

Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?



While in California at the Disney Awards in July, 2005, Terry Wick (in charge of Disney Teacher Awards) told us about a screening for “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” We were invited to take a trivia test if we were interested. It sounded like fun and I decided to go for it. The test was a Scantron test (multiple choice that was graded immediately) with 30 questions to answer in five minutes. Twenty of us had our names called and were invited to participate in an interview following the test. I interviewed with a Red Sox fan, which made the interview process painless.

In September, Jeffrey Thompson (another Disney teacher who took the test and interviewed) e-mailed me to ask if I had heard anything – and that they had called him to come to NYC! I was very excited for him, but I had heard nothing. He appeared on the show in October for a December 5th “air time”.

On October 20th, Kristin took a call from Nathan Ross telling her that I had qualified for “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire”! She immediately tried to call me at work. Joyce Morse, Apollo House secretary, ran down to my room with the news. I called home, got the information, and called Nate Ross back. He told me that I had been chosen as a contestant, and that my scheduled dates were Tuesday, November 15th and Wednesday, Nov. 16th.

For the next several weeks, I began carrying trivial pursuit cards with me, having fun questioning students and faculty. At home, I did some trivia “studying”, especially geography (which seemed to appear on many trivia questions) and Presidents. I also played computer “millionaire” and Jeopardy games, which provided some virtual practice.

On Monday, Nov. 14th, I left school a little early and headed home to find that Karen had everything under control. I had packed the night before and we waited for Linda Tice (a Halifax friend) to come pick us up. She was very excited and drove us to the T station in Hanson, MA. We took the train to South Station – Kristin was very excited and talkative! At South Station, we boarded an Acela train and began the three hour trip to NYC.



We arrived on Monday night at Penn Station – it was dark. We could see the Empire State building lit up in red, white, and blue lights. I took a picture before we boarded a cab for the Milburn Hotel on 76th St. The cab ride was harrowing –maybe typical for some New Yorkers– but not us! The Milburn looked like a Brownstone building on the outside, but was quite ornate inside the lobby. We went to our room 602



and found a nice, large suite. There were chandeliers, impressionistic artwork and fluffy green comforters.



On Tuesday morning, I had to awaken at 6:00 AM to arrive at the studio by 8:00 AM. I got up, took a shower, and packed a change of clothes for the show. I found the West Side Café restaurant for breakfast. I reviewed a few last trivia cards and headed for 24 67th St., the entrance for the TV studio. The street was small, crowded,



and did not look anything like a TV studio entrance. It turns out that this was the SAME entrance that I had gone into for the taping of the Tony Danza Show. That TV appearance had happened so fast last fall that I had never gotten my bearings. So I was quite surprised to see that it all looked so familiar!

There were a couple of other contestants there when I arrived. We were let in at 8 AM and were brought into the “green room”, which was actually yellow. They had some light breakfast foods there for us. There were many staff there, probably 10 or so young employees. I was introduced to my producer, Jennifer Weeks, who was very enthusiastic and personable. I also got to meet Nathan Ross, with whom I had had many e-mail conversations. He had been very helpful. The other contestants included a woman lawyer from Houston (Julie), a retired lawyer (Les), a car mechanic from Ohio (Dan), a hedge fund manager from NYC (Julie), and a Disc Jockey from Minnesota (Jamie). We spent the morning in meetings of various types, including how to behave on camera, a lawyer briefing on the rules, a practice session on how to enter the set, and how to greet and sit in the hot seat. After that, there was a lot of waiting as we viewed past contestants and reviewed strategies for the game. At 12:00, a group of 6 contestants left from last Thursday’s taping entered the room. It was then that I realized that I probably would not be on the show until tomorrow (Wednesday). These contestants had been “carried over” from a taping from the previous Thursday. A contestant on that day had been very slow to make decisions, and this delayed taping for everyone else.



Karen and Kristin, meanwhile, were entering the studio as guests from different entrance at 30 67th St. Peter Bennett (Karen’s cousin and a good friend) had made arrangements to attend, as had Paul Salamone (Colleague who had retired and lives in NYC) and his wife, Lauren. It was great to know that there would be familiar faces in the audience. Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell them that I probably would not be a contestant on Tuesday. Taping began at 1:00, and we were able to watch the shows live from the green room. It was fun to watch people as they were plucked from the green room and appeared live on stage, which we could view on the monitor. We would play the games together and discuss answers as they played their games. We were not allowed to read anything or have any trivia materials with us. Cameras were also forbidden. The contestants were monitored at all times, and even had to be escorted to the rest rooms! I really

liked the group of people that I met there. Although the time went slowly, it was fun to see people we had met as they became contestants.

As the taping for the day was finishing up, they called me out of the “green room” (it was really yellow!) to go backstage for my appearance. There were two other contestants there, and it seemed certain that I would not get the call today. My producer, Jennifer Weeks, briefed me again and told me that they do not tell contestants who is going to be next in the hot seat. This is because, she told me, people get very nervous when they know ahead of time. So, they just tap one of the three people waiting just as the previous contestant finishes up. She went over possible topics that Meredith would discuss, especially my baseball tie (given to me by a student, Michaela Wood) and the fact that my classroom was set up as a phone a friend. (My other phone a friends were my brother Paul, Jim Shapiro (friend from Chicago), Sharon Jeffery (colleague), Chad Wohlers (friend from church), Tim O’Connor (colleague’s husband), Gaby Grossman (colleague), and Sue/Jimmy Vaille (friends). Suddenly, the alarm rang, and the final taping was done. We were told to return tomorrow at 11:45. We were escorted to the alley on West 67th St. and Karen, Pete and Kristin met me there. It turns out that they were starving, having only one mint to eat for the entire 7 hours of taping. Then we saw Sal and Lauren coming down the street and it was a great reunion (I hadn’t seen Sal since last year when he retired). The phone rang as we headed to find someplace to eat –

It was Casey LaRosa (a fellow Disney teacher who lives nearby). She told me that she had found my hotel and could meet us there. What a great surprise! Her husband Jerry and son Vernon were with her and we agreed to meet somewhere for supper. Everyone was starving (except for me – they had fed us all day!) and we looked desperately for a restaurant. Casey found a deli near the hotel, secured a table, and called us to give us directions. It was the Viand Café on Beacon St. It was awesome to see her and her family there outside of the restaurant!



