



This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show

Episode Twelve: Being Seen on *Jeopardy!*

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV

Buzzy Cohen: Every *Jeopardy!* episode starts the same way...with the legendary Johnny Gilbert introducing the contestants.

As a contestant, first and foremost, your reason for being there is, of course, to win.

Other than that introduction at the very top — listing your name, profession, and where you're from — you get right into the game. *Jeopardy!*'s format is crisp, it's succinct — and it goes by very quickly.

Opportunities to show off your personality on Stage 10 are scant. That's often why contestants agonize so much about the dreaded interview that comes after the first commercial break. You've got just a few seconds to tell the host — and the whole country! — who you are. And what you're about.

It's a process with a lot of prepwork — lots of long questionnaires trying to wring out the most interesting things about you. But in the end, all that prepwork comes down to just, like, 30 seconds on stage. Regardless of how you decide to present yourself...sometimes, how the public reacts or responds to you? It's just not what you expect.

And you don't *really* know how it's all going to go down — how people will see you — until your game airs.

For many of us contestants, *Jeopardy!* is more than just a game. It's an incredibly vulnerable

moment...when you show yourself to the whole world, and what that's like? Well, it can lead you to feelings and experiences you might never have imagined.

For some, being on TV comes with a range of anxieties, but generally, it turns out to be much better than expected.

THEME MUSIC

Contestant Voice: Being on the show has just become a really fun party story to tell people.

Buzzy Cohen: For others, appearing on *Jeopardy!* is an entirely different experience. They're catapulted into the public eye — and sometimes, that scrutiny isn't what they anticipated.

Contestant Voice: Making it to *Jeopardy!* is one of the ways that's publicly rewarded in a mainstream way instead of having life remind you that you're a weird egghead.

Buzzy Cohen: I'm your host, Buzzy Cohen. And from Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV, This Is *Jeopardy!* The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show.

This week...we delve into the perspectives of three contestants who went on *Jeopardy!* — including yours truly...and we explore what it means to have the eyes of the country upon you.

THEME MUX

ACT I

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music

Sam Buttrey: I'm Sam Buttrey. I'm 61 years old. I was the champion of the Professor's Tournament on *Jeopardy!* in 2021 and I came third in the 2022 *Jeopardy!* Tournament of Champions.

Buzzy Cohen: When Sam Buttrey first got “The Call” to be on *Jeopardy!*, he wasn't sure it was for real.

Sam Buttrey: My wife and I were actually on vacation in, I think it was Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. So sun and tequila and fun. And I got a call from a woman who not only wanted to invite me on *Jeopardy!*, but wanted my social security number right then and there to start the paperwork. And it sounded a lot like a scam.

Buzzy Cohen: When the contestant coordinator finally convinced him, *Yes, this was for real*, Sam was thrilled. After getting “The Call,” he got to prepping.

Sam is a professor of Operations Research at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. And the Professors’ Tournament was the first time in *Jeopardy!* history 15 professors from a range of colleges and universities across the country had come together to compete.

The Professors’ Tournament aired in December of 2021. It was comfort food for millions of Americans facing a long winter of Covid spikes and holiday stress.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *From the Alex Trebek Stage at Sony Picture Studios, this is the Jeopardy! Professor's Tournament. Here are today's contestants: an Assistant Professor of U.S. and African American history at the University of Colorado...Ashleigh Lawrence-Sanders. An associate professor of writing studies at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York...Lisa Dresner. And an Associate Professor of Operations Research at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California...Sam Buttrey.*

Buzzy Cohen: Sam won the inaugural Professors’ Tournament...bringing \$100,000 back with him to Monterey.

But he *really* made a splash the year after that...when he came back for the 2022 Tournament of Champions.

When those TOC games started airing, Sam quickly became a fan favorite. Not just for his solid gameplay, but the flair with which he delivered his responses.

