

Marc Robinson

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INTERVIEWER: I am Mark Robinson, I am 39 years of age, and I am from the North East of England, from a place called Billingham, but I've lived around. I've been a lot of places and done a lot of things. I joined the army when I was 16, which is probably one of the reasons why I ended up here, because I was kicked out of the army for being gay in 1997. In a roundabout way, I ended up all over the country, a few other countries as well, ended up in London, tried to volunteer for a charity round there, didn't really get anywhere with it, not going to name any names [inaudible mouthing of name] and then I ended up in Manchester for love. And then I had an argument with someone in a club about TV, of all things, and at the end of the argument I was told I was quite articulate, really, I'm not as thick as I sound, and I took that as a great compliment, and I found out they worked at a place called the Lesbian and Gay Foundation, and they thought that seeing as I can quite happily talk to anyone, had I ever thought about volunteering? And that was Christmas 2003 ish. And that is when a chap called Graham Robertson brought me into the fold. Yes. And so I moved to Manchester in 2004 eventually, but my first volunteering gig was in February 2004, doing the clinic as the clinic volunteer with Nurse Julie, at Basement sauna, four hours, 1-5 on a Sunday. It was very warm. Very very warm. And awkward. But hey, there we go. So yes, that is the potted history, right up until my first volunteering stint.

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INTERVIEWER: OK, great. So if I could take you back again, do you have... well there's a couple of things. Could you say a little bit more about your time in the army, if you're comfortable talking about that? And what led you to leaving.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. I can. I'm actually- we did- I still do 'we', even after leaving all this years- [the] LGBT Foundation, there was a magazine they used to do called Out North West, RIP, and we did a military Pride cover, and that with some... we talked to some people about their military experiences. And I ended up on the cover - yay! I think that was my first ever cover feature. Although I do appear in the background in certain covers, I'm hidden. But yeah yeah, I've got no problem talking about my military time. What do you want to know? [laughs]

[00:02:53]

INTERVIEWER: I don't know, for someone who has no idea about what it would be like... where were you sent, what were your... did you have mates, what were your colleagues like?

PARTICIPANT: I didn't really have friends. It's... I mean, you're thrown into these places and you get to know people for a very short space of time, before people always move on. But I joined, and I did all the testing and stuff, I got sent to Scotland for further testing, and did all this stuff, and ended up being a Royal Engineer. But when you sign up, they ask you the question, are you now or have you ever had sexual relations with someone of the same sex, either in the military, or

in general? And I answered the question honestly, and said, no I hadn't, because I'd been thinking these funny thoughts about other men, [but] I hadn't acted on them. So although I had my fingers and toes crossed at the time, when I said the answer, it was true, I hadn't done anything. So I joined the army totally legally. And... I had a couple of dalliances while I was in the army, but I was only in for just over two years before getting kicked out. And all that happened is, I had... I rubbed people up the wrong way. And the worst thing you can do to someone in the army, back then, if you wanted to get them into trouble, was to start a rumour that they were gay. And the people I was stationed with 42 Military Survey in Berkshire, of all places - I'd been a lot of other places then, but that's where the catalyst was - they started a rumour that I was gay. In the newspapers they used to have, "are you gay? bi? questioning? call this number 0890..." and they used to cut them out and stick them to my door, and stuff like that. They didn't realise how close to the mark they were. I mean, I totally was, I was a raging homo. And they didn't know. And I'd only just started to understand that myself.

But they had stuck them to my wall, and we were having an inspection, and I thought stuff it, I've had enough, I'm going to stand on inspection, have my room inspected with those on the door. And I stood there and waited. And you could see the guys on the opposite side of the corridor staring at me, like "take it down Robinson!" I'm like, no, I'm taking it down, I'm not taking it down at all. And just before the squadron sergeant major came round the corner to start inspecting, one of them stepped forward and ripped it off the door. Because they honestly didn't know, it was the worst thing you could do to someone to get them into trouble. They didn't- I didn't- we didn't- and that was the beginning of the end, those rumours.

