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An activist's life continues

Interview by L. Charlene Vacon

There are things that touch us and change the conditions of our lives so greatly that we become changed people in the process of dealing with them. When Mary Ganong's husband, Reid, became HIV-positive, the couple found themselves in such a situation. It was often a difficult time that took much endurance and perseverance, qualities that Mary was not found wanting.

Through her experiences, Mary has become very active on AIDS issues in her community, and now volunteers with the Valley AIDS Concern Group. This warm, often fiery, woman invited me into her home to talk about some of these experiences. I asked Mary when they found out that Reid was HIV-positive.

"In March – No! December '85," she responds. "He received the blood in March after a triple bypass. A child died. And (the doctors) didn't know why. So, they performed an autopsy and found that this child was HIV-positive. Then they started to check back and found that the child had received a blood transfusion. They checked and found six people that had received part of that plasma."

"The donor was a regular donor. He thought he was doing a good thing. He was devastated! He didn't know he was HIV-positive. Can you imagine? All that at one time? And then we found out who had received the plasma. The doctor came up to the house and took blood from both of us and then we found out that Reid was positive. I was negative. I have had subsequent tests and I was still negative. Fortunately."

The news that Reid was HIV-positive was devastating. "Reid more than myself went into denial," Mary says. "He did not want to tell anyone. He was ashamed because of the situation that prevailed at that time – the Eric Smith situation, the way people reacted, the negative attitude. He, for some reason that wasn't his fault, was ashamed. I didn't tell our children for two years! He didn't want anyone to know. I told them without his permission. He was very angry with me."

"We didn't tell his sister; we didn't tell anyone. Now, I know that there were people in this area that would have been great support. But he didn't want to tell anyone. And I felt the same way. Look! We didn't know how people would react. I asked people, especially people with children, afterwards, 'How would you have reacted?' and they were honest enough to say, 'I don't know.' At that time there wasn't the education. It hadn't developed to the point that it's at now. Which isn't very far. Still, it was totally new. WE handled it ourselves. We got no counseling before. We got no counseling after."

I ask Mary about the Valley AIDS Concern Group and the kind of role it plays in supporting family, friends and people with AIDS themselves. While she is active in the group now, in 1991 when Reid died, they hadn't known about the group.

“We could have really used it previous to that,” she says. “You need someone that you can pour your heart out to... You don’t want them to tell you, ‘Oh, never mind! It’s going to be alright.’ You just want a hug.”

Mary describes herself as a “huggy person.” She says she and Reid found some of the health care workers were cold, making the situation worse. Yet, though some were cold, there were many people who were feeling, caring, and responsive. It was to these people that Reid and Mary would turn.

When Reid developed lymphoma, they met a naturopath. The prognosis with the cancer was grim. And with chemotherapy, they fully expected a number of side effects. But, “thanks to Lois Hare and thanks to Sue Robinson, a far-sighted individual – she gave us a print-out of the chemo that Reid was going to get. The printout was the chemo – the toxicity, what organs the chemo attacked. We brought that in to Lois. She took it home on the weekend and set Reid up with a regimen of vitamins and herbs and a diet that would counteract the toxicity. If it was going to attack the liver, there was something that would counteract it. He had no reactions during the chemo! He was never nauseous. He was never constipated. He didn’t have diarrhea. All these things that people have – he lost his hair – but he was never sick.”

The herbs, the special diet, the vitamins – all these things didn’t come cheaply. Mary says they “wrote out a real hefty amount every time.” What’s worse, she says, is that many people are denied this care because of cost. “We could afford it. Unfortunately, there are lots of people who can’t. It’s very expensive. Very expensive!”

Along with the wonderful and helpful people, Mary also talks about the people and organizations she encountered that were not so wonderful. When I ask her about the Red Cross, she holds nothing back.

