



A Different Kind of Visionary

Creative inspiration from blind American Indian artist Sacheen Smith.
By Stephanie Schroeder

A MERICAN INDIANS often define themselves by their clan or tribe of origin. Artist Sacheen Smith (“Sheenie” to her friends) is Navajo, or *Diné*, from Albuquerque, N.M. Her clans are Tsenjickini (Cliff Dwelling People) and she was born to Ashiilhi (Salt People).

Smith, 27, lost her eyesight eight years ago, she says, “through a series of eye diseases—keratoconus, optic atrophy and, finally, a brain tumor I was diagnosed with about three years ago. I’ve been through two sets of radiation treatments and am in the middle of my second chemotherapy treatment.” She says all this without a trace of self-pity. “And I don’t have a clue about the outcome or prognosis after I’m done.”

The transition from a sighted youth to a blind young woman would be difficult for anyone. But Smith, who is openly gay, decided at age 16 that it wouldn’t devastate her life. She challenges herself to overcome the barriers she faces as a blind person. An artist before she lost her eyesight, she thought she would never draw or paint again.

However, Smith met Ojibwe artist Sam English, a distinguished contemporary American Indian artist (and a member of the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa Indians). “Sam is amazing and he inspires me on a daily basis,” she says. “We were recently both at the same conference and he asked me to collaborate on a painting with him, and I was like, ‘Oh, my God. His artwork sells for thousands of dollars and it is

incredible that he asked me to collaborate.”

Because English has been a source of strength and support, and has encouraged her not to give up her art, Smith has found a new way to create and utilize her artistic abilities as a blind person. These days, Smith says that her inspiration to paint is her desire to be visible as a blind artist. “I dream in colors and details,” says Smith, who also comments that she does not forget what she saw as a sighted person. “I love the reaction to my paintings. I can’t see my work, but other people can and they cannot believe I am blind.”

Smith has many reasons to need to relax these days. Aside from being an artist (www.sheenie008.multiply.com) and a full-time student, pursuing a double major in political science and Native American studies at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., she is sought-after as an advocate for American Indians with disabilities, both on and off the reservation. Smith’s second job is as a motivational speaker to youth with disabilities. She talks at schools and professional organizations, telling her own story. She aims to be an inspiration and to show that it’s possible to accept whatever dis/ability life hands you and to move forward. “I can’t stand the mentality of organizations for disabled people that foster dependence rather than independence,” says the fierce and fiery but very soft-spoken young artist. ■