There's other stuff, really, but it all ended up with me [sighs] going to the welfare officer at the time, Colonel Witten (retired) [?] and saying, sir, I'm a puff. [He said,] [posh voice] "Oh. Oh, well. Staff Robinson, take a seat." And I was sent home the same day. But not to jail. Because it was just... it was in the news a lot at that point about it. So in the old days, even a year before, I would have been put in jail first. But no, they sent me... they gave me a train ticket, sent me home, and then brought me back three weeks later for a fastball discharge, where you have to hand all your stuff in, and then leave. It was... an interesting chapter in my life. But yes, that was the military. There's more stories and stuff, but when it comes down to it, there's nothing juicy or salacious, because I didn't really get up to anything. I wish I had! I really do. [laughs]

[00:06:40]

[Break]

[Interviewer has a cough, and goes to get some water.]

[00:07:38]

INTERVIEWER: OK. So. Sorry about that. Can you tell me when you first heard of HIV or AIDS, or whatever it was called? Do you have a first memory of hearing about it?

PARTICIPANT: I... I mean, I was completely divorced from the idea of gays, never mind AIDS, as it was: it was just AIDS, AIDS AIDS, that's all we got in the eighties. But of course, it's the tombstone adverts, I just remember watching that on the telly. I remember... I was only 11, but it meant nothing to me; too young, and not relevant, I didn't think. I didn't understand what it was. And it's something that... my dad used to turn the TV over when those adverts came on. Might be something to do with the dance routine that me and my cousin Rachel made up, to George Michael's Freedom. Maybe my parents had a bit of a clue before I did. But, err. [laughs] Ah crap. If Rachel watches this, that'd be quite funny. But yeah, we didn't really talk about it. But looking back, I'm pretty certain that the parents knew. But yeah, it was... like, honestly, it just didn't really come into our world. I don't know, it was... it didn't seem relevant at the time. But then again I didn't really know anyone who was gay, at all, ever, until after I left the army, till I was 19.

[00:09:25]

INTERVIEWER: What was it like growing up in Billingham?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, it's... Billingham is just outside of Middlesbrough. There's a triangle of towns, Middlesbrough, Stockton and Billingham. And it was... it was the eighties, there were lots of strikes, lots of depression, lots of long periods of unemployment for my parents. It was not exactly a great time, but... I don't think it was for many times in the mid and early eighties. But you made do. I don't really think about back then much. I'm much more of a looking to the future kind of guy.

[00:10:19]

INTERVIEWER: Fair do's. So what was your first impression of Manchester when you came here?

PARTICIPANT: [laughs] I came here for a conference. I used to work for the DVLA. And I came for a worker's conference for... we had these things called meeters and greeters we brought in, and I was one of the first in the country, it was us and Leeds. And we had a conference for all of us, back when we had forty licensing officers, and we did it at the Britannia, just over there. And I snuck out of the event on the night, because I didn't want to hang around them lot – I was living in London at the time, so I was out, all that kind of thing. And I walked round the corner, I was looking like, where can I go, what can I do? And I saw a rainbow flag on this building, and I was like, what's this? [saying it slowly] Napoleon's. OK. And I went in Napoleon's. And I had a few drinks, and I pretty much fled after that, and I never came back to Manchester for a couple of years!

But that was a mis-start really, because then the next time I came up was for Europride in 2003, and that was awesome. I wore my gold wristband for about six weeks after that, I just kept it on the entire time. It's also where I met my now husband as well. He was the one of the police working there, and I lost my work's mobile phone, so I had to- there was a police pod, and so I went in and filled out the forms, and he filled out the forms, and I was like, hmm, you're not bad. And so I just then relentlessly pursued him until he said he'd go out with me about six weeks later.

So yes, mis-start the first time in Manchester, but the second time in Manchester was much better. But yeah, Europride was brilliant. And that was also the first time that I heard about the Lesbian and Gay Foundation, was in 2003.