“Very frankly, I blame the Red Cross more than I blame anyone else. They knew the process (for testing blood for HIV antibodies) was there. They should have said, ‘We’re not going to take any more blood until we get the testing.’ True?” she demands. I nod my head, thinking she’s right on. Mary explains why she thinks this took place. “My theory is: So? Big Deal! A bunch of gays will die. A bunch of drug users will die. Who cares? We’re better off without them. But they didn’t realize what they were doing.”

After Reid got the blood transfusion, and after they found out he was HIV-positive, they never heard from the Red Cross. Mary says, “The hospital – never heard from the hospital. Never heard from the surgeon. After Reid died, I got a letter from the hospital asking for funds!” Mary’s voice rises and she pauses, emphasizing this bizarre situation. “Well! I wrote back on the back of that letter everything that was in my heart. The way we were isolated, ignored. What were they scared of?? I wrote that this happened in their hospital. We got nothing from them. Oh, I really let it out! And I did get a letter of apology from the administrator saying that he was sorry and the last sentence gave me some hope. He said, ‘If this should ever happen again, I assure you we will handle it differently’.”

Mary continues, talking about the treatment from the surgeon in that same hospital. "When Reid was in the hospital, the resident was taking his record and he said, 'Who was the surgeon?' I was very vocal about the lack of support. The intern said he couldn't believe that this surgeon had never responded to Reid's situation. So, he saw the surgeon on the floor and he said, 'I have a patient of yours and his wife downstairs. Do you know what happened to them?' They never told him! He came downstairs with the tears running down... He took Reid's hand and my hand and said, 'I swear to you, I didn't know. You must have thought that I didn't care.' And I said, 'That's exactly what we thought.' He said, 'I thought I was giving him life. And I gave him death.' They never told him! Now that's six years. They were scared of malpractice I guess. I don't know."

I ask Mary if she feels that the latest compensation packages settles anything for her, and she returns to the theme of malpractice. "Frankly, I would prefer to have my husband back. How? How can they settle anything? The only thing that I wanted was acknowledgement. So, this is a way of acknowledging that malpractice was done. The same way as you sue someone in court. It's a way of acknowledging that they were wrong."

Mary was the second person to receive the N.S. Special Assistance Package. She says the only reason she got it as soon as she did was because she pushed for it. "I didn't just get the compensation sent to me. I pushed... I called a lawyer. I called Robbie Harrison, who sent a letter on my behalf. I sent a letter. I met the Minister (of Health). If I hadn't pushed, I'd probably still be waiting."

"You have to be obnoxious. You have to be an ogre in order to get things done. If you are nice and polite, and you say, 'they made a promise. They'll come through with it'... In the letter, I wrote, I said, 'I'm 77 years old, and I'd like to get this while I'm still around!'"

There is lots of advice and guidance to be taken from what Mary says and does. Indeed, one of the areas she works in now is education people, in schools, hospitals, and wherever she can, about AIDS. There are some things in particular that she wants people to learn from her situation:

"I want (people) not to be panicky or terrorized by the knowledge that (AIDS) exists, but to educate themselves as much as they can. Mostly the thing that I want is for people to throw off this terrible attitude of homophobia. I really believe that because of people's attitudes that finding a cure and going ahead on the whole AIDS thing has definitely suffered. There has been no support from the public. It is not a 'gay disease'. And even if it was a so-called 'gay disease', it deserves our attention and people deserve our support. I find that there is an awful lot, still, of homophobia. This bothers me terribly. When I do speak to the schools this is definitely brought up. People are people and they have to learn to accept. Having been... at the receiving end of discrimination, because I'm Jewish, I can appreciate to some extent. I can't appreciate it completely, but I have been at the brunt of discrimination. We don't have to do what other people do. We don't have to accept philosophies. We don't even have to like people. Just accept the fact that everyone is a human being and accept them for what they are. That is my philosophy. And that's the way I hope I live."



The Women of Wolfville dedicate their 2014 production to Mary Ganong - an inspiration to women of all shapes, sizes and ages. She not only took it all off for us - but GAVE it all to us as well.