

Final Richard Hammer Transcript
12/14/20

Hello I'm Kathleen Kaan, and I'm Vanessa Corwin

VC: The CDC estimates that there are 37.9 million people worldwide living with HIV. Our guest Richard Hammer discusses how he copes with being HIV Positive and single during COVID.

VC: Welcome to the podcast.

RH: Thank you, Vanessa. Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this. I am HIV positive. I have been since 1986 and asymptomatic and doing very well.

VC: Glad to hear you're doing well. Being HIV positive during the Covid era, how does that affect your daily life, and do you have any difficulties obtaining the medical care and the medicines that you may need?

RH: The Covid situation and the HIV situation have never intersected. One has never gotten in the way of the other. I wake up every morning, I take my antivirals, and proceed with my day. I am very curious about one thing, which is, the antivirals that I'm taking. I've checked online to see if there have been any studies regarding my antivirals and if there are, if they work for Covid. I have not seen any studies whatsoever, which I find very interesting because I have not been exactly the – you know – I've only – I've been as safe as I can be. However, I've still been in what some would call risky situations and I'm having no problem. And, I'm wondering to myself, gee is there something in my antiretrovirals that is also helping to stave off the Covid virus?

VC: Well, that's certainly an unknown question. But what kind of behaviors have you been engaging in that -- that you consider risky?

RH: I've been to the movies, actually in a movie theater. I felt safe enough to go into the theater and see exactly what my experience would be. It was safe, they put in Plexiglas by the candy counter, so, I felt really safe doing it. However, they had a rule. And the rule is that you needed to, while you were watching the film, you needed to keep your mask on except if you had a beverage and a snack. So, of course, I bought popcorn and a diet Coke, and I sat there with my mask off with my friend who did the same next to me. The seating, the closest person in the theater was about six or seven seats away. I've also gone to Palm Springs several times, stayed in a resort, where you need to wear a mask going through the lobby. But once you check in no one's wearing a mask in the actual resort itself. And so those are things that might cause other people to be concerned. I have noticed something very interesting. My HIV friends and my HIV negative friends, these are two different groups of people. I find that the fear level of my negative friends is much greater. They are much more timid. In fact, two of my friends who are HIV negative, they're not coming out of the house. They told me point-blank.

They're in the house and they're living in tremendous fear. And I feel for them. It's just not a way that I can live right now.

KK: It's interesting, Richard, because I think you've already gone through that fear in 1986. I mean the whole world was afraid and didn't know a lot of things about how you contracted HIV. Do you see that similarity between, if you remember the fear you had so many years ago, and these people today? Do you sympathize?

RH: I'm not feeling tremendous empathy as I feel that I should. And the reason is, is that HIV was quite terrifying, and when I found out I was positive, I was sure, well back then, there was no cure, there was nothing. There was no medication. And so people would say, why even bother to get tested. However, things changed, and they said then, you know, it does matter if you get tested because there are drugs that are now coming out on the market. The way that translates over to the Covid thing is that this thing of testing, I have never been tested and I do not understand why I should get tested because there is no cure, there is no solution.

VC: Well, the idea behind getting tested is well, you know, not because there's a cure which there isn't, or treatment, which there really isn't, but the idea that you take serious steps not to spread it to others. So the risky behaviors, like going to the maskless resort, and stuff like that, becomes kind of a spreader activity where you might be spreading it to other people. Because that's I think the scary thing about this thing, is that you can be carrying the virus and you can be totally asymptomatic, and you can be fine, so that's the rationale behind the testing. The idea being that you hopefully will not spread it to others and you will be vigilant about wearing a mask.

RH: Other than the resort in Palm Springs, I'm actually very vigilant about wearing a mask. From the get-go I've always worn a mask every time I leave – I live in a 3 story apartment dwelling, a condo and I wear a mask when I walk out of my door. I don't go into the elevator without a mask. There are a lot of elderly people who live here. I'm very conscious about that.

KK: Let me ask you something. They're of course talking about a vaccine that seems to be happening not too long in the distant future. Would you, when everybody can take this vaccine shot, would you do it? Would you get vaccinated?

RH: Well, I'm not sure. And my reasoning for that is this. Number one, I have needle phobia. I'm terrified of needles. I don't even get a flu shot. I'm out cold.

VC/KK: Wow!

