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# Parents

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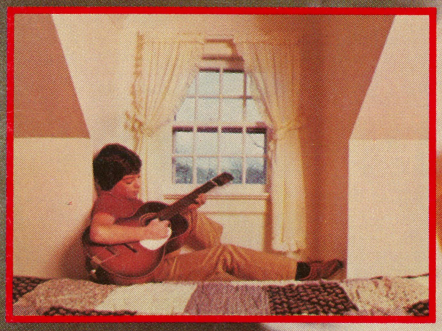

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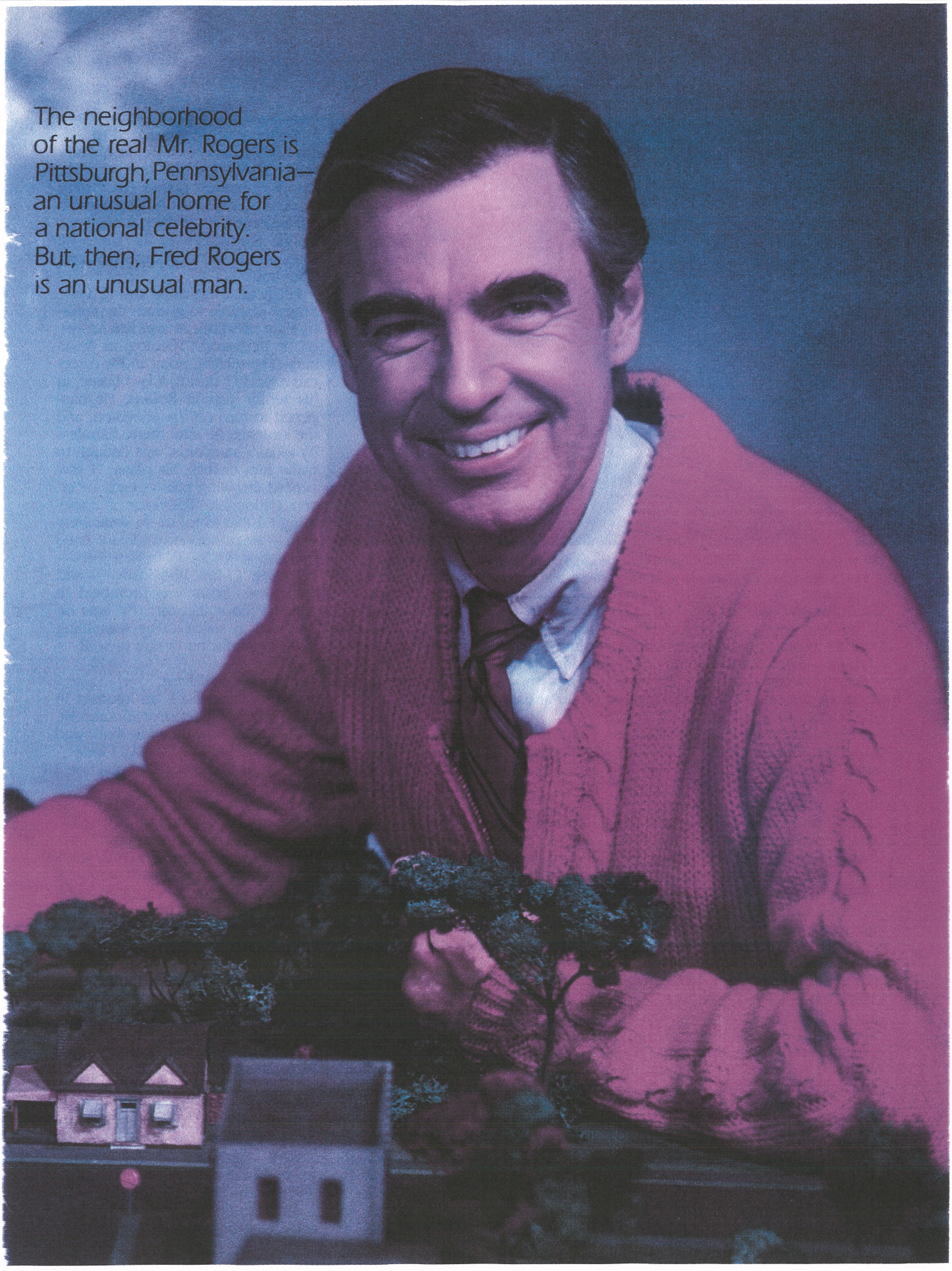


The neighborhood of the real Mr. Rogers is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—an unusual home for a national celebrity. But, then, Fred Rogers is an unusual man.

# Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood

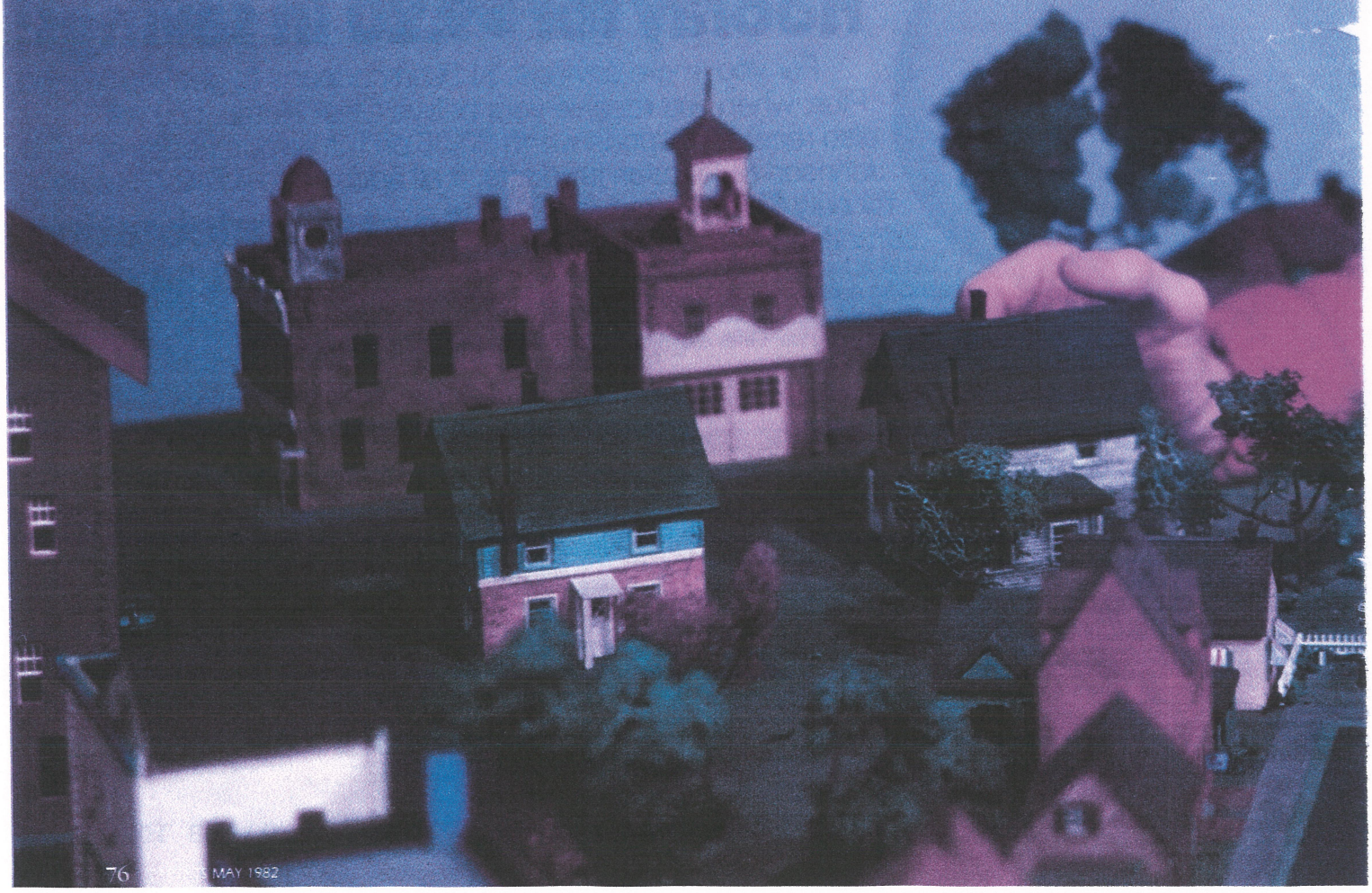
By Melanie Chadwick Stevens

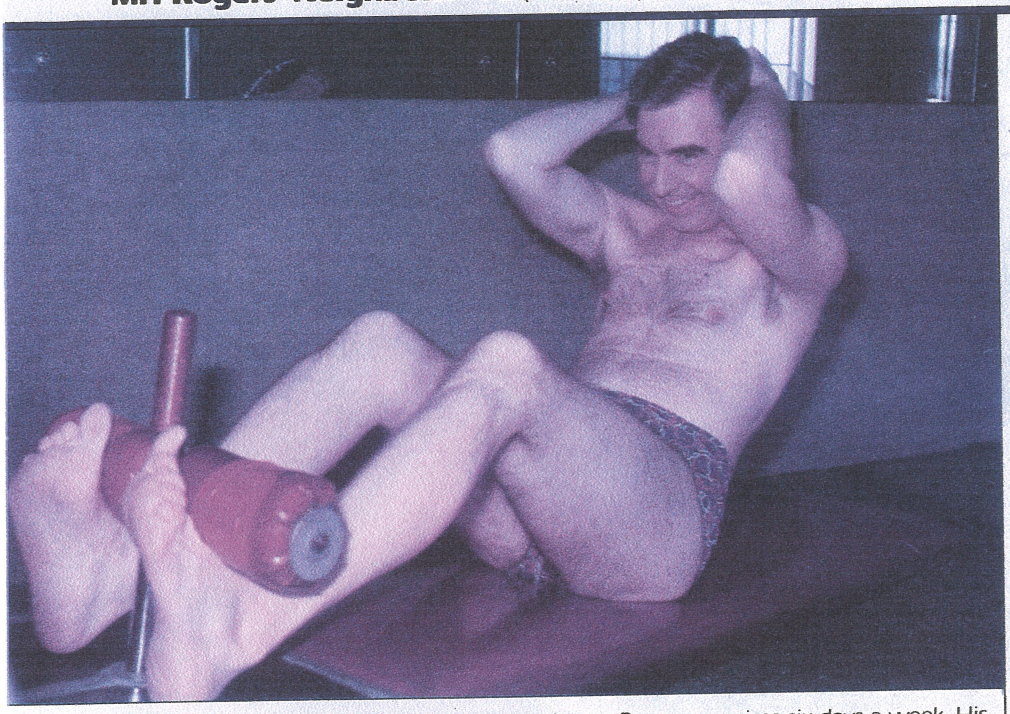
Photographed by Jim Roderick

His award-winning television show, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,* has been praised as a model of children's programming. Designed for children from age two to eight, the show features, in a slow-paced format, familiar rituals and a daily excursion into the "Neighborhood of Make-Believe," where people and puppets act out childhood dramas. In the confusing and often scary world of the young child, his messages are simple and reassuring: you are special; all your feelings are okay (it's what you do with them that's important); you are worthwhile and acceptable *right now.* Who is this gentle, serious man—and how did he get to understand children so well?

**Roots in childhood.**

Born in 1928 in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, 40 miles from Pittsburgh, Fred McFeely Rogers was the firstborn son in a well-to-do household. "My being a child was the greatest preparation for what I do today," he says. An only child until age eleven, Fred played by himself much of the time, using puppets, blocks, and dress-up clothes to create his own world of make-believe. His interest in music also began very early. "My grandmother bought me a piano when I was five, and an organ when I was ten," he says. "I always remember how they encouraged me to play for people." At Christmastime, his father used to put the sound box of the organ on the front steps while





