Pedro Zamora, Half A Lifetime Ago

November 11, 2014 By Shawn Decker

Today marks 20 years since Pedro Zamora passed. That's half my lifetime ago, but the loss still resonates with me because of Pedro's influence on my life and my work as an educator. His relationship with Sean Sasser on MTV's Real World showed me that a loving, healthy relationship with HIV was possible. Pedro's roommates reactions to his status were mixed in the beginning, but the solid friendships that grew (particularly with Judd Winick) made me realize how cool my friends would probably be if I ever spoke about HIV.

See, half my lifetime ago, when I "met" Pedro through his appearance on my television, I was a year and a half away from talking about my HIV status. At that time, in 1994, I'd spent pretty close to half my lifetime living with HIV... yet I'd never openly discussed my status, only when backed into a corner by my parents or at a doctor's appointment. Or when someone ratted me out to a girlfriend.

Pedro showed me that you can disclose on your terms. That HIV can just be an extension of who you are. If someone has a problem with your status, it's not your fault it's their ignorance that is the reason for the uneasiness.

His educational style was more straightforward and less laid back than the one that I would adopt after I spoke out; but in the pre-protease era, that's how you needed to reach people. I loved watching him educate on The Real World, then simply live his private life in public as he fell in love with Sean Sasser and shared laughs with Judd and his other roommates over silly, mundane things.

As I was watching from my parent's house where I was living at the time, my now-partner, Gwenn, was also tuning in. Her thoughts on Pedro:

"I remember watching the San Francisco season of the Real World between my freshman and sophomore year of college at my friend's house each week. When I went back to school that fall I also remember the day that Pedro Zamora passed. It was very soon after that I heard a young woman speak at my school who was HIV

positive and that is where my journey to becoming an activist began. It’s been 20 years today since Pedro’s death and although I didn’t know it at the time it was the precursor to my work.”

When Pedro passed in the fall of 1994- the same day that the last episode of his season of the Real World aired, I was devastated. All of my fears of my own mortality, which I’d mistakenly thought I’d come to terms with, bubbled up. Throughout Pedro’s journey, I was making baby steps towards a future I didn’t think was for me: being open about my HIV status. But after he died I just wanted to go back to never thinking about HIV again, and I hated it for taking my new hero so abruptly.

Ironically, Pedro was a hero I couldn’t even say was my hero: half my lifetime ago I was still so quiet about my HIV status.

A year after his passing, there was a Real World Reunion. Judd, Puck, Pam, Sean and the rest of the cast were there. Everyone except Pedro. Judd teared up and asked viewers to “do something” about HIV, anything. It was a desperate plea not only for himself, still grief-stricken, but also a call to arms that his friend, Pedro, would have given had he been there. I was in a lingering depression, one that would last a couple more months- 1994 had been tough, I lost pop culture heroes in Pedro and Kurt Cobain and was also blindsided by a hepatitis C diagnosis.

At the beginning of 1996, I was ready to answer Judd’s call. I posted a website, outing my status once and for all. I began to hone my craft as a writer and develop an educational style that, like Pedro’s, was just an extension of who I was.

And now it’s a half a lifetime later. Pedro’s not here in the physical sense, but his influence has stayed with me over the years. I have the love and the life I dreamed of when I was watching him and learning about his life; a journey he unselfishly shared.

I’ll never forget the doors he helped to open up for me in my own journey.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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