

Faron: Things, and it's like no. I mean, we loved the house. I mean, we planned to stay here forever when we bought it, right? So, and just all the stuff that he's done in the city, and I kind of established my own friends and life and everything. So, at first, it was like no. It was too fresh, and he had really just started at Diversity. So, he was working before that at [inaudible 00:00:29] and then at the Renewal Projects for a short time, and then, that shut down. So, they went to Diversity. So, he was just really starting to get established there. So, it just felt like it wasn't the right time, and then, he started checking out opportunities. So, he found one. He thought he was going to get it, and this is probably off the record. He applied for one in Raleigh in North Carolina, and it didn't pan out. It was one of two people. They picked the other person.

Faron: So, that was kind of disappointing. That was just a few months ago, and then, before that actually, he had applied for this position in Phoenix, and it took them so long. They were using a headhunter, and he was going through that process, and he would hear from them once a month. They were kind of dangling it out there, but weren't in any hurry, obviously. So, that still isn't final. So, he's not really talking about it. That's why I say it's kind of off the record, but that was one of the things that kind of prompted Phoenix specifically is that that's still a possibility. And so, we kind of feel like by moving there, we really established the fact that we are relocating there regardless. So, maybe that will give them a heads up. Again, it's down to him and one other person.

Speaker 2: Oh, it's a nail-biter.

Faron: It's a really, really wonderful opportunity. So, we're hoping.

Speaker 2: Oh, fingers crossed.

Speaker 3: Fingers crossed.

Speaker 2: And you work from home, right? So, you can just go anywhere.

Faron: I do. Yeah.

Speaker 2: It's so nice to have that flexibility.

Faron: Yeah, and I've lived all over. I've worked for this company for 21 years, and I do software. I was a business analyst for many years, and then, I went into product management, and now, I just moved up into program management. So, I manage the product managers and the scrum masters, we call them, like project managers for our division. So, it's been really good.

Speaker 2: So, now, can we take you back to the very, very beginning and have you tell us-

Faron: How far back are we talking?

Speaker 2: [crosstalk 00:02:32]

Faron: That was a long time ago.

Speaker 2: Just to tell us something about your family, how you grew up, where you grew up. Take us from the beginnings.

Faron: Okay. I was born in Wisconsin. I was raised there in a very small town, and there were 1000 people in the town that I grew up in. It was a farming community. I have two brothers. I have a brother that was a year older than me and a brother younger than me. So, I was a middle child, and it was a great childhood. I mean, really, it was a close knit community, but it was very homogenous. It was all white, all Christian and Jewish people. I mean, we had one African American family move in while I was in high school, and they had a son in my class, and everybody loved him. It wasn't that he was shunned or anything, but I could imagine how difficult that would be for him, more so than the rest of us. But we lived about 30 miles from Madison. So, there were opportunities to be a part of something bigger than that. So, I kind of knew early on that I was gay, but it just wasn't the right thing for my family. I mean, I kind of knew that was not going to go over well, and I was involved in the church and stuff. So, there were those messages, too.

Speaker 2: What church was it?

Faron: Well, my father's family's Lutheran. So, we started there, and then, my mom's family was Baptist. The Lutheran church was outside of town. So, we had to drive back and forth, and it was this beautiful little old stone church in what they called a Norwegian settlement, which was quaint. It's still there, and they don't have church there anymore, but it's really a historic place to be. So, my grandparents were Baptist. So, just for practical reasons, my parents really didn't go to church much, and my grandparents were very active in the church. So, my parents were not about to drive us out into the country to go to church, and my grandparents were like, "You can come with us." They would drop us off and pick us up for Sunday school and everything. So, then, I was in the Baptist church for most of my middle school, high school, and then, I had a Sunday school teacher in high school that switched over to the Pentecostal church. So, after a couple years after they left, I switched over and went to that church. So, it just got kind of progressively more and more crazy. So, that's where I was then when I was in my 20s, which was another kind of push away from coming out and facing.

Speaker 2: Did you stay in town, or did you move away?

Faron: I stayed a few years. It's kind of funny. My grandparents lived in the city, too, both sets of grandparents. So, all of my extended family and my immediate family were all in that small town. So, my grandfather passed, and my dad's parents passed in the '70s, but my mother's father passed right after I graduated from high school. So, I moved in with my

grandma to just help her run the house and do other things, and then, my parents moved, and my younger brother moved to Atlanta. So, my dad used to tell people he wouldn't leave the nest, so he moved the nest is what he used to say because my dad's a jokester. My older brother passed, actually. He had leukemia. So, he was eight when he passed. So, it was just my younger brother and myself. So, they moved, and I stayed there for a few years, and then, I moved out of that town into another nearby town for a little while. And then, I met my wife. I was married in my 20s, and we met through the church, and we settled down in the south suburbs of Chicago. So, I moved from kind of southern Wisconsin to not that far away but just far enough away.

Faron: I went to college there, and we got married and started having kids. We had three kids. So, my parents have lived in Atlanta. They're still there. So, they've lived there this whole time, my brother as well. So, kind of back to the gay side of things, I mean, I felt like I was gay, enough to where when I was in high school, I talked to this Sunday school couple that I was close with about it, and their take on it was this is just Satan trying to get you to sin and all this kind of stuff. So, I kind of went through that whole idea of trying to kind of reprogram everything, which of course didn't work. And we remained close. They were very open with me, and I was very open with them, and so, we remained friends even after I came out. I mean, it was just kind of a matter of they loved me and wanted to help, and that's how they felt like they could help me, even though it was kind of misguided. So, I was married for 10 years. I had never been with a man. I was in the closet the whole time, but before we got married, I told my wife that I was attracted to me. Before we got married, I told her.

