



Positively Speaking

A Podcast by Casey House

Season 2, episode 6 – HIV and pets

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[theme music]

Liz Creal [0:05]
[theme music continues in the background]

Welcome to Positively Speaking, a podcast that explores the experiences of people living with HIV. I'm your host, Liz Creal. I'm a social worker at Casey House, a subacute specialty hospital in Toronto providing inpatient and outpatient care for people living with or at risk of HIV.

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But before we get started, a couple of comments about the importance of pets to our well being. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, studies have shown that the bond between people and their pets is linked to several health benefits, including decreased blood pressure, cholesterol levels and triglyceride levels and decreased feelings of loneliness, anxiety and symptoms of PTSD. Many of our clients at Casey House talk about the important role their pets play in their lives. And during the pandemic, their pets took on an even more important role.

[theme fades out]

First up is Alex. Alex is part of the Peer team at Casey House. Alex went through varying periods of severe illness before the advent of combination therapies in the 1990's led to a breakthrough in his health and life expectancy. Here he tells us about his HIV diagnosis and 40 year journey managing his illness.

Alex [1:54]

I became HIV positive 39 years ago going on 40. Lucky to be here. However in that timeframe I have certainly experienced a lot of things that as a long term survivor has been very challenging. When I was diagnosed back in 1983, of course, there were no medications. But I remember being told I had two years to live. And that I should get my affairs in order. And so I didn't have much hope at that point. By March 86, 96 rather, they started to come up with combination therapy. I was one of the first 20 people in Vancouver to be offered it. And so I was really blessed to, to have a another chance at healthy life

Liz [2:46]

As Alex's health stabilized, he was able to focus on work, on relationships and on other aspects of building a healthy and fulfilled life. Here he describes introducing a pet as part of that equation,

- Alex [2:59]** I entered into a long term relationship. And then at the same time I decided that it was it was a time in my life when I could actually take on a pet and add that to the mix. And so I ,back in 2006, I purchased a little Bichon and named him Flanders. He was 8 weeks old when I brought him home. And he was, he fit into the palm of my hand. I just remember so distinctly coming home with him in the car and, and he was so small and fragile and, and he became my child, essentially. So I, I fell in love with this little creature immediately. And he was many things to me. Ah, sort of a companion. He could be my conscience at times. He provided me with some solace when things got very sort of challenging at work and also my relationship as, as would be for a lot of people I think. But unconditional love, which of course doesn't come along in many ways. And certainly with a dog, you, you get that.
- Liz [4:18]** While a pet can fill the void of isolation, there's a lot to consider in taking on that responsibility. Alex understood the commitment that was necessary in getting a dog.
- Alex [4:28]** I think that's why when I got Flanders and I made that real, that solid decision to commit at that point. I also decided that I was going to give him the most amount of attention I could possibly give and to truly commit to his care. And as much as he could give to me I was going to give back. Flanders didn't expect much in return. He was just spoiled rotten. Because I worked such long hours initially and I felt that it was important that he had maximum socialization and I wanted him to be a happy dog. He had full time daycare. The only thing I didn't do was send him to college. If I were to come back as another being or another thing in the future, I would like to come back as my dog.
- Liz [5:20]** Along with the emotional commitment, Alex points out that having a pet also has financial implications.
- Alex [5:28]** What I would say is that there is a huge commitment financially as much as emotionally to having an animal and having a pet and whether it's a cat or a dog you have to remember that, that there will be visits to the vet which you may or may not be prepared for in terms of finance. So it's always important to know that you need to have some kind of safety net in place, whether it's insurance or something set aside for one of those days when you are really going to be desperate to keep that that animal alive.
- Liz [6:05]** Flanders was always there when Alex's health declined. After living such a long time with HIV and his health fluctuating Flander provided much needed motivation for Alex to keep going.
- Alex [6:17]** There was that coexistence that at times I don't think I would have survived without. you know he could be there when I wasn't feeling well, of course, and, and they just sense when you're not feeling well. And when your mood is not up, or when you just need some kind of reassurance that, you know, things aren't as bad as they appear.
- Liz [6:42]** Alex's story reminds us not to underestimate the importance and the value that a pet has in the lives of people living with HIV. At Casey

House, we've seen many instances where people have declined an inpatient admission, because they didn't have anyone to care for their pet.

