that?

PARTICIPANT: Ok. I would say it's the finding the friends that made the biggest impact in terms of me looking back at it and thinking that it was an alright time, it was a good time actually, in the end. Initially I felt isolated and different, and by the second year I felt very much part of it. As I said earlier the standard of education was very good, so that's, that a great start in a way in terms of being in this country. But the thing that always got in the way, in a way, in many senses, was just feeling imprisoned sometimes, and when you want to just go out and do something you couldn't, so that was odd, because that was nothing like my childhood. So it had its frustrations, but it was ok as well. More than ok. So, that's my impression of it, especially because of the people.

[00:08:35]

INTERVIEWER: What happened after boarding school, so did you move straight to Manchester?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, I came to Manchester, my brother lived here already, so it was easy. I lived with him, and went to college for two years to do my A levels, so it was quite an easy transition at that point.

[00:09:06]

INTERVIEWER: And you mentioned these, kind of feelings. When did you first act on...

PARTICIPANT: Uh, in terms of— my first kiss was just before I was 21, so I was quite a late developer in that sense because I held back. I'm talking with a man. So, it, yeah, it took a while for me to get to the point to think, "I'm gonna do this". And what helped me, I remember, was when I was at college, one of my very close friends came out. And it was you know, this kind of standard thing of wondering how people would react to it, really worried about it, and I thought, you know, "What would my straight friends say? What will my family say?" etcetera etcetera. And the fact that the response to him coming out was pretty positive, and we're talking about a while back now, that really encouraged me to pluck up the courage. As well as other things. I had been doing a lot of reading in terms of strengthening myself, in, you know, more confidence, but also really not being so concerned about what others might think. That was the biggest worry for me. So that really encouraged me, and about a month later, I think, I came out as well to my social— my very close group of friends. And it was a similar reaction, you know, "We like you for who you are", and that kind of thing. And that was really encouraging. And then, after I was 21, I plucked up the courage to actually tell my family, which had its ups and downs. So. So, yeah, that's when I kind of changed things. So that is... 1980, I think.

[00:11:30]

INTERVIEWER: Just wondering if you could tell me the first time you became aware of this thing called HIV or this thing called AIDS, however it was termed at the time. When did you first hear about it, do you know—

PARTICIPANT: I think I heard about it, either late '85 or early '86. And the way that it was being presented... I don't know if it was straight away, but very soon after I heard about it was "the gay plague". And, terrifying, just terrifying reading about it, terrifying thinking where it was more prolific, and in that— at that stage in my life, I travelled around to several— to the US quite a bit, um, and, you know one of... It was easy to think that it could be any of us at any moment that could be affected by it directly. And when it really hit me was when one of my ex-partners was diagnosed, and that was very early on here in Manchester, and so... And at that point there was not a lot they could do for him. And you know, I just remember his experience of, you know, paramedics coming round and they not wanting to touch him almost, and that was just horrendous to hear about, because I wasn't there at that point, when they wanted to take him to the hospital.

So, that was a real shock when he got ill, and then pretty quickly, passed away. But that started a series of people that I knew who were affected. So it was a really, really, scary, strange— I say strange because it was like a numbing affect, you just didn't know what would happen next, you were obviously terrified for yourself as well, but to see so many close people being affected, you know around the globe, was quite devastating.

[00:14:31]

INTERVIEWER: Ok. [coughs] Excuse me. What was the media coverage like at the time, do you remember anything?

PARTICIPANT: Well the one that my generation all remember was this big gravestone crashing onto the ground and, you know, suggesting an immediate death sentence, basically, for anyone who had HIV. That kind of added to the hysteria and this, being scared of it, quite strongly. So uh... I do, because I was so, uh, affected by it, I read a lot about it, and I tried to see as much as possible about it. I mean I can't remember exactly when, but pretty soon, the facts started coming out, in terms of, you know, touching someone, or drinking the same drink from somebody's cup, etcetera, would not affect you and all of that kind of... the realities of it, and what precautions needed to be there, etcetera etcetera. But it— I did have a period when I was convinced I was HIV positive because of unprotected sex, and terrified to go for the test. And the test, you know, took so long for results to come round, all that kind of thing. And again I can't remember at what point, but I did have the test. And, you know, relieved, I couldn't believe at that point that I was not HIV positive. So. But by that stage, all the messages about safe sex, etcetera, had come in, and so I adopted them very quickly.

