

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Her mother wanted her to grow up knowing her Alaska native culture. Today she is a creative force behind PBS Kids' *Molly of Denali*, the Nation's first nationally-distributed animated children's television series featuring an Alaska native lead character. Meet this filmmaker and community activist next on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people, Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou I'm Leslie Wilcox. Princess is her first name, not her title. Princess Daazhrai Johnson of Farebanks, Alaska is the creative producer of *Molly of Denali*, a PBS Kids' animated series that debuted in 2019. The concept for this show originated with producers from Boston PBS Station WGBH. The producers wanted to create a children's show about Alaska that would involve native people on every level of production. Princess Johnson led the Alaska native advisory group that developed the characters and stories that would showcase the native cultures of Alaska.

*Hey, there you are! Ready to sing?
Ready! And maybe you will be too because...
Oh, Molly!
Tooey and I found your friend in the picture and brought back your drum. Do you have your songs again?
I left them so far behind. They'll need to find their way back to me.
That's okay Schada'a. I'm just glad we could find it for you.
Molly, we're next!*

Princess Johnson was born to an eastern European Jewish father and a mother from Alaska's Neets'ali Gwich'in tribe. They met in Los Angeles. When Princess was seven years old her mother decided to raise the children in her family's culture and language

and moved them to Alaska. She left behind her husband, who didn't care for the cold climate.

My mom was a single mom and we just – I just really had a transient childhood. We went a lot of times from urban to rural areas. My grandmother was living in Gwich'yaa Zhee or Fort Yukon. She had a cabin there so sometimes I'd spend a couple of my summers up there and then we were in Fairbanks, Anchorage, we lived a little bit on a homestead in a place called Sterling, Alaska. We are Neets'aai Gwich'in and my mother was born in Fort Yukon. But my grandmother is originally from Stevens Village and my grandfather, Teho, was from Arctic Village. A lot of our – my generation wasn't taught the native language and a lot of that is because the history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools. So I heard the language, I heard my grandmother and my aunts and everyone speaking the language fluently, but of course they would only really yell at us in the language or reprimand us in the language, but they didn't teach it to us. So we weren't really immersed in it, they didn't speak it to us consistently. I never went to a school for more than two years, so it was very weird. I always joke, like my mom didn't get the memo that we stopped being nomadic. [LAUGHTER] At the turn of the century.

Even though you moved schools a lot, you did well in higher education – a masters in education. How did you manage that, to just kind of be able to move – you know, you moved around and you had continuity too?

I think my mother really – and my father while he was around – instilled in us a sense of curiosity about the world and also to, to be creative and to honor that creativity. And my mother and father both were writers, and my mother's still a writer. And my grandmother wrote the first dictionary in the Gwich'in language. And so I just, I come from a long line of storytellers and people that I – that value knowledge so – and it has helped me in my life, understand the world around me and I try to keep that curiosity going all the time and I really believe we're all life-long learners.

What were some of the native, the Alaskan native beliefs in your group that you hold to this day, things that perhaps Americans don't think about.

Well one of the things is that from the time I was really little, my mom always asked me what I dreamt about and so therefore, I understood inherently that dreams are really important. And also, that ability, all of our traditional stories, talk about how we as human beings – the animals actually felt sorry for us and would teach us how to do things better. And so we spoke the same language as the animals and in the Neets'aai Gwich'in tradition, you know, we have an origin story that talks about a man who became a vs'ai, a caribou and in that manner was able to teach, when he transitioned back into a human being, tell us how the caribou wanted to be respected and treated. So I pull on that a lot and I think that those indigenous values of keeping

humility in fact as human beings, we are absolutely dependent upon clean water and clean air, and soil and these rich ecosystems that have evolved over millenia and we – we have to keep that humility and that balance going and that is especially relevant for us today.

I know there's a real treasuring of the caribou, and I know the – I know the Alaska natives say that it's a – you protect them. And you also eat them.

