



Fred Rogers looked to his teacher and mentor, Margaret McFarland, for ideas, inspiration, and insight for more than 30 years. Their discussions about children and life were practical as well as deeply philosophical. When they couldn't meet in person or talk over the phone, the discussions continued in their correspondence.

MISTER ROGERS' MENTOR

BY SALLY ANN FLECKER

# WHEN FRED MET MARGARET

**I**n the 1950s, before Fred Rogers became Mister Rogers of television fame, he was a theology student who was interested in working with young children. For counseling experience, Rogers was assigned to work under the supervision of child psychologist Margaret B. McFarland, an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh. That, as they say, was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. It was a pivotal professional relationship, as well. For 30-some years, until her death at the age of 83 in 1988, Rogers and McFarland would meet weekly to discuss children, upcoming scripts, props for the show, or song lyrics. They often talked daily. So much of Rogers' thinking about and appreciation for children was shaped and informed by McFarland's work—actually by her very being—that to know and love Mister Rogers is to know and love Margaret McFarland.



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In 1953, a powerhouse triumvirate founded the Arsenal Family & Children's Center, where pediatric students could go for training in normal child development. McFarland, as cofounder and director until 1971, was at the heart of the center. Her partners were pediatrician Benjamin Spock, her then-colleague on the medical school faculty, and psychosocial developmentalist Erik Erikson (a visiting professor in the School of Medicine from 1951 to 1960). McFarland had not achieved the same fame as Spock, author of *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, one of the best-selling books of all time, and Erikson, author of *Childhood and Society* and originator of the term "identity crisis." But McFarland, a 1927 alumna of Goucher College who did her doctoral studies at Columbia University, was every bit their equal. Fred Rogers, on the many public occasions when he acknowledged McFarland's significance to his work, frequently passed along Erikson's high praise: "Margaret McFarland," Erikson had said, "knew more than anyone in this world about families with young children."

If Rogers wanted to understand more about the inner life of the child, he had come to the right person. McFarland, a tiny, soft-spoken woman from Oakdale, Pa., had taught kindergarten teachers in Australia for four years and was on the faculty of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts before returning to her hometown. She didn't just have deep intellectual prowess in developmental theory. The meanings and textures of the child's emotional landscape were the air she breathed.

One time, Rogers wanted to do a program about fire. He took his ideas to McFarland. "She helped me to realize that it was essential to deal with control of fluids before even introducing anything about fire," Rogers recounted in a conversation published as the prologue to Stuart Omans and Maurice O'Sullivan's book, *Shakespeare Plays the Classroom*. "I learned, for instance, that most children's dreams about fire center around their control of their own body fluids! That's how personal a 'fire' can seem to a child."

With insight informed, but not dictated, by her psychoanalytical training, McFarland understood just how hard children work at learning to control their bodily fluids. Potty training is no picnic for parents, but imagine it from the point of view of the child. It's a pretty big, anxiety-laced deal. So Rogers created segments where he examined the everyday

flow of water in bathtubs, and he showed films of children damming up streams—a way of manipulating and controlling fluids—and looking at waterfalls (which can be both scary and exciting at the same time). "And then, finally ... a tiny fire—and I mean tiny—in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe," Rogers said. "We didn't show flames, just some smoke; and the fire was put out in half a minute by the make-believe fire people." When the shows aired, Rogers fielded seven complaint calls on behalf of children who had been frightened by the fire. Each of those children was having urinary difficulties. "I was fascinated," Rogers remembered. "If I hadn't had the developmental insight, I wouldn't have been able to

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begin to understand the obvious tie between what was presented on our program and the children's personal developmental concerns dealing with anything related to fire."

The Pittsburgh-born historian David McCullough, in a 2003 interview with the National Endowment for the Humanities, pointed out another of McFarland's great acuties. "What she taught in essence is that attitudes aren't taught, they're caught," he said. "If the attitude of the teacher toward the material is positive, enthusiastic, committed, and excited, the students get that."

Once, McFarland asked a well-known sculptor from Carnegie Mellon University to come to Arsenal, Rogers recalled in the Omans and O'Sullivan book. "Dr. McFarland said to him, 'I don't want you to teach sculpting. All I want you to do is to love clay in front of the children.' And that's what he did. He came once a week for a whole term, sat with the 4- and 5-year-olds as they played, and he 'loved' his clay in front of them. ... The children caught his enthusiasm for it, and that's what mattered. So like most good things, 'teaching' has to do with honesty."

