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November 1983
Issue 75: \$1.95
Foreign \$2.50

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**The
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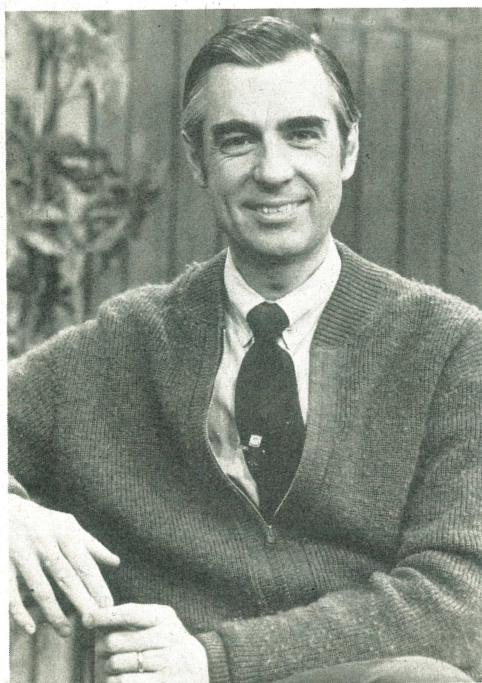
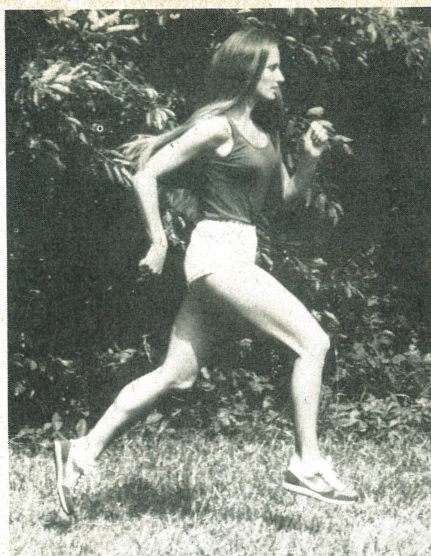
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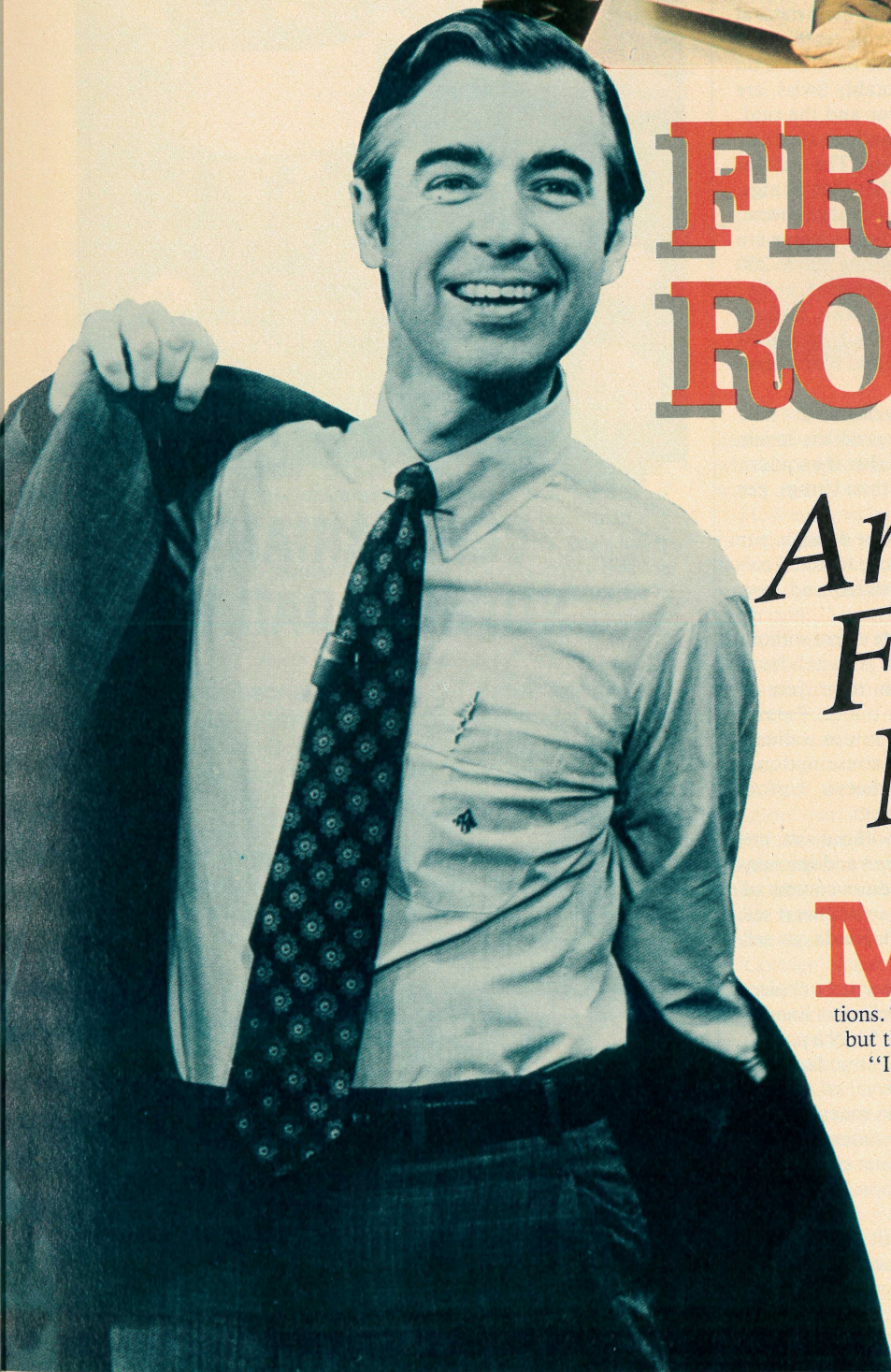
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FRED ROGERS

