



PEOPLE MOVES

How Molly of Denali found its diverse cast and crew

Dorothea Gillim, creator and executive producer for WGBH on the new PBS series, dives into how she was able to find Alaska Native talent to bring the new series to life with authenticity.

By **Alexandra Whyte** June 25, 2018

The upcoming PBS KIDS series *Molly of Denali* is the first US nationally distributed children's series to feature an Alaska Native lead character, but it is groundbreaking in more ways than just its animated characters. Not only will the lead, Molly, be Alaska Native—the actress playing her will be as well. Producer WGBH made a real effort with this series to not just talk the talk, but also walk the walk by having Indigenous talent fill out positions both in front of and behind the camera as much as possible.

“Our commitment was to have all of the Indigenous roles played by Indigenous actors,” says Dorothea Gillim, the executive producer for WGBH and creator of *Molly of Denali*. “We wanted to have a nice diversity of voices that we collaborated with to help us shape the characters and the worlds so that they really felt authentic.”

Co-produced by WGBH Boston and Atomic Cartoons, the animated series was greenlit earlier this spring and will **premiere next summer** on PBS KIDS, as well as the pubcaster’s 24/7 channel and digital platforms and at a later date on CBC. It follows 10-year-old Molly, an Alaska Native girl from the fictional village of Qyah on the adventures of her and her family running the Denali Trading Post. Each 38 x half-hour episode will include two x 11-minute stories, as well as interstitial content featuring live-action depictions of real children and regions in Alaska. It is being developed as part of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and PBS Ready to Learn Initiative, with funding from the US Department of Education and CBC.

Gillim along with her co-creator Kathy Waugh, wanted to create a story that centered around a kid living in a store and the location was inspired by seeing President Barack Obama visit Alaska. But from the beginning she knew that it wasn’t her story to tell, which is why she brought on as many Indigenous voices and production talent as possible to ensure the story was told properly.

However, the team is somewhat limited in how much Alaska Native talent can be on board, since Vancouver, Canada-based Atomic Cartoons is handling the animation, meaning a significant portion of the cast has to be Canadian. Gillim says she pushed to make sure Molly was Alaska Native, and they were able to find and cast 13-year-old Sovereign Bill to voice the title character. WGBH also cast Adeline Potts—an Alaska Native with dual Canadian citizenship—as Auntie Midge, the village’s tribal leader. The rest of the cast is primarily filled out by Canadian Indigenous actors, though Gillim says finding the show’s talent wasn’t a walk in the park.

“We went to the more obvious places, like talent agents in Toronto and Vancouver, but we had to go well above and beyond that to really source that talent,” she says.

Gillim stresses that this can be a major hurdle to diverse hiring efforts, saying that people often go the traditional routes and give up when those don’t work. But the talent is definitely out there, she says, and can be found if you keep looking. After the initial search didn’t turn up what they were hoping for, the talent agents reached out through local theater companies, after-school programs and social media. They looked not only to Alaska but also Toronto, Vancouver and Edmonton, before expanding the search to Seattle since so many Alaska Natives live in Washington state.

But finding the right fit for the cast wasn’t the end of the process. Bill, for example, had very little acting experience, having only previously performed in an eighth-grade production of the musical *Annie*. Once they had been cast, the fresh-faced talent worked with voice director Nicole Oliver to

prepare for the series, coaching them on not just acting but the fundamentals of working in a recording booth.

The emphasis on more diverse hiring reflects a wider trend in entertainment. Across the board, representation is starting to get better on screen. This year's [broadcast inclusivity report](#) from The Hollywood Reporter shows that CBS has made the biggest gains, reaching more than 50% actors of color in its new series orders this year, second only to CW. But behind the scenes, things still remain abysmal. ABC and CW have no people of color working as creators or showrunners, while CBS and NBC have only one and Fox has two. Most of those numbers are down from the 2017-2018 pilot season.

While it's not an exhaustive study, the numbers are sobering. So WGBH made sure that when it was creating this series, Alaska Natives were worked into every avenue of the process, including having a working group of Alaska Native advisors, consultants and scriptwriters, as well as Alaska Native and Indigenous fellows and interns. Rounding out the team as the series' creative producer is Princess Daazhrai Johnson.

"We chose Princess as our creative producer because she has the perfect set of skills," says Gillim. "She has a background in acting and she went to Sundance, so she's a storyteller herself. And she happens to be Athabascan, so she grew up in the same place as Molly. She's been a joy to work with."

As for finding behind-the-scenes talent, it was a bit easier than tracking down the title character, but the process was not as straightforward as putting out a job posting.

"We went through something called Vision Maker, which is a PBS consortium for Native American filmmakers. We sent it to all of our PBS contacts in Alaska. CBC is a co-producer on the show, so we sent it to them in case they knew anyone. We sent it to theater companies and film programs in Alaska with a similar approach—we cast the net wide," says Gillim.

For Gillim, bringing in talent that was representative of the project she created was not just important from a PR standpoint, but because it also enriched the storytelling. Gillim says the writers were able to bring a wealth of knowledge and ideas from their own childhoods and family traditions, which the rest of the production team would never have been able to dream up.

And as Gillim points out, in addition to being an asset to WGBH's current production, the focus on diversity means the cast and crew have built up skills they can apply to the field moving forward, enriching the industry as a whole.