Celebrating Cultures with Molly of Denali

By Rochelle Adams

“Are we there yet?” may or may not be every parent’s favorite question.

In Alaska, it takes on a whole new dimension because of how vast the landscape truly is. Despite the immense distance, my children and I frequently travel back and forth between our home in Anchorage, Beaver and Fort Yukon, a journey which takes several days. Like my ancestors, we travel so that I can teach my kids about the world, about who they are, and where they came from.



Molly of Denali ©2020 WGBH Educational Foundation

In addition to being a mother of three, I’m also an educator, artist and Native language instructor. For the last 3 years, I’ve served on the advisory committee for MOLLY OF DENALI, PBS KIDS’ newest show, which features 10-year-old Molly Mabray and her adventures with her friends in the fictional village of Qyah, Alaska. Together with others from across the state, our advisory group helped ensure that the show authentically portrays the life of an Alaska Native girl growing up in Alaska. The show is the first to feature an Alaska Native lead character, and has embedded curriculum to teach children how to interact with different types of information — such as charts, online resources, oral history from elders, and beyond.

In addition to learning how to read a map or vlog, I hope that MOLLY will inspire families to talk about the similarities and differences that exist in our world, and gain an appreciation for other cultures.

As I’ve learned in my own journey, language can build an important bridge across cultures. **Learning how to say “thank you” in your Native language, or that of a classmate or friend, can be an important first step** towards understanding and appreciating our differences. You can help your child explore their own cultural history with one of the many language dictionaries available online, or learn Alaska Native words with MOLLY’s interactive games.

While we honor our differences, **it's important to see that many values are universal.** Knowing who you are, respecting your environment, and honoring your elders are not just important Gwich'in values. They are important human values. As Molly learns these lessons during her adventures, it's a great opportunity to talk with kids about what we all have in common, even with people whose lives may look very different than our own.

Finally, it's important to share your own family's story. In one episode of MOLLY OF DENALI, Molly learns about her grandfather's experience at boarding school, where he was shamed for his cultural background. He had never talked about this with his family. Like Molly's, my own grandparents didn't share much about similar experiences at boarding school. Watching MOLLY together has opened up important dialogue in my village about our collective histories.

As families watch MOLLY OF DENALI, **I hope that parents and grandparents will be inspired to share their own stories,** so that kids everywhere can understand where they came from, and gain an appreciation for how we are all interconnected.

Rochelle Adams is the cultural advisor for the PBS KIDS series, MOLLY OF DENALI. *She is also an educator, artist, and Native language instructor. She is the mother of three children.*

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Funding for MOLLY OF DENALI™ is provided by a Ready To Learn Grant from the U.S. Department of Education; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People; and by public television viewers. Additional funding made possible with the participation of the Province of British Columbia Production Services Tax Credit. Corporate funding is provided by the T. Rowe Price College Savings Plan and IKEA Retail U.S.

The contents of this program were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. The project is funded by a Ready To Learn Grant (PR/AWARD No. U295A150003, CFDA No. 84.295A) provided by the Department of Education to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.