

# THE CONNECTION

THE NEWSLETTER OF REGIONAL HIV/AIDS CONNECTION

## Pat Brown: Living Positively

You know what? There's nothing negative about being HIV positive. I'm Pat Brown, 62 years old, and HIV-positive for over 24 years. But I refuse to be defined by that. It's the least of me and probably the most boring part.

Most of what I've accomplished in life has been done since I became positive. In that time, I've published

seventeen novels, sold maybe a dozen of my paintings and lived in a lot of different places. Circumstances put me at ground zero when AIDS first appeared in North America. I was very connected to the gay scene in LA from the early eighties and I lived through the fear, the rage, the loss of people I loved.

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Pat speaking at Red Scarf 2018

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## New HIV Cases in London-area Down Over 50% from 2016

In January, the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) reported 29 new HIV cases diagnosed in the London-area in 2018, down 52 per cent from a total of 61 new cases in 2016 (which was the highest rate MLHU has ever recorded).

This positive news for our community is credited to a strong outreach response serving people who use drugs, experience homelessness, and face a wide range of systemic factors that increase their risk for HIV and other sexually-transmitted blood-borne infections.

At RHAC, we are proud to make a significant impact in collaborations that have increased awareness and access to prevention and harm reduction. We are so grateful to work with the incredible community partners who support our mission and the health and wellness of those we serve.

Most of all, we are grateful to our clients for trusting us with their care and support.

ISSUE 1



Regional  
HIV/AIDS  
Connection

WINTER 2019

# Recognizing the Positive Impact of Harm Reduction

As we move into 2019, RHAC continues to work diligently to make a difference in the lives of individuals living with, at risk for and affected by HIV and Hepatitis C Virus (HCV). In 2018, the organization successfully delivered on the operational demands of a Temporary Overdose Prevention Site (TOPS). At the time of writing this piece, we received notice from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care that RHAC will be funded to continue this program as an interim Consumption and Treatment Service (CTS). The site—a partnership between RHAC, MLHU, and the collaboration of many partners—was selected as the recipient of the 2018 Pillar Award for Collaboration. Given the continued opposition we face, it was a truly powerful and affirming moment to experience a standing ovation from the approximately 1,000 community members in attendance. Additionally, we were thrilled to learn that TOPS was also selected as the recipient for the Ontario Public Health Association's 2018 Community Partner Award.

I am also pleased to acknowledge that our very own Sonja Burke, Director of Counterpoint Harm Reduction Services, received the Atlohsa Peace Award for "Bravery." The Atlohsa Peace Awards honour individuals and organizations who work tirelessly in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation and embody the Seven Sacred Teachings. Over

the last 6 years, Sonja has walked alongside Indigenous leaders and community members to help bring harm reduction services to communities in need. "It is important that we understand what Truth and Reconciliation is," says Sonja, "but more importantly it is putting our agency and individual commitment to action." RHAC has made a committed effort to meet with Indigenous community members, health providers, and leaders to learn about the needs of the community and traditional approaches to healthcare. "To be recognized for our work in harm reduction and our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation is a humbling experience."

In closing, I would like to express my profound appreciation to our service users, supporters, volunteers, donors, partners and funders for their continued support of, and belief in, the work of Regional HIV/AIDS Connection. RHAC will be reaching its 35-year milestone of service delivery in 2020. As I look back on the legacy of our contribution to the health and wellness of our community, the broader HIV/AIDS movement, and the many brilliant contributors (past and present) to our legacy, I remain humbled by the privilege of leading this organization.



Brian Lester, Executive Director



Pillar Community Innovation Awards, 2018

**TOPS**  
BY THE  
NUMBERS

**12,300**  
CLIENT  
VISITS

**72**  
OVERDOSES  
REVERSED

February 12, 2018—January 24, 2019

## Reaching the Regions

*RHAC is proud to serve its mission across Perth, Huron, Lambton, Elgin, Middlesex, and Oxford Counties.*

In October, RHAC reconvened with St. Joseph's Healthcare, LIHC, and the Huron County, Perth District, and Southwestern Health Units to discuss regional trends and strategies. One important outcome of this meeting was an agreed focus on new strategies to connect community members at-risk for HIV to prevention and harm reduction services.

Rural & Ethno-Cultural Sexual Health Outreach Coordinator, Sean Garcia, has been working to connect with members of the African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) communities involved in seasonal migrant work. "Approximately 17,000 migrant workers come to Ontario annually," says Sean. Migrant farm workers can be at increased risk for HIV due to: limited healthcare and prevention access, discrimination, social isolation, and other factors. With Sean's help, RHAC is actively addressing regional community concerns through outreach and education.