America's Favorite Neighbor

by Paul Obis

Most people know Fred Rogers as "Mr. Rogers," host of the popular television show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* which is seen nationally on 250 public television stations. The show is geared primarily toward kids ages 2-6, but the audience also has many older viewers.

"I really like watching his show," a 40-year-old woman once confided to me. "Fred Rogers makes me feel good about myself."

The attraction is Fred's loving, easy style and the deep sense of concern he exudes. Songs like "You Are My Friend, You Are Special" are filled with warmth and touch deeply. Others, like "You'll Never Go Down The Drain" are fun but not frivolous.

Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood is a mixture of songs, conversation, how-to, field trips and make-believe. He has a kind presence and relates to the children in an understand-

“It’s hard to eat something you’ve seen walking around. . . When kids first discover the connection between meat and animals, many get very concerned.”

ing way that is more friendly than fatherly. He talks to the kids at their level, without talking down.

Fred Rogers says he is just being himself, when he’s on the show. “I’m an adult, a man, a parent and a friend,” he says of himself. And, though it’s not widely known, he’s also a vegetarian. Rogers hopes that through example, children will realize their own capacities to become caring and interesting adults.

The show originates from Mr. Rogers’ TV home, a comfortable, cozy place where he exchanges his jacket for a sweater (knitted by his mother) and his work shoes for more comfortable footwear. From there, he converses with seven million weekly viewers. After conversation there may be a visit from Mr. McFeely, the local messenger (played by David Newell), or Mr. Rogers may take the kids to visit the home or workplace of a nearby neighbor.

“The most important goal of each show,” says Rogers, “is to strengthen a child’s sense of self-esteem.” While repeatedly stressing the unique value of each human being, Rogers affirms again and again our common humanity. He talks candidly about childhood anxieties, separation from loved ones, the wholeness of our bodies, and the difference between fantasy and reality.

