Real Life Survivors

When will more people living with HIV start getting real...on television?

June 1, 2009 By Kellee Terrell

On the February 23 episode of LOGO's *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a reality show designed to find the country's best drag queen performer, the six remaining contestants were asked to create a public service announcement for M·A·C Viva Glam, a lipcolor line whose proceeds go to M·A·C AIDS Fund.

After deliberating with the judges, RuPaul announced that Ongina, a.k.a. Ryan Ong Palao, won the challenge. Overwhelmed, he fell to the ground. "I've always wanted to say [it], but I have been so afraid: I have been living with HIV for the past two years," sobbed Ongina. RuPaul applauded him and said, "You are an inspiration."

Generally, most dramatic moments like this one are carefully scripted nonsense, concocted to rake in high ratings. (Think *The Bachelor's* Jason proposing to Melissa and then telling her on live television he made a mistake.) But Ongina's disclosure doesn't fall into that category. Ongina told *POZ* this past February that the confession was completely unplanned. "I decided to disclose right there on stage when they announced I was the winner," the 27-year-old said. "I didn't want to say it on national television because my parents didn't know—but you have to celebrate life, you have to keep going."

His spontaneous disclosure has been dubbed by some as a milestone in pop culture history. "That was the best reality we have seen in a long time—it's the best of what reality [television] can do," said Michael Jensen, the editor-in-chief of AfterElton.com, a media and entertainment website for gay and bisexual men. "Many can identify with Ongina." (In a television twist, Ongina, a fan favorite, was eliminated in the next episode.)

The HIV-positive reality star is not a new concept. In 1994, Pedro Zamora from MTV's *The Real World: San Francisco* became a much-needed voice for AIDS in a pre-antiretroviral America. Thirteen years later in 2007, on *Top Design*, John Gray explained his unruly behavior as a side effect of taking testosterone to counter his HIV-induced low hormone levels. That same year on *Project Runway*, Jack Mackenroth left the show when he developed a non-HIV-related staph infection. But the lack of HIV-positive people on reality shows, given the enormous popularity of this genre and the alarming rise in HIV infections, baffles us.

It's probably the result of a combination of several things: "AIDS in America" isn't as celebrity-

driven or profitable as “AIDS in Africa”; a “What’s the big deal?” attitude prevails because the virus is considered manageable; and it’s easier to ignore HIV because of whom it disproportionately affects. We’re 28 years into the epidemic, and we have yet to implement a national AIDS strategy.

AIDS, a sobering topic, strongly conflicts with mainstream media’s need to constantly feed us buffoonery, commercialism and fluff. As Jensen sums it up: “It’s about what the producers want to show at that given time.” Perhaps when Zamora was cast in 1994 for *The Real World*, the show’s producers wanted to make a particular statement. Keep in mind, back in the day, the show focused on pertinent issues.

Marvelyn Brown, author of *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive* and former POZ cover girl, auditioned for *The Real World* a few years ago and wasn’t chosen. “The producers told me I was too mature,” she said. She could have been the only straight, black HIV-positive female reality star to date—this millennium’s version of Pedro. Apparently, peddling unprotected sex, drunken hookups and fistfights trumped the fact that 34 percent of newly diagnosed cases are, like Marvelyn, younger than 30—MTV’s target audience.

But we can’t blame everything on television’s quest to dumb down America. With stigma fueled by miseducation, homophobia and our discriminatory policies such as the HIV travel ban, it’s no wonder that when casting calls come out, HIV-positive people stay home—or decide not to disclose to producers and viewers. “I know other people who were on reality shows and who were positive,” Mackenroth says. “But because of [stigma], they chose to keep their status to themselves.”

Whatever the reasons, we’d like to remind producers that it’s arguably more powerful to witness a real person living with HIV fall in love, take meds or scream at the ignorant guy for saying you can “catch” the virus from a toilet seat. But don’t get us wrong. We don’t think a handful of positive people on the small screen for November sweeps is going to eradicate the disease, especially if the show is highly exploitative; grounded in sexist, racist and homophobic ideologies; or full of people acting like fools.

Yet, given the right program with the right premise, it could serve as a prevention tool, encourage testing and, most important, be a means to celebrate life for those already living with the disease—a message that is glaringly missing from today’s “reality.” “I received an e-mail from a young man whose sister was recently diagnosed with HIV, and he didn’t know you could be positive and pursue your dreams,” Mackenroth says. “He thanked me for showing that it’s possible to live a full life.”

In the future, we hope that if more HIV-positive people end up on reality shows, they will represent the diverse face of AIDS—an array of ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations. We’d also like to see them on shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, *The Amazing Race* and *The Real Housewives* franchise—thus bringing HIV more into the mainstream. But Jensen isn’t as optimistic. “Shows that could make the most impact, like *The Bachelor* and *Survivor*, are probably the ones that wouldn’t

have any HIV-positive contestants," he says. To be continued….

SOUNDING OFF
We wanted to know how Ongina's disclosure on RuPaul's Drag Race affected you. Here's how some of you reacted:

Robert Breining
Levittown, PA
Diagnosed in 2001
I was so proud of Ongina for sharing that he is HIV positive, especially considering that his own family didn't know yet. He showed other people living with HIV/AIDS that they can still live a productive and fulfilling life. I tip my hat to Ongina for giving others hope. With infection rates on the rise among young people and reality television shows becoming more and more popular, it's inspiring to see people living with HIV/AIDS being cast.

Rick Guzman
Houston
Diagnosed in 1985
I fell apart when Ongina admitted [his] HIV status. [Like him] I had carried that same burden on my shoulders for 10 years before telling my family. I know when I finally told my family it was like getting a boulder off my shoulders. I have been HIV positive since 1985, and I have to say, "Thank God, I have been pretty much in good health." I guess it's because I have a wonderful partner and great family support.

Dab Garner
Jacksonville, FL
Diagnosed in 1982
Hearing the pain in his voice made tears come to my eyes. I was so proud of him for disclosing. As one of the first Americans diagnosed with HIV, I know all too well the stigma that is still attached to HIV even today. Ongina coming out about his status was sharing not only [to those in the room] but also on a national level. Hopefully, his bravery will not cost him personally or professionally. Now if we could only get others to be so brave, maybe we could end stigma.

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