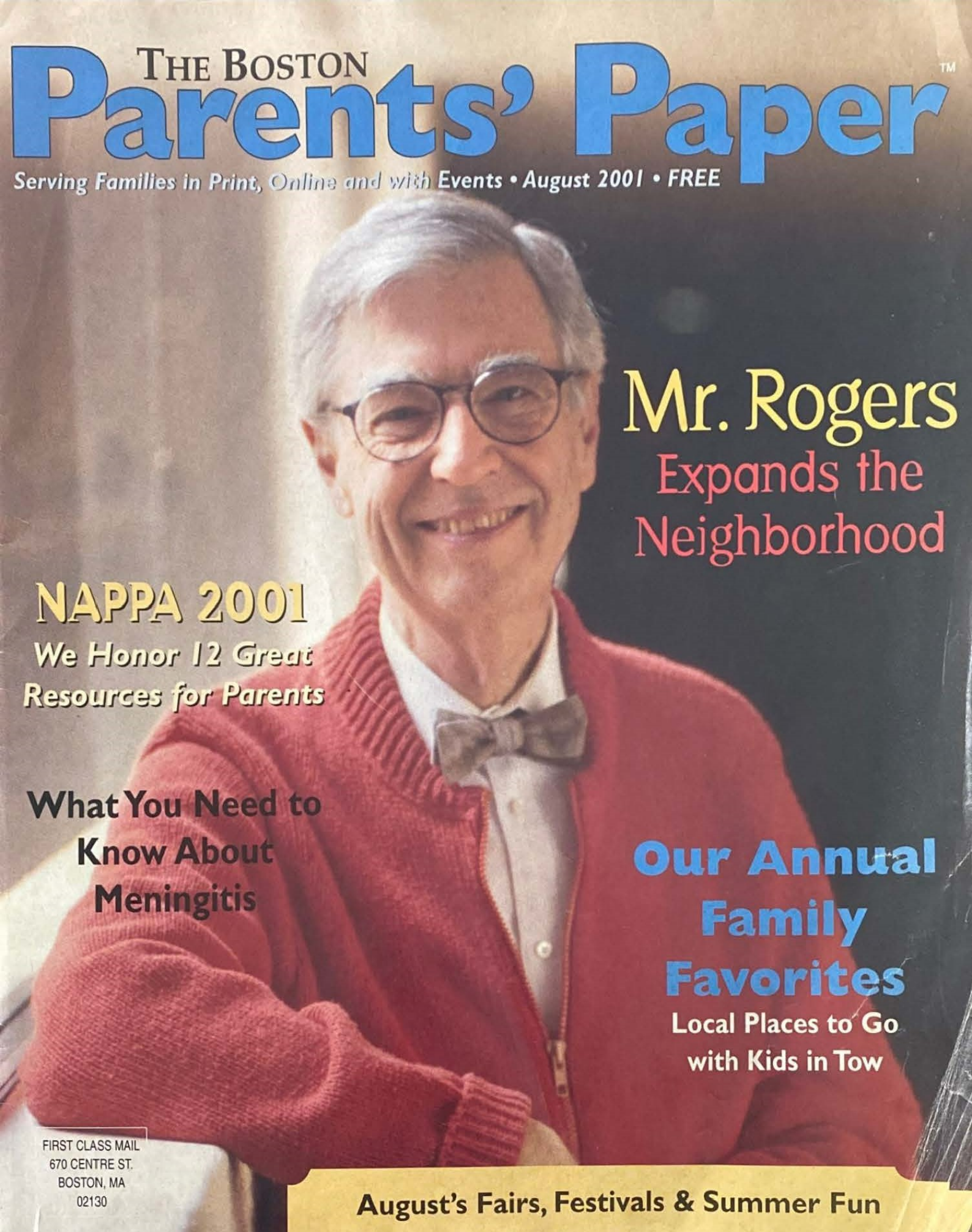


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A photograph of Mr. Rogers, an older man with white hair and glasses, wearing a red cardigan over a white shirt and a grey bow tie. He is smiling warmly at the camera.

Mr. Rogers
Expands the
Neighborhood

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August's Fairs, Festivals & Summer Fun

Mr. Rogers Expands the Neighborhood

By Bill Lindsay
Photos by Eric Stocklin



Fred Rogers may have discontinued filming new shows for the award-winning public television show that made him a children's television icon for more than three decades, but he's "refocusing, not retiring," emphasizes David Newell, the director of public relations who also plays Mr. McFeely on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

There is no sense of things slowing down in the Family Communications Inc. (FCI) offices in Pittsburgh. Not in the gentle, bow-tied 73-year-old leader, nor in the dozen or so staff members, many of whom have worked with Rogers for 20 years or more. In fact, there is a spirited vitality emanating from these modest offices.

