



On the set of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," Fred Rogers conveyed in every aspect of his television presence — including his hands and shoes — the calm gentleness that he wanted children to see.

BEAUTIFUL NEIGHBOR

THIS YEAR'S COMMEMORATIONS OF THE
50TH ANNIVERSARY OF "MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD"
NOT ONLY INCLUDE AN ARRAY OF MOVING TRIBUTES TO THE ICONIC
CHILDREN'S TELEVISION SHOW, THEY ALSO REVEAL THE
GENTLE GENIUS OF CREATOR FRED ROGERS. BY CRISTINA ROUVALIS.
PHOTOS FROM LYNN JOHNSON COLLECTION, MAHN CENTER FOR ARCHIVES
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red Rogers — the cardigan-wearing, sneaker-tying hero

to generations of preschoolers — had a way of reassuring kids that someone really understood all the big worries of their little worlds.

And it wasn't just TV shtick. He treated everyone as kindly in person as he did through the television screen.

But when it came to creating more than 900 episodes of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," the ordained Presbyterian minister wasn't laid back.

In the world he created for Daniel Tiger, Henrietta Pussycat, King Friday and millions of kids, everything had to be precise, down to the sheet music shown on screen. If the notes didn't correspond to the song being played, the real-life Mr. Rogers would politely correct the person managing the props. "That doesn't match what we're hearing."

"They're just kids," some might say.

But Mr. Rogers insisted. It didn't matter that the average preschooler would never notice, let alone call him out on the inconsistency. "He was so invested in kids, in putting them first. We had to do it right," said Margy Whitmer, a producer on the show.

At one point, he even decided to go back and edit some of his older episodes. In the early days, Mr. Rogers would

look into the camera and say something along the lines of, "Stand up and let me see how tall you are. My, you really have grown."

A few years later, he grew concerned that he might be misleading kids into thinking he could see them through the TV screen. He asked Hedda Sharapan, his associate producer, to review those episodes and suggest edits. The crew replaced the original bit with new footage where he talked about growing and explained how to measure with a ruler.

"He was a perfectionist as far as what he felt was meaningful for kids," she said.

Fifty years after the first episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" aired in 1968, and 15 years after everyone's favorite neighbor died, Fred Rogers is shining brighter than ever. Out of appreciation for all he did, both those who worked with him and those who once sidled up to the TV to watch him are determined to ensure his message lives on.

