Pedro Leaves Us Breathless

How a nice Cuban boy from the suburbs of Miami becomes a nationally respected AIDS activist, gets on MTV's muy hot true-life soap, The Real World and winds up America's summer heartthrob.

August 1, 1994 By Hal Rubenstein

Pedro Zamora is a transcriber's nightmare. During four hours of conversation, not once does he pause for reflection or effect. He never clears his throat, repeats the question or employs any of the standard stalling-for-time tactics. His speech is devoid of hmms, huhs, let-me-thinks and, sometimes, when he's really zooming, even breath.

But Pedro Zamora is an interviewer's dream. Most 22-year-old guys have their heads so far up their butts you can't make out the knots on their ties; yet here is a young Latino man, who has known of his HIV positive status since before he graduated high school who unfailingly focuses with greater precision and responds with more revelatory clarity than anything from the mind of Minolta. Apart from having been chosen from 30,000 applicants and becoming the most riveting member of the septet that makes up MTV's third edition of The Real World, Zamora demands and deserves attention because he has scanned America's uncharted horizons of sexuality and AIDS like a halogen lighthouse, confronting obstacles deliberately sidestepped and discovering opportunities previously overlooked. When was the last time you were so busy listening to someone you forgot to blink? Wherever Pedro Zamora speaks in San Francisco, the fog lifts.

Still, he's not satisfied. Regardless of how much more information we now have about AIDS, Zamora is adamant about how badly our current just-the-facts-ma'am approach to the disease has fared thus far. Delivering cross-references more intricate and dazzling than those Stockard Channing dialogues in Six Degrees of Separation, he calls for relevance instead of statistics, individuality in place of consensus, action over intention, and he wants to be answered now.

When you're in love and in danger, the time for hesitation is through. The guy is on to something. Pick up his pace. Forget about Smirnoff. Pedro Zamora will leave you breathless.

Hal Rubenstein: What made you want to be on MTV's The Real World?

Pedro Zamora: I thought it would be a great way to educate people. One of the problems I face as an educator is that I can get up and tell my story about not feeling well or having fun, about getting sick or going out dancing, but people can't really see it, and I thought being on the series

would be a great way to show how a young person actually deals with HIV and AIDS. And I also thought, it's four or five months in San Francisco, how bad could it be?

HR: Did MTV express any reservations or discomfort about your HIV status or give you any direction before they threw you in the soup?

PZ: No. During the interview process they voiced some concerns, but they were related to me and to my welfare. They told me it was going to be a very stressful situation, and they were worried about the toll it might take on my health. And we discussed that my six roommates should know that they are living with an HIV positive person. But that was about it.

HR: Knowing how much stress can compromise the immune system, why were you willing to risk that?

PZ: I thought about it knowing that just being away from my family would be hard for me. But part of the changes I started feeling when I was diagnosed was my increased willingness to take risks. That may sound kind of odd, but I acquired this desire to experience things I hadn't before. And it's been very stressful at points. And during the filming, my T-cells have dropped. And I got PCP.

HR: You have AIDS?

PZ: Yeah. About a year ago, my T-cell count dropped below 200, so, technically, I was defined as having AIDS then; but after the PCP, my T-cell count is next to nothing.

HR: That didn't make you want to drop out?

PZ: No. For 2 1/2 months I got to do all kinds of stuff—going out with my roommates, dancing till four in the morning, rock climbing. Then I got sick, and now I can't do any of that. Thankfully, the PCP was very mild and was over in three or four weeks.

HR: What was the response of your other Real World roommates when you first showed up?

PZ: They knew one person in the group was HIV positive but they didn't know who. I told them the first night and they asked a lot of questions; but there were questions about me, not the disease: how did I feel when I found out? what did my family say? Instead of, can I get it from picking up a glass? I was ready to answer that, but I didn't have to, and that was very nice. They were pretty educated.

HR: Can you forget the camera is there?

PZ: When all of us are together and we're out doing something or behaving as a group, you can. But that's because the focus is not on one person.

HR: Has HIV ever been used as ammunition against you by your roommates in an argument?

PZ: No. They know better.

HR: Were there any misconceptions?

PZ: It's hard to tell. In front of me, it didn't come up. Among themselves, that's another story. I know that some had questions they didn't ask me; they asked each other.

HR: Do you feel differently now that your status has technically changed?

