

## **MICHELLE ROSS**

### WORKING FOR THT (TERENCE HIGGINS TRUST) ON THE HELPLINE AND THEN AS A COUNSELLOR FOR TRANS PEOPLE

#### **Extract 1: 5.46 – 7.59**

I was doing the helpline for 23 years, and I went, I became one of the lead trainers, and redeveloping the whole service around the helpline, erm, and I loved it, you know, people knew me for being on the helpline. And I also um, again three months into my being with THT, I ... they started developing a trans ... a training course, a therapeutic course for people interested in becoming counsellors and it was involving HIV and AIDS issues, sexuality, bereavement, and something else, I can't remember. I've still got that certificate. That was my first certificate, and it was presented to me after we completed the course. It was only a six month course. I think it was six months, and ... but it was, when I say only, it was like from the Friday night through to the Sunday evening, so it was really intensive over a whole weekend and erm, yes, it wasn't every week, it was once a month for six months. And there were assignments to do it and then I knew that I wanted to be a counsellor, and the main reason that I wanted to be a counsellor was so that I could work with people with HIV, and serodiscordant couples. Serodiscordant means where one partner has HIV and the other doesn't, and there were, especially in those days, lots of issues.

C: What's the first word? Sero?

M: Serodiscordant. S.E.R.O Serodiscordant. Yes, so yes, and that was mainly how I eventually trained as a couple counsellor, individual counsellor and I am still a counsellor. I don't see clients now, you know, but it's what I ... I love. You know? The therapeutic world is what I've been doing for so long and it's my passion. But my main passion is sexual health and HIV awareness and services and informed service, and these days I focus on trans people.

#### **Extract 2: 21.02 – 24.29**

### CO-FOUNDING CLINIQ, A SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICE FOR TRANS PEOPLE.

So anyway, so ... we started meeting to see what else ... what other interests we had, and what came out of that was we need a specialist service for trans people and sexual health and so Graham, Graham Reed who's the other co-founder of CliniQ, which is a service I co-founded with Graham, asked a group of young trans people, young trans queer people called Project Q to do a survey, and they did a survey and what came back from that was the experience of not just young people but people of all ages, trans people, and their experiences of accessing sexual health services and it was dire. We knew this anyway, but this was kind of to affirm and reach a broader group of people and have something that we could use to show, stats and people's experiences about accessing sexual health, and it was just terrible, and eventually, after having some more meetings, and then a colleague of mine at THT introduced us ... his name's Lee Brooker, and he introduced us to Dean Street, people

at 56, Dean Street in Soho, and they all wanted to do something for trans people but they didn't know what really, they thought maybe they could produce a leaflet or something, some information, and when we said "Well, how about providing a service?" They said "OK, we can provide a space, but it will only be about five till eight o'clock, that means everybody has to be out and gone by eight o'clock". So we went for it and we opened up the meetings that Graham and I were having to people at Dean Street, people at London Friend, people at Antidote and ... Galop to bring together a community really of people who were allies, or trans people, to see how we could put this service together.

And then I was asked to train all the nurses and doctors at Dean Street, over a three day period. So we did it, around these issues, around sexual health and HIV and all the issues and terminology and looking at what forms and looking at not just having binary forms. Binary means, when you, in these terms, if you think of male and female as being binary it doesn't really, it can't record other identities, of it's just a binary system, so you need to think of other identities within that.

Well, the NHS is a bugger! Can I swear? Anyway, for being very binary, you know, and so we kept the paper record things in CliniQ, really, and CliniQ as it's called, the Q is respecting project Q and the work they did on the service ... survey, and we've been running now for three and a half years, coming up to four years. We're an award winning service for enhancing patient dignity.

**Extract 3: 46.40 – 53.27.**

HIGH NUMBERS OF DEATHS OF TRANS PEOPLE. TRANS REMEMBRANCE DAY. APRIL ASHLEY. RAISING PEP AND PREP AWARENESS AMONGST TRANS PEOPLE.

