



# A Life Well-Lived



INSIDE THE FINAL DAYS OF THE BELOVED *JEOPARDY!*  
HOST, A ROMANTIC AND AN OPTIMIST WHO  
BELIEVED KINDNESS SHOULD ALWAYS PREVAIL

**BY GILLIAN TELLING**



**LIFE IN HARMONY**

Trek and his wife, Jean, in their Studio City, Calif., home in 2018. He told *People* he wished he'd met her sooner: "We could have had a longer life together."



**MASTER OF CEREMONIES**  
 Trebek presided over the premiere episode of his final season, the show's 37th, in September.

**I**N EARLY JULY 2020, while Alex Trebek was quarantining at home with his family in Los Angeles, he was itching to get back to work on the set of *Jeopardy!* “My job gave me quality of life,” he told *People* then. “It established a rhythm and order of things. I miss it very much.” Still, he was enjoying the extra time at home with Jean, 56, his loving wife of 30 years, and his children Matthew, 29, Emily, 27, and Nicky, 54. He’d also just released his memoir *The Answer Is... Reflections on My Life*. But he was a little bored. Because he’d been undergoing various treatments for stage 4 pancreatic cancer, with which he was diagnosed in March 2019, he was so immunocompromised that he couldn’t even leave the house during the coronavirus pandemic. So he did what many others did: He tidied up.

“I’ve just been doing little projects around the house, getting rid of stuff,” he said. “I have accumulated so much over the past four decades, it’s difficult

to decide what’s got to go. My wife, Jeannie, has a great theory. She says if you haven’t used it in a year, it’s got to go. Well, I have things I haven’t used in 40 years!”

One thing he wasn’t wasting his time doing? Bemoaning his fate. Trebek, who turned 80 on July 22, was well-aware that the average patient with his aggressive form of cancer lives just one year after diagnosis. While some days were so difficult that he felt ready to die, he did his best to stay strong for his “soulmate” Jean. “She’s kept me alive,” he explained. “If it weren’t for Jean, I’d have put myself out of this a long time ago.”

When *Jeopardy!* resumed taping at the end of July, Trebek dived right back into his hosting duties. On Oct. 29 he hosted the show for his final time—an episode that will air in early 2021. Ten days later, on Nov. 8, he died peacefully at home, surrounded by a small gathering of friends and his family. “He was coherent,” *Jeopardy!* producer Mike Richards told *Today* of Trebek’s final day. “He wasn’t in pain.”

He also wasn’t scared. “Mortality doesn’t worry me,” he told *People* in May 2019, shortly after his diagnosis. “My dad died at 72, and my mom lived to be 95. So if I saw it off in the middle, that would be good.” Trebek was also content with how he’d lived

## The Voice of *Jeopardy!*

For the 37 years that Alex Trebek came onstage to host *Jeopardy!* he had just one man heralding his every arrival: announcer Johnny Gilbert. In his 70-year career, Gilbert, now 96, has worked on many game shows and with many hosts but none more impressive to him than Trebek. “He was introspective and really very intelligent,” Gilbert says. “He read a lot. People would ask him all kinds of things, and he would have answers for them.” Many questions came from the studio audience during tapings of the show, when, during commercial breaks, Trebek would go from professorial to puckish. “One gal asked him, ‘Boxers or briefs?’” Gilbert recalls. “Alex took a beat and said, ‘Thongs!’ He loved the audience.” Since Trebek’s death the mood has of course been more somber. “Everybody’s walking around in a little bit of a fog,” reports Gilbert, who will remain with the show, but he has no doubts that *Jeopardy!* itself will ably survive. “*Jeopardy!* is a very special game. If [the new permanent host] lets the show be the show, it will be fine.”

his life, noting that he had “not one” regret. “Is there any downside to how my life, my career has gone?” he asked. “I don’t think so.”

The outpouring of grief from fans around the world following his death was swift and heartfelt. A few days later Jean Trebek thanked fans for their support, writing on Instagram, “My family and I sincerely thank you all for your compassionate messages and generosity. Your expressions have truly touched our hearts. Thank you so very, very much.”

Among those offering tributes was his friend and *Jeopardy!* champion Ken Jennings. “Alex wasn’t just the best ever at what he did, he was also a lovely and deeply decent man, and I’m grateful for every minute I got to spend with him,” said Jennings. Over the years many had stories about the role Trebek had played in their lives. On the Nov. 5 episode, winner Burt Thakur, an immigrant from India, choked up as he told Trebek, “I learned English because of you. My grandfather, who raised me... I used to sit on his lap and watch you every day. It’s a pretty special moment for me, man.” Tony Vinciguerra, the CEO and chairman of Sony Pictures, which produces *Jeopardy!*, said, “For 37 amazing years Alex was that comfort-

ing voice, that moment of escape and entertainment at the end of a long, hard day for millions of people around the world.”