PZ: Yes. But it wasn't because of the PCP itself. Even when I was asymptomatic, I made a conscious effort to not make a distinction between HIV and AIDS. I didn't want to hide behind the HIV because I watched a lot of my friends, when they were finally diagnosed with AIDS, go right back to the beginning, reliving all the trauma they experienced with the discovery of HIV. I didn't want to go through that again.

HR: Yet many of those who are asymptomatic for HIV for a decade or more don't classify themselves as having AIDS. Do you differ with their thinking?

PZ: No. That's what they're comfortable with, and it's about whatever makes you feel safe. I just didn't feel comfortable with that definition; probably because I didn't see a difference politically. I didn't agree with the definition the government had of AIDS. It was too narrow, excluding a lot of people, women especially, making it hard for them to live and do what they wanted to do by denying them the benefits and assistance they needed. But about a year-and-a-half ago, when I began having minor symptoms—headaches, diarrhea, exhaustion—it stopped being an intellectual choice, and it began to affect me emotionally. That's the change that occurred and has been heightened by the PCP. I started thinking, what do I really want to do with the rest of my life? When I started doing AIDS education, I made myself a promise that there would be a point where I was going to quit and focus on me and take care of myself and do what I really want to do. I think I'm now at that point, and I've discovered that I really don't know what I want to do.

HR: Is there more of a difference being HIV positive in San Francisco than in Miami?

PZ: Oh, yeah. When I first came out as HIV positive in Miami, I was 18, and that was it. There was nobody there.

HR: They were there, they just weren't telling you.

PZ: Well, I mean publicly. I was the only young person speaking out. I had more requests than I could handle. Then I started speaking all over the country, and then I met three or four young people doing what I do. It feels great, not to be the only one.

HR: Miami seems to have become home for anyone who wants to have fun without feeling guilty? Is Miami on a false high?

PZ: Definitely. My generation doesn't know of a time when AIDS didn't factor into a decision about sex. People over 30 can remember a time when it wasn't the case. So, it's hard to excuse going to a club and finding young people not wanting to protect themselves.

But what bothers me about dating, is the guy who comes up to you, says "Hi," and in the course of half an hour, is all over you, wants to take you home, never mentioning the words AIDS, HIV or condom. So, you go home and somewhere between leaving the bar and getting into the bedroom, you say, "I'm HIV positive" and suddenly it's a big deal. That really pisses me off. If you're that concerned now, you should have been that concerned about it when you were all over me in the bar.

I have no patience for it. In my career, I'm an educator; but in my personal life, I don't have to educate anyone. I'm choosing to go on a date, without first having to explain everything in the middle of it. You want to go and have sex with me, get an education, go learn the facts and then we can discuss it. But not now. I can't tell you what to be comfortable with. It's not my responsibility.

It's all about risk and risk is relative. Every time you get on an airplane it's a risk, but it's one I feel comfortable with. I feel fine having protected sex, others may not. Some people have oral sex without a condom, others won't kiss. There's no wrong or right answer. It's what you feel you can handle.

HR: Has HIV carved a niche in your consciousness you can never get away from?

PZ: Definitely.

HR: Do you resent it?

PZ: Before I came to San Francisco, I thought about going on disability, going back to school or going to the beach—anything to get away from it. But it's everywhere in my working and personal life. People stop me on the street to tell me they saw me on the news that night, or in The Miami Herald. I will never get away from it completely. But it's gotten to the point where I want to take control of it and do it in my way, in my time.

HR: But how can you harness getting zapped? Those times when you're in the midst of something, feeling great about it, yourself, the day, your only concerns seemingly are focused on what's immediately surrounding you—and then comes the sneak attack. This little voice inside you says, in a deafening over-the-shoulder whisper meant for you and you alone, "You're HIV positive." And everything else hits the wall.

PZ: It usually happens when I'm with my family, playing with my nieces. All of a sudden it just hits me that I may be dead in two years. It happened a few weeks ago in Hawaii, after the start of PCP. I had begun treatment, was full of energy. I was parasailing 800 feet in the air. Everything was so beautiful, it was such an incredible feeling. And from out of nowhere, right in front of me, I saw my

PCP. This slap of reality. You want to run but you can't. Certainly not when you're 800 feet up. You have to snap back.

Without a doubt, the hardest part of being HIV positive, of having this life-threatening virus, is that you can't feel anything. You don't feel sick. You don't feel there is anything you shouldn't be doing. Yet you're supposed to plan your life around it. And think about life. The reality is, I'll probably be dead in five years, but I try not to think about dying. But I do know the one thing I don't want is a Cuban funeral.