Faron: I felt like this is something you need to know. She was like, "Okay. Well, just promise me you won't leave me for another man." And I told her. I said, "I don't think I can do that. I mean, I can tell you how I feel now, but I can't make a promise that I don't know if I'll be able to keep or not." So, we got married anyway, and for 10 years, I was faithful to her, and we had our ups and downs, just like any married couple. But after 10 years, it was kind of like I felt like I was checking in with myself. I needed to kind of evaluate, and I had already felt like I was depressed because we were very involved in the church. I was directing the choir. I was singing in the choir, and I wasn't happy. I wasn't quite sure what to do, but I felt like I had to figure it out. So, I talked to her about it, to my wife, and I said, "I'm feeling like I need some help." So, she found this Christian counselor that she thought, "We'll go here." So, we went there once, and she was basically calling me a sinner and telling me I needed to repent, and I was like, "No. That's not what I need to hear right now."

Faron: So, the next stop was exodus counseling. So, I end up with an exodus counselor in Chicago, which was actually really good because I would drive. It was like an hour, over an hour, away from my home. So, I would drive up there in the evening, and he was very open. He wanted to kind of understand my journey, like we've been talking, and kind of understand how I felt about it all, and it was much less what I thought it was going to be and what everybody kind of thinks of that as. In my case, it was really good. We met for

probably three months, and at the end of the three month period, he basically said, "I think I'm going to refer you to a coming out group." And I was like, "Wow." And I had been going online. I was on AOL chatroom, that's how long that was, and met someone online from California, and we've been talking, and I was telling my situation and my story, and he was very supportive. So, we were talking on the phone a few times. I was talking to him, I remember, on the way to one of my sessions at the exodus counselor. He owned a travel company.

Faron: He was like, "I'm going to Hawaii on a trip. Why don't you come with me?" I was like, "I can't do that." And he was like, "Why not?" I was like, "Because I'm married," right? So, I get to my counselor, and I told him. I said, "He asked me if I would go on this trip," and he said, "What did you say?" And I said, "No because I'm married." He said, "Well, why did you just automatically, without even thinking or really considering, you just automatically respond the way ... It's almost like you're programmed to," right? And I said, "Well, because I can't do that." And he said, "I think you need to realize you're in a rut, and you need to kind of lift your head up out of the rut and look around a little before you just make those kind of statements." And it really got me thinking. That's how I was raised. You do what you're supposed to do, right? My parents were very strict, and you just follow the rules. There's no question, right? So, I did not go to Hawaii, but after a few more months and after it, then I went to the coming out group a few times, and then, I decided I needed to leave my wife, and so, I had that conversation.

Faron: I didn't have that conversation with her, actually. Chronologically, I told this guy online what I thought of doing and everything, and he was planning a trip to visit his mother in Florida and was stopping through Chicago, and he said, "Why don't we have dinner?" This was around the holidays, and I said, "Well ... " It was actually at New Year's. I said, "I think that will work out okay." Because I was taking my family to visit my parents in Atlanta, and then, my wife was taking the kids on to Florida to visit their family, and I was coming home because I had to come back to work. So, I came home by myself, and just schedule-wise, it worked out to where I could go and do that while she was ... which was very unusual, but that's the way it worked out. So, we had dinner, and he left. He got on the plane and left. The whole time, I was thinking to myself, "I'm comfortable." That was comfortable to me, where my life with my wife was always like what the counselor was saying, doing what you're supposed to do but not really feeling like that's what I wanted to do.

Faron: So, anyway, he came back through Chicago, and we spent the weekend at a hotel before he went back home, and then, when my wife came back, I sat her down, and I said, "I'm going to move. We need to end this." So, of rocky, I would say. He was 19 years older than me. So, he had lived a full life, and he owned a travel company, had been all around the world, and I hadn't really done any of that. So, it was all the first, like going to Europe and going to Australia and going to Alaska, going to Hawaii and going to gay bars and going to all of these things, and it was I moved out. So, that started that whole

ball rolling. So, we went through the divorce proceedings, and it was hardest on my kids because they were young enough to where they didn't really quite get it because one day, everything seemed fine, and then, the next day, I was gone, and they didn't really know why, and my wife didn't want to tell them why. So, I agreed to that. I continued the relationship with the guy online, and so, I ended up moving there after the divorce was final. So, we worked together for seven years after, after I moved there, and it was kind just I was 35 years old and finally feeling like I was 18.

Faron: And I was going back to visit my kids. I had kept up that relationship through the whole time. So, that first partner was HIV negative and so was I, obviously. So, that was kind of nice. We didn't have to really worry about being affected, but he had lost friends, a lot of friends, to AIDS. So, we actually were involved with HIV prevention work there, which was kind of interesting considering later on, things kind of came full circle to me.

Speaker 2: How did you first hear about HIV?

Faron: Well, I was 18 when it all blew up in the news, so 1980.

Speaker 2: 1982? 1980?

Faron: I graduated in '80. So, '81, '82, yeah, I started hearing, and that was one thing that really drove me into the closet even more because I thought if there's anything that I was afraid of, it was dying, and it was like I'm not going to risk my own health and life for that. So, that really kind of steered me toward that path every bit as much as my parents' influence and society, the small town and everything. But it kind of saved my life, really. I mean, the whole HIV thing blowing up like that really kept me from being infected because of the fear involved with that.

Speaker 2: It's the first time we've heard the positive side of being in the closet for so long.

Faron: That really is my experience. I mean, because the timing. If it had come out two years later, three, four years later, it would've been too late. I would've already been infected by the time because I started working in Madison right after high school. I didn't go to college right away. I waited five years. So, I did some volunteer work, kind of part-time staff for Youth for Christ, working their music group and touring and stuff and doing that work. Then, I started working at a hospital in Madison, and Madison's a very progressive city. So, I had opportunities there to be with a man, but it was like no. Because of all the headlines and everything, I was living in fear, every day, was living in fear. So, kind of that mindset of feeling like I had to follow the rules also really served me well because I was not inclined to just throw care to the wind and just do what I wanted to. That wasn't really an option. So, those things combined really kind of helped me get through that healthy, and then, having my first partner be HIV negative helped, too, because then, that gave me another seven years of not having to really worry. So, then, we split

up, and then, I moved back to Chicago. My kids were teenage-ish. My oldest was in college. My two other ones were in high school.

