Wilson Cruz Grows Up

The actor playing gay 15-year-old Rickie Vasquez talks about his so-called life.

February 1, 1995 By Stephen Cloutier

It's another Thursday evening, and again I'm joining friends (all female) at our weekly My So-Called Life party. This week turns out to be the "Sex" episode. Will she? Should she? Angela Chase, the lead character (played by Claire Danes), is the 15-year-old inside all of them. Rickie Vasquez is the 15-year-old, slowly coming out of the closet, still trapped inside me.

Consequently, this episode provokes a heavy discussion about sex and growing up in our society. Safe in the comfort of our twentysomething living room, we can process our high school traumas and understand their motivations. We remember the pain and are cleansed.

Ten o'clock. Time for The Real World.

But tonight, MTV airs their tribute to The Real World's Pedro Zamora, the man who made this season more real than many of us wanted to get. After an hour of tears, our conversation continues. How are teenagers today going to make it through the new traumas they're forced to deal with in the '90s? How are they making it to their twenties? How do we make it further?

The questions are never answered, of course, but for me, the discussion was unbearably necessary. So I thought, maybe that discussion could continue within these pages, and what better person to have this discussion with than a 20-year-old gay man who plays a 15-year-old gay boy on national television.

Wilson Cruz plays Ricky Vasquez, a young man coming out in the era of AIDS, on ABC's critically acclaimed and low rated My So-Called Life. As a 23-year-old who's been there, I sit down to discuss sex, AIDS, Pedro Zamora and the future with the actor burdened with speaking for all of us.

Stephen Cloutier: On December first, World AIDS Day, the "Sex" episode of My So-Called Life aired, during which your character says he thinks sex should feel like "a miracle, like seeing a comet." Do you think teenagers in 1994 view sex in that way?

Wilson Cruz: I think that there are some teenagers who view sex in that way. Do I wish that most of them did? Yes. But I don't think that's realistic. Obviously, from what we're seeing on the show, most teenagers are having sex. But I think kids are becoming more and more aware of the

responsibilities that lay within sexual contact. They seem more informed than when I was younger. When I was growing up the only thing that stopped me from having sex was just fear—of everything. I think now they're reacting more out of knowledge than the ignorance that I had. I was fearful from ignorance.

SC: Where did you learn about sex?

WC: On the street, conversations with friends. I don't know.

SC: But it wasn't your parents?

WC: I wanted to talk to my mom about it. I was really embarrassed to talk to my dad. I wanted to talk to them about it because I was confused. I lost my uncle to AIDS when I was 15. He got it through IV drug use, but the mention of AIDS involved sex in my mind, so I wanted to talk to them. But I thought that if I started talking to them about it they might think I was gay and the mess that goes along with that, so I just avoided the whole situation altogether. I mean, you wanna ask your parents about AIDS and what it involves, but then you think if you ask, they're gonna think that you're gay because most ignorant people if they hear the word AIDS, are gonna think of homosexuals, first thing. So they don't want to raise their parents' eyebrows any more than they already have, without even mentioning AIDS or HIV. People are scared to talk about it.

But ignorance is born out of silence.

SC: So is Rickie your voice?

WC: Rickie is Winnie's [Holzman, the show's co-executive producer and creator] voice, but she has quite the voice. She has a clear vision for him, and I'm part of it and she discusses that with me. We talk about where we want him to go and what we want him to do and where he comes from. A lot of it is based on my experiences growing up, so I guess in a way, he's my voice, but I just say what she writes.

SC: But you do get some input into what she's writing.

WC: Yeah, if I feel something is inappropriate or not very realistic. I always feel like she's accessible to me. And if she has a question about a story line, like whether it's realistic or not, she'll come to be before she writes it and she'll say, "I was thinking about doing this. What do you think about it?" and we talk about it.

SC: I read that you were thrown out of your house after you told your father that you're gay. Did you request that story line for the show?

WC: Winnie and I are very close and when it was happening we were in very close contact. She used it because she knew that it was a story that had happened to a lot of people. It happens every day—26 percent of gay youth are thrown out of their house and end up being homeless and

living out on the streets because of a fight that they had with their parents. So obviously it's an issue that needs to be addressed. So it happened to me and she wanted to address it, so we took advantage of the opportunity. My dad and I made up within two weeks, but there were still parts of it that I didn't deal with. There's abandonment issues. There's a feeling of lack of support, feeling like you're out on a limb alone. It's a lot to deal with when you're 19 years old.

SC: Do you feel like you're coming out again?

WC: The past year has been one long coming-out process. I came out to my dad on Christmas Eve 1993 and I went on and did the show from there. It's been this huge snowball thing. The minute you tell one reporter, you go on and go on and now it's like all I'm doing is telling the world. This is about as out as anybody can get. I feel like I'm naked to the world at this point.

SC: Do you feel a sense of responsibility being really the first gay teenager on national television?

