

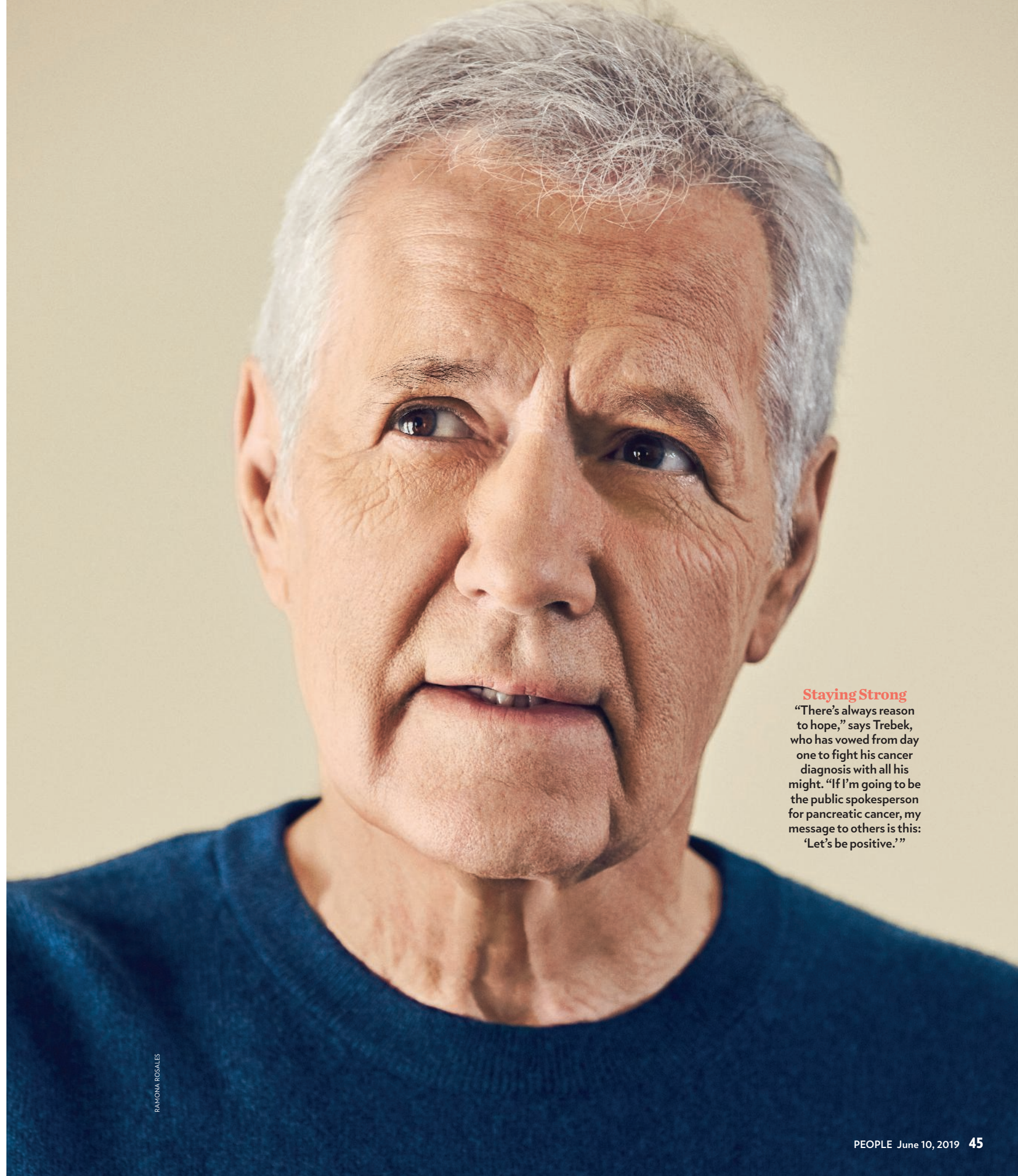


Never Giving Up Hope

Alex Trebek

AFTER A STAGE 4 PANCREATIC CANCER DIAGNOSIS, THE *JEOPARDY!* HOST IS RESPONDING WELL TO TREATMENT AND MAKING GREAT STRIDES IN HIS RACE TO BEAT THE ODDS

