Reality Check

Sean Sasser finds the future in a city from his past

September 1, 1998 By Manjula Martin

When Sean Sasser answers the phone, he's immediately disarming. Sweet, calm and confiding, he talks as though he's known me for years. This is ironic, since for years he's been known by me and millions of others as one of the real-life characters on MTV's 1994 season of The Real World. Sasser's then lover, Pedro Zamora (who died that year), was a regular on the show, and the two plucked HIV from the streets of San Francisco and planted it squarely in the nation's living rooms.

The star of POZ's June 1997 cover, Sasser moved back to San Francisco in April after a brief Atlanta respite. He's now working as media development manager for Stop AIDS!, a San Francisco prevention organization. The 29-year-old is also going back to school to study psychology at the New College of California by way of the unique HIV/AIDS Reentry and Empowerment Scholarship Program. After he graduates, Sasser hopes to provide the kind of support he lacked as a teenager by counseling gay and HIV positive youth on dealing with issues of race, sexuality and health.

It's been 10 years since you tested positive. How's your health?

Physically, I'm OK. My T-cells are just above 800, and my viral load fluctuates between 10,000 and 25,000. I hate pills—I can't take them—so I've never been on any meds. But if I got sick and had to, I'd try a combination of holistic and Western medicines. With Western meds, you're only treating the symptoms, but holistic medicine takes so damn long to show results.

There was a time when I said I'd never go on drugs, but that was during my "I'm gonna die anyway" period. Now I realize I'm not dying. My outlook has changed. I'm getting into the idea of planning my future, which has a lot to do with going back to school. I had given up on school for 10 years. It's great to have it back.

You tested positive when you were 19 and a freshman at the University of Chicago. That's a difficult time for anyone. How is testing positive different for kids than for adults?

For teenagers, there's already a vacuum of support, and testing positive just makes it harder. Young people are not yet initiated into how systems—whether medical or social—work in the world. When you test positive, you have to rapidly learn how to deal with everything, from health

care to the possibility of losing the support of your family. It's like you instantly have to become a grownup.

How did you get the support you needed?

It took me a long time. In college, there was absolutely no support, so I didn't really do anything about it. I left school and stayed in Chicago, but there was no one I could identify with. I didn't find a real community until I moved to
San Francisco in 1991.

When I first arrived, I went to the doctor for chicken pox, and disclosed that I was positive. The staff there immediately told me about Bay Area Positives, an HIV support group. I was like, "You mean there are other people?" I thought I was the only one. The reality of HIV in San Francisco makes it such a supportive place.

With you and Pedro on the show, The Real World suddenly became unavoidably realistic. People everywhere watched your lives unfold. Not only were you young and HIV positive, you were famous for it. What was that like?

It's weird, because I always wanted to be known for something. When you're young, you wanna be a movie star or a rock star, but I never thought anything like that would actually happen. I certainly didn't think I'd be famous for something as personal and controversial as being gay and HIV positive. At first, the show was no big deal to us—we were just living our lives—and then it turned into this overwhelming thing for the rest of the world. Of course the hardest part was seeing Pedro through his dying process, and then being left here alone.

What effect do you think you and Pedro had on teenagers who watched The Real World?

I can't imagine what it would have been like to be a gay teenager, feeling so alone and watching what we did on TV. I didn't have any of that when I was a kid. Basically, MTV got lucky. Because they found Pedro, and he was ideal, and it worked. It was real.

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