



Positive Women

Support and advocacy for women living with HIV

Our Journey, establishing *Positive Women Victoria*

Speech given by Bev Greet, Chair and founder of Positive Women Victoria, at the My Journey Kit Launch, 21 May 2013.

Before I begin I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land of the Wurunjeri people of the Koolin nation, that we are gathered on today, the elders past and present.

My own journey living with HIV started in 1984. I was a primary school teacher with a three year old son in Melbourne, and I honestly thought I was the only women living with HIV in the world. I knew that gay men were living with HIV but not any other women. I searched to find other women like myself. I was told that there were other women living with HIV but we were such a diverse group that we wouldn't be able to gel as a group to support each other.

It would be another four years, not until 1988, before I met another woman living with HIV. We thought that there must be others that were feeling the same as we did, isolated, fearing the future and without access to any women's specific HIV information. So we set up a group, meeting in each others houses, and eventually this group grew with other women learning about us. However it was not until 1992, four years after the original group started, that we received any funding. Up until this point we had always been told that there weren't enough women to be able to justify funding, and we always thought 'well what is the magic number then?'

These were scary days. We were preparing for our funerals. We weren't having babies and the stigma and discrimination was rife. However establishing *Positive Women Victoria's* peer support program helped decrease the sense of isolation that we felt. While we were a diverse

bunch we were able to share information and stories to support each other in an extremely distressing time.

Funerals became a regular occurrence. Often AIDS would not even be mentioned. And then our thoughts would turn to '*well, who will be next?*' Over those years I made many friends and I still grieve for the courageous women who we have lost.

It is wonderful since successful treatments have emerged and *Positive Women Victoria* has experienced a bit of a 'baby boom', something once thought impossible... For myself, it has been nearly 30 years of living with HIV. I have been happily married for nearly 20 years and my son recently obtained a PhD in environmental science, and now I long to be a grandma!!

Today *Positive Women Victoria* is still the only independent organisation funded for women living with HIV, run by women for women, in Australia. Although the sense of urgency has lessened there is still a need for *Positive Women Victoria* to provide support, advocacy and share information on treatments with women living with HIV. Stigma and discrimination still exists in a very real way for women living with HIV. We are still a minority within a minority. And women continue to face discrimination within the HIV community itself. Our independence is as crucial today as it ever has been.

In concluding I wish to thank all of our supporters, those of you who have supported us, not only as individuals but as an organisation. In closing I would like us to take a minutes' silence to honor and remember those women who have gone before us.