Real Spirit

In a blog post titled "25 Years Without Pedro Zamora," POZ contributing writer Shawn Decker looks back at how the late activist's appearance on *The Real World* inspired him. Below is an edited excerpt.

January 6, 2020 By Shawn Decker

November 11, 2019, marks 25 years since Pedro Zamora passed to spirit. His life inspired me to peek out from my own HIV shell. When he was on MTV's The Real World in 1994, I was avoiding the media's coverage of HIV because I found it to be depressing.

Then came Pedro, walking right into the middle of one of my favorite TV shows. He was full of life. He laughed easily. He made new friends with most of his new roommates and costars. He was also living with HIV openly.

Most important to me was that this wasn't the fictitious character with HIV who always died by episode's end. This was reality TV. And he was the most real thing I'd ever seen on television.

And then he died—a few hours after the final episode of his season aired. I was devastated. And any part of me that was thinking about coming out of my own shell and speaking openly about HIV quickly retreated.

The following year, a Real World reunion special on MTV brought together castmates from the first three seasons in the name of nostalgia and drama. Pedro's boyfriend, Sean Sasser, spoke briefly. He was also HIV positive. He looked healthy; I was relieved. (Click here for a remembrance of Sasser.)

The moment that really helped me was when Judd Winick, one of Pedro's roommates and someone he'd really connected with, explained why he wasn't exactly feeling the feels at this reunion.

Pedro wasn't there. It didn't feel right. Judd was still in mourning. And even though I was just a viewer on the other side of the TV, I realized that I was still in mourning too. Judd implored people to do something about HIV. Anything. And his words resonated.

I didn't realize it immediately, but I know that when I put up a website the following year, in 1996, and opened up for the first time about HIV, Judd's words had their intended effect.

The majority of the past 25 years of my life have been, in some way, focused on my experiences with HIV. I love educating, and I feel good about my contributions to breaking stigma. Part of that

is helping people who are still in their shells.

After I put up my website, my life just felt different. A weight that I didn't even know I was carrying had been lifted. I wasn't vulnerable to seeing a depressing news article about HIV. I wasn't worried about having to tell a future girlfriend about my status.

I learned how small the "out AIDS community" really was too when I got to meet Sean Sasser in person. I was so starstruck. When I initially emailed him out of the blue, he responded by saying he knew who I was through my POZ column. During a POZ Life Expo in San Francisco, I even got to spend a couple of nights at his place.

A year or so later, I got to meet Judd at a book event. He was very friendly. These days, we have quite the rapport on Twitter.

Unlike with Pedro, whom I never got to meet, and Sean, whom I was too much of a noob with to properly thank, I was able to tell Judd how much his presence on The Real World, his words at the reunion special and his graphic novel Pedro and Me (2000) meant to me.

Twenty-five years ago, Pedro died. My heart ached at the loss. It cringed at the thought that I was probably going to die eventually too. I retreated to my shell, but no longer did I comfortably fit inside it. And part of outgrowing it had a lot to do with Pedro. What a shame it would have been if I'd allowed his death to cancel out everything that his life had represented—and still does.

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