Never Forgetting Sean Sasser, 1968-2013

August 8, 2013 By Shawn Decker

Sean Sasser

Sean Sasser, whom many of us were introduced to through our televisions in 1994 via The Real World, has passed to spirit at the age of 44. My heart goes out to his friends, family and partner, Michael Kaplan.

Sean was one of my heroes. When The Real World: San Francisco aired on MTV in 1994, I had a year's worth of high school diploma under my belt but no real plan about what I wanted to do with my life, which made me not too much different from most 18-year olds. I was a fan of the reality show, The Real World, and loved the previous season set in Los Angeles. When episode one of San Francisco came on, I quickly realized that I was in for an entirely different experience...

Pedro Zamora, one of the housemates, was HIV positive. He began dating Sean Sasser, who was also HIV positive. Pedro was an activist and educator, and Sean had a quiet, calm demeanor. I fell in love with both of them. They offered a glimpse into a future I desperately wanted- the ability to talk to friends about HIV (something I had not yet done at age 18) and finding a partner that I could share my life with.

That season of the show was a game changer for me. But before I could even process how the show had impacted me, Pedro Zamora passed to spirit. I was devastated. Just as I'd learned about a life that could be possible with HIV, I was also reminded of something that I feared...

When Sean Sasser was introduced to us, there weren't any truly effective combos. As people with HIV, there was a sense that we were ticking timebombs. Yet, there was Sean Sasser, a year later at a televised Real World Reunion, calmly discussing he dearly departed partner. Stupid producers cut short Sean's speaking time- hey, he wasn't a roommate!- but once again I was moved by him. Judd Winick, one of Pedro's friends and roommates, called for people to do something about HIV...

I sat on my bed, but I wanted to jump out of my skin and do something about HIV- not as me, though, as someone else. A few months later, I finally opened up. The impact of Sean Sasser and his Real World alum has never been lost on me. Before any of us could crack a laptop or iPhone and search "living with HIV", there was that group of young people dealing with HIV, conveniently bringing the topic into our living rooms.

I needed that. And so did a lot of other people.

So thank you, Sean, for giving me hope that “poz Seans” can find love and comfort in their own skin.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

In 2009, I shared a personal story on this blog about meeting Sean Sasser. You can read it here.

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