50... Pedro Zamora Would Have Turned 50 Years Old Today

March 1, 2022 By Shawn Decker

Today Pedro Zamora would have turned 50. Last December, I blogged about what would have been Ryan White's 50th birthday. I never really knew that they were the same age until now, partly because it seems like people we lose are forever frozen at the age that they passed. Most especially if they die young.

Judd Winick posted this, alongside some pictures of his friend, on Instagram: "Today would have been Pedro Zamora's 50th birthday. (He was a leap year baby, so, his b-day is really the February 29th). It is so hard to think of him at 50. In our head & hearts he will forever be be stuck in amber. So young, funny, & brave. A friend, a son, a brother, a champion.

Pedro Zamora accomplished many great things during his life. After contracting HIV as a teenager, he made it his mission to graduate from high school. Thankfully, loftier ambitions took hold, and after announcing his status to his classmates Pedro discovered his purpose: to educate others about the virus as well as the stigma. He rose to the occasion before becoming a castmate on MTV's reality show, The Real World, and then just showcased his educational skills while also living his life for the world to see... we saw him get married to fellow positoid heartthrob, Sean Sasser... we saw his doctor's appointments... we saw him in sickness and in health...

And then, on the same night as the airing of the final episode, Pedro Zamora passed to spirit. It kills me how many people we lost just before effective treatments were available. When Ryan White passed in 1990, I wasn't open about my status. My mom was devastated but I'd kept a healthy emotional distance from anyone else who was living with HIV, because they only reminded me of my own morbid countdown. Pedro was different. I bonded with him. I'd just graduated from high school and had no idea what my future held... maybe I'd pursue music? I spent so much time huddled up over my synthesizers, but I was too bashful to sing...

That all changed about a year and a half after Pedro passed. I was 20 and had just launched my website where I disclosed my status and celebrity crushes. The first talk I ever did was to a church youth group in my small hometown of Waynesboro, VA. My friends Josh and Jenny attended, and I'm sure I tripped over many words on that first voyage. But the thing I remember most is how warmly the teenagers treated a 20-year old local yokel with HIV. That, and hugging my friends after the talk. I also remember being proud and feeling like, in a small way, I was beginning to carry the torch that Ryan White and Pedro Zamora had lit. I certainly relied on them as inspiration

as I answered questions about living with HIV, as well as my hopes for the future.

Of all of the impactful scenes Pedro provided on the Real World, the one that got to me the most was when he went to speak to college students about his life with HIV:

"Until my last breath, I will be living with AIDS."Somehow, you have to find some type of meaning to your life... I have to believe that there is a sense to all of this... that all the pain that I'm going through- that all the anger all the frustration- that there's something bigger than that. I believe in a God. I have this belief that God is never going to give me more than I can handle in a day's time. My reality today is that I'm a person living with AIDS- I am not dying. I am living with it. And until my last breath I will be a person living with AIDS."

As I typed his words, I cried.

Which apparently I needed today.

A big part of that scene's impact was how Pedro had the support of his new friends, fellow Real Worlders Judd and Pam, who went to watch him speak that day. When that episode aired I was still keeping my status a secret. I'd even leave the room while watching the Real World with friends whenever Pedro was onscreen, because it just felt too personal. If I laughed too loud at one of his jokes it would give me away... or if I squirmed a little during one of his check-ups where his t-cell count dropped...

I didn't know that I'd be sharing my own life and medical drama then. But what I did know was that my friends probably all knew my status already, and that they were all totally cool with it. So thanks to Pedro, Sean, Judd and Pam for showing me that HIV is a team sport, just like life, and it's all made easier when we recognize the beautiful spirits who truly get us.

Happy 50th, Pedro.

Until My Last Breath,
Shawn

The trailer for the new documentary, Keep the Cameras Rolling: The Pedro Zamora Way

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