Sam Buttrey: **So, uh, the voguing moment arose in a category in which we were naming dances, apparently. I don't remember all the details.**

Buzzy Cohen: Well, lucky for us, we can roll back tape anytime we want.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: *New York drag competitions called balls were the birthplace of this stylized dance that Madonna brought to the mainstream. Sam.*

Sam Buttrey: *What is Vogue?*

Ken: *Yes. Would you care to Vogue?*

Sam Buttrey: Yes, I would. But later after the show.

Buzzy Cohen: Who knew a nerdy white guy could actually know something about drag culture? I mean, Sam should be out of his depth here, but somehow, his stage presence was just charming.

Fast forward to later in the game...

ARCHIVAL:

Ken: Sam, you might think I've forgotten, but earlier in the show, you promised to vogue for us. Would you care to demonstrate your — your drag ball technique?

Sam: You know, I've changed my mind. I'm gonna floss now, Ken. [Laughter.]

Ken: He is one wild and crazy guy. Yeah.

Sam: Really? Are we doing that, Ken? [Laughter.]

Sam Buttrey: Now conversely, I don't really know how to floss either, but at least I had seen it done by the well-known Backpack Kid. So I broke out the best moves I had...and I'm glad that people took it in the spirit in which it was offered. You know, I don't think Backpack Kid has anything to worry about in terms of competition.

Buzzy Cohen: The Sam Buttrey viral moments — they kept coming! Here's just a few games later, in that same Tournament of Champions.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken: This feline not only got freaky deaky with Tyga, she also told us to get into it. Yuh. So we did. Yuh. Sam.

Sam: Who's Doja Cat? [Laughter.]

Ken: Yeah, you're a fan. I can tell.

Sam Buttrey: I knew that I wasn't supposed to know that as an old guy. Um, and I think there's sort of the incongruity of the old guy knowing who Doja Cat is. I'd, I'd heard of her. But it also helped of course, that in, in, in the *Jeopardy!* style, the clue had, uh, some keyword, like feline or something, that I was able to decipher.

Buzzy Cohen: When *that* game aired, social media exploded. Doja Cat fans were celebrating the world over...showing their approval with tweets like, “Sam’s a Kitten,” “Stan Sam” and “Sam goated for real.”

Sam Buttrey: I think it's fun to be in a niche area of fame where if you're knowledgeable, there was a time when I was kind of a big deal to this very, very narrow group of, uh, very serious *Jeopardy!* fans, but at the same time, I could go about my business and not be bothered. In contrast to somebody like Steve Martin, who I suspect when he goes for lunch, people stop him and ask to shake his hand and what have you.

Buzzy Cohen: Oh yeah — in case you haven’t seen any of Sam’s shows, he looks a lot like Steve Martin.

So much so that after Sam won the Professors Tournament, Steve Martin himself tweeted, “So great to split the prize money with Sam!” about his *Jeopardy!* doppelganger.

Maybe it was the combination of these things...that Sam knew stuff people didn’t expect him to. Maybe it was being a celebrity lookalike. Whatever it was, the Internet *loved* Sam Buttrey.

And when fans discovered that Sam wrote his own original songs, available on Soundcloud...they went absolutely crazy.

Excerpt from “The Colonoscopy Song (A Song for the Age)” by Sam Buttrey

Sam Buttrey: Oh, when you get to be the big 5-0, like me, you're filled with wisdom and maturity and there's another side of life that you're ready to see. You get to have a colonoscopy. Colonoscopy, colonoscopy. Let's all get one or maybe two or three. Colonoscopy, colonoscopy...

Buzzy Cohen: See, Sam Buttrey fandom goes deep...and a love of Sam kind of brings out the good in all of us.

Like, when Sam competed against super champ Matt Amodio in the Tournament of Champions, the two should’ve considered each other fierce rivals. But instead, a friendship blossomed.

Here’s Matt.

Matt Amodio: I think he is the most kindred spirit I had, that I've ever experienced, in *Jeopardy!* Of all of the wonderful, wonderful people I've met. We have some of the

same, uh, loves of wordplay, of corny jokes, of puns, and we're making each other laugh.

