



Back from Hollywood, stethoscope in hand

Heather Kent

Evan Adams, the only medical student at the University of Calgary to shoot movies between classes, is also 1 of only 2 First Nations students at the medical school. As the first-year student hit the books last year, his latest movie, *Smoke Signals*, was earning rave reviews across North America, and he was gearing up to appear in 4 other films.

His accomplishments don't stop there. His work, *Dreams of Sheep*, recently represented Canada in the International Festival of Young Playwrights in Australia, and in November he received the Motion Picture Award for Best Actor from the American Indian Film Institute. These days, when Adams isn't immersed in studying he's making public appearances and researching his next role for the movie *Indian Killer*, which is about interracial murder.

He says acting and medicine aren't separate entities to him, and he is hoping to bring an actor's insight and an aboriginal perspective to his medical career. In me, he says, the dual roles "are the same. As an actor, I'm trained to see humanity in everyone. I hope that I see that immediately when I'm with patients. Acting and medicine are about core experiences of the human condition."

Although Adams, 32, always wanted to become a doctor, his introduction to acting was accidental. His father, chief of the Sliammon First Nation in Powell River, BC, ensured that his son received a good education. In 1984, while he was studying undergraduate science at McGill University, he had an unusually lucky break. While out for a walk he stopped to look in the window of an acting school, and the woman who owned the agency asked if he was an actor. He said he was — he's not sure why — and he accepted an invitation for an audition the next day. He landed the lead role in a Canadian movie.

Adams abandoned his studies at McGill and returned to Vancouver to study acting, and worked in numerous screen roles. He starred in 2 telefilms based on books by Farley Mowat, *Curse of the Viking Grey* and *Lost in the Barrens*; the latter won an Emmy award. He has also appeared

on TV shows ranging from *The Beachcombers* to *Stir Crazy*, and was host of the Knowledge Network series *Kids First*.

Through his acting, Adams tries to dispel traditional images of native people. "Native images are really fantasy," he says, "and a surprising number of people prefer the fantasies. I want to speak in the first person for native people."

He says he tried to do this in *Smoke Signals*. "Since I was a boy, I was told to be cool and sophisticated . . . that this was required by the dominant culture. I tried to see [the role] as a chance to redeem the old-time Indians I was copying."

"I'm more of a brainy actor than an intuitive one," adds Adams, who describes himself as "very disciplined" in his work. He was disciplined enough to return to school at the University of British Columbia in 1996 after a 12-year hiatus and resume his undergraduate studies. He credits the First Nations House of Learning with supporting him throughout that time. Before leaving UBC, he set up a bursary fund for

other First Nations students in the health sciences. "If an actor can go into health, so can other people." He filmed *Smoke Signals* just before he graduated last spring, and found himself flying to Idaho for shoots between examinations.

Adams chose the University of Calgary because of its "progressive approach to medicine. Our view of health — ethnopharmacology — is welcomed there. Divorcing from our spirit doesn't work anymore."

Dr. Laura McLeod, who teaches a course on cultural issues in health care, says Adams' knowledge and ability to articulate native health concerns makes him "a wonderful asset to the course."

Adams says he "feels compelled" to practise medicine "in an area where I'll encounter the most native people. Today, there is so much for aboriginal doctors to do [because] physicians haven't done enough for native communities. I'm always ready to speak up." ?



Evan Adams on the set of *Smoke Signals*