



As a Saturday morning cartoon baby, Jennifer Keitt saw little diversity when it came to children's programming.

Bugs Bunny, Road Runner and The Flintstones did little to reflect her world. That changed when she was 5. It was 1969 and Sesame Street had just debuted.

Paving the way toward diversity

BY
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"I remember when *Sesame Street* came on," recalls Keitt of Atlanta. "It was like, Wow! I still remember Susan and others from those early shows. It made a great impact on me."

Jennings Bryant, director of The Institute for Communication Research at the University of Alabama, worked on the formation of research that helped guide *Sesame Street's* development. "One of the missions of the show's co-founder, Joan Ganz Cooney, was to use television as an agent for social change. From the very beginning, *Sesame Street* was designed to serve minorities, to help children who weren't arriving at school as prepared as others."

To reach their target audience, diversity was a key element of the show. "From the get-go, as far as I was concerned, that was one of the strong missions of the program. That was reinforced with hiring at all levels, whether talent on the program, researchers or writers," says Bryant. "It wasn't just window dressing on the set. It was a major mission they undertook from the beginning."

As the show's creators and producers worked to make *Sesame Street* a success, they were paving the way toward diversity. "It was the only thing on television at that time that had a diverse cast of adults and children, so they certainly achieved their goals," says Tina Pieraccini, professor of communication studies at State University of New York, Oswego. "They communicated to children of all colors that anybody can be anything they want. They also had roles for women that had not been seen before and later for disabled individuals."

DIVERSITY MATTERS

Studies have shown that what children see on television can affect their cultural attitudes. According to the social learning theory, children learn about themselves and the world around them by observing others. Television can play either positive or negative roles in this learning process.

"Children need to be given an opportunity to understand that everyone isn't the same. That people are different and they should respect differences in others," says Robert L. Myers, professor of psychology at Widener University in Pennsylvania. "I think *Sesame Street* has done a wonderful job in relating this."

In a 1998 poll conducted by Children Now, a California-based research and action organization, children of all races agreed that it is important to see people of their own race on television. "Eighty-four percent of the children said it signifies that people of their race are important," says McCrae Parker, senior associate. "Eighty-one percent felt that seeing their race depicted on television made them feel included in society. Seventy-eight percent thought television had the ability to provide positive role models."

In general, minorities have been underrepresented on television and in many cases misrepresented in terms of stereotyping. "There was

such a lack of minority characters in children's programs 20 years ago that, in fact, when minority children watched television there was little they could identify with, with the exception of programs like *Sesame Street*," says Pieraccini.

"If a child has a damaged self-image, a lack of diversity can further damage it," adds Myers. This impact may be even stronger for Latino, Native American and Asian children who rarely see people on television with whom they can identify.

"Subtly it sends the message that something is wrong, simply by omission," says Pieraccini. "If you couple that omission with a stereotypical image, that message becomes more blatant."

SESAME STREET'S MARIA

Sonia Manzano has been "Maria" to *Sesame Street* viewers for 30 years. "Growing up, there was never anyone on television who looked like me, or talked like me, or lived in the kind of neighborhood I lived in," she says.

Although it wasn't something Manzano thought of consciously, she says the lack of diversity affected her thoughts about a career. "If you didn't see Hispanic lawyers, teachers or actresses, you would have a hard time thinking you could be the first one."

Sesame Street caught her eye while she was a student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania. If she passed through the student center when *Sesame Street* was on, she found it difficult to walk away. "I remember being so surprised to see two African Americans on a kids show, and quite surprised that they were speaking to me from an inner city stoop, an environment that was familiar to me.

"Plus, it was so weird to have Burt Lancaster reciting the alphabet," adds Manzano.

She was appearing on Broadway in *Godspell* when an agent set up an audition for her with *Sesame Street*. "I came to the very offices I'm sitting

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**JENNINGS
BRYANT**
DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE FOR
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA



DID YOU KNOW?

Sesame Street first debuted on November 10, 1969.

The first episode was sponsored by the letters W, S and E.

"Muppet" is a combination of the words "monster" and "puppet."

Big Bird has 4,000 dyed-yellow turkey feathers.

COURTESY OF SESAME STREET WORKSHOP

in right now and auditioned for and got the part. I never wanted to go anywhere else," she says.

After arriving on the set, the Hispanic actress began to understand the show's mission of mainstreaming inner city kids by making them feel valuable and necessary. "I kept asking the producer what Maria should be like. Should she be like this, or like that?" recalls Manzano. "She's exactly like you, they said. She talks exactly like you, she walks exactly like you, she thinks exactly like you. So I realized they wanted a real person for the show that kids could relate to."

"People like Gordon, Miles, Luis and Maria made very important contributions just by being themselves," says Bryant. "They were clearly minority, while at the same time were strongly engaging personalities that were liked by everyone."

That, says Manzano, is one reason *Sesame Street* has been so successful. "Where *Sesame Street's* community is fabricated, the fact that the people are real and interesting helps you buy it. If characters don't have depth, are shallow, you won't."

LEADING THE WAY

Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture at Syracuse University, places *Sesame Street* in the top 10 most influential television programs of all time. "I think *Sesame Street* absolutely revolutionized children's television," he says. "The very fact that *Sesame Street* took

place in this neighborhood and had this integrated cast of both humans and muppets was really something completely different."

