

**OPEN SESAME:** A new documentary, "Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street," explores how the founders of "Sesame Street" and its crew broke barriers to create educational programming and promote diversity in subtle ways starting in 1969.



Sesame Workshop / Courtesy: Everett Collection

# 'STREET' SMART

By ZACHARY KUSSIN

**A**CCORDING to a new documentary, the revolution will be televised — on a kids' show, no less.

"Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street," in select theaters nationwide on Friday and inspired by a Michael Davis book, explores how a team of "rebels" had the wild idea to educate kids through the democratizing medium of TV — and create a world inspired by the civil rights movement that still resonates nearly 52 years on.

"It was like a ripple effect: pulling people in until they got a dream team of individuals who used the power of television and creativity and really purposeful intention to do something that had never been done

## How a group of rebels and civil rights activists created 'Sesame Street'

before," Ellen Scherer Crafts, who produced the documentary with her husband Trevor Crafts, told *The Post*.

"We still have a show that pushes those boundaries and continues to experiment and try new things, and be very socially relevant," Trevor said.

Children's Television Workshop (now

known as Sesame Workshop), the organization that debuted "Sesame Street" in 1969, was co-founded by Carnegie Foundation psychologist Lloyd Morrisett and television producer Joan Ganz Cooney, now both 91.

At times of greater racial and socioeconomic divisions in the late 1960s, the two

set their focus on disadvantaged children — primarily inner-city black children.

"We found that those children would enter school three months behind, and by the end of first grade, be a year behind — and get further and further behind," says Morrisett in the film, which will be released on video-on-demand platforms on May 7, then on HBO in December. "And I wondered whether there was a possibility that television could be used to help children with school."

Morrisett later approached his friend Cooney — who had produced documentaries with Channel 13 in New York and had supported the civil rights movement — at a dinner party she hosted and asked whether this possibility could be made a reality.

"I knew the answer right away," says Cooney in the film, adding that American

# Prince Philip ponied up to Lady Louise

By LEE BROWN

Prince Philip reportedly left his beloved ponies and carriage to his 17-year-old granddaughter, Lady Louise — after first making sure they played their part at his sendoff.

Queen Elizabeth II's husband had long shared his love of the animals with Louise — the daughter of his youngest son, Prince Edward — and even taught her carriage driving before his death, according to The Sun.

The young royal (inset) became so devoted to the two black ponies — Balmoral Nevis and Notlaw Storm — that she was seen exercising them in Windsor Great Park on the day her grandfather died, the Daily Mail reported.

They went on to play a moving role in their late master's funeral Saturday, pulling his custom-made four-wheel carriage with his driving cap, gloves and blanket.

Philip left the ponies and carriage to Louise, who vowed to continue caring for them and exercising them at Windsor, the reports said.

Lady Louise, who is 14th in line to the throne, became the queen's favorite granddaughter after a lengthy stay at her Scottish retreat, Balmoral, in 2019, The Sun said.

That same year, Philip proudly watched his young study compete at a carriage-driving competition at the Royal Windsor Horse Show.

Philip had also taught carriage driving to Lady Louise's mother, Sophie, Countess of Wessex, after it became his passion when he took it up at age 50 in 1971.

He became such an expert that he represented Great Britain in three European Championships and six World Championships.

Philip said he took it up after a "dodgy" arthritic wrist forced him to stop playing polo, writing about the thrill the new hobby gave him in a 1994 book.

"I am getting old, my reactions are getting slower, and my memory is unreliable, but I have never lost the sheer pleasure of driving a team through the British countryside," he reportedly wrote.

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## Queen's long day of double mourning

Queen Elizabeth II suffered a double heartbreak Saturday, losing a longtime friend on the same day as her husband, Prince Philip's funeral.

Horse expert Sir Michael Oswald, who spent almost 30 years as manager of the Royal Studs, died after a long illness, the Times of London said. He was 86.

Oswald was regularly photographed with the queen, a keen horse-racing fan, and was appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order in last year's New Year Honours. He died just days before his birthday Wednesday — one he shares with the

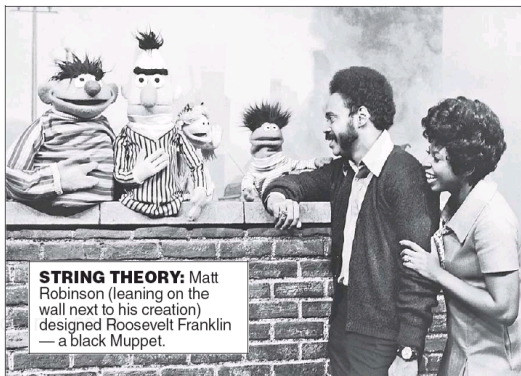
queen, who turns 95.

The racing adviser had also been close to the queen's mother before her death 19 years ago; and his wife, Lady Angela, was one of the late royal's ladies-in-waiting, the Times noted.

