

Opinion: Mr. Rogers' messages of kindness would be beneficial today

By Ann Hornaday, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.11.18

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Fred Rogers on the set of his TV show "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." Photo: Jim Judkis/Focus Features

"Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" was a popular television series for children that was on from 1968 to 2001. "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" is Morgan Neville's documentary about the host of the show, Fred Rogers, that just came out in theaters.

The title comes from a song that Rogers would sing at the beginning of each episode. The film feels like it was made to soothe the rapidly fraying nerves of a country stuck in political and pop-culture food fights. Rogers was well known for his messages of kindness and empathy.

In the film, Neville revisits Rogers' signature TV show, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," and the kind but mysterious man behind it. Neville has created a film that is both a reminder of the past and powerful appeal for civility. Civility means being polite and having good manners.

TV Programs For Children Were Not So Great

"Won't You Be My Neighbor?" begins in 1967. Fred Rogers had been working in Pittsburgh on local television and had attended the Presbyterian seminary. Seminary is a school for people who want to learn about religion. Presbyterianism is a branch of Christianity. During this time, he began to think of children's television programming that would tend to the emotional needs of a young audience.

In a black-and-white film clip of Rogers playing the piano, he compares changes in musical notes to the growth stages of infants, toddlers and youngsters. Up until that point, young children had mostly been targeted by television producers as people to be molded and tricked.

"Maybe this is too philosophical," he says to himself, while he plays and thinks out loud. He was convinced that "what we see and hear on the screen becomes who we are."

Anyone who was a child or raised children in the 1960s and 1970s knows what came next.

This Neighborhood Was A Safe Place

"Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" became a huge success and cultural force. The show offered kids a safe place while the outside world - and sometimes their own families - were struck by hardship and social change. With his pleasant voice and manner, Fred Rogers presented a harmless and plain, maybe even timid appearance in his sweater and lace-up sneakers. Underneath the bland look, he was a leader for important work in understanding children's minds and the messages people get from TV and the news. Rogers was pointing out children's fears and worries. He was gently prodding, or helping, them to question the values they were being sold elsewhere on TV.

As those values became more shallow, violent and distrustful, Rogers' mission became more difficult. "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" revisits the episode when he helped his audience understand the meaning of the word "assassination" after the death of U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy. The episode aired almost exactly 50 years ago to the day.

Mr. Rogers Helped With Healing

As something of an expert of thoughts and feelings, he helped the nation process the Challenger space shuttle tragedy in 1986. The Challenger exploded shortly after it launched, killing its seven crew members. Many people were watching the launch on live TV when it happened.

By 2001, when he was called upon to speak about the terror attacks of September 11, he was clearly burdened by doubt. Rogers might have doubted himself, but he also might have had doubt in a world that despite his most honorable efforts, seems not to have heard a word he had been saying for 30 years.

In addition to filmed interviews with Rogers, Neville includes the reminiscences from his wife, sons and coworkers. Neville also shares an impressive amount of film from early shows and appearances - many of which will make viewers cry. Rogers died in 2003.

The Film Takes Us On Many Of Fred Rogers' Paths

The unspoken question that "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" asks is what Fred Rogers would make of the present day. The culture now seems to be full of outrage, meanness and intolerance. Neville smartly constructs his film to tell many stories. One story is the little-engine-that-could tale of how the low-tech "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" became such an unlikely hit.

Another story is about a man whose mission led him to television, the most powerful media influence of the last 100 years. Yet another story is the use of television to attack people and make viewers buy products.

Lastly, the film is the story of the path of a man who prized tolerance and community, but asked a gay coworker to not tell people he was gay or risk being fired.

But to his credit, Neville does not stop there. Rather than a look back at the way things used to be, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" leaves viewers wrestling with our own conscience. The film makes us consider our own commitment to the unconditional love and acceptance that Rogers talked about so passionately.

"Won't You Be My Neighbor?" winds up being as quietly, cozily groundbreaking as its subject.

Quiz

1 Which section of the article explains who helps to tell Rogers' story in Neville's film?

- (A) "TV Programs For Children Were Not So Great"
- (B) "This Neighborhood Was A Safe Place"
- (C) "Mr. Rogers Helped With Healing"
- (D) "The Film Takes Us On Many Of Fred Rogers' Paths"

2 Read the list of sentences from the article.

1. *During this time, he began to think of children's television programming that would tend to the emotional needs of a young audience.*
2. *Up until that point, young children had mostly been targeted by television producers as people to be molded and tricked.*
3. *He was gently prodding, or helping, them to question the values they were being sold elsewhere on TV.*
4. *Yet another story is the use of television to attack people and make viewers buy products.*

Which two sentences taken together provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that television can have harmful influences on young children?

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4

- 3 What is the MAIN reason the author includes the section "The Film Takes Us On Many Of Fred Rogers' Paths"?
- (A) to reveal that "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" contains many of the same themes as "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood"
 - (B) to expose Rogers' hypocrisy for highlighting tolerance and community but not extending it to his coworkers
 - (C) to suggest that "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" will serve as a replacement for "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood"
 - (D) to indicate that Rogers was unable to completely deflect the damaging effects of the media on children

- 4 Read the article's introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

HOW does the introduction develop the MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) It introduces Rogers' popular TV show and describes its audience.
- (B) It introduces Neville's newly released documentary and outlines its focus.
- (C) It compares the production of Rogers' TV show with Neville's film.
- (D) It evaluates the popularity of Neville's film featuring Rogers' show.