I'd lived a chaotic life for a number of reasons which I won't go into, um, and I knew ... when I met my partner he helped me change my life, hugely. Massively. It was chaotic, and so I learned to be with him and just a few friends and obviously in Manchester we knew a lot – 'cos that's where we met, we knew a lot more people, and again, a lot of my young trans friends died. There's only one from that time. They died when they were young. My first friend when I was nineteen and no money for a burial. We buried her. We got money together as a group of trans people, about seven of us, to pay for her coffin and to pay for her burial ground and they wouldn't use her present name, even though she'd changed it by deed poll, they wouldn't use it. So on the coffin we had her name printed on the coffin, not the name she was given at birth.

So, you know, and, you know, and it followed really, a lot of people died, young. Yeah. Anyway, it was just a bit chaotic. And erm ... yeah. So when I met him, my partner, he ... he helped me change my life completely but I ... we became initially very much together. He was a student. I moved into student accommodation for a while and then he moved into my mum's house with me until we got our own place a few months later, and erm ... yeah, I'm kind of losing my train of thought.

C: Well no, I asked you about how trans people were treated generally.

M: Erm ... not well, really. I think that still happens today, you know there's trans day of remembrance and ... held annually and in that trans day of remembrance the names of all the trans people that were murdered are read out and it goes into the hundreds – hundreds, and that's not, obviously it's not just from the UK, only a few people that we know of in the UK are murdered. There's lot more that are beaten up or violence against, or verbal violence, but usually it's from around the world, and they're murdered because they're trans ... transwomen. Very few trans men are identified in this name reading, and it's huge really, and just today, just this day, there's on Facebook, in 2015, where a trans woman is being sent ... a transsexual trans woman is being sent to a male prison.

C: I saw that.

M: Yes. Exactly. And, you know, how can that be? The issues there are just huge. And you can't do that to someone who's got a gender recognition certificate, 'cos that would be illegal and um, so yeah, there's still issues that are different and you know a lot of people didn't even know about trans ... trans people, back in the day, and um, I remember in the papers when I was twelve, April Ashley, in ... this is in the '60s, was exposed in the papers. I remember reading that and I thought ... and I knew my identity as some ... I'm not sure what I knew about my identity, but I knew I wasn't male, whatever that means, and when I saw April Ashley in the papers, it just resonated with me ... hugely, and I knew then what I would do. It kind of crystallised something. So yeah, I mean I'm not far off 70 now. So, you know, that's a long life and ... well, I mean I'm three years off 70! So...

C: Jaw is still dropping! Really? No, I had no idea you were that age!

M: Well, I guess thinking about 1969 or 19...

C: I know, but ... crumbs, so you've seen ... quite a lot.

M: I've seen a lot over the various decades really.

C: Do you ... do you ever get weary or are you still very hopeful? Or a mixture?

M: I don't get weary ... in that way. I mean I must say that transitioning and gender care is not my passion. There's enough people into that and wanting to change and improve that. I'm interested in individuals, how it impacts on them. Like services in gender care. But I'm not campaigning for better gender care services. What I am campaigning and want is better awareness of all servicing especially around sexual health and HIV. And also in the community aware of PEP and PREP. You know PREP's not available in the UK yet. That means pre-exposure um, treatments so that people don't become HIV positive and PEP is Post Exposure so if somebody's been at risk of HIV they can get PEP. I've ... I talk about this at community groups and there's only one or two trans people have even heard of PEP which has been around for some time, some years. So there's just that basic awareness raising within the communities. *(Filling up)* And this is where my passion lies ... It just ... it drives my partner mad ... bit crazy 'cos you know I just can't ... I have a choice, I'm aware as a therapist but that's where it lies, that's where my driver is, you know, I owe a lot to people that died ... *(crying a little)* sorry ... and you know, I sometimes feel I never did enough, but

that's just my stuff. Don't know why I got upset, you know, I don't usually think about that very much, just go with the future.