

Spinning Gold

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By Emily Andreano



It seemed the only logical step. Nancy Cook Smith, fledgling textile designer, realized when she finished school that what she needed was some money. So she piled samples of her work into an enormous wicker basket and tried peddling them door to door-on Beverly Hill's Rodeo Drive.

That first entrepreneurial effort proved disastrous.

"I learned that people won't buy just anything there-you need an air of professionalism," she says with a rueful smile. "You need business cards, stationery, and all the rest of it."

But Smith's gritty perseverance eventually paid handsome dividends; her work is now sold not only on Rodeo Drive, but in some of the poshest boutiques in the country, and her list of clients reads like a Who's Who in Hollywood.

These days, her business calls are very well organized. She is hearing impaired; artist-promoter-husband Peter Tigler is hearing. She has learned to sense when she'll need him along on calls to help speak for her, but confides, "I don't rely on words. I find it's best, whether you're deaf or hearing, to have everything written down."

Smith says that she has used her textile background to "create a different approach to clothing."

She first designs and makes a handwoven (handloomed) fabric. She then works a garment around the particulars of each fabric. She uses all natural fibers; mostly rayon (a wood pulp product), cotton, linen, and some silk. She thinks of the threads as crayons and tries to arrange them in a harmonious pattern. They are all mill ends (remnants) to ensure that her work won't be duplicated, and, undoubtedly, to keep her costs down.

"Each fabric, each piece is basically one-of-a-kind," she says. "The concern with color, pattern, the hand [drape], and simplicity of style give my work a recognizable mark."

She concentrates on women's wear, but also makes accessories-scarves and neckties. She is considering more shop accounts, pursuing gallery type exhibitions, and exploring the use of her fabrics in other contexts, such as furniture. She likes furniture's dimensionality, a property which attracts her to sculpture as well. In addition, she does all the photography for the portfolio displaying her work.

"My insistence on being a designer, an artist, and a craftsperson," she says, "has led to acceptance in clothing stores [in Los Angeles, New York, and other places] as well as in galleries and shops that specialize in wearable art or craft."

Although she travels less than she did as a beginner, she will visit a store that indicates an interest in selling her garments.

"I have to check and make sure it's qualified to carry my merchandise," she says unblinkingly. "But it's nice not to have to go out and find jobs anymore. Doing painting and sculpture is just too risky. You have to have something commercial-like a scarf. It's like a race; after six years in the business, I seem to have won."

Her outfits command high prices, though no higher than many other designer clothes, and less than some. Her ties, which are reversible, sell for \$32. A three-piece outfit consisting of a skirt, top, and unlined coat retails for \$1,100. Sold separately, the skirt and top are \$850.

They have been seen in a number of movies, among them "Tootsie" (on Jessica Lange), "Flashdance," "The Osterman Weekend," and "48 Hrs.," and on television's "Dick Cavett Show," where Raquel Welch wore one of her scarves. Her creations also are frequently seen on actresses Louise Fletcher and Anne Bancroft, whom Smith says has "a great sense of humor and is very supportive."

Smith's studio, which is staffed by five assistants, is, by design, at her home in Santa Monica, California. She speaks proudly of the self-sufficient enclave she and Tigler have developed. They have made most of their own furniture, and live what she refers to as a "different and supremely satisfying life." She claims that she need venture into the outside world only to stock up on supplies for her studio and her larder, which suits her fine.

Singer Carole King writes in "Good-bye Don't Mean I'm Gone":

*Missing you the way I do
You know I'd like to see more of you
But it's all I can do to be a mother
(My baby's in one hand, I've a pen
in the other)....*

Smith is another artist doing a juggling act. Her 18-month-old daughter Coco, who is hearing, is as constant a topic of conversation as her work-the two are intertwined. Since she is determined that Coco see her in her milieu as an artist, she takes her daughter on occasional business calls. She even wove some bias strips (pieces of cloth) together for Coco, so that the little girl (who was around a year old at the time) would be able to see the process of weaving in close-up detail. Coco is given a free hand in the studio; she is even allowed to handle straight pins-"at least for now."



"One of the most important and valuable things to give your children is a good self-image and a strong inner self," Smith says. "I felt becoming a parent was important for me. I can't afford not to have the time for a baby, so in the end I remain flexible between the two posts -as an artist and as a parent. I make sure to work my schedule around the baby as much as possible. My work in the studio helps us both."

Coco is learning Spanish from the family's Spanish-speaking maid. Her mother seems delighted at the prospect of a bilingual daughter.

She likens Coco's development to her own growth as an artist.

"For my little girl," she says, "there was a three-week period between crawling and walking. When she knew how to walk, she did not stop learning. She found much more to do. She started to kick things, run, skip, step on things whatever looked good. Now I can't recall what has happened to time, or whether that last hurdle was high or low. It's the same for an artist. Once you realize you have some talent, you challenge yourself to try other things."

Smith takes on a faraway look when she speaks of her family, and of the very private world the three of them have created. Yet she admits that she feasts on the interchange of ideas that takes place when she and Tigler entertain fellow artists at their home.

