



Positively Speaking

A Podcast by Casey House

Season 2, episode 3 – Xica’s journey as a trans woman

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[theme music]

Liz Creal [0:03]
[theme music continues in the background]

Welcome to Positively Speaking, a podcast that explores the experiences of people living with HIV. Positively Speaking is brought to you by Casey House, a specialty hospital in Toronto providing care to people living with and at risk of HIV. I’m your host Liz Creal. I’m a social worker at Casey House.

The focus of this episode is on the experience of being HIV positive, and living as a trans woman. While there are many definitions related to people who identify as trans, non binary or gender fluid, in this episode, we’ll refer to Xica as trans, a term that she’s chosen and is comfortable with.

And just a warning. This episode contains references to suicide, and other content that may be upsetting to some listeners. See the Episode notes for information about how to access supports.

Xica, who you might remember from our episode on HIV and immigration, is originally from Honduras, and her journey brought her to Canada as a refugee claimant 20 years ago. She only found out that she was HIV positive when she went through the immigration process. But before we hear from Xica we want to call your attention to important facts related to the challenges faced by many in the trans community. In 2019, a Trans Pulse Canada survey collected over 2,800 responses from trans and non-binary people aged 14 years or older and living in Canada. Here are some of the results from that survey. One in three reported that their primary health care provider had no knowledge about trans and non-binary health needs, and 59% were misgendered daily. One in three had considered suicide in the past year, and 64% reported avoiding three or more public spaces, such as public washrooms, schools and public transit, for fear of being harassed or outed. While arguably the acceptance and visibility of trans and non-binary people have shown recent improvement, compared with the general population, trans and non-binary people still have worse mental health, high rates of depression, suicidality and self harm behavior, among other concerns, and face ongoing harassment and discrimination. If you’re interested in learning more, including information about trans mental health, you can find links to resources in the Episode Notes. But now back to Xica. She can never felt like she was in the right body from the time she was very young.

[theme fades out]

Xica [2:35]

I grew up with three sisters, my mom and my aunt who was helping raising us. I totally believed I was a girl. So I just, my sisters, because they were older than me, they would, they would dress me up as a girl, when I was just like four or five. I remember, I started liking it so

much. And because I think they already saw in me that I was more like girly than a boy. And that's why they just thought, oh, this, let's put our old clothes on him. So that I would do it on my own when they were not around. And I would put like towels on my head and just like put it down and do like braids with a towel. And then I did that for as long as I can remember. And it was a house full of women because my dad left the house, maybe when I was five or four years old. And my mom asked dad to just get out. My dad was cheating on my mom. And my mom put up with him for so long until she didn't see any value in him anymore to be even our dad, to ask him to leave to not be in our lives. So next thing you know, there is no father figure anywhere. So when he left, it was peaceful at home. It was so nice. I mean, I can tell you that I had the most beautiful childhood and the worst of it. At the same time.

Liz [4:04] As Xica grew up, she started to face significant challenges, particularly in her hometown

Xica [4:09] When I was the happiest was when my mom would take us to see my grandma at her ranch, which was like three hours away from the city. And there on, I would just go and play with the horses, play with my cousins, and go to the river, take the cows to the river, hang from trees. And I did all these amazing things. But in the city, it was just like, I was just a bullied kid. You know? Some of the bullies were nice to me when we're just on our own. But in a group set-up it was always the bullies. And that's why I would even like just go and take the bus on my own to go see my grandma. But I remember by the time I was 12, 13, I was getting some seminars in school about sex. You're hitting your puberty, and you're like, what is going on? The whole thing was confusing to me. And by the time I went to high school and everything, I didn't have the vocabulary. I didn't know. I started hearing about gay people. I thought that being gay meant that you felt like a girl. And I was I ever wrong. I didn't, I didn't think I ever heard the word trans until I probably came to Canada. And I saw trans people down there, I saw trans people. And I so how oppressed and repressed they were. But I also thought to myself, I don't want to end up like them. I don't want to end up that sad and so so unsupported and poor. So it was like, okay, I need to fit in somehow. I was being bullied and harassed on the street. I have specific people that were belonging to gangs, have these little gangs there. So they had nothing to do but hang around, where people passed by when people go to work and people go to school. So every time I went to work or school, they were there. And sometimes they would use violence. And it was, it was like very humiliating. Very dehumanizing for me.

Liz [6:30] Desperate to fit in, the only place Xica felt she would be accepted and find community was within the Mormon Church, which she was familiar with. Unfortunately, the church was no different to what she experienced elsewhere, in that she was bullied and stigmatized.

Xica [6:45] So then I went back to the Mormon church, because once my dad left, we didn't go back to the Mormon church. And then I went back on my own, to try to find a community. To try to find like, good people, I

guess. And so I went to church. By that time, my, my uncle was a big, big leader in the Mormon church. And they received me with open arms. So at some point, the guy who was I felt like he was attracted to me, was being a bully to me at church. And he was so bad that I decided not to go to church anymore, because I didn't want to be like them.

Liz [7:27] When Xica realized the church was not the right place for her, she started exploring and meeting new people on her own. But this brought a whole new set of issues.

