

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Media review

### Learning to heal from the heart

#### Medicine Woman

A television series directed by Shirley Cheechoo  
VisionTV 2007  
13, 1-hour programs. English.

Watching Dr. Danielle Behn Smith kneel in the Namibian dirt, helping women of the Ovahakaona tribe dig out the root of a tree, you realize that this is neither a typical television personality nor standard reality show fare.

*Medicine Woman*, a series of 13 hour-long programs being aired on both VisionTV and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, bills itself as “one doctor’s personal mission across 6 continents to learn the ancient knowledge” from shamans, yogis, herbalists, folk healers, mystics and traditional medicine men and women.

The interesting hook to this Canadian–Australian co-production is Behn Smith, a young, videogenic family physician who is also West Coast First Nations. From the opening credits, the viewer is pulled in by the narration of Behn Smith as she explains not only the premise of the show but also her personal reasons for doing it: “My quest is to find these healers, learn from them and preserve their knowledge for generations to come.”

It’s a lofty yet admirable goal, and Behn Smith meets the challenge with dignity. Unlike most television journalists who parachute into foreign countries wearing flak jackets and posing as instant experts, she comes across as humble and respectful learner.

“I was trained in Western ways, but I wanted to learn from traditional healers,” explains Behn Smith, who



Murray MacDonald

Canadian physician Dr. Danielle Behn Smith travelled to countries in 6 continents, including Peru in South America (above), to explore the “ancient knowledge” of medicine.

studied medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario and completed her family practice training at the University of Manitoba’s Rural Medicine program. “I had just finished my locum on the West Coast and I was a bit disillusioned with my family practice training. It wasn’t what I wanted. Something was missing,” explains the 29-year-old. “I’d been taught how to diagnose and treat medical illness. I know all of the medications to prescribe and the lifestyle changes to recommend. What I hadn’t learned is how to help empower peo-

ple to fight disease using their own traditions.

“As a 92-year-old homeopath in Namibia pointed out to me, conventional doctors heal with the head; traditional doctors heal with the heart. For me, that was the missing piece.”

*Medicine Woman* is part National Geographic, part spiritual quest and part travelogue. Through Behn Smith, viewers are introduced to Aboriginal healers living in the lush rainforests of South East Australia, to the Veddahs or Forest People of Sri Lanka, to the Women of Red Ochre in Namibia, to

shamans of the Bolivian jungles and to her own Dene elders living in Fort Nelson, British Columbia.

Because she is a member of both the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada and the Canadian Aboriginal Leaders in Medicine, Behn Smith first learned about the show when she received a listserv message about the producers who were looking for a young, Aboriginal physician to act as host. Behn Smith applied and after several months of waiting, she made the cut.

So with a list of 13 ailments affecting her own people, Behn Smith traveled across the globe looking for possible answers from traditional healers. Her take-home goal? “To provide culturally sensitive care, I need to incorporate traditional healing models and practices alongside conventional medicine, so that my people can take pride in their wellbeing because they can take true ownership of it,” says Behn Smith.

Behn Smith believes that meeting traditional healers from around the globe has made her question some aspects of Western medicine. After a

medicine woman in Namibia explains how she uses the tree root to help pregnant women with pain, she asks Behn Smith what is in her tablets. “I realized that even as a doctor, I don’t really know what’s in the pills that I prescribe.

“Traditional healing has such a completely different approach. With Western medicine, you’re trained to know all the answers. And then you meet [traditional healers] who think that someone’s health is such an intricate matter. How could you know all the answers? Instead you have to just let your ego go and allow the healing energy flow to through you.”

Behn Smith is convinced that the future of healing lies in combining both Western medicine and traditional therapies, and believes that what she’s learned from traditional healers has made her a better doctor. “I’ve had some really positive response from my patients in Dawson City. People are interested in approaching health care in a different way. They’re happy that I’m open to traditional ways of healing.”

What does Behn Smith hope Western-trained doctors will take away from the



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Among the Himba of Namibia, Behn Smith finally realized that conventional doctors heal with the head while traditional doctors heal with the heart. “For me, that was the missing piece.”



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Dr. Danielle Behn Smith, a 29-year-old family physician in Dawson City, Yukon, is convinced that the future of healing lies in combining both Western medicine and traditional therapies.

show? “Humility is such an important part of traditional healers’ foundation. They have such gratitude from a higher power for the gift of healing people. There’s such an incredible connection between people’s minds, bodies and spirits. Our current care could be vastly improved if we could include these spheres of care.”

Beautifully shot and well-produced, *Medicine Woman* is both entertaining and informative. Season 2 has not yet been shot and Behn Smith doesn’t know if she’ll be involved or if the producers will use another host. But she says she feels blessed to have the “gifts she has learned” from the experience.

Although the show producers bill her as a “medicine woman,” Behn Smith hesitates to describe herself that way. “I’m just Danielle,” she replies.

**Janis Hass BAA**  
Documentary filmmaker  
Ottawa, Ont.

Janis Hass is a freelance writer and documentary filmmaker. Her latest film is *Harvest Queens*.

*Medicine Woman* is now airing on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network every Wednesday at 11 pm, Saturday at 2 pm and Sunday at 3 pm