[00:16:58]

INTERVIEWER: What did that mean for you, in terms of the sex you were having?

PARTICIPANT: Um, I was— I thought, well, the reality of it was, I thought I'd rather be alive than— at that point, alive than not. So, it was fine. I, you know, it was fine. I just thought it's not a big price to pay for just trying to ensure that you have a much better chance of not becoming HIV positive and... so yeah, I just did it, without even questioning or thinking about it eventually. And I think the reality was that I, personally, the oral side of sex was much more interesting for me anyway, so I was absolutely fine with that. And occasionally using a condom, fine.

[00:18:13]

INTERVIEWER: I was wondering whether you could say a little bit more about how I imagine then, in a way, when your partner became ill, that you must have done some kind of caring work, and how was that process for you?

PARTICIPANT: Well, the first one I'm talking about, he was not my partner at that point, we had been previous to that. I think "partner" maybe is too strong a word in terms of the relationship partner. But he was one of my first boyfriends for a short time. And the caring that I did for him, because it happened so quickly— I mean, he couldn't, the diagnosis was not there until very, very late. So by the time that was the diagnosis, he died soon after that. And he held quite a lot back, a lot of people didn't know how ill he was. So there wasn't that much, even a chance, for people to care for him in that sense.

But I did have another partner quite a bit later on who, again an ex-partner, who died. And I cared for him for a period of several months when he was in hospital. And it was, I was one of the executors of his will as well. So, yeah, that really affected me, because, as well as the kind of going to hospital regularly, there was quite a lot of emotional kind of support that, you know, had to happen. So, I think there were four of us who were kind of core group who looked after him, and then supported each other around it, one of them being my current partner— husband, we've been together 27 years. He really helped me at that time as well, because he obviously knew Gary, who died at that point, and. So yeah it was a difficult time, but it's a really strange thing, because I said it's this numbing period, and I— this went on for quite a while because you just knew so many people who died. And I didn't have time in myself to mourn them. I feel so strange saying that, but that's the way it was, and then suddenly, like I don't know exactly when, years later, I really mourned all of them at the same time, it was a real kind of a break down moment where certain things, the way thoughts and conversations went, it all came home all at the same time. I just, I went through years of being strong, you know, and thinking that's how I'm coping with the emotions and the loss and all the rest of it, and that's how to deal with it, to be strong and carry on, and then, it was all too much, and that's when there was a kind of a— there was a break down, but there was a real memory and appreciation of all the people that I had lost. And then of course the remembrance of people who died of HIV continued through the Pride events etcetera, and that was always very close to my heart. I say "was" because especially at that point when it was so important to remember the people very very publicly, as well, to remind everybody else of what happened.

What I'll say is that it's very important still because so many people— young people, who you know, are out, and rightly out, and living their lives as gay people, quite a lot

of them don't— are not always aware of what happened in the 80s. And I come across that— it's not, obviously it's not intentional on their behalf, but they're not always aware of the history of what has happened.

[00:23:42]

INTERVIEWER: You talked a little bit about mourning. When you did— in a way when you did have the space to do that, what form did that take for you?

PARTICIPANT: Um, there was a— I hadn't cried for a while, I cried a lot. So that was the initial kind of response. But then there was a lot of thought, and the thought was recognition of the loss, but lots of positive stuff as well, just remembering all the good bits of the people. So that is part of the mourning in a way, but it— out of mourning comes something else which gives you something more positive about those people, and just— it might sound corny, but the fact that they were in your life was very important, so. So yeah, it started from just, grieving, proper grieving. A bit of anger, the anger that initially comes with why, why such a lovely person should go this way.

[00:25:13]

INTERVIEWER: What do you think the wider— I mean you've talked about the numbing affect. What do you think the wider kind of emotional, psychological impact was on people at the time, people like yourself, but...

PARTICIPANT: D'you mean—

[00:25:35]

INTERVIEWER: Of the endemic.

PARTICIPANT: —people who weren't, uh, directly affected by? I mean I'm obviously— "directly affected" doesn't make sense because I was.

