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She's the unflappable center of a show where anything can happen. **JULIE CHEN** takes a break from her day job on *The Early Show* to look back at seven seasons as host of *Big Brother*

Oh, Brother!

AS TOLD TO JIM COLUCCI

Even after

logging a pre-dawn news anchor shift on CBS' *The Early Show*, Julie Chen is all smiles as she enters an underground conference room beneath the New York City studio where the program originates. The founders of a reality show website have just sent her three framed posters of the "Chenbot." It's a nickname she loves.

The robotic sobriquet arose from the reserved, journalistic and unbiased demeanor she exhibits as the host of the hit reality show *Big Brother*. But outside the walls of the show's California compound, Chen is funny, self-effacing and boiling over with opinions of the show's past contestants that previously she dared not share. Now, as the show prepares for the debut of its eighth season this summer, Chen—who is such a *Big Brother* fan that she has sampled the show's trademark losers' gruel and even considered starting her own PB&J-eating challenge with her two sisters—looks back at her favorite moments from seven seasons of manipulation and deception in the summer sun.





The first season of *Big Brother* was fun because the whole experience was very raw and very new for everyone, so you never knew what to expect out of the show. In fact, I remember one moment that would have ended the show right then and there: George, whom we had viewed as kind of a simple guy, tried to engineer a revolt. It was uncharted territory, and the producers were wondering, "What are we going to do?" The housemates had all the power, and they could have walked right out. That's what I love about live television, and what I've loved about breaking news as a reporter—anything can happen, and you just have to wing it. It was great because that moment brought reality to reality television.

George, a roofer from Illinois, leaves the *Big Brother* house after it was revealed during the show's live broadcast that viewers had voted to banish him.

SEASON 1

Season 2 was all about the intrigue of watching Dr. Will and how he manipulated his way to the finish line. And there were a lot of memorable moments, like when Shannon used Hardy's toothbrush to clean the toilet—and then we edited it to show, from behind the mirror, Hardy brushing his teeth so meticulously. In actuality, I think we intervened—at least I hope we did—and made her tell him what she'd done.

When there were just four players left in the *Big Brother* house, we sent four former *Survivors* in to compete with them—and I just loved the reaction. First of all, they were just thrilled to see outside people coming in. But then, also, so many of them were fans of *Survivor*, so it was like we were giving them

celebrities. But it was interesting how the housemates' next reaction was, "Game on!" It was a moment of *Big Brother* pride, bonding and working together to win the challenge.

I also remember season 2 for the bonding we saw between Kent and Bunky. I'm not involved in casting, but with one of them being a conservative older man and the other one gay, I know the casting people had thought, "Oh, good—there will definitely be fireworks." But then it was so pleasantly surprising to us that Kent came a long way, and I think, learned something about himself. I think Kent walked out of the *Big Brother* experience not just having participated in some reality show, but having seen an accepting side of himself that he would never really have had access to. And becoming friends with Kent was nice for Bunky, too, because as he's said, it has been hard for him at times to find people who could embrace the fact that he is gay. So what we thought would be a problem in the house ended up becoming something we felt proud of.

SEASON 2

SEASON 3

We brought Sheryl Crow into the house to give a private concert, and it was so cool seeing her sing "Soak Up the Sun" in the *Big Brother* backyard. That season, Danielle was the one to watch. In the house, she would be quiet and play it very cool—but then in the diary room, she would reveal to us how she was the puppet master. And she almost pulled it off, until the other players saw how diabolical she was, trashing them in the diary room—in fact, that became the last time we allowed evicted houseguests to watch diary room sessions. From then on, we decided not only to sequester the evicted players, but also to show them only selected portions of what happens in the house.

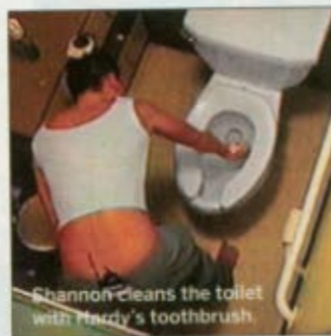
But the thing I know fans remember from season 3—and I loved it, too—was when I smacked Marcellas for making the worst move in *Big Brother* history. He could have used the Golden Power of Veto, which was brand new that season, to save himself, but he was so confident that he was beloved by everyone voting. It was total ego. So when he took off the necklace and put it away in the box, it was so unexpected that I could hear the control room in my earpiece, screaming. It made for a great moment, but one where we had to scramble. We usually have a list of questions and topics for me to talk about with the evicted houseguest, which we all thought would be Amy. I had no questions for Marcellas, so I winged it. And when he came out, I said something like,

"I'm going to do this for your grandmother who is watching," and I smacked him with my note cards. It wasn't so much a matter of Julie the Robot showing emotion—it was more to acknowledge what everyone at home was thinking: "What are you, stupid?"

All they wanna do is have some fun: Sheryl Crow makes a surprise visit to the *Big Brother* 3 house.



Chen, John Fila/CBS; Season 1: Morty Brinton; Season 2: Robert Veets/CBS; Season 3: Tony Esparza/CBS



Shannon cleans the toilet with Hardy's toothbrush.



Hardy seems to be laughing as Shannon exits the shower.