[00:12:35]

INTERVIEWER: Had you ever thought about working in that area up until that point, or... what were you doing? You were at the DVLA in London as well-

PARTICIPANT: At that time, I was actually working for a train engineering company, a train building company. I was the modifications coordinator, sorting out anything that goes wrong on a train, getting it fixed and getting that fix put out across the fleet. So yeah, I've been around. And that was in Derby. I mean, [mock disgust] Derby. After London, and the hedonism that was London, that was horrible. I hated it. I just felt trapped, and I wanted to go somewhere quiet, and I liked rollercoasters. So I thought, I'll move next to Uttoxeter, because that's right next to Alton Towers. But they didn't have broadband. So I picked Derby and I just moved to Derby. And got a job there as an engineer's assistant, and then worked my way up. And then I was travelling from Derby to Manchester every other week to visit my then boyfriend. But yeah, so... it was like, London was just [vocalises an explosion] and Derby was [mock snores], and then Manchester was just right. It has big city sensibilities, but it's Northern-ish. It's almost North(!) So it was, everyone's friendly, and it just felt right. I liked the fact it was a city but you could walk quite easily from one side of the city to another. And I just thought, this is somewhere I could live. And so I did. I'm still here! That's after 13 years.

[00:14:30]

INTERVIEWER: So after you left the army, you obviously, in some senses had publicly identified yourself as gay, is that a term you'd use?

PARTICIPANT: Uh-huh.

[00:14:44]

INTERVIEWER: What... up until you joined the army you were saying you hadn't really acted on the impulse. I imagine in London maybe you did a little bit more?

PARTICIPANT: Oh yeah! [laughs] I exploded out of that closet. Exploded.

[00:15:06]

INTERVIEWER: So could you tell me a little bit about that, and how you... Basically this project is kind of also about how we navigate, negotiate, the kinds of intimacy that we want and stuff, and I guess I'm intrigued by, whether, at that time, say, you were, or not, really aware of safer sex messaging, or was that a factor in the kinds of sex or relationships you had, or not really at all?

PARTICIPANT: When I moved to London, eventually, I had actually had a boyfriend. He was a DJ. So we used to go out clubbing and all that kind of stuff. It was 1998,

yeah. So... It was awesome. And I loved it, I loved going to Trade, and RVT, Horse Meat, all the places. But some of the things that still went on there, because it's still... Paul used to try and hold my hand when we were on the tube and stuff [but] I don't like PDA and being all... I was so... I wasn't used to the fact that everyone was quite open about being gay, but you could only be open about being gay in certain parts of time, like Soho. But then you'd get get the old thing- [smiling] there were people still with hankies, doing hanky code, so I had to lean the hanky code when I moved to London! Because like I say, there were people still doing it.

And there were still people doing the whole, you'd walk past and they'd give you the eye as you're walking on the street, and then they'd do the 1, 2, 3 and turn, and then pull and off you go. I did that a few times. So that was a bit risky. There was... I mean, cottaging was a thing, that happened a lot, but it's not like you'd shag in toilets. So the safer sex thing wasn't a huge thing. But the one thing I do remember was, the message, seeing condoms, people... We were being told to use condoms. Safer sex was a thing, and it was Terrance Higgins Trust that were absolutely hammering that message home in London. And I used to see them out fundraising and stuff, they'd always be giving free condoms, getting tested - I used to get tested at my GP. So yeah. When I saw Terrance Higgins Trust, I saw the work they were doing, and when I lost my first friend to AIDS-related illness, I was like, there's got to be someone I can work with, someone I can help, volunteer with, and obviously Terrance Higgins Trust was the place I went to.

But it was really hard. I guess, obviously, it's the capital, and they were only small back then, and there's only, as I learned many years on, working for the LGF, now LGBT Foundation, you can only have - I mean, you could have all the volunteers in the world, but it's really hard to make positive use of those people. And so you've got to draw a line somewhere about how many people can help out in certain capacities. And I applied a few times to be a volunteer for the Terrance Higgins Trust, but it just didn't happen. Because I guess everyone wanted to volunteer at that time, it was a thing: everyone wanted to muck in, everyone wanted to help. We'd just had the Admiral Duncan bombing, and there were people being kicked to death on the South Bank, that kind of stuff. It was very raw, and people wanted to help out with local charities. And that was the only one I knew at that time. I didn't know there was anything else. I mean, there was a gay men's support group when I was just... I used to come home from... when I was in the army, I used to come up to Teesside, and there was MESMAC there. But that was more of a peer support group at that point. So we used to get together and just talk at a vicar's house, which was really strange. That didn't long. But anyway! So yeah, really for me the only people I saw actively doing work to raise awareness around HIV and make sure people were protecting themselves was the Terrance Higgins Trust, at the time. But obviously I'd never really been to Manchester yet.