[00:25:45]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, yeah.

PARTICIPANT: Sorry, my, I mean you know, I have... I wasn't affected by it in the sense that I'm not HIV positive. D'you mean, just affected by it?

[00:26:00]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah I do, in a broad sense, yeah.

PARTICIPANT: [at the same time] Broad sense, yeah.

Well it's— some of the things I've mentioned before, but fear was a big thing, a huge thing. Fear. Fear and, because I've worked with HIV positive people a fair amount in recent years, also stigma. The stigma of dealing with it, and how other people will

see it, all of that. So, those are probably the biggest things. Initially, it was a death sentence, and you know, how do you deal with that. To be close to some people who knew that they were going to die was a strange experience for me. But you learn from it as well, in terms of resilience, in terms of saying, "I'm gonna make the most of this time with me". It's a reminder that we should all do that. [small laugh] So uh, yeah. It's a really strange mix of thoughts and emotions. But I would say the strongest were the first two I mentioned.

[00:27:41]

INTERVIEWER: That's fair. So you talked a little bit about the kind of public recognition of the loss, and kind of public grieving in a way. Could you say a little bit more about that? You mentioned Pride, is that— the vigils part of that—

PARTICIPANT: The vigil, that's what I meant, yeah.

[00:28:03]

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe, for someone who's coming to this, doesn't really know what it is, what is it, and what does it mean to you?

PARTICIPANT: Um, it's very emotional, because it is remembering people who were affected by it, and died, and people who are living with it, who have lived with it for many years and who have had to adjust in so many ways to, you know— it has changed and the profile has changed a lot, and it's so good to see that, you know, many people can live very healthy lives now because of advance of medication etcetera, and mental thinking, and all the rest of it, to lead very strong lives. It is, uh, very personal... It's a very personal thing to have the vigil, but it's also a reminder to the rest of the world, how important it has been as part of our history of what's happened, and is still happening, and the fact on the focus needs to be there to help people living with HIV. So, in terms of the overall impact and message, it's really important for it to be there. It's really important to have days like the 1st of December when it's World AIDS Day.

So, allow— for more of this to be out there, maybe some of that stigma will start reducing, maybe by more HIV positive people out there saying, "We, despite the, maybe the shock or whatever it is of the condition, we're here, we're living strong lives."

[00:30:30]

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that in your work, you know you've worked with people living with HIV, could you say a little bit more about your work and what you do?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, I mentioned that in the last close to ten years I've done personal development coaching, and through one of the um... I met somebody when I went skiing, and at that stage I did not do any of this work, and he had been— he was HIV positive, and he had been working with disabled people, and people who were living with long-term conditions for quite a while. And he had worked with the

Elton John AIDS Foundation on a big project doing coaching. And I was really attracted to do something similar, and that's when, with him, we started the social enterprise, to not just do this kind of work, but you know, extend it to marginalised people in general.

So through that, I then got involved in two projects, with living— with people living with HIV, and the first one was telephone coaching, and the idea was that it reached people who would not get services quite readily, you know, they didn't live in big cities etcetera. So it was really good because the reach of it was country-wide, and it was people who might live in remote areas, and that wasn't just geared toward gay men, it was anybody with HIV. And that was really really rewarding, to me, because people had somebody to talk to, and they could explore what they could do. It's this feeling of isolation, partly because of your condition, and the fact that you couldn't, you didn't feel capable enough sometimes to carry on with your life, because you'd been knocked back so much by this. So to get people to really start thinking for themselves that they can do things, they can— they've got so many strengths, that's the basis of the coaching. That they can rely on, and get moving again. So those were mostly the outcomes, and that was really rewarding.

And then in more recent times, we worked with George House Trust on a project called "being positive", which was geared towards gay men, and there were the three of us from the social enterprise did quite a lot of face to face coaching, but also telephone coaching, towards, you know, what I talked about, the— some people talking about the burden of how they felt, and again, the results were really really good and positive in terms of self-awareness, self-respect, self-confidence, it's to do with reminders of that.

[00:34:28]

INTERVIEWER: Um—

PARTICIPANT: Sorry the other thing that was talked about a lot was the stigma again, what I mentioned earlier.

