

Children's TV show 'Look, Listen and Learn,' created by a Seattleite for people of color, wins awards | The Seattle Times

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1 of 2 | "Look, Listen and Learn" is an early-learning television show featuring creator and producer Val Thomas-Matson as Auntie Lena and her animal... (Kayla Fisher) More

Val Thomas-Matson always wanted to work in children's television. But the Western Washington University broadcast communications graduate's first task interning at KOMO was stuffing envelopes with letters explaining the cancellation of beloved local children's show "Boomerang." It would take nearly 30 years before a Best Starts for Kids grant gave her the opportunity to create her own local children's TV program.

"Look, Listen and Learn" is an early-learning television show grounded in child-development research. Created by producer Thomas-Matson for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) audiences, the show features a diverse cast in local settings. It presents lessons for kindergarten-readiness and addresses timely, real-world issues like the Black Lives Matter movement. The first season of "Look, Listen and Learn" recently won three Tellys, awards honoring excellence in video and television across all screens from among 12,000 entries from all 50 states and five continents.

Thomas-Matson worked in broadcasting for many years before moving into public health. But even working in drug and alcohol prevention, she dreamed of a BIPOC-centered

her animal friend, Possum, debuted in Thistle Theatre's stage show "Auntie Lena's African Stories." Finally, in 2018, a Best Starts for Kids Innovation Grant enabled Thomas-Matson to begin television production of "Look, Listen and Learn."

"Reading is fundamental for us," said Thomas-Matson of the program. A picture book created by an artist of color anchors each episode. Its social-emotional theme is woven through the episode's reading, cooking and art segments, linked by conversations between Auntie Lena and Possum. Every script is evaluated for educational value against the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills list. After the credits, Auntie Lena presents a parenting tip.

The pandemic provided a surprising opportunity for the show. While developing safety protocols that would allow them to film the planned second season, the "Look, Listen and Learn" team struck on the idea of mini-episodes. In these, Auntie Lena joins Possum on Zoom to talk about timely, complicated topics like the Black Lives Matter protests and COVID-19 safety.

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got really mad. I thought, 'Why the heck can't a little Black girl from Seattle, Washington, create a show about her town?' I wanted little Black girls and other little girls from here to see themselves represented."

But there is more than hometown pride behind the focus on location. Many places feel off-limits or unwelcoming to families of color, an effect of institutionalized racism that research has shown harms children's development. "Look, Listen & Learn" is presenting local cultural and learning resources that are welcoming to families of color.

"I wanted to showcase for families some of the places where it is safe to explore, to look, listen and learn freely," said Thomas-Matson.

“It’s for everybody. All of our families need to normalize seeing BIPOC people being the best selves they can be. We are celebrating BIPOC children and families in concert with white families,” Thomas-Matson said.

“Look, Listen and Learn” won Telly Gold Awards for

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