Speaker 2: And this was early 2000s?

Faron: Yes. Yeah. Let's see. The divorce was 1998. So, I was in that relationship until 2005, 2006. So, I moved to Chicago in 2006, and I stayed with a lady who I had worked with when I lived in that area at first when I was still figuring out housing and stuff. So, I found an apartment in Chicago and lived by myself for the first time in my whole life, I mean, at 35. I went right from living with my parents, living with my grandmother to living with another family to being married, being in college and in the dorm to being married, and now, I was alone. And it was great. It's what I needed for the whole coming out, finding yourself and learning what the world is all about kind of thing. So, I was meeting guys online and hooking and not really paying attention, and that's when I got infected. I moved there in July of 2006. I think I was infected in October, September, October. So, just a few months, but I didn't know right away. I ended up getting some really odd symptoms. I felt really sick, and this was in November, and I ended up in the emergency room, and I was having a rash, and I was weak.

Faron: It was hard to go up and down stairs. I had flu-like symptoms, diarrhea, nausea, and I was like, "This is not a normal thing." It wasn't the flu. I knew it wasn't the flu because the rash, it was weird. So, I went to the emergency room, and they didn't know what it was either. They thought it was just some virus, stomach virus, just drink plenty of fluids. So, I got better. It passed, and then, it wasn't until I had my physical in December. I was living in Chicago. This was a new doctor for me, and he ran blood work and everything. So, it was at Christmastime, and my physical was in the middle of the month, and I had to go back the day after Christmas for my results. So, I went to his office, and they called me in from the waiting room to the exam room, and I was by myself, and my chart was sitting there open. So, before anybody even came in, I saw my results, and I thought, well, I didn't really know if I was reading them right because it was like antibody positive or whatever, and I was like, "Well, maybe that's not what I think it is."

Faron: So, he came in, and he was like, "I have to tell you. You tested positive for HIV." I had already started dating someone in November in Chicago. So, I had been at his apartment before I went to the doctor, and then, after I got the news, I was in shock, of course, because I thought that I had been safe. I guess I didn't realize the risk that I was taking. I hadn't been with that many people, and other than that sickness, and I hadn't put two and two together until afterwards to know that was ... I had been infected and that was the virus having its effects on my system, and then, it cleared up. So, I thought, "Okay. Well, maybe that wasn't." I didn't even think of the time. So, when the results came in, it completely took me off guard. So, he talked about other treatment and trying to educate me on what it meant and what would change for me, and he said to me, "We have really good medications now. It's 2006," right? So, he said, "You'll live a

healthy life and die of something completely unrelated." That's what he told me. I thought, "Okay." And then, he gave me some information, some websites and things to do some research.

Faron: And I went online and read everything I could. I was just like okay. I knew some of what it was about, but I didn't understand the medications and all the side effects and everything. So, I read everything I could. I asked questions, and I went back to see him again, and he said, "We don't have to start treatment right away because my CD4 count was like 350, but my [inaudible 00:24:41] level was like 70,000 or whatever. So, he said, "We wouldn't have to start yet." And I said, "No. I want to start right away." I couldn't imagine having the virus wreaking havoc on my system and waiting to start treatment, and at the time, it really wasn't advisable to start right away because there weren't as many treatment options. So, they were like putting it off as long as you can kind of extends the effectiveness of the medications that they had. So, I was like, well, but the other side of that is that it also does damage to your organs, and I said, "I feel like I need to combat those effects and trust that there's going to be other medications if this one becomes ineffective."

Speaker 2: So, what were the medications like in 2006?

Faron: Well, they actually had Atripla. So, I was able to start right away on a one-pill treatment, which was great, and I didn't really have any side effects. It worked right away. So, for me, the hardest part that I had to deal with was the emotional part because I felt like I allowed it to happen. So, I had a lot of guilt about the fact that I didn't do everything I could've done to protect myself and that people had always looked up to me. My parents always felt like I was the perfect son and always did the right thing. And then, I didn't do the right thing. I could've avoided this completely, and I was thinking earlier today. I was like, "There's a lot of diseases that you have no control over." You either will get it, or you won't, and your behavior my contribute to the risk factor, but there's still an element of dodging the built. With HIV, if you're with somebody that's positive, you're going to get it. It's not like, "Well, I'll just go ahead and do this, and maybe I'll get lucky." No. If they're infected, and you're having unprotected sex with them, you're pretty much guaranteeing infection, and that was on me.

Faron: I knew better. So, I had to go through a lot. I went to a support group of HIV positive people just to help deal with that more so than anything else. I didn't tell anyone. I take that back. Right after I left the doctor's office, I went to the guy that I was dating and just broke down on the sofa. It was the holidays, right? So, I stayed on the sofa, I think, for three days and really couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. I just cried and just numb. I was just completely like, "My life is over. No one will want to date me. Will I be able to work?" All the things, and kind of taking it to the extreme. And then, my kids were coming to visit the next weekend. So, I was like, "I've got to pull myself together." So, I went back to my apartment, and I can remember cleaning to get ready for them to come, and I was making my bed and hit my toe on the bed to the point where it bled.

And I remember my reaction was like all of a sudden my heart just started racing, and I thought to myself, "That's the virus. How am I going to protect my kids when if something like this happens, I'm just spilling infection everywhere?"

Faron: So, there were so many instances like that where you just don't even think, and then, something just kind of slaps you in the face, and that was one of those slaps in the face where I had to just get a grip and realize that I'm going to clean it up. It's going to be fine. I had read online you can't get infected from silverware and hugging and kissing, all those casual interactions. So, I was like, "You know what? It'll be okay. They'll be safe." That was my main concern, and I'll just have to deal with my own emotional things to myself. So, they came. It was fine. I just kept it like that, my parents, too. They didn't know.

Speaker 3: Did they know? Did you come out to them as well?

Faron: Yes. I'm sorry. That whole time when my wife left to go to Florida. After she left, I told my parents. That's when I came out to my mom and dad before I came back to Chicago. It was all [inaudible 00:29:43].

