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'Weakest Link' auditions lure those in search of TV fame and fortune

By Mike Hughes
Lansing State Journal

With visions of game-show fame dancing in their heads, people lined up Tuesday at the Lansing Center.

They were auditioning for "The Weakest Link." That meant they were supposed to seem smart and personable, all at once.

It wasn't easy. In all, 81 people tried out in the morning, with separate auditions at night. About a third of the morning people got to a second round.

"It was really cool just to be here," Hector Juarez, 51, a Waverly Schools employee, said after being rejected. "You don't have many experiences like that in Lansing."

It was more fun for the second-rounders. They got to talk to a camera and play a mock game.

"I got everything right," Tony Baltimore, 25, a political aide, said. "But they voted me out anyway."

Actually, the final vote belongs to the producers. They'll look at tapes and gradually decide who gets on the daily TV show; about 150 shows will be taped in the next half-year.

There were no sure things, even among friends.



CHRIS HOLMES/Lansing State Journal

Honey, it was just a joke: "Weakest Link" applicant Hector Juarez (left) says if he wins he'll take his fiance Elaina Ankney (right) to a place she has never been - the kitchen. Tony Baltimore (front), an aide to U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers, shares in the laughter. Of the three, only Baltimore advanced to the second round.

TV's link

- "The Weakest Link"
- 7 p.m. weekdays, Channel 47
- Occasional celebrity specials on NBC (Channel 10)
- Tuesday's tryouts were for the daily version.

On the Web

- The Weakest Link, www.weakest-link.tv/

Advertisement

One couple - Juarez and Elaina Ankney, 42, a health-care worker - met double rejection. Another - Bill and Emily Cortez, a 26-year-old car salesman and 22-year-old photographer - has thrived lately; just three weeks after their Las Vegas wedding, both got to the second round.

"When they called my name,

I was thinking, 'Oh no, he wanted it more,' " Emily said. "Then they called him, too."

For some friends, things didn't work out that neatly.

Jon Ross, 25, and Alysia Sofios, 26, are anchors at Channel 47. She made the second round; he didn't.

"I was pretty sure I'd do well on the questions," Ross said. "But she's prettier than I am."

Lucy Holtzhouse, 29, an auditor, came enthusiastically. Jennifer Worley, 30, an underwriter, only came for moral support.

Worley was the one who got to the next round. "I feel like such a heel," she said. "Lucy was the one who was bright and funny."

These people were auditioning for the non-network syndicated version, hosted by George Gray. The NBC one, with Anne Robinson, is slated only for celebrity specials next year.

Some, including the Cortezes, are fans. "I watch just about every day," said Shannon Martis, 40, who is between jobs. "I just like George's humor."

Others were less sure.

"To be perfectly honest, I prefer 'Millionaire,' " said Ted Kilvington, 33, a data code operator.

Still, he came to the auditions, partly because his car didn't start in time for him to get to work. "I took that as a sign."

It was an iffy sign. Kilvington, like Martis, was rejected.

For some people, the preparation began the night before.

"We prayed," said Shelia Anderson, 39, whose husband, Cleo, made it to the second round. "I knew he would make it. He's very smart; even after he



CHRIS HOLMES/Lansing State Journal
The perfect answer: Contestants for "The Weakest Link" fill out applications Tuesday morning at the Lansing Center.

graduated from Michigan State, he read the dictionary straight through, just to learn."

Ankney's unsuccessful, pre-audition effort included buying a full outfit, with slim orange pants and leather jacket.

"I wanted to look kind of dressy," she said.

Holtzhouse and Worley each independently chose pink. "It's bright, cheery, out there," Holtzhouse said. "Like me."

Martis' tastes are far from pink. He wore snakeskin boots that elevated him even beyond his usual, massive (6-foot-5, 240-pound) presence. "You kind of stand out a little," he said, sheepishly.

Mike Redding, 44, who owns a media production company, compromised by wearing a "Got Milk" cap. He often wears a cowboy hat, but decided that would be too much.

"I didn't want something that says, 'Choose me or I'll kill you,' " he said. They didn't; he didn't.

Some people had no choice about what to wear. "I have to go straight back to work," said Baltimore, resplendent in suit coat and tie.

Visually, these 81 people offered broad variety. That was a good thing, said R.J. Portella, the audition coordinator. "We're looking for the mirror of America."

Inside a conference room, they fill out a questionnaire and introduce themselves.

Juarez - who is in the rock band Twin Ferraris with his twin brother, Victor - savored that.

"If I win the money, I'm going to take (my fiance) somewhere she's never been before," he told everyone. "The kitchen."

Ankney laughed. She said she'd buy him a McDonald's restaurant.

Others also had snappy introductions.

Ken Pierce, 41, a safety consultant of considerable size, called himself "a recovering anorexic." James Brown, 42, proclaimed himself "the hardest working man in marketing."

Patty Crecine, 35, a bartender, said she was there because "I always beat my boyfriend in 'Jeopardy.'" Tom Cantrell, 32, an information technician, described his tongue-in-cheek Tom Bowl, in which the nation's top two college teams are invited to a game in Beal City; some (including Nebraska) have accepted, but none has shown up.

Orma Woodman, gray-haired and of undisclosed age, said she works in a funeral home; "I'll get you eventually." Michael Garcia, 56, a headhunter and consultant, promptly muttered, "Not if I can help it."

People said interesting things - not necessarily with any success. Cantrell and Woodman made it to the second round; Pierce, Brown, Crecine and Garcia didn't.

The reasons for rejection are varied, Portella said.

One factor was a 20-question quiz, covering a cross-section of pop culture. (The people taking it were forbidden from mentioning the questions afterward.) Far more important, he said, was whether a person seemed interesting in the introductions and questionnaire.

The rejects shouldn't fret, Portella counseled. "Repeat after me: 'This is just a dumb game show.' "

Some people didn't need that consolation.

Scott Pohl, a newsman and host on WKAR-AM, made it to the second round. So did Cathy Bacile, a Lansing State Journal copy editor and writer.

So did both Bill Cortez and the former Emily Irish, who recently moved from Arizona to her home in St. Johns. "Her father said if we were going to live together, we should get married," Bill said.

On one day's notice, Emily planned a Vegas wedding. Three weeks later, they were both enjoying the second round of "Weakest Link" tryouts.

"It was fun," Bill said. "But you do go blank for a minute."

Others didn't get that far. That included, alas, this reporter. I got most of the answers (about 17 of 20) right, but may have flunked the personality part.

As I understand it, this is just a dumb game show.

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