Any feeling of culmination from having filmed the final episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in December (the shows will air at the end of August) is more than offset by the many new projects in the works. Rogers and his cohorts have long been involved in special projects outside the show — producing dozens of books, CDs, videos, parenting resources and training materials. But now those efforts are taking center stage.

There's the new computer-animated planetarium show, "The Sky Above Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," and the interactive children's museum exhibit, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood — A Hands-On Exhibit." And, of course, there are accompanying guides for teachers and parents with tips on how to make the most of the experience and activities to do with children afterward.

Then there's the Web sites. PBS' *Mister Rogers* site for children — www.pbs.org/rogers — is being revamped this summer with new features and activities. "The most exciting thing is we're going to put up a story that Fred will narrate," says Sam Newbury, FCI's director of production. "As technology advances, we'll do more."

PBS is also developing a parenting Web site utilizing *Mister Rogers'* vast resources.

"We've done TV programs for parents," Newbury says, "but it's tough because there are moments when parents are sort of interested and other times when they are very interested. With the Web there's instant accessibility. You can go get what you want, whenever you want it."

The Rogers team is also exploring the Web as another means of providing training. Training programs geared toward parents, educators and professionals who work with children and families are a growing part of FCI's focus.

For example, "What Do You Do with the Mad You Feel?" explores ways parents and care providers can help children manage anger and learn self-control. Follow-up workshops on challenging behavior and discipline are in development.

Another program, "The Safe Havens Training Project," helps teachers and child-care providers support children who routinely witness violence. A similar program to help law-enforcement officers be sensitive to these children's needs is in the works. They're also working on a pilot program to help retail employees know how to intervene when they witness child abuse.

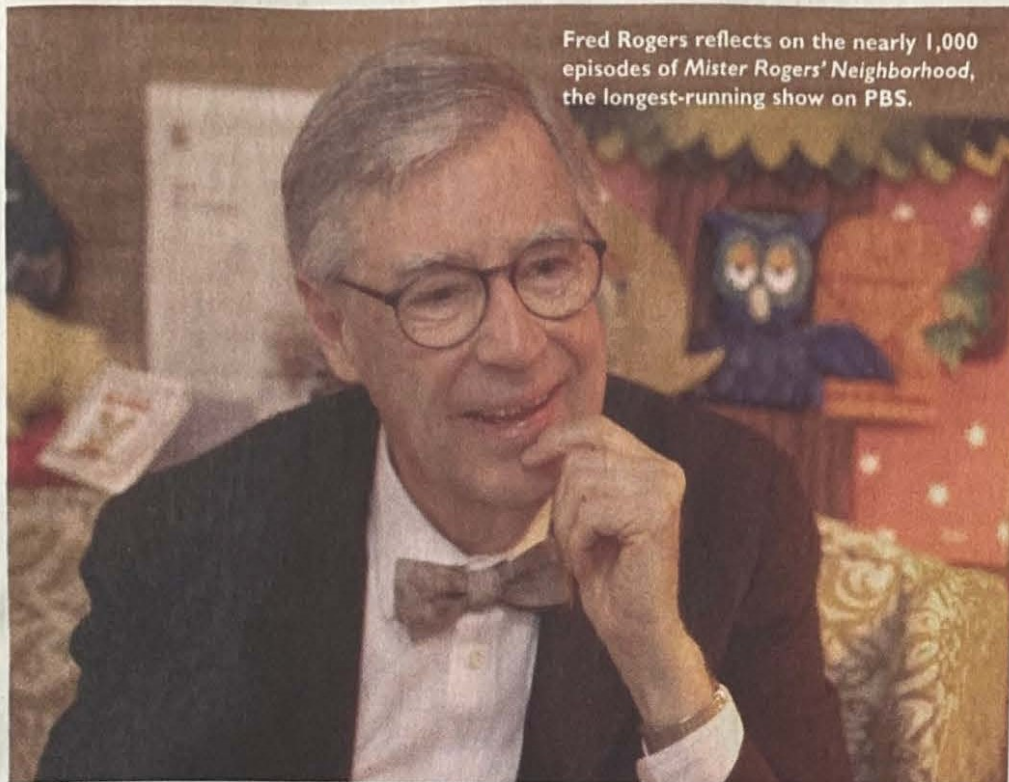
"The television show is not the right venue to deal with these things," says Margie Whitmer, the show's producer. "But we're the right people."

Still other programs include "Taking Good Care of You," which addresses health issues in early childhood settings and emphasizes the role of self-esteem in healthy development, and "Different and the Same," a series of videos on anti-bias for grade schoolers.