**Time out:** In between writing and taping shows, Rogers exercises six days a week. His other hobbies include listening to classical music and browsing in card shops.

Fred played carols for the neighborhood. At a young age, he learned to turn to music to work his emotions through—a practice that continues to this day. "When I get to feeling *very* angry or *very* sad, invariably I go to the piano," he says.

It was a very secure existence, he observes, but when he was eleven, his sister, Elaine, was born. Although he is "crazy about her" now, the empathy Rogers exhibits for young children when a new baby arrives in their family comes from the memory of his own angry, left-out feelings at the time of his sister's birth. In fact, the mischief-making puppet of the *Neighborhood,* Lady Elaine Fairchilde, bears her name.

"I wish that I had had somebody then, even if it was on television, to talk about 'What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel?' " he says, quoting the title of a song he often sings on the show. "Because if people on a program say things like that, that means that you're not the only one who's feeling angry or jealous."

Married and the father of two sons, James (called Jay), 22, and John, 20, Rogers also has firsthand experience with sibling rivalry from the parent's point of view. "Our boys fought a lot—I don't think unduly so," he comments, "but they were healthy in their rivalry." He points to a positive change in their relationship, which began during adolescence. "Now, if Johnny gets angry with his mother and me at home, he'll often say, 'I'm going over to Jay's.' They're getting closer and closer together."

