From the perspective of our time, almost 80 years later, it can seem like such an abrupt change. Here is this little boy, so shy and unsure of himself, chubby, sometimes sickly, deeply dependent on the love and support of his parents and grandparents. And then, in what seems such a sudden transition, there is this slightly older boy, just getting to his teenage years, who is slimmer, more self-assured, focused on his school work, even beginning to distance himself from his parents. And in photos from that time of this emerging Fred Rogers, a look of confidence and poise.

In real life, of course, it was never so sudden. It wasn’t just one thing, one event, that turned the tide. It was a series of things that helped a struggling young boy find the means to shift, to start the lifelong process of finding himself and then defining his life.

It was the extraordinary devotion of a beautiful young mother who talked with Fred Rogers as if he, too, were a grown-up; and listened, always listened so carefully and thoughtfully, to the questions and worries of the young boy.

And it was the support of his maternal grandfather, Fred B. McFeely, who spent countless hours encouraging the boy to take risks and do the things he really wanted to do—and
Fred Rogers with his nurse Laura Mellon, or as he affectionately called her, “Wawa.”

who famously told the tentative young man, "Freddy, I like you just the way you are." And the music, which gave context to the creative yearnings of the boy—all made practically real when his grandmother, Nancy McFeeley, affectionately called her, "Wawa."

By the time Fred Rogers was in high school, he was a fine student and an accomplished young man—student council president, editor of the Latrobean, finalist in the Rotary Oratorical Contest, winner of an extemporaneous speaking prize, an actor in high school theater, and a member of the National Honor Society. And he was exercising his independence: staying home to focus on his studies during his parents’ long winter vacations in Florida, choosing his own friends rather than the children of his parents’ friends, and heading off to New England and then Florida for college rather than his father’s alma mater, Penn State.

In a way, it had started with some of the bullying Fred had experienced in elementary school. Rogers was set apart from the other young boys in his town of Latrobe, Pennsylvania by a number of things—his shyness and vulnerability, his asthma and sickliness. As much as anything else, it was that Fred’s parents had money and many of his schoolmates didn’t. His parents, worried and predisposed to protect their young son and afraid to let him in the Lindbergh-kidnapping era, had Fred driven to elementary school daily in a black Cadillac limousine. The family chauffeur, a driver named Brent Ross, who was trusted and loved by the little boy, took him to school early every morning and picked him up in the middle of the afternoon, rain or shine. But, as much as he appreciated this care, then nobody will bother you. ‘"

As the young Fred Rogers thought about the bullying, and what he was advised by the adults in his life, he rejected that advice about the hours he spent in church with his mother, and all the lessons he learned from her and from the church services. He knew he really did care. And he knew he wanted to care.

Fred Rogers’ mother, Nancy, was a loquacious adult. She loved to talk. And she loved to talk with Fred. Never to Fred, always with Fred. She talked with him as an adult, and she listened with the greatest interest to everything he had to say, and answered his questions about her deep religious faith and her relentless commitment to charity and giving. She instilled in him, at the youngest age, a sense of service, but it was always more joyful than dutiful.

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Fred Rogers was running, and the boys were running after him, calling out: "Freddy, hey Freddy, fat Freddy. We’re going to get you, Freddy.” Rogers went over to the nearby home of a family friend, a widow named Mrs. Stewart, who let him in and comforted him. Those boys went on their way, and Mrs. Stewart called my house and somebody came and got me,” recalled Rogers years later, speaking at Saint Vincent College. “... but I resented the teasing. I resented the pain. I resented those kids for not seeing beyond my fatness or my shyness... and what’s more I didn’t know that it was all right to resent it, to feel bad about it, even to feel very sad about it. I didn’t know it was alright to feel any of those things, because the advice I got from the grown-ups was, ‘Just let on you don’t care, then nobody will bother you.’"

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their learning from any other source except their own parents and families. And, over the years, Fred Rogers became the national symbol of early learning, just at the same time that psychologists, child-development experts and researchers worldwide were finding that the learning that takes place in the earliest years—social and emotional learning, as well as cognitive education—is the crucial building block for successful and happy lives.

The children responded in ways that brought millions to watch their television sets and experience this quiet, graying, slightly stooped, middle-aged man with a gentle manner. He led them through his daily lessons on life, broadcast nationally on educational television. He became the exemplar, for these children, their parents and a whole nation, of high-quality early childhood education. And he became the symbol of educational television, too. And, finally, the symbol of the potential of human life to be led by the most deep and humanistic values, to be led by love.

He preached love, he lived love, and millions of children grew up loving him.

Nothing was so surprising to public television managers as the day in April, 1967, when Fred Rogers visited WGBH in Boston. That city had been one of the first metropolitan centers outside Pittsburgh to air Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, even before the Neighborhood was nationally syndicated, and the managers of WGBH knew Fred was popular with the children who tuned into their
applied in advance, and only ticket-holders were admitted. New protocols in which tickets were issued to those who when Fred came back to WGBH, the staff there instituted the logistics of just moving people through. In later years, talking with each and every child, further complicating that had been expected. The line wound into the station’s that number. When over 5,000 people showed up, the line stretched down the street toward Soldiers Field, where the Harvard football team played, and created traffic slow-downs reminiscent of football-game days. McFeely; son, Fred; sister, Laney; and Father, James. The Rogers Family—mother, Nancy; grandmother, Nancy Rogers’ skill as a television programmer set him apart, of course. But it was his creative vitality, his moral fiber in a world that often seems guided by no moral standard in the world of instant communication, and researchers debate its impact on education and cognitive function, Fred Rogers stands out clearly as someone who, though he embraced and used new technology in his creative work, always did so in a careful, thoughtful, slow-paced fashion. Today, new studies are showing that information processing on computers and hand-held devices can have an impact on everything from the functioning of the mind to the health of the brain itself. Rogers’ method was to keep things simple, and to go at a measured pace, always examining the media and the content carried on the media to ensure that the highest standards for quality were in place. Although Fred wore the traditional necktie on the Neighborhood, he actually preferred bowties. Here he is pictured with his sister, Laney.