

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:14	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:22	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. Bonnie Hunt is my guest this week. She’s a comedian, an actor, a TV host, a writer, a director. Bonnie Hunt has done all of it. And she’s extremely good at all of it. I mean, acting? There’s <i>Jumanji</i> , <i>Jerry Maguire</i> , <i>Cheaper By the Dozen</i> , a bunch of Pixar movies. Her first ever movie part was in <i>Rain Man</i> . Not bad.
00:00:49	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:00:51	Clip	Clip	Charlie (<i>Rain Man</i>): Sorry about the toothpicks. Raymond: 82, 82, 82. Charlie: 82 what, Ray? How much is this? Raymond: Toothpicks. Charlie: It’s a lot more than 82 toothpicks, Ray. Raymond: Right. 246 total. Charlie: Here’s your change. Fran, how many toothpicks are there? Fran: 250. Charlie: Pretty close. Come on. Let’s go, Rain. Raymond: 246. Fran: There’s four left in the box.
00:01:19	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:21	Jesse	Host	Bonnie starred in three sitcoms in the ’90s. And in the early 2000s, she hosted <i>The Bonnie Hunt Show</i> , a profoundly underrated and super funny daytime talk show. One of her favorite recurring guests was her mom, Alice.
00:01:37	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:38	Clip	Clip	Speaker: Alice, do you have a joke you like to tell? Bonnie: Uh-oh. Oh no, my dad used to get so frustrated when my mom would tell a joke ‘cause she’d always do the punchline first. <i>[The audience laughs.]</i> Bonnie: Uh-oh, she’s laughing. Alice: Okay, the nurse said to the doctor, “Doctor, there’s a man—”

Bonnie: Uh-oh! Wait, Mom! I'm impressed! A nursing joke. Alright, go ahead?

Alice: Are you listening?

Bonnie: Yes!

Alice: Okay, the nurse says to the doctor, "There's a man in the waiting room with a glass eye, named Brown." And the doctor says, "What does he call his other eye?"

[The audience laughs and cheers.]

Alice: Should I repeat it? *[Laughs.]*

00:02:19 Sound Effect

Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:02:20 Jesse

Host

Bonnie Hunt has also created several hit TV shows. She has written and directed movies. And now, she's taking on an entirely new genre: family television. *Amber Brown* is streaming now, on Apple TV+. It's based on the Paula Danziger book of the same name. Amber, the show's title character, is a middle school aged kid living with her mom. Her parents are split up, and when the show starts, her dad lives overseas. Amber's world gets turned upside down pretty quickly. Her mom starts dating some guy named Max. Her dad moves back. Her best friend is headed out of state. It's a lot! But she has a lot of ways to help cope: a video diary, drawing, even talking with a cool auntie.

Before we get into my interview with Bonnie Hunt, who created the show, let's play a clip from *Amber Brown*. This comes from early on in the series. Amber heard the news about her dad. She's on the phone with her friend, Justin, talking through it.

00:03:22 Sound Effect

Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:03:23 Clip

Clip

Music: Dramatic, high energy background music.

[A video call jingle.]

Justin (Amber Brown): Your dad is moving back?! What does that mean?

Amber: I truly believe he's coming back for my mom. And then they'll get back together.

Justin: Wait. What about Max?

Amber: What about him? He's a sports car.

Justin: A what?!

Amber: A phase?

Justin: Well, my mom said they're serious. Like, getting married serious.

Amber: Don't even say that!

Justin: Okay, okay! Calm down. My mom does have a tendency to exaggerate. Or maybe she wishes she was marrying Max.

Amber: You can have him.

Justin: Once your dad's home, will you still live fulltime with your mom?

Amber: Aunt Pam said I'll probably be half mom, half dad.

Justin: Great title for a horror movie.

Amber: *[Chuckling.]* Yeah. Really. This year already feels like a scary movie. I didn't get any taller over the summer.

Justin: Well, statistics show that shorter people live longer, healthier lives.

Amber: Statistics show that best friends know exactly what to say to make you feel better.
Music swells and fades.

00:04:15 Sound Effect Transition

00:04:16 Jesse Host Bonnie Hunt, welcome to Bullseye. I'm so happy to have you on the show, so thrilled about it.

00:04:20 Bonnie Hunt Guest Thank you, Jesse! I'm glad to be here. I love NPR. Love it.

00:04:25 Jesse Host Hey, so do I. What can I say?

00:04:36 Bonnie Guest So, how did you end up in children's/tweens and teens television? Actually, I was writing a show about an eccentric aunt. This was the idea I was gonna write based on my own personal experience. I have 15 nieces and nephews that I know of. *[Chuckles.]* And, uh, my mom was encouraging me to write about my experiences being an aunt. I don't have any kids. I'm divorced, and I get to be that one that comes in and goes to all their school plays, but also they can confide in me when they need to. And it's just—it's a great life experience, and there's a lot of ups and downs and a lot of characters and a lot of love and lot of humor and a lot of pathos. So, I'm working on that, and I run into an executive from Boat Rocker that I've known over the years. And I don't know where we were, but he said, "What are you working on?"

And I said, "Oh, I'm actually writing this show."

And he said, "Well, we have the rights to this book series, *Amber Brown*, that a woman wrote about herself and her niece." So, I took a look at the books, and he said, "Why don't we join forces?" And of course, I had to talk to the family of the author who had passed away and get their blessing. But they—you know, in the books, the little girl is about seven or eight years old and there's a lot of bitterness with the parents. It's just a different feeling. But they were very open to bringing the two worlds together—my life experience combined with the characters in the book. So, it was a really nice collaboration, a lot of respect.