Buzzy Cohen: To Sam, it all felt great. Even if it couldn't last forever.

Sam Buttrey: There were times as my, uh — if I can call it fame — as my fame was tailing off, that I found myself checking Reddit to see if anybody had said anything nice about me recently or Facebook or what have you.

Buzzy Cohen: But ultimately, all of that was kind of the perfect amount of attention.

Sam Buttrey: I was happy to ride the wave while there was a wave, and I'm pretty happy for the wave to be gone as well.

MUX

Buzzy Cohen: A beloved, nerdy professor had charmed the *Jeopardy!* fan world, going viral several times over.

Like a hot air balloon, Sam's *Jeopardy!* fame rose higher and higher...before eventually he gently floated back down to Earth and his normal life. Though he did appear again on *Jeopardy!* for the Masters Tournament earlier this year.

Sometimes, *Jeopardy!* fame can be unexpectedly bonkers like that. But for others, the mere thought of going on your favorite quiz show...of having the eyes of the nation upon you? It gets complicated quickly...even if it is a lifelong goal...

That's after the break. Stay with us.

ACT II

Corin Purifoy: I was obsessed with *Jeopardy!* as a kid. Chicago *Jeopardy!* aired at 3:30 in the afternoon, and I wouldn't get home from school in time to watch it. So I would stay home, quote unquote, sick from school so that I could watch Alex.

Buzzy Cohen: That's Corin Purifoy.

Corin Purifoy: My pronouns are she/they, and I was on *Jeopardy!* in the summer of 2019.

Buzzy Cohen: When Corin got “The Call,” they didn’t just feel excited. They were hit with a range of emotions.

Corin Purifoy: My thoughts went from extreme excitement to excitement tinged with fear. I am a tall, Black, femme-leaning, non-binary person with glasses and wavy dreadlocks. And I was very scared that one of those things or many of those things would be used against me and that I would be the laughing stock of Twitter.

And for a moment, I almost thought of not going on the show just so that I wouldn't be giving people ammunition to use against me.

Buzzy Cohen: 2019 may not sound like that long ago, but remember, in *Jeopardy!* history, this is before LGBTQIA+ superchamps Amy Schneider and Mattea Roach had graced the stage.

Corin Purifoy: The thought that I would be so visible to everyone, I would be in everyone's household...yeah, that was really scary.

I did talk a little with a couple of friends and with my sibling, who is also non-binary, and a lot of them had the same advice for me to just do what made me comfortable.

Buzzy Cohen: The thing that was most complicated about this? It’s that Corin was out and proud long before they stepped on the Alex Trebek stage.

Corin Purifoy: I am not generally someone who likes to hide the fact that they're queer or likes to hide the fact that they're non-binary. If you look on my social media, I post memes and jokes about it all the time.

Buzzy Cohen: But this was the most exposure they’d ever encounter. The biggest platform Corin would ever step onto. *Jeopardy!* averages 10.4 million viewers a show.

Whoever you are as a contestant, you’ve got to be prepared for a lot of attention.

So when they were getting ready to go on the show, Corin made a decision.

Corin Purifoy: I kind of told myself that I was going to just wear a dress, wear a cardigan, wear whatever would make me look the most femme. Not have them use “they” as my pronouns. And I really went back and forth with, *Do I go on and be my authentic self or do I not risk having swaths of the Internet come after me?*

MUX reflective beat

Buzzy Cohen: There's a dark side to the exposure that comes with being on national TV. It's something many contestants have experienced.

The Internet? We all know how terrible it can be. And being on *Jeopardy!* doesn't make you an exception to the ruthlessness of what people who don't even know you will say about you.

I know this first-hand. You can still look up the Twitter account @ScrewBuzzyCohen. Hasn't been active for a while, but it is still there.

I've had my share of haters on the Internet, but also — I'm a straight cisgender white guy. And the things trolls have said about me since I went on *Jeopardy!* — well, they're just not as targeted. They're not as tinged with underlying or outright racism, sexism, homophobia or all the other kinds of hate human beings can dream up.

