



Urban Times

ARCHIVES

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champion” (The second and final part appeared
in the June 2006 issue.)

From May 2006:

Confessions of a Jeopardy! champion

Cottage Home resident Ed Angleton took the plunge - trying out for Jeopardy! and a chance for fame and fortune. This is his story.

First of two parts

1 THE AUDITION: IN FEBRUARY OF 2005, JEOPARDY! ANNOUNCED THAT A CONTESTANT SEARCH WOULD BE HELD IN Chicago in late April of that same year. I had always been a fan of the show, watching it sporadically over the years. It wasn't until the famous run of victories by Ken Jennings that I began to seriously watch the program.

It was then that my darling wife, a very astute woman named Jenny Elkins, noted that I was doing as well playing along at home as the contestants in the studio, including Jennings. That was when the seed was planted. "You should be on the show." This spark of an idea was further fanned by other family members whose support ranged from "Jenny's right, you need to try-out." to "It's scary that you know all this." Thus, when the Chicago auditions were announced, I dutifully went to my computer and registered through the Jeopardy! website.

An audition call like the one in Chicago will result in thousands of would-be contestants registering for a chance at fame and fortune. To narrow the field, and lessen the burden on the contestant coordinators, a lottery of sorts is conducted with invitations to try out assigned randomly. Out of what may have been two to three thousand appli-



Ed Angleton poses with Jeopardy! host Alex Trebek.

cations, about three to five hundred people are asked to try-out. To keep things manageable, the potential contestants are assigned to one of three separate audition sessions.

My audition was at 9 a.m. Monday, April 18, at Chicago's Navy Pier. I arrived about 20 minutes early and waited in the hallway with a rapidly growing crowd. At 9 a.m. the doors opened and we were all ushered inside. We were given a Jeopardy! logo pen and a blank sheet with numbered spaces. Yes, as I had always been warned in school, "There's going to be a test."

The keepers of the tests announce whether the dream lives on or if we are to be consigned to the trash heap of broken hopes and aspirations. Anyone not moving on is thanked for trying and advised that they can try again after a year has passed. Two names are called out. They've won copies of the most recent edition of the "Jeopardy!"

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Quiz Book.” Thank you for playing, see you again next year.

More names are called. These are the few, the proud, the ones who passed the test.

Eight names are read out. Oh God, I failed! No! This can't be! Everyone said I could do this. I'm a Loser! I've let everyone I know down! Wait there's one more name. The coordinator is having trouble pronouncing it. He's saying Ed Argletshjfgl. I ask, “Would that be Angleton?” “Why yes, at second glance, it would.” Joy! Happiness! Redemption! I'm in! I made the first cut.

The first cut? There's more?

Out of the 150 or so hopefuls who arrived at 9 a.m., nine are left. Polaroid pictures are taken of each of us and attached to the reams of paperwork we had just filled out. Now comes the fun part, the mock game. At this point it occurs to me that the nine of us remaining divide easily into three groups of three. Three being the number required to play the game. My turn comes with the second group. The coordinators are looking for players who can speak out and keep the game flowing.

It is at this time I am formally introduced to what would eventually become my personal nemesis, the BUZZER.

OK, so it really doesn't buzz or make any sound of its own. It's just easier to call it a buzzer than repeatedly say signaling device. Ring in too soon, you're locked out for a fraction of a second, too late and you're staring at your competition answering all the questions you know by heart.

During the mock game I ring in correctly often enough to get to answer several questions. I immediately move to the next clue. The game flows. I'm in my element. On the few questions where I don't ring in first and my opponents answer incorrectly, I pick up the rebound. I am a Jeopardy! machine.

Let's just skip all this and fly me directly to Los Angeles. Bring on the best. There's a short interview. I tell them about my 112-year old-house in Cottage Home. They ask what I would do with the money I might win. I tell them about my 112-

year-old house in Cottage Home.

That's it. I'm in the contestant pool. In an average year they need about 400 players. If they decide that you will be one of these happy 400, you'll receive a call two to three weeks prior to taping. What they don't tell you is that there are approximately 2,000 people in the pool. You stay in the pool for one year and if not chosen to appear, you can repeat the process after a year.

2 THE CALL: NOW IT'S JUST A matter of time until I get “The Call,” Taping is set to begin in June for the upcoming season. I'm figuring that I should hear from them sometime in July or August. This is going to be great. I'll fly out to L.A., tape 76 shows or so and return to Indy as the supreme Jeopardy! champion. July comes and goes, no call.