By **GILLIAN TELLING**



Staying Strong

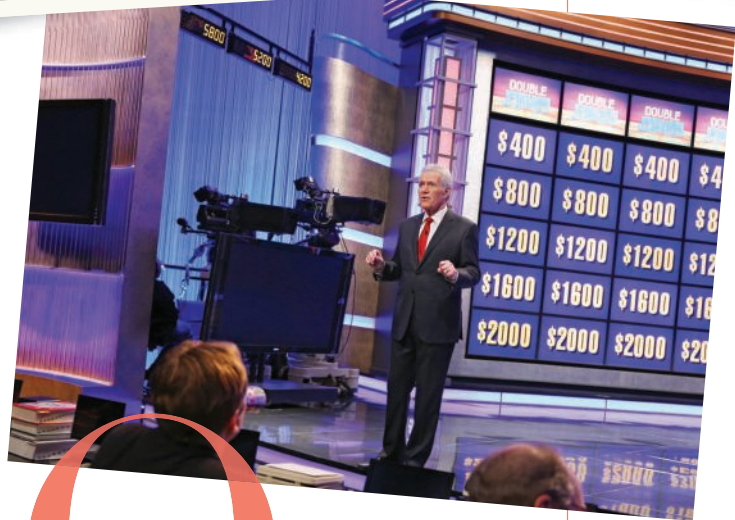
"There's always reason to hope," says Trebek, who has vowed from day one to fight his cancer diagnosis with all his might. "If I'm going to be the public spokesperson for pancreatic cancer, my message to others is this: 'Let's be positive.'"

PATRICIA ROSALES



excited, just beside themselves with joy.” So too is the longtime *Jeopardy!* host. “I got a little emotional,” he says of the news. “But these were tears of joy—not tears of great depression.”

To be clear, he has known both. The Canadian-born game show host told *Good Morning America* that as he initially grappled with his diagnosis, he felt “sudden bursts of deep, deep sadness.” Despite suffering from side effects of chemo including losing his hair and his sense of taste, Trebek stayed on the job, taping five shows of *Jeopardy!* twice a week until it went on summer hiatus in April. (The show resumes taping in July and is currently seeing its highest ratings in 14 years, thanks to the winning streak of contestant James Holzhauer; see sidebar, page 48.) Harry Friedman, *Jeopardy!*’s executive producer, says, “This is not some phony stoicism. This shows everyone who he is. We’re so proud of the way he’s handling this. When we talk



On the morning of May 4, just two months after announcing a devastating stage 4 pancreatic cancer diagnosis and still feeling weak from several rounds of chemotherapy, Alex Trebek, 78, took the stage at the annual PurpleStride walk to end pancreatic cancer in Los Angeles. Looking out at the gathering of survivors and their supporters—including 200 of his own friends and colleagues—he told the crowd, “[Cancer] survivorship is measured starting from the date you are diagnosed with cancer. On that scale, my gosh, I’m a 62-day survivor. But I’m working on it.” To great cheers, including from those at the event who had lived for more than two decades with the usually fatal cancer, Trebek added, “I promise you this: If I become a 22-year survivor, you will all be welcome at my 100th-birthday party.”

Two weeks later Trebek got news that he is one step closer to that celebration someday: His oncologists told him he was responding so well to chemotherapy that some of his tumors had already shrunk by more than 50 percent. “The doctors said that they hadn’t seen this kind of positive result in their memory,” Trebek tells *People*. “It’s kind of mind-boggling. I’ve already gone from where I was to this. The doctors are so

↑ **Still on the Job** “What would I do if I retired?” asks Trebek (above, in 2016, and below, in 1984), who has loved hosting *Jeopardy!* for 35 years and counting. When he announced the cancer, he joked he had no choice but to beat it because “under the terms of my contract, I have to host *Jeopardy!* for three more years!”



What You Need to Know About Pancreatic Cancer

“Your pancreas is deep inside the abdominal cavity, so you can’t feel any tumors, and there are no blood tests to detect pancreatic cancer,” says Julie Fleshman, president and CEO of the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network. So it’s usually discovered at late stages, making it the third-deadliest type of cancer. About 57,000 people are diagnosed each year, at an average age of 64. “There’s more research than ever, and about 175 clinical trials open. There are options,” says Fleshman. What to look out for:

- **Persistent stomach pain, persistent lower-back pain and unexplained weight loss.**
- **Jaundice (yellowing) of the eyes and skin.**
- **Risk factors such as family history, obesity, smoking, age and new-onset diabetes.**



Trek onstage at the PurpleStride walk to end pancreatic cancer on May 4 in Los Angeles.

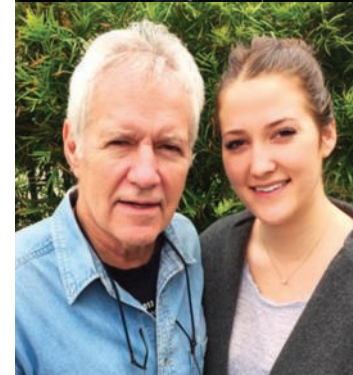
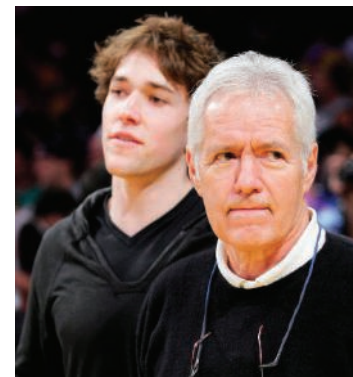


‘I’ve got a lot of love and prayer out there, and I will never minimize the value of that’

about events going forward, there’s never been a hint of ‘Well, if I’m still here...’ It’s like, ‘Okay, we’ll do the chemo thing, surgery if necessary, and then I’ll be back.’ He’s not being cavalier, it’s just ‘We’ll get it done!’”