WC: I try not to think about it. I do think about it, but I try to think about it as little as possible, because if I do, it will drive me insane. It's a lot of pressure. When I first started I felt like I had to be so many things to so many people. But once I sat down and thought about it, I decided I can't do that. I don't want to create a symbol for the gay community. I don't want to create a symbol for the Hispanic community. I just want to create a character that people can relate to and maybe learn something from, just from watching him. I think that's my mission here because my thing is that, once you know someone is gay, you can understand it and become less ignorant of it. There are people out in the Midwest or somewhere that have never sene or heard or an openly gay person, and until they see them they'll be stuck in that mindless ignorance. This is my chance to say, "Hey, my name is Rickie Vasquez, and I'm gay, and now you know me."

SC: Pedro Zamora made an amazing sacrifice to that end.

WC: Yeah, he affected me a lot, not only because he had AIDS but because he was a young Hispanic male. I could relate to him in a number of ways, and to the fact that he put himself out there on the line, in the most unselfish way. It was all totally because he wanted people to know someone with AIDS to help people understand.

SC: Pedro told POZ, "[Our] generation doesn't know a time when AIDS didn't factor into sex." Have you always felt that?

WC: Definitely. When I started puberty it was the beginning of the crisis. I was 13; that was eight years ago, right about the time we started seeing it on the news every five minutes. So of course everytime you have sex with someone, you think, "This could be it." But it affects the way you come into contact with people, it affects the way you practice or don't practice.

SC: Have you ever had sex without a condom?

WC: I have. But it was a long time ago, I swear to you, because the fear that came after it taught

me a huge lesson. That I never want to go through that much fear in my life. I don't want to go through it again. I don't want to put myself in the position of waiting to take an AIDS test again. It's way too horrifying a process. I regretted it and I don't to it anymore.

But it's the weirdest thing. A while ago, an acquaintance of mine came up to me, and I guess he had just finished reading some statistics [about seroconversion rates for young people] and he says, "So which one of us do you think is going to be the one to get this?" and I could have hit him. But I think people start thinking that way. I think there are teenagers who assume that they're going to have AIDS eventually and act as if it doesn't matter. I've actually heard people talk like this and it's like, you are not a statistic, none of us are statistics, and it's just an effect, a picture of what is happening. It's not what's going to happen. They can't tell us the future. They can just tell us what's going on now. And the only way that can change is if we change it. But they just assume, "Well, everybody's getting it so I'm going to get it too." We're surrounded by it every day, and when you're fed all of this, you just assume that that's the way our lives are going to be. People aren't taught that they have the power to change things. We say it, but no one really convinces you of it and people don't know that one person can make a difference. It's so frustrating.

SC: How do you get people you're sleeping with to talk about AIDS and safer sex?

WC: It's usually one of the first conversations we have. It's like talking about politics, or like talking about family. I bring up my uncle and talk about that. I think I subconsciously bring it up without even knowing, or they bring it up. Well, the guy I'm seeing now, he brought it up last time, you know, I mean you have to make a responsible decision and love yourself enough to talk about it, make sure it's out there. But the other thing is trust. Are you going to trust what this person is saying?

SC: Were you very close with your uncle?

WC: Yes. He was very young—he was 31 and he was kind of like my older brother. He was my mother's youngest brother and he lived with us, so we were very close. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't think about him. It's kind of strange—I still feel like he's around.

But I've also lost a lot of friends—and sometimes I think that, yeah, I lost them to the disease, but I think that more, I lost them before they had left us physically. They left me emotionally because they couldn't deal with the whole situation. They felt like they were dead before they even died. So I try to make it very clear that I'm there every step of the way and I make sure that I am there when they need me, whether it's a phone call or going to a movie or whatever, as long as they know they're supported and that they're loved. That's what's important.

SC: Do you think that AIDS will be in any story lines on My So-Called Life, or is 15 too young for them to start dealing with it?

WC: I don't think it's too early for it to be on our minds. I agree it's too young for any of them to

deal with it on a personal level, in actuality, but I think we should address the fact that it's a part of our life. It's something that I at least thought about every day. It affected my coming-out experience. It affects the way you perceive yourself at an early age. When I was 15 or 16 it was still taboo to talk about it. And saying you were gay, well, the first thing my mother said when I came out to her, because she had just lost her brother, she said, "I don't want to lose you." And I said, "Mom, I could be as straight as Arnold Schwarzenegger and I'd still be at risk. It has nothing to do with me being gay." But it has that connotation.

Educating and trying to diminish the impact of homosexuality is definitely a goal of mine, because along with that comes the ability of people to accept. If they can accept someone being gay then that's one step closer for them to accept someone who has AIDS or HIV. Like, if someone can accept someone's race, that at least opens their minds to diversity, which will hopefully allow them to open their minds to homosexuality and so on. It's kind of like a chain reaction. I'm hoping. I'm putting my faith in society that that's the way it works. But I haven't figured it out.

SC: How can we teach people that?

WC: Live by example; teach by example, I should say. And that's always been my attitude. I'm not the type of person to preach, or give long-winded speeches. I, hopefully, am teaching by just living my life. I try to teach openness and honesty right now and we'll see what happens. I'll continue working, to be blessed with work in the industry and, maybe that lesson will be taught. I just try to live by example and share my experiences, and that's all any of us can do. I'm in a position where I can reach more people than most people can because of the show. So we'll see.

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