In early 2000, David Pritikin ’93 was asked if he would be interested in going to Malaysia for a few months to help produce an unusual new television program. Pritikin thought it would be nice to get out of Los Angeles for a while and see a part of the world he knew very little about. Besides, the premise of the project sounded intriguing.

One year later, that offbeat new program has become a cultural phenomenon, and Pritikin has found himself playing an integral role in it. The program is “Survivor,” the enormously popular CBS series in which contestants are “stranded” in harsh, remote locations and try to outlast each other for a $1 million prize. Pritikin served as associate producer for both of the “Survivor” series that have been filmed so far, and he expects to have a key role in the third series, to be filmed this summer.

“It’s surreal right now,” Pritikin said. “Why is this show so big, and how did I end up on it?”

Since the first “Survivor” made its debut last summer, the program has become a ratings juggernaut and a staple of American pop culture. The first series was filmed on a tiny Malaysian island in the winter and spring of 2000, and aired during the summer. The second series, which was filmed in the Australian Outback last fall, began airing on Jan. 28 and will continue through late April.

Pritikin, a member of the men’s basketball team during his four years at the University of Hartford, earned an associate’s degree from Hillyer College (then called the College of Basic Studies) and a bachelor’s degree in politics and government from the College of Arts and Sciences. The 1992–93 Men’s Basketball Information Guide described Pritikin as a versatile player and a “gritty defender, physically strong and scrappy,” and said that he “exhibits a ‘blue collar’–type work ethic”—qualities that may have come in handy on the “Survivor” set.

The alumnus says his experiences at the University, both as a basketball player and as a student, helped him to overcome shyness, build confidence, and develop the drive to succeed. You can take what you’ve learned through athletics and through school and mirror it to your everyday life.”

Pritikin still has close relationships with a number of friends from his Hartford days, including Jack Ayer ’94, his former roommate and basketball teammate, and Lee Villas, B.A. ’91, M.A. ’93, a former manager of the basketball team. Pritikin also is occasionally in touch with former Hawks teammate Vin Baker ’93, who went on to become an NBA All-Star with the Seattle SuperSonics.

After graduating from the University, Pritikin moved back to his hometown of Chicago and entered a stockbroker training program. But his true passion was in television and film production. He had worked as a production assistant on various independent films, and in the mid-1990s he co-produced an independent film called Totally Confused with his brother, Greg Pritikin, a writer and director.

In 1998, David Pritikin decided that being a stockbroker “was not what I wanted to do with my life,” so he packed up and moved to Los Angeles. Eventually, he landed a job as assistant to the producer of the ABC television program “Sabrina the Teenage Witch,” on which he worked for two seasons.

During that time, Pritikin met a producer named Tom Shelly. He had a feeling that Shelly would be a good person to get to know, and he cultivated a relationship with him. Pritikin’s hunch proved to be correct: Shelly was hired as supervising producer of “Survivor,” and it was he who invited Pritikin to take part in a strange new program being filmed, as
Pritikin put it, “in the bowels of Borneo.” He interviewed with Shelly and the show’s executive producer, Mark Burnett, and set off on the biggest adventure of his life. As soon as he landed in Malaysia in February 2000, Pritikin knew he was in for a challenging assignment. “We were slapped with thick, heavy heat and humidity as soon as we got off the plane. It was unbearable.” After a two-and-a-half-hour boat ride, he and the rest of the crew arrived at Pulau Tiga, the remote island where the show would take place. The 16 contestants would arrive about two weeks later.

Like his fellow crew members, Pritikin had no idea what to expect and no way of knowing that “Survivor” would become such a big hit. “I thought it was definitely an extraordinary idea, and it was an opportunity to get to a part of the world I wouldn’t get to otherwise. But obviously, none of us knew what a success it would be.”

As associate producer, Pritikin worked with the camera crews to record the contestants’ daily lives on the island, following their every move, while trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Most nights he slept on a hammock on a beach at the edge of the jungle, so he would be close to the contestants when they awoke in the morning. The arrangement had its advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, “It was beautiful. You’d wake up and you’d just see nothing but water.” On the other hand, there was many a night when Pritikin would wake up to find rats crawling on him.

Of course, he and the rest of the crew still had it better than the contestants. While the contestants’ diets were limited to small rations of rice and any rats or fish they could catch, the crew ate real meals cooked by a Malaysian chef. Even so, Pritikin says he lost about 15 pounds during the filming in Malaysia.

He came back to the United States in late April 2000 and, over the next few months, worked on postproduction and editing. By the time “Survivor” finished its 13-episode summer run at the end of August, the show had become a wildly popular hit.

Next Stop, the Australian Outback

In late September 2000, Pritikin headed Down Under to resume his duties as associate producer for “Survivor II.” The premise of the show was the same as the first; but in many ways, the experience was very different.

When Pritikin left for Malaysia, no one had heard of “Survivor” and no one had any expectations for it. By the time he left for Australia, both the popularity of the first show and the expectations for the second were overwhelming. “I think there was a lot more pressure the second time around,” he said. “When you’re on top, everybody is gunning for you. Everybody is looking for you to fail.”

Another difference between the two shows was the size of their budgets. In Malaysia, a crew of about 100 people worked on “Survivor,” Pritikin estimated. For the filming in Australia, the on-location staff grew to about 250 people. That included a group of intimidating, highly trained security guards, who kept out reporters and others trying to sneak onto the “Survivor” grounds.

Perhaps the difference between the budgets for “Survivor” and “Survivor II” is best illustrated by Pritikin’s weight fluctuations. “As the budget goes up, so does the food quality. During the first show I lost 15 pounds, and during the second show I gained 15,” he said, quickly adding that he has since lost the extra weight from “Survivor II.”

Despite the bigger staff and better food, working on “Survivor II” was far from cushy—in fact, it was downright dangerous. Contestants and crew members had to deal with extremely rugged terrain, oppressive heat, some of the world’s deadliest snakes, “spiders the size of my hand,” and the crocodiles for which the Outback is famous, Pritikin said. Highly venomous snakes with names like Death Adder would routinely slither through the crew’s camp.

When asked if any contestants or crew members were bitten by snakes, Pritikin said he could not comment. Like everyone associated with “Survivor,” he had to sign a $5 million confidentiality agreement to ensure that none of the show’s secrets would be revealed.

Though conditions in the Outback were harsh, Pritikin said the filming of “Survivor II” was a positive experience. For one thing, he was given more directing responsibilities in the Australia series, a promotion that he thoroughly enjoyed. And during the grueling 42 days of filming, he did occasionally get to have some fun (depending on your definition of fun). For example, he and other crew members jumped into the water from the top of the 40-foot cliff that contestants leapt off in the second episode. In case you’re wondering, it hurt.

Since “Survivor II” began airing in January, Pritikin has been writing weekly episode summaries and editing video clips for the “Survivor” Web site, accessed through <www.CBS.com>. In July, he will leave for the set of “Survivor III,” the location of which had not yet been disclosed when The Observer went to press.

Pritikin’s ultimate goal is to be an executive producer of a television show, preferably a comedy. At just 29 years old (he will turn 30 in April), it would seem that he is well on his way. But despite the high-level contacts and impressive résumé he is building, he is well aware of the cutthroat nature of show business. “This business is so fickle. It’s a tough, tough business.”

Nevertheless, whether he’s navigating the treacherous terrain of “Survivor” or the jungles of Hollywood, Pritikin is confident that he has the talent and determination to succeed.