That doesn’t mean Trebek hasn’t had moments of serious worry. Pancreatic cancer, which affects the small glandular organ behind the stomach, is one of the deadliest forms of the disease, and the five-year survival rate for patients diagnosed with it is just 9 percent. “I know the survival rates for pancreatic cancer are very, very low,” says Trebek, who says he hadn’t been feeling right in his stomach for months before the diagnosis but chalked it up to indigestion. When the biopsy confirmed cancer, he was terrified. “When you hear problems with the pancreas, you think, ‘Oh dear, not that...’” And yet, Trebek says, his initial concerns have not been for himself. “Mortality doesn’t worry me—except for the effect it has on those who care about me.”

It turns out many people care a great deal. The universal outpouring of love—at the Daytime Emmys in May, where he won Outstanding Game Show Host, he received not one but two standing ovations—is something Trebek credits with helping him respond so well to treatment. “I told the doctors, this has to be more than just chemo,” he



His Support System

“Jeannie cried when we got the good news [about how well I’m responding to chemo],” Trebek says of his wife of 29 years, Jean Currivan (above). She has stood by his side through his cancer journey, as have his kids Matthew and Emily (left), who he says are “staying very positive.” When Trebek needs to get out of his own head, “I just keep busy around the house. I’ve got projects. I finished my wife’s bathroom, and it rained and there was a leak, so now I’ve got to find where it’s coming from!”

THIS SPREAD: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT, CAROL KALESON/JEOPARDY! PRODUCTIONS, INC. (2); RAMONA ROSALES; NOEL VASQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES; PANCREATIC CANCER ACTION NETWORK; MICHAEL LOCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Why Alex Cheers for 'Jeopardy' James'



"I love him! He's just a good guy, a nice person," says Trebek of professional gambler James Holzhauer, 34, who has already racked up more than \$2 million during his 28-day (as of press time) winning streak and provides Trebek with another reason to love his job. The host says he relishes a good streak on the show; he cried when Ken Jennings, who won \$2.5 million-plus during his 74-game run in 2004, eventually lost. "It's just exciting," says Trebek, who watches his own show as much as he can. The country agrees: *Jeopardy!*, which usually averages 9.5 million nightly viewers, is now reportedly seeing 12 million on nights when Holzhauer is competing.

says. "I've had a couple million people out there who have expressed their good thoughts, their positive energy and their prayers. The doctors said it could very well be an important part of this." Beyond cards, he has received holy water and oils and prayer shawls, had masses said for him and was even sent cannabis. He adds, "You usually don't hear about how you've affected people until you're dead, and then you obviously really don't hear it; your family does. They might think, 'Gee, he was really liked and respected,' but I'm hearing it while I'm alive. That's been such a positive in my life."

Trebek also praises his wife of 29 years, Jean Currivan, 54, for being a rock throughout his journey. "Jeannie's been wonderful, but it's been a lot," he says. "My heart goes out to caregivers, because they have to deal with their loved ones' suffering, and they also don't always know how to help, because there's not that much they can do except make you feel more comfortable. They also have to be strong and not allow you to be downhearted." As for their two children, Matthew, 28, a restaurateur in New York City, and Emily, 25, who works in real estate in Los Angeles, Trebek says they've never doubted his ability to keep fighting. "They look at me as Mr. Strong, and if anybody's going to beat this, Dad will," he says. "They're very positive, and until I demonstrate otherwise, they're going to continue in that vein."

'I'm trying to give hope to a lot of people out there. We're making progress, so let's be positive'

Now, as the sudden celebrity face of pancreatic cancer, Trebek says his newest mission—other than to make a full recovery—is to shine a light on the cause and help raise money for research. "Medicine is always coming up with new ways to deal with the different types of cancer," he says. "The survival rate for pancreatic cancer 20 years ago was 4 percent. Now it's up to 9 percent. We're making progress, so we need to be hopeful. It doesn't always have to end in death." While he admits he's curious about what may have caused the cancer, the self-described homebody who rarely goes to parties has no regrets about how he's lived his life. "Not one," he says. "I don't live in the past, I live in the present. It's the old cliché statement, but just live every day as if it's your last day. Get the most out of it." For proof that he takes his own advice, look no further than his sprawling home in Los Angeles, where his numerous Emmys, countless family photos and massive collection of history books are evidence of a life well-lived, and well-loved. "Is there any downside to how my career, my life, has gone?" Trebek asks. "I don't think so!"

With additional reporting by **Christina Dugan**

