

Back From Reality

Minnesota's contingent of ex-reality TV stars has mixed feelings about its experience on shows like *Project Runway* and *The Bachelorette*

By: Rose Hansen | [June 2012](#) | From the print edition



Depending on one's perspective, life after reality television is either excessively rewarding or unexpectedly punishing.

Image credit: Marhsall Franklin Long

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Twenty years ago, *The Real World* shoved ordinary folks into the spotlight until they became famous. That first season holds an innocence lost on today's participants. Back then, those seven strangers picked to live in a loft had no clue what to expect, or what riches they could acquire in the aftermath.

Today, participants often parlay their reality TV appearances into careers. The Twin Cities reality show population holds talent agency contracts, attracts onlookers and demands thousands of dollars to appear at shopping centers, corporate conferences and private events. But even as they are cashing in on their fame, many are trying to separate themselves from the shows that put them in the spotlight in the first place.

"People know me from [*Project Runway*], which is good and bad," says soft-spoken Danielle Everine, who competed on season 9. "I don't want it to define me."

Part of that hesitation comes from contestants feeling like their "true personalities" were not captured on screen or that editing sleights-of-hand were used to concoct story lines that were tenuous at best. "There were moments [watching the show] when I thought, 'It totally did not go down that way,'" says Justin Davis, who appeared on season 7 of *Next Food Network Star*, "but I understood it was the nature of the beast."

"You do sign a 6,000-page waiver saying [producers] can do whatever they want with you during the show and edit it however they want," says Ryan Hoag, who appeared on season 4 of *The Bachelorette*.

Producers shuffle footage for concision, to make a babbling interview coherent or to simply tell a story quickly and entertainingly. "They tell you: 'This is reality TV and we don't put words in your mouth, but we will show things that you do and say,'" says *The Biggest Loser's* O'Neal Hampton.

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Even after eight years in the high-profile career of NFL wide receiver, Hoag describes the post-Bachelorette months with amazement. “[It was] as if Michael Jordan in his prime walked into a bar,” he says. “Everybody wanted to take a picture and [get an] autograph. In one sense, it’s silly and it’s fun, but in another sense—hey, I was on three episodes. I wanted to talk about more things than [season 4 bachelorette] DeAnna [Pappas].”

Hampton says producers told him at the outset, “Your life is going to change from this point on.” After being on television for two hours every week for nine months on season 9 of *The Biggest Loser*, that prophecy proved true. Hampton shops at multiple grocery stores and uses several gyms just to maintain a small measure of privacy. “Life’s not back to normal, and I don’t know if it ever will be,” he says.

But many say they’d do it again.

“I believe in face time,” says Tim Mahoney, who competed on season 1 of *The Voice*. “As a musician, you’re always trying to play to bigger audiences, and when millions of people watch a show, people know about you instantly. It does ten years [worth] of touring in two minutes.” The singer claims requests for private performances rose by 40 percent. He’s also competed on the Salvation Army’s local “Dancing With the Stars” fundraiser and appears on radio station KTWIN 96.3 as *The Voice* expert.

And he’s not the only one whose fame leveraged him into stability.

Hampton travels the country as a motivational speaker, while Everine works as a Project Runway Design Expert for Clothier Design Source, a local apparel development company. Her line has been featured in the Denver Art Museum and the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts. Davis says his Next Food Network Star appearance was the boost needed to popularize his food blog and start a catering company with his wife.

What may define these individuals more than anything is their collective resilience. After getting booted on national television, one might expect them to be humiliated, but the reality of post-TV life belies that assumption. Mahoney is still convinced of his own talent; Hoag remains hopeful about love.

So, as they move forward in their own realities, how do they feel about the “reality” they had to go through to get there? According to Davis, these shows are “staged,” Hoag calls them “scripted” and Mahoney simply grins and says, “It’s a production.”

Does that mean the allure of reality TV is gone?

“I still get sucked into a lot of shows myself,” admits Rebecca Epley, who competed on *America’s Next Top Model*. She’s not alone. Every contestant interviewed admits to following shows like *Survivor*, *Real Housewives of New York City* and *Dancing With the Stars*. Even this group, which knows better than any of us that there’s little reality in the genre, gets hooked. But why?

It's been speculated that the appeal comes from the pleasure of feeling superior to on-screen contestants when the drama moves into full gear. When the tears and backstabbing happen, we shake our heads and think, Why would you do that?

In that reaction something very real exists, whether we like to admit it or not. Reality TV still has the power to provoke us. It offends. It challenges our sense of good behavior. We're taught to value team spirit, but *The Biggest Loser* and *Survivor* prove teams can screw you in the end. The cult of self-esteem claims everyone is beautiful, but Tyra Banks says sit down and shut up.

And then sometimes it does something that is usually considered the territory of high art: It actually tells human stories.

"Every time I cried on TV, those were genuine tears," Hampton says. "They didn't have to prompt or script any of that. They didn't have to set up scenarios."


And when Hampton breaks into tears and begs his competitors to keep his then-obese daughter on for another week at the ranch, it's a haunting slice of life more authentic than any fictional subplot. In 20 seconds, we see one man's love for his child—we see the human condition on full display. It's unsettling and heartbreaking. And the reality is, it's great TV.

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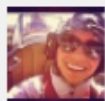
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