25 Years Without Pedro Zamora

November 11, 2019 By Shawn Decker

Today 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 The Real World in 1994, I was avoiding the media's coverage of HIV because I found it to be depressing. Because it was always a glimpse into a future I dreaded... a future I'd dedicated my life to living in defiance of. And a big part of that strategy was to never think about HIV until I had to.

Which, in my mind, was going to be related to a physical decline.

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 co-stars. He was also living with HIV openly. Most importantly to me was that wasn't the fictitious character with HIV that always died by episodes end. This was reality TV. And he was the most real thing I'd ever seen on television.

And then he died. On the night that 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, there was a Real World Reunion special on MTV, which was bringing all the castmates from the first three seasons together 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. 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 of this reunion special.

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 when I put up a website the following year in 1996 and opened up about HIV for the first time, I now know that Judd's words had their intended effect. They were the pendulum of Pedro's influence on my own thinking and self-image about HIV swinging back into the proper direction.

The majority of the last 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. The same way that Pedro made The Real World can't-

miss television. Just watching a show where HIV was a central part of someone's life was a big step for me in 1994.

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 had business cards made up that said, "Shawn Decker: Professional Sickboy". In sharing my life with HIV, I was careful to do it in my own way.

I learned how small the "out AIDS community" really was, too, when I got to meet Sean Sasser in person. And I was so starstruck and nervous about embarrassing myself. When I initially emailed him out of the blue, he responded by saying that he knew who I was through my POZ column and interview with the magazine. During a POZ Life Expo in San Francisco, I even got to spend a couple of nights at his place. One of my life's regrets is not smoking pot when offered by him and his friends. I was still a bit of a prude, as I'd stated in POZ, "I never smoked marijuana because I was afraid it would lead to harsher drugs, like AZT."

I was such a noob.

A year or so later I got to meet Judd Winick at a book event. He was very friendly. These days, we have quite the rapport on Twitter. Unlike with Pedro, who I never got to meet, and Sean, who 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, words at the Reunion special and his graphic novel, Pedro and Me (2000), meant to me.

25 years ago today. MTV News. All day and night. Pedro has 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 of 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.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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