[00:34:33]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Mhm. How would people describe that, what kinds of experience did that involve for people? Protecting— obviously not naming people—

PARTICIPANT: No obviously not, but you know one of the things is— and we talk about this with a lot of the coaching that we do— is coming out, you know. It's quite often difficult enough if you're gay to come out as gay, and then to come out with something else on top of it, and how people might react to that. Will they reject you, will they— so it's exploring that kind of thing, and as to what would you gain by actually coming out, is it going to lessen the stigma that you're talking about? Who would you come out to, why would you come out to these people, what— So that's the kind of thing that they wanted to and needed to explore. And, you know, I remember one of the guys I worked with was bisexual and he didn't— he really felt that if he declared being HIV that a lot of people would not go anywhere near him.

So the exploration was then, well, what's beneath this way of thinking, but what's really important for you to share, and how? So that they, it's much less likely for them to respond badly to you, and it's all about safe sex, and how you really respect them, and that kind of thing. And it was really examining that.

[00:36:49]

INTERVIEWER: Ok. You mentioned two projects, so there was the telephone outreach kind of project, and—

PARTICIPANT: Yeah the second one was the George House Trust one, "being positive", yeah.

[00:37:01]

INTERVIEWER: Ok, yeah. What kind of impact do you think that work has? Like it sounds great.

PARTICIPANT: Well we always, we do questionnaires beforehand, and we do a questionnaire afterwards as well, and apart from people describing what impact it did have for them, we also kind of measure four or five things before and after. One of them is being self-confident, one of them is being, "how much more likely are you to feel at ease about sharing the situation?" The other things are more practical like financial situation, relationships. The other thing is relationships, so, for some people, it was so easy to just go into their shell, and this was an opportunity for them to get out of their shell with one person initially, i.e. the coach. But then also explore what it meant to open up a bit more.

So the impact was definitely measured and our reports actually show that. We were doing reports for these projects, as you have to for most projects, to show the impact of them. And there was a considerable rise in being more confident with yourself, there was considerable rises in being more open. And, also with certain people who concentrated on their life projects, just being more confident to pursue those projects, because they felt good. It's a— that's so important, if you're feeling more satisfied and good about things, then it's much more likely to go on and do things. So it, like a lot of coaching which applies to all sorts of people, underlying it is that, feeling alright about yourself. But this was— had a very definite kind of focus about where they were coming from. So, but, for people who are not that aware of how coaching works, is that, it's all about that person, so it's whatever they bring into the picture that counts. They direct it, they set the tone of what needs to be discussed, with a general background of what their lives— what's happening in their lives.

So, yeah. It's been very rewarding to be involved in those projects.

[00:40:12]

INTERVIEWER: Great. Ok, so we're coming toward the end of the interview now. I was just wondering if you could maybe reflect, maybe a personal reflection, looking back over the past 30 years or more, what changes you feel have been significant for you, or if there's been watershed moments for you, um, yeah.

PARTICIPANT: For me personally?

[00:40:50]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: Well I think for me personally the biggest thing is meeting my husband. [small laugh] Because he actually has helped me deal with... yeah. He has helped me deal with the sexuality side of me, as I said I didn't have many role models. The way he's my role model is he's very at ease with himself, and that was the biggest lesson to me, was to be myself. And being myself meant, very much, being at ease with my sexuality, eventually. I haven't talked about it much but it took me quite a while to really be at ease and open with my sexuality. So that then led on to me just being more myself. And it was a huge burden that I was carrying by not opening up. So that's a major impact that has been— that sort of authentic me, coming out. It's definitely... it's been life changing. And it has been a work in progress, but I would say that in my 50s, it's been the best, because I've just kind of become more and more and more... myself.

[00:42:41]

INTERVIEWER: Mhm. Ok. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish? Maybe something we haven't mentioned or covered?

PARTICIPANT: Um... I think, it's— well. When I think— just talking about the story, and remembering, you know in the mid-80s and now, in some ways, it's quite a short time. We've come a long way in terms of advances for sexual health, and I'm so pleased that they are there, because the picture was so different in those years to what it is now, and to have so many role models for a start, but also— in every way, you know, gay role models but also people living with HIV and, you know, role models by just living their lives fully. It's really, really good to see.

[00:43:58] End of transcript.