

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Yul Kwon, From Bullying Target to Reality TV Star

By NPR Staff  
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*Yul Kwon's early life was mired with a host of challenges. Born to South Korean immigrants in New York, Kwon never had a positive role model from his community. In 2006, he decided to join the cast of Survivor and make a name for himself in popular culture. As you read, take notes on how Yul Kwon overcame his personal demons to become a role model for other Asian Americans.*

- [1] Yul Kwon first earned his game-changer status when the Yale University-trained lawyer put his career on hold to compete on the CBS show *Survivor* in 2006. He became the first Asian-American to win that show's \$1 million prize. That led to work as a special correspondent for CNN, a lecturer at the FBI Academy, and deputy chief of the Federal Communication Commission's Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau.



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Kwon currently hosts the news program LinkAsia on LinkTV, and recently finished hosting PBS' *America Revealed*, a mini documentary series about agriculture, transportation, energy and manufacturing.

## Being A Target Of Bullying

Kwon's early life involved a host of challenges. He was born in 1975 in New York to South Korean immigrants. He tells *Tell Me More* host Michel Martin he had a severe lisp as a kid, so many people assumed he was a foreigner who could not speak English properly. Kwon says he grew increasingly quiet to avoid being teased or beaten up.

"But as people who've been bullied are well aware, the more quiet you are, the more you attract bullies," he says. "And it started to be a real problem for me. I started to develop a number of social anxiety disorders."

- [5] Kwon says these issues continued for many years, partly because he did not see many role models from his community. He watched a lot of television (as a way to learn English), and in the rare times when he did see Asian-Americans onscreen, they were portrayed in negative stereotypes.

"If you're a guy, you're either a Chinese cook, or a gangster, or a Kung Fu master who could kick butt but can't speak English, or a geek who can't get a date," says Kwon. "And so, over time, I think I just internalized a lot of these images and I became that quintessential Asian-American."

Despite a difficult childhood, Kwon went on to earn a bachelor's in symbolic systems from Stanford University, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa.<sup>1</sup> He also earned a juris doctorate from Yale Law School, where he served on the editorial board of the *Yale Law Journal*. He worked in law, politics and business, then made what some would consider a surprising shift to television.

## Becoming A Star Of 'Survivor: Cook Islands'

Kwon says he never imagined that television was an option for someone like him, but one day, he received an email from a *Survivor* casting agent who was seeking Asian-American contestants.

"It turns out that the reason they wanted to do this was because they had a twist to that season," he says, "which was they were going to divide the contestants into racial tribes and have a war of races."

- [10] Kwon initially was not interested in participating, but then he thought back to his hunger for positive role models as a child. He says that if he had seen them, it might have helped him build courage, confidence and an image of himself as a potential leader.

"The great thing about a reality show is that it's not scripted, so I don't have to play a stereotype, I don't have to play a role where I'm speaking with an accent," he says. "And so I thought if I did well on the show, I could potentially be the kind of role model that I didn't have when I was growing up."

Kwon surprised even himself by winning the show, a victory he attributes to fair play. He says he wanted to apply all the things he learned from working in law, politics and management consulting, and to play an intelligent game that did not involve backstabbing.

He says the win also brought him closer to his father, who initially discouraged Kwon from joining *Survivor*. He says his performance on the show prompted his father to say something he'd never heard before: "He said, 'Yul, I'm sorry.' And I'm like, 'What?! Who are you? You're not my father,' you know. And I asked him, 'Why are you sorry?' And he said, 'You know, I've always just kind of viewed you as this kind of kid who's trying to figure out what he wants to do, and you know, didn't really have it together. And then I saw you on the show, and I'd seen what kind of man you'd grown up to become, and I was really proud of him. So I'm sorry that I doubted you.' "

## Making Headway For Asian-Americans

Kwon says that in recent years, television audiences have seen more Asian-Americans playing roles that don't descend<sup>2</sup> into stereotypes. He points to actor Daniel Dae Kim. Kim now stars on the CBS series *Hawaii Five-O*, but had his breakthrough role as Jin on the hit TV series *Lost*.

- [15] "What Daniel Dae Kim told me when he first took on the role was, 'Look, I want to bring a level of craft and artistry to this role that no one else can. And in doing so, I want to create a narrative arc that allows this person to become a three-dimensional character.' And that's exactly what he did on *Lost*. Over the arc of that whole series, he became one of the most popular characters on that show."

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1. Phi Beta Kappa is an honorary society of college and university undergraduates and some graduates to which members are elected on the basis of high academic achievement  
2. **Descend (verb):** move or fall downward

Regardless, Kwon notes that Asian-Americans still have a ways to go in achieving equality on screen. He says he would like to "use media to get to a point where people look at us as Americans — as opposed Asian-Americans, African-Americans or any other subcategory. But first and foremost, we're Americans."

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Why did Yul Kwon develop “a number of social anxiety disorders”? Select TWO answers. [RI.2]
- A. Because Kwon was bullied
  - B. Because Kwon was Asian-American
  - C. Because Kwon was pressured to achieve academic success
  - D. Because Kwon’s father was abusive
  - E. Because Kwon watched a lot of television
  - F. Because Kwon lacked a role model

2. Why did Yul Kwon agree to join the cast of Survivor? [RI.2]
- A. Because Kwon wanted to win the \$1 million cash prize
  - B. Because Kwon was tired of law school and wanted a new challenge
  - C. Because Kwon wanted to embody the role model he had missed out on as a child
  - D. Because Kwon was opposed to the way Survivor had cast Asian Americans in the past

3. Describe the relationship between Kwon and his father. Cite evidence from the text in your response. [RI.3]

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4. PART A: Which of the following best describes the meaning of the phrase, “three-dimensional character,” as it is used in paragraph 15? [RI.4]
- A. An actor who can successfully play three different kinds of roles
  - B. A character who is believable and complex
  - C. A character who is simple and unexplained
  - D. A character who becomes the most popular

5. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "...casting agent who was seeking Asian-American contestants..." (Paragraph 8)
  - B. "...I don't have to play a stereotype..." (Paragraph 11)
  - C. "...a level of craft and artistry..." (Paragraph 15)
  - D. "...one of the most popular characters on that show." (Paragraph 15)