00:05:57 Jesse Host You have—what?—six siblings. Is that right?
00:05:59 Bonnie Guest I do. I have three brothers and three sisters.
00:06:02 Jesse Host My wife’s family is Catholic, and her mom has a bunch of siblings, and those siblings all have a number of children. Do your siblings also have huge numbers of children?
00:06:17 Bonnie Guest Yes. Well, everybody has three, about. That’s about the average. *[Chuckles.]* So, you know, for me it’s just so nice, because I wasn’t lucky enough and didn’t end up having children and got divorced. And it’s just such a—it’s such a unique relationship, where you can provide guidance. You don’t have the immense responsibility of a parent, but you have a responsibility, but also an outlet. And it’s something that I really cherish. I mean, I revel in all my nieces and nephews and their lives and their adventures.

And it’s a really rich part of our show, too. I love the fact that she has this mom who sets pretty healthy boundaries, and this aunt that she can of loosen up a little bit with. But the aunt is also responsible. Like, she’ll tell the mom when she needs to what’s really going on. And sometimes she doesn’t.

00:07:09 Jesse Host My colleague, John Hodgman, had a line in one of his shows that he was a member of the Only Children, Super Smart, Afraid of Conflicts, Narcissist Club. And, um.

[They chuckle.]

That’s me, too. I have two half-siblings, much younger, but when I married my wife—you know, we started dating when we were teenagers. And when I joined my wife’s family, this like flood of family members—they all lived in the same place.

[Bonnie affirms.]

Like, my parents have siblings that lived in other places. But like, just a river of family members *[chuckles]* and—

00:07:45 Bonnie Guest Right. No, I get it, Jesse! We have four condos in the same building.

[Jesse laughs.]

That is really something. I mean, I just like—how did we end up doing that after we were all cramped into that little house? You know? And my uncle and my grandma were always there. So, there was a lot of us in that house. Like, 11 people most of the time. And you know, it’s just so funny that we’ve kind of recreated it in our adult lives. There’s a comfort to it. Don’t you like that? I mean, didn’t you love that when you were a teenager? To be—

00:08:18 Jesse Host No! I hated it when I was teenager.
00:08:20 Bonnie Guest What do you mean?! No, I’m talking about when you were dating your wife! Like when you met the big family.
00:08:24 Jesse Host Yeah! No, I couldn’t stand it!
00:08:26 Bonnie Guest It was just too much for you.
00:08:27 Jesse Host And they’re so nice.

[Bonnie laughs.]

They're woonderful people. Like, wonderful people. But I was sitting there like, "Why do these people just wanna talk to each other? Don't they wanna go to their rooms and read a book?"

00:08:40 Bonnie Guest Oooh, that's so fascinating! I love that! I love that perspective, hearing that.

00:08:47 Jesse Host I was like, "Augh! Can we please stop being friendly?!"

[Bonnie laughs.]

"Why do these people all know my name?! I don't know any of their names!"

00:08:55 Bonnie Guest Oh my god! [Laughs.] That would be difficult. That's true. Going into a big family atmosphere and you can't remember names. That's—yeah.

00:09:05 Jesse Host It's Bullseye. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Bonnie Hunt. She's the creator of the new kids' series, *Amber Brown*. She was also the star of films like *Jumanji* and *Cheaper By the Dozen*.

You lost your dad when you were relatively young. He died when he was 50, I think.

00:09:21 Bonnie Guest Mm-hm. Yeah, he was 52. Yeah.

00:09:23 Jesse Host You had your mom for a long time, thereafter. She only passed away relatively recently.

00:09:28 Bonnie Guest Yes. This past year. Yeah.

00:09:30 Jesse Host She lived with you. Were you the mom-taking-care-of one, since everyone else had 75 children?

00:09:37 Bonnie Guest Yeah. You know, we all helped each other. I was very lucky to—I had gone home right before the pandemic started. And I went home for just a few days, 'cause actually my niece, Ashley, was staying with me in California with her mom and dad, 'cause she was being treated for cancer at City of Hope. And she's still being treated. But I went home to do a benefit or something in Chicago, and then I got a phone call from a friend of mine who was a doctor. And he was like, "Listen, you can't come back to LA and be with Ashley, because there's this virus. And this was in March. And I'm like, "What are you talking about?"

He's like, "Yeah, that virus that's all over the news. But it's here now, and it's not—it's too big of a risk." So, then my mom and I started staying between her house and my condo, and we just were roommates. And you know, it was just amazing that just by circumstance, I got to have all that extra time to just be with my mom. And she was witty, funny. She was all love. So much wisdom and so much talent. She played the piano all the time. And—just a gifted musician, a singer. I really had a unique mom. I mean, she would always say, "I gave birth to my audience," because she had all of us kids. And was always entertaining, but really there for us.

I mean, she gave her life to us, and it's so interesting. Like, I lost my dad so young. And I remember the devastation and the waves of sadness and feeling overwhelmed with grief. And to be going through it at this age and—it's really the hardest thing I've ever gone through, losing my mom. Because I wanna call her ten, twenty times a day, like I always did. And it's a journey. Grief is a journey. And you know, I'm working on the acceptance of it. I mean, I got to have my mom for so long. She was vital and amazing and hilarious

and brilliant 'til her last days. And you know, she passed away in her sleep of natural causes, and she was just old. And I miss her every minute of every day.

00:11:47 Jesse Host How long did the two of you live together, from March?

00:11:52 Bonnie Guest We were together for two years.

00:11:55 Jesse Host That's kind of amazing.