But not all of the team's activities are so serious. They're also creating a set of magnetic postcards for nostalgic adults with feel-good *Neighborhood* sayings such as "You Make Each Day a Special Day" and "Everybody is Fancy."

A Quick Look

As the creative force behind *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Fred Rogers has had an indelible impact on generations of children and parents. Now that he has ceased producing new episodes of the long-running show, he's focusing on a wide variety of new projects, but they're still all about supporting children and their families.



Fred Rogers reflects on the nearly 1,000 episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, the longest-running show on PBS.

And, for those who will miss the good old-fashioned TV show, there's no need to worry. With more than 300 programs in syndication, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* is sure to be in regular rotation for years to come. And, no matter what the venue or medium, Fred Rogers will undoubtedly continue to share his warmth and wisdom.

Here's some of what the ever-gracious and affable Mr. Rogers shared with us:

How have the needs and interests of your audience changed over the years?

I think the outside things change, and they have changed a good deal because of the proliferation of child care, but I think the inside needs remain the same. We all long to know that we are lovable and capable of loving.

And children today have to deal with a proliferation of violent images in their lives. I think that they get scared because they feel a part of that and they think that maybe they can be destructive, too.

We need to help them to realize what's fantasy. We've worked on that forever on the television show, the difference between reality and fantasy. That's why we separate those neighborhoods on the show. There's the one in which I come in and we talk about everyday things and there's the one that the trolley takes us to and we pretend.

Another real tough one is the need for consistency in child care. I don't ever want to feel as if I'm

judgmental, but with this very early care, when both parents have to work, it's especially important. When a baby looks into a caregiver's face – that person's, that mother's, that father's – it's the map of that child's world. And if those maps are always changing, that world can become very frightening.

Are there things that you did in the early years of the show that have grown in importance since then? Things that have become even more relevant today?

Well, one of the large themes of the *Neighborhood* is separation and return. And what could be more appropriate to deal with than that? It's the trying out, it's the testing: "I'll individuate just this far, for now. Then, it's just a little further. And if I can trust you, I'll go a little further." It's how human beings grow.

To what do you attribute your remarkable empathy with children? Is it something innate or is it a result of your work with child-development experts like Margaret McFarland and others?

I wonder if some of it doesn't have to do with being an only child for 11 years. I was an only child until my sister was adopted when I was 11. Also, I've just been fascinated with people and how people grow. And, I think I've always been an acute observer. Maybe that comes from being an only child for a while. I don't know. I'm much more interested in other people.

What were the keys to your going from

being a man interested in puppetry and music, and intrigued by the idea of educational television in the early 1950s, to becoming an icon of the genre?

I'm so convinced that the Holy Spirit will guide us when we are asking for that. I wouldn't have ever dreamed that I would have become Mister Rogers.

I'll tell you a little story. I took this seminary course when I was younger. I used to go on my lunch hour. After the semester I went to Nantucket, which is the usual place we go in the summer. And I had heard that this very famous preacher was going to come to the chapel there. I could hardly wait to hear him. Well, I got there and he had cancelled because of sickness. This man was filling in for him.

My wife and I were there with some friends sitting beside us. And I sat there thinking, as this man was preaching, "This is the worst sermon I have ever heard in my life!"

Thank God I didn't say anything, because when it was over, I turned to one of our friends and I was astounded. She had tears in her eyes. She said to me, "He said exactly what I needed to hear." She had come in need, and I had come in judgment.

So I am convinced that someone doing his or her best, whether it's television or writing or whatever, that message is taken and translated in the space that goes to the person in need and meets that need. That was a seminal experience for me.

That connects with your description of the space between you as Mister Rogers on the TV and the viewer being "holy ground."

It is. I'm convinced of that. Somebody came to me the other day. He wants to produce or be involved with television for children. He said, "What do you think is the most important thing?"

I said, "The most important thing is for you to know who's in ultimate charge, and for you to be yourself. Don't let anybody try to talk you into being anything that you aren't, because kids can spot a phony a mile away. And, another thing, the greatest teacher is the person who just loves what he happens to love in front of somebody else." That's the trick.

We had a sculptor come to our class for 3- and 4-year-olds one year at the Family and Children's Center, where Margaret McFarland was the administrative director, Ben Spock was the medical director, and Eric Erickson used to come in for case conferences. What a place! What training! You know, I've just been so blessed along the way.

At any rate, Margaret had asked this young
Continued on the next page

Mr. Rogers

Continued from the previous page

sculptor if he would come and "just love clay in front of the kids." She said, "I don't want you teaching them how to sculpt. I just want you to love the clay."