Back to Corin...who had plenty of reasons to be leery. There's a precedent for social media backlash against *Jeopardy!* contestants...and quite a few have really been put through the ringer.

But Corin loved *Jeopardy!* And like the rest of us contestants, this was their dream. So they did as much emotional preparation as they could.

Corin Purifoy: I just tried to hype myself up, like, this was a dream that I was fulfilling. This was something that I had wanted for years and I wasn't going to let strangers on the Internet ruin that for me.

Finally going on the show...Corin's biggest worry?

Corin Purifoy: My biggest fear was that being Black, we are kind of seen as being representative of our entire race, and I didn't want to perform badly and then have people think, *Well, this is why there aren't that many Black people on Jeopardy!*

When the day came, she put aside her fears and put on her game face.

Corin Purifoy: Stepping onto that stage and stepping behind the lectern, I kind of entered this dissociated state of just, if I know it, I know it, and if I don't, it's too late now. So I'm just going to have fun with it. It almost felt like resignation, but in a positive way.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *This is Jeopardy! Let's meet today's contestants. A fiber artist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin...Corin Purifoy. An attorney from Levittown, Pennsylvania...Michelle Bruck. And our returning champion...*

Corin Purifoy: I had so much fun. That was the best day of my life.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *We're gonna give you a mash-up of two popular musical groups and you name them both in new musical supergroups.*

Corin Purifoy: *Uh, supergroup 600.*

Alex: *Smashing Blowfish.*

Corin. *[Laughs.] What are Smashing Pumpkins and Hootie and the Blowfish?*

Alex: *Correct.*

Buzzy Cohen: At the end of their game, Corin came in second to Jason Zuffranieri, who was on game number three of what would end up being a 19-game streak.

ARCHIVAL: *Let's go to Corin. She had \$14,200 and her response...was along the same lines as yours and is incorrect also. And it costs her \$8,100. That drops her to \$6,100 and takes us to Jason, our champion.*

Buzzy Cohen: She didn't humiliate herself. And although she didn't get Final *Jeopardy!*, she actually didn't get a single clue wrong leading up to that.

Corin had held her own. And when her game finally aired, she got together with friends for a watch party.

Corin Purifoy: **We went to a local pizza place. And they showed it on all of the TVs. It was crazy watching everybody, you know, cheer when I got questions right. And boo when other people got questions right. [Laughs.]**

Yeah, it was probably the second-best day of my life.

MUX: **reflective suspenseful**

Buzzy Cohen: But back at home...away from the warmth of the glowing TV screens and the support of their friends, Corin decided it was time to face what they feared the most. Their game had just been seen by millions of viewers. They could not hide anymore.

They turned to that sometimes-black hole of social media...

And started to scroll...

And read...

And scroll...

And something funny happened. There wasn't vitriol. In fact, quite the opposite...

Corin Purifoy: I noticed that, um, a lot of Black people were cheering for me. And kind of doing the whole, *Oh, that's our baby. She did so well. I'm so proud of her.* Um, and that — that felt really good to know that, like, I hadn't let my people down.
[Laughs.]

Buzzy Cohen: I completely blacked out during my interview. I couldn't have told you what I was talking about, but apparently I told Alex about how I used to do Haitian and Brazilian folkloric drumming.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex: *Corin Purifoy is from Wisconsin and this young lady for a year played in a Haitian and Brazilian folkloric drum and dance troupe. Those two don't seem to coincide...Haitian and Brazilian. I would think they're a little different, no?*

Corin: *They were more closely tied than you think, and they both had a really deep tradition, an oral tradition of passing down their music. So we, we ended up taking rhythms from the entire Caribbean and South America.*

Alex: *Sounds like a fun thing to be a part of.*

Corin: *It was.*

Alex: *Yeah.*

Corin Purifoy: I remember some people talking about how I was schooling Alex and everybody else watching *Jeopardy!* on the diaspora and how proud they were that I was there to educate everybody on our culture.

