



# Positively Speaking

## A Podcast by Casey House

### Season 2, episode 2 - Immigrating to Canada with HIV

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[theme music]

**Liz Creal** [0:05]  
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background]

Welcome to Positively Speaking, the podcast that explores the experiences of people living with HIV. I'm your host, Liz Creal. I'm a social worker at Casey House. Positively Speaking is produced by Casey House, Canada's first and only specialty hospital with inpatient and outpatient care for people living with and at risk of HIV. The focus of this episode is on HIV and immigration. The three people you'll hear from all applied for refugee status in Canada. By Canadian law, this means that as refugee claimants, their HIV status is not considered a barrier to their application. People living with HIV are allowed to travel to Canada. However, HIV status is one factor considered by the Government of Canada when deciding if a person can stay in Canada for an extended period of time. This is not the case for people applying for visas to work or study in Canada. In these situations, because they will be eligible for publicly funded health care and social services, there's first an assessment of the financial demand they may place on these systems. Canadian law says that foreign nationals can be denied a visa or refused entry at the border if they might reasonably be expected to cause excessive demand on the Canadian healthcare system or social services. This type of exclusion is called medical inadmissibility. If you're living with HIV, and if you're already in the process of applying to live in Canada, you should seek appropriate legal advice. We've provided some further information on this in the Episode Notes. First step is Xica. Xica is a peer community worker who is originally from Honduras. Xica's journey started after recovering from a suicide attempt, which happened when she could no longer endure the stigma and bullying she experienced as a young trans woman. She only learned about her HIV status as a result of her medical screening in the immigration process to Canada.

[theme fades  
out]

**Xica** [2:05]

It was very early morning, I was coming out of a coma. And my mom, I heard I heard my mom crying. And one of the one of the things that I remember very well is when my mom asked me, "what can I do for you for you not to try to hurt yourself again"? And, you know, the first thing that came to my mind, not even something that I had thought before, was I said, I just I want to get out of here.

**Liz** [2:48]

As a young trans woman, Xica felt she didn't fit in or have the support of her family, aside from her mother. Leaving Honduras was not an easy choice to make. But it was the only choice she felt she had.

**Xica** [3:00]

My dad was so angry with me. He didn't even live with us. But one of the times that I saw him, he told me, "You are going to die of AIDS for

being who you are". And that was like, wow. That's the way you're going to help make me want to change? I'm going to die of AIDS? I mean, they just did the best they could do to try to protect me even though it's not the right approach it I see now that they were really just trying to protect me. And from there on it was trying to figure out where am I gonna go? What's gonna happen? Can I really, am I capable? Am I mature enough to be responsible for myself?

**Liz [3:54]** Realizing that her life was no longer tolerable, and concerned about her safety, Xica's mother helped her to escape from Honduras.

**Xica [4:05]** I learned English by myself, in my spare time because I was bullied so much. I didn't really have that many friends. So I was studying and studying and just a self learner. Because I realized that this is my chance to prepare for my life. It's like just learn, learn, learn, learn as much as you can. So by the time I was 16, I was working and I got a job as a receptionist in a hotel. Because this situation was bad. I was being bullied and harassed on the street. I have, specific people that belong in gangs, have these little gang there. So they have nothing to do but hang around where people pass by, when people go to work and people go to school. Every time I went to work or school they were there. I was harassed. Sometimes they would use violence. And it was like, it was really humiliating, very dehumanizing for me. So I just didn't like being in that particular part of the world. So, strangely enough, my mom decided to send me to New York, because my aunt lived there, and she was gonna be able to, like, you know, to look after me. Keep an eye on me. Help me out. Do all the things.

**Liz [5:22]** The stories of migrants escaping oppression, often focus on the drama of the escape and beyond. But before that, there are often months or years of complex challenges and risks, not least of which are the administrative logistics to try and secure the documents required to cross borders safely. Here Xica details the process of getting to her initial destination of New York.

**Xica [5:45]** I went through the visa process. They asked me for a one last document that I didn't bring. So they gave me two weeks to bring that document. And if everything was fine, that would give me the visa. And then like, a couple of days later 9/11 happened. And they closed all the embassies, then the US embassies for a few, for a while there. And, it was the attack in New York. And I'm like, I'm supposed to be going to New York. This is so horrible. And when I realized that they actually open-- reopened the embassy, and I had the document, and I was like, "oh my god, am I going to be able to get out of here?" Because they were apparently denying most visas to everybody because of the attack they had. So I was very surprised when they when they gave me a yes. And they gave me a visa.

**Liz [6:45]** Xica's stay in New York was short lived. She'd always felt that Canada would be a safer place for her and decided to take the risk and cross the border at Bellingham, Washington to claim refugee status.

