Pedro & Sean & Me

April 3, 2009 By Shawn Decker

I am so relieved- MTV's "Pedro" was a good movie. I got teary-eyed, it hit all the right notes and it was interesting to see the details portrayed in Judd Winick's graphic novel, Pedro & Me, come to life in this film.

It didn't hurt matters that the screenplay was written by Dustin Lance Black, either.

One of my worries is that the film would gloss over the trouble that Pedro's partner, Sean Sasser, had in the final weeks and months of Pedro's life. Zamora's family held Sasser at bay, telling him that Pedro no longer needed "a lover". I remember reading this back in 1997, when Poz did a cover story on Sean.

It really broke my heart.

Gay rights was a no-brainer, but the article really made me think about why gay marriage needed to be- and still needs to be- legalized as well. I'd made so many friends in the HIV/AIDS community, and couldn't bear to think about any one of them not being to see the other if something happened. So kudos to the team behind Pedro for including some of what Sean went through. It was also fun to see a cameo by Judd and Pam, and their kid.

In the last blog I shared a run-in I had with Puck several years ago. Here's a story about Sean Sasser... it's long, so maybe read a little on Friday, then Saturday and then finish on Sunday.

When I went up to New York to be interviewed for Poz magazine- the first interview I ever did about being HIV positive- I was so nervous. I thought about my positoid heroes, Ryan White and Pedro Zamora, took a deep breath, and just said. "Be yourself." In a strange way, that was comforting. I knew my life was changing, and I felt like I had their blessing.

After the first visit to New York, I got a job offer to manage Poz's web site; they didn't know that I knew nothing about internet programming, but assumed I did because I had a web site. I also got a job offer at Community Prescription Services, a mail order HIV meds pharmacy run by Stephen Gendin.

WIth Sean Strub and Stephen Gendin in 1997.

I lived in New York briefly and gave it a shot, but after a month I was exhausted and a bit

embarrassed by my lack of skills in web-making. On the CPS front, I was completely fearful of screwing up some positoid's drug order. I was also lazy- I didn't want to memorize HIV meds combos and nicknames. Also, I was still afraid of getting sick and having to someday be on them.

Spending every afternoon at CPS was like a daily reminder of that fear.

I was still thinking about quiting, but I didn't want to let Stephen or Sean Strub down. Then one day, a positoid was roaming around the Poz office. We started speaking, and went to grab lunch. He'd gone to a Mennonite school in Virginia, and was eager to get started in New York City, but wasn't sure about job opportunities and thought Poz would be the only place that would hire him.

"I think I know about an opening somewhere else," I said. He took my spot at CPS

When I told a co-worker at CPS that I was going back to Virginia, she must have been relieved. The other staffers- all positoids, a requirement at CPS- must have been relieved. They were carrying my weight for a while. "What will you do?" "I want to talk about HIV." She wished me well, and said that it was obvious to her that this is what I should be doing.

I got home to Virginia, and immediately I came down with a nasty bronchial infection. I spent a few months laying low, getting back into my blog and figuring out what the next thing to do was. When I pitched a column to Poz, they decided to give me a shot, and soon after the magazine with my interview came out I was writing the Positoid column.

Several months later, I returned to New York- the Poz with my interview had come out, as well as my first couple of columns. I popped into CPS to see my co-workers. "You're famous!" I was happy my identity of "office slack off" had changed and I'd found my rhythm, much more a peace making positoids life than worrying about messing up their drugs. Another thing I noticed was a picture in my old cubicle.

"Is that you with Sean Sasser?" I asked the kind positoid who took my spot at CPS.

He said yes.

After I got home, I sent a gushing email to Sean and was overjoyed when he wrote back. He knew who I was from the column in Poz, and I immediately saw just how small the positoid universe was. We met at a Poz Life Expo (pictured here) in New York City, then a year later I went to Los Angeles for another Expo. I'd never been to San Francisco before, and Sean was kind enough to invite there for a visit.

Sean gave me some advice on educating, and how important the prevention message is, that just telling an audience you're positive is not enough. Later that night, Sean was aghast that I had not brought pajamas, and couldn't believe I didn't own a pair.

Years later, Gwenn would share his confusion on that particular void in my life. (I now have several pairs.)

Sean lent me a pair of his, and that night I thought for a long time before going to sleep... I couldn't believe how far I'd come. That I was an active part of a community, raising awareness and spirits by being myself. I wasn't the guy who ignored his status, only reminded when he watched *The Real World*.

Also, as I went to sleep that night I couldn't believe that I'd gotten into Sean Sasser's pajamas.

Watching *Pedro* brought back a lot of these memories, and how the *Real World San Francisco* played such a crucial role in planting a subconscious seed that started to change how I felt about my HIV status. That shift in attitude is what led me to meet Gwenn, discover my love for writing as well as my passion to educate others about HIV.

So thank you, Pedro Zamora. You are still with us in spirit.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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