

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.”



*by Jennifer
Hines*

The Groomed Guider

A story of a student and her furry friend

With a determined look on her face, Amber Bass takes a deep breath, swallows her mounting anxiety and pushes open the door to the fast food restaurant that had twice kicked her out.

Amber isn't your typical fast food consumer. Amber suffers from retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic mutation that is causing her to go blind. Retinitis pigmentosa is a rare eye disease where the retina is damaged and causes severe tunnel vision. Because of this condition, she has a four-legged set of eyes that lead her everywhere.

Amber met her guide dog, Truly, a black lab with big golden eyes, in June 2014 after going through a special program with Guide Dogs for the Blind. Amber flew out to California for two weeks to meet her new partner and ever since she came back home, the two have been inseparable.

"[Truly] is literally an extension of my left arm," Amber says. "She's my eyes."

Truly guides Amber around campus without making a noise besides the occasional yawn or sleepy grunt. Her golden eyes stay focused on their route and, almost as if she is psychically connected to Amber, knows exactly which direction to take. But, the moment Amber takes off Truly's harness, Truly begins to act just like any other dog, running in circles and barking for her toys. Most of all, Truly loves to get pets from anyone who will give them because this is only allowed when her harness is off.

Amber was paired with Truly the summer before she came to college at East Carolina University. Truly helped Amber navigate through orientation and has since learned every shortcut on ECU's campus. Together, they now reside in Cotten Residence Hall.

The familiar jingle of a lead smacking against a harness tells the residents of Cotten's first floor girl's hall that Amber and Truly are passing through on their way to class. On a good day, the people on her hall tell her "hello" and go on about their business. Other days, they talk to Truly and try to pet her. Amber finds this a bigger nuisance than people realize.

Even Amber's mother, Cyndi Crandall, notices that the number of people stopping Amber to talk to Truly, even with a giant "Ignore me, I'm working" sign on Truly's harness, is getting ridiculous. "One time," says Cyndi, "someone actually said, 'I know she has a sign on her that says ignore her, but can I pet her?'"

Truly often accumulates more attention than Amber would like, especially in high-traffic areas such as the dining hall. When Amber and Truly arrive at the West Ending Dining Hall on Mexican Night, several eyes turn to her and Truly.

Amber walks from station to station, peering through the glass. She cannot see what the contents hold, but she uses her phone to zoom in on the name cards of each dish. As she passes each station, another person turns to look at Truly with various expressions of shock, confusion and even adoration. The dining hall soon becomes full of not-so-subtle sideways glances and craning necks.

After several minutes of consideration, Amber steps into the burrito line as she tries to



read the toppings list from too far away. Pulling out her phone, a group of three young women get in line behind Amber and do a double take when they see Truly.

One of the members of the group, who had started to drift away toward the salad bar, is called back by the girl behind Amber.

“Macy, I have a secret,” she not so quietly whispers to her friend.

Macy comes back and leans in toward her friend. Her friend begins to whisper in a low tone, but mentions of dogs can be heard here and there. Suddenly, Macy pulls her head back and laughs.

“Yeah, me neither,” she says.

Amber continues to mind her own business. Even though she is aware of the whispers, she is so used to it that it doesn’t even faze her anymore.

After Amber receives her burrito, the crowd parts ways to allow her and Truly to get through. One young man, caught in the middle of the shifting crowd, halts in front of Amber. He looks down, pushing his modern horn-rimmed glasses back up his nose, and smiles.

“Aaaaw,” he says.

Amber quickly moves around him, looking for a table. She navigates her way through throngs of students chatting about their day. As she moves by

each table, bodies turn fully around in their seats to watch as Amber and Truly pass. More whispers ensue as Amber sets down her plate on an empty table and makes her way back up to the soda fountain.

As she passes a large, round table full of students, a young woman with brown hair turns around and says to her friends, “Man, I really want to pet that dog.”

By the time Amber makes it back to her table to begin eating, she has already been assaulted with countless odd looks and been the subject of

several whispered conversations.

“[It’s] usually worse at the beginning of the semester,” says Amber, who is a junior adapted curriculum special education major. “As the semester goes on, people become slightly less interested.”

Amber remembers one time in the dining hall in particular when a young woman barked at Truly. “We walked by and some girl barked at her and that sparked a whole conversation at her table,” Amber says.

Moments like those make it hard for Amber to be confident when going out alone with Truly. The anxieties Amber has developed all stem from one negative experience with the management of a Greenville fast food restaurant. On two separate occasions, Amber and her family were told they had to leave because they could not bring a dog to the establishment. The restaurant’s manager refused to speak to them herself because she was afraid of dogs.

“The second time it happened, we didn’t even make it through the door,” says Amber. “All of the management and cashiers were yelling at us, telling us we couldn’t have Truly in there. It is so embarrassing to have the entire attention of a restaurant on you all at once and you haven’t done anything wrong.”

According to North Carolina statutes, a blind per-

son has the guaranteed right to “be accompanied by a dog guide in all public accommodations and on all transportation,” basically making the actions of the fast food manager illegal.

Lisa Pase, an independent living specialist and advocate with the Disability Advocates and Resource Center in Greenville, says that those statutes apply to more than just blind service dog handlers.

“People think automatically that a guide dog is for someone who is blind,” says Pase. “A service animal helps someone with disability. An animal could help someone with anxiety or something of that nature.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was created in 1990 and until 2011, only dogs were considered service animals. “We call them service animals under the ADA because, in 2011, miniature horses were listed as service animals,” Pase says.

Despite Amber’s anxieties about going out in public with Truly, her best friend, Kim Dana, a sophomore sociology major, says that Amber’s personality doesn’t show that anxiety at all. “I think Amber is very strong and when people say something about Truly, she carries herself very well and she stays very composed,” says Kim.

At the time, Amber made several phone calls to the restaurant’s corporate headquarters as well as

the ADA hotline, but the issue remains unsolved. Taking matters into her own hands, Amber decided to revisit the infamous restaurant.

“I’m ready to fight them on it if they give me a hard time,” says Amber.

As Amber gets out of the car, she adjusts Truly’s harness, takes a deep breath, and marches right through the restaurant’s front door like she owns the place.

Instead of being met with resistance as she was expecting, she is met with a chorus of “Welcome to Popeye’s.” Even the manager walking down the hall stops to ask Amber how she is doing.

Amber places her order, collects her food, and finds a table all without complication. Other than a few sideways glances from some of the customers milling about the dining area, everything is normal. “Well that was anti-climactic,” Amber says, giggling and sliding into a booth. “They must be under new management.”

Amber finishes her meal and takes one final walk to refill her cup. Nobody says a single word to her, not even as she exits the building. Amber has a big grin on her face as she walks to the car.

“That,” Amber says, “was satisfying.” ■