00:11:56 Bonnie Guest It was amazing. And you know, it was Grand Central—whether we were at my mom's house or in my condo, we were—there were—you know, they're not very far apart. And so, all the grandkids—we had our own little bubble of—you know, we all protect each other. Everybody was very safe. You know, wearing masks and all that stuff. But were always still together, and my mom got to be with all the grandkids, and you know, her six children. My siblings were always there in support. And you know, it's just—it's life and saying goodbye is not easy, especially when somebody is all love like my mom was. There's just—she was very, very unique. She was that lady in the neighborhood where all the kids could come and talk to her, and she would have an open mind and an open heart.

And you know, all I think about is, "Oh my god, did I tell her enough how much I loved her and how amazing she was?"

00:12:55 Jesse Host I'm gonna stipulate that your mom was wonderful, but did you like get along with her, living in the same place? Like, my mom is very wonderful. My mom's really amazing. But I wouldn't necessarily...

00:13:06 Bonnie Guest *[Laughs.]* Well, I think because of my years as an oncology nurse, I've always known that life is temporary. So, yeah, we would bicker. But I just knew how special the time was. I think because I was watching on the news, everyday people were losing loved ones during the covid thing. And my mom was very safe and protected from all of that, 'cause we were living in this little bubble. But when I saw these people on the news and even friends that couldn't even go see their parents in the hospital or be close to them or to leave them—I just started to get so aware. I was just so aware of how lucky I was to be with my mom.

But yeah, you know, I mean we're a typical family. We're just a normal family. We bicker and everything else, but not too much. Mostly, Mom and I would laugh. She had a keen sense of humor. When I was writing *Amber Brown*, Mom would read all the scripts, read all the scenes, give me notes. And when we were casting the show, she was—you know—right next to me, kind of leaning in, looking at the Zoom auditions, *[chuckling]* telling me who she was giving a thumbs up to. And of course, she wanted me to hire everybody, 'cause that's how my mom's heart was. "Oh, I know that person wasn't right, but can't you write something for them?" You know. "Can't you include them?" That's just how she was.

00:14:28 Jesse Host Did you like showing your work to your mom?

00:14:31 Bonnie Guest Oh. Oh, yes. 'Cause she's brilliant. I mean, storytelling was a big part of our childhood. You know, it was first of all free. On the front porch at night, when the neighborhood guys would hang out—I wrote a film called *Return to Me* that I directed many years ago. And there's these scenes with these four or five older guys sitting around a table, you know, solving the world's problems and telling stories. And that was a big part of my childhood. And then, I also used to see my parents watching *The Andy Griffith Show*, you know, old reruns to stuff. And in those moments, completely escape

from any anxiety or fear or—you know, all the pressures of life and being married and having all those kids and finances.

I remember looking at the TV and looking at them, and I just remember it so vividly, how powerful I thought it was. So, sharing the show with my mom and sharing my writing with her and wanting her to be proud of me, 'cause she always talked about the ripple effect—even as an actor, I would get certain scripts and she's like, "Don't do that! It's not gonna have such a great ripple effect." [Chuckles.] And you know, storytelling puts an energy out there. She said when she was young, she'd go see a song and dance movie and she would dance all the way home, 'cause it was—it affected you.

So, I hope that I can give families the same thing that I saw my family get from *The Andy Griffith Show* or *Mary Tyler Moore* or *The Dick Van Dyke* or *Bob Newhart*. You know, all those great shows. *Taxi*, *Cheers*, where you just want—that's what you wanna give them. That's that great medicinal comfort of escaping your own life for a moment.

00:16:04 Jesse Host We've got more with Bonnie Hunt coming up after the break. In just a minute, we'll talk about how she discovered improv in Chicago and how she managed to combine it with her day job as a nurse. It's Bullseye, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:16:19 Music Transition Chiming synth with a steady beat.

00:16:23 Jesse Host Welcome back to Bullseye. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with the great Bonnie Hunt. Bonnie is a star of both big and small screen. She hosted the daytime TV show, *The Bonnie Hunt Show*. She's starred on countless sitcoms. She's in movies like *Jerry Maguire* and *Rain Man* and *Cars*. She created and co-wrote the family show *Amber Brown*, which is streaming right now on Apple TV+. Let's get back into our conversation.

You mentioned you were a nurse for seven years.

[Bonnie confirms.]

00:17:02 Bonnie Guest You worked in a hospital starting when you were a teenager, right? I did. And that's one of the couple of episodes in *Amber Brown* I wrote based on my own experience. I volunteered at a nursing home very young, which my mom—that's another thing my mom had me do. And I remember not wanting to go, which is what I have Amber Brown say. She says, "I do not wanna be around the old people. I've—" She was like, "I know it sounds bad. I was scared of them." And I just kind of wrote my own truth. And then I remember after a few weeks that my mom had me go there and volunteer—and what we'd do is you'd drop off the flowers in their room or make the beds. You know, I'm 13/14 years old. And you know, here's these people and they're 80/90 years old. All of the sudden, I started to get such fulfilment from it, because they were excited to see me.

"Oh, I can't wait to see you tomorrow, Bonnie." And then I realized just that they were people, that they were once young, that they had dreams, that they had lived lives. And I became obsessed with reading their stories. I would read these charts. I mean, these are

people that went through world wars and had families or people that they lost or were separated from or had great loves and incredible little jobs that they did. And I'd read their chart and then I'd go in and talk to them, and it just became such a big part of my life. And so, it was always part of me. And I remember the day my dad passed away, I—he wasn't feeling that well that day, and he was about to mow the lawn, and I said, "I'm going—you know, I'm going to Norwood Park." I worked at Norwood Park nursing home. And by that time, now I'm a—you know—certified nurses assistant and I'm 18 years old.