- Alex** [6:58] Flanders has been, to me what a child would be to I guess a parent. Being a gay man I never anticipated having children. So this is as close as I'm every going to experience that. You know it's a daily kind of experience taking care of a dog and, and just that little creature depends on you for, for everything, essentially. So we were very much attached to one another.
- Liz** [7:27] For Alex Flanders was vital for his physical and emotional health.
- Alex** [7:32] From an emotional perspective, he provided me a certain, a sense that I was not alone, and that I could certainly continue to exist in a healthy manner. He gave me a reason to live at times when I really didn't see much purpose in getting out of bed. And if you don't have a partner, I truly believe that how you interact with that other creature can be incredibly beneficial to your, your overall health. And I have Flanders to thank for that. In the last 15 years he provided me that that solid basis to get up in the morning and want to live.
- Liz** [8:23] During the pandemic, while many people decided to get a pet. Sadly, Alex had to say goodbye to Flanders.
- Alex** [8:30] This has been a particularly difficult time during COVID. When I say goodbye to Flanders, and in January, you know, we were still in the COVID period. His sight had gone, his hearing had gone. And, and at that point, it was a difficult decision for me. Extremely difficult, um to say goodbye. And I resisted for quite a while. But I do find myself waking up in the middle of the night and I do find myself crying and, and um, it's hard to shake memories that that are difficult now because when you see your pet pass before you it's, it's not an easy memory to, to put in the back of your head, your mind. But that being said, all the wonderful memories certainly outweigh that. And um, yeah I just can't imagine not having him in my life.
- Liz** [9:35] An update on Alex. Early in 2023 Alex decided it was time to get another dog in his life. So he adopted Zero Goodman or Goodman and is happily getting to know his new companion.
- Kenneth** [10:44] My name is Kenneth. I am a Casey House client as well as I'm also a community member. I am about 62 years old and living with HIV for over 35 years. I also have a pet. His name is Olson and he is a standard poodle. He's brown in colour. And literally speaking he's more than just a pet or a dog for me. He is also a service dog because I am visually impaired and he is also my guide dog.
- Liz** [11:24] There are several organizations that train service dogs in Ontario. As of January 2023, Service Dogs Canada estimate that there are over 55,000 service dogs in Canada. And Kenneth has one of them.
- Kenneth** [11:38] I have Olsen for over five years. He came from a guide dog school in Ontario. It's called The Lions Foundation Dog Guide. So normally, when

a service dog is trained they usually give it to the handler, like myself, when they are two years old. When you apply to guide dog school, you fill an application with your health record, why you need a service dog. You need to have some sort of assurance from other nonprofit organizations such as Canadian National Institute for the Blind, or Balance for blind adults to certify that you are fully capable to have a service dog.

Liz [12:27] As previously mentioned, Kenneth went to the Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guide School. Olson is his third dog. And there's a reason that Kenneth has a poodle.

Kenneth [12:38] Most of the service dogs are Labrador, Golden Retriever. Sometime German Shepherd. But in Canada, their fading out German Shepherd as a service dog. I don't have a choice. But the reasons why they give a poodle for me because I do have mild asthma. Poodle, they are very smart. Too smart for their own goods, right, Knowing, they know that I am visually impaired. I can't see very well at all. So sometimes they just put their head into the table and slowly sneaking out and steal a couple bites of my muffins.

Liz [13:16] It's important to make the distinction between a dog that's a pet and a service dog. Kenneth reminds us of the difference.

Kenneth [13:24] If you happen to see a service dog - normally a service dog will have a leather harness or a metal harness. And if they are on the harness, they are working. The best way to treat, say for my dog Olson will be ignore him. Not even calling his name so you don't, won't distract him. But if he's off the harness, then he become a pet. Once he's on a harness, his whole personality change. He's a little bit more focus ,a little bit more, pay attention to me. But once he's off the harness, he's a different animal.

Liz [14:10] The trust that Kenneth needs to have in Olsen is vital.

Kenneth [14:14] I must say Olsen is very good to avoid obstacle as well as in terms of sound. I living in downtown Toronto. And there's a lot of constructions, you know, fixing the sidewalk. He will just sort of keep me safe. To gear out the sidewalk or walking, go through the construction site without any hesitation. I need to know the route. How many streets I have to cross over. Right? When I make a right, when I make a left, right. So normally as the service dog they will, when they get close to the curb, they will stop at the curb. Or if I knew that is intersection coming up I will say find the curb. And I will have to listen to the traffic myself. When I feel safe to cross, I will use the command say, "forward". If there is another obstacle or if somebody is standing in the middle of the sidewalk, he will slow down. Or they will make a judgment to see if they can pass by this obstacle or this pedestrian, without, it's safe for me and him to pass. So he will analyze or he was trained to make sure there is enough room for him, Olsen, to go through this obstacle.

Liz [15:43] As you've heard from Kenneth, Olsen's job is to help navigate Kenneth safely in public spaces. However, he's much more to Kenneth than a navigator.

