

Spring Cleaning

We all have it in one form or another—the stuff we hold on to that we don't really need, that no longer serves us well. The clutter, the cobwebs, the clothes! Chatty CATIE asked four PHAs what they plan on clearing out of their physical and spiritual closets this spring.

INTERVIEWS BY RONNILYN PUSTIL

SCOTT GARY MAJOR, 38

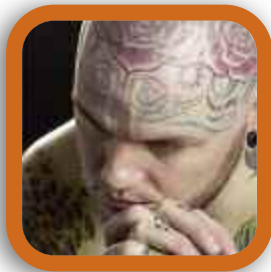
Toronto

Diagnosed with HIV in 1997

CD4 count: 720

Viral load: undetectable

I actually started doing my spring cleaning in December. I'm getting a divorce, and in the process of moving out I basically decided that nothing that was "ours" would be "mine." I thought it would be too difficult to take things with me that were part



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of the last 10 years of our life together into my new life as a single person. So when I moved, I took everything that was strictly mine: clothes and some artwork, no furniture and no crap. I'd been amassing stuff that was perfect for our married life but not necessary for life outside of the marriage. It's just stuff, I don't need it and it's all replaceable, so what's the point?

This past year I also started taking care of myself more, going to the gym and eating better. I ended up dropping about 40 pounds, which has made me feel healthier and better about myself. I haven't had any serious health issues in the past 12 years and I've been very lucky with my HIV medications. I wanted to help my body along by taking better care of it.

I believe that everything happens for a reason, and the end of our marriage is going to be better for both of us. It will allow me to progress in my life and do things that I wouldn't have done because I'd become sedentary and didn't look beyond my marriage. I realized over the past couple of years that I was just letting everything happen around me.

Now I'm going to do what I want: travel more, enjoy life more, ride my bike more. I've never let HIV get in the way and I'm not going to now.

Having HIV is just a part of who I am, it's not *who* I am—just like I'm gay, I'm male, I'm tattooed, but those things don't define me. If you let something like HIV rule you, you can't survive it. If this disease is going to take me, it's going to take me, but I'm going to live a life I'm happy with.

AL McNUTT, 59

Truro, Nova Scotia

Diagnosed with HIV in 1987

CD4 count: 270

Viral load: undetectable

To clean out my physical closet, I would like to give away all the clothes that no longer fit me properly. As we all know, HIV meds often cause body changes, such as lipodystrophy or lipoa-trophy. I have fat accumulation around my waist and chest area.



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Sometimes I like to think that it's not the medication—it's just the fact that I'm 59 and it happens to the best of us. But I'm sure the HIV meds also have something to do with this.

Some of us want to hang on to our favourite jeans or shirts in the hope that we may fit into them one day—even though we know full well that we're never going to be that size again. I also have shirts in my closet that my children or mother gave to me, and I can't let go of them for personal reasons. You cherish the love and caring behind the gift and you cannot part with it.

I've got to do a major clean out and get rid of those clothes. There are plenty of organizations that provide clothes to those less fortunate and there are so many people in need, so you can give those things away and feel good about it.

Switching to my spiritual closet, let me first say I am more of a spiritual person than a religious one, though often we confuse the two. The church I attended while growing up in a small rural town was evangelical, and it espoused the idea that you needed to be in touch with God and talk to God all the time. I'd like to clear those cobwebs out of my head because if I could separate spirituality and religion, I could be more in tune with myself and my surroundings.

I don't feel that one has to go to church to be spiritual. How I feel closer to my spiritual side is by going outside and watching the seasons change, seeing the many varieties of wild birds in my backyard and enjoying a coffee and relaxing with my partner. This is how I clean out the negative thoughts and regain my strength. Spirituality is an individual and personal thing, it's different for all of us.

TINA, 43

Montreal

Diagnosed with HIV in 1989

CD4 count: 630

Viral load: 20,000

At first I wanted to answer this question by focusing on my actual physical clutter—my body, lifestyle and self-image. Some of my routines—drinking too much coffee, eating comfort foods, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol to relax, only getting exercise by running errands—are not the healthiest, but they comfort me. Sometimes I need that pizza or that smoke after my meal! I'm a strong believer in moderation, and as long as my routine doesn't interfere with my well-being, I see it as giving myself the TLC that I need at the time.

But then I realized that the clutter is actually the constant feedback and judgment from others—society, friends, family. I want to de-clutter the negative, guilt-tripping messages I receive from other people. I want to let go of the notion that if I'm not perfect I have no worth. I want to cherish my own self-image and values more than those of others. Being free of these messages would be priceless compared to the prison I need to stay in to keep everyone's opinion of me above my own.

Finally, I want to always be open to learning new ways of coping and comforting myself, like I did this winter. In October I moved from Vancouver to Montreal. It was a long way from what I'd been calling home for the past 11 years, and I felt very vulnerable, alone and scared of the unknown. So I tried something new to comfort myself: I took up skating on Mount Royal. It brought me back to my childhood in Quebec and that kind of innocent fun. I'd forgotten how much I loved it. And I didn't care if my feet were freezing! I was having fun and getting fresh air and exercise. As a result, I didn't smoke as much, I was sleeping better and I felt more energized during the day.



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I actually did my spring cleaning with this interview: All the introspection and feeling I went through in preparing my statement, then saying it out loud and sharing it publicly created a commitment within me. I realized I don't have anything holding me back.

I would suggest to anyone reading this article that you ask yourself this "spring cleaning" question. It's a great way to invest in yourself.

TREVOR STRATTON, 44

Port Colborne, Ontario

Diagnosed with HIV in 1990

CD4 count: approximately 400

Viral load: undetectable

This story is not only about my own spiritual house cleaning but that of my whole family and community.

I'm an Aboriginal person, from the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. Our community's traditional territory is Toronto. Even though I live in the Niagara region, Toronto will always be my home.

In 1787 and 1805, our Chief and other leaders negotiated with the Crown the purchase of a vast expanse of land in southern Ontario, including the land on which Metropolitan Toronto would one day be built. Those negotiations were tainted by later breaches in the agreement, and so, in 1986, our community submitted a number of land claims, including the Toronto Purchase Claim, to the federal government.

We have been waiting over 200 years for fair payment for the rights to our traditional territory. In late January,



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the federal government offered \$145 million for an out-of-court settlement. Our community is in shock. Elders are upset and families are painfully debating the offer. How should we respond? How do you put a monetary value on those presents and gifts that our leaders agreed upon in the original agreement? Although it's about money, which is tangible, it's brought up a lot of spirit in our community. It's a hard time for people to pick up those old bones. It's a time of real introspection for us.

It has been seven generations since our leaders were misled. Traditionally, when we address any issues in our communities, we always look seven generations into the future. This is our way. Seven generations ago our ancestors must have been thinking and praying hard for us for something like this to culminate.

My gut reaction to the offer was to think of my mother and grandmother and all my relations and all the people who waited for so long. I think of the pain I sometimes saw in my grandmother's eyes and the suffering our

people endured in the residential school system. I think of the multi-generational trauma passed down through the ages and how many of our people are now affected by HIV/AIDS and other health issues. How can we put a dollar sign on that?

OK, lighten up, Trevor. In terms of physical spring cleaning, I inherited five cats when my mother passed away in 2007. Now I'm the cat lady! One of my cats, Bones, found a way into my basement and made a mess by shredding old newspapers and marking his territory. This spring, while my family, community and I work through this time of soul-searching, I will be cleaning up my basement of old Bones. +