A LITTLE KINDNESS MAKES A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE.

WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

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For over thirty years, Fred Rogers, an unassuming minister, puppeteer, writer and producer was beamed daily into homes across America. In his beloved television program, Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, Fred and his cast of puppets and friends spoke directly to young children about some of life’s weightiest issues, in a simple, direct fashion. There hadn’t been anything like Mr. Rogers on television before and there hasn’t been since.

Though he may be best known today as a soft-spoken, cardigan-wearing children’s television host, in reality, Fred Rogers’ career represents a sustained attempt to present a coherent, beneficent view about how we should best speak to children about important matters and how television could be used as a positive force in our society.

In Won’t You Be My Neighbor?, Academy Award-winning filmmaker Morgan Neville (Twenty Feet from Stardom) looks back on the legacy of Fred Rogers, focusing on his radically kind ideas. While the nation changed around him, Fred Rogers stood firm in his beliefs about the importance of protecting childhood. Neville pays tribute to this legacy with the latest in his series of highly engaging, moving documentary portraits of essential American artists.
When I met Joanne Rogers, I told her I wanted to make a film not about Fred Rogers’ story but about his ideas. She smiled and said that sounded pretty good, because Fred had always said his own story was the most boring story of all time. I respectfully disagree.

I was born in 1967 and “Mister Rogers Neighborhood” went national in 1968, so I was part of the first generation of Mr. Rogers’ devotees. I remember loving the show, but like most toddler fans, my memories are warm but hazy. By the time I hit 2nd grade, I had moved on to baseball cards and movies.

Decades later, after one of my documentary subjects Yo-Yo Ma had been telling me stories about Fred Rogers, I began to think about Fred differently. One night I came across a video of Fred giving a commencement address. There was something in his tone and words that struck me: this is a grownup voice I just don’t hear anymore. He was talking about civility, about compassion, about grief and about the hard work of being human. He was talking to students, but it sounded like he was talking about the world today. I immediately felt I wanted to explore this further in a film.

Fred said his task was “to make goodness attractive,” and he struggled with this mission throughout his life. It was clear that this was not a saintly calling, but the hard, everyday work of being a better person.

Ultimately, Fred felt people didn’t really understand the depth of his work. Simple and deep was the defining tone of the show, but making something simple and deep is anything but simple.

Fred Rogers was asking big questions: How do we care for each other? How do we respect ourselves? What kind of neighborhood should we create together?
There was no way to make this film without internalizing those messages from Fred Rogers. His ethos permeated every aspect of the production in the best possible way. Egos were checked. We took our time. There might have been hugs.

I can’t think of another film I would have rather made right now.

- Morgan Neville, director
Below are questions to help begin a discussion following the film. We encourage you to add or amend.

- What is your first memory of Mister Rogers? Did you watch *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* growing up? Why do you think you still remember that from your childhood?

- What were you most surprised to learn from the film? What is the same as you remembered him? What is different?
  - Does anything from your childhood experience of watching feel both the same and different when you reflect on it now?

- Which stories in the film stood out to you most? Why?

- Mister Rogers sought to integrate his faith with his service to children and families on television. What do you recognize as the alignment between his deep convictions and what he wrote, said, or produced?
  - If you are part of a community of faith, how do you incorporate the teachings of your religion and your values into your life and work to better help your neighbors?

- Mister Rogers says, “Children have very deep feelings, just the way parents do, just the way everybody does.” What is the significance of this?
  - If you are an educator, parent, or caregiver, how does this thought resonate how you interact with children?

- Did you have someone in your childhood, whether someone close to you or a public figure, who had an impact on you the way Mister Rogers had on so many? Who was the Mister Rogers in your life?

- What is Mister Rogers’ cultural significance? In what ways has his legacy endured past the popularity of the television program?
• How did Mister Rogers and the show engage with social issues? Are there issues today that we can approach with a similar discipline of respectfulness and thoughtfulness?
  • If you work at a non-profit, how does your communication to the external world and the way the external world communicates about your social issues enhance or limit your impact?

• Can you name and describe one of Mister Rogers’ core values, and describe how your own life speaks to that?

• Have you recently encountered a neighbor in need? Were you able to help them, and how?

• Who is the most unusual or unlikely person that you consider a “neighbor”? How has that person helped you, or you helped them, or both ways?
“If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of.”

- Fred Rogers