Speaker 2: That was a lot.

Faron: That was a lot. And they were okay. Their initial reaction was we just wanted you to be happy, which was a relief because I had waited that long thinking that they were going to reject me in some way, and it really didn't happen. They didn't want to hear anything about it, but that was better than the alternative. So, we did spend some time kind of silent and not talking because when the whole divorce thing was going on, I reached out to them one time and just really wanted to talk to them, and they were kind of siding with my wife and feeling sorry for her being stuck with three small kids, and then, I'm moving across the country. So, I'm looking at it like, "I'm your son. I need you to help me," and yet, I understood why they felt an allegiance and kind of torn, but I had a hard time with that. So, for six months, we didn't talk.

Faron: And then, after six months, I had a dream that my mom was crying, and so, I had to call her, and I said, "I don't want to be separated like this." They told me. What they said to me at the time was, "We just don't want you showing up on our doorstep with your partner." And I said, "You don't have to worry about that because I would not subject him to that knowing how you feel." And then, he ended up going there with me and met them, and it was fine.

Speaker 2: Can I stop you for one second?

Faron: Absolutely.

Speaker 2: Would it be possible to turn off the TV from upstairs?

Faron: Oh, sure. Yep.

Speaker 2: Because I'm just starting to get a little worried.

Faron: [inaudible 00:31:52] We have dogs. So, they're up there kind of hanging out at the TV.

Speaker 2: [inaudible 00:32:00]

Speaker 2: (silence)

Faron: In the process of packing, I just ran across some pictures today that took me back. So, this was a picture of my wife and kids. That was a year before the divorce, and then, when I first left the house, I lived with that same friend that I stayed with when I came back to Chicago. She had been a coworker. So, she was about 20 miles away from them. So, I would drive back regular. For a while, I was driving my second oldest daughter to pre-school. I'd go in the morning, pick her up, bring her to pre-school, and then drive her back at the end of the day. So, I had this constant commute back to the house, and then, when my ex-wife would need to go somewhere or do something, I would stay with them at the house. So, we had this kind of, not an open-door policy, but it felt like that where I was just in and out. This was during the divorce, which was kind of awkward. But then, when I knew I was going to move away, I was like, "I'm going to get pictures done." So, I bought them kind of matching outfits and then brought them to have pictures done. That was a few months before I moved.

Speaker 2: They're adorable.

Faron: Yeah. I know. Cute kids. And then, after I moved away, and my partner was a travel agent, I took them on a cruise. We went on a couple trips. We went to Hawaii with them, and we went on a cruise, and this was one of the pictures that we had done on the cruise ship. So, this would've been probably a couple years after because I had to go to court so they could visit with my partner and myself. It's illegal [inaudible 00:34:39].

Speaker 3: So, were they aware of your relationship then, or was this-

Faron: Yeah. After I moved, my ex-wife was a speech therapist in a school system. So, she was talking one day to the school psychologist, kind of talking about what was going on, and she told him that she didn't think it was right to tell the kids that I was gay, that that would harm them and harm our relationship, and he was like, "No. You should tell them as soon as possible. They should know so that they can understand what's happening." And so, she called me, and she was like, "I was just talking to the school psychologist, and he suggested that we tell them as soon as we can. I said, "Okay." She says, "I was going to do it tonight." I was like, "Well, could you at least wait until I'm there?" "No, I really think I need to do it right away." I was like, "Okay." I said, "I'm available by phone if they react badly or if they have questions and want to talk," I said, "Please call me."

So, that's how it happened, which is really, in retrospect, I probably didn't stand up for myself enough. That was a case where I really felt like I should've put my foot down and said, "No. We need to think this through and handle it better than that."

Faron: So, when I was there the next time, everything was fine. My parents, interestingly, their concern was about the kids, too, me moving away and making sure the kids were okay, and I told them. I said, "I'm the same person. I still love my kids. I'm not going to just ignore them just because I'm coming out." And it was the same with my ex-wife. I think her fear was that this was going to change the relationship that I had with them, and I was like, "I'm still their dad. I still love my kids." So, I think I had to really convince all of them I'm going to continue to come back and see them. I'm going to continue to talk to them on the phone. I'm going to continue to parent from afar. It took a long time for them to realize that just because you go through a divorce doesn't mean your kids are dragged through some awful thing, and we kept our differences between us. So, for the most part, they didn't really know a lot of the things that were happening between my wife and I. So, I think we did it as well as we could, I think, given the circumstances.

Faron: And the relationship that I have with them now kind of confirms that. I mean, and now that they're in their 20s, they know kind of their mother's foibles and their grandparents on both sides. So, they kind of see the dynamics and realize that, out of all of them, I'm probably the most sane one of them all. So, I think the idea that I am somehow damaging them is long gone.

Speaker 3: So, you stopped at ... We talked about how you got diagnosed, and you received that. So, what happened afterwards? How did you get yourself back together?

Faron: Therapy. I've been therapy my entire adult life. I went to that newly diagnosed, HIV positive, group, and that helped, and actually, the guy that I had been dating, we had a relationship then. So, I probably went into that relationship not thinking that one through either because, again, I was afraid that no one would want me being HIV positive. I mean, that was just kind of the message that I was hearing in my head. So, the fact that he was there for me when I was diagnosed, it kind of helped me initially to deal with the emotional part of that. We ended up together, and we were together about five years, and I think I just always found the strength. I mean, the first partner that I had, he used to say, as I was going through the whole divorce, then coming out and everything, he says, "You're so brave." And I said to him, "I feel so weak." My whole life, I have tried to do right by everybody in my life, and coming out and getting a divorce seemed like putting myself ahead of everyone else, and it felt so contrary to who I was, but I had to.

