

When things get scary, remember Mr. Rogers

Knoxville 4:00 p.m. ET June 21, 2017



(Photo: Paul Efir / News Sentinel)

In our family it's simply known as the Fred Story. During either Christmas break 1980 or spring break 1981, I cobbled together enough money to fly home to Pittsburgh from my graduate program at Syracuse. My mom met me at the gate. Coming the other direction in the hallway was Fred Rogers, the founder and host of the public television children's program "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

"Hello, Fred," said my mom. Instantly I was taken aback. "Oh, my God," I thought, "she's talking to a guy we only know through television. How embarrassing."

"Hello, Claire," beamed Fred Rogers, "it's been years."

At the moment I could've been knocked over with a feather. She knows Fred? Regaining composure, I joined their conversation. He was headed to a conference on children's television. By the way, his soft, slow, reassuring voice was not a TV affectation. That's exactly how he spoke.

Following the brief chat Mom and I headed to the parking lot. "All those years with the trolley and the puppets, the sweaters and the sneakers, and you never said you knew Fred?" I stammered.

She looked at me with a look that only a mother can give and said, "I don't tell you everything."

Eventually, bolstered by my sister and brother, we got the story. She and Fred long ago had done some children's theater at the Pittsburgh Playhouse. Sometime in late 1956 or early 1957 he'd called and explained he had been developing further plans for his children's television program on educational television. Would she like to come to Pittsburgh's station WQED to play some characters? She declined, noting she was pregnant (that would be me) and starting a family.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about Fred Rogers. He died in 2003, but his memory lives on through his programs, his books, scholarships and a company still devoted to the healthy emotional growth of children. Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister and a student of child development.

In 1969 we also had a mean-spirited president who exploited anger, fear, differences and division — and one who sought to cut funds from public broadcasting. Fred Rogers' thoughtful congressional testimony played a large part in saving the newly formed Public Broadcasting Service.

In this scary time we adults can take solace in the words Fred Rogers relayed to children: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

Now it is up to us, the youngsters who saw early versions of Fred Rogers' work in Pittsburgh and the kids who nationally saw his program starting in 1968, to be the helpers.

Mark Harmon is a professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee, and a member of the Tennessee Democratic Party Executive Committee.

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Senior softball enthusiastically casual, fun

Mark Harmon, Columnist 4:00 p.m. ET June 14, 2017



(Photo: Paul Efir / News Sentinel)

I played my first game in the Knox Senior Co-Ed Softball league earlier this summer on my 60th birthday. My team is the Green Hornets, the largest of the rosters and one used to fill gaps when the Grayhounds, Blue Sox, Cardinals, Yellow Jackets and Young at Heart (orange T-shirts) are short on players.

Tuesday and Thursday mornings, weather permitting, we can be found at Caswell Park. The league started in 2008 and soon had four teams; now it has six, playing games on three of the four diamonds.

League rules encourage warm-ups and stretching, sage advice for coercing senior bodies through the rigors of play. I learned this well when running the bases earlier this summer. I felt a pull in my left leg and crumbled to the infield dirt. A week of recovery later I was back on the field.

Purists or very competitive people likely would scoff at our slow-pitch league rules. Balls and strikes are not called. Everyone plays. Outs are made in the field, but three outs end nothing. A half-inning ends when all players bat for that team. On the base path there are no lead offs. You can overrun any base without penalty. Runners are forced out only, no tag outs. To further reduce the chance of collisions, there is an alternate home plate (in foul territory near the one used for batting) that runners must use.

Running speed varies greatly. I've seen and been part of some slow-motion double plays. Men, starting at age 60, and women, starting at 55, play together with ease. If you look closely, you can see them subtly adjusting to each opposition batter, anticipating the next play and communicating as to who will cover which base. All do their best regardless of age; six octogenarians dot our ranks.

Infield chatter, the "hey batter" chants of Little Leaguers, has no role here. One hears only some casual joking and the occasional encouragement of teammates, even opponents. Dugout conversation drifts casually, usually landing on weather, sport, family and one's health. Politics and religion informally are taboo, or at least approached gingerly.

Our Green Hornet crowd typically consists of the spouse of one player. She avoids the metal bleachers and sits in a portable lawn chair. Another senior couple met in the league and married on the field in 2010.

John Schmidt, who both plays and coordinates the league, declared, "Softball is a game. Senior softball is a passion." More than 80 people have played at least one game this year. Scores and standings are not kept. Games end with congratulations and smiles. All seem pleased to play some variation of the sport of our youth, tempered by our age but still infused with our enthusiasm.

Mark Harmon, professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee, is a second baseman and occasional shortstop.

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Dogs leave legacy of love, laughs

Mark Harmon, Columnist Published 4:00 a.m. ET Oct. 26, 2017 | Updated 5:42 a.m. ET Oct. 26, 2017



(Photo: Paul Efird / News Sentinel)

We called the puppy Sam even before we knew he was part Samoyed. My brother Mike brought him home. Sam was a white ball of fur broken only by dots for his eyes and nose, and a hint of brown at the tips of his ears.

Most pets leave fond memories. Sam did more. He became the comic actor in family stories.

Our pup adored all of us. Any of us returning to the house was a cause for jubilant, random dashing. When he'd grown larger he added a tendency to put his jaws around my wrist and lead me around the house. On one of those trips I discovered his stash, a collection of our washcloths and socks. He apparently rubbed his snout on

them to be closer to our smells.

Sam was not a great walking dog. He could trot alongside me, but also could pull violently toward passing motorcycles, or get agitated by an object later discovered to be a ceramic garden gnome. One hates to get too scatological, but once a Sam poop came wrapped in knee-high hose that likely had been part of his stash.

Our dog adored Mom. The quickest way to stop his excitement about one of us was to say, "Mommy's coming." He'd dash to the door, tail wagging triple time. She'd return from work and let him have her car keys, and those keys jangled as he made a racecourse of the first floor.

Together they'd relax in the kitchen. She made the mistake of asking him to "give paw" and rewarded him with a piece of cheese on a Wheat Thin. The process of association meant that from then on he'd put a paw on her knee and expect a cracker. If it appeared without cheese, he'd sniff and peer upward at her — as if to say, "Something's missing."

Sam also would hang out with mom as she cooked dinner. One night she treated him to spaghetti sauce on his dog food. Moments later he trotted about the house with a reddish-orange stain encircling his snout.

Our dog Sam once broke free of his chain in the yard and was dashing about in traffic. My brother and I chased him until an inspired Mike walked up to a car stopped at a traffic light and opened the rear door. "C'mon, Sam," Mike yelled, "let's go for a ride." Sam plopped into the car, much to the surprise of the startled driver. "Sorry, lady, it's the only way to get my dog," announced Mike as he grabbed Sam's leash and dragged him away.

Samoyed/shepherd mixes are susceptible to epilepsy. The affliction appeared and escalated quickly. Sam died in a fit, far too young but leaving a legacy of joy and love impossible to forget.

Mark D. Harmon is a professor of journalism at the University of Tennessee.

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