Xica [7:37] So I started meeting people, going to the gay bars. I was but by then I was like, almost going to university and like getting out and meeting new people, all kinds of people. And next thing you know, I'm a party girl. I went from church girl to party girl. socialite, oh, my gosh, it was crazy. But my family didn't take that very well. They're like, okay, okay, so you're gonna be gay, I guess. And you're gonna do this, you're gonna do that. And then I slowly saw the doors being closed on me.

Liz [8:18] Despite feeling that no one had her back, Xica kept moving forward on her own. This took enormous courage.

Xica [8:25] I was a very hard working girl, I was working in the morning as an English teacher. Going into like a telephone or international telephone operator in the afternoons. On my, on my dinner break, I would go to a French course. And then at night, I would DJ at the gay club. And I was, I was so tired. I was so tired. And , what am I doing? And then everybody's mad at me. No one's happy with me. So I started getting a bit depressed. At some point, my family came up to me. Just before I was coming out, I guess. I was working in a hotel. And I made a friend from the US, and he kept sending me letters. And my mom, they found the letters. So they're like, are you gay? I have like this intervention, all my sisters and my mom. Are you gay? And I'm like, oh my gosh. They went, they went into my private drawer. First of all, how rude! You know, when you're like confronted like that, and you just don't even know what to say because you don't even know what's really going on.

Liz [9:36] As a young person, Xica had experienced a complex childhood, not having her dad around her experiences at school, at church, and figuring out relationships and her sexual identity.

Xica [9:48] Anyways, as time went by and I started dating, dating a guy and it was crazy because then I started being like, openly gay I guess at work, here and there and you just like, you know the barriers just started building up, building up. And at some point , you, maybe before I was 20, I was already suicidal. My sisters at some point didn't want to move didn't want to live with me. They had converted to Gnosticism. And, they had another set of beliefs systems. That, they just didn't want to, We were fighting a lot. There were a lot of arguments. I would, I would fight by, like playing loud music and just being loud. I'm very good at that. But because I just don't like it when people are just shoving their values on me when I'm not even. I'm not hurting you. I'm not doing anything to you. I'm trying to live my life, you know. But no, it just didn't work out. They moved out. My grandmother passed away

shortly after. My mom, my mom was very sad. She asked him to move back in. They come back to me to tell me that they would do it only if I would just stop being who I was. And I said yes, for my mom's sake.

Liz [11:15] Xica was forced to give up who she was in order to please her family. And that had dangerous consequences. Xica recalls an experience she had in hospital after overdosing on Lorazepam.

Xica [11:27] I was waking up. And from I think I took Lorazepam, a bunch I stole from somebody. And I was waking up and I had, somebody's holding my hand and is praying. And it's one of the ladies from church and she's praying for me to die. "Take him, Lord, take him so I can see Him in heaven. Before she commits, he commits all the crimes, all the sins that gay people do." Right? And I'm just like, I was in shock. I was in total shock. I was like, Wow, I'm not gonna open my eyes. I'm gonna pretend I'm fainted again. Sleeping. Once my mum came in, I felt safe to open my eyes. And she was crying. And I said, I know. I know why you're crying. I said, "You don't have to blame yourself for what happened to me." And so we kind of made an agreement that everything was forgiven. So when she asked me, "What can I do for you not to try to hurt yourself again." And I said, get me out here. The first thing that came to my mind, now. I have not even ever thought about leaving home or leaving my country. And I said, "Get me out of here. I don't belong in this place." Maybe Spain, maybe the US? Somewhere. My family started reaching out. Because I think they realized that I was gone already. I was gone. And then if they didn't, if they didn't reach out, I wouldn't have. My sisters were uncomfortable with who I was. My dad was uncomfortable. Everybody was uncomfortable. I'm like what the heck, I'm just gonna, you know, just gonna have to be on my own. And that ,I felt like that was my destiny just to be on my own because of all the programming that that my family had in their, in their vision in their, in their concepts of the world. And just, I'm just gonna be on my own. And it's not their fault. It's just, it's sad that they, they let the program overcome the love that they had for me. It was all in me. There's another manipulation. I couldn't get a phone call, couldn't have a friend over let alone a boyfriend. Can't have music. Can't be out after 11pm I think it was. And then other things happened like that, that were just like, you know, I'm depressed. What's the point?

Liz [14:05] It was really hard for Xica to understand why people couldn't see beyond the labels they imposed on her

Xica [14:09] I was always nice. I was always very attentive to the people I cared about. Because I didn't want them to like just see me as somebody who's gay or trans or whatever. I didn't want that label on me. I wanted to be like, I'm a person. I can make you laugh. I can make you dinner. Or we can go for a walk. We can play. We can do all kinds of things. But no, people always focus on the things that they think are wrong with you. And oh my gosh, goodbye.

