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Jeff Varner: "I'm Profoundly Sorry" – Survivor 34 Exit Interview

Posted By: Global Staff | April 13, 2017



John Powell – [GlobalTV.com](#)

Host Jeff Probst has called what happened "one of the most raw and painful studies of human behaviour that Ad Choices

ever happened on

."

: "I am at peace with whatever direction Zeke chooses to take. This is his story to tell. I did a horrible thing to him. Granted, I did it without malice. I wasn't trying to hurt him. It came from a different place. If he needs to throw me under a bus to elevate himself to do what he needs to do, I would ask him to point me to the bus. I would gladly lay down for him. This is his time and I am here to elevate him as best that I can. I wish him all the best. I love him dearly and I respect him greatly."

: You have received a lot of criticism but also by the same token a lot of understanding as well. For example, Audrey Middleton, the first transgender person to star on Big Brother USA, sent you a kind message on Twitter. How do you feel about all of this?

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It was the most inexcusable moment in *Survivor* history.

Back to the wall at Tribal Council, Jeff Varner outed Zeke Smith as transgender not only to those participating in the production but to everyone watching at home.

"Why haven't you told anyone here you're transgender?" Varner said to Smith claiming he was being "deceptive" in an attempt to save his own skin and turn the tribe against Smith.

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Smith has gone on public record saying he forgives Varner but won't forget how his actions changed his life forever.

For what it is worth, Varner himself deeply regrets what happened.

"I hurt him and I am profoundly, profoundly sorry. I hope that I can be an example to people about why you should never, ever do what I did because when you out a trans person, you stigmatize and shame them, force them back into the closet. You aren't letting them be themselves and that is a horrible place to be," said Varner as he described what happened before that fateful Tribal Council.

John Powell: Take me back to that Tribal Council and what your thinking was. You seemed to be making a very good argument but then what happened, happened.

Jeff Varner: "Well, there was a lot of conversation that was happening on the beach before we headed into Tribal. In that time, I had a private conversation with Ozzy as we were looking for the hidden immunity idol together. He dropped his guard and let me know he was in a secret alliance with Zeke and Andrea. That didn't make it to air but that would have added a bit of context. As I went back to camp with that information, I started arguing about deception and how they are all being deceived and I was going to prove it to them that night. Sarah, Tai and Debbie said they would vote with me if I could prove that to them. That is where I was when I walked into Tribal. I was arguing the whole deception card meaning the others were being deceived by an alliance."

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Jeff Varner Outs Zeke Smith as Transgender, Faces Backlash From Tribe

"We need to recognize the humanity and the dignity of trans people, to lift their voices and help them be heard and stop reducing them to sex surgeries and body parts because that is so objectifying and dehumanizing."

"You didn't see on air where Zeke popped up and said I was lying and not telling the truth. There is no deception. I just emotionally popped out with what I popped out with. It wasn't an intended thing and it just turned into what it turned into."

"I thought Zeke was out of the closet. I couldn't even fathom someone would go on a reality show like *Survivor*, not once but twice, and had a secret like that. It never dawned on me. We didn't have the luxury of watching *Millennials vs. Gen X* before we went out there. So, I thought Zeke was a massive player. I thought he was a villain and I was so massively wrong about him. I misjudged him greatly."

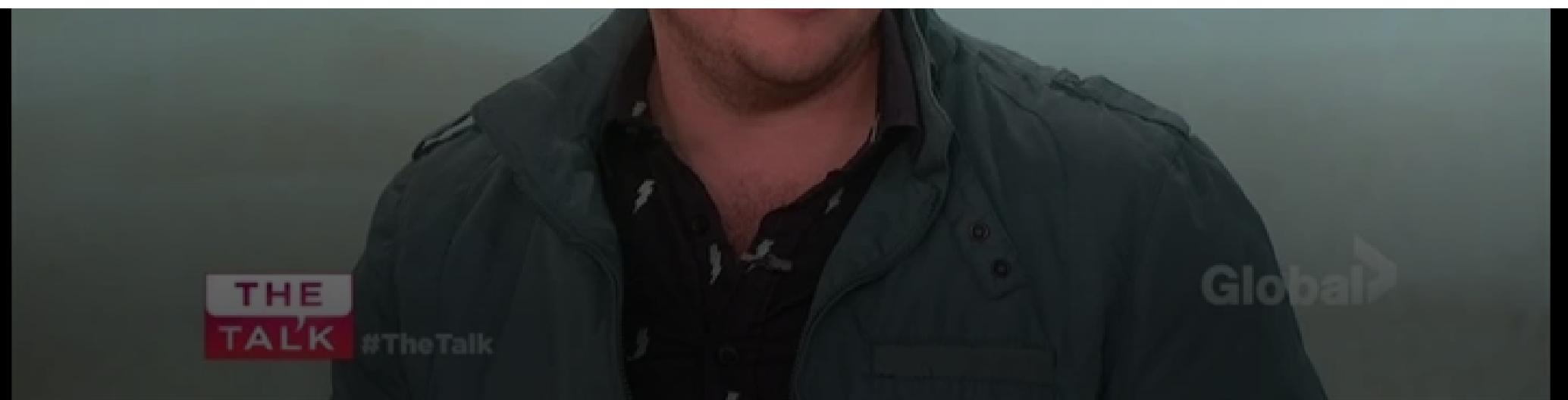
"When I was arguing with everyone, I thought he was out to the fans because he just played. It didn't dawn on me that he played all of those days and nobody knew. When it hit me, it hit me. I couldn't live with myself for the longest time. I had some really awful thoughts and thank God for the *Survivor* therapist. They made sure both Zeke and I had therapists back home to work with. It prepared me for last night. Now that I can officially talk about it, let the healing begin."