And my dad says, "Oh, you know, I think it's nice that you work. That's goodness. You know? That's—taking care of old people."

I said, "Well, Dad, I'm getting all this practice so I can take care of you when you're old and grey." And that's the last thing I said to him, and he passed away a few hours after I left. He had a heart attack in the house. And—but I always thought about—that my mom had me do that. And I was in nursing school at that time. You know, during the day. And working at the nursing home from like 3-11, whatever my shift was. And I don't know. You know, my parents made me—pushed me into stuff that I didn't really feel comfortable with, but always my mom would do that trick, "Just do it for a week. Just do it for one week and see how it feels." And it was always having that out that made me keep going back.

And it—I'm so grateful for it. I mean, I'm still a nurse advocate. I volunteer as an advocate for newly-diagnosed cancer patients, and I have never fully left it, because it's a gift, especially in showbusiness, to have the perspective. It's so needed, because you can really get hurt by this business if you let it go to your heart. And—or your head. *[Chuckles.]*

00:19:52 Jesse Host

When you started performing professionally, did you feel guilty about it?

00:19:59 Bonnie Guest

Gosh, Jesse, that is such a great question. No one has ever asked me that. Yes! I was working at the hospital and would go on auditions on my lunch hour. I was at Northwestern, in Chicago. And I was hanging around at Second City at night. Any theatre, you know, there was different—all these different, great theatres in Chicago. And I got in this little improv group. It was—Joan Cusack was in it. She was amazing. And I grew up with guys that all went on to be writers and stuff in the business. But we were just at this place called Bob's Bar, across from Ridley Field.

So, it became a combination of my daytime life, like my patients that were having outpatient chemo and stuff would come to the shows, and I would put their name in the show or whatever. And then eventually, to get hired by Second City, and know that I'd have to go on the road, and I would have to leave the daily big part of my life—my whole purpose of going to the hospital and being there... Yes! I felt really torn. And...

But then, when I got put on mainstage at Second City, only being in the touring company a short time, I was able to do both for a while. And the whole cast would come to the hospital and do skits. You know. I would—"Come on you guys, can you—can you—?" You

know. Mike Myers, everybody else. I was like, “Come on. Let’s go. Do you guys mind coming tomorrow and just doing some of the scenes?” And it was—it was great, because I needed it therapeutically. Because I was with people in their most vulnerable time, facing their own mortality, and it was hard for me to reconcile in my 20s. I felt a lot of sadness and I just wanted to fix it and help people.

And sometimes we didn’t have the answer, but one thing I knew for sure was that same thing I said about my childhood. I’d bring in my VHS player. I’d bring in movies, and we’d watch a movie together. And in that moment—you know, maybe I just had my hand on their wrist while they were laying in the bed. And I’d sit next to the bed, and we’d watch a movie and laugh. It’s powerful. Storytelling can be so healing, so powerful, so comforting. The ripple effect, like Mom would say.

00:22:14 Jesse Host

I remember when my grandmother was—her last night alive. She was in the hospital. My wife and I went to visit her. And she asked where my dad was; he had been with her during the day. And I said, “Oh, he went to the movies. He’ll be back later.”

00:22:36 Bonnie Guest
00:22:38 Jesse Host

And I remember my grandmother saying, “Yeah. He does love going to the movies.” *[Chuckles.]*

Did she say that?

She did. Very generously. Yeah. I was like, “That’s true. He sure does. Yeah.”

[Bonnie affirms.]

00:22:51 Bonnie Guest

Like, what a gift it is.

It is! I mean, it’s sharing a part of yourself and, I mean, I feel like writing for this demographic—which I really wrote it for the whole family. I didn’t want to insult anybody’s intelligence and to feel everybody could watch it together and laugh and feel something. And it’s so important for me, too, to do that. Like, it’s so important. *[Chuckles.]* I mean, it might not be important to someone else, but it’s different for me. Like, I’ve never had the kind of fame—like the big fame. I’ve never had that big success. Like, when I did my talk show, I didn’t turn out to have *The Ellen Show*, but I had my show. And I always tell young writers when they say, you know, “But if you really wanna sell something—” I said, “I don’t write for success. I write for connection. And, you know, keep your life small. Enjoy it all.

Like just my writing is important to me. My storytelling’s important to me. And then the scripts, I say I’ll—you know, I’m lucky enough to get offered. I’ve always been selective in that respect as well. It’s—you know, it’s just—I feel so lucky having been able to do so many great movies, like *Jumanji* and *The Green Mile* and *Jerry Maguire* or *Cheaper By the Dozen*, and all that good stuff. Fun. Happiness. And thoughtful.

00:24:13 Jesse Host

Now, Bonnie, as much as it can mean to someone to provide them with wonderful entertainment as an entertainer, being an entertainer is also—to some extent—a selfish act. *[Laughs.]* Like, it is—

00:24:27 Bonnie Guest

You got me.

00:24:28 Jesse Host There is an element of, *[through laughter]* “Hey! I’m over here! I’m gonna control you by making you laugh!”

00:24:34 Bonnie Guest And do you know what? It goes back to—Jesse, you’re—I mean, this—oh, you’re a very good interviewer. Because when you said did you feel guilty and stuff like that, it’s so true, but back to when I worked at that nursing home, when I didn’t wanna go and started volunteering and then eventually stayed there as a nurse’s assistant before I went—you know, while I was in nursing school—it was because they wanted to see me. The patients made me feel good about myself. I mean, it—when people say, “Oh, how can you do this? Or how can you do that as a nurse?” I’m like it’s selfish, because you feel needed. And I think that’s my addiction. I want someone to need me, and I want someone to like me.