### Increasing Harm Reduction Access

Last fall, RHAC also expanded its regional reach with our new Oxford and Elgin County Mobile Outreach programs. Through a partnership with Southwestern Public Health and ADSTV, RHAC is helping to serve harm reduction needs in Oxford and Elgin counties by offering life-saving resources, including naloxone. On Facebook, our outreach pages have been able to alert clients about toxic fentanyl supplies—a warning that was shared on 84 profiles and reached over 5,000 people.

"Often individuals using substances in rural communities face stigma and barriers to access," says Chelsea Phelps, our Harm Reduction Support Worker. "The Mobile Outreach programs will hopefully be an opportunity to bring those services right to individuals—rather than making those individuals go to them. We have a great team of harm reduction workers, nurses and addictions counsellors, and our hope is that we can continue to expand harm reduction services and keep meeting people where they're at."

## Top 5 HIV and Hepatitis C Developments in 2018

*Amidst ongoing challenges, 2018 was also an encouraging year of progress for the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS and HCV. Explore more at: [www.catie.ca/en/top-10-hiv-and-hepatitis-c-stories-2018](http://www.catie.ca/en/top-10-hiv-and-hepatitis-c-stories-2018)*

- 1. Canada became the first government to endorse U=U:** the scientific statement that people living with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load cannot sexually transmit HIV.
- 2. An estimated 91% of HIV-positive Canadians on treatment achieved viral suppression,** meaning they can live longer and healthier lives without passing on the virus sexually.
- 3. New guidelines expand HCV testing recommendations** to include baby boomers (born 1945-1975).
- 4. Survey demonstrates a low to moderate knowledge of HIV and hepatitis C,** stigmatizing attitudes, and a low perception of risk amongst Canadians towards HIV and Hepatitis C.
- 5. Overdose Prevention Sites responded to the Opioid Crisis throughout the country** helping to prevent HIV and HCV transmission, reverse overdoses, and connect people who use drugs to supports and services.



## Preventing HIV with PrEP

*PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, is a pill that people who are HIV-negative can take daily to prevent HIV. We caught up with **Kody**, our Gay Men's HIV Prevention Worker, to learn more about RHAC's PrEP Clinic.*

### How did the PrEP Clinic get started at RHAC?

The PrEP Clinic is a partnership between RHAC and SpecialtyRx Solutions, a collaborative network of pharmacists and healthcare practitioners. SpecialtyRx's Canadian PrEP Lead, Mia Biondi, and I identified a need for PrEP access and partnered to create the PrEP Clinic at RHAC.

### Who is PrEP for?

PrEP is for anyone who is HIV-negative and wishes to use it to prevent HIV. Some people are at higher risk for HIV due to systemic barriers and may be more interested in PrEP. We see some clients who are single, who are in open relationships, or people in serodiscordant relationships (this is where one or more partners in the relationship is HIV-positive and one or more of the partners is HIV-negative). PrEP is an option for *anyone* who wants to explore this breakthrough in HIV prevention. We provide a sex positive, queer-and-trans-affirmative, anti-oppressive, anti-racist, feminist-informed space for our clients to explore their sexual health options.

### What does a regular visit to RHAC's PrEP Clinic look like?

Clients often remark on how seamless the process is. On their first visit, clients spend some time with both myself and our nurse practitioner, Mia, discussing their sexual health. We order preliminary bloodwork and a full screening for STIs. Once the results are in, Mia is able to write a PrEP prescription for those who are HIV-negative. The first prescription can be sent electronically to

SpecialtyRx's pharmacy, or clients can take it to a pharmacy of their choice. The medication is then mailed directly to the client, or they can mail it to RHAC where we dispense it on-site. We follow-up with clients before they finish their first month on PrEP, and every three months after, to provide on-going sexual health support and screenings.

**“We are not only preventing HIV, but we are also treating STIs, providing one-on-one support, and education about sexual health.”**

### How many people have used the PrEP clinic?

To date, over 30 clients.

### What coverage options are available for people interested in PrEP?

There are many coverage options (including but not limited to Ontario Drug Benefit, OHIP+, Ontario Works, ODSP, and private insurance plans) that our clinic can help clients to navigate.

### What impact has the PrEP Clinic made?

Seeing this clinic flourish has been a wonderful experience. We are not only preventing HIV, but we are also treating STIs, providing one-on-one support, and education about sexual health. We are developing meaningful connections with people who might otherwise not have received this kind of care.



**RHAC's PrEP Clinic is by appointment.** To make your appointment, contact us at [prep@hivaidconnection.ca](mailto:prep@hivaidconnection.ca) or call 519.434.1601 (ext. 250).

## Know HIV. No Stigma.

Red Scarf is a year-round movement bringing community together to raise awareness and end the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. Since 2012, our local community has handcrafted more than 9,000 red scarves in support of people living with, at-risk for, and affected by HIV/AIDS.