Trebek never tired of hearing what *Jeopardy!* meant to his fans or what he meant to their parents and families. “I get a lot of women in their 70s, 80s, 90s who tell me, ‘You’re hot!’” he told *People* with a laugh in 2019. “But I’m not like George Clooney. I’m not an A-list celebrity. I’m considered family, because you’re home every night, and you get used to seeing me there.” When he’d visit his son Matthew, who owns two restaurants in Harlem, he’d take the subway and smile and wave at those who recognized him. “When I walk around Manhattan, policemen and firefighters will say ‘Hey, Alex!’ and just wave. Like you’re one of their pals. That’s a nice kind of fame to have. It’s comforting.”

In his final few months Trebek spent as much time as he could sitting on a swing in his backyard, appreciating the beauty of the life he’d built. He took comfort in being in the presence of Jean, whom he’d met in 1988 and married in 1990. “With Jean it just happened,” he wrote in his memoir of being instantly smitten with her, not long after getting divorced from his first wife, Elaine Callei, whose daughter Nicky he



#### FAMILY PRIDE

The Trebeks (from left, children Matthew, Nicky, Emily and wife Jean Currivan Trebek) arrive at the 2011 Daytime Emmy Awards in Las Vegas.

had adopted. “I wasn’t looking for love, but I realized at a gut level that here was someone who was going to complete me as a human being.” After his cancer diagnosis Trebek worried how it would affect Jean. “I feel bad for caregivers, because they have to deal with their loved ones suffering, and there’s not always a lot they can do except make you feel more comfortable,” he said. “She has to be strong and try not to let me be downhearted and be positive, even though we knew this was serious.” Jean, who runs a website that promotes kind living called [insidewink.com](http://insidewink.com), said she did her best to stay happy for them both. “I want to uplift him,” she told *SurvivorNet* last year. “When I keep my

own self buoyed and enjoying my life, I can actually share that with him. He can look at me and have a sense of ‘Life is beautiful.’”

That beauty is something Trebek appreciated even before he got sick. Not a day went by that he wasn’t grateful for a job he loved and a wife and family he adored. In his memoir he wrote about his hopes for his legacy. “I’d like to be remembered first of all as a good and loving husband and father, and also as a decent man who did his best to help people perform at their best,” he wrote. “I’ll be perfectly content if that’s how my story ends: sitting on the swing with the woman I love, my soulmate... wonderful children nearby.”



#### THE MOORS THE MERRIER

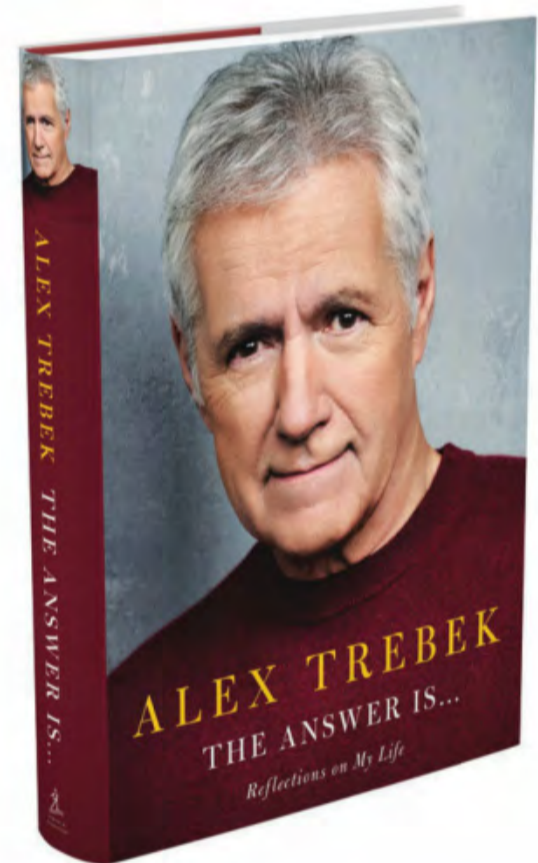
Above: In 2019 Emily, Jean, Alex and Matthew visited the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, England, the village where Emily Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights*.

#### STORY OF HIS LIFE

Right: In July Trebek released his memoir, covering his childhood in Canada, his long career and facing life and love after his cancer diagnosis.

#### IN THE FESTIVE SPIRIT

Below: The Trebek family donned paper crowns, a British holiday tradition, when they gathered to celebrate Christmas in 2019.



“

THERE ARE MATES,  
AND THEN THERE ARE  
SOULMATES.  
THAT'S A SPECIAL KIND  
OF RELATIONSHIP”

—ALEX TREBEK

**A FOND FAREWELL**

Trebek and Jean, here in the yard of their California home. “It’s a cliché, but live every day like it’s your last,” he told *People* in his final year. “Get the most out of life.”

