

What is ‘Most Fun Ever?’

Dallas CPA gets her shot on “Jeopardy!”

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By Anne McDonald Davis

Deborah Beams, CPA-Dallas, had long dreamed of being a contestant on “Jeopardy!.” So she called up the game show honchos and they responded, “Sure, great! Any time!”

Wait, no. That’s not how it works. Each year, around 80,000 people take Jeopardy Productions’ online tests trying to score high enough to be chosen for an audition. Out of the few thousand who make the cut, only a few hundred will actually ever appear on the show.

Beams ponders: “Whatever the magic formula, I made it. It took me five tries, four online tests, three auditions and 13 years ... but I made it.” She adds, laughing, “I don’t know if they took me this time because I admitted it was my fifth try.”

After Beams’ audition in October 2016, she knew that it could take up to 18 months to learn her fate; she heard from “Jeopardy!” in two. Her taping was slated for sometime in January 2017.

“My busiest time of year,” she rues. “Luckily, we hadn’t gotten too busy when the specific day for me was set. I told my co-workers, ‘When “Jeopardy!” calls, you have to go!’” So off Beams went to have an experience she describes as “awesome,” then returned to her supportive colleagues to share every exciting detail.

Wait, no. That’s not how it works. When someone competes on the show, they are not allowed to tell anyone what happened for months. Only after their episode airs may they discuss the outcome and details.

Beams remarks mischievously: “It was actually kind of fun to have a secret. Now my family had seen the taping, so they knew. But they had to keep quiet too!”

Aside from having a bright mind, a broad base of knowledge, a cool head and the neuromuscular synapses necessary to slap a buzzer really fast, “Jeopardy!” contenders rely on a certain amount of good fortune. Since her appearance was scheduled to air around Easter, Beams was hoping for categories that played well with the holiday. No such luck.

She sighs: “I got ‘Female Lead Singers’ and ‘Marvel Comics.’ It didn’t help that one of my opponents was a total comic book geek.”

Still, Beams won her first game pretty handily. “I was having fun playing and was a close second to the returning champion going into final. When Alex Trebek said, ‘Our champion doesn’t look too happy,’ that’s when it hit me – I might win this thing!” Beams also won the following game, which was a nail biter. Jeopardy tapes five shows a day and her two victories were games four and five. Then her family piled into the rental car and went out to dinner to celebrate. Along the way, Beams’ sister speculated on rental cars vs. Uber and the ride sharing company’s origins.

“Didn’t Uber start in San Francisco?” she mused. That would be one of the questions on the show the next day when Beams returned. Luck, remember? (After Beams received her winnings, she wrote her sister a check for the amount of the clue.) Also, Beams hit the Daily Double late in her first game. Thanks to many hours of playing “Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?”... she knew what Interpol was. For her second



Alex Trebek and Deborah Beams



Deborah Beams at the Governmental Accounting Standards Board

game, it seemed almost hopeless by Final Jeopardy. But Beams did her math, expecting her opponents to bet big, and left herself enough cushion for when all three contestants missed it.

Even though she came out ahead that round, Beams earned less money than the person placing second, who always receives a flat \$2,000. Beams finished with \$1,300, but it was enough to win. She chuckles, “It was probably one of the 25 lowest winning scores in “Jeopardy!” history.”

Transplanted to Texas

Beams spent most of her childhood in Wisconsin, moving to Tyler, Texas, when she was a sophomore in high school. She admits to having more than a little culture shock, plus no clear sense of what she wanted to study for a future career.

“I wanted to be a teacher; I wanted to be an engineer,” she reminisces. “By the time I was really looking at college, I knew I had to figure something out. I liked math and mom mentioned accounting. So I looked into it. Senior year, we had a day when we each ‘shadowed’ someone in their work. I got paired with Kathy Kapka (2015-16 TSCPA chairman) over at University of Texas at Tyler and really have to credit her for launching my career. She even hired me as a student assistant during two summers while I was in college.”

A graduate of the University of North Texas, Beams enjoys going back for Homecoming and other events. For upcoming accountant students, she advises: “Remember that your professional honesty and integrity start in school. While that’s not an issue for most accounting majors, my mind still boggles over the one I caught plagiarizing on an *ethics* assignment, of all things, when I was a grader for one of the professors. Also, take the (CPA) exam as soon as you can, while the information is fresh, and you’re

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still in the habit of studying and taking tests.”

Beams, an accounting and auditing assistant director with BKD, also hopes accounting majors fully realize all the different ways they will be able to apply their degree. “I am passionate about governmental accounting. It’s a very specialized area, but it’s highly important when it comes to the public interest. It matters where that money is going. So find what interests you and make that yours.”

When she’s not protecting our tax dollars, Beams plays violin for her church orchestra, the New Life Symphony Orchestra, and has performed at Carnegie Hall, Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow and the Sydney Opera House.

“My fourth-grade self couldn’t have imagined that when I started,” smiles Beams. “My dad says he remembers the day I brought home that half-sized violin and just made noise. It’s a nice outlet now. I remember one time I’d had a particularly hard day – I really didn’t feel like going to rehearsal. But I was able to take out my frustrations through the music. It can be very cathartic.”

Da DA Da Da, Da DA Dum

Does Beams hear the Final Jeopardy music in her sleep? She claims: “No, I don’t even remember hearing it on stage. “Jeopardy!” is a good memory, so fun to be there and see how it works. I met neat people from all over the country. I had relatives from five states come to the taping. It was a dream come true just to get to do it. That I won was extra sweet.”

What do most people ask about her moment in game show history? “What are you going to do with the money?” Beams replies. “For me, it was a trip to New York to see ‘Hamilton’ this past September. Back when I spent three years in Connecticut as a practice fellow at the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB), I thought about seeing the production while it was off-Broadway, but passed. Then it became the biggest thing ever. It definitely deserves all the hype – it was amazing!”

Although she missed out on “Hamilton” the first time around, Beams’ work with GASB during that time proved to be a turning point in her career, cementing her desire to pursue governmental accounting as her specialty.

She reflects: “Many people commented how calm and poised I appeared on television. I credit much of that to my time at GASB, three years of making presentations to the Board (highly respected members of the profession) that were also webcast. Beams adds: “The GASB board and staff had a group dinner the night of my first show and made the restaurant turn on the game. I heard there was lots of loud cheering. They acted as if it was the Final Four!” ■



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