HR: Why not?

PZ: Latinos, especially Cubans, will lay you out for two or three days, then have open house for 24 hours a day. It's three in the morning and you're surrounded by these 80-year-old ladies who haven't seen you since you were 7, sitting around making jokes, amind all those ugly flowers, thousands and thousands of thousands of the tackiest flowers you'll ever see.

HR: You've stated, however that Latino gay males have a lot more to worry about than an overabundance of gladiolas gracing a coffin.

PZ: A few months ago, I was at a CDC press conference, and they wanted to know why Latinos haven't gotten it together. Why they haven't heard the message? And I got annoyed. I said that the reason we haven't heard the message is that up until now we haven't been called. The message had never been said in a way that we could understand or relate to, in a language we could make sense out of. None of it seems to be about us.

HR: What needed to be made more specific?

PZ: Take the most simple problem. It took us, what, 10 years to realize that you couldn't find a pamphlet that wasn't written for a white middle-class sensibility? Almost nothing was in Spanish and given out in communities of color. My reality as a young gay Latino man is very different than the reality of white America. That's not necessarily bad or good. Just different.

HR: How?

PZ: The resources I have. The references I use. How I relate to other men. My first boyfriend was also Latino. I was 15, he was 18. I could not touch his ass. Keep in mind, I was having sex with him and he identified himself as gay. But we grew up with the attitude that a man doesn't touch another man's face, and you definitely don't touch another man's ass. White boys don't grow up with that.

HR: Unless they start out with Latino boyfriends.

PZ: And when you are dealing with education, you better get those attitudes into place. Religion has to be dealt with too. Luckily, in my family, that wasn't a major issue. My sister became

religious after my mother died, but she's the most wonderful person on earth. She's the most wonderful person in my life, and my sexuality isn't an issue with her. But when you are trying to educate people at such a personal level, you have to take all these factors into account.

HR: But that's an approach that would be beneficial for everyone, not just minorities.

PZ: Exactly. My greatest challenge in life has been to become an entire person. We fragment people, especially minorities, because we assume it's easier to deal with specific problems if we compartmentalize behavior. Well, I could deal with the fact that I was gay. I could deal with my being a Latino man in America. I could deal with having been sexually abused as a kid. And I could deal with having HIV and AIDS. But I couldn't deal with them together at the same time. And you have to if you ever want to become a whole person.

Go seeking services and you'll see the compartmentalization in action. But if you can't deal with my having been sexually abused then it's going to be impossible to deal with and understand my HIV because—guess what?—they are connected. And if I'm struggling to be a whole person, and I'm fairly well-informed, how hard must it be for others? No wonder we're also struggling to be a whole community. We're not and won't be until we accept the diversity that is going on.

HR: We're even goaded by our own gay press to unite for common goals and desires. Yet, while there are basic freedoms, rights and services all of us deserve, we are no more uniform in our dreams and aspirations than all blacks, Jews or women.

PZ: Oddly enough, that's how we wind up excluding people. We expect everyone to want and need the same things. So, gays with different needs often drop out. For a number of reasons, some legitimate, we fail to include young gays in our community; partly because we're afraid. Mention young gays and immediately the association is with pedophilia and recruitment. But young gays exist. To open our arms and accept them means accepting the unique responsibility that comes with them. But if our goal is to be a whole community, it has to happen, and it has to happen now.

HR: At a young age, one's suspicions can approach panic: You're missing a part, you will never be a whole person, life will always seem a case of "if only."

PZ: When I first started doing AIDS education, I would talk about my situation, but I wouldn't talk about my sexuality. I would go into a class of 50 students, tell my story, but never say I was gay. I was gender neutral. "Hey, I never said I had a girlfriend," I'd reply, but only when questioned. I didn't start admitting to the boyfriends until two years ago and that was only after all the media attention. I wanted to put out there that I didn't get AIDS because I was gay, but because I had unprotected sex. I left out that when I was 14, I was going to bars and having sex with 40-year-old men, because at the time, it seemed like an unrelated issue. I didn't want anyone to use that as the excuse or the reason for me getting AIDS, because it sounded so convenient, because it sounded wrong.

