

Educator in the Neighborhood:

**Erica Nemzek, Early Learning Coordinator, Waynesboro Area School District**

Erica has been teaching for 13 years. In her current role, she works with 15 Kindergarten teachers in four different elementary schools. She also supports seven *PA pre-K Counts* classrooms. Erica lives in Waynesboro, PA with her husband, son, and dog.



*What's your earliest personal memory of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood?*

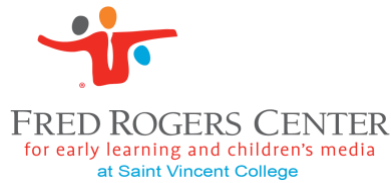
I would have probably been 4 years old. My family had a shoe repair business so I stayed at home with my parents. I can remember connecting with Mister Rogers because I was intrigued by the way he would take his shoes off and my dad was a shoe repair man. So, I remember pretending that when Mister Rogers took his shoes off he would be taking them to our shop to get them repaired.

*What is your favorite episode you've shared with played for students? Why?*

It has to be the hula hoop episode (episode [1720](#)). There is something about that episode... that the kids are in full amazement. And it is relatable. The idea of practicing and that you're not good at everything and when you aren't good at something, then you practice and practice and then you get better. It's just an easily, relatable piece.

The way I have set up the lessons for the teachers, the hula hoop episode is part of lesson 3. In all of the classrooms, it seemed that no matter where classrooms were in terms of student interest in MRN so far, like maybe in one class only 1-2 students seemed to watch MRN and in another maybe more seemed interested, but when you played the hula hoop episode, everyone watched it. And then they've all been connected to Mister Rogers ever since.

*Could you explain a bit about how are you working with teachers this year?*



In my position I'm able to support and co-teach with classroom Kindergarten teachers. My job is to create and support social-emotional lessons and I've decided to use MRN episodes to do so. So, I prepare and map the lessons based on curriculum and student needs. The first four lessons of my mapping are all a foundational piece as to why we are watching MRN.

The hula hoop lesson was one of these four foundational lessons. I ask everyone to do the first four lessons, and then they can follow the mapping for the rest of the year, or they can take off and select episodes on their own. Lessons one and two included just small clips of episodes, then with the hula hoop episode... it was just all attention on deck! And this made the teachers go, "oh, maybe this will work." This is part of the buy-in, getting classroom teachers to understand how students now days can connect to episodes that they might not think are relevant.

*Do you see a difference when you play a short clip vs a whole episode?*

It depends. For me when I would play short clips, it was purposeful because maybe the pretend play in Neighborhood of Make Believe would have lost interest because students would have needed to watch the episode before to understand it. But, when we watch the full episodes, those ones might not have had as long of a Make Believe section because it might have had a factory visit that was longer. I make decisions, personally, based on if the Make Believe section can stand on its own or needs the episodes around it. But then there are also times when I will just skip over it. It depends.

*Do you have a most memorable MRN classroom moment?*

I have so many. It would probably be the dominoes episode ([1657](#)) or the one creating with the markers (episode [1646](#)). Because with both of those, the follow-up that happened with students was memorable. With the dominoes... we explored how it was to communicate and share and take turns with dominoes in a large group, small group, or in pairs. And how that matters. With the marker episode, Mister Rogers uses the markers to draw when he plays Mozart. To have the kids, first of all, be introduced to that style of music and see how you can create a picture in that way, and second of all, for them to draw a picture of "nothing" and then be able to express how the music made them feel.

*How has MRN impacted your teaching?*

I remember seeing or hearing the question: What would Mister Rogers do? I think about that. After watching how he speaks, his eye contact, his tone, his cadence, his ability to pause and think in space and time. It's almost musical the way he speaks. This helps me pause and reflect about how I'm having a conversation with a student. That it's okay for there to be silence.

*Which puppet or person of MRN do you most identify with? Why?*



Oh, man (laughing). I would probably be speedy delivery Mr. McFeely because I feel like I'm always trying to be that person who says here you go, here's what you need. He's got this high energy in how he speaks, and he's there and then he needs to go. I just see myself as that character.

*Besides Mister Rogers, which puppet or person of MRN do you notice students talking about the most?*

I think Owl because they think that Owl is Mister Rogers. I find that as they're getting to know the adult characters, they are trying to connect them to the puppets. They are trying to understand the puppets and who is talking. They are trying to figure out who is saying what.

*What is something you've learned in your readings from the FRC archives?*

Well, I guess everything that I'm learning behind the scenes is new. Because I only saw Mister Rogers from my childhood perspective before now. So learning things as an adult is amazing. That he wrote his own scripts. To be in the archive and see all of the real documents that he wrote and hear these amazing pieces of artwork, these episodes on TV, and we still play these episodes and they're still relatable. Now days, there are so many people putting their hands on scripts when something is made for TV, but for him, yes he had help, but it was pretty much him doing it, writing it all.

*What more would you like to learn from Fred Rogers and the archive?*

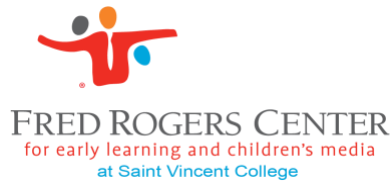
I want to learn more about the puppets because I didn't know that he was the voice of all of them and I want to learn more about which puppets are based different people in Fred Roger's life.

*Why do you show MRN to students?*

To be honest, in my position, I was asked to find a set curriculum for our students for Social-Emotional Learning because we know that for our kids this is an area we need to strengthen. And when thinking of what a program would be like, I couldn't find anything that I thought would be better than playing Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. I didn't want a program or another set of workbook things or someone pretending to act our different scenarios. I wanted it to be authentic and relatable and captivating. I wanted the kids to enjoy it.

*Is there anything else you want to say?*

I guess my other take back is in the world we're living in—and we're seeing it now in this Covid-19 situation. Everyone is used to fast paced and quick fix. Playing episodes slows the pace and allows students to connect and reflect at their own speed and to do it personally. It is kind of ironic now that everyone has to be shut down. It seems like people are having to re-learn how to slow down and connect with their families.



*What message from Fred Rogers do you think matters right now for families at home with children [due to Covid-19 closures]?*

Caregivers are being looked to for comfort even harder right now. Our children will bounce back and we will all be resilient, but we have to have patience with one another, give each other grace—knowing that we are all in a state of uncertainty—and therefore remind our children that we love them, they are safe, and we will get through this together. Smile! We know that is contagious, too.

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*Educators' Neighborhood* interviews are conducted and transcribed by Melissa Butler.