

# The 'radical' legacy of television's Mister Rogers

By Peter Smith  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

LATROBE, Pa. (AP) - When he died in 2003, Fred Rogers was described in many headlines as gentle, beloved, kind and - of course - neighborly.

But how about radical? Counter-cultural? Trouble-maker?

Scholars and others are using such adjectives as they assess the legacy of the late creator and host of the long-running "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"

For all his much-parodied gentle voice and manner, the Latrobe native actually worked from a steely social conscience. He used his program, with its non-threatening benign puppets, songs and conversation, to raise provocative topics such as war, peace, race, gender and poverty with his audience of preschoolers and their parents - patiently guiding them across the minefields of late 20th century political and social change.

Rogers was no "meek and mild pushover," wrote Michael Long, author of the recent book, "Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers"

Rogers was "a quiet but strong American prophet who, with roots in progressive spirituality, invited us to make the world into a counter-cultural neighborhood of love," said Mr. Long, a professor of religious studies and peace and conflict studies at Elizabethtown (Pa.) College.

An early example could be seen on a recent afternoon in a classroom at the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media on the campus of St. Vincent College in Latrobe. The center was formed to carry on his legacy, and that includes learning to be bold advocates when needed, said its co-director, Junlei Li.

Li, a professor of psychological science, is teaching a seminar this semester titled, "What Would Fred Rogers Do?"

Many of the students had watched "Mister Rogers" as preschoolers. Now as adults, they have been studying such broadcasts in an intensive course that blends psychology, child development and - apropos for a show produced by an ordained Presbyterian minister - theology.

For a recent class, the students viewed an archived "Neighborhood" program. The black-and-white video and the characters' hairstyles reflected its 1968 vintage, but the onscreen conflicts seemed to arise straight out of today's newscasts with their high-definition anxiety.

The puppet King Friday XIII was posting border guards, installing barbed-wire fences and drafting passersby to keep out the those fomenting social change.

"Down with the changers!" he proclaimed. "Because we're on top!"

The episode aired when other television programs were bringing the Vietnam War into American living rooms, and when "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" had just gone into national distribution from its Pittsburgh production base. It was part of weeklong series on conflict, change and distrust.

King Friday's declaration of national emergency to preserve the status quo "is a political statement," said Li. "It's not a plot line merely to entertain children. It's the idea that when we resist change, it's because we want to maintain our position"

To underscore the episode's relevance, Li interspersed news clips of the current presidential campaign, with Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's pledge to bar Muslim immigrants and wall off migrants from Mexico.

In the end, the neighborhood was saved, but only through the bold civil disobedience of King Friday's subjects.

"People who want change are often equated to troublemakers," said Li.

"I know it's odd to say it, but my understanding of Fred Rogers' legacy is that he was a troublemaker in the same tradition as Dr. Martin Luther King or Bobby Kennedy or Dr. Hanna-Attisha (the pediatrician-hero of the Flint, Mich., water crisis), who saw something they thought was wrong and decided to take action. Fred had the opposite style. He didn't go on marches, he was not confrontational, but nevertheless he had a ground on which he stood and he wanted to do something about it"

Rogers used his program in many other ways to navigate the minefield of late 20th century social transformation.

He wore an apron and ironed clothes on a mid-day broadcast set in a house, when most men would have been at work, modeling a revolution in gender roles. The puppet Lady Elaine Fairchilde anchored a newscast long before Barbara Walters did, and she rocketed into space a decade before Sally Ride broke the glass stratosphere.

Rogers even referred to God as female in a prayer, which wasn't lost on writers of protest letters.

Rogers and regular cast member Francois Clemmons, an African-American, dipped their bare feet in a wading pool on a 1969 broadcast, when bitter conflicts over legally segregated swimming pools were still a recent memory.

When politicians in the 1980s spoke of welfare recipients as lazy and unworthy of government help, Rogers portrayed hard-working parents who still couldn't afford all that their children wanted or needed.

Rogers broadcast public-service announcements on helping children deal with news of war and other tragedy, and he advocated for legislation that would allow at least one parent in a military family to remain with his or her children rather than be deployed.

To be sure, some of Rogers' cast members thought he was too cautious at times, according to Long.

Betty Aberlin, who portrayed Lady Aberlin on the show, publicly expressed her disappointment in 1991 that in the run-up to the Persian Gulf War, Rogers didn't re-run an anti-war segment from 1983.

Clemmons was disappointed that Rogers never pursued his idea for depicting an inter-racial romance on screen.

More painfully, Rogers insisted that Clemmons, who was gay, keep that secret off as well as on the screen, which strained but did not break their friendship, Long wrote. Rogers evolved toward a more accepting attitude, remaining active in Sixth Presbyterian Church in Squirrel Hill and supporting its gay-affirming ministries.

For those that Rogers disappointed, it helps to remember he "never depicted himself as a saint," said Mr. Long.

And judging by the letters that Long found in the archives of the Fred Rogers Center, plenty of viewers did understand the edginess of his messages - and didn't like them. Members of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church protested Rogers' funeral, recognizing that his mantra of unconditional acceptance challenged their anti-gay hate message.

Rogers created, hosted and directed his program at WQED in Pittsburgh from its mid-1960s local premier to its completion after three decades, 900 scripts, 230 songs, millions of viewers and countless magic trolley rides later.

The St. Vincent students say the course has given them a new appreciation for the Fred Rogers behind the Mister Rogers they knew in their early years.