**Xica [6:56]** I basically grabbed the, the next flight the next day in the morning. And I didn't tell my mom, because I felt like my mom would be too

nervous for me doing something like this. And I just left I just did it. And I said, "Well, if it doesn't work out, I'm gonna see my mom pretty soon". Because I will obviously get deported. So I went and took a shuttle to Canada US border. And I went there and I'm just like, "you know what, I'm just gonna, just gonna line up behind a car. And then and then just tell them my story. And see what happens." And I did that. I remember people seeing me from their cars. I was, there was a long line of cars passing going. And there I am walking with my luggage. And the first thing that the immigration officer said to me, when he saw me was like, "Well, that looks like a very expensive luggage to be discriminated against". And I don't know but that kind of bugged me a little bit. But I said, well, I turned around the luggage and I showed him the other side. And I said, "Well, there's a big hole and it's not that fancy". A huge hole that, the US, US customs made in my bag. They ruined it. And then he took me to this place inside the offices and they kept me there for six hours asking questions. They asked me why, how is it that I learned, that I knew English so well. And I just told them what the truth is, I learned it by myself. After a long period of time, I think I woke up at five o'clock in the morning, New York time, they finally led me through, at Western time, at midnight. And they led me to and they gave me this paper to be as a refugee claimant. And then I'm thinking to myself, what am I going to do now? So I just sat there. There was like a bathroom and it was locked. And I'm just sitting there, I'm just going to wait for a bus in the morning or something. That, heck of it. I started hitchhiking baby. I'm not going to stay here. A bear is going to come from behind me and I'm gonna be dead before I know. So I got a ride from a Good Samaritan.

Liz [9:17]

Six months after Xica arrived in Canada, Honduras was identified as a non-risk country by the Canadian government. Had she waited, her claim for refugee status would have been denied. Fortunately, she just got in under the wire. But there was another huge, completely unanticipated challenge that was thrown in our way.

Xica [9:37]

When they did the immigration medical exam, it came back positive. It was a big cloud over my sunshine. Because I was like, "oh my god, like everything was gonna happen now". I'm here. Things are going great. And then, and then my HIV status came back positive. And that put a huge cloud in my world. And I didn't have any hopes that I was going to be accepted at that point as a permanent resident or as a refugee, convention refugee. So it was, there was a lot of stress, trying to figure out what is it that I can do to prove them that I'm healthy and that I'm willing to, you know, work. Blah, blah, blah. But you just get, you just get very scared to get sent back. Especially with, with something like this. And then I started thinking to myself, I'm like, "How is this possible? I've only had one sexual partner at this point", which was, I had a boyfriend in Honduras, that I hadn't mentioned before. But he was also, it was a very another rocky relationship I had. And I kind of started dawning on me that I realized that I, I caught him cheating. And that was one of the reasons I kind of wanted to also to leave Honduras, and I got depressed. I was having problems with my, with my, with my boyfriend and my family, at my work. Everything combined, just like made me just lose my mind. And realizing I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, he gave me this". And it's just, I was just like a virgin

back in the day. And I just couldn't believe this was happening to me. It was so psych, so so, I was in denial, I just couldn't believe it, actually I, I don't deserve this.

**Liz** [11:36] Xica's story is an example of the complexity of issues faced by people forced to flee their country of origin. Adding to the immense stress of the refugee process, finding out she was HIV positive, of course, had an enormous impact. For many refugees, assimilating into a new culture, learning a new language, and finding housing and employment, are overwhelming experiences. Xica showed incredible courage and strength throughout her journey.

**Xica** [12:05] So I worked really hard to just try to give them a good impression of me. I was, I enrolled myself in as many employment services as I could. I started volunteering. I started just doing all the things I could do to make them look, make them feel like I was, you know, I was capable of doing things. And on my conference, my immigration meeting, it was great because I, It was very, you know I told them everything that I just told you. And I had a I had a boyfriend at that point, he also came with me to the hearing and gave a good word for me. The employment service wrote a beautiful letter for them, under my name. And then I was lucky enough to be, to have been accepted. So I'm very, I'm very grateful that everything went great and I was in. And, and you know, the struggles, it was more, it was not more about getting into the country now it was about more about my mental health. I felt lots of shame. And even though I realized that there was, it was more open, and it was, it was, I was in a safe place. Because, you know, number one place in the world for a HIV research was Vancouver at that point. But there was still that blockage in my head about being open about it, because of all the programming, all that stigma.

**Liz** [13:32] As a young trans woman, Xica was finally reaching a place where she could express herself more freely.

**Xica** [13:38] I started being more comfortable with who I. I found a job within like six months working in hotels again. And then I started finally experiencing what it's like to dress up as a girl freely and, and not care about what others think. There was definitely a change of scenery, a change of energy.