**Developing a path.**

When Rogers himself was a teenager, he began to understand that language, as well as music, could be a powerful way of expressing feelings. He had a French teacher who wasn't afraid to talk about emotional issues, and that was tremendously freeing. "I used to be able to say things in French that I could never say in English!" he laughs. At Dartmouth he majored in romance languages, and he now keeps up his French with the puppet "Grandpère" and by playing a cassette of Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* in his car.

But his interest in music remained predominant. "I think what I really wanted to do when I was at Dartmouth was to become a songwriter," he recalls. Friends got him an audition with the popular lyricist Jack Lawrence, but although Lawrence told him, "I think you have a flair for it," Rogers was disappointed. "I thought he was going to take me over to Tin Pan Alley and introduce me to a publisher," he smiles. "That was *my* Neighborhood of Make-Believe!" The following year he transferred to Rollins College, where he majored in musical composition and met his wife, Joanne, a concert pianist (they were married in 1952). As it turns out, he *has* become a songwriter, though not on Tin Pan Alley—all the songs he sings on the show are his own compositions.

Religious even as a young man, Rogers planned to go into the ministry right after college and was accepted at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The turning point in his career came in 1951 during a visit home, in his senior year at Rollins. He happened to turn on the television, and the violence he saw there, harmless by today's standards, was enough to make him change his plans. "I saw people throwing pies at each other, and I thought, 'Television is something I'd like to try to do something with.' " He postponed seminary, lined up a job at WNBC-TV in New York—"carrying Cokes and coffee"—and within two years was promoted to network floor manager. He was on the road to success. But something else was surfacing in him as well.

**Caring for children.**

Rogers looks back on his days in New York with a sense of amazement, even awe, at how they foreshadowed what has come to pass. "All I know," he says, "is that every day I had free, I would go visit centers that in one way or another took care of children." He also began to stop in St. Patrick's Cathedral every morning to pray. "I can't say there was some constantly guiding light," he says slowly. "I wonder if anybody *really* can. But I do think there's more, much more to life than our senses give us."

Gradually he arrived at a sense of what his ministry would be—to convey "reassurance, encouragement, and a sense of self-worth" to children. When friends invited him to come to Pittsburgh and help start WQED-TV, the nation's first educational station, he jumped at the chance.

**More viewers than ever.**

Today over 250 stations in the Public Broadcasting System carry *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,* and his audience of 6 to 8 million viewers is larger, and more diverse, than ever. Although made up primarily of preschool and kindergarten children,

Rogers says that high school students have confided to him, "You have no idea how many of us are watching." College students watch, too. "You'll see signs on dormitory doors saying GO TO IT, FAIRCHILDE," says Rogers.

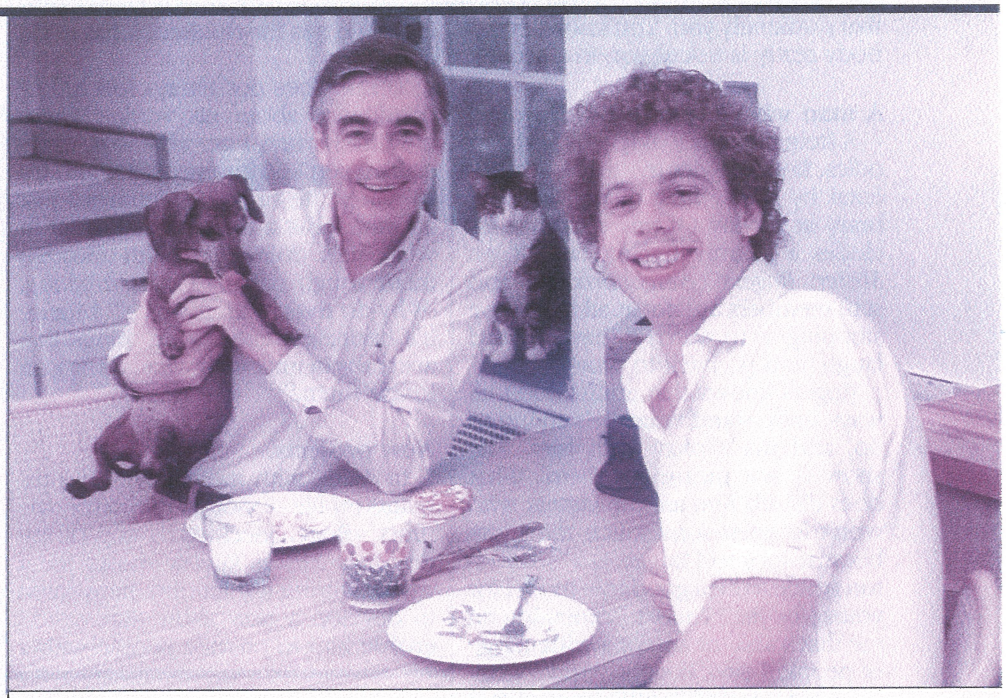
Rogers feels that one reason for the broad appeal of his program is that the issues he explores for young children are also being reworked by adolescents—most notably, separation, sexuality, and identity. Hedda Sharapan, a staff member of Rogers' nonprofit production company, Family Communications, Inc., puts it another way: "People in today's world just seem to be needing the kind of messages they get from Mister Rogers."