RH: I take good care of myself, and if I get the flu, I can get the flu. I feel like I've already been to death's door, and maybe that's given me a little bit of a cocky attitude. What's happening here is that there are two different Los Angeles. It is the constituency that the governor is speaking to and then there's the rest of us. When the Dodgers won the world series, and everybody ran out into the streets and went crazy, I did not. I stayed

home and watched “The Nanny.” (laughter) When the Lakers won the basketball pennant and all these fools rushed out into the streets, same thing, I did not go out. When Black Lives Matter was out there, I did not go out. I have not been out in any large crowd situation. And, when I say I’m not wearing a mask at the resort, well, I mean I’m talking about, I’m lying there by the pool and the next person might be three-four feet away. I’m not on him, so I’m not right on top of him, talking to him directly. So I felt very, very comfortable that way. Among my friends who are positive, I’ve had two friends that came down with Covid. It’s been nothing. It’s been two days, they felt lousy, and then they got better, and they were fine. I don’t have any personal experience having anyone in my life that has gone through what I see on television. It’s almost as if there are two different universes. And I think the mayor, and people say, drop everything, go inside and don’t move. I believe he’s speaking, yes in general, to everyone, but specifically to those who have been out there wandering around all the time. And, um, so that’s my take on it.

VC: Do you think that the media and the medical world are properly acknowledging the problems of people living with HIV during Covid?

RH: No. I don’t believe that anyone has talked about, has addressed anything to that specific group. However, I will say this, that the HIV situation now is that it isn’t a question of being more needy or needing any special instructions, it’s more a question of how it has affected the lifestyle of a single person. Please allow me to explain. I have two cousins who live not far away from me. They’re both married with grandchildren, children, and grandchildren. It is very normal for them to come home and have dinner and their wives and their family and see their grandkids. That is what they normally do, that is their life, Monday through Sunday. A single person, such as myself, is very different. It is critical that at my age, and I’m 69 years old, that I not isolate. That I get myself out as much as possible and that I socialize as much as possible. My two greatest goals over the past ten years have been my career, which I’m working on, and starting a new company. But the more important one is to develop a strong and large network of friends and social contacts because this is what keeps me alive. We’re just coming out of the summer now. The summer’s been a very, very important part of my life because every weekend there is a pool party. I belong to millions of different organizations. There are mixers, there are pool parties, everything is social and out there. This is a season when I really develop all of these new friends and contacts, and it’s very, very important and this has been taken away from me. I stayed home a lot and started getting so depressed. I started feeling suicidal. And I got to the point when I said, you know what, I’ll take the Covid. I would rather die than live like I’m living because I feel like I’m dead.

KK: Richard, you are talking to two single women that completely understand. The isolation is the worst thing.

RH: The isolation is the worst thing, and that’s why we’re never talked to, we’re talked at. I feel that everything’s about the family. And, people do not acknowledge that there are a lot of single people in the world, and it is a very, very difficult thing.

VC: It is, I think, just speaking for myself, I can say that my social life is on zoom these days.

RH: Yes, as is mine. However, I can only take so much zoom. And you know, it's a funny thing, I still need to have that in-person contact. It really means a lot. And the fact that, for example, when they shut down the LA restaurants, Pasadena decided to defy the order. Pasadena is only a 20-minute drive from here. And it's also in Los Angeles county. Their restaurants remained open. And so five of my friends, we all met in Pasadena and sat at the same table and ate dinner. Now they've got a new thing where if you do go out they want you to be on your honor system, you must be from the same household. A new schtick -- from the same household business. If it was up to them, I'd just be sitting here and I just can't do that. I've gotta survive this without hurting myself and without hurting anybody else.

KK: Richard, you're saying so many interesting things that other people have not brought up. I think we're afraid to say what you just said, as a single person.

VC: Indeed. I completely agree that single people are not really appropriately addressed, certainly by the media during this time. Now you're in LA and we're in New York. Do you think that LA takes the pandemic as seriously as, let's say the East Coast?

RH: I think people on the East coast take it more seriously, I really do. Then again it has a lot to do with your wonderful governor. When he speaks, I listen.

KK: Well, make it clear that when you're saying "he" you mean Governor Cuomo.

