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Spinning the wheel and chasing a dream

By Sarah Spakes

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Hollywood really is where the American dream is made.

Growing up, I watched "Wheel of Fortune" every night with my parents. I still watch with them when I'm home. Usually, I answered correctly the most quickly. Several times, my parents suggested that I apply to "Wheel of Fortune."

During Christmas Break 2021, we were watching "Wheel of Fortune." One commercial showed Pat Sajak and Vanna White telling viewers how to apply to become a contestant on the show. All you had to do was submit a video introducing yourself and explaining why you would be a great fit.

My boyfriend and I both submitted videos. In early June 2022, I got a callback to do a Zoom audition; my boyfriend did not. The Zoom audition was simple, much to my relief. The other two potential contestants and I solved toss-up puzzles competitively, introduced ourselves and individually did lightning round. The contestant coordinator told us that if we did not hear back within a month, we should try again next year.

I did not hear back in July.

On August 9, I opened an email with the first line saying, "Dear future 'Wheel of Fortune' contestant." I had never been more shocked. The email requested my presence at Sony Pictures Studios for filming "Wheel of Fortune: College Week" on August 26 and asked for a confirmation by August 10.

Here was a conundrum. That was the first Friday of classes, and I would also have to miss the first Thursday so I could get COVID tested there. My parents also bought their dream house, and the final day to move out of the old house was August 26. But this was quite possibly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I was a senior. I only had two semesters left to be on “College Week.”

I told them I would be there.

I flew out on August 25. I landed in LAX, and I learned that Miley Cyrus lied in “Party in the USA.” I never saw the Hollywood sign, the Lyft driver did not play Jay-Z and I never heard a DJ play Britney.

On August 26, I was in the studio from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. In the morning we were at the “Jeopardy!” set. There, we did hair and makeup and listened to the lawyers and contestant coordinators explain the rules. I learned that I do not want to be a lawyer because I could not write all those rules.

That afternoon, we went to the “Wheel” set. We played practice rounds. The wheel weighs 2,400 pounds; it was easier to spin than I feared. We got to watch six episodes of “College Week” and “College Edition.” They fed us several snacks and a delicious lunch.

Many people helped ease the nerves while I was behind the wheel. The live audience helped by clapping, laughing at jokes and cheering. Pat and Vanna helped us feel like we were at family game night. Jim the announcer had been chatting to the contestants all day. The contestants I played with and the other 17 in the audience all became friends during those long 12 hours, and we rooted for each other.

I hoped to win at least \$5,000. That felt like an amount that indicated I had solved puzzles. After taxes, that amount would let me net enough money to buy myself something nice.

For each turn, you can spin the wheel, buy a vowel if you have money under your name or solve the puzzle. You will land on a cash value; a prize with cash value that is added to your total; a bankrupt, in which you lose your cash, prizes and your turn; or a “lose a turn,” in which you keep your cash and prizes but lose your turn.

You can buy a vowel for a flat rate of \$250. If you know the puzzle, you can solve it.

After spinning the wheel several times, I hit bankrupt twice: The first one took a trip to Spain that I’d landed on earlier, and the second took all my progress on the puzzle. The two bankrupts hurt. I guess God wanted to keep me humble.

The contestant coordinators advised us to buy vowels and win the prize puzzle. The prize puzzle counts as money won. I wanted to go to “bonus land,” and winning the prize puzzle would help with that.

When I realized I would go to bonus land, it felt surreal. Bonus land meant that I had won the show, and I would take home my earnings up to that point: \$21,950 in cash and prizes. I would get to spin the little wheel, solve a puzzle on my own and talk to Pat and Vanna more one on one.

Not getting my bonus and seeing what the answer was hurt even more than the bankrupts.

Yet, I am so grateful and am still so excited. Being on “Wheel” is literally a once-in-a-life opportunity. Not only was I on it, but I got to go to the bonus round. Despite the setbacks at the beginning, I won a trip to Barbados valued at \$7,700 during the prize puzzle round, in which the person who solved the puzzle won an all-expenses-paid-for trip. My cash total was \$14,250, making my winning \$21,950.

How fitting that my episode aired on the first day of Thanksgiving break: a season for gratitude and time with the ones who support us and push us to try things we don’t think we can do.



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