Other shows began to follow its lead. Children's Television Workshop built on its success with *Sesame Street* by introducing *The Electric Company* in 1971. Bill Cosby brought *Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids* to commercial television in 1972.

Thirty-three years after *Sesame Street* went on the air, public and commercial programming now offers a colorful mix of characters.

"One of the best shows from a diversity perspective is *Gullah, Gullah Island*," adds Bryant. "*Gullah, Gullah Island* extended diversity programming by introducing the first minority family to children's television. Diverse guests were brought into their home. That was an important milestone."

Thompson thinks current shows continue to make progress when it comes to diversity. "It's a pretty good line-up," he says, as he names some of the popular ones today. "There's *Garcia*, *Dora*, *Jackie Chan's Adventures*. *Little Bill* on Nick, *Sagwa the Chinese Cat*, *Static Shock* on the WB network and *Zoom* on PBS, not to mention *Sesame Street*. It's not just African Americans but people of all color."

BEHIND THE SCENES

Sesame Street's founders did not leave anything to chance when they began creating the show. "Every episode of *Sesame Street*, from the

very beginning, had a hard-nosed curriculum, much like a lesson plan, which had to be turned into an interesting television program," says Bryant, an original fan of Big Bird, Snuffleupagus, Oscar, Ernie and Bert. "We had to be sure that the translation didn't get lost in the process, that the educational messages were reaching the target audiences."

Producers brought in educators as consultants and insisted on good working relationships. "The fact that you were working with top-flight educators and top-flight researchers made the program work exceptionally well," says Bryant. "And the program's impact was thoroughly evaluated and refined."

Sesame Street continues to be the most thoroughly researched and tested television show ever produced, and has received the most Emmy's in television history.

It's content often begins with writers and producers who come up with some of the initial ideas for the show, says Manzano. "We might go to an Indian reservation and speak to their leaders to see what their needs are and what their kids need to know. Then we come up with clear mandates, like this is what we're going to talk about. We'll pick three things, then the writers will have to make it funny."

The show also has been adept at changing with the times. "*Sesame Street* has always reflected what's going on in society," says Manzano. "In the late 1960s, it was very

James Earl Jones was the first celebrity to appear. Other celebrity guests have included Celine Dion.

Sesame Street has received the most Emmys in television history.

The children who appear on Sesame Street are chosen from day care centers and schools in metropolitan New York.

The program is viewed weekly by more than half of all preschoolers in the United States.

There are at least 10 foreign-language versions of Sesame Street.

Sources: Sesame Workshop, Children's Television Workshop, Muppetcentral.com and LearningResources.com

involved in the Civil Rights movement, Head Start program, activism and grass roots politics. In the '80s I think it reflected the importance of technology, so we taught about computers. We focused on my marriage and having a baby, and on Mr. Hooper's death." United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan appeared on the show this year to help teach children how to resolve conflict. Perfect timing in a society troubled by terrorism.

INTERNATIONAL APPEAL

Sesame Street's ability to touch children has not been limited to those living in the United States. Over the years, the program has been co-produced in about 100 other countries, says Bryant. "One of the lessons learned was that you couldn't be a strict exporter, you had to be a collaborator," he says of *Sesame Street's* efforts in the international arena. "Local values were accommodated and different characters and music were used to get the educational lessons across."

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SONIA
MANZANO
SESAME STREET'S MARIA

One of the show's international endeavors brought criticism this year when plans were announced to introduce an HIV-infected muppet on the South African version of the show, *Takalani Sesame*. "That's a perfect example of *Sesame Street* attempting to keep contemporary with what children are going through," says Thompson. "There is an alarming percentage of HIV positive people in South Africa. Any kid would have some experience of knowing an HIV positive person."

Although plans are not under way to bring the new cast member to the United States, Gary Knell, president and CEO of Sesame Workshop, told *Today* show viewers in September that the new muppet, an orphaned 5-year-old girl, is a way to address the specific needs of that country, where one in nine people are infected with HIV and millions of children have been orphaned by the disease. This customized approach is carried out in other countries as well, to meet the unique needs of their children.

PROGRESS STILL NEEDED

While *Sesame Street* has been successful in revolutionizing children's television with its diverse cast and colorful teaching style, there is still room for improvement. "I think television is still very much a wasteland when it comes to diversity," says Myers. "Diversity is among cartoon characters and puppets, but there is very little on television where you see real people in diverse situations."

With four children ranging in age from 7 to 14, Keitt hopes the diversity she now sees in children's programming will make its way to primetime and to other programs geared toward older children.

"After Bill Cosby left us hanging in the air, my kids don't see African American families that, in my opinion, look like ours," says Keitt, who hosts syndicated radio show *Today's Black Woman*. "They're only portraying African American families in comedic roles. Always funny, always ha ha. Our family is normal. We're not funny. We're not crazy and silly."

"We've gone from no adequate representation on television programming to television programming that is slanted, bias and choosing to look at our lives from one microcosm."

Keitt's concern is warranted. According to Nielsen Media Research, 2000, children are watching television during prime time more than at any other time of the day, with 10 million children watching from 8 to 9 p.m. Yet prime time television remains primarily white, with people of color appearing more often in secondary or guest roles.

"It's our feeling and recommendation to the networks that children deserve to see a diverse world in television," says Parker of Children Now. "It's important that they see positive role models that are demonstrating to them the potential they have, regardless of their race, class or gender." ■