In 2018, we hosted 22 pop-up events across our local community, sharing the message of “Know HIV. No Stigma” to raise awareness around the positive progress made in treatment and prevention. The funds raised solely from red scarves and donations tallied \$17,937!

This year, Red Scarf featured Canadian reggae-rock band Bedouin Soundclash for our annual concert. Thank you to our presenting sponsor London's Best Rock FM96, and to Indiva for proudly supporting Red Scarf 2018! We would also like to acknowledge our regional partners, including the Huron, Lambton and Perth Health Units for their extraordinary contributions to our awareness campaign.

Most of all, thank you so much to our knitters and crocheters for making Red Scarf possible. We are so grateful for all the time and effort our local community has put into raising awareness and ending the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS.



Red Scarf 2018 at London Music Hall



## World AIDS Day 2018

*December 1st has marked World AIDS Day since 1988.*

On World AIDS Day, the Federal Government of Canada announced a new directive to help limit unjust prosecutions against people living with HIV. Canada also became the first country to sign the Undetectable=Untransmittable (U=U) endorsement, affirming that a person with an undetectable viral load cannot sexually transmit HIV.

RHAC marked World AIDS Day with our annual AIDS vigils in London and Stratford, our HIV testing and information event at United Kutz barbershop, a Red Scarf coffeehouse at Stratford's Revel café in partnership with Perth District Health Unit, and a pop-up event at Covent Garden Market to hand out

red scarves in honour of World AIDS Day.

From December 1st to 5th, RHAC observed Aboriginal AIDS Awareness Week in support of culturally-competent care, community-informed support, and safe treatment for all. Our community partners at Oneida Health Centre hosted a Red Scarf day, raising HIV/AIDS awareness and helping to reduce the stigma associated with HIV.

For 30 years, World AIDS Day has provided the opportunity to raise awareness, to show support for people living with HIV, and to remember and honour those we have lost. We are so thankful to the people we serve for trusting us with their care and support, and for the contributions they make to RHAC at every level. Thank you to everyone in our community for having the courage to do what is right and standing in solidarity for World AIDS Day.

## Pat Brown: Living Positively CONTINUED...

When I returned to Canada permanently in 2007, I found myself in a place I had never been before. Illness left me paralyzed from the chest down, totally dependent on other people for everything. I had to learn how to walk again, a very unnerving experience.

**“There is nothing negative about being HIV positive.”**

But something good came out of even that. I ended up at the John Gordon Home. Here I had my first introduction to London's AIDS Service Organization, at that time it was ACOL (the AIDS Committee of London). They wanted to help me. At that time, though, I wasn't really open to accepting anything but the most basic help from them. I've spent most of my life on my own, without a lot of real support in my life. I guess I didn't know what it looked like when it showed up.

ACOL became RHAC and I dipped my toe in the pool, attending the odd luncheon or conference. And I started interacting with both RHAC employees and volunteers. I've never met a friendlier group of people who seem to really care about what they were doing. I have to admit it took me a while to realize that these people were sincere—in my world people like this didn't exist.

I enjoyed being with them. They sincerely wanted good things for the clients they served, including me. Not only that but they respected me and encouraged me to participate in everything. But more than anything, they encouraged me to be the best I could be. To be open to using my strengths (some of which I didn't know I had) to help not only myself, but others.

Through RHAC I found I loved volunteering my time and in the last two years I have expanded my scope and made new, astonishing discoveries about myself. As a child growing up, I was pathologically shy. I would call in sick or quit activities if they meant any sort of public appearance.

But through the time I spent in the various groups RHAC ran, I began to overcome that. I was encouraged and supported in any participation I wanted to engage in so I did more and more. And *enjoyed* it. Then I was honored to be chosen to attend the OAN's Positive Leadership Development program because they thought I had the potential to be a peer leader, something I would never have believed of myself. I found myself accepting more and more responsibilities and looked for more I could do. I became the co-facilitator for the women's group, then the volunteer coordinator for Red Scarf. I applied for and got the peer coordinator position for the annual Women's Symposium where I also spoke.

And best of all, I was selected to train for the front desk reception position and now do that twice a week, or whenever they need someone to fill in. I love being the first face or voice people meet when they contact RHAC, whether it's to meet with our peer support workers or to use our facilities related to harm reduction. Most bizarre of all, I found a love of public speaking.

None of this would have been possible without the ongoing support of RHAC and all the wonderful staff. In fact, I've never held a job in my life I enjoyed as much as I enjoy the time I spend there. I joke sometimes that RHAC saved my life, but in many ways this is true. If they didn't save it, they certainly enriched it beyond anything I had ever hoped for.