And there’s a lot of ego involved in this business. I mean, I want somebody to see “written by and directed by”. I want someone to say they loved my story. And I love when I’m in the grocery store, and somebody comes up and says one of my lines or something that I wrote and what it meant to them. Like, you’re so right. It is selfish, and it is—you know, it feeds your ego! And for me, it’s like I love it! I mean, *[laughing]* you nailed it! But that’s probably what drew me to it from the beginning! Even being a nurse. You’re needed.

00:25:56 Jesse Host When you started doing improv, how did you start doing improv? Like, how did you find it? Did you go to a Second City show and think, “Oh, this is amazing. I wanna do this,” or—?

00:26:06 Bonnie Guest I couldn’t believe it was a job, Jesse! I’m like, “What do you mean these people get paid? Like, what is that?” I was pretty young, I think. I don’t know. 14 or something the first time I went? And I think that we went either with my parents or my friend’s parents or something. I remember just the first time seeing it. And then, of course, *Saturday Night Live* was on TV, and they had gotten a lot—Bill Murray and Belushi and all the guys were from Second City. So, I was very hyper-aware of it, but also couldn’t believe it was a job. And the improv sets were free. So, you could go every night—every single night—and see the improv set for nothing. And if you didn’t have a seat, you stood along the wall, and it was amazing.

I might see Robin Williams come through and Milton Berle came through. I mean, you name it, the people would come through.

00:26:54 Jesse Host Wait, did you see Milton Berle?

00:26:56 Bonnie Guest Yeah! Milton Berle did the improv set. Yes.

[Jesse laughs.]

Yes!

00:27:01 Jesse Host I don’t necessarily think of Milton Berle as an improviser first and foremost.

00:27:04 Bonnie Guest This is the—well. Well, he—well, he was! He was hilarious! Because you know, he—those guys—are you kidding? Those guys that did live TV? Nothing scares them. And—

00:27:14 Jesse Host Well, I know nothing scared Milton Berle. He had natural confidence.

00:27:18 Bonnie Guest Yes. Yes, he did. Yep. Yep. And yeah, there were so many—oh my gosh. So many people came through there.

00:27:25 Jesse Host Was it like 68-year-old Milton Berle or 72-year-old Milton Berle and a bunch of 23-year-olds?

00:27:31 Bonnie Guest Yeah. Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Yeah. That's what it was like. He was in his—probably in his 70s. I just remember it was right around the time Sammy Davis Jr. died. And there was only one African American cast member in the show. And Milton Berle said to the one, "I'm sorry about Sammy Davis Jr."

And the cast member said, "I'm sorry about Jim Henson."

[Jesse laughs.]

And it was just one of those—you know, green room—there was so much that happened in the green room that was so fast and off the cuff. And it was a whole 'nother world back in that green room. 'Cause we had no script! I mean, we would do the—you know, the review that we—based on improv and eventually written into scenes. But then, every night, we would improvise based on audience suggestion. And that was just—like, I knew then, when I was working there—I'm like, "Nothing will come close to this feeling."

I did work in an emergency room my first two years out of nursing school. And I remember that feeling of exhilaration and teamwork to do your best to save somebody, especially after losing my dad as young as I did and as fast as I did—suddenly, to a heart attack. My brother and I worked in the same ER. My brother's a doctor. And I remember, we just didn't want anybody to feel that sadness. And the teamwork and the adrenaline and the process of just getting it done to help some family or a patient, whatever you needed to do. And improvisation was the same cooperation. You know? It's like somebody yells something out, you all have to go out there and take care of each other, help each other through it. I mean, I know it's not a direct analogy, because no one's life is at stake. But it's that teamwork. That's what I still love to this day.

That's why I like producing shows, 'cause I like putting the team together.

00:29:23 Jesse Host I was talking with D'Arcy Carden the other day about that feeling when improv is going right, which is that your whole focus is on making everybody else look good. And like—

00:29:35 Bonnie Guest That's the whole thing.

00:29:36 Jesse Host You have this tremendous feeling like, "Oh wow, all these people are here to make me look good, too."

00:29:43 Bonnie Guest Yeeeah. It was the best. I knew it would be the best version of showbiz, for me. Because you're in control but you're not. You know? You're at the mercy of what's happening in the moment, but you still have to make your own decisions quickly. And the audience is your biggest teacher. They let you know right away. Are you accessible? Are you funny? Are you believable? Do they buy it? And it becomes a sixth sense if you—I mean, I was just so—I just loved it. I loved every minute of it. Plus, I was at the hospital during the day with people facing... *[sighs]*. And families and it just—I don't know, it was a perfect outlet and a luxury.

And then, when I was offered *Saturday Night Live*, I said to Lorne Michaels, “Well, if a scene’s not clicking and you wanna start improvising—”

“Oh no. You know, you can’t do that.” And he was always really nice to me and straightforward, and I just thought—you know, I already had one of the greatest jobs. It wasn’t live on TV, but it was live every night. Eight shows a week, for four years. And I loved every minute of it. Never missed a show.

00:30:46 Jesse Host

So, when somebody comes on the show—you know, I read a lot about them and like I don’t think I know—I’ve had many people on this show whose careers were so marked by things they had said no to. And especially like *[laughs]*—you know. I think sometimes it’s like, “Oh gosh, I should have taken that part in *Indiana Jones*,” or whatever. I kind of get the impression that you being—turned down *Saturday Night Live* I think a couple times.