Fred McFeely Rogers was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania (40 miles outside of Pittsburgh) in 1928. He graduated from Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, in 1951 with a B.A. in music. Upon graduation, he joined NBC-TV as assistant producer on *The Voice of Firestone* and the *NBC Television Opera Theater*. Later promoted to network floor director, Rogers supervised, among other programs, *Your Lucky Strike Hit Parade* and *The Kate Smith Hour*.

It was a glamorous and secure job and Fred seemed destined for a long career at NBC, but he left voluntarily in 1953 to join Pittsburgh’s fledgling educational television station, WQED, the country’s first community-supported Public Broadcasting Station.

“People thought I was crazy to leave my job, but it was a chance to do something I really believed in.”

One of his first assignments was to put together a show called *The Children’s Corner*, which he wrote, produced and performed in partnership with fellow Pittsburgher Josie Carey. The two had a weekly production budget of \$30, but human energy and creativity compensated for the lack of money. The show won a prestigious

award one year later, and the series ran for seven years.

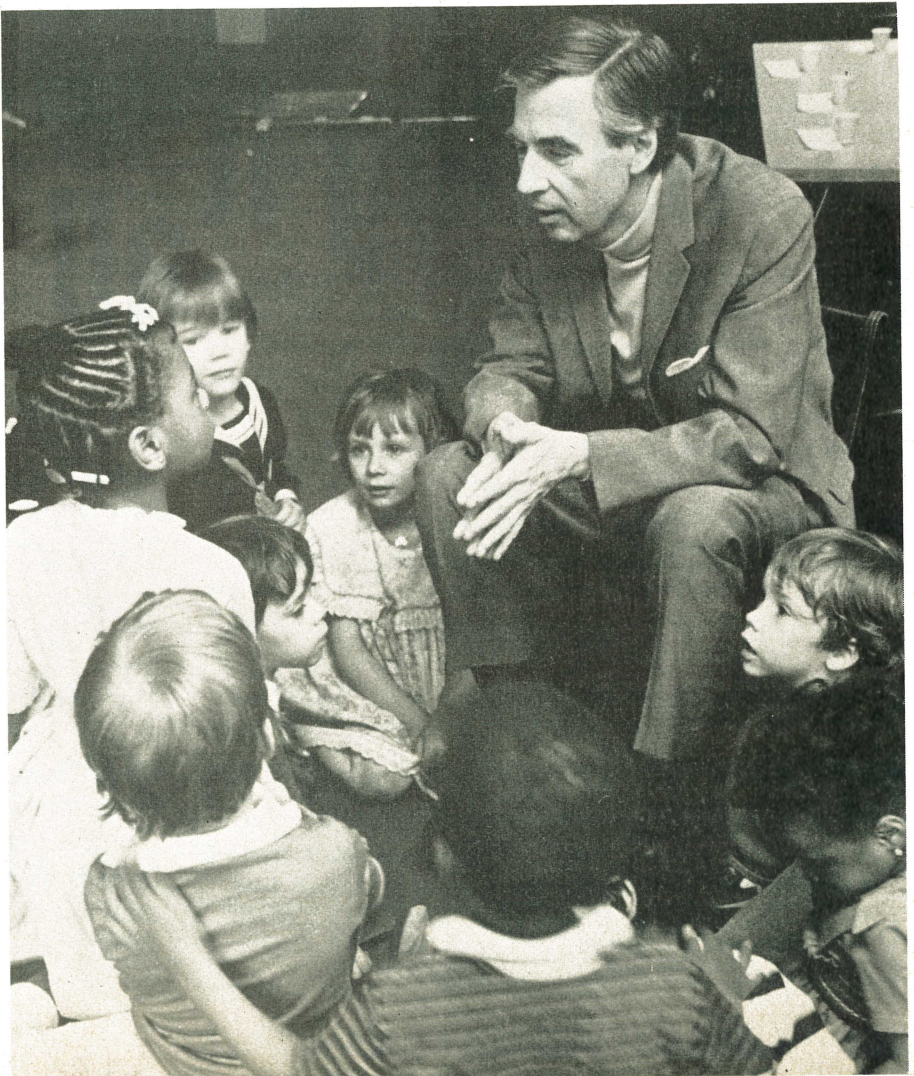
While Fred Rogers was busy creating children’s programming, he also found time for another Creator. In 1955 he enrolled as a part-time student at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. His training there included work with children under the supervision of the nationally respected psychologist Dr. Margaret McFarland. Other teachers at the University of Pittsburgh included Dr. Benjamin Spock and Eric Erickson.

