

# THE SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY CONNECTION

## Looking for secrets through a viewfinder

*A local photographer's lifetime of work includes camaraderie with Ansel Adams, Hunter S. Thompson and other notable figures of the baby boom generation*

BY SHASTA KEARNS MOORE

*The Southwest Community Connection, Feb 1, 2010*

**MARKHAM — Cherie Hiser believes her upbringing in Southwest Portland directly resulted in her life as a successful and celebrated photographer — but perhaps not in the way you'd expect.**

She was known in her childhood as the beautiful blonde Sherri Jenkins, Wilson High School's first May Queen, who rode her horse to school through what was then rural Oregon. The self-described "farm girl," who started several clubs at the brand-new high school, was a third-generation Portlander surrounded by close family.

But Hiser, now a Markham resident, said her "Leave it to Beaver" childhood and bigoted father pushed her to explore and attempt to understand people on the fringes of society.

"That's what I've been photographing for many years, is people who are different," she said while recently discussing a lifetime of work, including ground-breaking early photographic studies of people who were tattooed, transgender or gay. "And what I've found out is we're kind of all the same."

Some of Hiser's most powerful images explore that paradox — difference and similarity in one person — using diptychs, which are images placed side-by-side.

In her "Letters to Pepper" series, tattooed people are shown in their nursing or business uniforms — as society wants them to be seen — right next to photos of them nude, exposing their body art. The work, begun in the 1960s, was startling to a mainstream culture that still considered tattoos unusual and taboo.

Hiser, who herself got an ever-growing tattoo of a rose bush on her upper torso, went on to chronicle similarly ostracized cultures of gay, transgender and mentally ill people.

"I tend to like to photograph secrets," Hiser said while poring over decades of images at the Newspace Center for Photography in downtown Portland. Hiser begins teaching a class there on finding one's own voice called "Lighting the Spark" on Feb. 3.

### Hunter S. Thompson used her space to campaign for sheriff

It's hardly the first time that Hiser has found herself teaching at an arts center. After a suggestion from a fellow party-goer at actor Dennis Hopper's house, Hiser started the Center of the Eye in Aspen, Colo., in 1969 and the center soon become internationally known for its innovative work, big-name



PHOTO COURTESY CHERIE HISER / THE SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY CONNECTION

As part of a photographic study of aging, this self-portrait shows 70-year-old Cherie Hiser behind a mask of herself as the 1957 Wilson High School May Queen. Hiser, a world-renowned photographer, has lived in Southwest Portland for much of her life and is teaching a new class at the Newspace Center for Photography that begins in February.

instructors and students who went on to work for National Geographic or other careers in photography.

“The Center of the Eye became known as one of the most significant photography workshops in the world,” Hiser said.

But it wasn't only about photography. Hiser let author Hunter S. Thompson use the space when he ran for the local sheriff's office in 1970 on a platform of legalizing all drugs, ripping up all the pavement and other “Freak Power” reforms. (Thompson lost by only a few votes.)

In fact, Hiser's life story seems to intersect many of the formative figures and events of the baby boom generation. Her fascination with tattooing began when she saw a tattooed Janis Joplin at Woodstock. She embarrassed herself on one of her first photography assignments for Aspen's newspaper when news anchor Walter Kronkite paused in the middle of his speech to say that she might have better luck if she took the lens cap off. She served on the board of trustees for a foundation created by legendary photographer Ansel Adams, to whose granddaughter she is a godmother.

### **'I'm really alone now'**

Yes, Hiser has lived a full life of photography, drugs, two marriages, A-list celebrities, and numerous forays into America's subcultures.

But though she lived fast, she didn't die young. Hiser is now 70 and through what she calls her largely “autobiographical” work process, she has become fascinated with a study of aging. For her latest photography series, called Re:Vision, she is recreating photos she took long ago of her friends. At least, those who are left.

Hiser was able to redo a 1968 wedding photo with her first husband 25 years later and several other portraits of Aspen-area friend. The passage of time shown on their faces is striking.

But for some of Hiser's old friends, time has stopped. A Google search for “Center of the Eye” reveals obituaries and Wikipedia entries for lost alumni. Hiser had no children and divorced her last husband about 10 years ago.

“I'm really alone now,” she said. “It's lonely being the last one standing.”

Newspace Program Director Laura Valenti said Hiser's fearlessness and willingness to confront frightening issues such as her own aging process is part of what makes her so inspiring to her students and the local photography community at large.

“One thing about Cherie is that she's really inspirational,” Valenti said. “She has a great way of kind of pushing students to get a little wild and creative with their work and (to) step out of looking at things in a purely technical way ... which often leads to really awesome, creative work.”

Guy Swanson, a longtime friend who recently finished two documentary shorts on Hiser, agreed.

“She is a purely artistic person. She thinks outside the boundaries, which is something that artists do,” Swanson said, adding that she pushes her students to find their own artistic voice. “You have to find your voice and follow that voice. You don't follow someone else's voice.”

For her part, Hiser said she has enjoyed passing her life on the outer edges of society.

“I've always felt I'm not a white-picket-fence person.”

### **Video clips:**

Visit this story online for links to Guy Swanson's two documentary shorts on Cherie Hiser's life and influences. The videos do contain several nude photographs and some references to recreational drugs.

See [www.photographicimage.com](http://www.photographicimage.com) for a gallery of Cherie Hiser's work.