**Minister of the airwaves.**

In 1963, Rogers' career and interests came together: he was ordained a Presbyterian minister, with a special charge to "serve children and their families through the media." It is a charge he takes very seriously, although he never mentions God on the show or refers specifically to his religious beliefs. "I don't ever want the *Neighborhood* to exclude people who, for one reason or another, might feel that certain words were leaving them out."

Rogers sets aside a daily period in the morning for meditation, Bible reading, and prayer, and attends a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh. A vegetarian, he doesn't smoke or drink hard liquor. Six days a week, he works out in a local gym and swims. Between working, exercising, seeing friends, and taking care of correspondence, he spends what little spare time he has listening to classical music and browsing in card shops. Remarkably, except for college and his two years in New York, Rogers has spent most of his life in the Pittsburgh area. "By jet-set standards," he observes wryly, "I lead a fairly dull life."

In the face of all his popularity, Fred Rogers is, indeed, an unlikely celebrity. "We're very private people," he says of himself and his wife, Joanne. "She's always said that one person in television is enough," he adds, giving one to believe that her sense of privacy may be even greater than his own. Good-humored, warm, and accessible as he is, he will not discuss his marriage; nor will he talk in detail about his relationship with his sons. "I don't think it's fair to have people's families splashed over the media," he says. "I'd like to protect them."



**Family ties:** John, twenty, who lives at home while he works and goes to school, enjoys a snack with his father and the family mascot, Frisky.

Rogers takes issue with the idea, put forth by gossip columns and talk shows, that people should reveal a lot to each other very quickly, or risk being called "uptight" or "secretive." "I think it takes time to develop trust," he explains. "Everybody has his or her own inner clock as to when it feels comfortable to let somebody in—and when it doesn't."

**Keeping in touch.**

The premium Rogers places on privacy doesn't mean that he and the members of his family are isolated from each other. In fact, the family is particularly close. Rogers is in frequent contact with his sister, who lives near Philadelphia, and his mother, who still lives in Latrobe. His sons are nearby as well. After spending one year at Rollins College, James returned to Pittsburgh and got a job in a lab at a local hospital. He has an apartment not far from his parents. John, who works as a mechanic's assistant by day and studies business in college at night, still lives at home.

**Each child is different.**

One of the themes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* has always been the uniqueness of each person. "You are my friend, you are special," Rogers sings. Not surprisingly, his two sons have begun to carve out identities for themselves quite apart from their unusual father.

As a matter of fact, when James went away to college, Rogers visited him and found that he had not told anyone who his father was. "When I got down there, his friends were *very* surprised," he recalls. "And to me, that said something. I think that he wanted to be his own person, to be making it on his own rather than having the limelight of somebody back home shining around him."

Although at this point neither of his sons plans to go into television or to work with children, Rogers also sees that in some way his work has influenced them. "Jay is in charge of the development of the film of all the heart catheterizations that they do at the hospital. And John is a kind of doctor of cars, working with an excellent mechanic," he points out. Both are involved with helping things to get better and are working with "the insides of things," activities Rogers himself clearly values.

"Kids can identify in many different ways, and they don't necessarily have to be tremendously obvious," he says. "We don't develop in a vacuum. I think it's exceedingly creative to be able to take the stuff, the material, of your life, and form it into something

that's uniquely you. You know, everybody really is a sculptor, in a sense."

**A man who can take kidding.**

A frequent target of spoofs and parodies, Rogers is not in the least threatened by them. In fact, the video library at Family Communications includes a Johnny Carson takeoff on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,* and staff members are not at all shy about stopping in to watch it, have a good laugh, and go back to work.