[00:19:50]

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you had a friend who passed away. I'm just wondering if you'd feel OK talking a bit more about that, that process, or how that affected you.

PARTICIPANT: It... I mean, obviously, not using names or anything, it was... It was just weird, seeing someone that you know, someone full of life – I mean everyone's full of life, that's the whole point of being alive – but just watching someone fade away, fight fading away, and all because of something that is arguably preventable... people make mistakes. And those mistakes were costing lives. So all you could really do - because... we had an idea what was going on, but it wasn't - it was probably three or four months into a severe complication where they came out, because that's kind of what you do, isn't it? You come out as gay, and then you have to come out again as having HIV. And I think when they did that, they were expecting to be shunned or whatever, but... I don't know why people even think that. No, your true friends rally round. But there's really nothing much you can do. Just have as much fun as possible, and try and keep smiling. But... then, then you die. [laughs awkwardly] It's really hard to explain.

I mean, I was young, I was only... how old was I? I was 21 when I was witnessing this. And I'd seen death. I'd seen people die in some horrific ways in previous jobs, I think it's pretty obvious which one. But watching someone that I knew, and cared for, go out that way, wasn't that pleasant. But you've got to stay strong for them, it's just what you have to do. But... and then obviously I found out about how there's a whole support network, there's people helping people. There was Terrance Higgins Trust, Body Positive, places like that. I was like, well, there's got to be people out there that don't have those people to support them, or just to say hello. I don't drink hot drinks, so it's not like I can go for a cuppa- maybe hot chocolate, I don't know, I do hot chocolate. But it's just about spending time with people, and I wanted to volunteer just to be part of that. I don't like the idea of people being alone that way. And that wasn't the first person I lost- there was more after that, but... even right up until probably last... well, the last friend I lost of HIV related illness was... eight years ago? Yeah. So yeah, it's still happening. I still think about them.

[00:23:07]

INTERVIEWER: OK. So could you say a little bit more, we got to the point where you had met someone from the LGF, as it was then, and you were getting involved with the organisation. Did you start out by volunteering, is that right?

PARTICIPANT: Yes.

[00:23:27]

INTERVIEWER: Could you say a little bit more about that?

PARTICIPANT: My first volunteer stint was at Basement sauna with Nurse Julie cajoling the men that were in there to get tested. And then you wait three weeks, and come back in, and find out your results. But I got insanely proud of it, because you go around- and back then we had posters on the inside of every cubicle and things like that, and we had stuff everywhere, so you'd go round and make sure everything is up, that people hadn't been tearing things down, because people do – hooligans! And I was like, this is something to be insanely proud of, a service to deliver, like this. And I was like, I feel like I'm doing something. I mean, I was brought on primarily because I can talk a lot, to anyone. I get it from my dad I think, I

just... I can be quite bizarrely reserved and shy on certain things, but when it comes to walking up to someone and asking them questions about their sex life, I have no issue doing that. And it was off the back of that chat that I had in the club that I was called and asked to help out, because the volunteer had dropped out, and that was the beginning of that.

And then I found out about- obviously Out North West magazine, which I'd been reading, and then found out the person I was talking to was the editor of Out North West magazine, and he asked if I'd like to write for it, which was very cool. I was along for the photo shoot, so- oh, god, I'd forgotten that.

There was a photoshoot for the condom report, that was 2004, I think, I dunno. Might be up on the wall over there, dunno. The condom report was the first major investigation and survey into gay and bisexual men's activities and condom use in Greater Manchester. And we did a photoshoot for it. And that was fun. I made some friends that day. But the reason I'm smiling is, the safer sex packs, you've seen the safer sex packs? They're around. Not as around as much as I'd like, but then again it's not me delivering them anymore. But in the old days, we actually used to have a picture of an actual penis in the pack. So it would be a semi, and then hard, then put the condom on in the circles. And I was going to be... the cock! [laughing] It was going to be me. And I was there at the photoshoot to do it. And my boyfriend at the time, because we'd not been going out long - it might have been 2005 then - but yeah, not been going out long, and we were all up for it and everything, I don't mind, I was going to do it, and then at the last minute he just said, can you not do it? I was like, oh. OK. The packs have to go to print soon, but... I was like, OK, if this is what you want, I will not do it, I will not put my willy in the packs. So yeah, there was an emergency photoshoot done in someone's front room to fix that one later on. But yeah, that was, um... [laughs] crazy times. I just thought, why not? I was asked to do, and I thought, why not? It's just my body, it's just some bits. [smiling] It's particularly photogenic, so why not? [laughs] Oh dear. And I'd done porn, so I thought, why not? But no, my new boyfriend said no, so I said no. At the very last minute. Cos I brought him along to be a fluffer! [laughs] Oh dear. Yeah. That was fun.