- Kenneth [15:51]** I took him to the dog park twice a day. I will let him socialize and play with other dogs, maybe for half an hour to 45 minutes, depending on the weather, and give him a chance to meet with other dogs. Let him play with them, as long as I can keep him safe. Bear in mind that he's a service dog. So he play a big part of my life. But I also want him to be a dog. So he will play with other dog, he will find me a bench. And once I take, once he found me a park bench I will he sat me down, and it's an empty spot. And then I sat down and did I take him off the harness and he goes, he's gone. For maybe 10,15. He always check on me. One good thing about Olsen, he always check on me. When I bring him back at home, his harness is off. So he become a pet. Normally, he will chill out. He knows, oh I'm tired. He will chill out for maybe 45 minutes to an hour. Then I will feed him. If not feeding him. His routine is very predictable. Olsen is. Because when I feed him, after feeding him within 10 minutes he would go to his toy box to pick up toys and then bring the toys to me and asked me to play with him. So we play together, squeaky toys for maybe 10-15 minutes. Sometimes he will bring balls to me then asked me to throw and he, he will return it back to me. And I think Olson, between me and Olson the bonding is very good.
- Liz [17:36]** We asked Alex and Kenneth if they had a take home message for the audience. Here's what they had to say.
- Alex [17:43]** I truly believe that the benefits of having a pet, whether it's a dog or fish, or turtle or what have you, can really extend one's life or quality of life.
- Kenneth [18:00]** A lot of people are looking for a pet recently because of COVID. Because everybody's lonely. But I just want to send a message to anyone who wants to adopt a dog. You have to think about this. It's a huge commitment. It's not just in having a pet to keep the owners happy. But also you have to provide unconditional love.
- Liz [18:35]** Restrictions were eased and we invited interested clients to come to the courtyard at Casey House to introduce their pet and share something about them for this episode. Here's some of what they had to say.
- Jonathon [18:35]** My name is Johnson and my dog's name is Nikki. Nikki came into the room and looked at me and she said, "your mine." I chose her because she has a medical issues and I have medical issues as well. Though I wanted to give her a chance. Her nickname is Houdini. We fly from Fredericton to Ottawa. By the time we got to Ottawa she realized how do your fingers or nails out and unzip the dog carrier. So I'm half asleep and all of a sudden this head comes out of nowhere.
- Jeremy [19:21]** Hi I'm Jeremy. I miss my husband a lot. And I honestly think they keep me out of hospital because we when I when I lost him, I would get a lot of low ,so lonely that I would have suicidal thoughts. But the cats kept me ,they just kept me active and they kept me so that I wasn't, I wasn't alone. I think everyone should have a cat or a dog or an animal. I think it adds value to their life and, and time to their life.

- Norman [20:01]** My name is Norman and my dog is Apennine. She was three months old when I first saw her and she still had the one floppy year. And for a gay single man, my life is my dog. And she's been, she's been a wonderful joy.
- Judy [20:20]** I'm Judy and this is my dog Chanel. And I got her right after my mom passed away. And she was God sent. I quit smoking. I quit all my habits. I didn't want her inhaling the smoke. But I quit a lot of stuff because of my dog and because of my health. And she turned out to be a really good dog.
- Bruce [20:49]** My name is Bruce and this is my little baby Minnie, who is a sweetheart. And she has certainly added brightness to my life. Just having her there and her sweet little self and to be able to stroke her and massage calms me greatly. Everybody in the dog park loves Mini. Because she is a rare Chihuahua who barely barks at all. She is an amazing little dog.
- Tim [21:29]** Tim O'Reilly and my, my new baby is called Cashew. Now she is a Yorkie terrier. I've got cookie. I have Dolly. I have Teeny Weeny. They keep me going. It's like children, you know, because my children are all grown up. These guys are my children. Like I don't think of them as dogs. I love them. They give me, they make me feel alive. You know, instead of getting depressed, and that's the way I used to be, now I just like I gotta stick around for my kids.
- Jesse [22:03]** My name is Jess Morales. I'm from Costa Rica. I have the lucky guy in the world. I have two beautiful puppies. The name is Kino and Nico. They are Chihuahuas. I'd be honest with you I have, I get depressed when I get notice that I was HIV. Because I didn't know what kind of life I can have after that. But I get Kino And is my support. Is basically my baby, my life. And after all, one year later you know I was little sad. So I decided to get another one, Niko, and I'm not able to have a boyfriend because I have two boys. They make me feel my life
- Liz [23:35]** Thank you to Alex and Kenneth for sharing your stories and their unique relationship with their dogs. And also thanks to Jonathan, Jeremy, Norman, Tim, Judy, Bruce and Jesse for their courtyard comments about their pets. We would also like to extend our thanks to everybody who directly or indirectly contributed and supported this podcast. Thanks to Joanne Simon's, CEO of Casey House for believing in this project and who provided consistent support and confidence in our editorial choices. Also, thanks to Lisa McDonald and Rossen Lee for ensuring the podcast was made available and accessible to all. And thank you to our clients who were so generous and sharing their stories. We're proud to have been given the opportunity to have your voices front and centre in every episode. And also special gratitude and thanks to Eric and the other clients who we lost during the production of his podcast. Thank you.

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 Cernanto, Amanda Crawford and me Liz Creal. The music was composed and performed by Nick Nausbaum. Our sound engineer was David Matta. Also thanks to Adam McGee, Tony Boston and Federico Gutierrez for their creative input and support. Remember to subscribe to Positively Speaking on your favorite podcast platform.

Thanks for listening.