

# television

## For Richer or Poorer

Reality contestant battles for some acceptance (and \$200,000)

by Michael Wayne Keck

I won't lie. I've always thought it would be rad to be on TV. So when I got picked from thousands of peeps throughout the country to be on the WB's *Survival of the Richest*, I was hella excited.

It all started with an ad I saw on Craigslist that said: "Do you feel like an underdog? Do you want a bigger piece of the pie? Tell us all about it."

Being unemployed and feeling like I'm not getting ahead in life, I thought I'd apply. After a long selection process of applications, interviews on camera, 20-page background checks, a psyche exam (Am I crazy? I'll save you time...yes!), a medical exam and a panel interview with network executives, I was packing my bags and being driven to the hills of Los Angeles.

It was fun, exhilarating and scary as hell. Even up to the point where I walked into the mansion, I had no clue what the show was about. In the interview process I had been asked numerous times how I felt about rich people and whether I'd ever ridden in limos or shopped in Beverly Hills. I genuinely thought I was going to be living like a Hilton and experiencing the high life. What a shocker when I found out I'd be cleaning toilets, serving chicken at a Medieval restaurant and sharing a house with rich, spoiled brats.

To add to the joy of my television debut, I was

"randomly" paired with a blatantly homophobic dude, Nick, who made me feel like a high school freshman being bullied by an asshole senior.

Don't get me wrong: At 27, I've dealt with my fair share of discrimination and intolerance. I used to think it was my duty to win people over, but I had gotten to the point in my life that when I encountered bigots, I simply walked away and avoided the negative energy. Life is too short.

This was my initial reaction with Nick: Why bother? He's an insecure jerk. I'm not. But old habits die hard, and I knew that millions of people would be watching our interaction, so I started to think maybe it is a gay man's duty to help people understand and accept us. If not me, then who will?

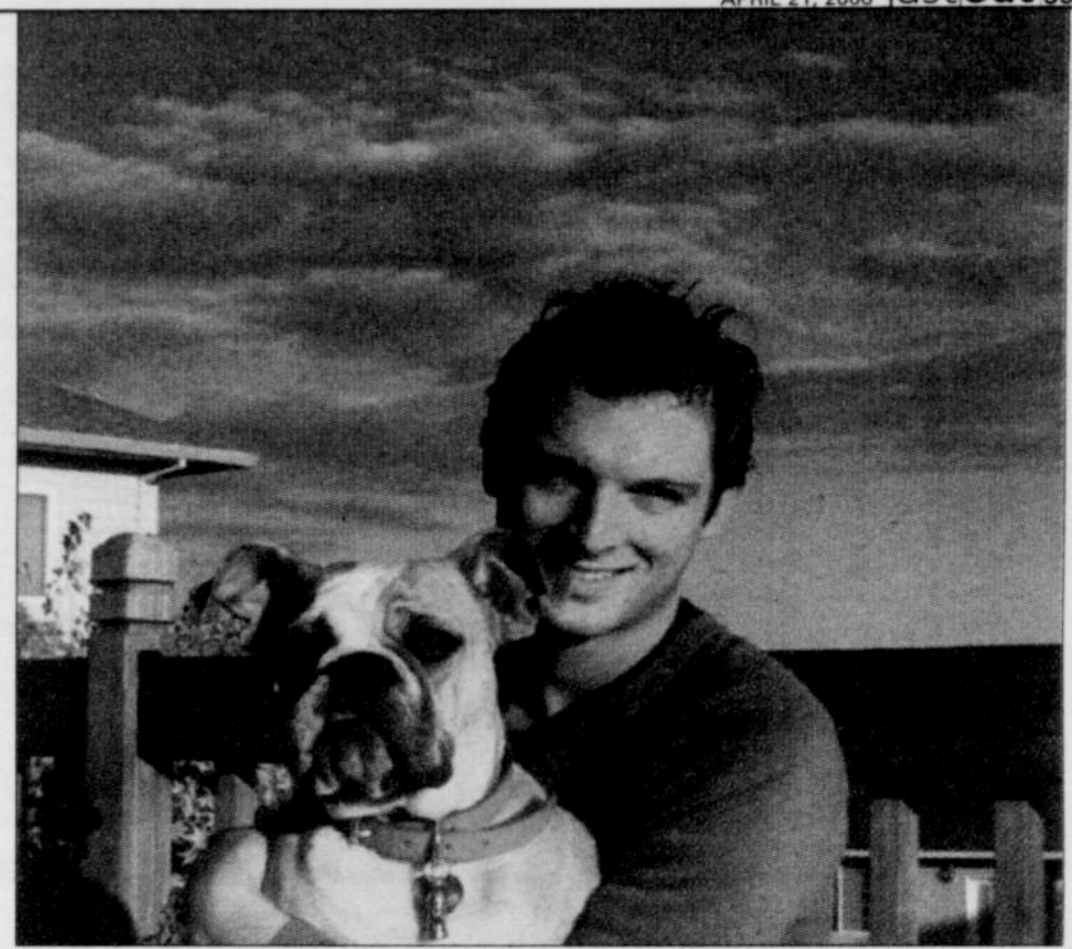
Suddenly, winning \$200,000 took a back burner to trying to teach Nick that I'm here, I'm queer, get used to it—maybe even accept it. It wasn't easy. I sincerely felt at times like crawling back into my turtle shell. All kinds of old feelings and memories of being bullied and harassed in high school and college came flooding back.

Besides being called a girl and a flamboyant bitch by Nick, at one point he literally moved his mattress out of the bedroom because he refused to sleep in the same room as a gay guy. It hurt, but I didn't give up. I started opening up about my life,

my family, my relationships and my experiences as a gay man. He really started seeing me as more than just a homosexual but as a real person. And that's the way to change anybody's bigoted mindset—if you can let the haters get to know you and see your authentic self, it truly can change people's minds and the preconceived notions they have.

As it played out, Nick got voted off the show, and with the rules of the show, I had to go, too. Was it fair? Not really. But I made some great friends, got paid a little money and got to be on TV, and I'm even getting recognized at the grocery store now, which you know I'm loving.

One of the biggest things I got out of it was a renewed sense of confidence in myself and passion for my community. I was becoming an apathetic gay man, which can be dangerous. If we are all lazy and indifferent toward our detractors, how will we



Michael Wayne Keck (with his English bulldog, Lola) was paired with a homophobic spoiled brat on the WB's *Survival of the Richest*.

ever forge forward for acceptance and equal rights? I mean, Ang Lee can only do so much for us; we need to step it up ourselves, too.

I guess I'm just some "unemployed receptionist" trying to save the world, one homo hater at a time. **ic**

*SURVIVAL OF THE RICHEST* airs 8 p.m. Fridays on KWBP-TV. Keck will be back for the May 5 finale.

MICHAEL WAYNE KECK is a former Portlander living in Los Angeles. Although he doesn't love his reality title of "poor kid," he understands there are worse things to be known as, like "big fat obnoxious fiancé."

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