But, while volunteering for the LGF, over the next couple of years, they actually had a job - someone went out and delivered Out North West magazines and condoms and lube boxes to people, and Out North West across the northwest - hence the name. And someone was paid to do that. Someone was actually paid to drive around, chat to people and convince them to take the stuff they we were giving out. Half the battle was getting people to find a place to put this free stuff. And I thought, I want that job. So I applied. I applied in early 2005, I think? Didn't get it. But that didn't put me off. I resolved that the person who got it, they wouldn't last. I knew they wouldn't, I gave them a year. So I thought, right, I'm going to start temping, I'm going to temp, and carry on volunteering the hell out of this. So I did. And then in early 2006, the person who was doing it at the time said, I've got a new job, it starts in a couple of days, so I'm leaving in two days. And I just happened to be in when that announcement was made. And I said, well I'm temping at the moment, if you want I could shadow and I could just carry on, if you want? We'll sort out a temporary contact, and I can apply for the job like anyone else applies for the job later on, but this is important, we can't let this drop, this job needs to be done. So I

insinuated my way in. So I shadowed that person the next two days and took over their job immediately. And then I applied for the job three months later, nearly didn't get it. Luckily there were two positions advertised and they decided to make the job bigger, so I scraped in, and then I was there until 2015. So yeah, it's a job I wanted. And I wasn't wishing the person any ill-will, I just thought, they're going to move on. They'll get bored. You know when you read a job description, and you think, that's me, that just describes me. It's written for me, why aren't I doing it? So I did it. [laughs]

[00:30:00]

INTERVIEWER: Could you say a little bit more about... so in your volunteer role and maybe in your paid role as well, you were going into saunas - what were people's responses when you... you know, you said, cajole people to get tested, and take safer sex packs, whatever. What kinds of responses did you encounter in those kinds of spaces from people?

PARTICIPANT: When I first started doing it, it was still surprising how- well, when I first started preaching the message, going into saunas and talking face to face with people to try and get them to sign up to get tested, there still felt like a lot of ignorance. But it's almost like, people knew what was going on but pretending, it'll never happen to me, so why should I care, I'm not really gay anyway. Or things like that. So I'd just have to turn on the charm 110% and talk to them. I'm pretty hard to resist when I'm on full flow. You need a certain kind of person to be able to go in and do that kind of thing. And even years on, talking to the people who took over that job and started doing it, because I moved on to different jobs within the organisation, and they'd say to me, well, you're just dead good at it, how do you do it? I said, I always get butterflies every single time I have to go up and talk to someone about their sexual health. Every single time, the first person I talk to, I always get butterflies in my stomach, every single time. But once I start, I can't stop. I'm just on fire. You've just got to be a certain kind of person to do that.

But yeah, you'd get people who would just point blank deny, or they'd pretend you weren't there - if you're talking to them, it's like hello? Hello? Hi! Trying to get them to talk, or... I remember Basement used to have a TV, so there'd be something on the TV. So you'd chat to them about- like on Saturday, they used to put the football on, because there'd be guys who'd said to their significant others, I'm going to go into town for the footy. And they weren't going into town for footie, they were going into town for sex. So they used to put it on, so they could at least know the score when they left! That was a genius stroke by Mr Steve Grey, the manager at the time. [laughs] So you'd start talking to them about football. I'd learnt a thing or two about my time in the army, used to talk about either girls or football, so I'd learn some stats and things, and I could talk the talk a bit. And I used to engage them on something and try and get them relaxed, and once you got them relaxed on a topic of conversation, you could tend to segue, sometimes subtly, sometimes really bluntly into, "so, when's the last time you got tested? Do you know we do this service?" And I'd just find a way in. But yeah, there was a couple of times when the person would just look through you. They'd pretend you weren't there. And they're the ones you want to get the most, really.

