



“Grandpa’s Drum” Family Viewing Guide

Introduction

Set in the fictional village of Qyah, Alaska, and featuring 10-year-old Molly Mabray, her family, friends, and community, the PBS KIDS series MOLLY OF DENALI offers an authentic look at Alaska Native contemporary life, as well as the values and culture of the people who have lived in Alaska for thousands of years. In addition to loving basketball, birds, singing—and her dog Suki—Molly celebrates being Gwich’in/Koyukon/Dena’ina Athabascan by honoring her family’s heritage and traditions.



“Grandpa’s Drum” and “The Making of Grandpa’s Drum”

Part of telling the Alaska Native story, then and now, is dealing with complex, often challenging issues. These are incorporated into MOLLY OF DENALI in age-appropriate ways, with great respect and sensitivity.

The “Grandpa’s Drum” story, and the short, behind-the-scenes video, “The Making of Grandpa’s Drum,” deal with a particularly painful history that many Native Americans, including Alaska Natives, experienced. Beginning in the 1870s and continuing into the 1980s, boarding schools were created to “educate” Native Americans about Western culture. Originally run by missionaries, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a federal agency, soon took over the schools. Children—some as young as five years old—were removed from their homes and sent away. Families who resisted were threatened with legal punishment.

The schools were deliberately located far from home. It was thought that separating children from their communities would make the assimilation process faster and more complete. Forced to abandon their Native American beliefs, clothing, and customs, and to learn and speak only English, the children were stripped of their Native American identity, culture, and

history. Physical abuse, malnutrition, and other horrific conditions were common. Generations of Alaska Native children were traumatized by their experiences, and the repercussions of this national tragedy are still being felt.

Based on the personal memories of Tanana Athabascan tribal Elder Luke Titus, “Grandpa’s Drum” portrays the loss, confusion, and shame that many Alaska Native children felt. As Grandpa Nat’s friend Shyahtsoo explains in the story, “We were made to feel bad about who we were, of the way our people did things.” Luke Titus, in “The Making of Grandpa’s Drum,” says, “I did not understand why people were so angry with us for speaking our language and singing our songs.” Although many communities are now working to reclaim, revitalize, and preserve their rich and diverse cultures, some languages and traditions were lost forever.

At the time, some considered it “progressive” or charitable to educate Native American children in boarding schools, because they thought it would help young people get jobs. However, others recognized the grievous harm that such schools caused. As Sovereign Bill, the Alaska Native actor who plays Molly, says in “The Making of Grandpa’s Drum,” “It’s a big weight for many Native American communities.” In the story, when Molly and her friend Tooley help find Grandpa’s drum—which he had given away when he wasn’t allowed to sing his own songs—he sheds tears, even as he is filled with joy to discover his voice again.

Talking with Children

Children may relate to “Grandpa’s Drum” on a variety of levels. Many will understand the meaning of the show and will particularly enjoy the satisfying ending. Some may be all too familiar with experiences of loss, trauma, and hardship. Provide as much background as is appropriate for you and your child. (On your own or with your child, you may want to watch “The Making of Grandpa’s Drum,” which provides helpful insights and information.)

Children may be curious about why Grandpa Nat was sent away to school and why his traditions and way of life were forbidden. Explain that Alaska Native people, like other groups considered “different,” were not always treated justly. Some Alaska Native children were sent to school far away from their families and were not allowed to speak their own language or wear their own clothes.



After watching “Grandpa’s Drum,” provide opportunities for children to ask questions and to talk about their ideas and feelings. You may want to help get the conversation started with questions such as:

- Why do you think Molly decided to find Grandpa Nat’s drum?
- How did Molly and Tooeey use the clues in the photograph?
- How do you think Grandpa Nat felt when he was sent away to boarding school as a child? Why did he give away his drum?
- Why do you think Shyahtsoo’s doll was taken away? What was it replaced with? What kind of doll is Shyahtsoo’s granddaughter shown playing with today? What do you think that means?
- What happened when Molly and Tooeey brought back Grandpa’s drum?

Talk about your own family’s heritage and history. Are there elements that are similar to Grandpa Nat’s story? Help children recognize and celebrate their own culture while appreciating the experiences of others.

Find Out More

Native American history is rich and varied, reflecting the strength and resiliency of its people. Yet Native Americans have been largely absent or misrepresented in the media as well as in the classroom. Trusted sources that tell the history of Native peoples, as well as explore contemporary issues, include those below. Explore them on your own or with your child to learn more:

- Discover whose tribal lands you live on. Find information from the [National Congress of American Indians](#) or [Native Land Digital](#).
- Find relevant toolkits and information regarding the visibility of Native Americans on the [IllumiNative](#) website.
- Learn about Alaska Natives by visiting the [Alaska Native Knowledge Network](#).
- Delve deeper by listening to the NPR story “[American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many](#)” or reading “[A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People](#).”
- Search PBS LearningMedia for related resources, such as [Montana Mosaic: Experience of Indian Boarding Schools](#), [Activity Starter | Native American Boarding Schools](#), or [Impacts of Cultural Diffusion | Wild Nevada](#).



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