Not only with the vs'ai, with the caribou, but also with the salmon, or the whale, or any animal that we're harvesting, there's a spiritual belief that that animal is giving itself to you so that you can survive. And again, there's that tie between – in the, like I've mentioned in the Gwich'in tradition of – we actually were able to shape shift into those animals. So there really is, um, a part of us – they say we retain a part of the caribou heart and the caribou retain a part of our heart, and we really do have this spiritual um, relationship that goes back thousands and thousands of years.

You don't take more than you need.

Exactly. I think that if we listen, that the animals are messengers, that they are – they bring messages and signs. There's a lot of stories about them also teaching us, like I mentioned, how to make things better. Um, I think that the animals, you know right now, are sending a very strong message that we need to change our behavior as human beings because we are literally destroying their habitat and ecosystems, especially when you look at the oceans, which of course we in Alaska and Hawai'i, and all around the world are so connected by that water body. I mean we're all connected. We're all connected by what happens here or by what happens in Alaska. We have very little sea ice left. That sea ice is what the rich plankton – and grows underneath and what the whales eat, and this whaling season for my Iñupiaq brothers and sisters in Utqiagvik, they usually have landed about twenty whales and they haven't – they didn't land one. Where are those whales? Those are our brothers and sisters, those are our relatives and that's very troubling, and it should be troubling to all of us because of course, those are the same whales that come here.

Princess Johnson of Alaska grew up steeped in the stories and traditions of her native Gwich'in culture. She bristled at restrictive government and policies that she said, failed to value indigenous culture and protect Alaskan lands. And she developed a passion to safeguard her heritage.

My mother and my grandmother are very strong women with very strong, you know, very strong spiritual foundation. And that is a lesson, you know, passed down to me, is just to – we have to be comfortable and confident in our own skin and grounded in our relationship with the Creator and with the elements around us, and that resiliency um, is something that you know, and humor can't forget the humor!

Cause sometimes, that's all you can do, right, is laugh?

Exactly, Exactly! Is keeping, you know, not taking ourselves too seriously.

Did you ever feel as you grew up, that you were less than because of your native, indigenous background?

Honestly I did and that is because of the history of colonization and the U.S. assimilation as policies that engrained in us as native people, that we were less than, that we should be ashamed of our language and our culture and who we were. And when I was very little, I didn't know the true history, it wasn't taught in public schools. I didn't know about the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, that my mother was sent away and hit with a ruller by the matrens for speaking Gwich'in until I asked her when I was in middle school: "Mom, why didn't you teach us the language?" And then she told me that story and it was such an eye-opener.

She was told you must be a Westerner, you must be –

Yeah!

You must get out of this routine of the tribe.

Yes, exactly. And that what we now know in turn, historical trauma is a real thing. And I feel like a lot of my childhood in Alaska, I was carrying around a sadness that I had no explanation for why am I so sad? And that depression – that only made sense when I learned the true history of what had happened to our people and how we had um, you know, a Western education and the Missionaries, etc. had literally came in and said "This is of the Devil, this is – you're savages. You need to start acting like civilized, um, people," which of course, you know, was the worst thing that could've happened to us as indigenous people. So that's really, um, to be able to um, learn those true histories and to think critically about um, about those histories and how relevant that is today, is really, really imporant.

Well how do you claim, or reclaim your heritage?

By learning the language, keeping it alive, and we have so many people that are doing that right now, really working at revitalizing and maintaining our languages, ther's – there's been some exchanges actually, between my tribe – people, tribal members um, coming here to Hawai'i to learn from the immersion schools and the success of immersion schools here and now they have, my son is actually in a Koyukon immersion program that just started a couple years ago. And how do we really know who we are and where we're going if we don't know where we came from? And keeping that tie – regardless so, you know, we have a tie to our ancestors, and I think keeping that alive

and acknowledging it is a good thing. We honor those that came before us and we really need their wisdom and that experience to figure out what is the way forward. So it's not unique to indigenous people, that pressure to homogenize and become American, I mean I think everyone that came to this country felt that.

But not everyone was colonized.

Most people around the world – indigenous people.

