

# 'JEOPARDY!' STAR'S SECRET PASSION

**Off-camera, Alex Trebek crusades for the world's children**

by Lisa Arcella

**A**nd the answer is: Handsome Canadian star of popular game show, "Jeopardy!" If you said, "Who is Alex Trebek?" you'd be right. But there's more to Trebek than just quizzing contestants and doling out dollars.

Yes, 48-year-old Trebek is a mild-mannered game show host who lives with his mother in Hollywood Hills and has been romantically linked to such women as Stefanie Powers and Rona Barrett. But there's also a side of this star that few get to see—the tireless crusader for the children of the Third World. Trebek recently sat down with *Celebrity Plus* to talk about his private passion.

Relaxing with him in the famous lobby of New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel, it quickly becomes apparent that Trebek is an attention-getter. People stop, stare, smile and ask the star of everyone's favorite brain game for autographs. Even Presidential candidates want to meet him. Then-Vice President George Bush, also staying at the hotel, has invited the graduate of philosophy from the University of Ottawa to lunch. "Yes," Trebek smiles confidently while popping a cashew into his mouth. "I have an invitation, but I am not a Republican . . . I'm not a voter [in the U.S.]."

What's the attraction to the show and its star? "We [Jeopardy!] are perceived as a more intelligent program, and it's no dishonor to admit that you watch us." When the ques-



The more familiar Trebek at his podium on the set of "Jeopardy!"

tion is put forth as to why viewers find him irresistible, Trebek is suddenly a bit embarrassed.

"They [the public] find me to be a regular sort of individual," he explains with a pause. "People feel comfortable with me, and that's good. I think they realize that I'm not a flake, but somebody reasonably solid that they can trust, and that's good."

Modesty aside, Trebek is popular. He hosts the number two syndicated game show, has hosted many game shows in the past and his suave sophistication can be seen



in countless commercials. This popularity was not lost on the Christian relief and development agency, World Vision. They recently enlisted the star for a tour of the poverty- and drought-stricken areas of Ethiopia and Mozambique.

For Trebek, the trip was an eye-opener. In civil war-torn Mozambique, for example, about one of five children will die before their fifth birthday because they are hungry or have treatable illnesses but can't get medical assistance.

"Somebody asked this morning whether it bothers me a lot to see the suffering, and to a certain extent it does," Trebek admits. "I've seen enough of it now that I can



**Trek getting tour of a drought-stricken village in Mozambique.**

look at it in a semi-detached way and see it as a problem that needs to be solved and needs to be dealt with. There are moments, of course, when you are confronted with a child that is in a very bad way, and you know that child is going to die—it tears at you. I love kids, I have a good time with kids . . . even with those that are in bad shape.”

Get Trebek talking about Africa and his interest and zeal for the subject take control. “The per capita annual income in Ethiopia is a little over \$100. That’s a hundred bucks a year,” he says in amazement. “Now try and equate that in your life. Wait . . . I know, they can live a lot cheaper, right? But how

could you live on \$100 a year? There’s no way you can. There are kids coming into these camps with no clothes. They wear bark—they have absolutely nothing.”

Still, Trebek could have taken the route that many stars in Hollywood follow: simply lend their names to a cause and stay at home. “Yeah, but I like to see things for myself,” he counters. “I may have been a little skeptical at first, a little cynical about their [World Vision] operations, and I wanted to see for myself if they were really doing something good.

“I’m not afraid to wallow in the mud and get into shocking, smelly and disease-ridden situations. That doesn’t intimidate me—so I felt comfortable doing it and am very pro-World Vision and what they are doing, so I’ve continued to help them out.”

Part of the reason Trebek, who has no children of his own (he was divorced eight years ago), chose the organization was because they aid nearly six million children a year and encourage self-sufficiency in adults—envisioning a day when natives will come to rely on their own resources instead of relief workers.

“That has happened in some places,” Trebek enthuses. “For instance, in Korea, where World Vision started over 30 years ago, there are a number of projects which receive no financing at all because they are supported by people within the country.”

Want to ruffle Trebek’s feathers? Suggest that with millions and millions starving, relief work is basically a futile effort. The normally calm performer is visibly agitated. “A friend of mine really upset me about two years ago by telling me that we shouldn’t be spending and sending these foodstuffs to the children of Ethiopia because they have suffered so much from malnutrition that their brains will never develop completely, and that we are not saving them for anything good,” he relates. “That really shocked me—gosh, what a hard-hearted attitude. I was happy to find—on these trips to Ethiopia—that this is not the case. While it’s true that they are not going to be rocket scientists, they can still lead productive lives as farmers and workers in the cities.”

When he isn’t working on the show or for his favorite charity, Trebek stays forever busy and in shape by playing golf, tennis and water-skiing. Whatever free time is left is spent trying to convince people that they too can make a difference. “If enough of us get together, we can help,” he says earnestly. “When you get involved and do something, not only do you help others, you also help yourself. That’s happened to me.” ☆