[Bonnie confirms.]

You know? You turned down *Designing Women*. You canceled your own sitcom. *[Laughs.]* Which—

00:31:23 Bonnie Guest

That’s right. Well, because they wanted to replace people that had worked really hard to get it to where it was. That’s why. Yeah.

00:31:29 Jesse Host

Right. I mean, that—like, the thing of it is that I think even the sort of missed opportunity stories of people who are on this show are usually missed opportunity stories. They’re like, “Well, that’s show business! You do one thing; it doesn’t work out. You do another thing; it does.” I kind of get the impression *[chuckling]* that you’re pretty cool with the things that you didn’t do and the things that you turned down and the things that you ended.

00:31:54 Bonnie Guest

I mean, you have to be. I mean, as an oncology nurse, I’ve never heard anybody say they wished they spent more time at work. They were always talking about the people, their families or someone that they loved that they worked with. It’s always about the relationships and the teamwork. My dad would say: When people reminisce about their lives, they always talk about the struggle.” Remember when we had nothing? Remember this, and you know, that’s the romantic part of life.

But there are things that I turned down that I think, “I wonder—you know, what if I did this? Or what if I did that?” Maybe things would be different. You know? Look at—Tina Fey did *Saturday Night Live* and definitely is much—probably more recognized and more relevant than I ever had success at. But you know, success is measured differently for different people. And I don’t let myself go to a place like, “Oh, I wish I would’ve done this or that.” I mean, we all have that, whether it’s—you know, relationships or showbiz or work, whatever it is. I definitely have those moments. But I feel good about my work and about my friendships that I’ve made along the way. You know, the greatest value.

00:33:06 Jesse Host

I wanna ask you about daytime television, quickly. You had a daytime TV show that was great. It was really a good show.

[She thanks him.]

I mean it, for real. And you know, daytime television is not made for me. *[Chuckles.]* Like, I'm a dude who's a coastal elitist. I host an NPR show, literally. Daytime TV's not made for me. And I just—when I would see your show, I'd be like, “Oh man! She's great at this! This rules!” And I have this buddy who's a comedian. He was kind of a edgy comedian. Not like a profoundly edgy comedian. But he accidentally got famous in the demographic circles of daytime television. And they gave him a daytime—syndicated daytime TV show.

[Bonnie reacts with surprise.]

He took it because why wouldn't you. If it works, you become the richest person in the world, and it's a great job, etc., etc.. I talked to him about what that was like for him, and he found it to be completely overwhelming, totally inscrutable, and it did not work. *[Laughs.]* And I was like, “Oh, yeah, I can't even begin to imagine how I could do that.” So, what was it like for you, somebody who—look, you know, you had the opportunity in a time when Ellen had hit doing a show that was a little bit more like a late-night—you know, a little bit more of an actual comedy show than most daytime TV. So, you had a little bit of an—you had a little bit of a lane there to do that. What was it like for you to enter this world of cooking demonstrations when previously you had made fun of cooking demonstrations?

00:34:44 Bonnie Guest

It felt very easy and natural. I mean, I find other people—whether as a nurse or as a talk show host, I find other people and their stories and their lives very interesting. And my mom always did, too. We'd go to the grocery store, and it would end up—we're going in for a gallon of milk, and I would be eight years old, and my mom would end up talking to the guy behind the counter about his kids and his family. And we'd get in the car, and we'd know his whole life story. And it was fascinating, and it just became part of who I am, as well. But the daytime talk show world—like, the politics of it, and the way that they want you to do the show—was so against the grain of who I am. But they tell you all that. You know, when you're first going in. “We want you. We want you to do what you do.”

And I did what I did. And you know, I loved aspects of our show that were kind of like a throwback to *Fernwood 2 Night*, where I'd have—I mean, I had a trainer on the show—Mike Hagerty—who, you know, was about 300lbs. And he played my trainer, and we had fake books made. And he would come on very seriously, and you know, do training. And it was just hilarious, because we were improvising. There was no script. I worked with him at Second City. Music swells and fades.

00:35:48 Sound Effect Transition

00:35:49 Clip Clip

[The audience laughs and applauds at regular intervals.]

Mike: Weee!! What a nice, thin audience we have here, today!
[Laughs.]

Bonnie: Yeah, they're all in good shape!

Mike: Just kidding.

Bonnie: Well, I'm having a lot of anxiety just talking about my weight, 'cause I don't even wanna call attention to it. But I am excited to start on this adventure, and—yeah.

Mike: Great! Great, well. You know, I have Tommy Lasorda. Well, he's one of mine.

Bonnie: Yeah, I know Tommy Lasorda's one of your clients, and I knew—

Mike: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. I, uh, only work with the big talent. *[Chortles.]*

Bonnie: Yeah. Yeah, that's what I heard. I mean, that's why—when my agent called me and said, "Do you wanna do this?"—I thought, you know, Oprah did it on her show. And it really, you know, made her more accessible. And I think just talking honestly about my weight, and—

Mike: Well, yeah. Well, you have a dog, right?

Bonnie: Yes, I do.

Mike: Well, you should walk it.
Music swells and fades.

00:36:31 Sound Effect Transition

00:36:32 Bonnie Guest

And we had hypnotists and psychics. I mean, stuff that wasn't real, but the audience who got it, got it. And then, when I had real, authentic people on, it was fascinating. Whether it was Rod Blagojevich—you know, a politician that was—you know—caught being corrupt and being able to talk to him in a serious way. Or doctors that were on. I had many cancer patients on. And then, celebrities. And I would always tell the celebrities, "Do you have a dog? Do you wanna bring your mom? Do you wanna bring your kid?" And it became a real conversation, kind of like the joy I had when I was lucky enough to do *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. He just threw the ball. You know? It was like, "Here! You've got the ball now! It's your time."

