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A common thread among producers is the one “Aha!” moment that altered their way of thinking about diversity. Although many producers have long had the best intentions to create series that reflect their progressive ideals, they were, in practice, perpetuating the same cycles. For some, the moment came from an industry event, a particularly insightful talk, or even just an off-hand comment. What ties them all together is the fact that realization spurred action and consequential change.

Shabnam Rezaei, co-founder and president of Vancouver/New York-based Big Bad Boo Studios, did not grow up pining to create children’s TV. In 2008, she and her husband founded a production studio to create a direct-to-DVD video celebrating the Persian New Year, particularly in response to negative representations of Iranian culture and religion in the wake of September 11, 2001.

“Iranians were being called terrorists and there were just so many misconceptions out there,” she says. The production was a success and it forged the company’s route into children’s entertainment. “At first, I had blinders on,” says Rezaei. “I saw that this was certainly not just an issue for Iranians, but really for all immigrant populations.”

Firmly entrenched in the industry and proud of her nascent company’s approach to diversity, Rezaei went to Kid-screen Summit last year and had an eye-opening moment.

“[Actress and activist] Geena Davis gave a wonderful, data-driven speech,” she says. “They surveyed all of these movies and discovered that only 17% of background characters were female.”

The number, among other facts mentioned in Davis’s keynote, simply blew her away. “I thought to myself, ‘I’m sure I did better than that with my productions,’” Rezaei says. But the truth was that her company’s projects projected the same dismal stats noted by Davis. “The fact is that I had been brainwashed,” she says. “The concept that representations on the screen should be male-dominated had been drilled into my head at an early age. I didn’t even think about it in my own productions. At that point, I knew I had to make a conscious effort to change.”

The culmination of her realization is *16 Hudson*, a 39 x seven-minute animated series in co-production with Canada’s TVO Kids and SRC. Likely to bow in 2018, the series features progressive (as well as

comical) storylines and an inclusive cast of main characters. It also has a diverse crew.

J.J. Johnson, partner at Toronto, Canada-based prodco Sinking Ship Entertainment, also described a similar moment of clarity that was brought on by being confronted by simple numerical facts.

“My eye-opening experience to there being some serious challenges in the industry was when I saw a research report from Prix Jeunesse on gender balance in kids TV,” he says.

Johnson’s company had enjoyed a successful run with a number of productions, and the Canadian producer felt that his series were reflective of his values of inclusivity and equality. “The study really explored the kinds of representations that girls have on TV,” he says. “How they fall into specific and stereotypical categories like ‘best friend,’ ‘girl next door’ or ‘love interest.’ I just didn’t realize that I had naturally fallen into the same rules that everyone obeys and does not question.”

As a result, Johnson started taking a closer look at not only the series themselves, but also the crews that put them together. “In every category, we had a lot of males working,” he says. “It was such an ‘Aha!’ moment. I knew from that point forward that if I was going to tell different stories, I would have to make a conscious effort to do so.”

This sense of self-accountability has been more formalized by The Jim Henson Company. While Henson productions have been lauded since its inception for promoting and embracing diversity and multi-culturalism, CEO Lisa

Henson knew that her company’s reputation only told one side of the story.

“Historically, we have showed more diversity on the screen than behind it,” she admits. “The group of original puppeteers were all white men. They even did all of the female voices!”

Acting upon this realization, the company has recently taken stock and made conscious and overt changes to address the imbalance. Henson has enlisted the help of California-based Stanford Research Institute to objectively evaluate the company’s progress towards creating an environment that fosters diversity in everything it does.

“Getting a third party to look at what we are doing is a valuable and important part of how we are approaching this issue,” says Henson. “We are very invested in making changes.”



New multicultural series *16 Hudson* represents the culmination of Big Bad Boo’s realization that it had to change its approach to depicting diversity

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