

A Friendly Neighborhood Chat

Mr. Rogers speaks out on education, the Internet, and the importance of being human

By Sean P. Egen

In an industry where style and flash are often valued more than substance, Fred "Mister" Rogers has made a career out of quietly slipping into his sweater and canvas sneakers and calmly inviting us to be his neighbor. And America has graciously accepted. His TV show, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, is the longest running in PBS history at 32 years and counting.

Along with being a television icon to millions of kids, young and old, Rogers is also an ordained minister and chairman of Family Communications, Inc. (www.fci.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to children, their families, and those who support them. And now the boundaries of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* extend into cyberspace at www.pbs.org/rogers/ and www.misterrogers.org.

We recently chatted with Mr. Rogers—and invited him to our neighborhood.

bLink: If you hadn't become TV's Mr. Rogers, what would you have done with your life?

Rogers: Well, you know, I prepared to be a classical composer. In fact, I started out wanting to become a classical pianist. But instead of becoming one, I married one.

I think that if I hadn't been a composer, I would've probably gone into the ministry full-time. I went to the seminary after college, when I was doing a full-time daily TV program. We were producing *Children's Corner* here at WQED (in Pittsburgh), and I went on my lunch hour. It took me eight years to get through the seminary because I was a part-time student, but I did graduate with a Masters of Divinity degree.

bLink: What role does the Internet play in the daily life of Fred Rogers?

Rogers: I use it mainly for email—keeping in touch with many people that I might not have ordinarily been able to be in touch with so frequently. My wife loves to send jokes to different people—people send them to her, she sends them on. It's this marvelous way of being in touch.

I have done little bits of research, but I can't say I've used it a lot this way—I think the older I get, the

more I'll be interested in that. For instance, I'm very much interested in Greek and Hebrew. I look forward to being able to expand my knowledge of those languages.

bLink: How do you see the Internet's role in children's education?

Rogers: Well, I think it's like the early days of educational broadcasting. We had great hopes for having television used in the schools as supplements for the teachers. And I think that's being realized almost more now through the Internet than through television, and will continue to be. So maybe we were just early in our thinking that way—with a different medium.

bLink: Do children learn differently than 30 years ago?

Rogers: I noticed that my grandsons have used the computer in their learning, which of course kids 30 years ago would never have had the chance to do. My grandson was at our place, using my wife's computer to look up really complicated stuff about dinosaurs—with great ease. I just delighted in that, because then he turned around and shared it with us.

bLink: What is the goal of your Web site?

Rogers: The goal is interactivity, encouraging imaginative play, hearing characters that the children have seen on television—and the children are then able to use those characters to make their own play. I also hope—since there are so many adults who have grown up with the *Neighborhood* and now have children of their own—that they're able to use the site together with their children. I just trust that everyone who uses our site will always know that human beings are far more important than any machine. That is the message that has been constant since day one. Whatever computers can do to bring real people together, that's their best use.

bLink: One popular segment of your show is where you visit a factory and show children how things are made, or how they work. Would you consider coming to EarthLink to show the kids how the Internet works?

Rogers: Oh, that would be a really fascinating segment. In fact, it sounds like a whole special. We'll pass that on to the producers. ☺