Season 2 houseguest, Dr. Will



The *Big Brother 4* cast (clockwise from top left): Scott Weintraub, David Lane, Jack Owens Jr., Nathan Marlow, Alison Irwin, Dana Varela, Erika Landin and Jun Song.

As part of the game, we give the surviving players a treat—like sometimes we show them a movie. In season 4, we sent a mime into the house. But instead of finding it fun, the two remaining players, Jun and Alison, were both freaked out. Now that I think about it, I guess mimes are kind of freaky, especially if you're trapped alone with one in a house.

I loved watching Alison that season. She was so aware that the cameras were all around her, and she was afraid that she was going to get in trouble with her boyfriend Donny for flirting with Nathan and all the other guys—including her ex-boyfriend, since season 4's theme was The X [as in ex-] Factor. So she would hold up a picture of Donny and just stare at it until she would cry. And then she would tell us how she purposely did it, knowing that Donny was probably watching on the live internet feed. It was part of just how manipulative she was.

4 SEASON

5 SEASON

Season 5's theme was Project DNA. We had identical twins, Adria and Natalie, playing the game for the first half of the summer as one person. We would switch them out every three days, and then halfway through the summer, we revealed the trick to the rest of the house. We hadn't been sure if the twins could pull it off, but they did.

We also had Mike and Nakomis, a half-brother and -sister who didn't know they shared the same father. They were so opposite. Nakomis had different color hair every week, whereas Mike was a naive cowboy who had just gotten married. Before we even had a chance to prompt them, they started talking and realized all these things that matched up in their lives. And then we sent a letter in there from their father. It was so emotional—I remember, it was very early on in the game, and I was in my office, getting ready to leave for the night when I noticed on the live feed, "Wow,

they're talking!" I knew I had to get home because I had to do *The Early Show* the next morning, but I ended up staying late because it was really incredible to watch.



Twins Adria and Natalie reveal the season's surprise twist.



The cast of *Big Brother 5*, from left to right (front row): Lori Valenti, Karen Ganci, Jennifer "Nakomis" Dedmon, Diane Henry; (second row): Michael Ellis, Holly King, Jase Wirey, Adria Okins, Mike Lubinski; (back row): Scott Long, Will Wikie, Marvin Latimer and Drew Daniel.

Any time Janelle won was a favorite moment of mine from season 6, because she seemed unstoppable. We were amazed at how well she did, and there was almost no explanation why. She just seemed to have studied the game hard, and then the rest was just good karma. She would pass by Maggie and say, "I want to be honest, Maggie, you're a bitch," and keep walking.

6 SEASON

Just playing it very honestly got her very far—and that was a nice thing to see. And Maggie was so smart—she didn't react, and that's what got her to the finish line, ultimately winning the whole season. Apparently when they cast her, Maggie was funny and outspoken. But then the whole season, even in the diary room sessions, she had her game face on. It frustrated the producers of the show that she wouldn't

reveal herself, because we like to "out" people for who they really are, and she wouldn't budge. It turned out to be a great strategy.

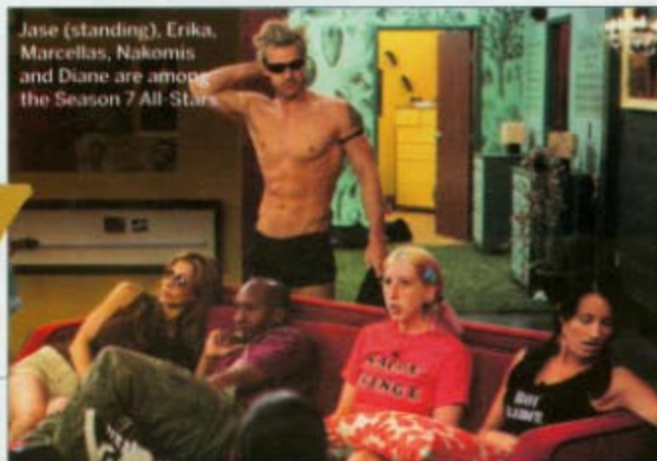


Janelle Pierzina wins a Head of Household competition.

During season 7, *Big Brother: All-Stars*, I loved when we had the "ghosts" of people from past editions appear on the other side of the camera port mirror. It would be someone like Holly from season 5, with a flashlight under her chin, calling out, creepily, "Jan-ELLE!" And then she'd be gone. Janelle particularly was really freaked out.

Back in season 2, Mike Boogie had said the most incredibly outrageous, pompous thing to Dr. Will, something like, "You know what's wrong with this *Big Brother* world? We're the stars of the show, and the extras are voting out the stars!" He didn't win that season, but actually, it turned out to be a true statement, because he won the all-star year. But my favorite moment of season 7 was in the finale when we exposed to Erika who Mike Boogie really was in terms of his arrogance and trash talking. I felt bad for Erika, because it was definitely humiliating, but she needed to know. He may have won, but at least in getting exposed in the finale—and then in getting beaten up by Rosie O'Donnell when he went on *The View* the next day—he was getting a little bit of what he deserved.

7 SEASON



Jase (standing), Erika, Marcellas, Nakomis and Diane are among the Season 7 All-Stars.

Season 4: Tony Esparza/CBS; Season 5: Tony Esparza/CBS; Season 6: Cliff Lipson/CBS; Season 7: Robert Voets/CBS