

Amy Schneider's gift to America was bringing her whole self to 'Jeopardy!'

Schneider was not just a transgender TV star, she was “a smart, confident woman doing something super normal”

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Columnist

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For eight weeks this fall and winter, America turned on its televisions to the game show “Jeopardy!” and learned, in dribs and drabs, about the life of contestant Amy Schneider. She has a cat named Meep, she told guest host Ken Jennings. She works as an engineering manager in California. She founded her high school debate club, but mostly so she could put it on her college applications.

She won her first game back in November (“What is Manhattan?”), and then she kept winning and winning, until she was the winningest woman in the history of “Jeopardy!” and nearly the winningest contestant of all time — one of only a handful whose earnings surpassed \$1 million. On Wednesday her victory came to an end. Bested by a Chicago librarian, alas, but set to return later for a Tournament of Champions.

Schneider is transgender, and the most monumental thing to note about this is that it wasn't treated as monumental. There were no public hissy fits, no tedious pontificating from the Piers Morgans of the world. There was nobody fretting that the *children* might be seeing this (if your children are watching “Jeopardy!” of their own volition, then congratulations). There was only a middle-aged woman on a middle-aged show, correctly answering clues about the Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl, or the British adventurer Robert Falcon Scott.

“The best part for me has been being on TV as my true self,” she told George Stephanopoulos in an interview. “Expressing myself, representing the entire community of trans people and ... just being a smart, confident woman doing something super normal like being on ‘Jeopardy!’ ”

As the days and the big wins went on, Schneider became a fixture in the nanosphere (grandma's kitchen TV, the activity room at the senior center), charming even the demographic that might be prompted to disparage people like her. Her winning streak encompassed the holiday season, when families gather and would give anything to talk about something besides politics. Schneider wore a trans pride flag pin as Thanksgiving approached — signaling to LGBTQ folks, in a small but vital way, that she would be at that table with you, even if you were not at the table with your family. *Been there*, she seemed to saying.

She was not an ad campaign. The small miracle was how she came out of the blue, sui generis. The bigger miracle, by far, was how good she was at playing “Jeopardy!,” something everyone thinks they can do until they are standing there with that clicker in their hands.

And as she kept winning, viewers everywhere became invested in her victories. How much more fun is it to root for someone rather than reject them?

She shared her broad and granular trivia knowledge, along with her astrological sign (Gemini), and tidbits from her childhood, and the fact that she's not great with plants but manages to keep a few succulents alive. She tweeted about how she knew the answer to a clue about President William Henry Harrison, and she tweeted a shout-out to her favorite spice store. Through all of it, America watched: For the final week of December, "Jeopardy!" was the highest-rated program on broadcast or cable television.

She tweeted, "I didn't want to make too much about being trans, at least in the context of the show. I am a trans woman, and I'm proud of that fact, but I'm a lot of other things, too!"

She shared her *whole self*, and this was her tremendous, generous gift to America. She would not allow the country to think of her merely as a transgender woman or merely as a "Jeopardy!" champion. Instead, with little fanfare, she made sure the two identities were linked. To the viewing public of a country that still regularly dehumanizes transgender individuals — via humiliating bathroom bills, via harmful stereotypes, via disgraceful statistics related to homelessness, poverty, sexual assault — Schneider was relentlessly human.

On Wednesday, her last episode as champion, we learned a few last tidbits. We learned that she owes her pop culture knowledge to her girlfriend, Genevieve, for example, and we learned that she could dominate a category about the 1770s. And then we learned that even the unstoppable contestants are eventually stopped: During the Final Jeopardy question, she could not remember the only country in the world to end in an H. (What was Bangladesh?) She conceded gracefully, and then she was gone from our televisions.

A shift in culture is a lot to ask from a game show, or one of its contestants. But maybe, beyond the record-breaking and the cash winnings, her lasting legacy is actually this: This wonderful idea that you never know who you might meet, and what you might learn, if you just tune in to the world around you.

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