I loved it, I really enjoy just engaging and talking to people. Even... was it 2008, 2009? We were doing this pilot thing with the Council and the police, where we'd go down the canal at night, after midnight, just to see who's down there and talk to them about being safe while engaging in outdoor sex, cruising on the canal. It used to happen. But at the time there was a spate of people being pushed into the canal or being robbed, so it was a case of, I'm going to go down there, be visible, talk to people, hand out condom and lube packs, and just make sure people are aware of the risks with regard to safety – safer sex, but also personal safety too, because there were people being taken advantage of in that situation, because if you're down there and someone robs you, are you going to tell the police? No. Highly unlikely you are. So we were going down there to make sure people were aware of the techniques that people were using to rob, and that kind of thing. But it was funny sometimes, we'd come down one end, you'd see people scatter out the other end and stuff. Took a while, but after doing the programme for a few months, people got used to us hanging around down there and just chatting to people. That was a challenge. I did that a few times.

I used to go down there with my other half – that sounds wrong. My other half was the Village policeman. So I used to work with him. When we were in Princess House, we actually had a police office in Princess House, which was staffed by the Village policeman, and also the PCSOs were a new thing, and PCSOs used to come in and used to be based out there. So what was really cool about the LGF back then - I mean, I know that the police utilised the LGBT Foundation for talking to people in a safe space, taking statements, if people have had bad experiences. But it was pioneered at Princess House. And so people used to be taken in, they used to be talked to, and interviews were taken. Rather than taking them down the police station, which can be a bit impersonal. Even the witness suite, it's a bit cold, they could come into the LGF (at the time) and talk to a policeman.

We had a surgery every Thursday, 6-8, you could come in and talk to the police about anything. Which was really really cool. We also had a housing surgery back then too. But anyway. But yeah, that was the start of us really getting noticed as a safe space people could come to for advice.

[00:36:38]

INTERVIEWER: OK. I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about the changes. Because obviously then, you were at the LGF for about ten years, is that right?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah... I got my ten year certificate and badge, yeah, I did.

[00:37:00]

INTERVIEWER: Over that time, things like testing, kind of technologies I guess for safer sex, sexual health, have changed a little bit. And obviously more recently we've had PEP as well as quicker testing, fingerprick testing, and obviously we're coming up to, like, PrEP is going to be a thing. I was just wondering if you could, reflecting back, how does that impact your work, or affect sexual health?

PARTICIPANT: Well I mean, this job was my life. And you had to keep up on the technology as well, and you had to know what was going on and you had to know about the advances in medicine and testing and things, because especially in the job I was doing, you had to go out and talk to people. I ended up doing the website, social media, admin, crawling under tables doing cables one day, but then the next day I might be out at a fresher's fair in Penrith, or I might be at one in Stockport, or... It was just great, you'd be in different places. But you'd have to be able to talk knowledgeably about the technology or the testing that was available at the time. But yeah, when I first started, obviously, I started encouraging people to get tested, and that was when [it was] three weeks and you had come to the sauna and then come back to the sauna [for results]. A number of people didn't come back, so... it was a bit odd. But then by the time I left, we actually had same-day testing clinics, people were finding out their result in 20 minutes. It changed rapidly.

I remember having to do a promo video for self-testing kits. Oh god, my finger hurt for about a week, because you get this card, and it's got five circles on it, and you get something to prick your finger with, so you go [popping sound] like that, and I was like, [crying] I hate my own blood! And I'm being videoed doing it, so I've got to [be like], yeah, this is dead easy to do. And then you've got to colour in these circles with your blood, and I'm like, there's nothing coming out! [pained squeezing noises] And eventually I managed to colour in these five circles. My finger, it hurt for about a week, but I had to make it look dead easy! Obviously it's easy again now, but yeah, self-testing! When self-testing came in, that was just a revelation. You could order these kits and obviously, we were at the forefront – LGF / LGBT Foundation – at the forefront of pioneering this in the north of England. So yeah, it was cool.

[00:40:14]

INTERVIEWER: Could you just say that bit again, because I knocked the camera?

PARTICIPANT: [sharp intake of breath]

[00:40:16]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So self-testing... pioneering?

[Break]

[Interview interrupted by people outside the interview room.]

