

Culture

‘Make Them Smile:’ A day in the life of a drag queen

Jennifer Hines | TEC Staff Apr 5, 2017



Cody M. Perry

A typical brunch on the second Sunday of the month at The Scullery smells of fresh brewed coffee, sizzling eggs and hashbrowns and a ton of hairspray.

As customers chatter, happily sipping from mimosa glasses and scraping the last bits of food from their plates, there is a group of drag queens behind a green sheet used as a makeshift curtain piling on layers of makeup.

Every second Sunday of the month, the Scullery partners with PiCASO, a local charity, to host a drag brunch to benefit HIV and AIDS patients. Coleman Temple hosts the event on a regular basis as the legendary Miss Purina Chow.

Temple, who saw his first drag show in 1981, was immediately captivated by the creative outlet of dressing in drag. After spending most of his childhood walking around in his grandmother's robes and high heels, he knew he could do it.

“I knew I had the heel thing down, now trying to be pretty was going to be hard at six feet tall,” said Temple. “I tried and it just didn't work. So, I thought, ‘I was a clown at school. Maybe I should make them laugh.’ Boom. Miss Chow was born. And I've been making them laugh ever since.”

Temple has been performing as Miss Purina Chow for 30 years. To start with, it took him almost two hours to get into drag for a performance but has finally gotten his prep time down to 45 minutes.

“While I enjoy it, I wouldn't want to be a woman for nothing,” said Temple. “Y'all got too many issues with clothing. Men have it easier and you will always have my utmost regards for the things you have to go through.”

Miss Purina Chow's outfits consist of clown-inspired makeup, a giant yellow wig, secondhand robes and dozens of pearls that clack against each other as Temple makes his way through a crowd collecting tips and lip-singing classic hits. Temple said Miss Chow was inspired by all the important women in his life.

“I was always influenced by strong women so my portrayal is a brunswick stew, if you will, of all the strong women in my life,” he said. “That, to me, is an ode to them for all the good they taught me.”

Of all the women that influenced him growing up, his childhood caretaker, Ida, might have had the biggest influence on his performances.

“The lady that raised me said ‘If you can make one person smile each day, you've done God's work,’” said Temple. “Yesterday, I made a whole room smile and that works against other people out there making people sad, making people unhappy and hurting them. I can't help everybody but if I can make a room full of people smile and they can take it out there.... We can overcome that hate with love.”

Temple's involvement is more than just an outlet for him. As a 32-year survivor of HIV, he works with PiCASO as a way to help those in similar situations to him when he was younger.

“Because the stigma, while people think it's bad now, they have no clue as to what it was back then,” said Temple. “I mean, they would run you out of town. Burn your house down. People were scared. And rightfully so. They didn't know. I mean, this was, you know, frightening. It was frightening for me.”

In March, Temple won an award for being a long-term AIDS survivor.

“For some reason, knock on wood, I am still here,” said Temple. “And I attribute that to my family's love. My friends' love.”

Temple was nominated for the award by Aaron Lucier, a board member with PiCASO who heads up the monthly drag brunch. Lucier has been with PiCASO for nearly 20 years and has seen the charity grow in many ways.

“We do HIV testing and because if people get into care, they live a long time,” said Lucier. “Everybody's still at risk, but those who don't get into care are more at risk.”

Lucier said the drag brunch is a fantastic way to raise money while showing people a good time.

“You wake up on a Sunday. You get to support a good cause (and) have a really fun time in Greenville that is a little crazy and a little fun,” he said. “And you go home with a smile on your face. What more could you ask for?”

During a drag show, Temple said his main goal is more than making his audience smile.

“Making (them), for at least five minutes, forget the mysteries of the world, forget the light bill, the phone bill... whatever your problem is, for five minutes ‘Come with me and you'll be in a world of pure imagination,’” Temple sang.

Also singing “The Lonely Goatherd” from “The Sound of Music” and quoting “Bohemian Rhapsody,” the song his shows are known for, Temple made it known that he loves getting the audience involved in his performances.

“Just because everybody knows it, they sing with you and they become part of the act,” he said. “And that’s important. In a world of individuality, to find something that brings us all together, even for just six or seven minutes, we’re all singing it. We’re all feeling it. We’re all smiling. In one moment, I’m pulling on Ida and making them smile.”

Temple’s take home message from his time as a drag queen is one of spreading love and acceptance.

“Love is not something that makes you weak,” he said. “It is not something that makes you less of human. It actually makes you more of one because if you can turn the other cheek, you are so far ahead of the game.”