



# A Story Worth CELEBRATING

**Sesame Street  
Co-Creators Joan  
Ganz Cooney and  
Lloyd Morrisett  
Receive the Press  
Club's Distinguished  
Storyteller Award**

BY ALEX BEN BLOCK

**F**ORTY-EIGHT YEARS ago *Sesame Street* changed children's television forever by presenting the first program for preschoolers that integrated education and entertainment with a culturally diverse cast, innovative puppetry and animation. Today it is a beloved institution broadcast on HBO, on more than 300 public TV stations and through co-productions in about 120 countries.

It has come a long way from its birth in the boiling cauldron of social change in the late 1960s when Carnegie Foundation Vice President Lloyd Morrisett asked public TV producer Joan Ganz Cooney during a 1966 dinner party in her New York City apartment if she thought that television could be used to teach young children?

Cooney said she didn't know the answer, but it



Left, Joan Ganz Cooney with Muppet friends at the seventh annual Sesame Workshop Gala in 2009.

Above, Cooney visits the set in 1969.

Above right, the cast from an early *Sesame Street*.

started a discussion and sent her on a mission that would change her life, American television and ultimately the lives of hundreds of millions of children and their parents around the world.

For their achievements, the Los Angeles Press Club is presenting the inaugural Distinguished Storyteller Award to Cooney and Morrisett at the 2017 National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards.

"*Sesame Street*," said L.A. Press Club President Robert Kovacik, "has educated and entertained generations of children and set a high standard for storytelling well worth celebrating."

*Sesame Street* has evolved with changes in society, and survived political upheaval and the emergence of cable TV and the Internet. Throughout it maintained the core mission, first stated in 1968, to "promote the intellectual and culture growth of preschoolers, particularly disadvantaged preschoolers."

"Simply put," says Jeffrey D. Dunn, now the CEO

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of Sesame Workshop (successor to the Children's Television Workshop), Cooney and Morrisett "transformed children's television."

It wasn't always easy. At first there was stiff resistance to having Cooney head the organization, even though she had spent months researching and writing the proposal which had helped raise the initial \$8 million (about \$67 million in 2017 dollars) from foundations and the U.S. government to fund the first 130 episodes.

"I had a lot of confidence in Joan," recalled Morrisett, "but two other representatives from the Ford



Top, Morrisett and Cooney at one of many board meetings; Cooney with Muppet creator Jim Henson. Right, Cooney views Center Kids.



Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education thought somebody else should do it.”

They were concerned that Cooney had never run a big business, lacked educational credentials beyond a college degree, and had never run a broadcasting company.

“A woman at the Ford Foundation questioned whether the project could be taken seriously with a woman head,” recalled Cooney, “if you can imagine that being a question from a woman.”

At the time, it was rare for a woman to run a multimillion-dollar business, especially a young woman with more ambition than experience.

“I was not an expert in children exactly,” said Cooney, “but by the time this came up, I had done the study, and it was that study the backers were backing.... There were questions raised but there wasn’t anybody else as qualified.”

That was proven from the first broadcast on Nov. 10, 1969, which brought rave reviews from the *New York Times* and every other media outlet, highly favorable audience reaction, and ratings exceeding the most optimistic expectations.

There were detractors. In Mississippi, for in-



stance, the state’s educational office refused to carry the show because it was too culturally diverse for their taste, meaning it had too many African-Americans mixed with Hispanics, and a mix of rich and poor children and adults of all ages.

“We made the show set in an urban set so we got criticism from various quarters,” said Morrisett. “They said it didn’t represent people in Boise, Idaho, for example, but gradually that faded away.”

*Sesame Street* happened because of the huge social change in the ‘60s and the rise of the civil rights movement, and new laws passed along with President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs. For the first time, there was funding for non-commercial TV through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which helped fund *Sesame Street*.

Still, when the Republicans took over under President Nixon, and later under President Reagan, money for public TV and *Sesame Street* began to disappear.

Cooney came to the rescue thanks to a family connection. She had grown up in Phoenix, where her family was friends with the owners of a big department store, Goldwater’s.

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—Lloyd Morrisett

When conservatives were cutting public TV funding, Cooney appealed to “Mr. Conservative,” her neighbor’s son, Sen. Barry Goldwater, who surprisingly became her white knight.

“He did not love public television but he loved education,” recalled Cooney, “so he seemed happy to support a television show that was going to teach children.”



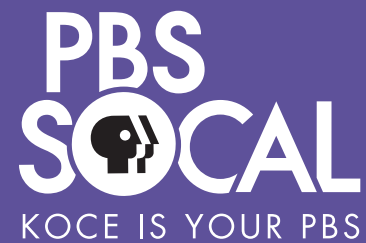
Thank you, Mrs. Cooney and Mr. Morrisett, for your leadership and inspiration— and for helping kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder for 48 years and counting!

—Your Sesame Street Family



CONGRATULATIONS  
SESAME STREET  
ON RECEIVING THE  
DISTINGUISHED  
STORYTELLER AWARD.

Thank you for helping to foster a  
love of learning in the children  
of Southern California.



2017 **STORYTELLER** AWARD



Sesame Street recently introduced an autistic puppet named Julia.

The ultimate financial salvation came from the key hire of Jim Henson, whose puppets known as the Muppets delighted kids. His creations were innovative, clever and amusing, with dialogue that worked for kids and parents on different levels.

When the government money dried up, Sesame was able to turn to licensing the Muppets. First a talking Big Bird and then Tickle Me Elmo became huge sellers, along with albums, live shows and more.

Morrisett's interest in education began when he was growing up in Los Angeles where his father was a professor at UCLA. When he was 11, he met Julian Ganz, who became a lifelong friend and introduced Morrisett to his cousin Joan.

Morrisett attended UCLA and then graduate school at Yale. He taught at Berkeley before moving to New York, where he joined the Carnegie Foundation.

"Lloyd was the one who got the idea (for *Sesame Street*) in the first place," said Cooney.

Early one morning Morrisett had found his preschool age daughter in the living room watching a TV station logo, waiting for cartoons to air. He later told Cooney that showed him how fascinated kids found TV.

"He said, 'Why not give them something good?'" recalled Cooney. "'Why not try education?'"

Out of that *Sesame Street* was born. Over the years Morrisett, Cooney and their talented team dealt with many issues—business and creative—and fought battles laying the groundwork for an enduring institution that their endless research showed really worked.

"We demonstrated," said Morrisett, "that media can be used for social purposes and that it proved to be of greater longevity than was originally expected."

"I once said," Cooney said with a laugh, "that my talent—I didn't play piano or the violin—was to be a good conductor. You get up with your stick and conduct them."

And they played a tune that really did change the world.



DAVID GEFFEN  
FOUNDATION