# Tribal Council

September 1, 2008 By Staff

On September 18, CBS will unveil the 17th season of its “reality” endurance competition Survivor. As POZ went to press in late July, the names and biographical details of this season’s 18 contestants had not yet been disclosed. But judging by the program’s past 16 seasons, it would be reasonable to expect the cast to include some version of these ratings-friendly personalities: the leering fitness trainer, the Zen earth mother, the bitchy gay dude, the prejudicial Midwesterner who needs to “grow,” the motormouth bartender and the single mom who’s doing it all for her kids. It would not be reasonable, however, to expect an openly HIV-positive survivor. Of the nearly 300 contestants who have been selected to appear on Survivor since its inception, none has been openly positive.

Why is this, exactly? HIV-positive people, after all, know a thing or two about survival. Surely the daily grind of medications, side effects, opportunistic infections, financial struggles, disclosure and the battle against ignorance and stigma add up to one hell of an immunity challenge, whether it’s with the case manager at the local clinic or with dreamy Jeff Probst on Bora-Bora. But the HIV-positive tribe has even more to recommend it. We have won marathons and triathlons, climbed Mount Everest, braved Marine boot camp, tasted liquid Norvir and held our breath for record time awaiting ADAP reform. But how much longer will we hold our breath waiting for a worthy successor to HIV-positive Project Runway contestant, POZ cover star and champion swimmer Jack Mackenroth, who dared to disclose his status before the program began. (And bravo to the Bravo network for airing and promoting him.)

What better way to educate the public about HIV than to show a thriving HIV-positive person right there with the other “survivors,” digging latrines and balancing tiki dolls on bamboo? What’s more, Survivor 17 will unfold in the West African nation of Gabon, where AIDS prevalence is eight times that of the United States and rising—a twist that would have offered the show’s producers a nifty little humanitarian opportunity.

CBS publicist Brett Gold says that the program is “very hesitant to release and/or comment on details relating to the personal health records of our contestants.” We get it. But does the show have a policy of automatically disqualifying positive contestants? Gold wouldn’t comment. The contestant application, which anyone can download via CBS.com, says, “Contestants will be selected based upon the following traits: strong-willed; outgoing; adventurous; physically and mentally adept; adaptable to new environments; interesting lifestyles, backgrounds and personalities.”

Sounds like we're in!

As for the physical/medical stuff, the application form declares that "all semifinalists must undertake physical and psychological examinations and testing (to be conducted in Los Angeles by medical personnel selected by the Producers) and meet all physical and psychological requirements."

Gold wouldn't specify whether the testing includes HIV testing nor whether a prospective positive candidate could somehow get onto the show without disclosing his or her status. But we think we all deserve an answer. To get one, let's make the producers see our faces, read our stories and realize that we are the ultimate survivors. Either download the application via CBS.com (under "shows," click on "Survivor," then "about," then "casting") or send a note requesting a clarification of the show's HIV policy, along with your own remarkable survival story, to the application address:

Send your letters to:

SURVIVOR
2801 Ocean Park Blvd.
Santa Monica, CA 90405

And while you're at it, why not call CBS and share your thoughts directly?
New York: 212.975.4321
Los Angeles: 323.575.2345

Whomever you contact, tell 'em POZ sent you—and that the tribe has spoken.

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