**Liz** [14:03] Xica struggled with her HIV diagnosis, not telling her close group of friends and waiting 10 years to start HIV medication. She was very fortunate that her health was not seriously compromised.

**Xica** [14:15] So I had to reinvent myself yet again. And try to find the courage to just be free, you know, from my own from my own mental prison. One time I remember, just I was excited, I was going to come out to my friends. And they had become my family, my chosen family that I felt like I was not, I was, I owe them something that really proved to me that they were there for me. And I thought well, in Honduras, when I told my friends about who I was it became an issue to most of them. So is this going to be an issue for my current friends? So it was like, Oh, I'm gonna have to risk it again. So I just decided to come out one more time. I have come out so many times in my life, baby. "I'm like,

What do you mean come out? I've always been out". But I feel like people just want you to come out. At some point I said to myself, I am not coming out anymore. I'm just gonna be myself shamelessly.

**Liz** [15:22]

[piano music]

Xica found her way to a rich and fulfilling life, living her authentic self, and not compromising on who she is. She's achieved this despite the many barriers in her path. Next, we'll hear from Ower who was born and raised in Venezuela. Ower has been living with HIV since 2000. He left his family and his career out of fear of persecution for his activism and advocacy related to access to HIV medication. He visited Canada a number of times prior to applying for refugee status in January of 2014. In Canada, he continued his advocacy and peer work, fighting for the rights of people living with HIV in his home country of Venezuela.

**Ower** [16:07]

When I received that diagnosis, at the same time, I wake something in me to advocate for other people, and I say, You know what, I'm gonna be very open about my HIV status, and also I'm a pansexual person, and I'm gonna be very open about my sexual orientation. So I can perhaps, raise my voice and also stand up for human rights for other people that unfortunately, wouldn't be able to talk about HIV or sexual orientation. So as soon as I started with this movement, it motivated me to study law. So I became a lawyer. And also I study community social work at the same university. So the careers were very connected. So I also graduated from that school. And it's those skill has helped me a lot here in Canada to provide service to other people living with HIV.

**Liz** [17:08]

In Venezuela, HIV medication is not as accessible as it is in Canada. In advocating for access to HIV medication Ower became a target and was forced to flee.

**Ower** [17:20]

I founded, along with a couple of friends, not for profit organizations, to advocate for human rights for people living with HIV. As well, is something that is, unfortunately still happen in many countries in Latin America that people, in order to get a job or get hired from a job, they have to go through medical examination. And we advocate a lot to remove those laws. But it still, unfortunately, is happening. This is contrary to the human rights, because the main source of support that people can get is from their jobs. And if you're not able to find a job just based, because, based on your HIV status this is violating your human rights. And I was also advocating for HIV medication. Because as I mentioned, in Venezuela things were changing, but not in a positive way. So we started having a shortage of HIV medication, like lack of HIV medication. And I was constantly on media like newspapers, television, a radio station, talking about that. In regimes, such as the one that we have in Venezuela, when we talk about human rights and advocating they put you in a spot. I was in a very vulnerable situation, I received a letter from the, something that is compared to the Crown Attorney for a hearing, because I was inciting into hatred. This is what they said. So this hearing was supposed to be on January 2014. And I was lucky that I already had my tickets. I used to come every year to Canada because I have family and friends here. So I came before living here. I came as a tourist four times. So you already had my ticket to come in January. So when I received the letter, I say,"

okay, so I have a ticket. I know that it's going to be the last time that I would be here in Venezuela”.

**Liz** [19:27]

Those who are left behind, we're not as fortunate. Ower reflects on some of his friends and fellow activists who are not able to leave Venezuela.

**Ower** [17:55]

I'm still in contact with some that they also escape or run away from Venezuela. Unfortunately, people that also received the letter for the hearing from other organizations, because they lived with HIV, they get trapped in the country like without a passport, to leave the country. Or with all those measures that they have to report every month - they got very sick. And they both passed away, unfortunately. One was in 2016 and the other in 2018. But I'm still in contact with other colleagues that are now in different countries in Chile, Colombia, even Brazil, a Panama. So basically all the activists, they had to start doing activism, to improve the Venezuelan people from abroad, because if they are in the country, they're going, they could end up being in jail, or they kill them. Because there's no human, they don't respect the human rights. So well, maybe you could see those information in the news. Sometimes they look like, I don't know, they like, a horror or a terrorist movie. But it's true. I have experienced that in person. So what you read basically doesn't show what people in Venezuela is living right now.

**Liz** [21:03]

As well as his continued efforts to support human rights in Venezuela, Ower dedicates much of his time supporting others who are HIV positive and who are new to Canada. He uses his own experiences to guide new immigrants through the complexity of Canadian laws and policies. Ower's story is an inspiring example of the power of turning one's harder and experience into a tool for change and community building. Ower was asked if you had a take home message for the audience.

