





Artist overcomes addiction to find success in art, business

Located at 310 E. Mesa Ave. is a squat, non-descript white brick building with the words “PRIVATE ESTABLISHMENT” emblazoned upon the front door.

The yard is very tidy and you would never know that it's a business if it wasn't for the sign that reads, "The House of Stamps & The House of Lyndon."

On March 2, Lyndon Tsosie, 49, won the best of class award for jewelry and lapidary at the 60th Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market in Phoenix.

Tsosie entered a silver and turquoise concho belt titled, "Nilchih Dine'é" (Air People) for the competition, an intricate piece with each concho stamped in a different shape of various insects.

Originally from Tohatchi, Tsosie has lived in Gallup for the past 20 years, and said his ideas for designs are derived from oral history.

"A lot of it is from my family telling me stories and from growing up in Tohatchi," he said. "I was playing in the wash and [arroyos] as a kid. We would go swimming in the creek."

Playing outdoors for hours on end and returning home at sundown was the norm, because his parents worked.

"We'd flip rocks and look for snakes and stuff," Tsosie said, discussing his childhood and influences. "That's where the insects derived from and the understanding of Nilchih Dine'é and how the insects came into this world."

Playing outside and daydreaming was formative in his development as a jeweler 40 years later. While the Air People are considered holy beings that have been with Navajos since the beginning of time, Tsosie said he is not a religious person.

"I was raised Catholic, but I do believe in the Holy People," he said, referring to the Navajo gods.

PATH TO THE CRAFT

In his early twenties, Tsosie was wading through a life awash in alcohol and drugs before meeting a man that forever changed his ways and showed him the value of hard work.

“I partied until I was about 27 and then I met Teddy Draper Jr.,” he said. “I apprenticed for him and it was more like, life apprenticeship. He taught me about life.”

Through this mentorship, Tsosie learned silversmithing and understood the purpose of business and the realities of having a corporation. There was no room for drugs or alcohol.

“This coming May is going to be my twenty-second year being sober, and my twenty-first year being a corporation,” he said. “The art plays a pivotal role, but I’m not creating jewelry as much as I used to.”

The acclaim and numerous awards he has won for his artistry in metal came from employing various forms – inlay, first phase traditional, fine jewelry, traditional jewelry, contemporary – and utilizing the finest supplies to create beauty.

Throughout the various pieces Tsosie has produced in his career, there was one constant: stamps marking bold designs and Navajo craftsmanship.

These days, making jewelry has taken the backseat to pursuing his new business and networking with others to grow the business.

Tsosie’s business, The House of Stamps, is a stamp company. They sell stamps to about 25 countries and the business is internet-based, at the moment.

“We will soon be moving to 1618 South Second Street and we will be open to the public,” Tsosie said. “We’re an internet-based company right now.”

Tsosie is married to Valerie, and the couple has six children: Jasmine, Iyan, Talon, Azrael, Hiro, and Gillés. He taught his children the value of hard work and rewards that come with success.

You will know Tsosie is at work if you see the white Dodge Viper parked in front of The House of Stamps.

“It’s not about accolades or showing off, that’s just part of being an artist,” he said. “It’s about being able to do what we do as a team to generate income for other people.”

The company buys stamps, and Tsosie said everybody gets a fair share when they are sold.

“Material things come and go, but if I ever go broke, at least I know how to make a buck,” he said. “There’s so many things I’ve done to make a buck.”

For the past 22 years, he has been giving back to Navajo communities during Christmas. In 2017, his efforts provided food to 220 families and 263 families the year before.

Tsosie raffled $50,000 in jewelry and prizes in 2017. The year before, he donated a $9,600 concho belt for the raffle. The funds generated provided food boxes for the needy in Navajo and Zuni communities.

“In 1995, I only had $50, but I bought 10 bags of Gold Meal Flour from Bashas’ and gave it to an organization in Chinle,” he said. “The next year, I decided to do it on my own and distributed to people.”

The experience was eye opening. He said it was sad because the people that were helped really needed food. Giving back was a means to fulfilling his promise to the Creator, Tsosie said, for keeping him sober.

This clear vision is also one that he has for the city he's lived in for the past two decades.

"I love Gallup," Tsosie said. "We can do without the alcohol, considering its history with this area. [There's] talk of opening breweries or whatever. We should be opening museums and things for kids instead of bars."

This kind of cultural enrichment is important to Tsosie, and it reflects in his most important advice: keep reading.

"We need our young people to read," he said. "Read every day. Read the *Gallup Sun*. Knowledge comes from reading, it doesn't matter what it is. When you read, you can actually walk the talk."

By Rick Abasta
For the Sun