It was her curiosity about people and ideas, perhaps, that prompted her to fly cross-country to accept NTID's Lyon Memorial Lectureship last spring.

The lectureship is named for the late Edmund Lyon, who is best known for devising a phonetic finger alphabet. Established by his daughters, it introduces RIT students to the life experiences of profoundly deaf persons who have distinguished themselves in their professions.



Smith's speech was titled, "Words on Confidence." She knows a lot about that subject-she has always had an abundance of confidence in her own abilities, or at least in her ability to overcome adversity.

"I learned it's okay to be afraid and that there's no shame in failing," she told the students. "The most soaring triumphs come simply from trying again. Confidence sprouts from trying. I learn something important when I face a problem positively-I learn that I have it within me to go beyond what I've done before. With this attitude I feel whole despite my handicap."

Her positive attitude was first nurtured at the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Massachusetts. Originally from Glastonbury, Connecticut, Smith feels that the speech and speech-reading skills she acquired at the oralist school were "absolutely necessary to get me where I am now."

It was there, also, that she learned to sew, and discovered how much she enjoyed home economics. While taking an art course, she was photographed molding some ceramics for a brochure advertising the school.

Smith saw the brochure, and liked what she saw. In fact, she was so enamored of the image that she decided to become an artist.

After graduation from the Clarke School, she entered a public high school in Glastonbury, where she claims she was old enough to be everyone else's grandmother.

"As the school's only deaf student, I had trouble finding my inner self," she says quietly.

Her artistic inclinations did not wane, however-they may have been heightened by the enforced isolation of her high school years. She combined her two interests, art and sewing, into a textile major at the prestigious and highly competitive Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). While

there, she did an apprenticeship with Elaine Wilmath, a fashion designer at Providence's hugely successful India Imports, a business begun on a shoestring during the hip and heady days of the early '60s. She also worked there on a freelance basis, designing handbags.

The freewheeling atmosphere at India Imports must have had some effect on Smith. After graduating from RISD in 1974, she and Tigler, a painting major who was a year ahead of her, "bought a truck and drove around the United States for five months and sort of ran out of gas in Los Angeles.

"We wanted a taste of the unfamiliar, and it seemed right there," she offers with an impish grin. "Big city, art scene, nice climate, a few contacts."

Seeking out the unfamiliar-risk taking-seems endemic to Smith's nature. Her casual approach extends to all areas of her life, even her deafness. She relies completely on speechreading to communicate with others, often staring off into the distance to rest her liquid blue eyes during breaks in a conversation.

She used to wear hearing aids, but found them distracting. One day, she left them in her pants by mistake, threw them in the wash, and said that after that experience they "worked like new." A week later, they were dead.

"I figure I had my chance," she says with a philosophical shrug.

She knows no sign language, but can fingerspell, and taught her husband to do so as well. Her stint at NTID was the first time in her 34 years that she had any prolonged exposure to sign language. While here, she recalls, she was fascinated by the hands of animated conversationalists flying through the air around her. For the first time, it occurred to her that she might be missing something by not signing, and that she might like to learn.

Another side of her is staunchly independent, almost fearful that an outward display of deafness will somehow "pigeonhole" her.

"My friends say they think of me as hearing," she asserts. "I take that as a great compliment."

Nevertheless, rather than spurning her deafness, she seems to look upon it as a non-issue.

"My deafness has never really hindered my artistic development," she said in her speech. "But as a deaf person in a hearing world, there are often reminders that I am not whole, not capable. Little things can erode your will. That could affect all aspects of my personality, but the confidence that I fight for in my artistic life I force on myself in general.

"Opportunity will knock for deaf people as it does for everybody else. Have the awareness to see it and the confidence to act on it. If you don't see the opportunity, prepare yourself and look for it. Wise up! Your talent and professionalism are the issues, not your deafness. Make your embarrassing mistakes, but improve and move on. If Jacobo Timerman, famous tortured Argentinian survivor, can say 'There is more future than past,' certainly deaf people here can say that."

To some extent, she has come to terms with being publicly identified as deaf, for her family was recently featured on the television show "Hour Magazine," as one that is coping nicely with a deaf/ hearing relationship.

Smith's occupation was not mentioned in the story, but she has had plenty of exposure elsewhere, including twice being singled out as a "Best Bet" in *New West* magazine and as a

feature spread in *Spring* magazine. She also has been cited for her design work in *Craft* magazine, *The Daily News*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Los Angeles Weekly*, *Ornament* magazine, *Playgirl*, *The Providence (R.I.) Evening Bulletin*, *Slimmer*, and *Wet* magazine.

Smith cherishes her privacy, but has accustomed herself to being in the glare of the public eye. She is thoroughly charming and at ease speaking with strangers, who often mistake her accent, she confesses, for that of an exotic foreigner.

As part of the Lyon Lectureship, she addressed the group, Deaf Women of Rochester. One of them, an artist, asked Smith how long it takes her to construct a typical garment from start to finish.

Nancy Cook Smith squared her shoulders and parted her lips in a mischievous smile. Ever the businesswoman, she shot back, "A lifetime of knowledge."