It was difficult attending school between the ages of 27 and 35 while juggling a career and tending to familial responsibilities, but the persistence paid off; Fred Rogers was ordained as a minister in the United Presbyterian Church in 1963. Because of his unusual background, Fred was given a special mission: to continue his ministry to children and families through the mass media.

It surprises most people when they hear that this guru of children’s television is also a minister, because Fred Rogers doesn’t talk about God or Christianity on the show. Rather, his is a sort of ministry by style and example, which is just as well. Privately, Fred Rogers is candid about his ministry. “I want to be a vehicle for God, to spread His message of love and peace,” says Rogers. “The children who watch the show are my congregation and I take my ministry very seriously.”

Shortly after Fred Rogers was ordained he began work on his *Neighborhood* program. The original *Misterogers* began in 1963 as a 15 minute show and was produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; in 1964 it expanded into a half-hour format and was carried by an ABC affiliate in Pittsburgh. The show went national in 1966 when the programs were acquired by the Eastern Educational Network.

The popularity of the program has con-



FRED ROGERS

tinued ever since. Today Fred Rogers is recognized not only as a successful TV personality, but as an authority on children. He has received more than 60 awards and honorary degrees from a wide range of institutions.

He lives with his wife Joanne, a concert pianist, in Pittsburgh; they have two sons, James and John, both of whom are in their early 20s.

"I think it's important for people to sit down with their kids for a family meal at least once a day if that's possible," he told us. "Mealtime shouldn't be a just a time to get filled up, it should be a time for getting together and sharing. . . Eating together is an important part of the human spirit.

"In fact, our earliest perceptions of the world come through our mouths immediately after birth. Our earliest feedings have a great deal to do with who we become in later life."

Fred Rogers' compassionate nature forms at least part of the basis for his vegetarianism, but he's also concerned about maintaining his health.

"I stopped eating meat, fish and fowl about ten years ago," he says. "As I grew older I found I liked it less and less.

"Part of it has to do with the animals—it's hard to eat something you've seen walking around.

"That's something I've noticed in my work with kids. When they first discover the connection between meat and animals,



many children get very concerned about it.

"I also enjoy the health benefits. I weigh about the same now as I did when I was in college."

It's not surprising. Fred Rogers swims half an hour each day, and for a man frequently on the go, his is a very spartan diet. "I guess I just don't need a lot of food,"

he says.

Typically, his breakfast consists of milk and cereal or fresh fruit and toast; he never drinks coffee. Lunch is usually yogurt or cottage cheese with peaches. And dinner is usually tofu and vegetables.

"I love tofu burgers and beets," he notes.

His favorite drink is water with lemon juice. For personal and health reasons, Fred Rogers abstains entirely from alcoholic beverages.

How does he feel about the relationship between diet and behavior in children?

"Many parents have told me that their children behave differently when they eat lots of sugar and other junk foods, and I believe there is probably some truth in that. I haven't studied enough about biology or nutrition, but when you change the chemistry inside a person it's bound to effect their body and the way they behave.

"There are so many other wonderful things to eat besides candy bars and sugary cereals. It would be nice for kids to explore the varieties of unusual fruits, nuts and vegetables." □

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Our thanks to David Newell for his generous assistance in the preparation of this article, and to Jane Beckwith for her help. For information on Mr. Rogers' books, tapes, etc., please write: Family Communications, 4802 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213.