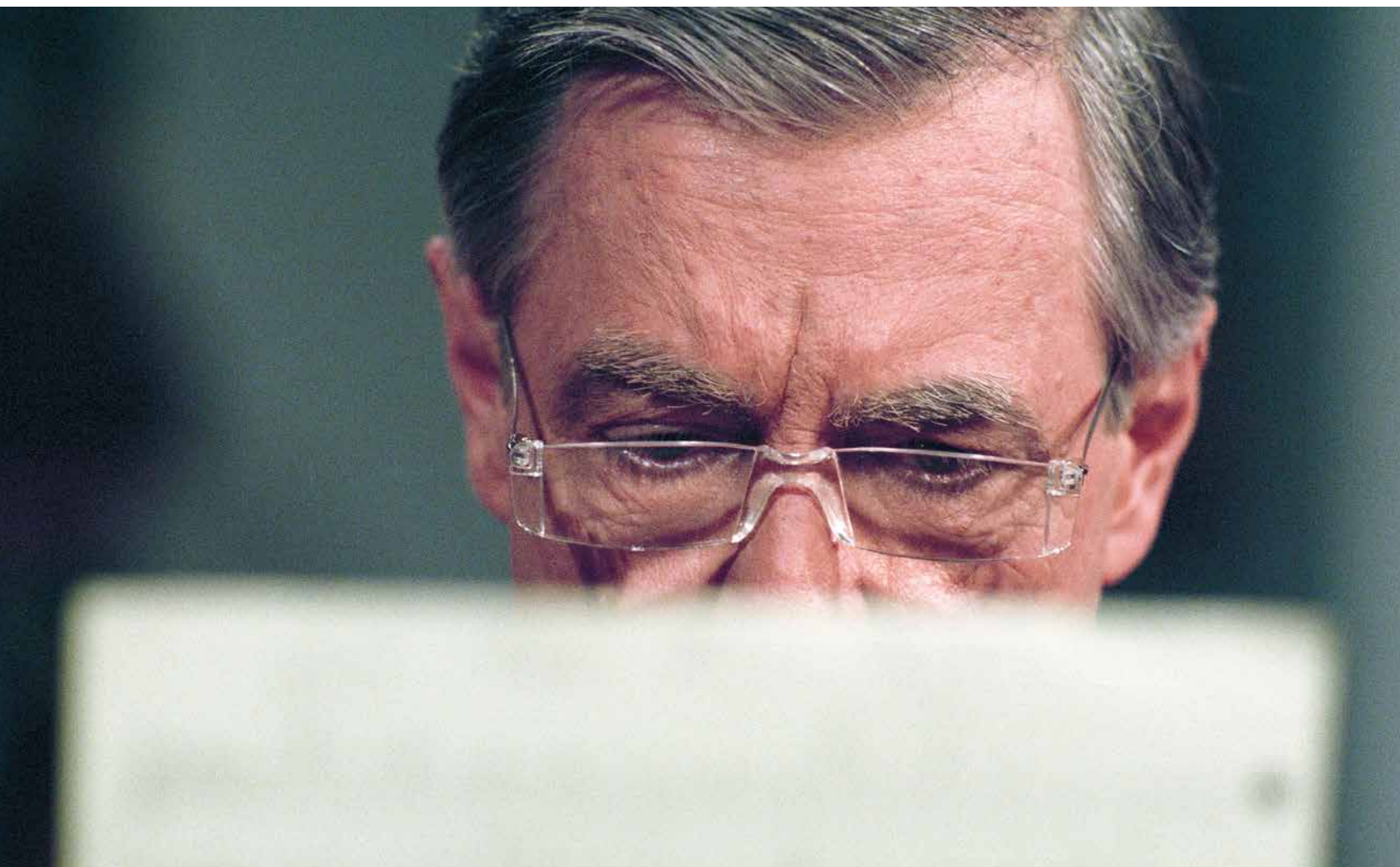
The biggest year of his posthumous career may have been 2018. The documentary "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" has been a critical success and the highest-grossing biographical documentary of all time. A movie with megastar Tom Hanks as Mr. Rogers is scheduled for release in October 2019.

"The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers" by Maxwell King, president and CEO of The Pittsburgh Foundation and former president of The Heinz Endowments, is the first comprehensive biography of the TV icon. A new Mister Rogers' Neighborhood website, www.misterrogers.org/, streams five episodes weekly. There is even a Mister Rogers memorial stamp, featuring him and King Friday XIII.

The Pittsburgh TV host brought something unique to children's programming. Rooted in child psychology, he focused on the social and emotional development of young children, giving them a strong foundation before they ever encountered academic subjects. Though "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" is no longer filmed, Fred Rogers Productions and the Fred Rogers Center have created new ways of spreading the Mister Rogers message.

Gregg Behr, executive director of The Grable Foundation, said that Grable has awarded more than \$3.9 million to Fred Rogers Productions and nearly \$1.1 million to the Fred Rogers Center over the past decade as part of its support of programs critical to a child's successful development.

Fred Rogers, shown opposite page above, operating the Lady Elaine Fairchilde puppet, often joined the "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" puppeteering crew in staging those segments of the show at WQED studios. Below, he is captured reading on the set of the television program.



“Inevitably, as generations pass, our direct experience with Fred Rogers will pass. What remains will be a critical legacy about how we support and care for children and how we put children first,” Mr. Behr said. “Yes, we are honoring the legacy of a person, but more so we are honoring the legacy of great ideas.”

One of a Kind

When Fred Rogers retired in 2001, there was never any question of finding someone to replace him. It wasn't like “Bewitched,” the popular mid-1960s to early-1970s TV show that swapped one Darren, husband of Samantha, a suburban witch, with another actor, and viewers willingly adjusted. Young viewers knew that the Mister Rogers who encouraged them on screen was not a character but a real person.