Faron: And it was the same thing then with the HIV thing. I had to kind of focus on me, and I think I had learned lessons from coming out that helped me deal with that, but the problem with that was, and I've spoken about this before when I share my story, it felt like I went right back into the closet again with my HIV status because you just go

through this whole process of becoming authentic and having people know who you are. My coworkers, I was out to them. I wasn't keeping secrets, but then, when I was HIV diagnosed, I didn't want anybody to know that. It was okay that they knew I was gay, but I didn't want them to know I was HIV positive because that felt like I was telling them something that would make me look bad. So, my decision then was to keep it private. So, my kids still don't know. My oldest daughter is an RN. She just got her RN last year. So, she's 29, and we're close. My second oldest is an accountant, and she's married with two kids, and she's a Republican. We're not quite as close because there's some stuff there.

Faron: We're not estranged, but we just can't talk about some things. And then, my son lives in Florida with his girlfriend, and he's kind of middle-of-the-road. He's independent. So, I've got one of each, and we're not very close just because he's not communicative. He just does his thing, and he's not into all the warm and fuzzy stuff. So, it's hard to have conversations with him, but when we do, it's fine. I mean, he has no issues with me being gay or anything like that, none of them do, really, but ...

Speaker 2: What made you decide to talk to us and have this become more public after so long of keeping it to yourself?

Faron: I think it's a process that I'm going through. Last year, my dad had open heart surgery, and I went to Atlanta to be with them, and I had some time with my mom, which I don't normally get. They're both retired. So, they're kind of joined at the hip most of the time. My dad is a Republican and kind of hard to deal with. My mom, they've been married forever. So, she kind of puts up with him, but I feel more of a kinship with my mom just because her sensibilities are more similar to mine. And so, I told my mom when I was there. I kind of went into a couple previous trips thinking I'm going to get my mom by herself and talk to her and would never connect, that we'd have the opportunity to do that. This time we did since my dad was in the hospital, and we were kind of driving back and forth. So, I talked to her. They also knew ... just to kind of backtrack. So, I've had a wife for 10 years. My first partner was HIV negative, and we were together for seven years. My next partner, I was positive, and he was negative. So, we were together five years, six years, and then, I met Rodney.

Faron: So, they know from Rodney's writings and his work that he works in HIV work, like social services. So, I remember my aunt saying to me after she found out that we were together, and I was moving here to be with him. She kind of went online and researched Rodney's books and different things, and she's like, "Just be careful." That's what she said to me, assuming that I was negative, right? She didn't know any better, and I was like, "I will." I'm already positive. And the fact that we ended up together, I think my parents are probably, I was guessing, are a little more suspicious of my status, but we had never talked about it. So, the conversation with my mom went really well. She had a few questions, but I was able to kind of help her understand that it wasn't scary. I'm in treatment, and the medications are working fine, and I'm able to work. I feel healthy,

workout and all of that. So, I couldn't have done that earlier because I didn't feel it myself, right? So, I had to get to a point, like with coming out. It's so similar. I had to get to the point where I was okay with it because I could come out.

Faron: It's been the same way with HIV. I had to get to the point where I was okay before I could talk about it and feel like I wasn't going to break down myself. So, I was diagnosed in 2006. So, it was 12 years before I told my mom. My dad doesn't know. I asked my mom not to talk to him about it. I'm not sure if she's told other family, but it's possible. My brother doesn't know. My kids don't know, but I'm getting to the point where I'm ready to talk to them, too. In fact, I'm going to Chicago next month after we move. I have a work trip back there, and so, my two daughters are coming to visit at the hotel, and I'm thinking that might be an opportunity to do that. But then last year, for World AIDS Day, I actually gave my story at an event in town, and Rodney was like, "Are you sure you're ready to do this?" I was like, "Yeah." He's been an inspiration to me, obviously, and plus just my own journey, getting to this point and feeling like I was okay in myself that I can talk about it now and not feel like I'm going to break apart.

Speaker 2: How do you feel that your diagnosis or your HIV status changed your relationship with other people, and how do you feel it changed your relationship with yourself?

Faron: Well, I think my relationship with other people, I think it really has felt like I'm in the closet, especially like I talked about with my family and with my friends, and that really has been a shadow, I think, because for a while there, I was able to be open with them, although they didn't want a lot of detail, but I was able to at least feel like I was being honest with people. And now, it felt like I'm having to kind of gloss over things, or not that there's that much to talk about, but it does weigh on you at times. It does kind of affect your thinking at times, and I had to kind of stuff that inside and with my kids, too. I felt like if I were to get into a car accident or have some other catastrophic thing happen and end up in the hospital, I don't want them to find out from my doctor. I want to be in control of that information. So, that weighs on me, and so, it affects my relationships because I'm always thinking, "When's going to be the right time? And is this good?" Rather than feel like you can just be there and be present, and there's all this stuff going on in my head.

Faron: With other people, I don't have that problem because I think I'm kind of over the stigma myself. At first, like I said, it was about feeling guilty and feeling like shame, really, and the messages around the disease, I think, have changed, too, where it used to kind of come along with that. People would look at you like, "Oh, you live a careless life," or it's those stereotypes of kind of a negative thing. And now, it's more accepted, I think. I think as far as my relationship with myself, I'm still in therapy. I feel like such a late bloomer, I think, in general. Coming out late, I was diagnosed with HIV when I was 40-whatever years old. I mean, that's late. Most people are diagnosed much, much earlier than that. So, I have regrets. Through the whole coming out thing, my mantra was kind of "no regrets." I didn't regret I was married. I didn't regret I was in the close. I didn't

regret coming out. When it comes to HIV, I have regrets. That's one thing that I can honestly say has been hard to deal with, this feeling like if I had been more in control of myself, then I would not have been infected.

Speaker 2: Because you sound like someone who's always been very much in control of yourself and that that's been really important to you.

Faron: Yeah, and I think it's how I was raised, I mean, really and truly. My parents are a role model for that, even though there's a lot of [inaudible 00:49:58] there. They, through good and bad, taking marriage vows really meant something to them. That was one of the things that my wife kind of called me on when I said I wanted a divorce. She's like, "But we took vows." I'm like, "Yeah." That's how I felt, and I was committing to what I thought I could do, but I said, "When it comes right down to it, this isn't fair to you as much as it's not fair to me." So ...