Buzzy Cohen: It was a moment of celebration. And Corin felt so proud of herself.

But later, while she was still processing it all...she began to realize how much easier it was to celebrate this one part of herself over another.

Corin Purifoy: It was easier to say, yes, *I am here as a Black Jeopardy! contestant* than it was to say, *I'm here as a queer contestant* or *I'm here as a non-binary contestant*.

And you know, a few years later, now we've had contestants like Mattea Roach and Amy Schneider, who have come on and blazed the trail for trans and non-binary contestants. And I know things would've been different if I had been on today. But back then I just, I didn't, I didn't have that representation yet.

Buzzy Cohen: Even today, Corin has complicated feelings about how they represented themselves to the country.

Corin Purifoy: I do wish I had, you know, put on, like, a small Pride pin on my cardigan or something like that, just to show in some small way — not even for everyone, but for other queer people, other non-binary people, other trans people that, you know, we're out here. That this is a space for them.

MUX

Buzzy Cohen: It's not simply a positive or negative experience. The aftermath of being on *Jeopardy!* contains multitudes. Just like Corin does.

The regret of not showing who they are, not showing off their full complexity? That's also mixed with a feeling of pride. That they did this!

Corin Purifoy: You just have to have a love of learning and a love of tiny, useless details, and you can make it on the show.

Buzzy Cohen: A love of tiny, useless details? That is indeed what binds us all.

Three years after Corin's game aired, they were sitting at home, back in Milwaukee, watching *Jeopardy!*, when a familiar face appeared on screen.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *From the Alex Trebek Stage at Sony Pictures Studios, this is Jeopardy! Second Chance, brought to you by Moderna. Here is our next group of Second Chance contestants. A chart caller, writer, and editor from Chicago, Illinois, Rowan Ward. A sports writer...*

Buzzy Cohen: Corin was actually friends with Rowan Ward before either of them was on *Jeopardy!* The two were active in trivia circles.

And this wasn't Rowan's first time on *Jeopardy!* either. As you just heard, this was the Second Chance Tournament.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: *Rowan Ward is a chart caller, writer and editor from Chicago, who in their first Jeopardy! appearance battled no less than Matt Amodio. Had him in their sights going into Final Jeopardy! Now, you finished in third place. What did you do with your winnings?*

Rowan Ward: *Well, I had a thousand dollars and I had actually, before going on Jeopardy!, told my close friends to call me Rowan. I was under another name on the show, but I'm non-binary. I wanted a name that fitted me. So what I did with the money is I used it to pay for my name change filing, and now I'm back on Jeopardy! with a second chance as my true self.*

Ken: *That's fantastic. Welcome back.*

Rowan: *Thank you. [Audience clapping.]*

MUX

Corin Purifoy: **Seeing them on that stage and seeing them be their true self and dominate was just beyond my wildest dreams for them. It has me a little verklempt. [Laughs.] Because seeing someone who is in the same boat as you really succeed at something lets you know that it's possible. And I am just so proud of them.**

Buzzy Cohen: There's one more thing that's hit Corin unexpectedly in the wake of their *Jeopardy!* appearance.

Corin Purifoy: There are a few Facebook groups of, um, *Jeopardy!* alums that we all just kind of flock together. And friend each other on Facebook. We barely even talk about the show, honestly. It's just we talk about our personal lives and, um, what's going on in the world.

It's just the most supportive group of people that come together over just the chance that we've all been on the same TV show.

At first I thought it was just going to be: I get up, get on a plane, go on the show, and then that's it. And now I know I've met some of my best friends through this show, and I have a community of people that I belong to and that I will belong to for years.

MUX

Buzzy Cohen: We'll be right back. Stay with us.

ACT III

MUX: Bright beat with momentum

Buzzy Cohen: Growing up in Short Hills, New Jersey, I was a *Jeopardy!* fan long before the possibility of being on the show had ever crossed my mind.

As a kid, I was endlessly curious about the world around me.

Amy Cohen: He had a really, uh, good attention span for a child. He just kind of could find things and pull them out.