"It's really interesting to look at it and see things I completely missed," Cara Thomson, a junior psychology major from Upper St. Clair, said. "I'm like, how did I miss that?" She said Rogers handled the subject matter appropriately for the children's age level and that the messages probably also got to the parents in the room.

Juli Cehula, a sophomore from Uniontown with a psychology major and children's studies minor, recalled that watching Mister Rogers each day, donning his trademark sweater, "was like another friend was coming into my house"

Now she's impressed with how he communicated with young children on topics like grief and anger.

"Today everyone's so guarded and has this shield up and doesn't want their kids to hear anything bad," she said. "But these are issues that children are dealing with"

Student Marla Turk of Painesville, Ohio, recalled how the show helped her bond with her mother when she was young.

"She would watch it with me and we would discuss it afterward," said Turk, a second-year major in mathematics and economics. That, she realizes, was prompted by Mister Rogers' open-ended questions such as "What do you think about change?" (asked during the King Friday episode).

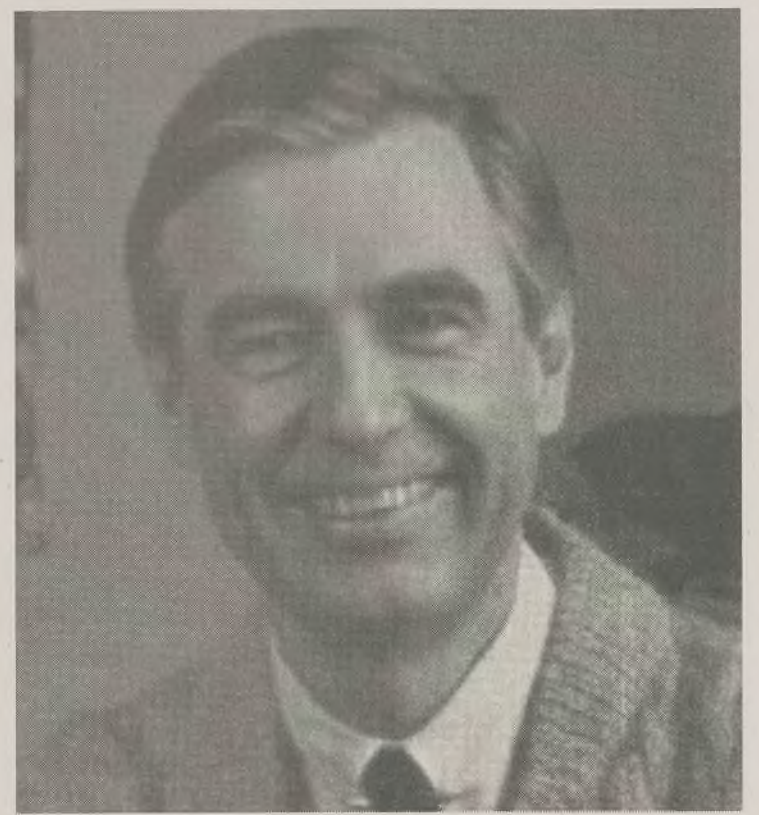
Unlike his students, Li never watched or heard of "Mister Rogers" when growing up in China. But he was working toward his doctorate in psychological science at Carnegie Mellon University when Rogers died in 2003 at age 74, and he began learning about and appreciating his work. That led to jobs at the non-profit Family Communications, which Rogers founded, and then at the Fred Rogers Center.

Li said he's impressed at "how cross-cultural he is" On return trips to China, he has lectured to rural parents raising foster children with special needs, and people are "invariably moved to tears" when he shows them videos of Mister Rogers singing about how special of ability.

Rogers came by his strong social values through serious spiritual exploration. He earned a degree at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and was ordained a Presbyterian minister. But "unofficially, he was Quaker" and a "dyed-in-the-wool" pacifist, said Mr. Long. His often-stated maxim that everyone was special, resembled the Quaker belief in a divine inner light.

Elizabeth Seamans, a longtime scriptwriter and actor on the "Neighborhood," knew Rogers to pray and read his much-underlined Bible every day and to apply Jesus' method of using parables to teach.

He never preached on broadcasts, and children would never know from it that he was a minister. But "he considered his television work as his ministry to children," she said.



MR. ROGERS  
(COURTESY PBS)

## Organizers: Moral revival tour will challenge injustice

(Continued From Front)

redistricting, labor laws, women's rights, gay rights and the environment. The weekly demonstrations often involved civil disobedience and led to hundreds of arrests.

It's now time for people to no longer embrace silence in the face of so much injustice, said Forbes, senior minister emeritus at Riverside Church in New York City. The tour "will remind our nation that even if dreamers' voices are silenced in death, there is no power on earth that can kill the dream of justice, peace and compassion," he said.

It will begin Sunday at Riverside Church. The first revival will be held the following day, April 4 - the anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 - at Temple Beth Or.

The tour will include direct actions in state capitals on three Mondays in September along with actions in Cleveland and Philadelphia after the GOP and Democratic national conventions in those cities, organizers said in a news release.

In addition to New York and North Carolina, the tour will travel to South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, Texas, Oklahoma and Washington, D.C.

Moral Monday is the legislative protest piece of the broader Forward Together movement led by the NAACP. The group has gone to court over North Carolina's new voting law and has challenged the state's redistricting plans. The movement has spread to several other states.

Barber, who is president of the state chapter of the NAACP, said he's speaking out on this tour as a minister and founder of a group called Repairers of the Breach. He is minister of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro.

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