

Educator in the Neighborhood:

Maureen Frew, Digital Media Specialist, Avonworth Primary Center

Maureen has been teaching for 21 years. She works with 450 students in Grades K-2 in the Avonworth School District, primarily through morning push-in/co-teaching with making-based activities in classrooms and afternoon technology-based classes. She lives in the North Hills with her husband of 40 years, in a community where many of her students also live.



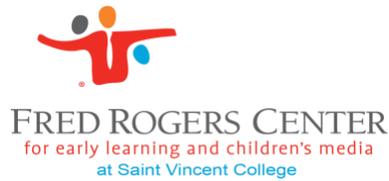
What's your earliest personal memory of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood?

Probably when my daughter, who is now 35, when she and I would watch it together before she would go to afternoon Kindergarten. She would eat Kraft Macaroni and Cheese at our round kitchen table, and we would watch Mister Rogers before she would catch the bus. He happened to be on at the exact right time because you couldn't record it or DVR it back then. You had to be there at the exact time it was on and we were there to watch it.

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

I really love the one with the boy [Jeff Erlanger] in the wheelchair (episode #1478). How Mister Rogers gets down to his level. He talks with him and lets him talk himself about how his chair works and who he is. Kids really relate to that because the child is talking instead of the adult doing all of the talking. Most adults would have done the talking to explain why he is in a wheelchair. Mister Rogers connects to children at their level.

As a maker-space educator, how do you think MRN connects to maker-centered learning?



Well, we have Handiman Negri who is always fixing something. And Fred is always making something... always... turning things into something else. He took the oatmeal container and made it into a bank. And the furniture company [in Neighborhood of Make Believe] and the sets are all handmade. It's not a green screen or anything; people actually stopped and did that, everything is made. Even "Picture Picture"... it is for something imaginary, but there is always an object there that was made.

You've played episodes not only to Kindergarteners, but also for older students who are part of your afterschool program. How have older students responded?

Yes, the majority of the older students responded really well because they are excited to say, "Oh, I remember that," or "Oh, my little brother watches Daniel Tiger." The episodes I have shown to them show some extra kindness. No matter how hard you try to get people to show kindness, it can be hard. There were times when we were having difficulty with kindness, so we just stopped and watched an episode. I told them, "Look, we need to step back from the making and re-think why we are really here, remember our purpose."

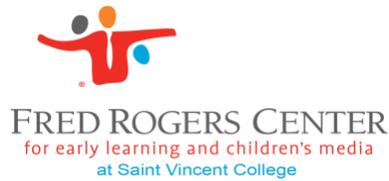
How else do you share MRN episodes and messages with your school community?

I am a big fan of Twitter... and I post messages for families, today the message was "give something good today," and I'm surprised to go back in the evening to follow the chain. I am often surprised to see who liked or re-tweeted or said, "Oh, we needed that." And for our morning announcements, a girl was singing "This Little Light of Mine." Now lots of kids want to sing songs. I'm still doing the morning announcements from my basement [because schools are closed]. I say, Today is Monday.... It's a rainy day... Happy birthday to __, __, and __... Your special [class] today is library.... You might want to think about.... We give a daily science experiment... and then a message like "Try to be kind to someone you weren't kind to yesterday," or "Write a message the garbage workers and go put it on your garbage can," or "Write a thank you note and put it out for the people who are making package deliveries." I sometimes quote from Mister Rogers for these messages. [Note: these morning messages go to each class of the entire school community, even during this time of school closures.]

How has MRN impacted your teaching?

I think it's probably been my best year of teaching. One, because of my age. Two, I understand now that simple and plain, noticing small details are more important than finding the next gadget. Slow down. It's more important for them to make a mistake and learn from their process. All 20 sunflowers don't need to look the same. I need to teach them foundational skills for them to teach themselves. For me to do it, nobody's learning.

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



Hmmm. Let me think about that. Unfortunately, I would say King Friday. I have a super strong personality. I'm trying with age to tone it back. Just because I'm loud doesn't mean other people are loud. The tone of what you say really sets the stage for the whole entire day for the child. And King Friday is students' least favorite character. They say, "Oh, he's so mean." He has a soft interior, though... it's just getting past that quick judgement.

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

At times I read and sometimes I wonder... I wish I could have sat on a couch next to Fred Rogers and met him. Is there somebody really like that? What made him be that way? He never missed what was happening with others. What gave him that initiative? How was he so intuitive? He didn't let it consume his whole life, but he was always there for other people. How did he set a boundary to do all that he did, but keep himself half-way normal? We don't know.

Why do you show MRN to students?

I think kids grow up way, way, way too fast. We as citizens of the world, whether you are a teacher, an uncle, a mother, anyone... we have to realize we are asking babies right now to do too many things. And then when they try something and get frustrated or cry, people say, "Oh, you're a big boy/girl and you need to do ___." I think about this... I watch kids be 13 when they are really 5 years old and it's too much. And schools often pit teachers against one another. They point out, "Oh, look what those students are doing" [compared with other students]. And I want to say... "No, they're [the students] not doing it, you're doing it. Let them be 5 years old and do what they can do."

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

I think it matters for families to know that you're doing the best you can. It's not perfect. You don't need to be perfect. Just do your best. When they're in school, it's not perfect either. Don't worry about what your neighbors are doing or anyone else, just do the best you can. Just do the best you can.

Do you have a hope for how connections with MRN might grow at Avonworth Primary Center next school year?

Oh, I have a hope that it will spread to more than Kindergarten and that it will be part of a weekly routine. Maybe at one point all the teachers would show the same episode and kids would get together and talk with each other about the episode... what do they like and why do they like it.

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



FRED ROGERS CENTER
for early learning and children's media
at Saint Vincent College