Alaska Native Culture

Introduction

An important mission of the MOLLY OF DENALI series, set in the fictional rural Alaskan village of Qyah, is to share with children—and grownups—a culturally authentic portrayal of Alaska Native culture and values.

Native American characters have long been absent or misrepresented in the media. They make up 0 to .4 percent of the characters in primetime television and popular movies and less than 1 percent in children's cartoons. When Native American characters are featured, the portrayal has usually been woefully inaccurate and negative. Often, the extensive and varied range of culture, language, and history, which is rich in its own diversity, is collapsed into a single identity: generic "Indians," clothed in buckskin, with feathers in their hair. Other familiar misconceptions include:

- Columbus "discovered" America; there was no one in America before Europeans "settled" here
- Native Americans lived here in the past and aren't part of contemporary American life.
- All Native Americans speak the same language or use sign language to communicate.
- Native Americans were either noble warriors or savages who needed to be "civilized."
- All Native Americans lived in teepees, killed buffalo, and dressed the same.
- All tribes in Alaska are called Eskimos and live in igloos.
- Sports mascots using stereotypical representations of Native Americans are harmless.

According to the National Congress of American Indians, there are 573 federally recognized Indian Nations (variously called tribes, nations, bands, pueblos, communities, and native villages). Approximately 229 of these ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse nations are located in Alaska. The other federally recognized tribes are located in 35 other states. Additionally, there are state recognized tribes located throughout the U.S. recognized by their respective state governments.

Source: www.ncai.org/about-tribes

Combating these ideas is important for many reasons, including the fact that research has shown that children need to see themselves reflected in the popular and educational media they consume. The limited and inaccurate portrayal of Native Americans has had harmful effects not only on Native American children, but on children of all cultures, who may only know the stereotypes commonly found in books, comic books, movies, television shows, and other media.

Alaska Natives and MOLLY OF DENALI

MOLLY OF DENALI is the first nationally distributed children's series to feature a Native American as a lead character. Created by WGBH in conjunction with an Alaska Native creative producer, an Alaska Native advisory goup, and a Native American cast, the series incorporates Alaska Native cultures and values in its characters and storylines. The human connection with and respect for the land and its creatures is a consistent theme throughout the series. Community members engage in traditional arts and crafts as well as time-honored hunting and fishing methods. Molly's world also includes the internet, cell phones, and other everyday conveniences of modern life.

Molly Mabray and her family are Athabascan. Molly's mother, Layla, is a pilot and her father, Walter, is a wilderness guide. They run the Denali Trading Post, a store/transit/information hub in Qyah (pronounced KI-yah, the word *Qyah* means "village" in the Dena'ina Athabascan language). Native Americans have lived in Alaska for hundreds of years. There are 11 Athabascan groups with distinct cultures and languages (including 22 dialects): Gwich'in, Koyukon, Ahtna, Dena'ina, Lower Tanana, Han, Deg Hit'an, Tanacross, Upper Tanana, Holikachuk, and Kolchan. Molly and her family are Gwin'in/Koyukon/Dena'ina Athabascan.

A variety of Indigenous and other diverse cultures are represented in MOLLY OF DENALI. Molly's best friend Tooey is Yup'ik/Koyukon/Japanese. Mr. Patak, the woodworker, is Inupiaq. Molly's friend Trini and her father, Daniel, the local librarian, are African Americans from Texas who have recently moved to Alaska. Nina, an environmental journalist, and Connie, the local mechanic, are European American. In addition, people from all over the world—tourists, journalists, scientists—visit Denali. The Alaskan setting also offers the opportunity to learn about diverse plants and animal life and interesting land features, including forests, mountains, volcanoes, and lakes.

Part of telling the Native American story, then and now, is grappling with the difficult history that Indigenous peoples have experienced in America. These and other complex issues are incorporated into the MOLLY OF DENALI stories and live-action segments in age-appropriate ways and with great respect and sensitivity. By creating stories and characters that *all* children can relate to, while celebrating Molly's heritage and acknowledging the struggles of and injustices against her people, MOLLY OF DENALI offers a unique perspective. It also gives children of every background opportunities to recognize and learn about their own family's history and heritage.

Alaska Native Culture and Values

MOLLY OF DENALI offers not only cultural authenticity, but also insights into Alaska Native values. Grounded in the principles of respect, responsibility, kindness, empathy, generosity, and self-awareness, these values often align with social–emotional skills and the ideas of civic responsibility. Of course, the values expressed in the series are not necessarily those found in every Native American culture. Yet they will likely resonate with other Native American peoples and a broad range of diverse cultures, traditions, and customs.

As you use the series in the classroom, you may want to post the list (below) of Alaska Native values as a useful set of guidelines that you can use or add to your existing classroom rules. As you discuss the Alaska Native values, explore what they have in common with the various cultures of your students. You may also want to help children identify and celebrate the values that are unique and special to their particular region, ethnicity, language, and history.

Alaska Native Values

- **Showing Respect to Others** – Each Person Has a Special Gift
- **Sharing What You Have** – Giving Makes You Richer
- **Knowing Who You Are** – You Are an Extension of Your Family
- **Accepting What Life Brings** – You Cannot Control Many Things
- **Having Patience** – Some Things Cannot Be Rushed
- **Living Carefully** – Your Actions Have Consequences
- **Taking Care of Others** – You Cannot Live Without Them
- **Honoring Your Elders** – They Show You the Way in Life
- **Seeing Connections** – All Things Are Related

Source: Adapted from Alaska Native Values for Curriculum, Alaska Native Knowledge Network, https://www.uaf.edu/ankn

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