

MOLLY OF DENALI: Sovereign Bill's Breakout and Breakthrough Role

Sovereign Bill has been at the mic since she could stand on her own two feet.

Bill grew up accompanying her parents, Willard Bill, Jr. (Muckleshoot) and Robin Pratt (Tlingit), participating in events and performing traditional Muckleshoot and Tlingit dances and songs at tribal and community events -- and as part of the Auburn School District's Native American song and dance group.

"My Muckleshoot and Tlingit cultural identity keeps me grounded," said Bill. "It's a big part of my life and has shaped me into who I am as a person. I have a deep love and appreciation for my cultures, and just always want to learn more."

Last summer, Bill went on a casting call with other young Native American and Alaska Native actors from [Red Eagle Soaring Native Youth Theatre](#). Bill received a call-back almost immediately. Now at 14, she is standing at another mic voicing the title character, Molly Mabray, in PBS KIDS' MOLLY OF DENALI. More than just Bill's big break, MOLLY OF DENALI is a groundbreaking role. It's the first nationally distributed children's series in the U.S. featuring a Native American lead character.

Since the inception of MOLLY OF DENALI, PBS KIDS and producer, WGBH, have been committed to ensuring that all Indigenous roles are voiced by Indigenous actors. Bill says that this positive representation and sharing of Native American and Alaska Native cultures is one of the most meaningful aspects of her role.

"I feel lucky to be playing Molly," says Bill. "I feel like I am contributing to positive representations of how Alaska Natives and Native Americans are portrayed in film and TV. It's important for Indigenous people to play these roles because of our deep understanding of and connection with these characters."

Prior to MOLLY OF DENALI, Bill's formal acting experience was performing an eighth-grade production of the musical, *Annie*. As she dives into the role of Molly, Bill finds inspiration in the script.

"I just love the script and how Molly is a positive role model for children everywhere," said Bill, who was recently given a Tlingit name, Yeil Shi Gis'ook, which means Raven Singing With the Northern Lights. "In the scripts, I definitely see a lot of the teachings that I've learned from my Elders, or my mom and my dad. Like when Molly says "thank you" to the animals or to the plants when she harvests them. I was taught the same values. It's really amazing to see the familiarity and the connection between myself and Molly Mabray."

One episode that was especially meaningful to Bill was one in which Molly discovered that her Grandpa Nat had gone to boarding school, where he was punished for singing his Alaska Native

songs. Molly gets involved with Native singing and dancing, and tries to get her Grandpa Nat to join her. In the episode, she helps him regain his voice and reclaim their traditional songs.

“That episode helped give me a deeper understanding of this tragic past that we Alaska Native and Native Americans have,” said Bill. “Just reading that, makes me want to keep going and keep doing this work.”