

Bethany Zeiler
Narrator

Sam Aamot
Interviewer

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Open Book
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Bethany Zeiler -BZ
Sam Aamot -SA

SA: Can you just state your name and say you give me permission to record the interview?

BZ: Sure, my name is Bethany Zeiler and Sam has permission to record this interview.

SA: Thank you. Where ever you want to start just introduce yourself.

BZ: I go by Beth. I met Sue Purchase at Women With a Point so, so long ago. I was a heroin user and used the syringe exchange. I started volunteering there. Eventually she hired me as syringe exchange outreach. We were doing this thing with pharmacies where we were putting our exchange packs in pharmacies where people could buy them. That was just revolutionary. They didn't need a prescription. They were in very distinctive packaging. In theory that's supposed to cut down on shame. You go in, you get your stuff, you're doing the right thing you don't need to worry about it. I was the go-between between Women With a Point and the pharmacies. Some of it went really well, some of it didn't. I never even thought about doing anything like that before.

SA: So it didn't go well with the relationship with the pharmacies?

BZ: With the pharmacies, yeah. A few of them pulled it. They would find people using in the parking lot. They were uncomfortable. We put literature inside and we had our own newsletter. We were trying to do it very, very user friendly. There probably wasn't enough of a filter for the pharmacy. We were going out into Southdale and Cottage Grove and places where people who needed syringe exchange didn't have access to one.

SA: Because it's outside the city you're saying?

BZ: At that time, I have no idea what it's like now. Then it was just in Minneapolis, not even really St. Paul, just Minneapolis.

SA: This is in the 90s?

BZ: Yeah.

SA: Do you remember when you started volunteering?

BZ: What year? I don't. I'll have to try to trace it back.

SA: What were you doing when you started volunteering?

BZ: I was doing the syringe exchange. People would bring in their used stuff and I'd give them new ones and talk to them about being safe and harm reduction in general. What you can do if you want to stop using, great, if you don't how do you stay alive until something changes. It was really cool because at that point in my use I had no intention of stopping. I hadn't met anywhere that didn't force that. You just had to kind of jump through the hoops to get what you needed. Sue hired active junkies. It's crazy, absolutely crazy. Sometimes it worked sometimes it didn't. You didn't have to be a junkie to get fired.

SA: Were you actively using when you were working for her?

BZ: In the beginning yeah. I got on methadone and buprenorphine.

SA: What was that experience like? Did you go to a methadone clinic?

BZ: Oh yeah, you have to. I suppose you could buy it off the street. It's such a powerful drug which I suppose is kind of ironic. It's so long lasting. It's a very different kind of physical addiction. If you're going to go down that road you want a constant supply. Most insurance will cover it straight up but it's like thirteen dollars a day which when you're spending a couple hundred it's pretty easy to get. Then I went to a private clinic out in Burnsville. I had to get out there every day from Minneapolis. They were nice but not super friendly. They'd let the police come and arrest people because they knew they were going to be there. That's terrifying. We're all felons really whether we've been caught or not. We're trying to be better and this is your reward. If you pee dirty there was always repercussions. It was an all or nothing deal.

SA: Was Women With a Point the only place you knew about that was kind of doing this harm reduction?

BZ: Yeah. The Minnesota AIDS Project was doing their own thing too. They were more focused on disease rather than addiction right then. I think that's changed. It changed kind of as I was there. They did a really good job. HIV education in the Twin Cities is phenomenal. It's right at your fingertips. You get new groups of people and it seems so long ago now if you're twenty two it's a lifetime. It's a couple of lifetimes ago. People forget how scary that was. Harm reduction is such a radical shift in approach. You can apply it to anything, anything: balancing your checkbook, cleaning your house, working on your relationship with your significant other. Just take what you can do, celebrate it and go on to the next step. I love how simple it is and how effective.

SA: And how anyone can do it.

BZ: Yes, with no tools. You don't have to read a whole book. I got to go all around the country. There was harm reduction conferences in Miami and Chicago and somewhere in Oregon. I got to meet a whole new group of people from all over the United States. They're still out there doing it. The one, I can't remember the name of it now, there's this big old syringe exchange in Chicago that's just been doing amazing work for a long time. They've gotten hit hard. It's a bigger city and the drugs kind of shoot up north and come back through Chicago. There's been a lot of death there this time around.

SA: When were you there?

BZ: In Chicago?

SA: You were just there for a conference.

BZ: Yeah, I never lived there.

SA: What do you do now?

BZ: I walk dog for a living right now. It is what it is. I like my guys.

SA: You kind of got out of harm reduction?

BZ: It closed, Women With a Point closed or Access Works closed. I had actually left before then. The funding for the HIV project was cut and that was supporting everything else. I don't think we ever expected it to be cut and it really just decimated it. Suddenly we could only afford two and a half people to do everything.

SA: The state cut it?

BZ: That was federal, that was a federal grant. That was probably right around 2000, '98 or 2000. It was just HIV was on the decline. We weren't reaching enough positive people who didn't know they were positive. That's not really what we were about. We hadn't figured out a way to get money.

SA: That's what was getting money.

BZ: Exactly, it was floating everything. First of all it's hard to get money to support actively using people to begin with and then to get money to keep the lights on. To ask for money so that I can get paid to do this is very difficult. After Sue left we just kind of lost our...The next woman who came on was great and she worked so hard. She was doing three different people's jobs. There's something about Sue. She's really charismatic; she makes you believe that you can do it even when you fail miserably. You just try again.

SA: She sounds like she really had a huge impact on the whole thing but also you.

BZ: Yeah. Oh a lot of people. Office culture will emulate the leader. She is always very compassionate, very up front, she's the first one in line to get up and shake somebody's hand, "What's your name?" You just emulate that.

SA: Anything left you'd like to say before we wrap up?

BZ: No, I don't think so. I wish it could have gone on longer. I wish I could have stayed involved more. I'm really glad that you guys are doing this.

SA: Thank you so much for coming.

[End of Recording]