**“Most of what I've accomplished in life has been done since I became positive. In that time, I've published seventeen novels, sold maybe a dozen of my paintings...”**

**Painting by Pat Brown**



## Women and HIV

Last fall, RHAC and Sisters of St. Joseph presented *Women's Bodies, Women's Lives*. The one-day wellness symposium welcomed guests to explore the art and science of self-care through art therapy, Indigenous healing, harm reduction, and HIV treatment. RHAC'S Women's HIV/AIDS Community Development Coordinator, Holly Taylor, explains that "the symposium is unique since it gives the opportunity for both service users and providers to learn more about women and HIV." When it comes to supporting women with HIV, Holly recommends that "the first step for women is to get tested. That puts us in a better position to reach people and connect them to the care they need. It's important that during testing, a diagnosis is supportive and informed and it facilitates access to care."

Women who experience intimate partner violence are less likely to access healthcare and social supports, placing them at increased risk for HIV. November 25<sup>th</sup> marked the first of 16 Days of Action to End



**RHAC staff at our Women's Symposium**

Violence against Women. "This campaign was an opportunity to address the different intersections that affect women with HIV. There are a number of different overlapping factors that contribute to stigma, affect access to healthcare, and contribute to isolation."

Every second week, Holly also goes to the Elgin-Middlesex Detention Centre to conduct workshops that cover everything from HIV basics, harm reduction, gender-based violence and overdose prevention.

## Gender Journeys

*RHAC's recent pilot of Gender Journeys supported Trans people through the social, physical, and emotional impacts of transitioning. Victor Feunekes is working to prove that this support is a much-needed service in our community.*

"From the beginning, a lot of community interest was buzzing around the potential for a group like Gender Journeys," says Victor.

Victor was familiar with facilitating Gender Journeys in the past at London Intercommunity Health Centre and saw an opportunity to bring it to clients at RHAC. "There are only a few visible programs and social supports for Trans people in our local community," explains Victor. Thanks to Gender Journeys, RHAC can provide a structured and guided group for people experiencing and considering transition. Something like this is important, says Victor, because it can help trans people maintain power over their own bodies. With accurate information and safe supports, Victor hopes that trans people in London can feel empowered and respected throughout their own personal journeys.

As a pilot project, Gender Journeys is working to prove itself as a much-needed service in the local

community. "People have been very interested in our sessions about hormones and surgeries," says Victor. "There is also a lot of discussion about coming out to your friends, to family, and to your children." The group sessions also explored topics such as hormones, transphobia, and dating.

**"The current climate is that trans people are generally underserved and not getting the support that they need."**

"I think that trans-specific services affirm that trans people are present and part of our community, with needs that we can serve. The current climate is that trans people are generally underserved and not getting the support that they need. This pilot was the right thing to do."



**Victor**

GBMSM and  
Youth Sexual Health  
Educator

# Save the Dates

Visit our events calendar: [hivaidsconnection.ca/events](http://hivaidsconnection.ca/events)

## **FEBRUARY**

### **Black History Month**

Find calendar of events at:  
[lcclc.org](http://lcclc.org)

## **FEBRUARY 7**

### **African, Caribbean and Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day**

[blackhivday.ca](http://blackhivday.ca)

## **FEBRUARY 21-22**

### **Opening Doors 2019**

Free for PHAs and family  
Windsor, Ontario  
[hivaidsconnection.ca/openingdoors](http://hivaidsconnection.ca/openingdoors)

## **APRIL 5-6**

### **Tachycardia**

In support of RHAC  
[tachy.schulichmeds.com](http://tachy.schulichmeds.com)

## **APRIL 25-27**

### **CANAC 27<sup>th</sup> Annual National Conference**

London, Ontario  
[canac.org](http://canac.org)

## **MAY 9**

### **Volunteer Orientation**

[hivaidsconnection.ca/volunteer](http://hivaidsconnection.ca/volunteer)



## **Where will you dine May 1?**

Dine at a participating restaurant on May 1 and **25% of sales will be donated** to client programs and services at RHAC.

For information, visit: [atasteforlife.org](http://atasteforlife.org)

# Thank You

RHAC would like to thank the following grantors and fundraisers for their support:

**TD Bank Group**

**Johansen-Larsen Foundation**

**Sisters of St. Joseph**

**Royal Imperial Sovereign Court of London**

**Indiva**

**Harrison Pensa**

**London Lawyers Feed the Hungry**

**Miss Shaneen – Why Drag? Show**

**Kevin Murphy – Community Ink**

**Toyota Manufacturing Canada**

**Dr. Pasquale Vecchio Optometry**

**The Bray Family**

**Dynacare**

# Connect with Us

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Social media: [@hivaidsconnect](https://twitter.com/hivaidsconnect)

**For staff listing:** [hivaidsconnection.ca/contact/staff-directory](http://hivaidsconnection.ca/contact/staff-directory)



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