

Teenage Juggler Drops In On 'Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood' "It Was Just Incredible," Said Joann Swaim Of Her Visit.

February 19, 1996 | By Erin Mooney, INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

When Mr. Rogers asked JoAnn Swaim if she would be his neighbor, she said she would, even though she lives more than 200 miles away.

The chance to meet Mr. Rogers, star of PBS' Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, is a dream few children get a chance to fulfill. So when the 16-year-old Coopersburg, Lehigh County, resident was asked to perform on the program, she gladly accepted. After years of traveling through the Land of Make-Believe and singing along with the soft-spoken, cardigan-wearing host, Swaim would finally have the chance to meet a man she knew only through television.

"I joked with everyone that I didn't care about being on the show, I just wanted to meet Mr. Rogers," the prize-winning juggler laughed.

When Mr. McFeely, the Speedy Delivery Man in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, made an appearance at the Lehigh Valley Mall last year, Swaim waited in line for his autograph, then juggled for him, showing him a skill she has honed since third grade.

After writing a letter to the show's producer and sending a tape of her work, the home-schooled high school junior was invited to a November taping of the show in Pittsburgh, which will air locally tomorrow. Combining the taping with a trip to the University of Pittsburgh, the entire Swaim family made the pilgrimage to a kinder, gentler place at WQED-TV studios.

"It was just incredible," Swaim said of her experience. In person, she said, Fred Rogers, 67, is just as relaxed as he is on television. After taping the television show for 30 years, Rogers now tapes just 15 episodes per year.

In her appearance, Swaim was introduced to Rogers as a neighbor and performed a series of ball-juggling tricks she developed herself.

"I only dropped three times. I was quite pleased with it," Swaim said. She said Rogers liked the fact that her act was not flawless, illustrating that though she is good at what she does, she is not infallible.

Swaim began juggling after ordering a juggling video from a book-club catalog eight years ago. Now she invents tricks and competes nationwide.

A member of the International Juggling Association, she has won several awards at national conventions and competes in "juggling" competitions, in which a person juggles while running. At the 1991 IJA convention, she won the 100-meter women's race, the 400-meter race and the mile relay.

Although she has competed in the United States and Canada, Swaim insists the pastime is purely for fun.

"It's just a hobby," she said.

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