Rogers knows that adults don't always understand what he's trying to do, and that's okay with him. The show is not meant for them. What does disturb him are the fathers who won't let their sons watch the show because they feel Rogers is a "sissy"—too gentle to be a good role model for young boys. "There's something in me that's able to accept a wide range of people," says Rogers. "And I wonder what it is within other people that doesn't allow them to do that. If a child needs what I have to give, it seems to me that that could be an important message to the parents."

**Not Mr. Perfect.**

Those adults who do love the show, Rogers reports, are usually brought to it by their children. Although some parents resent Rogers because he seems so "perfect," he does not see himself as a father substitute. "I think I'm just somebody who comes to visit, who knows who he is, is accepting of feelings, and is prepared to talk about them honestly."

Rogers recalls watching the show with his sons when they were young. His son James called Mister Rogers "other Daddy," making the distinction between his real father and the television Rogers. And it helps to remember that Rogers is not only the wise, gentle man who comes in smiling every day: he is also the creator of all the puppets—pompous King Friday XIII, shy Daniel Striped Tiger, impatient Lady Elaine. He makes no secret of the fact that they represent parts of himself.

When it comes to his work, Rogers is a perfectionist. Clare Lynch O'Brien, television writer/producer and a friend of Rogers', recalls working with him on a children's television project in India. When something was repeatedly done wrong, he finally lost his patience and burst out, "If we're going to do this for children, it has to be perfect!"

Yet he does not always feel full of confidence about his work. "There are times when I get very low, especially when I go into my office and try to write," he says. "Sometimes I just agonize." But a fundamental belief in what he's doing gets him through those tough times. "I start thinking, 'Why do the children watch?' I figure it's because we're saying things that are really in tune with what's going on inside them."

**New projects.**

In 1975, with more than 450 programs on file—enough to run for two years—Rogers decided to stop taping the daily *Mister Rogers* shows for a while. During the interim, he wanted to develop a new show that would enable him to provide people with a glimpse into the lives of those who make a contribution to the world. The result, *Old Friends . . . New Friends,* went on the air in 1978. In a series of more than twenty shows, Rogers interviewed a wide variety of people—an actor, a pianist, a priest—and even did a show in which he interviewed famous interviewers, including Tom Snyder, Hugh Downs, and Susan Stamberg.

*". . . 'I think it takes time to develop trust. Everybody has his or her own inner clock as to when it feels comfortable to let somebody in—and when it doesn't.' . . . "*

During the shooting of one *Old Friends* show, at an orphanage in Mexico, Rogers' attention was caught by the sad face of a young boy who had just arrived. The following day, Rogers gave him his grandmother's gold watch. "I felt I was too dependent on time—and on the watch itself," he explains.

A second project he has developed provides a format through which both parents and children can address certain issues. In a series of nationally broadcast specials under the general title *Mister Rogers Talks With Parents About . . . ,* Rogers explores going to school, superheroes, divorce, play, and competition.

Rather than jump in as the "expert" to answer a question, though, Rogers tries to draw out the speaker. "Often people ask questions that *they* want to answer," he says. "So you get a very rich response if you don't answer immediately." In fact, he adds, "I'm not so sure that people can hear until they've been able to tell what they've been thinking."

At the moment, Rogers is taping fifteen new *Mister Rogers* shows a year and three *Mister Rogers Talks With Parents About. . . .* In the future he wants to do more special shows that will try to find out reasons behind today's events and problems and address issues in a human way.

He wishes that he had done a special on the return of the hostages from Iran. "Everybody in this country was identifying with the release of those hostages because each one of us has something within us that feels imprisoned," he says. "And I never heard that verbalized by any person on television during all of those hours of reporting."

**The most important thing in life.**

For a man who is both performer and clergyman, father of two and television friend of millions, the integration of work and self is a process that Fred Rogers feels is never complete. "It's something I struggle with all the time—being real," he says. "I've worked very hard to be the same on-screen as off."

Although he is a private person, Rogers is by no means a loner. His talk is laced with stories about people. "I think relationships are the most important thing in this life," he states simply.

Today he has a lunch appointment with a group of close friends, all ordained ministers. He's late already—no gold watch to tell him what time it is—when a staff member comes in and says there's a little girl downstairs with her grandmother. Would he have a few minutes to have his picture taken with her? Fred Rogers nods—he's never too busy to have time for children. ◉

**Melanie Chadwick Stevens** is a freelance writer.