But the sincere, soft-spoken man whom children knew and loved was busy behind the scenes as the creator, composer, producer, head writer and showrunner of the television program. He not only wrote all the scripts at a punishing pace—65 shows the first year alone—he also performed the songs and handled the puppets. In a show that stressed content over production values, no one would be able to fill his navy-blue sneakers.

“We aren't looking for the next Fred Rogers,” said Paul Siefken, president and CEO of Fred Rogers Productions.

“We're looking for people who can bring the same work ethic, talent and commitment, and let the work speak for itself.”

As his career was winding down, Mr. Rogers mentioned the possibility of an animated spin-off. “Fred always felt that the puppets could live on in animation,” said Bill Isler, former CEO of the Fred Rogers Company, which was renamed Fred Rogers Productions in May.

It's fitting that his successors chose Daniel Tiger to be the first star of this animated future. Daniel Tiger was his first puppet, the one that mirrored him the most, Mr. Isler said.

Despite its quaint image, “Mister Rogers' Neighborhood” tackled difficult issues: divorce, anger, disabilities. He tapped into the experiences of his own childhood in Ligonier. He had a loving family but faced the taunts of bullies who called him “Fat Freddy.”

“He remained close to his childhood in a way that most adults don't,” said his widow, Joanne Rogers. “It was a difficult time for him. He was in his bed, isolated, with every imaginable childhood disease: measles, mumps, scarlet fever.”

By channeling his inner child, Mr. Rogers helped kids make their way through day-to-day struggles. “He helped them connect the dots and negotiate the world,” Ms. Whitmer said. “When you are 3 or 4, everyone else knows more about the world than you do.”

“Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood,” which follows the young son of the original puppet, continues in that tradition of helping kids grow socially and emotionally. Most episodes revolve around a conflict that the child needs to solve. In the first episode in 2012, the younger Daniel Tiger goes to pick up his birthday cake from the bakery, only for it to be smashed on the way home. It's a crushing disappointment, but Daniel's father shows him that the imperfect cake is just as delicious.

“His message was that birthdays often come with disappointment. The buildup is too much,” Mr. Siefken said. “But when something is bad, you can turn it around and find something good.”

The No. 1 children's show on PBS, “Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood” was created by Angela Santomero, the creator of “Blue's Clues” and other children's shows. As a child, she was mesmerized by “Mister Rogers' Neighborhood” and, as an adult, met her hero and visited him on set.

Ms. Santomero and her team do the animation in New York. In Pittsburgh, some of the

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original crew members for “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” then review the script and film live-action sequences that are interspersed throughout the program. In one episode, local children in red sweaters visit the Carnegie Museum of Natural History to learn about dinosaurs.

“It’s a shoutout to the visits Fred used to make to interesting people and places in the ‘neighborhood,’” Ms. Whitmer said.

Fred Rogers Productions has introduced several new math-themed shows. For example, “Peg Plus Cat” is an animated series about a little-girl math whiz and her blue sidekick, Cat. “Odd Squad,” a live-action show aimed at first- through third-graders, stars young “agents” who work together to solve oddball mysteries. The company, which delivers content through streaming and apps, has other shows in the pipeline.

“Sometimes we don’t realize what a treasure we have in Pittsburgh,” said Michelle Figlar, the Endowments’ vice president for Learning. “We produce award-winning, record-breaking shows and media content right in our backyard. It reaches kids of all incomes.”

The foundation is giving \$3 million over three years to Fred Rogers Productions for its Legacy Lives on Campaign, which supports the company’s efforts to extend

its leadership in producing children’s media and to continue sharing Mr. Rogers’ vision and values for generations to come.

Since 1991, the Endowments has provided \$2.3 million to develop The Fred Rogers Center as a hub for programs supporting caregivers and educators of young children. Since 1992, it has awarded \$5.9 million to Fred Rogers Productions for new programs—including “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood” and “Peg Plus Cat.”

“The [recent] grant will help people share Mister Rogers’ vision for generations to come,” Ms. Figlar said. “When you see the name Fred Rogers Productions, it means kids first.”

Extending the Legacy

Nicholas Ma was 6 when he walked onto the set of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” with his famous father, cellist Yo-Yo Ma. It was one thing to watch him through a 10-inch TV screen but quite another to see the TV host towering above him. Overwhelmed, the little boy hung back.