That's what I feel we do in the *Neighborhood*. When Yo-Yo Ma comes and plays his cello, he loves to play the cello and people feel that.

One of the things that distinguishes all of your work is the sense of calm and quiet. And that's even more extraordinary now that we have the "MTV-ization" of so many aspects of our culture – this rapid blitz of images and information. What you offer is such a juxtaposition to that and, obviously, something that is important to kids.

Or anybody! Any time I give a speech now, I always give the audience a moment of silence so they can think about those who have helped them become who they are. Invariably, that's what people will mention to me afterwards. We feel we've got to fill up all of it with words. Yet some of the most intimate moments of our lives are silent.

You talk a lot about helping children deal with transitions and change. How can families do better with this?

Well, my first thought is that whatever we can do to help parents not feel guilty is of prime importance. Because I think that, just from their own natural instincts as parents, they already feel guilty.

Fred Facts

- Fred McFeely Rogers was born in 1928 in Latrobe, Pa.
- He earned a bachelor's degree in music composition from Rollins College in 1951.
- In 1953, he joined Pittsburgh's upstart WQED-TV, the nation's first community-supported TV station. There he developed the first children's TV show, *The Children's Corner*. He co-produced the program and served as puppeteer and musician, but didn't appear on camera.
- Meanwhile, he attended the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Child Development and the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He became an ordained Presbyterian minister in 1963.
- Later in 1963, he made his on-camera debut when he created a children's series of 15-minute episodes, called *Mister Rogers*, for the Canadian Broadcasting Company.
- He returned to WQED in 1966 and developed the 15-minute *Mister Rogers* concept into a half-hour show.
- The first nationwide broadcast of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was on Feb. 19, 1968.
- Fred Rogers has more than 150 registered songs.
- He holds honorary degrees from 38 colleges and universities.
- There have been about 30 or 40 of the famous sweaters used over the years. Fred says that his mother made many of the early ones.

For children, one of the most helpful things is to talk about what might be coming. We've tried to do this through the *Neighborhood*. I've often sung that song "I Like to Be Told."

[Sings:]

*I like to be told
When you're going away,
When you're going to come back,
And how long you will stay.*

*I like to be told.
It helps me to get ready
For all those things,
All those things that are new.
I trust you more and more
Each time that I'm finding
Those things to be true.
I like to be told*

*Because I'm trying to grow
And I'm trying to learn
And I'm trying to know.
I like to be told.*

That sounds so simple. But how often do we do it? How often are children really scared, because they don't know what to expect? And if we don't know all the details, we can just say we don't. But, it's so helpful to let those little ones know, at least what we know.

What was the decision to stop producing new *Neighborhood* shows like for you?

I felt that we had dealt with practically all the themes that are important to children. But it doesn't mean that we can't continue to serve families in different ways.

The longer I get into this year of not going to the studio, it's only the people that I miss. I certainly don't miss the times when you have to do something over because the tape didn't work.

What excites you about your new endeavors, such as the new planetarium show or the interactive exhibit you've done for children's museums?

The fact that the people are together as they experience it. With our projects, most of the time it's adults bringing children and sharing that. There are very few programs that two or three generations have been exposed to. For a parent to bring a child to the

museum and both of them to see something that they know from television is so special.

I think one of the greatest dividends of a parent watching the program with the child is that the parent, in some instances, will remember his or her own childhood. And, if that's the case, the building of the empathy is of enormous importance. If we're doing a program about the first day of school, for instance, and talking about how it might not be easy, that parent might remember, "Hey, that's right. It wasn't." Think of what that means to the next generation, to have an empathic parent, not just an empathic television neighbor, but an empathic parent.

With your focus now on the Web sites, the

exhibits and professional training and parent support materials, has your intent changed?

The intent is just to do the best that we know. The television show was a little offering, and people came to it. I walk down the street and, invariably, somebody will come up and thank me for our program.

I'm convinced that parents, given the choice, will choose what they sense is healthiest for their children. If they have the time, and if they have the choice, that's what they'll do. You know, I'm on the parents' side.

I'd like to continue to nurture those who have grown up with us. I feel a kind of a relationship with these kids who are now parents, and the little ones who are coming along with them. And I'd like to do some recordings and the Web site stories and whatever else might come up. There are just so many ideas. I never in a million years thought that we would be so inundated with suggestions, and not just suggestions, but proposals.

Bill Lindsay is editor in chief of the United Parenting Publications neighborhood.

Resources

Family Communications Inc. offers a wide variety of parent support and professional training materials. For more information on these resources, check out www.misterrogers.org or call 412-687-2990.