RH: I'm talking about my future ex-husband! (laughter) But Governor Cuomo is no-nonsense, he was knowledgeable, he spoke with an authoritative manner. I don't get that feeling from our governor out here, or certainly not from the mayor. I just get a lot of posturing and positioning and whining. Also, I find it very, very difficult when the governor divided all the counties and gave us all a color-coded system. So if your county was in the purple tier, that was the worst. And, I remember saying to all my friends, LA county will never get out of the purple tier, and it never did. However, 15 minutes away in Ventura County, they did get out of the purple tier. So their gyms opened up, indoor gyms, their theaters opened up, so that's why I went to the movies. So you see it's very, very easy, and the same thing in Orange County, even San Diego county was completely open. Even the bars were open. So it's very, very easy to, if you need to get your fix of the way things used to be, it's easy to get that because it's so readily available. I'm just not going to be sitting here into January living in fear waiting for the grim reaper.

VC: Yes, these are tough times all around and ...

RH: I know because I'm going against a lot of what I hear from people and it's very difficult, because my lifestyle, and it has nothing to do with being gay, or even HIV positive, but being single, and that isolation -- it's a killer. So what is going to kill me,

that, Covid, HIV, you know I'm willing to take my chances. I have a lot of friends that I have not seen in a long time and I will not see them until this is over, because they're too concerned with the fear of coming out of the house.

VC: I know, it seems to me that in fact, one of my doctors said this to me. She said, "you have to live your life, and it's up to each individual to comport themselves according to their own comfort level, whatever that may be."

RH: My motto is not to hurt anyone. Not to hurt anyone. I go to the supermarket every day because that's what I normally like to do. I don't buy – I don't go to Costco and buy five weeks' worth of things. For me, going to the supermarket is an adventure. I'm always masked up. I'm the one who's always walking down the halls asking people to please mask up, so I'm very conscientious, and yet I feel guilty because I'm trying to take care of myself at the same time. And the way I'm taking care of myself is not what's coming out of the mouth of the governor and the mayor or Zelda Gilroy.

KK: Did you tell everybody what Zelda was? You have to tell

RH: Well, allow me to say, Zelda Gilroy was a character on "The Many Loves of Dobbie Gillis" which was a 1950's TV sitcom.

V: We're going into classic TV here!

RH: Well, long story short, Zelda Gilroy was portrayed by an actress named Sheila James. Sheila James, after she finished her career as an actress, went into politics and became Sheila Kuhl, and she is a member of the LA city council.

KK: Zelda was like a weird character at best.

RH: Yes, and let me say this about classic TV, how I have been surviving is finding going back to my passion. I'm a historian, a television historian and I'm finding great comfort in going back to the classics. And so, I'm watching Ozzie and Harriet, The Life of Riley, I Married Joan, My Little Margie, everything I watched as a kid. And God bless YouTube, it's all on there.

VC: That's amazing, so that's one of the things that keeps you going during these times, isn't it?

RH: Very much so. Yes, and also as a single man I still have this crazy idea in my head, at the age of 69, I'm still going to meet the love of my life. And so what I've been doing is, I joined a group called Deeper Dating, Deeperdating.com. It was started by a gay therapist who lives in New York, wrote a book and it's about finding out what your core values are and your core gifts, and not about presenting yourself with stats, I'm 5'10", I look like this and that, but who you are really at your core. And I've been connecting and using this time to study myself, learn about myself, and put myself out

there in a whole new way. I've met people on line that I never would have met had there been no Covid.

VC: Fantastic! That's fantastic! Well, I guess you could say that a silver lining has come out of this experience.

RH: Yes, a silver lining. Very much so.

VC: So, any advice for those living with HIV during this time?

RH: The only advice I would give would be don't be reckless, but live your life and do what you've been doing, and to follow your passion whatever that is. My career has also been my passion which is why I'm starting a new company, and hopefully that will connect and take off.

KK: Just tell us a little bit about the new company.

RH: Sure. I've always been in the entertainment industry in television, and this will be Netflix meets Amazon, but it's all about the continent of Africa. I'm one of the founders of a cable network called "The African Channel" which has been on the air now since 2005 and it's on in New York and LA. I have not been involved with it personally in a while, however, with the original partners, founding partners, we decided to take that concept and do it Netflix style, internet delivery. And so, we're in the process of closing final funding, and that is really going to help me get through this. Because once I have my work to put myself into, things will be much better for me. I've got a lot of energy and a lot of zip and I want to channel that into doing something interesting and still contribute to the world.

KK: You're so terrific and we wish you so much luck on your new venture, Richard.

VC: So Richard, thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

RH: I hope I've been of help to your listeners and I hope I've had something valuable to share.