As part of the 1994 special “Fred Rogers’ Heroes: Who’s Helping America’s Children,” Mr. Rogers visited Mesa Elementary School on the Navajo reservation in Shiprock, N.M., to recognize the work of principal Glojean Todacheene and enjoy time with the children.



Fred Rogers and his wife, Joanne, share a laugh together in front of the plaque that dubbed the home in their Nantucket, Mass., neighborhood "The Crooked House."

Mr. Rogers gave him space, allowing Nicholas to come to him in his own time—a rarity on a TV set, where time is money. “It was a very generous thing for him to do,” the now-adult Nicholas Ma recalled.

In the 1990 episode, Nicholas slid the cello bow back and forth as his father held his fingers on the strings. Ten years later, when he returned to the set as a teenager, Nicholas felt more intimidated playing alongside his virtuoso father than talking to his childhood hero on national television.

Thinking back on the time he spent in “the Neighborhood,” Mr. Ma became curious about the man behind the legend. He found the answers he sought in the process of producing “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” The documentary captures both Mr. Rogers’ authentic kindness and the intellectual rigor of his ideas about child development.


Mr. Ma came across many small surprises about the children’s television legend in his research.

“He woke up every morning and read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek. He swam a mile every day. He kept his weight at exactly 143 pounds,” Mr. Ma recounted. “What surprised people the most was how hard it was for him to do what he did. We just assume this guy just had the good fortune to be a genius, but he thought deeply about what he should do in the world.”

After retiring in 2001, Mr. Rogers became melancholy. “I miss my playmates,” he told his wife.

Mr. King, his biographer, also discovered a much more complex character than the avuncular man his viewers saw.

“Everyone says that he was the same on TV as he was in person. That’s true,” Mr. King said. “But when you see him on TV, he seems sweet, kind and simple. He was sweet and kind, but he sure wasn’t simple. He lived his life in a very intentional way. He was always intense about his work. He was always on.”



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Gregg Behr executive director, The Grable Foundation

Following his eight years at the helm of the Endowments, Mr. King fell into the role of Fred’s biographer while serving as the executive director of the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media at Saint Vincent College from 2008 to 2010.

“Why isn’t there a biography of Fred?” King asked.

“Fred never wanted one,” Mrs. Rogers replied.

But he convinced her that it was an important book to write.

Mr. King wrote about the time Fred and Joanne Rogers went out to dinner with colleagues in the 1970s. Just as the server brought the food, the head of a little boy popped up from under the table. He told Mr. Rogers that his dog had died.

True to his television persona, Mr. Rogers joined the child on the floor and explained how sad he was when his dog, Mitzi, died. As his food grew cold, he comforted the little boy.

Mr. King interviewed co-workers and relatives and dug through the Fred Rogers Archive—a treasure trove for scholars and filmmakers.

“We provide the unfiltered legacy to broaden the reach of Fred,” said Junlei Li, co-director of the Fred Rogers Center, which houses the archival materials.

The center also supports people who work with young children. Whenever disaster struck, Mr. Rogers was famous for saying, “Look for the helpers.” The Fred Rogers Center takes that one step further by “helping the helpers,” people like the child care providers, preschool teachers and crossing guards. Through videos, speeches and workshops, the center gives support to people who devote their lives to children.

Ms. Sharapan, a senior fellow at the Fred Rogers Center, travels around the country showing short clips from “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” as educational tools, not for preschoolers, but the adults who work with them. She often highlights one of Mr. Rogers’ favorite moments: the 1981 episode where Jeff Erlenger, a young boy with quadriplegia, demonstrated how his electric wheelchair works. Then, in a bit of TV magic, Jeff and Mr. Rogers sang “It’s You I Like” together. Ms. Sharapan goes on to ask the audience about the message they hear in his words.

“He is talking to the kid at eye level,” some have pointed out, while others have said, “We’re more alike than different.”

At a time of political divide and incivility, Ms. Sharapan said she hears more and more from people who have rediscovered “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” which still airs weekly on some PBS stations, and streams on Amazon and the new website.

“People say their children are mesmerized. His shows are like tapestries, which weave things together in a wonderful way. It’s timeless.” **h**