Almost Famous

Shawn Decker tunes in to reality-based TV series The Real World only to find that with HIV, the reception he gets is all static.

May 1, 2001 By Shawn Decker

Whether filmed on location in Boston, Seattle or San Francisco, every episode of MTV's long-running reality-based *The Real World* opens with "This is the true story of seven strangers, picked to live in a house and have their lives taped, to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real." But not real enough to include people with HIV.

OK, I admit it -- I've got a beef. Not with MTV, per se, whose overall record on AIDS programming is better than TV's big three networks, but with Bunim/Murray Productions, the producers of such top-ranked voyeuristic shows targeting Gen Y as MTV's *The Real World* and ABC's *Making the Band*, a series about O-Town, a pre-fab boy band from Orlando, Florida (yawn). To be fair, the company did cast at least one PWA on *The Real World* -- 22-year-old heartthrob-turned-prevention educator Pedro Zamora -- back in the pre-protease era. (Pedro left a void in my universe when he died in 1994 shortly after filming the series.)

But a lot has changed since Pedro graced our screens with his positoid presence. There are now better AIDS drugs, longer lives and a distinct air of apathy surrounding the disease. Not to mention that the last well-known young straight guy who disclosed on TV was Ryan White, who died in 1990. After years of personal conflict about public disclosure, and measuring the size of my ego against my good intentions to do AIDS ed, I convinced myself that any stardom that I gained would ultimately translate into a boon for the positoid race.

By 1999, after failing to get cast on the show more times than I have T cells, I knew I'd need a secret weapon -- a killer storyline. Enter my girlfriend, the well-spoken, intelligent and -- perhaps the biggest sell to TV land -- sexy (but wholesome) Gwenn Barringer, who had just competed in the Miss Virginia Pageant -- on an AIDS-awareness platform.

We knew we had a shot. Sure, there were downsides, starting with the stress of being videotaped every nanosecond for six months. And I had just started AIDS drugs after a dramatic plummet in weight and T cells. But Gwenn had already agreed to be my Florence Nightingale -- the counterpart of Pedro's loving boyfriend, Sean Sasser. We had it all figured out. We dreamed of peppering the airwaves with our prevention messages between mindless *Real World* antics. Drooling casting execs would be powerless to resist "The Beauty and The Beast" angle, not to mention our everlasting charm. We'd be the romance that they'd been craving since the show's

inception -- more popular than Hollywood couples like Jennifer and Brad, or Madonna and Guy.

We were certain that we'd clinched the spot when, at a fall 1999 open casting call (where you get an in-person interview along with other *Real World* wannabes), it became obvious after just seconds who was the cream of this crop. The jaws of our small group collectively dropped when I said I had been living with HIV for *more than 10 years!* But the biggest reaction came when Gwenn announced that *she was in a relationship with me!! And we had sex!!! And we liked it!!!!* I knew that the slimy casting agent thought she had struck gold. No more getting lost in the shuffle for *this* positoid. I had arrived.

Soon we got an enthusiastic phone call from the Bunim/Murray execs whose gum-smacking assistant told us that we'd be contacted again "sooner rather than later." We were set to begin packing. But then weeks passed without a word. Those bastards lied to us. I was left to imagine what had happened. I could envision an exec saying, at worst, "You know, we already *did* AIDS" or, at best, "Reflecting on Pedro, this experience can be too taxing to someone with a compromised immune system." Either way, we felt cheated. Having deflated my ego for a reality check, I understood that they were refusing not only to cast one articulate and empowered man with AIDS but, for yet another season, to even face the fact that half of all new HIV infections are among people 25 years old or younger.

Two years later, my beauty queen and I are still spreading the gospel of safe sex, without sacrificing ourselves on the altar of pop culture. We're just as effective at communicating our message as a humble couple from a small Virginia town as we would have been on *The Real World.* We learned the hard way that while not everyone can be on the show, AIDS can affect anyone -- and that's what's real.

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