



A Resilient Man

BY THELMA FAYLE

“Open your heart to all who love you.”
—Beautiful Dreamer, Les Chan, 1976

Long dark locks frame the sweet face of a 13-year-old boy in the picture looking down over the entrance to Les Chan’s home. The arresting photo was taken days before Les had his head shaved for brain tumour surgery.

A shaved head may not seem like the largest challenge, but it is a memory that still burns 40 years later. There was nothing “cool” about engaging puberty with a bald head in the ’70s.

That pivotal time launched Les’ determined crusade to handle life’s challenges with his new body. Hemiplegia, a condition in which one-half of a patient’s body is paralyzed, branded an indelible theme into Les’ action plans. His mantra became: Move Forward.

“My disability has been a godsend in making me a very strong individual,” he says. “I might have been a meagre kind of person otherwise.”

Wise words from the man who was not expected to reach age 14. Les says what’s wonderful about being told you can’t do things is that, in his case, spite spurs him on. “Fail-

ure is a wonderful motivator,” he claims.

Les’ textile artwork is hysterical, uplifting and beautifully detailed in a high-context style.

“I got into the punning in my needlework in the late ’80s,” says Les. Man Orchid (man or kid) has a playful-looking man emerging from a flower. Sex in the City has arms and legs haphazardly jutting out of building tops in a grey cityscape.

One of Les’ shows, the Tea Series, offered playful teacup themes. Two-tea-fruit-tea presents a colourful assortment of fruit and teacups. Cock Teas has a rooster floating in the air by the teacup. Then there is High Tea, a teacup with a peace sign on it surrounded by sprigs of a marijuana plant and rolled paper joints. And Tea and Trumpets, and M Tea.

Les points out one of his latest pieces: “These are the gay pride colours,” he says. The rainbow flag has six different shades that represent the skin colours of people around the world. Les is preparing for the gay pride art show in July, a Victoria library show in February, as well as shows in Port Angeles and a one-man show at the Martin Bachelor gallery

in Victoria in 2011.

His needle art presents themes that showcase Les’ involvement in many communities. The unmistakable red and black Chinese symbol for double happiness crops up frequently.

While Les recovered from the brain tumour, he needed to stay occupied. He watched his Aunt Ruth stitch her needlework and was fascinated by the process. After a few years, the commercial kits bored the young man and he set off on his own imaginative venture to have some fun. He began to design outlandish patterns.

The creative outlet helped him through tough high school days when he was in and out of hospitals.

“I was the ‘Chink,’ the ‘Sissy’ and then the ‘Gimp,’ and it was a devastating time, as youth can be for all of us,” says Les. “My sense of humour and my cockiness saved me, and I learned to cope. I am grateful that I look in the mirror now and see a man I respect. It was hard work.”

Les is thankful he battled his brain tumour in Canada. “If I was in China and had a brain tumour as a child, my life would have been very different. I would have been of no use to a farm family who needed help. I would have been farmed out,” he says.

The illness was hard on his family. “They didn’t know what to do. All of a sudden, they were thrust with a severely disabled child. We had the love of a large extended family, but my parents didn’t have the practical supports that exist now.”

Les’ mother had rheumatoid arthritis, so she and Les hung out together while his father, sister and brother did other things. When his siblings had kids of their own, and they went skiing and camping, Les would be left to babysit the kids.

“At times I didn’t take too kindly to that,” he says. “But now I have two nieces and a nephew that I adore.”

Les wants to share his survivor skills. “When I was young, I had to ask my father to buckle my watch strap, and I got tired of that,” he says. “I need to be independent.”

For close to 40 years, he’s had to learn skills that someone who has had a stroke at 50 or 60 doesn’t have time to learn. “I was lucky to have the challenge early and have had a lifetime to learn coping skills. I can save stroke victims time and frustration and show them how to live more effectively with a disability.”

Putting on a watch with one hand, tying a tie, chopping food in the kitchen, wrapping a gift and ironing are all skills Les had to teach himself to do. “I discovered there was such a thing as a one-handed can opener. Who knew?” He has amassed a whole raft of what he calls “survivor techniques” around eating, dressing and living. “There are all sorts of things you can do with physical limitations.”

Les tested his training session idea with a group of 20 people in Nanaimo and it went well. But he isn’t sure of the logistics of his goal on a larger scale yet.

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When Les needed more socializing in his young life, he discovered cooking. It was fun and he could share it. Les set out to eat well, entertain friends and live within a reasonable food budget. Within a few years, Les became a cooking instructor and the author of *Don't Stir Fry in the Nude*. He thinks of eating well as a demonstration of self-love. Les will participate as a culinary course instructor for a local chef series in the summer of 2009.

"I like taking care of everybody," he says. "People get blown away by the food I make. Part of my process is that I need people to 'ooh and ah' over my accomplishments. I am very conscious of my body; yes, my arm hangs and my leg is funny, but I am okay, and I am a great cook."