I'm amused by people who feel they can learn from my mistakes. But what are my mistakes? That

I wasn't given information. That I was never taught a health attitude about sex and my body. I take responsibility for my HIV and for my AIDS, but I have no guilt. I did nothing wrong. That's my whole problem with the innocent victim tag that is applied to children with AIDS. Where there is an innocent victim there is a guilty one. But I don't feel guilty because I'm not guilty. People go out to get laid, to get high, but not to get AIDS.

HR: Before you began speaking, how hard was it for you to come out as a Latino man in the strong Latino community that is Miami?

PZ: As far back as when I was 7, I can remember experimenting with guys my own age. I knew there was a difference. But it wasn't until I was 11 that it clicked in my mind, "Yeah, I might be gay." A close family member, I think it was my brother, was watching some guy on TV and blurted out the word "faggot," and I connected it to what I was feeling. So, I knew right away that it might not be accepted. But I never went through the guilty feelings or the sense of being dirty that so many gays talk about. Somehow, I knew this is the way it was, and it was natural to me. I never dealt with it publicly until my mother died. I never told her, though I'm sure she suspected it, but I thought I would protect her. Now I go back and hear stories and realize that she wouldn't have had a problem with it.

I was 14 when she died and after that I didn't care who found out. I told my father a few months later. I had met this guy who was 18—the one whose ass I couldn't touch—and we started spending a lot of time together. My father sensed something was odd. He started asking a lot of questions about where I was going and who I was going with. When he had my brother follow us one night to the movies, I decided that that was it. I told my dad that I was gay. We talked for hours. He went back and forth between telling me it was a phase and then reciting a list of all the people in history whom he knew were gay.

HR: At least he knew some.

PZ: It was like he was processing everything and was thinking it out loud, but it was pretty much the same when he found out I was HIV positive. He said, "You're my son, I love you and nothing is going to change that."

HR: You're lucky.

PZ: Very.

HR: Did you feel your luck had run out when you found out you were HIV positive?

PZ: When I found out I was HIV positive, all I knew was that people who got HIV were bad and died quickly. And here I am this honor student, captain of the cross country team, president of the science club. No, "good kids don't get HIV." That's what I was told.

HR: Are we getting smarter? Or are only the ones who really want to know getting savvier while

the others have turned and walked away?

PZ: Most people have the facts. What we have to get across is how to make those facts part of people's lives. We haven't done that. We have this myth that information alone will change behavior. If that were true, no one would be smoking, we'd all be using our seat belts, certain politicians would never ever be reelected. Intellectually most people know you can't get HIV by shaking someone's hand. But emotionally, it's another story. They don't want to shake that hand. And to deny the validity of either response is not real. We have to deal with and connect both. We talk about sex now, but we rarely talk about the emotion. You get information about condoms and oral sex, but it's not solely the facts you are thinking about when you're in bed with somebody.

We have to acknowledge the fear. We have to admit that we have the right to be afraid. And we really haven't done that. How can anyone educate children about sex and sexuality, if they don't feel comfortable with their own sexuality? If you want to deal with my health and my life, you have to acknowledge that I take another man's penis and put it in my anus and do it because I want to. If you can't handle that, don't talk to me. Find me someone who can, or education is impossible. The information will sit there as misfortune happens again and again.

A 5-year-old kid is being abused by a neighbor. At home, the child never hears about sex, never discusses sex. But his visits to the neighbor are all about sex. And the kid is naturally curious. So, he comes home one day and asks his father, "Dad, do you have hair down there?" How does the father react? "You're too young to know about such things." The kid assumes that these are bad things to know, that he will get punished if he brings it up again. So, when the neighbor says, "If you tell anyone we're both going to get in trouble," the kid believes him because he already has proof. He's been told it's bad. Had the father simply said, "Yes, one day you'll get hair down there too, but why are you asking?" maybe, just maybe, the child would have said, "Because I saw so and so's next door" and the abuse might not have stayed a secret and the torment would have stopped. It could have been stopped. And I'm not the isolated case. Even when there is no abuse, rare is the person who grows up feeling proud of his or her body and the changes that happen to it. We grow up talking about our bodies as if it was full of secrets.

HR: Who abused you?

PZ: A neighbor in Cuba.

HR: How old were you?

PZ: I left Cuba when I was 8 years old. But how far back it goes I don't know. 5? It's very hard for me to say because I don't know if it happened over a period of years or months. It's become selective. I don't have all my memories about it.

HR: Do you remember how you felt?

PZ: It was a curiosity thing. It was all totally new. I remember wondering what was all that stuff

coming out of him. He always tried to give me money afterwards. I remember wondering what I was going to do with it because I couldn't take it home. One time I told my brother, and he told me I was never to tell anyone else. Because he sensed I would.

