Firstly, 24 years after their season premiered, dozens of former cast and crew members of The Real World: San Francisco gathered to celebrate the life of castmate, Pedro Zamora—as well as to raise funds for a scholarship created in his name by the National AIDS Memorial Grove. At the intimate affair in the home of the show’s creator and executive producer, Jonathan Murray, they laughed, cried, and shared funny stories and fond memories—not just of a legendary activist—but of a friend, whom they loved and miss dearly.

The now infamous 1994 season in which Zamora clashed with hyper-insensitive and ill-mannered housemate David “Puck” Rainey was ranked number seven on Time magazine’s list of “32 Epic Moments in Reality TV History,” and TV Guide included Rainey on their 2013 list of “The 60 Nastiest Villains of All Time.” Rainey was eventually evicted (a rarity in the show’s history) for his abusive behavior toward Zamora and the other housemates.

Despite its turmoil, the season was also groundbreaking, educational, and inspiring. Not only was it the first reality show to cast someone who was out and HIV-positive, it was also the first to capture a beautiful gay love story, which unfolded between Zamora and his partner, fellow activist Sean Sasser—resulting in the first nonscripted same-sex commitment ceremony on TV. (The Golden Girls aired the first scripted one in 1991.) Sasser, who lived with HIV for 25 years, sadly lost a battle with mesothelioma, a rare lung cancer, and passed away in 2013.

“The Real World was built on the idea of diversity,” says Murray, reminiscing on casting the show’s third season. “The idea was to put seven people together who wouldn’t normally live together, from different walks of life—including different sexual orientation, different racial background, different socio-economic background. So when we were going to San Francisco in 1994, and we were casting in ’93, the AIDS epidemic was sort of at the peak in terms of consciousness of it and concern about it.”

“From the beginning, MTV was supportive and they saw this as a huge issue for young people in America and recognized that it was important for us to include someone [living with HIV],” Murray continues. “So, we put the word out in San Francisco—and then out of the blue, I get this letter from this young man in Miami. He was like, matinee-idol good-looking [and] he had...
found out in a high school blood drive that he was HIV-positive. Ultimately he had decided to focus on educating young people, and had already been to Congress and appeared in front of committees. He was prepared.

Because the modern HIV drugs used today to suppress the virus weren’t first developed until 1996, Zamora didn’t live to see this advancement. The drugs available at the time where far less effective and HIV was often terminal. Because of this, Zamora felt a sense of urgency in reaching his goals.

Aside from his activism, Murray says Zamora “also was a young man who was living within the same city as his conservative Latino dad and siblings, and he wanted to strike out on his own and go to San Francisco and live with other young people, and maybe find love. And at that time, as someone who was HIV-positive, you didn’t know how long you were going to be around, so you wanted to accomplish a lot in a short amount of time.”

Within two weeks of receiving the letter, Murray says he was on a flight to Miami to meet Zamora—who was “actually much sicker than he let on” at the time. Murray later found out that Zamora had been violently ill before the meeting but hid it from producers and was perfectly poised and professional throughout, a testament to his strength and determination. Murray says his only question after that audition was, “Who are the other six going to be?”

Looking back, it seems Zamora had the prescient foresight to understand that his limited time would have the most impact through this new format of reality TV. Former housemates Pam Ling and husband Judd Winick (who met and fell in love on the show, and are still together with two teen daughters) were two of Zamora’s closest and most supportive friends from the show. Getting to know, love—and then so quickly lose—Zamora affected the rest of their lives, they tell The Advocate.

Winick jokes he only gets recognized these days when out with his wife because “Pam looks exactly the same. I look like I’ve been sleeping outside for 24 years.” Though Ling does look amazingly youthful, Winick is perhaps being a bit too hard on himself, as the only difference from the Real World days is some graying of his more closely cropped hair.

“I know Pam and I went into it like, ‘This is gonna be stupid and fun and cool,’” recalls Winick of his expectations of the reality TV experience. “But even when living with Pedro... you got the sense that, ‘Oh, this is someone much more important’—and actually being hyper-aware of the fact that, going in, ‘OK, this is actually going to be sort of life changing for a lot of people’.”

“I mean, if you were in medical school in San Francisco in the ‘90s, definitely AIDS was part of training and just the patients that we saw,” says Ling of her continued work as a physician in this area. “I think for me, knowing Pedro was... really different than having a patient. Definitely being on The Real World with Pedro showed me how important it is to have the messages not only in the clinic, but to have messages where young people are—which is on MTV, outside of your typical medical context. And I still think that’s true.”

The couple says it was important for them to continue to support this particular scholarship, in Zamora’s name. “It’s been 24 years and there’s been a couple things that have had his name on it, and they’ve been fine, but this is the only one that seems to be kind of working,” says Winick.

“Well, this one really matches,” adds Ling. “I think this is what Pedro would have wanted, if it’s his legacy.”

I mean, it’s nice that there’s a street named after him and it’s nice that there was a clinic named after him—but this is about youth leadership and empowering other young people to carry a message forward.” And that really carries on his legacy.

Though being HIV-positive back then meant a more serious prognosis, the couple says they were still blindsided by Zamora’s rapid decline in health and sudden death. “He was going to go on and do this—it wasn’t going to be us,” says Winick referring to the fact that he and Ling continued a speaking tour in Zamora’s place for about two years after his passing. “We were going to be his friend and watch him... but then he got sick. And then, everything just changed.”

Winick later channeled his grief into an award-winning autobiographical graphic novel, Pedro and Me, which won the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Comic Book in 2001. He also expresses frustration due to the lack of conversation and education around HIV since the couple’s time on the show. “It makes us nuts and we talk about that. What would Pedro be doing right now? He’d be very angry.”

In particular, he’d be disappointed more young people aren’t embracing PrEP, the HIV-prevention protocol that’s nearly 100 percent effective in preventing transmission.

At 22 years old, Zamora passed away only hours after the last episode of the season aired in November of 1994. For an entire generation, the tragedy of the epidemic became all too real—but his message had lasting impact. And now through this scholarship, those who were closest to him in life are helping to ensure his memory and life’s work continues, and that his untimely death wasn’t in vain.

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