

Princess Daazhrai Johnson's Journey to MOLLY OF DENALI

Growing up, Princess Daazhrai Johnson loved watching movies, but longed to see someone who looked like her on screen. Johnson was born in Israel and raised mostly in Interior Alaska. Her background is diverse - her mother's family is Neets'aai Gwich'in and her late father was Romanian and Lithuanian. As a result of growing up fairly transient in Alaska, never attending one school for more than two years, she faced a lot of adversity. This, and the discrimination she faced as a child, fueled her desire to see a more just and equitable world.

It wasn't until she was a teenager when Johnson saw actress Sheila Tousey's portrayal of Maggie Eagle Bear's character in the film "Thunderheart" that she witnessed a strong Native woman on the big screen. Even decades later, Johnson genuinely glows when she talks about how much it meant to see Sheila's work in "Thunderheart," a 1992 contemporary western mystery film. Seeing a positive and strong portrayal of a Native woman stuck with her, and she realized how Native people really needed to see more images like the one Sheila helped bring to life.

Johnson holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Relations from George Washington University, and a Master's degree in Education from the University of Alaska Anchorage. She gives much credit to those individuals and organizations that inspired and supported her as an artist throughout the years: she is a Sundance Fellow for the Filmmakers, Producers and Screenwriters Lab, and an Emerging Voices Rosenthal Fellow with the PEN Center. She has been a member of the SAG-AFTRA Native American Committee since 2007 and also serves on the Boards of Dancing with the Spirit, NDN Collective, Native Movement, and was appointed by former president Obama to serve on the Board of Trustees for the Institute of American Indian Arts. Her screen acting credits include Jericho (CBS), Big Miracle, and Uncross the Stars. Her personal roles include daughter, sister, wife, aunt and most importantly, mother.

Now, Johnson is the creative producer on PBS KIDS' MOLLY OF DENALI — the nation's first nationally distributed animated children's television series that features a Native American and Alaska Native lead character. MOLLY OF DENALI features Molly Mabray, a feisty and resourceful 10-year-old Gwich'in/Koyukon/Dena'ina Athabascan girl, who takes viewers ages 4 to 8 along with her on adventures and fosters literacy skills along the way. With an emphasis on family and intergenerational relationships, episodes of MOLLY OF DENALI model Alaska Native values, such as respecting others, sharing what you have and honoring your elders, while showcasing contemporary aspects of rural life, including strong female role models and how technology aids in communication. Additionally, the series is grounded in a curriculum focused on Informational Text, a foundational aspect of literacy education.

“It is important to me in my role as Creative Producer to advocate for Indigenous representation in all aspects of the creative process,” said Johnson. “I aspire to see more Indigenous people gaining narrative and visual sovereignty over the images and stories that appear on screen. I hope that we start to see more and more original content created by Indigenous people, because no one can tell our stories like we can. These stories contain our values and that's something the world needs. I'd like to inspire the next generation to continually ask questions and examine their own cultural stories, the ones that have shaped who they are and honor where they've come from.”

Through MOLLY OF DENALI, the production team is able to examine stories through the lens of a young, curious, light-hearted, and smart Alaska Native girl.

“Seeking the wisdom of the Elders, practicing subsistence activities such as fishing, and berry gathering, as well as honoring and respecting the land that has provided for humans for millennia are just a few of the themes that will be woven in through the series,” said Johnson. Additionally, the production team's vision for MOLLY OF DENALI is to showcase many universal topics with which children from all cultures will be able to identify.