Buzzy Cohen: That's my mom.

Amy Cohen: I'm Amy Cohen. And I am a fan of *Jeopardy!* and I'm also Buzzy Cohen's mother.

Buzzy Cohen: A few weeks ago, my mom sat down with one of my producers to talk about raising me. (And in case you are wondering, I actually wasn't present for this and I learned a few things listening back to it later.)

My mom had noticed early on that I had a penchant for facts and figures. And I was really good at memorizing things.

She remembers one time, when I was in elementary school, I got called to the principal's office.

My principal's name was Dr. Harlan Clark. As soon as my mom walked in the door, Dr. Clark pointed at me. And my mom braced herself for the worst.

Amy Cohen: He said, *Buzzy's gonna recite the presidents in order. You know, Washington...went through the whole thing and the principal said, uh, Okay, now do it backwards. He did it. Like, without even skipping a beat. And um, the principal gives him a little blue card. And it said, You're a winner. And that was really the beginning of me realizing that he...he liked facts and trivia and stuff like that.*

Buzzy Cohen: (By the way, Dr. Clark was known for keeping a stack of those cards, either on him or on his desk. And at Deerfield Elementary in 1991, that card was, like, the biggest compliment a student could get.)

Marvin Cohen: Very interested in information. When he decided to get into something, he got into it hard and deep.

Buzzy Cohen: That's my dad. When he heard my mom was getting interviewed, the fomo set in, and he needed to jump on the mic too.

Marvin Cohen: My name is Marvin Cohen. And first and foremost I was a *Jeopardy!* watcher for...gotta be 30 years. And of course, uh, our son is Buzzy Cohen.

Buzzy Cohen: Those early childhood years? They were pretty uncomplicated ones for me and my family.

I was hitting all the hallmarks of a very happy, normal, *Leave it to Beaver* childhood...until I turned 13.

Amy Cohen: He went away to sleepaway camp. And we got a call from the director telling us that Buzzy was depressed and that he was really low. And that, you know, we shouldn't ignore it.

Buzzy Cohen: I went to sleepaway camp...at a camp called Mahkeenec. My days consisted of water skiing, climbing, bike riding, arts and crafts. There was a wood shop, archery, and it was the '90s, so there was also roller hockey.

It's hard to remember that summer...my first really big bout of depression.

But for my mom, that was the first moment she really noticed something big was happening with me.

Amy Cohen: I think we were monitoring it and not allowing it to overtake everyone's life, including his. You know, could we have done a better job? Maybe. I don't know.

Buzzy Cohen: On top of that, I was also growing up — going through puberty, and learning to manage all of these new emotions.

MUX: Suspenseful/reflective music

Buzzy Cohen: It's not the most comfortable thing to try to remember the most difficult times of my life.

Keep in mind, as I mentioned, this was the '90s, and there wasn't much national discussion — if any — about mental health, let alone depression.

My parents didn't really have the language to talk about all of this. But they did what they could. And they really went above and beyond.

They took me to a few specialists. And I started seeing a therapist, as needed. And little by little, I learned to recognize the patterns of my depression.

It would come on like a wave...washing into me...and I would lose my balance. What I learned about myself is that if I thrashed around against it, I would exhaust myself and run out of air...going deeper into the depression.

But if I let the wave wash over me, eventually it would pass, and I would float back up again.

When I was 15, I went to a sailing camp. And that's when my mom remembers a big turning point.

Amy Cohen: He lived on a boat for two weeks and he came home and he was like so much better, head-wise. He was like, *Being in the salt water, being in the sun, hanging out there for two weeks. Really, I felt no pain.* And I think it was like the first time he realized that there could be moments of no pain. Which made me feel bad 'cause I didn't realize he was in so much pain all the time.

Buzzy Cohen: Looking back on those years...they still weigh pretty heavy on my parents.

Amy Cohen: I was really scared for him and, and, you know, for, for where these problems were leading him. But he did hold it all together really very well and, uh, I was very proud of him. I'm always proud of him.

