Real Impact

In an opinion piece titled "Remembering Sean Sasser," Marvell L. Terry II of AIDS United and Charles Stephens of the Counter Narrative Project reflect on the late activist's legacy. Below is an edited excerpt.

January 6, 2020 By Marvell L. Terry II and Charles Stephens

Visibility in popular culture can be a risky endeavor for marginalized folks. The platform offered by a mass audience gives one an immediate megaphone. How can it not be seductive to have an opportunity to move hearts and minds, if not policy and funding? And yet, you are scrutinized and picked apart, carrying both the burden of history and that of representation on your shoulders. This pressure can be crushing. However, when done right, worlds open up.

Sean Sasser got it right. Let us reflect on his legacy on his 51st birthday, which was October 25.

Already a well-respected advocate and educator when he first appeared on MTV's The Real World: San Francisco, which aired in 1994, Sean offered a critical counter-narrative around how Black gay men and people living with HIV were imagined and depicted on television. Although he was not a regular cast member—he was the partner of Pedro Zamora—Sean's impact was significant.

Each season, particularly at its peak, viewers tuned in to see "seven strangers picked to live in a house" and share themselves with the world so that the viewers could "find out what happens when people stop being polite…and start getting real." This show was the great-granddaddy of reality TV shows and a defining moment for Generation X as we learned about ourselves through watching the show's stars navigate the same stuff we navigated.

The Real World: San Francisco introduced Pedro Zamora (one of the first openly gay men living with HIV and one of the first gay men of color to be portrayed in popular media). On the show, we witnessed the journey of Pedro's relationship with Sean, culminating in their commitment ceremony, a television first. Seeing two gay men of color in love offered a generation of us a vision of what the possibilities were for us. (Click here for a remembrance of Zamora.)

Sean's presence on The Real World as a Black gay man challenged assumptions as he projected dignity and grace, shattering stereotypes by not assimilating and by transcending them. He offered inspiration to those of us who had been pushed into the margins. This was a time when the popular sketch comedy show In Living Color (one notable sketch, "Men on Film," trafficked in many antigay stereotypes) broadcast on the Fox network would be going off the air as The Real World: San Francisco would premiere.

Sean, through his presence on The Real World—and his legacy in advocacy—offers us a story about Black gay boys who dream, then become Black gay men who fight. Robbed of his voice, he found it as an educator and an advocate, and, though he perhaps did not know it at the time, he spoke not only for us but to us. Sean demonstrated that whether you whisper or yell, the content of your message is as powerful as its volume.

For many of us, including Black gay boys who grew up watching The Real World, bearing witness to his story and the fullness of his narrative provided an example and blueprint for what it meant to be Black and gay.

Sean aspired to be an archaeologist in his early life. We should act as archaeologists excavating in our movement history the forgotten memories and lessons learned to guide our current efforts. And we must continue to amplify the names of those who came before us.

Additionally, like archaeologists, we must continue putting the pieces together to let the next generation and even ourselves know that we, too, exist and are not extinct. Thank you, Sean.

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