August comes and goes, no call. September, October, November and December all come and go, no call. I'm beginning to think they don't like me.

What did I do wrong? Why aren't they calling me? Was I too glib during the interview? Too serious? Maybe they don't like beards. I can shave if it helps. Please, please call me. Then the realization sets in, they're never going to call. I will languish in the deep end of the contestant pool, drowning in unrealized potential.

January arrives. Things are not good. My wonderful seven-year-old basset hound, Magic, is not well. On Monday, Jan. 9, my wife takes him to the vet for a biopsy. He's got some type of mass in his chest. We'll get the results on Wednesday. As I'm preparing to leave work for the day, my phone rings.

It's a 310 area code. I don't know who this is. I answer the phone. The voice on the other end of the line asks me if I've ever been on television. I answer no, then I hear the phrase I've been waiting for, “Well, you're going to be.”

It was one of the contestant coordinators. They want me after all! They tell me that I need to come to L.A. for taping on Feb. 1. I call my wife immediately to tell her the news. She's so excited

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all I can hear over the phone is her screaming. I immediately start looking for flight information and book a flight. I was given the name of the preferred hotel for contestants and make a reservation.

Contestants must pay their own expenses surrounding travel and lodging. Fortunately, third place is \$1000 and second place is \$2000 so that will cover all the out of pocket expenses for all the opponents I anticipate crushing. I'm ready to go, now I just have to wait. On Wednesday we get the results of Magic's test. It's cancer, a very aggressive form. On Friday I say good-bye to my little buddy. What should have been one of the happiest times of my life has been tempered by his loss.

A week before I am scheduled to appear, I get another call from the Jeopardy! staff. My appearance has been postponed until Feb 28. Alex has hurt his back and requires surgery.

Arrgh! I was primed. I was ready! And now I have to wait another month. Oh the inhumanity of it all. Well, on the bright side, I now have another month to prepare.

Which brings up an interesting question, how does one prepare for an appearance on Jeopardy!? First watch the show. The Jeopardy! quiz books are also a useful tool.

An even more useful tool is the online J! Archive. This site has all the clues and answers for every game for the last three seasons and various games for seasons before that. You can get a real feel for the categories that have appeared and the types of questions you may expect.

Certain areas are required. Know the U.S. presidents and when they served. Know the First Ladies and the vice-presidents if you have time. Geography is big. Know the state capitals. Know world capitals. Know major bodies of water. Opera is a favorite, so is Shakespeare.

Or you can do what I did and just go basically on what I already knew. I did buy a world almanac and fact book just to browse things geographical, but I really didn't put much time into studying it. I didn't even know there was an

archive until after I had appeared. One of the things the contestant coordinators tell you is to not read the Jeopardy! message boards from the time you get the call until after you appear. My reaction, "There's a message board?" It was from the message board after I had appeared that I learned of the existence of the archive.

3 I LOVE L.A.! Jeopardy! is taped at Sony Pictures in Culver City, about a 15-minute ride from the hotel. We were dropped off at a parking garage just inside the gate, where we waited for another shuttle bus to take us to the sound stage. Upon arrival at sound stage 10 we were whisked immediately into the "Green Room". There we found a long table with mounds of paperwork to fill out.

The returning champion from the previous day's taping was directed to a reserved upholstered chair. The rest of us got canvas backed director's style folding chairs. One by one we were made-up so we wouldn't look like zombies on TV.

During the course of all this, we were briefed on the rules. One area particularly stressed was that spelling didn't matter in Final Jeopardy! unless it changed the pronunciation of the word.

We rehearsed our "Hometown Howdies," a 15-second spot that the local stations can use to promote the show. We took an oath to keep the game moving and to "Not Quell the Mo." A large tray of pastries went mostly untouched. Water and juice disappeared. No one wanted to risk the coffee and the inevitable spill and stain. It was time to visit the set.

The Jeopardy! set seems smaller in real life than it does on TV. The floor is bright and multi-leveled. There are small chips in Alex's podium not visible on TV. The contestant podiums have a computer screen and light pen on which to sign in and then later use for Final Jeopardy!. The area around the computer screen is covered with felt, very useful for drying sweaty palms. And then there's the BUZZER — the real one — lying there atop the podium so innocently. We receive an ori-

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entation on the operation of all the electronic gadgets and begin the practice round.