Speaker 2: How did you meet Rodney?

Faron: We met online. I have met all three of my partners online. It's kind of funny because he claimed to have been coming to Chicago for a trip, but he wasn't coming to Chicago. He was just checking out people online. So, we met February 12, 2012, and we started chatting online, and within a few hours, we picked up the phone and started talking. I had other plans that afternoon, but I canceled them because we just started sharing our lives and our stories and immediately connected on the phone. And I think 10 days later, he was saying, "You know I love you." You don't even know me. We've never even met, and we had been talking every night on the phone when we were done working. We would text during the day, and then, at night, we would be on the phone. So, we would be watching TV shows together with our phones in our ear. I mean, we played online games. We played Scrabble online with our phones in our ear as though we were listening across the table from each other.

Faron: So, within six weeks, he came there to visit. A couple weeks later, I came here to visit, and by that time, I had found this house, and literally, our first weekend I came here, we looked at the house and bought it. So, we met in February. We bought the house in May, and I moved here in June. So, when you say I seem like I'm always under control, sometimes I'm a little carefree. I mean, this Phoenix move's the same way. We really just decided to move like three weeks ago. I mean, it's crazy.

Speaker 3: So, when you started dating, were you both out about your HIV, being HIV positive?

Faron: Yeah. Yeah. I think that was just another point of connection for us because although his experience was way different, he told his mother right away, and she was a big support for him through ... and that was in the '90s when the medications weren't as good. So, he had issues with illness and things and medication adherence, and his journey was quite different than mine. In some respects, that helped both of us because he kind of

could see another route, and I could see how my route was maybe easier, certainly different, and I think it's been good for both of us to kind of have empathy and to kind of understand where people outside of our relationship are coming from because we kind of have just a lot going on. And the same thing with being an interracial couple, I never dated a black person before I met him, and I think I was recounting, too, that my differences with HIV status, but my wife and I were in the Pentecostal church. And then, my first partner was Jewish, and my second partner was younger than me, which was different. And then, Rodney's even younger than he was to me and African American.

Faron: So, it's like I've had such completely different relationships. It's not like I stuck with a type and stuck with it, and it's been great. We have our stuff, too, but I think adding that interracial component has been a bigger challenge to us than anything else, than our HIV status and being gay and having children, and none of that has been as hard as dealing with that.

Speaker 3: How so?

Speaker 2: Because?

Faron: I think because of the stigmas. I mean, I think this neighborhood has been interesting to settle in, for one, because when we first moved here, it was a little rough, and I can remember our neighbors on this side or the ones that bought the house came over as soon as we got out of the car and were like, "Who's moving in?" I said, "We are." "Well, what are you going to do with the house?" So, it was a mess, and it became instant friends. And the couple that lived here before were a lesbian couple, and they had been very close with them, and they're godparents to the son that's moving in here. So, there was just a real easy situation here. Otherwise, I mean, the neighbor here's okay. The couple across the street's okay, but beyond that, it's rough, and we're sitting out on the front porch shortly after we moved in, and it was a girl that was walking. It was nighttime, and she just hiked up her skirt and pissed across the street, sitting on the curb, and I was like, "Wow. I just don't even know."

Faron: And then, a couple months later, I mean, I work from home, and I heard gunshots. I go running to the window, and there's a car speeding down there and then a shooting right on the next block in the street. I was like, "Shit, what did I do?" And Rodney always talks about me being so calm, and I think that has helped for sure because I think if I was a little more high strung, I couldn't have dealt with a lot of the things that have gone on, but it definitely has been a growing experience for me. Like I said, I think the challenge has been understanding what prejudice is like from the standpoint of being with him where, before, I didn't really understand white privilege, and now, I do. So, that really has been a learning experience than HIV.

Speaker 2: Do you have anything that you would like to say to people who are newly diagnosed in that doctor's office, maybe catching a glimpse of their chart, maybe hearing words they might never have thought they would have heard? What would you say to them?

Faron: That really takes me back. I think in that moment what would've helped me is to hear somebody say it's not your fault because I really, in that moment, that's what I felt like, "This is your fault." And that was more than I could deal with on top of the real issues that I was dealing with my health. I mean, obviously, the guy I was dating when I went there, he just was like, "It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay." And I heard that many times, and you need to hear that even though it doesn't sink in right away. I think there's many people that will help buoy you just by saying that, but I don't think that really cuts through. But if someone had told me it wasn't my fault, I might've been inclined to stop and think that through a little more earlier on because that took me a long time.

Speaker 2: I bet, especially since you and your first partner, it sounds like, had been involved in HIV education.

Faron: Yeah. Yeah. Yes, and we were telling people how to be safe and how to have the conversations and practicing having the disclosure conversations and everything, and it was like ... I don't know. It's like they say about young people feeling invincible, like it'll happen to somebody else, but it won't happen to you. And I was like, "Okay. Well, here I am 45 and having the same mindset," like I don't have to worry about it because I'm better than that, smarter than that. I don't know what, but just not even thinking, not even thinking. I've been lucky. I'm lucky to have good insurance. I'm lucky to have a good job. Working from home was really great at the beginning because there were days when, emotionally, I couldn't get off the couch. I felt okay physically, but emotionally, I was so depressed, and all I wanted to do was sleep because it was easier than having to deal with being conscious and wrestling with everything. So, there were days when I was glad I didn't have to get up and be around people.

Speaker 3: How's it like ... I mean, so, it's an everyday thing, and I remember last year after the performance, Rodney had talked about what it also means to be living with HIV and constantly being in treatment and being really ultra aware about your health and what you do. So, can you talk a little bit about that. I know you said you've been pretty healthy, but what are the challenges in that?