MUX

Buzzy Cohen: In 2016, I got “The Call” to be on *Jeopardy!*

To any outsider looking at me and my life, it seemed like I was doing pretty well. I was married. My wife and I had had our first kid. And I was holding down a steady job.

Now, I was about to take Stage 10 and appear on my all-time favorite TV show...something I'd been dreaming about my whole life.

But in that moment, all I wanted to do was disappear. I was mired in one of the most depressive periods of my life. It seemed like there was no end to it...and no way out.

A couple of days before I taped my first *Jeopardy!* game, I turned 31. My best friend Beau took me out to dinner for my birthday.

We went to a steakhouse in Santa Monica. I can't even remember what I ate, or even if I touched my food. Halfway through the meal, I said I was sorry, but I had to go home. I just...I couldn't make it through the dinner.

Look, I know...people are often shocked that that was my mindset at the time I went on *Jeopardy!*

Later on, Alex dubbed me “Mr. Personality” because I had a tendency to be cheeky and a little witty on stage. I was poking fun at myself and him. I was doing funny little intros. To most viewers, it looked like I was having the time of my life. And I was.

But in that period, I was constantly struggling with a little voice inside that told me I wasn't worth a thing. It was like living with a filter that colored everything...a heaviness that preceded anything that happened to me.

And this was one of the lowest points of my life.

My family could see how much I was struggling. My wife and my parents really wanted to help me. But they just weren't sure *how*.

Marv Cohen: As a father, all you can do is hope that they can talk to you and open up to you. And, uh, he did and he told us how he felt and we, you know, tried to do everything we could to help him.

Buzzy Cohen: When I was on the show, even through the fog of my depression, I recognized how special the experience was.

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *This is Jeopardy! Today's contestants are a music executive from Los Angeles, California...Buzzy Cohen. A garden designer from Blacksburg, Virginia, Jeanne Roper. And our returning champion — an assistant professor from Amherst, Ohio...Andrew Pau, whose six-day cash winnings total \$170,202. [Applause.] And now here is the host of Jeopardy!, Alex Trebek.*

Buzzy Cohen: Here I am in my very first game.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *This stop-motion film from Aardman Animations concerns a band of barnyard fowl making an escape. Buzzy.*

Buzzy Cohen: *What is Chicken Run?*

Alex: *Yes.*

Buzzy: *Chicken Soup. 800.*

Buzzy Cohen: My wife, Elisha, was working a demanding full-time job. But she made sure that she took time off to attend my tape days. And I remember looking out into the audience and seeing her sitting there...with my sister and brother-in-law...

And seeing them really made me smile.

After that first game...I kept going...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex: *Buzzy, as you just heard, won big yesterday. Can he win big again today against Stephanie and Jerry? Let's start finding out. Here comes the Jeopardy! round.*

Buzzy Cohen: For a brief moment, at my lowest point, *Jeopardy!* gave me something concrete to hold onto.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex: *Taking us to Buzzy Cohen. He had \$9,400. Did he come up with a correct response? He did. His wager? A lot. \$7,001. He is in the lead by \$1, and Jerry is not looking happy because he was writing...[inaudible.] Ah, too bad. It'll...where will you finish? You'll finish with \$13,999 in second place. But Buzzy Cohen, you're a two-day champ now with \$50,002. Well done. Good game, players.*

Buzzy Cohen: My mom remembers the impact *Jeopardy!* had on my psyche.

Amy Cohen: **To just walk on that stage, I think, all of the heaviness of what was happening in his real life...kind of like being an actor. You know, you can walk onto a stage and all of a sudden you're somebody else.**

Buzzy Cohen: Sure, it was partially escapism, but it was also the shock of seeing and interacting with Alex — the host I'd grown up watching. Someone I really trusted.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex: *Well, at least we have Buzzy Cohen. [Laughter.] And I've been meaning to ask you Buzzy...you weren't christened Buzzy?*

Buzzy: *No, I was not. It was the nickname that I had, um, in the womb that's stuck, but my, my legal name is actually Austin and I was named after Steve Austin, the \$6 million man.*

Buzzy Cohen: Talking to Alex, in the flesh, was like an affirmation. That I was good at something. And more importantly: that I was going to be okay.