HR: But you were intrigued?

PZ: Definitely. It was not always a negative experience. There were times it was a hurtful experience, physically, when he tried to penetrate me. But there were times when he would just touch. Sexual abuse is not necessarily about the physical act. It's about trust and emotional power. When I was 14, there was a 40-year-old man who had sex with me, and I see that as abuse, even if I consented, even if I enjoyed it. It was about the power he had and the power I didn't. When I had sex with another 14-year-old, I didn't consider that sexual abuse. That was experimentation. The power structure was the same. I had the power to say no. With a 40-year-old, there were plenty of times I wanted to say no, but I didn't think I had the power.

HR: Do you think it still has a lingering effect on you?

PZ: Yes. In the way I pushed people away and didn't know why. In my failure to connect with other gay men because of my lack of trust. It was hard for me sexually beyond the physical level. Emotionally it was just not there. I'm still dealing with it. Sean [Sasser] is the first person who I've been able to break through with. When I look at him, I feel an equal level of power. From our second date, I felt no barriers. I felt understanding. I felt safe. I was able to be vulnerable with him, because for the first time someone was vulnerable with me.

HR: Where did you meet him?

PZ: Here. Well, actually we met at the March on Washington [for gay and lesbian rights]. I had given a keynote address at a conference that he attended, and he came up afterwards and told me how much he liked it. He was an AIDS educator too. So, then when I came out here, we made plans to get together. Four days later we went out on our first date. It wasn't supposed to be a first date, but it turned out to be a first date. I had no idea if he was involved with someone or not. He didn't know if I was. We just went out, and it became a date.

HR: Is he HIV positive as well, if you're free to say?

PZ: Yes.

HR: Is it easier for an HIV positive person to have a relationship with someone who is also HIV positive?

PZ: Sean is the first HIV positive person I've dated. And one of the things I loved was that when I first started talking to him, talking about my feelings, the changes in my body, how I react to the education, I could tell in his eyes, in his mouth, he knew exactly what I meant.

It’s harder because now I’m not only dealing with my disease. I’m dealing with his. I have this person whom I adore, and I now have to spend time thinking that he can get sick. Before, all the focus was on me.

HR: Does Sean stay over at The Real World house?

PZ: Sometimes. Everybody was pretty cool about it. I remember the first time they saw us kissing and hugging, nobody seemed to respond to it, though I’m sure for some of them they’d never seen it. I know one of them said to me afterward, that she tried her best to act cool, but she was shocked. There is an additional issue because my lover is African-American. It’s not just that we are two gay men.

I’m in love with an African-American man. And the biggest problem I had when we started dating was all the messages I had been given when I was a little kid. Like most Americans, I grew up in a racist environment. And like many, I didn’t think I did grow up in one. When I told Sean, he was the first African-American I found attractive, he found that disturbing, and I couldn’t figure out why until I started thinking about it. I grew up being told that his race was not beautiful, were not attractive, and I bought into it. And the more I discovered how beautiful he was, the more I had to deal with the anger I had at having once believed otherwise.

HR: Four-and-a-half months is not a long time to have an exchange of rings.

PZ: Not at all. But, once again, you have to connect it to everything else that is going on. I’m now in an intense environment. The show, the fact that I now have full blown AIDS, makes everything in my life that much more important. I don’t have time to deal with bullshit, with games. I have to cut through things faster than other people. So does he. I’m not being cocky. I’m being efficient.

HR: And you credit this efficiency to being HIV positive?

PZ: Without a doubt. A lot of people spend 20 years together, and they’re still dealing with the bullshit. HIV has given me a lot of freedom. To say this is not acceptable in my life, I don’t want it, I don’t have room for it and if that’s what you’re bringing to the table, I don’t have room for you either. It has given me the freedom to take more risks. What I’ve wanted more than anything else is to learn how to be intimate with someone. The time to do it is now because I know that I don’t have 10 years, 20 years. So, I’m going to risk it now. We’re getting engaged and, in September, I’m moving back to San Francisco to move in together. It means a lot to me -- he means a lot to me—and I’m very excited about it. But part of me thinks, if the relationship with Sean doesn’t work, I’ll deal with it, get on an airplane and go back to Miami; do whatever I have to but get on with my life.

My life is being threatened every day. I’m dealing with AIDS, so I know I can deal with anything.

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