[00:40:53]

INTERVIEWER: Pioneering self-testing kits.

PARTICIPANT: Yes. I always get- because at the time, we were at LGF, so it's like, LGF, LGBT Foundation, LGF. Obviously, LGF became LGBT Foundation on the first of April 2015. So the LGF, as we knew at the time, we were pioneering self-testing kits. We actually ran the trial for Manchester. It was a huge undertaking. But the idea you could pop in and collect a kit, and then you could wander off, test yourself and send it in to the MRI, and then you get your results back by text, if you wanted it.

It's like, you get your results *texted*. [laughs] Or called, depending on the result. But just to go from three weeks in a dark dingy place to getting your results, to being able to be the boss of your own testing and your own results and finding out yourself, the empowerment that that gave gay and bisexual men, and men who have sex with men, to just be in control of your own status and know your own status, was brilliant.

And when I left the organisation, that's just when PrEP was coming to the forefront. We've been talking about PEP for a long time. We were, with the Community Health Partnership, with CHAPS, working with Terrance Higgins Trust. We were the partner in Greater Manchester, and pretty much the northwest, working with people in Blackpool, Body Positive Northwest, that kind of thing, on getting people's awareness about PEP, post-exposure pr- see I can't even say it. [slower] Post-exposure prophylaxis. So then when PrEP came along, understandably, people were a bit worried. It was like, what's the proof, where's the clinical guidance on this, what can we do? And I recall we actually didn't jump straight on what could be called the bandwagon, because we need more evidence on this. And we pushed for more evidence. And obviously, we know a lot more about it now than we did then. But PrEP is just incredible. A lot of my friends are on it, and to knowledge, they use it as well as, it's about being 100% safe. We've all been in that situation where we've been having sex, wearing a condom, and the condom has ripped. It does happen. And then there's the panic: well, did I come, or have I got any cuts, or any abrasions down there? Could there be any transfer across the blood barrier? Am I, could I have HIV? So off you go to A&E, [get] PEP, etc.

Now, again, taking control of your own status, and knowing your own status, with regular testing and also the ability to take PrEP. I can't believe, it's only been, what, since I started, 13 years, how far the technology has come. So hopefully it means no more people like me have had to watch their friends die. Hopefully that's a thing of the past now. That's what I hope. That it's a hope for everyone, not to have to go through what some of us have gone through in our lives, watching our friends die, waste away, in front of our face, from something that was preventable.

[00:44:55]

INTERVIEWER: You said you're a future person. How do you feel things are going to pan out in terms of, so we've got these new technologies, these new things coming in? How do you see things further down the line?

PARTICIPANT: Well, I'm aware of the campaign for no more cases of HIV, that the plan is to get rid of it in a generation with the tools that we have now. But we still can't be too complacent. I mean, I'm sure what everyone is hoping for, what I'm hoping for, is a cure, is something that will stop it in its tracks. It's inevitable, surely. But I just worry that- I don't want people to become complacent, and think, well we don't have to do much on the cure side of stuff now because we've got so many preventative measures. But no... yeah. Ending HIV in a generation is the goal. And that's going to be a mixture of things - it's going to be people using PrEP and it's going to be a cure. That's the future, it's not going to exist. It's going to be something that people make videos about, talking about- oh, do you remember HIV? People will be making videos about this in thirty years' time, talking about when HIV

was a thing. Because it's not going to be. Certainly in my lifetime, I will see it be stopped, without a doubt.

[00:46:37]

INTERVIEWER: OK. So we're just coming to the end of the interview now. Is there anything you'd like to add, anything you'd like to say, that we haven't covered?

PARTICIPANT: Oh god. I don't know. About what?

[00:46:55]

INTERVIEWER: Anything - this is your opportunity to say- you don't have to, you've covered quite a lot of ground.