What a wonderful atmosphere...a New York deli with great food and an informal ambiance. As we sat and ate, I realized that this was going to be a memorable event. The group was so diverse – Karen, Kristin, Karen’s Cousin Pete, my colleague Sal and his wife Lauren, Disney teacher Casey & her family– all special people from different parts of my life. Casey called Jeffrey Thompson and we talked about the Millionaire experience. Anyway, it felt like a family reunion – a memorable time with a boisterous crowd - everyone seemed to be having fun!

After some hearty goodbyes, we were off to the Milburn Hotel. I needed to get some sleep. I had been fighting a cold and was definitely overtired. Pete decided that he could not make the train home, and so he came back to the hotel with us to spend the night. We went over some trivia cards and said goodnight.

The next morning, Pete left early for his train (he would be going to work later that day) and I took a shower. I woke up refreshed and feeling better. I decided that it was a good thing that I didn’t appear on the Millionaire show the day before. Kristin, Karen and I went back to the Viand for breakfast. I had a ham and cheese omelet that was delicious. We had



some time after breakfast, so we headed off to Central Park. Kristin bought a camera on the way there at a food store.

Central Park was not what I had expected. Along the main roads, bleachers had been assembled for the upcoming Macy's Parade. Inside the park, it was hilly with rock outcroppings and narrow pathways through the woods. Along the way, there were stone bridges, stream beds and cobblestone paths. It was a beautiful warm (70 degrees!) day and the leaves were just beginning to turn. We stopped to take several pictures and took time to enjoy the scenery. It was strange to see the tall buildings surrounding this beautiful park!



It was hard to leave the park, but time passed very quickly and we had to get back to the hotel to get ready for the show. Karen and Kristin agreed that we should come back another time so that we could experience more of the city. There was so much to see and no time left! We also had to pack everything, so that we could leave immediately after the show for the Acela train.

At the hotel, Karen had turned on "The View", a live morning talk show starring Meredith Viera. She told a story about her 18 year old cat, who had to be put to sleep while she held it that

morning. It was really sad and you could tell that her cat was like a family member.

I left the hotel first because I had to get to 67th St. by 11:45. When I arrived, the other contestants were there to greet me. We were all excited and knew that this was definitely the day that we could become millionaires! We were let in by guards and escorted back to the green room. More food awaited us and then we had about an hour of waiting for the call to come backstage. Jennifer, my producer, briefed me again about what Meredith might discuss with me when I was on the hot seat. And then we waited some more backstage. Once again, I watched as contestant after contestant went onto the stage. We could see what was happening on a small monitor just offstage. The time crept by, and I watched as Dan, Jamie, and Julie went out on stage. It was exciting to watch as Dan and Jamie climbed up in prize money. Julie, the young girl who just moved two days before, was next. And then Jennifer tapped me on the shoulder!

Being out on stage was not so scary for me – I had been involved in many TV productions at PCIS. The crowd was frenzied up by a comedian before each contestant took the stage. I was fascinated to see the lighting and the boom cameras as they swirled around me. The screen in front of me was almost a distraction, until I realized that I had to



concentrate and ignore all of the stimulation around me. Meredith Viera was very nice. I had not met her before the airing. She was friendly, reassuring and gracious. She was also very



pretty, but up close, you could see a lot of makeup. In between questions, during commercial breaks, she was very personable. I told her that I was sorry to hear about her cat. As I finished my last question, I was asked to stay in the chair for a few minutes of additional filming. Then, I was whisked away to another area offstage. I was greeted by Jennifer, reunited with Karen and Kristin, and then asked to sign some papers. She told me that the show would probably be aired on April 3rd, 2006! After being congratulated by several other staff members, I was escorted to the door. Suddenly, we were out on 67th St., standing on the sidewalk. I looked at

Karen and asked if it was all a dream.

No time to think – we needed to get to Penn Station to catch our train. We headed towards Central Park and hailed a cab.

In no time at all, we were flying (almost literally the way the cabbies drive!) through the streets of New York. I remember trying to take in as much as I could of the signs from Broadway, the tall buildings and the wet streets. We arrived at Penn Station and fumbled our way through it looking for the Acela entrance. Kristin wanted to get a t-shirt and so we stopped quickly at a convenience store in Penn station. We found our way to the Acela, but it had been delayed, so we waited for about a half hour before boarding.



Once on board, it looked like we'd be all set. However, after about an hour of traveling the train slowed to a crawl. After two hours of moving slowly, we were told that the train in front of us had "wheel slippage" (doesn't sound good, does it?) and that we would be stopping to take them aboard. We had to back up, stop, and then collect about 75 more passengers. This delayed our arrival by about two hours. When we got to South Station, it was about 1:00 AM and it was nearly empty. We rushed for the Red line, hoping for any train heading towards Braintree. Luckily, they sent one LAST train. It was almost empty and we called Mildred, Karen's mother to come and get us. We drove home to our house – Mildred slept over- and settled into bed around 3 AM. Now, the hard part would be getting up for work in three hours....