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The Boston Globe

A positive change on reality TV



Gunner Scott of the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition thinks the reality TV appearances can help change attitudes. (Pat greenhouse/globe staff)

By Vanessa E. Jones
Globe Staff / October 7, 2008

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Levi Valentine had never watched a full season of Tyra Banks's reality show "America's Next Top Model" in the 10 seasons it's been on the air. Then Valentine heard that a transgender woman, Isis Tsunami, was going to be one of the contestants. That was enough to persuade Valentine, a 29-year-old transgender man who lives in Jamaica Plain, to tune in.

"Top Model" isn't the only reality show featuring a transgender woman this season. On VH-1's new show "I Want to Work for Diddy," Laverne Cox battles other contestants to become the rap mogul's assistant. Even before the shows premiered, their casting was applauded by groups such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the gay news website AfterElton, and local organizations such as Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, which

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works to end discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression in the state.

Once the shows began airing, the two women gained a strong following among viewers.

"They've presented themselves pretty well," Valentine says, "but they're not doing this for the community; they're doing this for themselves, which is great to see. It's about time actually."

On the "I Want to Work for Diddy" website, the blog writers say of Cox: "She is well-spoken, fascinating and, we humbly think, a trailblazer in the realm of televised diversity." The comment shows how Cox, and also Tsunami, have humanized transgender people. During recent interviews, local transgender people said they think mainstream exposure to Tsunami and Cox will help society become more comfortable with people who choose to live as a gender different from the one on their birth certificate.

The fact that both appear on reality shows could have a deeper national impact than if they had appeared on a television series or movie, says Gunner Scott, a female-to-male transgender person who heads the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition. The group focuses on ending discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression. "There are some folks on reality TV that we tend to remember," says Scott, "that become stars in their own way. The everyday-ness of it all is more accessible." Since Cox and Tsunami are black, the familiarity, in turn, may help temper the violence that's still directed toward transgender women of color, says Scott.

Cox and Tsunami have also inadvertently become role models in a community that doesn't have many.

"It's like, 'OK, there are people like me, and I could do other stuff,' " says Corey Wiggins, a 27-year-old transgender man who works with gay, lesbian, and transgender youth as a crisis intervention specialist and outreach coordinator with Boston Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Services. The Back Bay drop-in center serves 13- to 25-year-olds. "With a lot of our trans youth," Wiggins says, "a lot of people feel isolated because there are not a lot of trans folks in the media."

When transgender people are presented in pop culture, they aren't often portrayed positively. From 1991's "The Silence of the Lambs" to 1999's "Boys Don't Cry," there has been a tendency in Hollywood to either kill transgender characters or present them as prostitutes or freaks, Scott says. The appearance of Cox and Tsunami shows how that mindset may be changing.

This fall, fashion designer Kenneth Cole is using a transgender woman named Nina Poon in his national ads promoting bags and coats. The 2005 film "Transamerica" didn't end with the lead transgender character getting killed. The series "Dirty Sexy Money" is one of the rare examples in which a transgender woman actually plays a transgender woman, but the character is a prostitute. Several BBC documentaries have tackled the subject sensitively, including "Sex Change Solider," which airs tomorrow night at 9 on BBC America, about a man in the British Army who becomes a woman. American documentaries such as 2006's "Boy I Am," and 2005's "TransGeneration" have also explored the issue.

In the reality shows, Cox and Tsunami had to explain their lifestyle choices to the others in their group. While local transgender people say facing questions isn't unusual, they also say people should know there's a limit to what



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respectfully can be asked. "There's a line of want to know vs. need to know," Scott says. "For someone who hasn't met someone who's trans there's an issue of where is that line." For instance, although "Top Model" did touch on the fact that Tsunami was homeless and takes hormone shots to achieve her gender transition, those facts didn't drive Tsunami's overall narrative, which, Wiggins says, was a relief.

In fact, Wiggins didn't object to Tsunami having to explain herself on "Top Model." "I thought it was weird that people kind of took offense to it," Wiggins says, "like it was a personal attack."

Although "Top Model" judge and fashion photographer Nigel Barker has said in a recent interview that it's not unusual for transgender models to work in the fashion industry, some of the show's competitors didn't share that open mind. One aspiring model, Hannah, said she wouldn't hang out with a transgender person and shoved Tsunami when she thought Tsunami invaded her personal space. During a photo shoot a trio of competing models made fun of Tsunami behind a curtain as Tsunami was being photographed.

"When you have a bunch of people who are generally the same, and you throw something new into the mix, people are going to question that and be upset about that to an extent," Wiggins says. "It's about our intolerance of people who are not like us."

In comparison, Cox had it easy. A few of her competitors seemed uncomfortable in her presence, but Cox was generally recognized as a good person with a warm personality. "They loved her," Valentine says. "They were really comfortable with her."

There's a possibility that the likability of Cox and Tsunami will help alleviate some of the violence directed at transgender women of color. "In general," Scott says, "transwomen of color are seen as throwaway in our society."

That perception was in the back of Wiggins's mind and others Wiggins talked to after Tsunami was voted off of "Top Model" on Sept. 24. Wiggins says Tsunami had less to worry about since she doesn't look as masculine as Cox. But the reality television exposure removes the protection of anonymity.

"People said, 'I hope she doesn't get beat up,' " Wiggins says. "I hope no one beats her in the face, because she passes very well." ■

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