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Alex Trebek

Tiffany Yecke Brooks
tiffanybrooksphd@gmail.com

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Tiffany Yecke Brooks holds a PhD from Florida State (2007), an MA from the University of Bristol (2002), and a BA from Harding University (2001). She had been a lead or contributing writer for more than two dozen books, including *Fear is a Choice* with Pittsburgh Steelers running back James Conner, *Limitless* with Paralympic gold medalist Mallory Weggemann, and *Espionage and Enslavement in the Revolution*.



Image Courtesy of Tiffany Yecke Brooks

IN MEMORIAM: ALEX TREBEK

By Dr. Tiffany Yecke Brooks

He beamed into our living rooms five nights a week, so familiar a face and voice that he seemed less like a star and more like a kind uncle or wise neighbor who always seemed to have the answer. Literally.

There are few gameshows more iconic in American culture than *Jeopardy!*, and fewer hosts more iconic than Alex Trebek. For 37 seasons, from the revival of the show in 1984 until January 8, 2021, Trebek's gentle but authoritative presence made him a fixture on primetime television, syndicated runs in the afternoon, and a lot—a lot—of background programming on TVs in movies. He was such a fixture on the show, and so dedicated to his role, that he continued taping episodes up to one week before he passed away from colon cancer, on November 8, 2020. Simply put, Trebek was *Jeopardy!* and *Jeopardy!* was Trebek.

Writing this a little over two years after my own less-than-stellar appearance on the show on December 4, 2018 (I like to call myself a *Jeopardy!* bronze medalist), the biggest takeaway for me (after the importance of nailing buzzer timing) was how kind Trebek's eyes were. In fact, whenever people find out I was on the show, they always ask two questions: "Did they give you any clues about what the categories were going to be so you could study ahead of time?" (No) and "What was Alex Trebek like in person?" I'm always glad that I can reply honestly that he was warm, generous, and very professional during my taping.

To fill the time in commercial breaks, he answered questions from the audience in a humorous and sometimes self-deprecating way. Interacting with the contestants, he was genuine; when he said, "No, sorry," with just the slightest hint of a lingering Canadian accent ("sore-ry") after a wrong answer, you truly believed he *was* sorry, and that he hoped you got the next one right. The producers tell stories of him practicing obsessively to get foreign or unfamiliar pronunciations exactly right—not just for gameplay, but for the contestants' names, too. He

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wanted everything to seem effortless and natural, not because he wanted to seem like an unlimited fount of knowledge, but because in a game where accuracy is everything (“Prince Edward Island” is correct; “Prince Edward’s Island” will cost you \$800), he held himself to the same exacting standards.

Trebek was as beloved in the *Jeopardy!* alumni community as he was to the broader audience at home. When he first announced the news of his cancer on March 6, 2019, our online group immediately rallied together to record well wishes for him, as well as sending in images of our right thumbs—our buzzer fingers—to a fellow alumnus who is also an artist and turned the thousands of thumbprints into a beautiful portrait for Trebek to let him know that “his” contestants were pulling for him. When his final episode aired earlier this year, we all watched and messaged one another sadly on our group Facebook page. Even his final act was classy: he asked that many of his old suits be donated to the Doe Fund, an organization that helps men who are seeking to re-enter the workforce after homelessness, addiction, or incarceration. The moment that story was announced, we immediately began posting things like “Of course he did” and “That navy pinstripe in the photo was the one he wore at my taping!”

At the time I’m writing this, in February 2021, no permanent host has been named yet; a series of celebrity guest hosts have been filling in during the transition. This is, of course, a major point of discussion within the *Jeopardy!* alumni community, as well. We all have our favorite candidates (I’m Team LeVar Burton), but we all seem to be relieved that the producers are taking their time. It’s quite a podium to fill and quite a legacy to carry on.