Faron: Being healthy with HIV isn't that different than being healthy just in general. So, I think people's tendency to be unhealthy is still a temptation. I mean, I love junk food. I love sitting on the sofa eating chocolate. I do that. I don't think my habits around being healthy are any different specifically because of HIV. I started working out before I was diagnosed. So, that's always kind of been ... I'm pretty consistent. I have been [inaudible 01:01:38] with that, too, but I've been pretty consistently, and I think that's from being gay, being vain, trying to look like you're 25 when you're older. So, that has served me

well, but medication adherence has not been hard for me, I think, for the most part, because of cell phones. I have a reminder on my phone every night that it's time to take your meds, and there are times that I have forgotten that Rodney reminds me. I remind him. I mean, that helps. I've gone to the doctor faithfully the whole time I've been diagnosed. I've never really fallen out of treatment, which is, again, who I am anyway. So, I don't think any of that was hard for me.

Faron: And the emotional part, like I said, just staying in therapy. We don't often talk about HIV in therapy. I mean, it's more about relationship stuff and all of the normal things of life. It's not because I'm dealing with being HIV positive. I steal fear being alone, I think, overall. That's the thing that really, out of everything, being positive and being alone makes being alone seem way worse because I do worry about, "What if I get sick, and there's nobody there to help me?" So, that's probably the biggest part of that.

Speaker 3: How do you think your kids are going to react or respond to it?

Faron: I think they will react okay. I think it's kind of like coming out. You build yourself up in your head with all the possible reactions, and then, it ends up being probably the most favorable one of all. My oldest daughter, I think I'm closest with because she was eight when I came out. So, she had the most time with me being in the house, and she's the one that's most like me, and now, she's a nurse. So, I think out of all of them, she probably will be curious if anything else. My other daughter, she's very logical, obviously. She's an accountant, and she's a thinker. So, I think she'll be concerned, but the thing, like with my mom, when I told her and even with my aunt, who actually is the one that we're moving closest to who said be careful, I think their assumption, and I had to really be careful with my mom because I didn't want her to assume that Rodney was the one that infected me.

Faron: Because I thought, "If there's anything that I wanted to combat, it's taking it out on him." So, I had to make sure they understand the chronology of that. I was infected before I was with Brian, and then, I was with Brian, and then, now I'm with Rodney. I said, "I've been infected since 2006, and Rodney and I met in 2012." So, that would have been awful if he had been the one that infected, and then, you lay that on top of all the other reasons to [inaudible 01:05:31].

Speaker 3: Has your family responded to Rodney being black? Has that been an issue, discussion?

Faron: I'd like to say no. My mom loves Rodney. My dad, I can't tell how he feels. I think it's more about me being gay, but I'm not sure because they've been here. They were here for the wedding. My dad has a scowl on his face in every picture from the wedding, and I'm not sure. He is racist. I mean, he does use the N-word, and he talks what he thinks, and it's not a pretty picture, but yet, he has, and this is going to sound awful, he has friends who are black. I mean, like he will tell you, "I have this friend and that friend." So, he feels like he justifies that he's not racist, but then at the same token, he

generalizes about people in ways that are not favorable. So, I really think ... I don't know. And my mom, same thing, my mom will say, "I'm not racist because I have this friend, and it was a coworker, and we were the best of friends." And I'm thinking, "Yeah, but what about since then? That was in 1968." I mean, honestly, I don't know. Rodney and I have talked about it a lot because Rodney feels kind of some sense of rejection, more from my kids, than my parents, which is hard for me to understand.

Faron: And then, he, in some respects, is protecting me. If they don't call me on Fathers Day or whatever, he's upset with them because, "They're not treating you right," right? So, he that clouds his relationship with them, and for them, they just want me to be happy. So, whenever we have issues, and they hear that we're having issues, then they take that out on him. And it's like you're in a no-win situation when you're a stepparent anyway and all the more so when you're gay and when you're in an interracial relationship and when you're ... I mean, there are so many other factors that I don't know what to attribute it to.

Speaker 2: It's complicated.

Faron: Yeah. I don't think any of my kids are really racist. I think they're way more open-minded than that. We lived in a suburb of Chicago that was very mixed, and I remember when my oldest daughter was 15, I lived in Vegas at the time with my first partner, and my parents were there for Christmas and my kids were. We were all together. My daughter, Casey, said, "I've decided when I get to be in my 20s, I'm going to marry a black man." I said, "Okay. Great. That's great." I said, "As long as he treats you well, I think that's wonderful." And I think she expected kind of a shock. She didn't get it from me. I can only imagine what went through my dad's mind, but he didn't say anything. So, we did joke about that later because I reminded her. I said, "Remember when you said you were going to marry a black man? Look who's married to a black man." So, we talk very freely about it, but ...

Speaker 2: So, Faron, is there anything that we have not asked you that you would like to say about HIV, your relationship to it, the journey you've taken?

Faron: Yeah. I think in general, one of the things that I know, I hear it echoed in my head because Rodney talks about it often, is just how HIV has kind of taken such a back seat, and I really think that's frustrating because people have such a short attention span. So, if it's not in the headlines, then they just don't even give it any mind, and that's hard. Because I think about young people coming out and being in their 20s and dating and not even understanding because the medications are so good. It does affect your life. I mean, as much as it hasn't affected mine because I'm able to be on medications consistently, and I take care of myself. If you're not put together that way, it's going to be a struggle, and oddly, and I still have a hard time believing that this is true, I don't know anyone what died of AIDS, no one, because I was in the closet and from a small town, and then, I was in my relationship, it was already kind of ... There were

medications available. I know a lot of people who lost a lot of loved ones, but I'm not one of them. So, it's almost like I'm in No Man's Land on so many different levels, and that's one of them, being positive and not having that firsthand experience of losing someone.

Faron: But I think just having there be more dialog. It's hidden. I mean, it really is hidden. There are a lot of people living with HIV who just go about their business and don't want to talk about it, but if you don't talk about it, people don't learn. They don't understand, and like I said, because the medications are so effective now, it is just a chronic disease now. It's not a death sentence, but you should still protect yourself. I felt like, this was kind of a strong message for me, from the day I got the diagnosis, I felt it's my job now to make sure nobody gets it from me. I mean, I think if everybody adopted that mindset to get tested and then protect everybody else from yourself, then it would go away within a generation for sure.