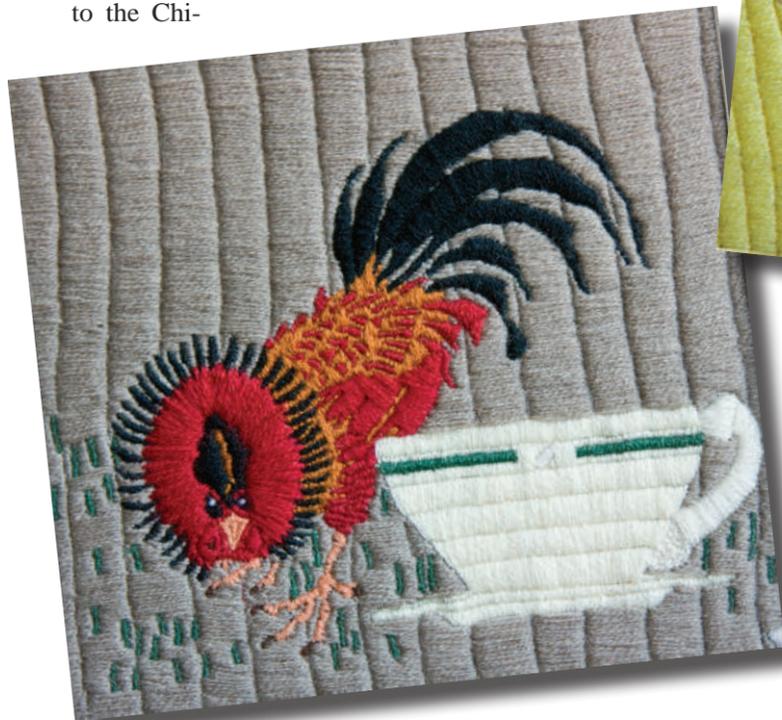
For 17 years, Les has hosted an annual Chinese New Year dinner for two large groups. Each evening will seat up to 80 friends. The first night for business contacts and straight friends and the second night is just for the guys. The 10-course banquets will set the backdrop for a fun evening full of irreverence and great food.

"The homosexual world is constantly bombarded with images of perfect bodies. And here I am, in my community. It is a difficult community for people with disabilities. My friends are comfortable with me, and it is not an issue anymore, but it is tough for young people."

Humour is an important part of Les' life and he says it is one of his gifts.

"I belong to a tourism operation and they wanted me to run for a position on the board. I told them the problem is I can't run. But I told them I could do my Terry Fox-trot."

Les loves the community spirit of Victoria and part of how he helps his newfound hometown is through offering tours of Chinatown. "I try to be helpful to the Chi-



nese community. I like bringing cultures together. I understand about missing opportunities; I have missed many."

Les' art shows are fun and have given him the accolades he says he needs; as is his involvement with the Victoria Chinese Chamber association, Tourism association, Island Gay Society, and Habitat for Humanity gingerbread fundraiser.

This page (clockwise), Les works on his needlework. Two pieces from Les's punning tea series: High Tea and Cock Teas. Page 15, Also an accomplished cook and author, Les in his kitchen.

Photos: Ted Grant

He acknowledges an important mentor, Gail Schultz.

"I went to the Centre for Self-Awareness for a decade and learned that I am okay," he says. "People see me as being confident, but it has taken me a very long time to get here."

But even after 10 years with an enriching mentor, and a list of accomplishments as long as his out-of-action arm, Les Chan is still irritated by the sight of his non-symmetrical reflection in the mirrored glass wall of the building he enters.

"I cringe when I see myself," he says, "that isn't really me. I choose not to acknowledge that it's my hobbled body. I shoot for my own personal perfection in life. And that reflected image does not jive with my own goal of perfection."

"In the wider definition of disability, every single one of us needs to come out of the closet in terms of accepting and appreciating our bodies for exactly what they are. My situation is a little more visible than most."

Les understands that when people see a body with a different gait, they initially assume there is a mental problem. "People with disabilities need to reassure ourselves that we are okay as we are."

Aside from being funny, clever and productive, this fabric artist, cooking instructor, published cookbook author, poet and volunteer to many community agencies, keeps on moving, although he claims to relax plenty while he creates his needle artwork.

A framed poem on the wall, which Les wrote in his 20s called "Beautiful Dreamer," bids guests farewell as they leave his apartment. He wrote it, no doubt, with a lover in mind. As Les says of his culture, "Chinese tradition is about the circle – everything comes back."

Through his own absolute resilience, the beautiful dreamer continues to make his dreams come true, one determined and uneven step after another. SL



"With fingertips clenched we faded to dark
One last kiss."

—Beautiful Dreamer, Les Chan, 1976

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