MOLLY OF DENALI

New PBS KIDS series shows the power of representation

By Princess Daazhraii Johnson









» ***Princess Daazhraii Johnson, top right, is a creative producer and writer for* Molly of Denali, *a new PBS KIDS series starring an Alaska Native girl, above, who lives with her family in the fictional village of Qyah.***

TOP RIGHT: MAARTEN DE BOER; ALL OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY ©2018 WGBH EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

» **When I was a young girl,** traditional Alaska Native foods, such as dry salmon strips and moose-head soup, were my favorites. Yet I remember being shamed by other kids at school for the things I ate. The message my friends, family and I got through various forms of media was that we should all be eating bologna sandwiches, Twinkies and other processed foods. Those foods were acceptable, familiar, "normal." Fish-head soup was "weird."

These were the memories that replayed in 2016, when I learned WGBH in Boston was working on a pilot for a PBS KIDS series called *Molly of Denali*, which premieres July 15.

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest. An animated children's series with a strong, kind and adventurous Alaska Native girl as the lead character? My first thought was: *Yes, please. Sign me up!* My second thought was: *Finally!*

As an Alaska Native (Neets'aii Gwich'in) mother of two young boys, and as someone passionate about representation in film, television and education, I feel blessed to have joined such a creative team of people who are just as eager as I am to bring *Molly of Denali* to life. The series is a wonderful opportunity for us as Alaska Native educators, writers, producers and actors to help create a show that reflects who we are in a positive and respectful manner.

Growing up in the 1980s, I rarely saw people who looked like me represented in pop culture. Depictions of Indigenous people were often the sort of stereotypical images that Hollywood had presented to the world through the old "Cowboy and Indian" movies. I longed to see images and stories to which I could relate.

In fact, the negative images I saw in films, mascots, news and other outlets led to feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem as a teen. As a young adult, I learned more about the impact these negative images have on public perception of Indigenous people. I was drawn to the entertainment industry in the hopes of changing the negative portrayal by creating opportunities for us to tell our own stories. *Molly of Denali* presents such an opportunity.

To develop the show, WGBH visited Alaska and partnered with the Alaska Native community, forming an Alaska Native Working Group, comprised of Dewey Hoffman, Rochelle Adams, Luke Titus and Adeline Raboff. This group helped to shape the characters and the fictional village of Qyah (meaning "village" in the Dena'ina language), where the animated series is set. The group also inspired many of the stories. In one episode, Molly catches her first fish, and, as is customary, she gifts it to her grandfather. Alaska Native values are imbued throughout the series.

Shortly after the first meeting, a job posting went out for

the creative producer position. I immediately applied with a heartfelt email explaining why this work meant so much to me, and here we are. Now, the show has had more than 15 Alaska Native/First Nations actors voicing characters, eight Alaska Native scriptwriters (myself included), one Alaska Native producer working on short live-action pieces, one Alaska Native production assistant and three Native interns. We also have six Alaska Native language advisers, along with a handful of additional advisers who have been brought in to work on individual stories. On our education side, we have Alaska Native advisers to assist with the development of classroom lessons that coincide with the show. In addition, the theme song for the series is performed by Phillip Blanchett and Karina Moeller of Pamyua—







» The Alaska Native Working Group, top right, collaborated with PBS KIDS and WGBH to develop authentic storylines and experiences, such as navigating Alaska forests by map, right, and building a dog sled in a workshop class at school, far right.

an Indigenous world music group from Alaska—with fiddle music by Gwich'in fiddler Brennan Firth.

Kids everywhere will relate to Molly. She is curious, innovative, silly, kind, full of humor—and she is not afraid to make mistakes, because she is surrounded by family and friends who support her growth and development. Her community is healthy and welcoming, and everyone takes care of one another. Basically, Qyah is representative of the beautiful state of Alaska that we call home.

This spring, I was reviewing an episode when my 8-year-old pointed to a scene that featured *muktuk*, a traditional Alaska Native meal of whale blubber and skin. "Mom!" he said. "That's my favorite, and she's holding that *ulu* (knife) you have!" Joy filled my heart, and tears filled my eyes. I remembered being shamed by other children in school for this kind of food, but here was my son, seeing his life being represented in a positive light. He was filled with excitement and celebration. That moment of recognition and pride in him reminded me that media are powerful; representation is essential; and *Molly of Denali* is helping to bring about a long-awaited change.

Princess Daazhraii Johnson is a creative producer and writer for Molly of Denali. *Among additional roles, she has been a member of the SAG-AFTRA National Native Americans Committee since 2007. She lives in Fairbanks.*

For more on Molly of Denali, *visit pbskids.org/molly.*

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ABOUT *MOLLY OF DENALI*

» *Molly of Denali* premieres nationwide on July 15 on PBS stations, the 24/7 PBS KIDS channel and PBS KIDS digital platforms.

The show is the first nationally distributed children's series to feature a Native American lead character.

The series is grounded in a curriculum focused on Informational Text, a foundational aspect of literacy education. This means that in every episode, Molly interacts with a variety of texts used to convey information—such as books, maps, charts, Indigenous knowledge from elders and her own vlog. *—P.D.J.*

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