I mean, most of the people came in through Ellis Island, I think

Right

were not – I mean...

But I would say the common colonizer mentality and the worldview of looking at nature as something that is outside of ourselves and “othering” nature. This sense of removal of “Oh, who cares if they're going to drill for oil in the north slope of Alaska, what does it have to – how is it going to affect me? There's hardly any people up there.” That mentality is so damaging and it – I believe it's the reason why we're at this precipice right now. You know, I've worked a lot with my community, um, over the years, um, on protection of the coastal plane, the birthing ground of the porcupine caribou herd. And if you look at the language that has been used in the past, a lot of it has to do with “there's nothing up there, it's barren land,” which of course is the opposite of what's actually happening up there – is that there's all this life happening there and literally calving grounds where up to 40,000 calves are born in a two-week period of time, and my community, that's how we've sustained ourselves, is having this sacred relationship with that caribou herd.

And yet it's a hard sell when a large percentage of America defines wealth as money and also sees the land and animals for dominion.

Exactly, and we can go back to the doctrine of discovery in the 1400's, which really dictated and is still um, valid today, it's related to manifest destiny and this sentiment that you know, we have to go develop these resources. The timber's there for us – the woods are there for us –

Control...

To control. And so that, that mentality has been very damaging for us.

You did very well in Western school and while maintaining your culture. But that must be really hard to do.

It is, I mean I think it's a constant challenge and I don't think you magically get to this place where you're like, "I am decolonized and I'm totally..."

I'm making my own choices

Yeah

whatever I want to do.

Well I mean, it is a constant learning and balancing act and so, there's things that you know, you take and you go, "okay, that's relevant for me and I can utilize that in my life and it is in line with my values." So I think that, as long as you're like, you know – and that's the wonderful thing I think about our indigenous values, is that it's not just about the individual, it's about the entire community and we have an obligation to our communities, wherever we live, um to keep in mind um, the good of everyone and not just ourselves. And I think in American society and culture, there's been so much emphasis on just the individual and um, and again, that's part of the predicament we're in right now.

And that's binary, right, those two things don't go together. Yeah, it's so hard to balance when one excludes the other.

It is, it is. And um, which is why I really am excited about any opportunity that we have to share our values about the world and to live those values, um, is really necessary right now, to tell these stories that include a sense of hope for the future.

Princess Johnson's values, stories and concerns about the future have all come together in her role as Creative Producer for *Molly of Denali*. She says this national PBS kids' show is an opportunity to change stereotypes rooted in the past.

It's been such a blessing to be involved with the production of *Molly of Denali*, you know because of being able to incorporate our Alaska native values. Because we get to inform, for really the – for me, on a big scale – the first time that we're saying: "Well, this is what we'd like to do," you know, "This is who we are and this is how we appear to the world." Not this stereotypical, um, maybe negative stereotype that everyone is used to, but this beautiful, joyous, curious, um, little girl who is part of a community that loves and embraces her, and gently steers her in the right direction when she goes off course. So it's been amazing and – to be a part of that.

And Molly is clearly navigating both worlds. She's checking out online, she's doing maps and she's talking with her indigenous elders, and I mean, she's just making use of resources available to her in the modern world.

Exactly. So I think showing ourselves in that modern context when people want to relegate us to the past, or they have their notions of who we are, is really important because we are breaking down then, those old stereotypes of who we are as a people. And we are resilient and dynamic, and we're absolutely you know, navigating all of those worlds.

[SINGING]

A lee ya o'hee a hey heeya
Eh hoo e hey e hey hey
A lee ya o'hee a hey heeya
Eh hoo e hey e hey hey
Lelghele hodee
Eh hoo e hey e hey hey
Seyeegg-ah sodelts'eeyh
Seyeegg-ah sodelts'eeyh
Lelghele (La hey la) hodee
Lelghele (La hey la) est'aanh
Eh hoo e hee e hee hey
A lee ya o'hee a hey heeya
Eh hoo e hey e hey hey

When Molly of Denali was created, it could've gone in a lot of different ways. How did you decide what her character would be like and also, did you decide at all to touch on, I know it's a children's show but, touch on painful and sensitive issues?

