



# Survivor

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## From Survivor To Survivor: Joe Opens Up About Abuse, Healing And Fatherhood

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Joe Hunter and Eva Erickson. Photo: Robert Voets/CBS.

By John Powell – GlobalTV.com





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Joe Hunter displayed his scars for all to see on Survivor. The fire captain's sister was a casualty of domestic violence. As he revealed on the show, his last phone call with her didn't end well and he never spoke to her again. Emotionally, he was still carrying a lot of regret and pain. He was able to release some of that in a very powerful scene. Although he finished in third place this season, Survivor was about more for him. It was about healing and letting go.

John Powell: Joe, it's great to be talking with you today. How are you?

Joe Hunter: I'm good, I'm good. Thank you, John. Thank you.

John Powell: Now, I want to do two things. First, congratulations on making the finals of Survivor but more importantly, I come from a background where, as a child, I experienced spousal abuse in my household. I saw things that no kid should ever have to see. It was hard growing up in a home you didn't want to return to —when everyone else wanted to go home to feel safe, I didn't.

What did it mean to you to bring that issue to light, to talk about it, and make it part of your journey on Survivor after what happened to your sister?



Joe Hunter. Photo: CBS.

Joe Hunter: First off, I'm very sorry to hear that and thank you for sharing. It's conversations like this that matter. That moment on the show, it wasn't fake. I just want to thank the production team, the editors, everyone involved in Survivor for allowing that to happen naturally.

It started with my son's letter, my daughter's letter and my wife's letter. They reminded me and gave me the courage to say, "Hey, the real thing I want to be courageous about is this."

There were deep-seated issues, just like the ones you mentioned, that I don't usually share. But I thought, if I really want to be brave for my kids, I need to be vulnerable.

This is something I've been carrying around for a long time. People like yourself, and others who've experienced domestic violence, need to hear it too. So many suffer in silence. Hopefully, we can all start healing.

John Powell: I've read about the strides you've made with the bill you supported in your sister's honor. Just briefly, what are some of the things you think we need to do to address this issue more effectively?



Joe Hunter. Robert Voets/CBS.

Joe Hunter: That's a great question and thank you for asking. First, grace. We need to give people space to speak without judgment. What happened in our family, people would ask, "Why didn't she leave?" or they'd say, "Only weak people go through this," or "That person would never do that," and there's disbelief.

Whether it's a man or a woman, people need to be believed. It starts there, giving people space to share, to listen and then to act.

And stop being so judgmental. These situations don't happen overnight. Abuse typically develops slowly with people you care deeply about.

If a stranger attacked my family, I'd respond differently but when it's someone you love, it's complicated. People belittle the issue all the time. "Oh, it was just words," but verbal abuse can be more damaging than anything else.

So yeah, awareness. That's where it begins.

John Powell: In my case, it taught me the kind of father I didn't want to be. That really set me on a good path in terms of how I want to raise my son.

Speaking of support, you took Eva under your wing. I just finished speaking with her. You treated her like an adopted daughter and you reached out to her without any regard for how it might affect your game. What did that mean to you?



Joe Hunter, Shauhin Davari, Kyle Fraser. Photo: CBS.

Joe Hunter: That's another great question. Before I dive into that I want to say I'm really proud of that alliance.

People forget Eva and I didn't link up on Day One with some master plan. She shared something very personal and I just happened to be there. Imagine if I were on another tribe or another season, maybe that moment never happens.

What she gave me...(pauses)...Sorry, I get emotional, it was everything. She saved my life. She gave me the chance to show the world that you can play the game with integrity. I'm not judging anyone who lies or backstabs on Survivor. Everyone should play their way but I'm proud that this young woman gave me the opportunity to show my kids who I really am. She'll always be a part of my life. She's incredibly special to me.

John Powell: That's wonderful to hear. At Tribal Council last night, Kyle dropped a bomb and revealed how things really played out. What was your reaction to that?

Joe Hunter: It's funny, so much is said in exit press. I don't want to disrespect anyone's game, but yes, there were side conversations and theories. Did I know the depth of what was going on? Honestly, no. That's something I wish people owned more. We all didn't win, except Kyle, so we all have to own our part.

I'm not attacking my castmates but it's tough, because Kyle, Kamilla, Eva and I, we shared real things outside of the game that I would never share publicly. And then you get lied to by someone you trust. That's what messes with your brain. In real life that rarely happens. I didn't know the depth of Kyle and Eva's connection. I didn't know what Eva did for a living or Kyle either but I trusted them. And in a weird way, the relationship I had with Kyle might've kept me in the game.

Yes, he deceived me and won but he could've taken me out earlier and didn't. So, it's complicated. When I watched it back I felt like an idiot because I had no idea what was really going on.

John Powell: Well, from all the castaways I've spoken to they speak of you with high regard. That said, some also said that, in the context of the game, you were "The Godfather." People went to you for permission. This has been talked about a lot so I want to give you the chance to respond.

Joe Hunter: Thank you for giving me the space to respond. First off, I made it a point never to go after anyone publicly but here's what I'll say, if people called me "The Godfather," I take that as an odd honor but it's weird. You get called the "Godfather" and yet you get one vote at the end?



Jeff Probst and Joe Hunter. Photo: CBS.

So, I don't know if I was really in control, wouldn't that have shown in the votes? Your perception is your reality. I wasn't acting. I was just being who I am in real life. Maybe that was my downfall but I was genuine. I think that authenticity builds momentum between people and if others aren't into social connections, they might see it as a hierarchy that doesn't exist because it changes constantly.

I never claimed to be the "Godfather." I'm just a dad trying to build relationships but yeah, it was funny to hear.  
John Powell: Is there anything we didn't see on camera that you wish we had?

Joe Hunter: Yes, there are a few moments. The depth of my relationship with Shauhin, for example. We were very close. And same with Kyle and Kamilla – those bonds were deep and real.

There were private, off-camera moments I'll never share but I wish viewers could feel that depth more. Especially with Kamilla as it would help explain why certain moves were so hard. We weren't just game pieces. We had real, emotional connections.

John Powell: People don't always understand you're not just TV characters. You're real people with real families and real feelings.

Given everything you've been through would you ever go back out there again?

Joe Hunter: Oh, 100%! It's hard to leave my wife and kids, it really is, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

John Powell: What would you do differently?

Joe Hunter: This might sound crazy but nothing. Because as a dad, you rarely get to show your kids your failures on national TV. I can tell them stories from 20 years ago but there's no context. Now, they saw it all, my mistakes, my tears, my vulnerability. And all of it became teachable moments. So no, I wouldn't change a thing. I'm not perfect and I'm proud of that imperfection.

John Powell: As another father, I get that. Our kids see us as superheroes, and when we fail, it's tough but like my grandfather used to say, "You learn more from failure than success."

In the new era the jocks are targeted early but you guys banded together and flipped that narrative. How did that come about?

Joe Hunter: That's a good point. You're right, challenge winners often get voted out after the merge but I wasn't trying to start a revolution. I just didn't know the game well enough to over-strategize. I was just going to be me. David really led that charge. Had he approached me with the majority I probably would've gone with it. It wasn't about dividing people—it was about surviving. Honestly, I just wanted people looking elsewhere, not at me, but I loved flipping expectations. I love when people say, "You have to do it this way," and then you prove them wrong. It's honesty and loyalty or backstabbing and deception, everyone should be allowed to play their own game. That's the beauty of Survivor.

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