In groups of three we take spots at the podiums, the returning champion behind podium one. The returning champ selects the first clue and Glenn reads it. When he is finished reading a crew member located next to the judges activates the signaling system and illuminates a set of lights that line the outer edge of the Jeopardy! board.

The purpose of the practice round is to acquaint the players to the mechanics of the game, ringing in, selecting categories, and to allow the sound engineers to determine the optimum settings for each contestant's microphones.

I finally take to the stage and my timing is all over the place. I manage to ring in on a few and answer correctly, but I'm awestruck by the whole experience and I dawdle when choosing the next question.

I'm horrible.

Eventually, my turn ends and we all return to the Green Room. The first two challengers are announced. The games begin. Five games are taped during each taping day, supplying a week's worth of episodes. The remaining contestants sit in the audience. I practice my signaling reflexes with a retractable ballpoint pen.

The first game flies by and there's a new champion. The second game is taped and still another new champion. The third game produces yet another new champion. Three games down and I still haven't been selected. Those of us left go to a late lunch at the studio cafeteria. After lunch there's another practice session and the challengers for the next game are announced.

I'm going in! I check my shirt pocket for my good luck charm. Yes, Magic's picture is there. I'm ready.

4 **Game 1.** I receive my microphone and the make-up person retouches my make-up. I draw podium three. The returning champion, Mary, had appeared on the original Jeopardy! hosted by Art Flemming. She had won \$50 and a set of encyclopedias. The other challenger is

Jessica, a 26-year-old contract coordinator from New York.

My practice with the Buzzer pays off as I ring in first in the category, American Quotes. The clue: It begins, "When in the course of human events...". My reply, "What is the Declaration of Independence?"

I'm off and on a roll. I then proceed to dig myself into a hole with incorrect answers, while Jessica forges ahead. Mary never seems to get on track. I begin a string of correct responses and at the first break I'm in the lead.

After the commercial, it's time for the interview. Alex asks about my babyback rib recipe. Prior to the taping we had to provide the staff with five or six anecdotes for possible use during this segment. Why they picked this one I don't know, but I soldier on and reveal that I have, horror of horrors, burnt them on one occasion. Of course that was the night we were having a professional chef as a dinner guest. (Hi, Regina.)

Jessica and I battle back and forth, but I take the lead for good on question 18: "What is a Geiger counter?"

At the end of the Jeopardy! Round, I'm leading with \$8,200. I continue to expand my lead during Double Jeopardy! and lead Jessica by a score of \$12,600 to \$8,000. Mary finishes the round in the red and will not be part of Final Jeopardy!. The category is British Monarchs.

The players are given a pen and paper to calculate their wagers. The players are also aided by three read-outs above the set which display each player's current score. We are given ample time to decide how much to wager.

I wager \$3,401. If we both get the Final Jeopardy! question right, I win even if Jessica doubles her score. If we both get it wrong, I still win with \$9,199. I only lose if I get it wrong, Jessica gets it right and she wagers more than \$1,199.

The staff comes by and tells us the question will be a "What." All players are given the first word to prevent anyone from losing because it was not framed as a question.

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We write “What” at the top of our screens. The clue is revealed. We have to give the name of the last king not named George, William or Edward. My mind races back through time. Unfortunately, I overshoot and land on Henry as in Henry VIII.

Now I wait. I wait for the music to end. I wait for my fate to be decided. Am I right? Do I win \$16,001? Am I wrong? Do I win \$9,199 — or do I go home with \$2,000? Since Jessica has a lower score than I, her response and wager is revealed first. “What is Richard?” for \$7,999.

I won. Oh my God, I won. I knew that Richard was not right. No king has been named Richard since Richard III — and with good reason I might add. Dick predated my Henry.

Now the only question: Am I right? No, it’s not Henry. I had completely skipped the Stuart kings and James II.

Nevertheless, I am the Jeopardy! Champion. I let out a very deep breath and enjoy my newfound status. I congratulate Jessica on a game well-played and we join Alex for the end of game chit-chat while the credits roll. What we talked about I have absolutely no recollection.

In fact, after it had finished, I did not remember much of how the game played out other than the outcome. I was so full of adrenaline during the game I was unable to remember the details of what occurred. My knees were wobbly. My palms were sweating.

It was fantastic.

Next month: Ed returns for Game 2, as the defending champion.