So really that is – was a collective um, decision, what Molly was going to look like – what, with the Alaska native advisors on our entire production team and really that is the beautiful thing about the project, is when you have all of those different voices, even though sometimes it seems like a lot of different you know, voices at the table, you get a end result that just resonates so much more. So really, um, the more people involved, the better. I come from a community organizing background and when we collectively come to the table and we value everybody's input and not one person's voice is better than the other, then I think we get that, that like, better end result that feels authentic to everybody.

Were you liery when you were dealing with the PBS people, the WGBH producers?

I was a little trepidatious at the very beginning but what I learned was that the people at WGBH and PBS were very – they were good at listening and hearing what we had to bring to the table as Alaska native people and what we wanted to see –

And they valued it.

They valued it and they acted on it. So as soon as we came and said: "We want native people involved, we really want – you know, we really want people involved at every level of production," then you know, WGBH and PBS said: "Okay, let's – how are we going to make this happen?" And it was really a matter of them – the producing part of it and how do we do this, how does it look like on the ground? And so in that way, my trepidation kind of went away and we were able to build trust, but you know, you have to be able to build that trust when you're working in a fast paced, dynamic production.

I'm just wondering how you were prepared to jump into *Molly of Denali*, what was your training, did you know this is what you'd be doing one day?

I didn't know that I would be in animation but I've been very fortunate in the sense that I always knew some – inherently, that I was a storyteller and that I was drawn to the performing arts. So you know, I have a background in acting and theatre, and had done some independent films, I wrote, directed and produced a short film and had been exposed to – you know, I've lived in Los Angeles and had been fortunate enough to be a fellow through the Sundance Film Institute, so I went through their writer/director/producers' labs, so it's something that I had been working towards, although somewhat circuitously, because of course I left LA and came back home to work more in my own community –

And when you went to college, you majored in International Relations.

I did, yeah. At that point, it wasn't until I got done with my undergrad that I really decided to go in the direction more of, of film and theatre, and storytelling. Um, so – and this is something you know, a really awesome, I think, life lesson is just to trust where you're at and you do have to be ready when the opportunity comes. And I had given a lot of thought and steeped myself in that, in that education, I mean, I didn't even know I was going to get my masters in education, but absolutely relevant to the work that I'm doing right now.

Absolutely! Curriculum-based.

Yeah! I mean, I really wish I had a show like this growing up, it would've meant so much to me to see our children um, celebrating and feeling proud of who we are. My own sons who are four and nine, they're kind of – one of them is more on the shy side and I bring them to, you know, traditional gatherings where there's drumming and singing, they've always been kind of shy about it, but when we had our premiere for the show, they got up on stage with me and they were dancing so hard and they were so proud, and to see that, to know that I was not proud at their age, because at that time there wasn't a cele – there wasn't that big celebration – it just is um, it's amazing, I just don't

even have words for how good that makes my spirit feel. We should all feel good about who we are and celebrate our rich heritage where, wherever that comes from.

The new national childrens' series *Molly of Denali* airs every weekday on PBS Hawai'i at 10:00 a.m. and is also featured on our second on-air and online channel PBS Kids 24/7. Mahalo to Princess Daazhrai Johnson of Farebanks, Alaska for visiting our studio in Honolulu and sharing her stories with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox, aloha nui.

Were there certain dreams that were considered revealing, insightful, a tipoff about something?

Yeah all the time. I think that um, I've had some really amazing um, teachers in the dream world and things revealed to me, and I used to be really diligent about writing my dreams down (and) as I've gotten more busy and have children of my own, that doesn't happen so much anymore. But I think there's something to be said, I mean, even daydreaming, finding that time, that quiet time to um, to meditate and to ask a question, and then be open for you know, what those signs are and messages, you know, we talked about the animals bringing those messages and I feel like if you are – keep that humility in your heart cause we don't have the answers to everything, but we need to ask the questions.

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