John Powell: Did you have the chance to speak or communicate with Zeke after the series was over?

Jeff Varner: "Yes, Zeke and I have spoken several times since we have been back and in all of those conversations, he has been wonderful. We have bonded. He has given me his forgiveness. He has been so gracious. I have no idea where a human being gets all of that. He is a tremendous person and I am so grateful for him."

John Powell: In a public statement Zeke has said he forgives but he cannot forget. How do you feel about that?

The Talk**Zeke Smith Responds to Being Outed by Jeff Varner**



Jeff Varner

John Powell: Were you amazed at Zeke's reaction? While several tribe mates were clearly angry and upset, he was calm and dignified. He didn't respond with hate or malice in any way.

Jeff Varner: "I think it was an amazing reaction because we as a society in the United States we treat many trans people like they don't belong. We minimize them. We discriminate against them. We need to recognize the humanity and the dignity of trans people, to lift their voices and help them be heard and stop reducing them to sex surgeries and body parts because that is so objectifying and dehumanizing."

"The fact that Zeke spoke with such dignity gives me pride because that is the way it should have been. There were still parts of Tribal that didn't air which would have made my experience easier. There is a moment where Jeff Probst said..."Varner, I have known you for 25 years and you don't have a hateful bone in your body." That wasn't in the show and that's okay but what was in the show was that transgender wins in the end and I am smiling as I say that to you because it does make me happy. Zeke and I are going to move forward fighting for transgender rights. We are probably not going to do it together but we will both make good out of a bad situation."

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Zeke Responds to Jeff's Cruel Tactics After Being Outed as Transgender



John Powell

Jeff Varner: "When I met Audrey, Audrey was sitting alone at a table at a charity event all by herself. People were ignoring her. I made a B line for her because I couldn't wait to meet her. We sat. We talked and we chatted. Audrey became my friend at that event and I kept in touch with her. When I got back from Fiji, I reached out to her but I didn't call her because I couldn't legally tell her what went down. When yesterday began to

go down, I sent her a text. In return, she sent me the most beautiful, heart-felt message that made me cry. She is such a spectacular woman. I love her so much. I am very grateful for her support and the support of others. Audrey is just one of many that I have heard from. Transgender people have cussed me out but I have had an equal number reach out to me."

John Powell: What do you hope people take home or learn from the situation?

Jeff Varner: "There are several messages I hope that they get. One, don't you ever, as long as you breathe, out a human being in any way, shape or form. I am learning in my work and my research and through meeting different people, that there are a lot of LGBT people that freely out LGBT people. They think it is okay because they are in the family. That is wrong. We cannot out people. It is their story to tell. When you out someone, you force them to not be who they really are. Outing someone is assault. I want to make that point and have people understand that. I would like to also take a moment, I mean you guys are in Canada, but there are all these bathroom bills here in the U.S. and I don't want people to be bigots. Don't be afraid. It is not about bathrooms. This issue is about a trans person's right to exist in public. These efforts are trying to erase trans people from our society and that is wrong and I am not going to stand by quietly and let that happen."

John Powell: Would you ever play again, Jeff?

Jeff Varner: "I am never done with *Survivor*. It is my family. It has been for 20 years. You cannot just walk away from your family. I don't want to play again. I don't have any interest in playing again but I will never walk away from the family because nobody knows what it is like unless you have lived it."

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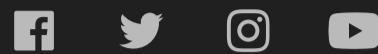
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