And it didn't feel like pressure. It felt like a joy. I was so sad when the show was canceled. And I knew why it was. I knew it was imminent, because they kept wanting me to get something viral. You know? Ellen would scare somebody, and then it would be all over Twitter. And I'm just like, "Well, that's not my thing." All due respect to the show that she did. It was just so different than mine. Mine was less produced and more no fourth wall. I talked to my crew. The audience got to know them. The last six months we were on the air, our ratings started to go up. I knew that we had the momentum, but they had already told me that they weren't gonna go a third year. So, I knew, and my crew knew. But we had the best time, and we did a show we were really proud of.

And it was so fun. I loved doing the cooking segments, because I actually was somebody who didn't know how to cook very much, and I was learning—whoever was on! It was just fun! And I loved having my mom on. My mom, you know, was in her 80s. And she

was giving advice, and she was hilarious and honest and helpful and loving. And that was a great joy for this person who had given up her whole life for us to have her legitimate time in showbiz. I mean, she got more fan mail than I did, my mom did. We were inundated, whether it was on social media, Facebook. She just became so loved. So loved.

00:38:31	Jesse	Host	We'll finish up with Bonnie Hunt after a quick break. When we come back, we'll talk about the quiet tone of her show, <i>Amber Brown</i> , and why she thought it was important to make an understated kids show. It's Bullseye, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:38:46	Music	Transition	Chiming synth with a steady beat.
00:38:50	Jesse	Host	It's Bullseye. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Bonnie Hunt. She's an actor and comedian. She's also the creator of the new TV show, <i>Amber Brown</i> .
00:39:05	Bonnie	Guest	How much of your relationship with your mom is in <i>Amber Brown</i> ? All of it. I mean, the kindness and love of the characters is my mother. And the challenge of writing something that is kind, loving, hopefully funny, at the top of my intelligence without being corny [<i>chuckles</i>] is the challenge. And I love that. And it's been really—you know, we did a screening in Chicago where we showed a few of the episodes in some theaters. And theaters were all packed. We just put out an announcement. And I was lucky enough to have that experience with Pixar, where we would show the movies at my sister's school district. 'Cause my sister's a schoolteacher, second grade. But there was kids there—you know, 15/16 years old—and then there was parents in their 30s and 40s and grandparents. And everybody—I mean, you could hear a pin drop in the theater when there was the pathos and then there was laughter. I was like [<i>whispering</i>] oh my god, the storytelling's working. Like, that's the best! And so, yeah. My mom is a huge part of it. Because she was funny, smart, and kind. [<i>Beat.</i>] And hopefully, that's—that's what I try to make the show be.
00:40:16	Jesse	Host	Do you worry that you're gonna be corny?
00:40:19	Bonnie	Guest	I mean, that's a word I use, but I mean not unaware. Like, authenticity—you know, whether it's <i>Jerry Maguire</i> or <i>The Green Mile</i> or <i>Jumanji</i> or even <i>Cheaper By the Dozen</i> —you know, I want my character to—somebody in the audience to go, "Oh! You know, I get it. Like, I'm with her." [<i>Chuckles.</i>] I mean, I had a student at UCLA recently. I was walking to the campus, and she came up to me and she said, "Are you Bonnie?" And I said yeah. And she said, "Can I give you a hug? I saw <i>Jumanji</i> when I was ten, and my sister and I were so worried about you, Sarah!" She like called me by my character name! And it's like that's just like the <u>best</u> ! You know? That somebody connects. And so, yeah, I guess I do worry. I don't want it to be corny. I want it to be smart and for the whole family to not only wanna watch it once, but maybe watch it a second time and laugh at the stuff and notice the subtleties of some of my humor—what's going on underneath. I love that stuff. And I love writing the parents and their dilemma.
00:41:27	Jesse	Host	It's pretty quiet for a family show or a kid's show.
00:41:32	Bonnie	Guest	Takes its time, yeah.

00:41:34	Jesse	Host	You directed it.
			<i>[Bonnie confirms.]</i>
00:41:41	Bonnie	Guest	<p>So, that was not just a writing choice, but that was a—that was a very particular choice you made?</p> <p>Right. The tone of the show. And even when I talked to the directors that came in on the subsequent episodes, when I was home with Mom, I wanted the tone to be that somebody would lean into the TV like a kid would lean in and wanna pay attention, instead of sit back and be like, “Oh, this is just coming at me.” And I didn’t wanna oversaturate the color. I went to every color timing session to make sure that it was not the—you know—box of Crayola crayons onscreen. Which is fine; it’s just not what I wanted. I wanted her artwork to feel that way—to come to life. A kid who sketched all the time—my dad found an old drafting table when he was working in some school, and he brought it home and painted it for me. And I would sit down in the basement at night and sketch and draw.</p> <p>And then, to be able to take my young self, apply it to the character, and then work with animators that were making my mind as a child come to life in animation, which is what I dreamed of when I was a kid—it was so—it’s great! You know? So. I mean, I hope it works. I hope it touches people and connects with people and that moms can, you know, have a sense of humor about themselves and connect with people that are going through a divorce. You know, connect with the emotions. And just kids! Like Amber says, you know. She’s sad. It comes in waves, and there’s times where she wants to be included and she’s not.</p> <p>It’s like, all that great stuff that you still go through, now. I still go through it now! Even in showbusiness. Like, will somebody offer me a good role? I miss acting. Will somebody think of me? You know. It’s the same feeling.</p>
00:43:17	Jesse	Host	This is a question that you for real do not have to answer if you don’t feel like it. Did you choose not to have kids?
00:43:23	Bonnie	Guest	No. <i>[Beat.]</i> I did not make that choice. So. I guess it just wasn’t meant to be, for me. I tried. Even adoption. So. But I had a couple heartbreaking—you know, it’s just—it’s so personal. And—but any child in my life is important to me. All the kids from <i>Cheaper By the Dozen</i> or <i>Stolen Summer</i> . I had eight kids in that movie. Or <i>Life with Bonnie</i> . Like, I—and I even think about these kids now, that it’s not really about them being on my show. It’s about I’m a part of their lives. You know? Setting some example. And I care about them, and I always tell them that this show is part of storytelling, that they’re telling a story, but it’s not part of who they are. And who they are is so much more important than this.
00:44:25	Jesse	Host	I mean, it—I imagine—changes your relationship with everyone in your family, as well as all those kids that you work with, that you have something to—you have something really special to offer them.
00:44:43	Bonnie	Guest	Well, that’s a very nice thing to say. I mean, I hope I do. I mean, I got married young. Well, I think it’s young. I was 24 or 25 and thought I’d have a—you know—whole bunch of kids. So, sometimes life takes you on a different path, but there’s all these

