

Spinning the Wheel

Written by Vivian Bikulege

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Do you watch Pat Sajak and Vanna White on Wheel of Fortune? Is it part of your after-dinner routine squished between network news and Jeopardy with Alex Trebek? In a world of social media and streaming services, kids and young adults probably aren't entrenched in guessing letters and solving puzzles, but I've been spinning for a long time.

I began playing Wheel of Fortune in earnest at Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the fall of 1995. Stan Bikulege, my sixty-five-year-old father, had suffered a massive left-brain stroke. The right side of his body was irreparably damaged. His speech and capability to communicate was stunted. I temporarily relocated from St. Louis to help in his long recovery.

Every evening, after feeding my dad from a dinner tray garnished with Jell-O, mystery meat, mashed potatoes, and hot tea, I would sit beside him in a high-back vinyl chair and challenge him to a game of Wheel. It was a kind of speech therapy, a way to relearn letters and words. After the show ended, I'd give him a kiss goodnight, head to my childhood home, exchange updates with my mom, go to bed, get up, work, drive to the hospital, and repeat. It took Stan three months of recovery and rehab before he'd return to his armchair, his family room, and his new normal.

Fast forward more than ten years, my mother, worn from caregiving, the loss of my father, and a body consumed by diabetes moved into our Lady's Island home. When I wasn't traveling, my mom, my husband Mac and I would watch Wheel as I cleaned dinner dishes. I'd

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pause for each round to pick letter and scold contestants for buying vowels. My mom would cheer me on as I tried to win each round fast and first, smug in my gameshow prowess in the comfort of my home.

About eight years ago, local auditions for the show took place in Savannah. Mac and my mom encouraged me to tryout but I declined. I wasn't going to waste time I didn't have believing I would make the cut. Just because Mac and Irene thought I was good didn't make it so. I wasn't a believer.

In November 2018, I was retired, no longer a caregiver, and the 36-foot Winnebago Wheelmobile returned to the Oglethorpe Mall. Mac noted the tryout dates in the newspaper and told me to go. I was rusty. The evening ritual of Wheel-watching had diminished with the loss of my mom. The return of the Wheelmobile seemed to be a "now or never" situation. My biggest impediment was my confidence and ego. I decided to audition anyway, drove to Savannah, and stood in a long line waiting for the Wheel of Fortune mock studio to open. I joined a group of wannabe contestants - a menagerie of excited dreamers eager for the chance to get on stage.

After two full days of clapping and cheering, my name was called for the very last round of play. I made a fool of myself. In the Fun & Games category, I guessed *Roach Trash* instead of *Royal Flush*.

What?!?!? Being laughable and loud gets you a second audition. I was called back months later. I took a test, wore nicer clothes, laughed, smiled, and just had fun. In January 2020, I was invited to Los Angeles to tape the real thing - America's Game®. I signed a legal contract with Sony and therefore, I cannot tell you how this will end. On March 13 – yes, Friday the 13th – watch Wheel of Fortune to learn if I win or if I lose.

In a warped kind of way, the not-knowing could be a metaphor for life. We don't know how the game will end. Will our luck or some greater power sustain us through the ups and downs of winning and losing? Will we travel seamlessly through time or lose our turn too soon, have a bankruptcy of faith, take risks or pass? And when we get to the end, as we all will, how will it end? In defeat? In glory? What will we learn? Will someone play the game better than us or will we be our own worst enemy? In some strange, wonderful way, I learned important life lessons all because I took a chance, persevered, played, and followed the advice of people that love me.

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I will tell you that getting on Wheel of Fortune was a process and a strange calling. I will tell you that the answer to the last puzzle on March 13 is the gift – for me, for you – maybe even for Pat and Vanna. In the end, I simply believe that Stan and Irene sent me a critical message on a studio set in Culver City, California, and now, if I choose, I am free to quit spinning. Tune in, pay attention, learn for yourselves, and enjoy the show!

Beaufort resident Vivian Bikulege will appear on Wheel of Fortune Friday, March 13.