News



David Newell, left, as Speedy Delivery's Mr. McFeely, is pictured with Fred Rogers in undated footage from "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" used in the 2018 documentary "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" (CNS/Focus Features/Lynn Johnson)

by Don Clemmer

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Speaking with David Newell is like encountering a disciple or a longtime collaborator of a saint. While the retired actor and Pittsburgh native is quick to note that he

doesn't have any theological training, he can just as quickly cite the animating role that faith and a sense of mission played in the life of the man he worked alongside for three and a half decades: Fred Rogers of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

Recent years have brought a deluge of tributes to the life and legacy of Rogers, who died in 2003, highlighting his status as something of a cultural saint whose reputation for goodness only grows in death as countless people attest to the positive influence he had on their development via television. These recent tributes include the 2018 documentary "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" and the new feature film "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," starring Tom Hanks. (As Rogers' communications director, Newell fielded the initial interview request from Esquire Magazine for a 1998 article that inspired the events of the film.)

Newell, who got his start with Rogers in the late '60s, just as "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" was beginning, is most famous for his portrayal on the show of Mr. McFeely, the energetic deliveryman known for his catchphrase, "Speedy delivery!"

Newell spoke with NCR about the personal faith and sense of mission that animated the work of Fred Rogers and how that revealed itself in his daily life with "kindnesses," big and small.

The following is an excerpt of that conversation, edited for clarity:

NCR: What have you made of this Mister Rogers renaissance in recent years?

Newell: I think there was always, from the day we came on the air, a celebration of his work. However, I don't think everybody understood right away some of the very substantive programs, like going to school for the first time and divorce and going to the doctor and a lot of the heavy subjects. And I think finally these documentaries really helped people understand what Fred was using television to accomplish. It was a mission. He went about writing scripts in a way that he thought would be helpful to families and using child development as a guide.

He never faltered from his mission. He never gave in to the bells and whistles that a lot of television gives in to. It was pure. I think it had a soul. And that was simply because of Fred's mission and his spirituality, too. Fred had deep, deep spiritual convictions. It wasn't a religious program. And that, I think, is part of the success, too. People saw the values, and I think children when they watched the program,

caught that he had respect for children and childhood. It's more than a nice little kiddie show. And at the same time, it was on public television, so there was no product to sell, except maybe goodness. He's been quoted as saying, "How do you make goodness attractive?"

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Why do you think children responded to him?

He had a focus, and his focus was to take this medium and make something for children that's positive. Fred said, there's a saying: "Attitudes are caught, not taught." And if you love doing something in front of children, they'll catch it. He loved what he was doing.

That's why I think the program over the years was not as understood as other children's programs. Why is he taking off his sweater and putting on shoes? Why is he looking straight to the camera? It all had a meaning, and I think it goes back to respect for childhood. The symbol of putting on a sweater and sneakers is play clothes and meeting children on their own level. That all is a respect for who they are. It wasn't an act. Putting on a sweater was almost, in a way, putting on a religious robe or something. It was getting ready for his mission.

He never preached. He never mentioned God, never mentioned a religious story. It was public television. But values can be accepted by everybody: being kind to each other and modeling kindness, thank you, and helping people and listening.

But working with him, was it also clear to adults that this was someone extraordinary?

Fred in some ways was a perfectionist — perfectionist about his message, not so much about the exterior of things. Our program was very homespun looking. And yet the substance that came out of that was powerful. And that's what was important to Fred — what was being said and not if you're seeing a puppet that was maybe a little threadbare. They weren't threadbare, but you know what I'm saying. They'd been around for a while. They weren't slick. It was just a well-loved toy, almost, that children have.

You know, Daniel Tiger I think was everyone's favorite, and Daniel Tiger's personality was Fred Rogers. He was Daniel. They all had a facet of his personality, but Daniel

was the closest to Fred. That shy, sensitive person, very caring, came out through Daniel. Daniel would always be the sort of conduit of those emotions. When you think of the program, it's one of a kind, and I don't think it can be duplicated.

