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New Orleans whiz kid joins John Cena on 'Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader'

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER AUG 8, 2019 - 4:15 PM

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Host John Cena on "Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader" in Los Angeles. Mia Tillman, right, is a fifth-grader from the Northshore.

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Sue Strachan

Sue Strachan writes about art, movies, TV, people, parties, fashion and homes. Contact: sstrachan@theadvocate.com.

When “Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader” debuted 12 years ago, the show proved, entertainingly, that quite a few adults are not.

After a break of four years, the show’s latest revival, on Nickelodeon, includes a new generation of fifth-graders and the adult contestants who need their help.

In the new season, one of those young brainiacs is Mia Tillman, who lives on the north shore.

The 11-year-old's effervescence and smarts make her a natural for the quiz show, which also features four other fifth-graders from throughout the United States.

The show airs on Monday nights. Mia's group of whiz kids rotates with another group, so she's not seen in every episode.

Mia already had a budding career in TV and commercials. She has been in two commercials and in the short film “Black Girl, Magic,” and has been cast in a movie filming in the New Orleans area (she can’t say which one just yet).

Her journey to quiz show stardom began with a casting call in Los Angeles, suggested by her agent.



Mia Tillman answered tough questions in 'Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader' on Nickelodeon. Mia, 11 and now going into sixth grade, lives on the Northshore.

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“I really wanted to do the show,” Mia said. “I was determined I was going to get it.”

In the show, WWE wrestler, actor and host John Cena introduces five fifth-graders and one adult contestant, and keeps the show moving at a brisk pace.

The adult is asked questions from elementary school curricula in a variety of subjects. The difficulty level goes up by grade level, first through fifth.

When the contestant answers the question correctly, they go to the next level, or grade, winning more money along the way.

When they reach the fifth-grade level, the contestant races the clock to respond to five questions that fifth-graders are expected to be able to answer. The grand prize is \$100,000 and being able to brag that you are smarter than the proverbial fifth-grader.

The kids participate when a contestant asks them to “cheat”: The contestant chooses one of the youngsters to help them if they don’t know the answer. There is a “peek” option, when the contestant can look at the fifth-grader’s answer and choose whether to use it; the “copy” option means that the contestant uses the answer.

Mia admits it is “really crazy seeing myself on TV!” and that host Cena is “really nice to everybody – always cracking jokes and making us all laugh.”

Mia is a straight-A honor roll student whose favorite subjects are science and math. “I like science because I like learning about the human body, astronomy, space and the astronauts,” she said.

In addition to schoolwork, she sings and plays the harp, violin and piano; her favorite composer is Beethoven. She enjoys track, golf and drawing. "I have my little sketchbook, and I always sketch things," she said. She also writes poetry.

One more talent? Baking. "My favorite thing to bake is my banana cupcakes," Mia said.

Mia was born in Houston, where her parents relocated after Hurricane Katrina. They moved back to the New Orleans area when she was 7.

Her two college-age brothers are supportive of her career and "have a lot of faith in me, so I appreciate that," Mia said. She hasn't tried any of her questions on them, but thinks that is a good idea.

What does she want to do when she is an adult?

"She has been saying she wants to be a pediatrician since she was 2," said Mia's mom.

"I had my little doctor's kit, taking my family's temperatures," Mia said. "As I got older, I realized how many kids were suffering with

diseases and sickness, so I want to help them.”

Back home after taping the season in Los Angeles, the rising sixth-grader has fond memories of her time on the show.

“My favorite experience was definitely hanging out with all my 'classmates.' I loved going up to the podium and helping contestants,” Mia said.

MIA TILLMAN'S FAVORITE QUESTIONS

Do you know the answers to these questions asked in the elementary school curriculum? TV whiz kid Mia Tillman does!

Question: True or False? A haiku has eight syllables in the second line.

Answer: False. A haiku is a Japanese style of poetry. It has three lines: five syllables in the first and third lines; seven syllables in the second line.

Question: How many prime numbers are there between 1 and 50?

Answer: 15 (The prime numbers are: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 47)

Question: What is the medical instrument for listening to someone's heartbeat called and how is it spelled?

Answer: Stethoscope

Question: "An object at rest remains at rest" is which law?

Answer: Newton's Law

Question: Who is the only U.S. president elected to the office four times?

Answer: Franklin Roosevelt

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