

## First Person

# Pedro Zamora: dignity in the face of adversity

by Jim Jenkins

November 11, 1994 was to be like any other Friday for me. I was ready for the weekend and ready to catch the latest film opening. Like so many others, I was waiting in line to see Tom Cruise in *Interview with the Vampire*.

I was out with one of my closest friends and had the usual good time. Fridays represent the end of the work week and the beginning of two days of freedom and celebration of being away from the corporate existence I lead so assiduously from Monday forward. However, when I got home late in the evening and was flipping through the television airwaves, Nov. 11 turned out to be a day of loss and regret. One of the few heroes left in the Gay community, Pedro Zamora, had died of AIDS.

Most of us in the Gay community never knew him personally. But not only did we have the privilege of knowing about him, so did all of America and the rest of the world who were fortunate enough to catch MTV's *The Real World* all summer long.

Pedro was the first openly Gay and HIV positive person that America got to see go through the process of living with AIDS. He did so with such softened dignity that his loss will make for an emotional void that many will find hard to fathom for the first time in their lives. Here was a rather simple and quiet man who sought to teach the world that there was nothing wrong with being Gay and that his love for Sean, his boyfriend, was as natural as the bond shared between two consenting heterosexuals.

We saw Pedro deal with relationship issues that everyone must face: dealing with family, friends, and making compromises in order to foster a lasting bond with someone we love. We saw Pedro deal with all of these issues right under the vast microscope of television.

Each week Pedro came into everyone's home and the more we saw of him, the more we came to appreciate him for his honesty and bravery. He was unafraid to show his love for someone, and he showed courage in trying to live with HIV. Before Pedro, I don't think middle America ever truly saw someone as open with their sexuality and their HIV status. Many young people who went through life basically uninformed and unaware of the horror of AIDS finally found out what it is like to constantly deal with this terminal illness when they sat in front of their television sets to see what Pedro was doing each week with his other roommates in their San Francisco flat. And now that he is gone, for the first time, many know what it is like to lose someone to AIDS.

Pedro was not an angel although he preformed very heavenly acts by trying to educate the masses. We saw him confront bigotry within the *Real World* household as he tried to contend with Puck, perhaps one of the most offensive and obnoxious characters ever to cross the airwaves. We saw him speak to teenagers about the urgency of practicing safer sex without handing down judgment, something the religious right has yet to appreciate and understand. We saw him deal with the separation from his family. Can you imagine that? A young Gay man whose family had accepted him for what he was? And they even knew he had AIDS. This must have shocked some bigoted Americans at first, but I am sure that if people tuned in week after week, they would have found it hard not to empathize with Pedro's plight.

Pedro was someone we all knew and all loved. It is so ironic that he died so shortly after *The Real World San Francisco* ended its 20 week stint on MTV. Very few of us live long enough to figure out our mission in life. Pedro obviously

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knew his, and the producers at MTV allowed him to fulfill that mission to educate us all on the need for acceptance and the need to go on living even when faced with death on a daily basis.

The producers at MTV are heroes in this as well. They took bold measures to show the first healthy semblance of Gays

on television that was not stereotypical. MTV is to be commended for allowing America to view what it is like to be Gay and be in a committed relationship as witnessed by the very poignant episode where Pedro and his boyfriend Sean celebrated their love in a very touching wedding ceremony. MTV took great risks in bringing the issues of both AIDS and homosexuality to the forefront on television and MTV deserves so much praise for being the first network to effectively supplant much of the homophobia and AIDS-phobia that still exists in America.

Even though some time has passed, I am grieving for Pedro. It still hurts me to know he is gone, but his spirit will live for us all in the annals of MTV and in many of our hearts. I never knew him, but I feel as if I have lost a good friend who taught me so much about humanity and gave me a sense of hope that I had experienced for quite some time. I also will keep the other six *Real World* roommates in my heart because I realize their pain must be far greater than mine. They lived with him every day and experienced Pedro's living with AIDS firsthand. While I have lost over 100 friends and acquaintance to HIV, I realize these six individuals explored unknown territory by living with Pedro and that his kind of loss to them must be overwhelming. But in time, they too will grow stronger from this and they will be able to keep Pedro's spirit alive as they share their memories with others they meet.

Pedro's life was about living with dignity in the face of adversity. He was an example for us all and I am thankful now that MTV gave him to us. I can rest easy knowing that God's newest angel has already earned his wings.

*Jim Jenkins resides in Arlington, Va.*