By all accounts, McFarland's performance as a teacher was spellbinding. Rather than rely on textbook descriptions of early development, she would bring in a mother and child for 15-or-so minutes. Then she would spend the next two and a half hours describing what she had noticed about their interactions.

"I've never seen anything like it before or

since," says Margaret Mary Kimmel, a PhD professor emerita of library and information sciences at Pitt. Kimmel, who was also a consultant for Rogers, created a class called Early Childhood and Media, for which McFarland offered to teach the child development segments. "Margaret talked about how the child interacted with the mother. 'Did you see her face and the baby's face? And what about when he started to fuss? How did the mother handle it?' I learned so much from just watching her watch and describe to the class what was going on between the mother and the baby."

Pittsburgh play therapist Carole McNamee was one of McFarland's child development students in the early 1970s. "She could just spot

things. She was phenomenal that way," says McNamee. Was the child exploring? Was the mother encouraging or discouraging? "Mostly she would be aiming for, in development, what that meant."

McNamee remembers telling McFarland a story about her 1-year-old daughter Caitlin, who was terrified of ants. Outside on the patio one day, McNamee showed the little girl how to step on an ant. "That turned out to be a big game," says McNamee. "She went around stomping on bugs for days. Margaret pointed out how handling small things became part of what Caitlin was able to do that gave her control over her life." Throughout the time she worked with children, McNamee says, McFarland's was the voice she could hear in her head.

"Margaret spent her time teaching, and with Fred, and with the children at Arsenal," says Kimmel. McFarland left behind very little written work; this writer unearthed a journal article on the "development of motherliness" and her dissertation, a case study on the relationship between sisters. "It highlights, for an academic, why writing is so important. [Otherwise] your fame is only in your students."

Yet by that token, Margaret McFarland lives on. Her students do not include just the scores of medical school and child development students she taught at Pitt and the many children and families she worked with at Arsenal. Her students also include every child who ever tuned in to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Quiet fame, perhaps, but nonetheless enduring. ■





At the end of each show, Fred Rogers sang, "It's Such a Good Feeling," punctuated by a snap. The peppy tune and its affirmative lyrics echoed an injunction of his mentor, Margaret McFarland: Attitudes aren't taught. They're caught.



# IT'S A BEAUTIFUL, AND WELL-THOUGHT-OUT, NEIGHBORHOOD

Fred Rogers was a lifelong student of childhood and development. Under the exquisite tutelage of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine's Margaret McFarland, he honed his intuitive approach toward children with a solid understanding of developmental principles and an appreciation for the actual work of childhood. Not only did he script every moment of his show, but he also approached every storyline, prop, puppet, and lyric—every last detail—from the perspective of how a child would perceive it and incorporate it developmentally.



## Entrance

At the start of every show, Mister Rogers enters his house by walking in the door, which is on the left of the viewer's screen, and moving to the right. This is how children's eyes will track when they learn to read.



## The shoe change

While Mister Rogers is tying his sneakers and zipping his sweater, children have the opportunity to move into the content of the show, so do they.



## Pace

The show's unhurried pace, in marked distinction from most contemporary children's programs, allows children the chance to process what is being presented, the opportunity to make connections, and the space to concentrate.





## Opening and closing moments

Each episode begins with Mister Rogers singing “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” and ends with “It’s Such a Good Feeling.” Routine gives children a feeling of security.



## Music

Piano compositions offer transitions from Mister Rogers’ house to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe through sly key changes that incorporate notes from the old key into the new one. Rogers likens that to a child going to a new school having the opportunity to see mother and teacher together for a moment.



## Trolley

The trolley serves as a transition. It brings viewers into the show and ferries them from Mister Rogers’ house to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe and back safely to Mister Rogers again. It also gives young children, who are concerned when parents leave, practice with issues of disappearance and reappearance.



## Reality and make-believe

A clear and careful distinction is drawn between what’s imagined and what’s real. Mister Rogers is never present in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. He does, however, both set up for what will happen in Make-Believe, as well as offer additional commentary when the segment is over. The message to children is that it is they who have control over their pretend worlds.

## Unflinching gaze

Mister Rogers often turns to the camera to talk to children—looking right into the television audience for what, to adults, might seem uncomfortably long. For children, though, the eye gaze mimics their earliest interactions with their parents and provides a supportive moment.



## You can never go down the drain

Really. But who would have thought before *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* aired that young children had very real concerns about those kinds of things?

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