children that need love wherever you are. So. You just have to find fulfillment that way.

[They start to speak at the same time, but Jesse stops.]

I love playing a mom. It's—I've been lucky to play a mom so many times. Go ahead, Jesse.

00:45:14 Jesse Host

You got to do something that your mom didn't get to do. And you know, who knows, maybe she would've taken a different path if she didn't have seven children. *[Chuckles.]* One presumes she would have taken some kind of different path if she had.

[They chuckle.]

00:45:25 Bonnie Guest

Right. Yeah. But she was always creative and funny and entertaining in her way. But boy, doing the talk show was really just fun to see her—but she was on—I did a TV series, *Grand*, and she played a nurse on that. They brought her on that. And then she was in *Return to Me*. She had a scene with Carol O'Connell, the great Carol O'Connell.

So, Mom, you know, did get some of it, and she got the fulfillment of having her children. And we just loved her so much. Every single one of us probably felt like an only child at times in our lives, because of the way she was able to give us her full attention and her humor and love, and then her excitement about other things, whether it was caregiving—you know, having me volunteer at the nursing home, and what I would get from it, or storytelling. Like, she had excitement. My mom was curious to the day she passed away, learning on social media. You know, using a computer, using her iPhone. That's remarkable when somebody's 95 years old, that she was doing all that. But she just—you know—was awesome.

00:46:33 Jesse Host

I bet she was proud of you, Bonnie. I bet your scheme to make her happy and proud worked. *[Laughs.]*

00:46:40 Bonnie Guest

[Beat.] Yyyeah. *[Choking up.]* I think right now, I feel like a kid that's in a high school play, and they finally got—you know, they keep looking out in the audience to see if their parents can see them. And I keep looking out of that curtain right now, hoping my mom can still see me. So. Sorry. *[Recovering from tears.]* Yeah. Well, she's worth every tear, that's for sure. Both my parents. Good people. Worked hard and were kind.

00:47:18 Jesse Host

Bonnie, I'm so grateful to you for taking this time to talk to me.

00:47:21 Bonnie Guest

Thanks, Jesse! Sorry I'm crying. *[Sniffles.]* I hope you call me again, and we go on a second date.

[They laugh.]

What kind of... oh my god. And you're—can I just say thank you to you for such a thoughtful interview? I mean, really listening and your beautiful questions and your respect. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it.

00:47:47 Jesse Host

Bonnie Hunt. Thanks so much to Bonnie for coming into our studio and sharing so much of herself. It was an extraordinary privilege. Her new TV show is called *Amber Brown*. It's streaming right now, on Apple TV+.

00:48:09	Music	Transition	Our production fellow, Tabatha, just told me she binged the entire thing in one day. I can't blame her. It's a great show. Give it a watch.
00:48:20	Jesse	Host	<p>Brassy synth with a steady beat.</p> <p>That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i>. <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. I'm at my house. I'm still testing positive for covid-19, the dastardly virus that has taken on the world. And it is terrible, and whether or not you've already gotten it, I wish you good luck with it. And I hope that you will take the opportunity to get vaccinated and get boosted. And if you qualify, get antiviral medication, should you happen to test positive, to keep yourself safe and your community safe. It makes a big difference. And yeah. Best of luck to everybody with it. And my thoughts to everybody who suffered from it.</p> <p>Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Tabatha Myers. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team for sharing it with us, along with their label, Memphis Industries.</p> <p>I wanna give a special thank you this week to the former producer of this program and my old pal, the brilliant Julia Smith. Many, many, many years ago, she came into the office one day and said, "I'm taking half a day off work, because me and my mom are going to see <i>The Bonnie Hunt Show</i>."</p> <p>And I said, "You are going to see a daytime television show taping?!"</p> <p>And she said, "Yeah. <i>The Bonnie Hunt Show</i> rules, and Bonnie Hunt rules." And, uh, I watched <i>The Bonnie Hunt Show</i> and I said to myself, wow, Julia is right. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Bonnie Hunt is amazing. And all these many years later, I can honestly say that it led to Bonnie being booked on this episode of the show. So. So, thank you Julia Smith.</p> <p><i>Bullseye</i> is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us in all those places. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.</p> <p>Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.</p> <p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p>
00:50:22	Promo	Promo	