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'Won't You Be My Neighbor'

By Derek Zemrak

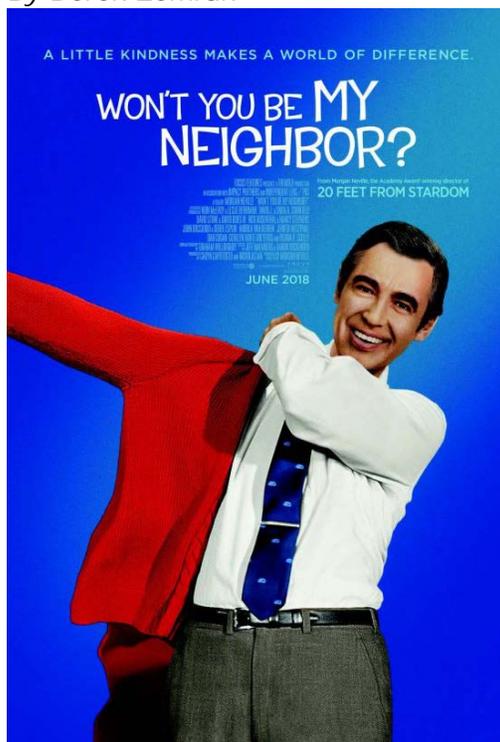


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If you asked any 30 to 80-year-old "What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear Won't You Be My Neighbor," I would guess that 75 percent would say "Mr. Rogers" and the other 25 percent would say "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." But who was Fred Rogers, the host of this children's program that ran on PBS television for more than 33 years? The show first aired on Feb. 19, 1968 and continued until Aug. 31, 2001.

"Won't You Be My Neighbor" is an in-depth, moving documentary by the Oscar-winning documentarian Morgan Neville ("Twenty Feet from Stardom"). If you haven't seen Neville's "Twenty Feet from Stardom," do yourself a favor and see it. It is one of my all-time favorite documentaries, which was released in 2013. This time around Neville explores in detail who Fred Rogers really was and why he was on a mission to provide young children quality, wholesome television programming.

Rogers delayed his plan to become a minister in order to start his first children's show in 1953. "The Children's Corner" aired on the newly formed public television station, WQED in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The rest is television history and later the show became a national success as "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." Rogers' style was completely different from other children's programs. Rogers did not play a character or use comedy. His goal was to educate young viewers. He didn't believe in playing a character because he wanted to be just himself on camera. He often stated, "One of the greatest gifts

you can give anybody is the gift of your honest self."

"Won't You Be My Neighbor" explores all the difficult subjects addressed during the shows including the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy, the Challenger space crash to 9/11. Rogers spoke about these issues and many others head on and directly to the children. Over his career Rogers produced over 1,100 children's television shows.

Not everyone liked the show or Fred Rogers and these issues are also addressed in the film. Sadly, there were several protestors at Rogers' funeral in 2003.

"Won't You Be My Neighbor" opens at the Orinda Theatre on June 22. I highly recommend this documentary, which is rated PG-13 with a total running time of 1 hour and 34 minutes.

The reopening of the Rheem Theatre will be at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, June 14. During the reception, there will be a fundraising auction to benefit the theatre. "Incredibles 2" will be screened at 7 p.m. Paul Mendoza, Lafayette resident and Pixar Supervising Animator on "Incredibles 2" will introduce the film. Tickets are \$40, which includes the reception and movie. A movie only ticket is \$12. Let's all come out and support the reopening of the Rheem Theatre.

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