"He always said he had the most wonderful job anybody could ever have," his widow told the Racing Post. "For all his working life he was simply doing what he would have done had he been a rich man who didn't have to work."

Besides his wife, Oswald is survived by daughter Katharine and son William.

Lee Brown



**STRING THEORY:** Matt Robinson (leaning on the wall next to his creation) designed Roosevelt Franklin — a black Muppet.

Children's Television Workshop/Courtesy of Getty Images

children had nothing else to watch on television but commercials, to the degree many memorized the song lyrics from a popular Budweiser ad.

"To me it was clear the kids just adored the medium, so why not see if it could educate them?," Cooney says.

**W**HAT followed was a Carnegie Foundation study that found that children between the ages of 3 and 5 watched television 54.1 hours per week — only the hours they slept exceeded that total.

In 1968, the show got an initial budget of \$8 million (\$59.45 million today), the bulk of which came from the federal government, for about 130 hours of television per year.

Cooney tapped Jon Stone, who died in 1997, to be its director, producer and head writer. Not only was he credited for developing the style and vision of "Sesame Street" — and enlisting the help of late Muppets creator Jim Henson, but he also identified with Cooney's values.

"I think what drew Dad in, really had to do with her vision — and I think when she started talking about inner-city children and the amount of time that kids are spending watching bad television with nothing to do because the parents are working, that's what pulled him in," Stone's daughter, Kate Stone Lucas, says in the film.

The television professionals teamed up with educators, a first-of-its-kind partnership, to form the Children's Television Workshop.

But beyond a young James Earl Jones reciting the alphabet and animations teaching children how to count, the show also aimed for diversity in its casting — notably including Matt Robinson, an African-American

death by talking about it," Stone says in an interview for the show's second season. "We simply show it."

Later, in 1971, Sonia Manzano — a Puerto Rican — and the Mexican-American Emilio Delgado joined the cast to play Maria and Luis, respectively.

**T**HERE were, however, divisions over how to approach diversity when it came to the show's puppets.

In 1970, Robinson advocated to have "Sesame Street" introduce Roosevelt Franklin, a purple-colored Muppet whom he created to represent a black child.

"I think Matt created Roosevelt Franklin because he was tired of pretending that everybody blended in together," Dolores says in the film.

— believed the character represented someone "simplicistically black," according to that book.

In the doc, Dolores details how black parents complained that Franklin reinforced attitudes that blacks are more musically inclined and whites are more intellectual. Despite the Muppet's popular appearances, the character vanished after 1975.

"For Matt, Roosevelt Franklin represented truth," she says. "He knew they meant well, but it was the beginning of the end for him. And then he left 'Sesame Street.'"

Of this progressive schism, film producer Ellen Scherer Crafts told The Post: "I think that would be natural for anything that's lasted half a century."

**I**n recent years, the show has once again embraced representation.

"I think what 'Sesame' did, and continues to do well, is be a place where children can come to understand very complicated things in a very safe and loving way," said Ellen. "They set that up from the very beginning."

Last month, for instance, Sesame Workshop — as part of a social-justice initiative — announced that it would teach children "The ABCs of Racial Literacy" with two black Muppets: Wes and his father, Elijah. One conversation shows Elmo asking why Wes' skin is brown.

Last June, "Sesame Street" and CNN held a 60-minute town hall for children and families to discuss racism — aired in direct response to the May 2020 death of George Floyd — to discuss prejudice, empathy and embracing others.

"Sesame Street," in an online-only 2019 segment, even addressed the opioid crisis with a foster-care Muppet who revealed that her mother was battling drug addiction.

"It is continuing to be the experiment of children's television, which is rare," said producer Trevor Crafts. "Everything changes about 'Sesame Street' and that's the amazing part — is that they continue to push the boundaries of what they thought was right, and then they change because the world changed."



**SIGN OF THE TIMES:** Elmo's dad teaches him about protests during a town hall with CNN about racism and how families can act to address it.

actor and writer who played Gordon. "They sold him on what this show could become; something revolutionary," his ex-wife, Dolores Robinson, says in the film of Gordon, who died in 2002 at age 65.

"Equally important, maybe even more important, was the fact that 'Sesame' was a neighborhood where people of all races, kids and adults and monsters live together," says composer, lyricist and writer Christopher Cerf in the documentary.

Stone's vision was to present an integrated cast without making any specific overtures to the viewer.

"We've never beaten that horse to

"He loved the message of 'Sesame Street,' but he wanted children of color to be recognized as children of color because, in real life, those children knew they were different," she says. "They knew they were brown, so why couldn't they be brown? Why couldn't their difference be recognized?"

Robinson wanted Franklin to speak like young black kids, according to the 2020 book "Sunny Days: The Children's Television Revolution That Changed America," using slang such as "Be cool."

Still, critics — including African-American show advisers and staffers