**Ower** [21:30]

I know how difficult is to navigate the system, even for people born and raised here in Canada, so let alone for people that they don't know the language. But there is there is a hope, there is support available. So just look for the right organizations, and you're going to find the right path to fulfill and succeed here in Canada.

**Liz** [21:55]

Lastly, we'll hear from Miguel. Miguel is 30 years old, and is originally from Mexico. He was in his 20s, when he was diagnosed with HIV. He initially chose not to get treatment and became very ill after he arrived in Canada. Miguel was young and didn't believe he could get sick until he did.

**Miguel** [22:17]

So I was in my 20s and I fall sick. But I was feeling myself healthy, younger with a lot of energies. Perfect life, you know. And when I got the result from the test, I never believe in that I was sick. And nothing happened. And I never took the decision to get medication. And last year, I got really sick. I got AIDS. And I was very, very sick. I was close to pass away. I know that here, they're going to help me. And I came to Casey House for a long time to get help. And right now, I am born

again. I'm very grateful with Casey House. Because if Casey House don't exist, then otherwise, I don't know what happened with me.

**Liz [23:38]** Like many of us, Miguel took his own health for granted. Because of a lack of knowledge about HIV, he didn't consider seeing a doctor to monitor the progression of his HIV. Now Miguel recognizes the mistakes he made in ignoring his HIV infection. Had he started on ARV's early on and paid attention to his health, he could have avoided a long stay in hospital. Now he advocates for people to take their HIV diagnosis seriously, and seek medical help as soon as possible.

**Miguel [24:07]** And right now I am thinking by myself. And I know a lot of people listen this. I don't recommend please to think that you're never going to fall sick. Many questions coming for you like why me? I don't believe so. Me, I'm sick. No, no, you are sick. I know it's very hard. Well, I can speak right now like that, because I had a big experience. But please believe in the results that you get in all your life because it's true. Never mind if you're younger, please.

**Liz [24:53]** We are very fortunate in Canada and the HIV medications are readily available to most people who need them. Miguel reminds us that in many countries such as Mexico, access to HIV medication can be a huge challenge. And the stigma of being HIV positive is still very prevalent.

**Miguel [25:10]** The big problem is this society. Because in my country, it's very difficult to get a job. If you fall sick with HIV people point at you that you are like, "AIDS boys". When you fall sick, nobody help you. Nobody come in to ask, how are you? Your friends disappears, everybody disappears.

**Liz [25:42]** For many people arriving in Canada as an immigrant or refugee, not only brings them to safety, it also represents a fresh beginning allowing them to explore their identities in a completely different context. For Miguel, this new chapter began with the challenges of navigating the immigration system in Canada, and then becoming extremely ill shortly after he arrived. Thankfully, Miguel was able to access health care through a community health center, and then Casey House and slowly his health improved. Miguel considers himself to be extremely lucky. Experiencing such a serious health challenge changed him. And recognizing that he was able to take responsibility for his health and his own journey has really empowered him. He hopes that by sharing his experiences, he can prevent others from going through what he went through.

**Miguel [26:31]** If you are sick, please go the hospital or go to the any place that they help HIV people. And please get your treatment. Is very important, very important. I just want to be happy because in my last life, I all the time thinking in everybody, but never in me. And right now the most important person, it's me. My priority right now is Miguel.

**Liz [27:10]** An update since recording this interview. Miguel was granted refugee status and is in the process of applying for permanent residency. His health has improved and he reports that he's doing really well.

We've heard our three guests, Xica, Ower and Miguel share their experiences of establishing themselves far beyond their country of birth. We've listened to them describe difficult journeys they endured starting from the moment they were forced to recognize their community was not as inclusive or safe as they'd hoped. Their journeys are fueled by a wish to be visible, to be able to realize their potential and to live in a place where people support each other, no matter the circumstances of their lives. Ultimately, these are stories of hope, and how we all yearn to see ourselves reflected in the community we live in.

If you have any comments or questions about this episode, we'd love to hear from you. You can email us at [podcast@caseyhouse.ca](mailto:podcast@caseyhouse.ca). You can also visit our website at [caseyhouse.ca](http://caseyhouse.ca) for a transcript of this episode, a glossary of terms and links to other resources. This episode was written and produced by Andre Ceranto, Amanda Crawford and me Liz Creal. The music was composed and performed by Nick Nausbaum. Our sound engineer was David Matta. Also special thanks to Tony Boston, and Adam McKee for their creative input and support. Remember to subscribe to Positively Speaking on your favorite podcast platform.

Thanks for listening