

## **Busting Stigma through Storytelling for World AIDS Day**

### **“We Are Here” Project sheds light on the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS in Victoria**

VICTORIA, BC –While this year’s UNAIDS World AIDS Day theme, ‘Getting to Zero’, aims to achieve zero new HIV infections and zero AIDS deaths— it is the goal of getting to zero stigma that is often hardest to attain. Advancements in treatment and broader access to testing have made the first two ‘zero’ goals within reach on Vancouver Island. However, for a coalition of storytellers who are living with HIV in the capital region, stigma remains a harmful and dominant force.

“Stigma is widely recognized as the main issue facing people living with HIV today. Since the beginning of the epidemic, storytelling was and remains a way for PHA's to find their voice. Opening their hearts to the community, welcoming dialogue, and understanding takes courage. We are blessed with compassionate leaders who speak out!” says Claude Gamache, Chair of the Vancouver Island Persons Living with HIV/AIDS Society (VPWAS).

“In the past year two years, I have been verbally and physically assaulted because of my HIV status right here in Victoria” says Dawn Clouthier one of several people who set to present their stories to the public on **Monday, December 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Belfry Theatre for “We Are Here: An Evening of Storytelling” starting at 6:30pm.**

The event is cohosted by AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI), the Vancouver Island Persons Living with HIV/AIDS Society (VPWAS), the Victoria AIDS Resource and Community Service Society (VARCS) and the Greater Victoria Public Library.

“On December 2<sup>nd</sup> we are offering an evening to experience PHA's telling their unique stories through theatre, music, video, dialogue, acknowledging that storytelling through its varied modalities can offer understanding and an opportunity for healing” continues Gamache.

In addition to the event at the Belfry Theatre, there will be storyboards reflecting local stories on display at the downtown branch of the Greater Victoria Public Library starting on November 18. The boards will also be on display Bruce Hutchison Branch and the Juan de Fuca Branch. Visit the Greater Victoria Public Library for more information.

This is the second year of the “We Are Here” project which will also be posted online.

The Belfry Theatre is located at 1291 Gladstone Ave the “We Are Here: An Evening of Storytelling” is free to the public on Monday December 2<sup>nd</sup> starting at 6:30pm.

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Photo Ops: Board Chair of VPWAS, Executive Director of VPWAS, select storytellers of the *We Are Here* Project on December 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Belfry Theatre.

### **More info, images, interviews**

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