



The Nonprofit Behind *Sesame Street*



Julia, *Sesame Street*'s first autistic character, playing with her friends.

PHOTO: SESAME WORKSHOP / RYAN DONNELL

It is hard to believe that the characters of *Sesame Street* have been educating and capturing the attention of kids around the world for nearly 50 years. What many people may not know is that, behind the scenes, this television show was created by the nonprofit organization Sesame Workshop – originally called the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) until 2000.

The mission of Sesame Workshop is to educate kids around the world or, more specifically, “help kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder.” The organization's tactics extend beyond television and also include radio, books, and interactive technology that reach children in more than 150 countries. We talked to Sheila Kelly, Sesame Workshop's chief development officer, to learn the intricacies of how they use their global reach and popularity to accomplish the nonprofit's mission.

What's a good example of how Sesame Workshop uses characters to help achieve its mission?

Sheila: Since we debuted Julia, the first *Sesame Street* character with autism, as part of our See Amazing in All Children initiative, we've heard so many touching stories from the autism community and beyond.

Parents say their autistic children have more playdates because of Julia. Teachers report that their students are more inclusive in their play. One mother told us that she used a Julia storybook to explain to her daughter that she, too, has autism. Her daughter responded, “So I'm amazing too, right?”

The power of our characters is almost magical, but we couldn't do what we do without support from people like our Sesame Street Yellow Feather Fund supporters.

Tell us about the Sesame Street Yellow Feather Fund.

Sheila: Although Sesame Workshop has always been a nonprofit, many people still aren't aware of our need for philanthropic support. The Sesame Street Yellow Feather Fund helps us

bridge that gap.

Earlier this year, for example, the Yellow Feather Fund ran the organization's first-ever crowdfunding campaign to mark Autism Awareness Month. With generous support from Sesame fans, savvy Kickstarter backers, and the autism community, we surpassed our original goal and funded the creation of a storybook that will show Julia helping a friend who is being bullied. That new storybook will be ready for kids and families in Spring 2019.

What other successful initiatives has Sesame Workshop been behind?

Sheila: At Sesame, we're always looking for places where we're uniquely qualified to make a lasting difference in the lives of children. Sesame Street for Military Families is a perfect example: 13 years ago, at a time when the number of active-duty service personnel was at the highest level in decades, we saw that resources aimed to help the littlest military kids were still scarce. Using

our early learning expertise and beloved *Sesame Street* characters, we've been able to support thousands of military families through difficult transitions like injury, relocation, and even grief.

We applied that same ethos to one of our newest initiatives: bringing critical

early education to children impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis, together with the International Rescue Committee. Wherever kids and families need a dose of learning, laughter, and hope – that's where we are. •

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Big Bird with a military family at West Point.

PHOTO CREDIT: SESAME WORKSHOP / RYAN HEFFERNAN