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>
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>
> —David Newell
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What can you share about the faith life of Fred Rogers, who was, we all know, an ordained Presbyterian minister?

There were two people I met in my life whose faith was so strong that it guided their everyday life. Fred was one, and my mother-in-law was the other. And everything that Fred did I think came out of that faith, his religious base that he had — his love for people, his thoughtfulness, his kindness. And he worked at it! I don't think it comes natural to everybody. I think you try to be the best person you can be when you have a strong faith.

He respected people so much and their idiosyncrasies and their maybe lack of faith or lack of religious convictions. His everyday life was big kindnesses and small kindnesses.

I'll give you an example of a small kindness that he did.

When you have a kindness, you think about others. And I have this intense interest in architecture, especially architecture of old movie theaters. It all comes from my interest in theater and performance. I love film and theater, and consequently I love the buildings that they take place in. I came into my office one day, and on my desk was a brick. And I said, "Where did this come from?" And just as I said that, Fred peeked into my office and was smiling. He was walking by the demolition site of an old theater not too far from where he lived. He knew that I knew this theater — a grand old theater; they shouldn't have torn it down — and thought of me and brought that brick in to my desk. Now I use it as a doorstop. It's still with me.

Official trailer for "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" posted on Focus Feature's YouTube channel

He was such a missionary of kindness, which is not something we consider an attribute of our current cultural discourse. What would he think of where we are today?

It's hard to put words in his mouth, but I would think that he would comment not so much about the politics — because politics, no matter what party you are, can be pretty brutal — I think he would not like the demeaning attitude that a lot of politicians have now; you know, making fun of others. You can disagree with your competitors, with your political rival, but you don't have to make fun of them. I think that would be what he would find very upsetting. I think everybody deserves respect. We're adults! We should be kind adults! When he was growing up, he was heavyset, and he was called "Fat Freddy." And he spent a lot of time alone. And I think, maybe, had Fat Freddy not ever have been, I just wonder if "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" would have been around. I think a lot of that name-calling, a lot of that making fun of, a lot of those put-downs, he remembered how he felt as a child. I think an element of what started getting him into the Neighborhood is how he could help others if that happens to them.

We're acting like kids on a playground, and we've got an important playground. On the world playground, we can't be calling each other names.

We still have so much to learn from him, don't we?

It is relevant, and people know that. I think the Neighborhood is evergreen. It's almost like a classic novel for children, like *Wizard of Oz*. It has a story for the ages, almost like out of the Bible in a way. It's a parable of sorts!

He was a groundbreaker. He talked about many things. He wrote a song about those angry feelings. You find ways to work out your anger without hurting others: That was his point! You pound some clay or some dough. You play on the piano. You run fast — anything but hitting someone! And you know, when you think about it, that can apply to countries, too. You don't bomb. You negotiate and negotiate and negotiate.

His mission was to take some human emotions and help children deal with them in some way. [Childhood] prepares you. It's there for a reason, your childhood. I think

you evolve out of that, and I think that's where a lot of your values are learned. That's how you treat others, and that's how you feel about others, where kindnesses are born.

You say he will never be replicated, let alone replaced. But how can we best strive to live out his legacy?

Before he knew he was really sick, he was thinking about, "OK, I started in the early days of TV, and … generally speaking, children's programs now are much better." And I think Sesame [Street] and Mister Rogers showed the way for a lot of that. But the internet is just awful. You can get the best things you want in a moment and the worst things you want in a moment by the push of a button. And he was thinking, "How can we use the internet for the good?" He was thinking maybe we can do some bedtime stories for children. He was thinking along those lines. He never stopped thinking about how do we help children? He was thinking of the current technology and how you can use it for the best. It was very interesting that he came full circle from television into the new media and how you can use that for the best. The technology was changing, but his mission remained a mission.

[Don Clemmer is a journalist, communications professional and former staffer of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He writes from Indiana. Follow him on Twitter: @clemmer_don.]

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