Liz [14:49] As mentioned in the episode on HIV and immigration, in order to move on with her life, Xica left Honduras and with the support of her mom, she made her way to New York City to stay with her aunt. This was not

long after 9/11. And Xica found it intolerable to remain in New York. So she decided to take her chances and apply for refugee status in Canada. She made it through that process, during which she learned for the first time about her HIV status. After periods in Vancouver and Montreal, Xica finally settled in Toronto, where she lives today. In Canada, Xica felt more accepted and comfortable in her own skin. And despite the numerous hurdles she had to face, Xica refused to let those experiences bring her down. Here she describes an experience during Pride in Toronto,

Xica [15:41]

I started being more comfortable with who I am. 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 not care about what others think. There was definitely a change of scenery, a change of energy. Pride Toronto just happened a couple of weeks ago, a month ago. And I had some friends visiting from Vancouver and I was so proud to like, show them how open minded the city is and how like, you know, avant garde it is and so forward and so organized when it comes to like. And we're at the park. And this man started yelling that I'm a disgusting human being. That, uh, that I'm a man in a dress or something like that. It was just so crazy. Right over here, Allan Gardens. But yeah, it was kinda like it takes away from your dignity, yelling at you in a park like that. And it's something that most people will not, will not experience. I'm just gonna go to the corner store and get something. And then as I'm just walking there, the next thing you know this guy's yelling at me, "Get the fuck away from me. You fucking tranny." I'm just like, Oh, well. Good day to you too. Oh my gosh, I mean, those things take away from your dignity. And those things and the, the passive aggressive ones too, when people are being nice to you, but they're, but they're also not being very nice to you. It's like, really is it because who I am? Because who I am is perfect. It's fabulous. And I love it. And it's not something that should be a problem for you. No, I'm not gonna give them that power. No more. Because I'm taking my power back.

Liz [17:46]

Given all of the hardships, Xica's resilience naturally had its limits. Her Journey to health was not without major setbacks. At one point, Xica spiraled. She lost everything and had to find the resources to regroup.

Xica [18:00]

At some point, I became a little pretentious. And then tried to kind of ignore, I bottled up everything without dealing with it. It just kept on going and going until the car crashed. Nobody gives you a manual. Nobody tells you had to deal with toxic people. And then sometimes, and then you become toxic. And then it just it just crazy. It's like, it's just like, it's like fire, fire and gas just like keeps going. I remember having, like the you know my mechanisms to kind of like deal with all the, all that bullshit. Excuse my word. was to, to build a wall. And just pretend to be a little bit stronger than how I felt inside. And next thing you know, I'm a bully. And then people start either respecting you, or disliking you, and letting you go because you started really hurting people that you love. It wasn't until I found myself at the transitional housing program at Fife House where I finally just had some time to regroup. Gather myself, gather all the pieces. And I started meeting these incredible people that gave me the support that I didn't realize

was out there. And I felt very humble. And I also felt really proud. Then, once my housing got stabilized, I started being offered to be a peer, a peer leader. And then I started taking all these all these courses and giving all these tools about how to deal with all the stress that has been bottled up.

Liz [20:04] After so many rejections and struggles, Xica remains strong and resilient. Now that she has her power back, Xica's able to reflect on those times with humor.

Xica [20:15] How many times have I gone on a date and the moment I say I'm a person living with HIV, and that's the end of the story. That's a deal breaker right there. Forget about getting educated on it. Nothing, it doesn't matter. It's, it's done. Or let alone when I'm like, "Yeah, I'm trans." And they're like, "What? Disgusting!" Gone! They're gone. And I'm like, "Well, really? Well, thanks, I guess I;m doing a good job." But there will be people, there will be amazing people that will just be normal to you, they'll just treat you as another human being.

Liz [21:00] For many years, the trans community has been invisible, and only recently is getting more recognition. In this episode we heard from Xica about the stigma and barriers she's experienced. We recognize this is one story. It's important to understand that most people in the trans community continue to face multiple barriers to health and equitable inclusion in Canadian society. They face harassment and discrimination with limited access to services and supports. Access to primary health care, including mental health services, is a huge and growing problem in Canada. For trans and gender diverse people, there are significant additional challenges to accessing gender affirming care. If you're interested in learning more, please search for your local trans community network or organization. Resources will be listed in the episode Notes. We asked Xica if there was a message she would like to share with the audience.

Xica [21:57] When you try to be somebody you're always going to be in a perpetual competition to be better than other people. And you'll also always end up being like, oh, there's better people than me, but oh, they're better than me. Oh, I'm just I'm just a trans person. Oh, I'm just a gay guy. Oh, I live with HIV. And then you end up victimizing yourself. Just be free. Just be you. Just, just be happy. Just make a choice to be happy for you, not for anybody else.

Liz [22:31] We'd like to offer our heartfelt thanks to Xica for sharing her story. While many will identify with her experiences and success, everyone's experience is unique. What is common to everyone is that the pathway forward involves major obstacles and challenges. And not everyone has access to the opportunities and resources that Xica was able to find. Like Xica, we look forward to the day when there are no barriers to being trans and where all of us are accepted and included equitably. And none of us are othered.

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. You can also visit our website at 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 McGee for their creative input and support. Remember to subscribe to positively speaking on your favorite podcast platform.

Thanks for listening.