PARTICIPANT: The one thing that I wanted to see more, and I want to see more of – we came up with this idea a few years back about, it's the Internet age. You see people sitting on a tram or on a bus looking at their phones constantly, watching videos on Facebook and stuff. So how do you engage with those people who have the attention span of a gnat? And we decided that if you can get a message across in 60 seconds, that people are more likely to watch that to the end, and maybe absorb – hopefully absorb – the message you're trying to give. And so were born the quickies, the sexual health quickies. Brilliant idea. And we had a sexual health coordinator at the time, Peter Boyle, who was brilliant in pushing for that, and securing the funding with the help of the rather lovely Rachel, who I believe is now Assistant Director at LGBT Foundation, but this is when she was a funding officer. And we managed to get some money for some equipment to start wandering around Manchester, taking videos. And those videos, we put up on YouTube, a people watched them, it was great! We were getting thousands and thousands of people watching sexual health information videos. Then Peter left and I did them. I did about thirteen of them. They were great fun. The messages are still relevant. Did we do one on PrEP? I don't remember, it's that long ago. But they're on YouTube, at youtube.com/lgbtfoundation, it's there. And it's such a good idea. And I would like to see LGBT Foundation revisit that. "Safer Sexual Health Messages in 60 Seconds" - it's digestible, and I just thought they were really relevant. And it's the kind of thing that, especially the younger generation - because I guess I'm the older generation now - it's something they could digest. Because, yeah, attention spans are terrible. But yeah, I loved what we did with the quickies. I thought that was ahead of its time, really.

[00:49:21]

INTERVIEWER: What kind of topics did you cover?

PARTICIPANT: Well, because it was for gay and bisexual men, we had to cover the bisexual side of things too, so when we're talking about HIV vectors of transmission, we had to mention breast milk, anal mucus, vaginal discharge. And we came up with this idea, there's a list of these ten things that HIV can be transmitted in, can be carried in. So we had this list of ten points, and we went to ten places in Manchester, and said these ten things. And it involved me popping out from behind

trees, standing in the middle of a busy place and just saying things like "anal mucus". And we had people walking past [do double takes], and I'm having to be completely, my usual energetic self to a camera. You'd just have people stopping dead.

We talked about poppers, and also the dangers that poppers can present. There was talk at the time about the newer version of poppers actually causing people issues with their sight. And it was about getting that information out. That was actually, I think it's still probably the most viewed quickie. A lot of people use poppers. But we filmed it at The Rock in Bury. But yeah, we didn't know, we just thought we were on the street, we didn't know that the street was the shopping centre, it's an outdoor shopping centre. So were filming with poppers in hand, and I'm doing my spiel to the camera, and there's these security guards just appear next to us. And you could see them looking at us, and [using their] radio, and they said, can we ask what you're doing? And we said, we're just doing a sexual health information short film for gay and bisexual men on the use of poppers. And their jaws just hit the floor; they'd never experienced anything like this. And they said, well, I'm afraid it's private property, you're going to have to move. And I'm the kind of person who'll go [dog barking noise] but Graham was like, no, just leave it, let's just go. So they escorted us to this line on the floor, this arbitrary line, and then they said, thank you, if you could go away. So we finished that quickie by making sure we were outside of that, but The Rock was in the shot... of every subsequent shot, The Rock is in the background. That was our revenge!

But I used to love it. Obviously it was... the condoms and lube scheme, CLDS for short, which I delivered for many, many, many years across Greater Manchester, obviously it was funded by Greater Manchester and so we got an opportunity to go to every single borough of Greater Manchester and film a quickie, which was brilliant. But that involved us driving along in a car, and I'm learning my lines, one line at a time in each place. And we'd jump out of the car, stand with something behind us with something that looks... like the pyramid in Stockport, or something like that, and then jump back in the car and drive around. It was brilliant! I think that they stopped me from doing it because I was having too much fun. Because when I was first asked to do it, it was known that being videoed and stuff was completely out of my comfort zone. And I started doing it and I was like, actually this is fun.

And – I'm a Doctor Who fan – the person who started them, Peter Boyle – a Doctor Who fan – we actually filmed a regeneration scene, which I'm hoping one day Graham will get round to editing and putting in the sound effects and everything, where Peter dies and regenerates and I jump up and I'm wearing Peter's clothes! They were very tight. And a sonic screwdriver [missed] [00:53:15] camera. And I'm hoping one day, I want Graham to actually edit that and release that. What I don't want him to release are all the bloopers from the quickies, because I made a lot of bloopers. But I know he's still got them all! He definitely still has every single edit. But yes, have a look at the quickies, you have to have a look at the quickies. They were awesome. And I want them back! Maybe they need a volunteer to front them.

[00:53:41] End of transcript.