ARCHIVAL:

Buzzy: *My sister's name is Lindsay, like Lindsay Wagner.*

Alex: *Lindsay Wagner.*

Buzzy: *Bionic woman. So we always joke that if we'd been born a decade earlier, we would've been Spock and Uhura. [Laughter.]*

Alex: *Who's booking these people? [Laughter.]*

Amy Cohen: **Alex has a...a way of, at least for Buzzy, of a connection, of, You're okay. You're okay. You're here. That's pretty good. Just being there. You're okay. And so, you**

know, he began to work on himself during that time. You know, when you come out of the hole, uh, and you see life, it's good.

I gathered during that deep time, it just, you don't, you can't see this light. You can't breathe. You can't do that. And so, um, *Jeopardy!* kept flashing lights at him. My feeling is that that's what it did for him. It just kept flashing. *We're here, it's here, it's here.* You know?

MUX

Buzzy Cohen: Being on *Jeopardy!* that first time rejuvenated me.

But in the aftermath of my run, I was still struggling. The ebullient person I was on stage was not who I was off stage. And in the days and weeks after taping, I was left with this empty feeling.

I thought I had reached possibly the end of my *Jeopardy!* experience. As far as I knew, I'd never get to step on that stage again.

But when I found out I was gonna get to compete on the Tournament of Champions, I had something new to work toward.

See — that little voice that tells you're not good enough? It can be incredibly destructive...but it can also be incredibly motivating.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex: *As I walked off this stage yesterday, I came to a conclusion that I want to run by all of you, and I hope you agree. Of all of the Tournaments we have done on Jeopardy!, this year's Tournament of Champions has been the most fun. [Audience cheering and clapping.] We've laughed. We've had some good times. It's almost as if the money isn't important, but it is. Now, with these scores here at the end of, uh, the first round, I don't think Buzzy, Alan, and Austin are going to exceed the minimum guarantees of \$5,100 and \$250,000. But hey, it ain't chump change. [Laughter.] Good luck. Let's go to work.*

Buzzy Cohen: Let me make something clear. It's not like going on *Jeopardy!* “cured” my depression. Far from it. Mental health is still a constant ebb and flow and something I'm dealing with for the rest of my life with the help of medication, therapy — all kinds of things.

But it's more like: entering into something so unequivocally positive for me helped me break the back of my depression so I could do the work. And I still had to do the work — and I got help.

But *Jeopardy!* provided the initial relief I so desperately needed.

It allowed me to take over. *Jeopardy!* was like the lifeline that helped me save myself.

MUX

Buzzy Cohen: Next time, on *This Is Jeopardy!:* The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show...

Sylvie: My mom's aunt, so my great aunt Bea, she was a *Jeopardy!* fan.

Fred: Oh yeah. You were not allowed to call her on the phone from 7:00 to 7:30.

Sylvie: Couldn't call.

Fred: Or she wouldn't answer the phone, you know.

Sylvie: No, she would scold you.

This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show is a production of Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV.

It's hosted by me, Buzzy Cohen.

This episode was produced by Mia Warren.

The series producers are Julia Doyle, Rob Dozier, Sylvie Lubow, and Mia Warren.

Associate producer is Serena Chow.

Our series editor is Sarah Kramer. Executive producers are Lizzie Jacobs, Tom Koenig, Sarah Kramer, Michael Davies, and Suzanne Preté.

Production management help from Susonya Davenport and Tameeka Ballance-Kolasny.

Our theme song was composed by Hannis Brown. Cedric Wilson is our engineer.

Special thanks to Charlie Yedor and Steve Ackerman.

And a big, big thank you to the *Jeopardy!* staff and crew for all of their time and help on this. Shout out to Alexa Macchia.

If you loved the show, follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.

CITATION

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