Speaker 2: A doctor once said to me, "We could end HIV tomorrow, literally right now. There's no reason why anyone should still be getting infected."

Faron: Rodney says that. Every time he speaks, he says, "What we know today, nobody ever has to get infected again."

Speaker 2: Did you know who gave you HIV? Did you figure that out?

Faron: I narrowed it down. That makes me sound like a whore.

Speaker 2: No, no. It makes you sound like a single person.

Faron: Yeah. It's one of a couple of people, and I don't even know their names. I know their first name, but I don't even know their last name. I know that makes me sound awful, too, but yeah. I mean, because Brian, the partner that I was with at the time, he had lost someone very dear to him, and he was angry for me that somebody had infected me and wanted to kind of be angry and channel that at the person who infected me. And I was like, "No. We're not going to do that. I am to blame as much as that person was to blame." It takes two. Yes, he could've protected himself. I could've protected myself, too. So, it was never a case for me to take it out on somebody else and to feel anger toward that other person, not ever, and I think that's something that people can get caught up in blaming the other person, and then, it ends up being rage that kind of consumes you.

Faron: I said, "No. I don't want to live bitter." So, from the very beginning, I thought, "No. I'm taking responsibility for this and really doing everything I can to be okay." I think that would be another message back to what I would say now that I think about it. Just that, I mean, there's kind of a fine line between feeling guilty and the shame and feeling like

you're accepting responsibility, and that's another fine line that he needed to get to.
Hey, baby.

Rodney: Hey.

Speaker 2: Hello.

Speaker 3: Hello.

Faron: Good timing.

Rodney: Welcome to our home in disarray.

Faron: I think I'm wrapping up, feels like it.

Speaker 3: Yeah, we are. We are wrapping up.

Speaker 2: It's a wonderful interview. Thank you so much.

Speaker 3: I know.

Faron: Thank you.

Speaker 2: I hate to say it, but as you were speaking, I could so easily imagine your words right next to your picture on the wall because you said so many things that are really profound in which no one that we've spoken to has said before.

Speaker 3: You really tapped into your inner self.

Faron: Well, I think I have a different ... I mean, like I said, my course has been different than, I think, a lot of people just because of the age when things happened and the being in the closet and coming out later. I mean, I think to me, and it's like I said, I feel like my experience is so different from everybody else I've spoken to, also. They either know so many people who have died. They know who did it. I mean, it's just so many different factors for them that are so common, and when I hear their stories, I'm like, "That's not how it happened to me at all." Yeah.

Speaker 3: How do you see yourself in Arizona? I mean, do you think you're going to be connecting with HIV positive support community or is that-

Faron: I don't know because I really haven't here. I mean, which is weird because I would think that I'd want to get back. I mean, that's kind of the way-

Speaker 3: [crosstalk 01:16:15] I was just asking that, not [crosstalk 01:16:15].

Speaker 2: No, no, no. [crosstalk 01:16:16]

Faron: No, I know, but it made me stop and think because I mean, I kind of have gone more toward music. That's kind of been my thing that I've always gravitated towards. When I lived in California, I joined the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus and sang with them, and then, when I moved to Chicago, I joined the Chicago Gay Men's Chorus and then the Windy City Chorus. And then, I moved here. I joined the Richmond Men's Chorus and The Notables. So, that's one thing I've already checked into there, and that's kind of been my connection, but even with that, like here, I haven't spoken about it publicly with them as a group. I've talked about it individually, but that has been my way to meet people because we're not bar people. It's hard to kind of create a community, and because Rodney's work has been in HIV, that kind of blurs the lines, too, with trying to make relationships that aren't all about the work, but I think that's one of the reasons why, when you asked earlier about kind of where I was in the process, I think that's kind of how we talked about it, and I started sharing my story. I think that's the next natural progression is the getting back piece because it was the same thing with the gay dad.

Faron: When I came out as a father and then came out as gay, I plugged into a community right away of support, and then, also to get back for other men who are going through that. There wasn't a lot of support for that then. So, I really felt like I was able to share my experiences and help other men dealing with that, and I really feel like this is kind of the same for this now. It's feeling I've got this. Now, I feel like I have something to offer where, before, I don't know if I was quite ready.

Speaker 2: Thank you.

Speaker 3: Thank you. This has been really [crosstalk 01:18:24].

Speaker 2: This has been really wonderful.

Faron: It's been great for me. I mean, the play just opened up so many things for me, too. That's the thing, too, that I think has helped is feeling like it's an open thing, a subject, to discuss and, too, there's been more movies and mentions of it on media of all different types. So, that also helps people feel a little more comfortable. It's not as stigmatized when people are able to understand the realities of it because that was very poignant.

Speaker 2: We're just sad that you won't be here to see the exhibition.

Speaker 3: I know.

Speaker 2: Maybe he'll come back and visit.

Faron: Yeah. When is it?

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Speaker 3: [crosstalk 01:19:12]

Speaker 2: January 23rd. Yeah, come back.

Speaker 3: [crosstalk 01:19:17] come back.

Faron: I can come back. I was already in The Notables. I don't know if you're familiar with it. It's an ensemble that I'm in, and we just did the last two nights, a performance that was so moving about being yourself and coming out and just the whole kind of positive, and the response was so great, and we were like, "We should do this a Pride or whenever." And I said, "I'll come back. I will come back and sing."

Speaker 3: Nice.

Faron: You can sit over here.

Rodney: No [inaudible 01:19:44].

Faron: We're just chit-chatting now.

Speaker 3: We're finished.

Speaker 2: We're done.

Faron: And Rodney's got more things to come back for here, too, because he was just going to tell them the ... What is it? GR. I can't think of that.

Rodney: VGRC [crosstalk 01:20:05].

Faron: VGRC just named an award after Rodney for social justice.

Speaker 3: Oh, wow.

Speaker 2: That's beautiful.

Faron: So, we're going to be-