

Educator in the Neighborhood:

**Kathy Brown, Kindergarten teacher, Pittsburgh Beechwood preK-5**

Kathy has been teaching for 32 years in Pittsburgh Public Schools, 23 years in Kindergarten. Throughout her 32 years, she has always had children in her classroom learning English as a second or third language. Educators run in her family; her dad was a principal in PPS and her grandmother was a Kindergarten teacher. She lives in Monroeville with her husband and three dogs. She has two grown children who are twins.

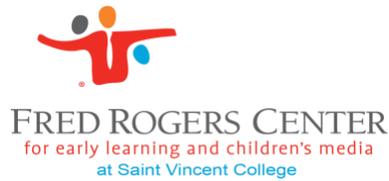


*What's your earliest personal memory of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood?*

The vision that pops into my mind, is sitting on the floor in my living room. I might have been 5 or 6 years old. I had two little sisters, ages four and two. Maybe me and my 4-year-old sister were watching Mister Rogers. It was very structured childhood. We'd watch it every day and Sesame Street afterwards. Then we'd eat lunch and go out to play. I remember pure joy and comfort in watching his show.

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

There are two, I'm thinking about. We found the one with Lynn Swann (episode 1484) and Mister Rogers going to the ballet class for Black History Month. I have a Lynn Swann jersey and I wore it to school that day. Afterwards, I played a CD of classical music and the whole class was doing their ballet spins and leaps. It was awesome to see the boys and the girls being ballerinas together, just like Lynn Swann. And I thought they'd never see situations like that but with Mister Rogers. The other episodes I liked are the costume episodes. The one with the



Wicked Witch of the West [Margaret Hamilton] (episode 1453) we played around Halloween and around Christmas time, we played the one about Santa Claus (episode 1261). How Mister Rogers explained it all to children was unbelievable. I thought this is brilliant. Both are really good episodes.

*Has anything changed in how you approach MRN with your students this year (from the last two years)?*

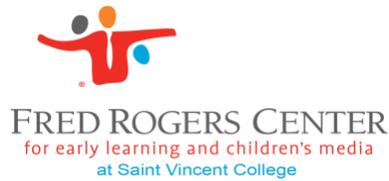
Well, we used to watch MRN on Fridays. We switched to Mondays this year so we could talk about the episode all week long. We made a couple other changes. And right before we left [because of Covid-19] we were talking about how we were going to start stopping the episode before it goes to Neighborhood of Make Believe for a little conversation. Take a little break to see if we are all on the same page and ask the kids some questions about what was going to maybe happen in Make Believe and review so far what Mister Rogers has talked about. We were looking forward to trying that to see how the kids react. I am looking forward to starting the school year with this new Mister Rogers routine.

*What has surprised you in your students' responses to MRN?*

Seeing their wonder and how their questions are being answered, questions that they never really want to ask or don't know how to ask or express in school. They seem to become kinder and gentler and they want to help people. And I think about the child who asked for the love song. My little friend, \_\_\_\_\_, has a difficult time in school. He had never been in school before and doesn't have siblings, so he was only used to adult relationships. Had a lot of anxiety about school. One day, the kids were drawing pictures of something they love and he didn't want to do it. He had his head down and I was letting him have his space and he yelled out... "Can you play that love song again?" I wrote down the words of the song [Then Your Heart is Full of Love]. We played it every day that week. And we added some motions to go with it. We acted it all out as we sang it.

*How has MRN impacted your teaching?*

Oh my gosh. I tell people, whoever asks me, that it saved my soul in teaching. It absolutely did. I was really struggling with all the academics with no emotional connection to anything. No quality emotional learning for children. And at first, I didn't think it [playing episodes of MRN] would work. When Sally [school principal] first asked, "What do you think about watching Mister Rogers in Kindergarten?" I thought, "Oh no, that's never going to work." I said it inside my brain, I didn't say that out loud [laughing]. 5% of me wanted it to work, but I didn't think the kids would have the stamina or interest to watch these shows that are 30 years old. They're so used to video games and fast-paced cartoons and movies. But I have a great partner in LeeAnne [Kindergarten colleague] and we were both on the same page for how we'd get them started and get used to it. We take it very seriously. This is learning. We're going to learn in a different way. We're going to watch a show and we're going to talk about it. This carries over to my whole day,



my whole year. If the kids are upset about something, I think back to how I can connect to a Mister Rogers episode. I think, "Is there a song I can play or is there a Mister Rogers book I can read?" It's greatly affected my teaching. I don't go into teaching anything without thinking about Mister Rogers... every day. I just wish everyone in the district could show Mister Rogers in Kindergarten. I wish it was part of the curriculum in every district. It saved my soul. Absolutely. When teachers ask, "Do you like it? Should I do it?", I tell them I know this is good for children. Mister Rogers is good, it's what they need.

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

Oh, my goodness. I think I see myself most like X the Owl because I just think of myself in my own neighborhood. I'm always out and about with my dogs and talking to all the neighbors that are out. My husband doesn't hardly know anybody in our neighborhood. And I know almost everybody. I'm helping a neighbor now who is by himself, 80 years old. X knows what's going on in the neighborhood, who is coming into the Neighborhood. He's like the nosy and nebbly neighbor. He takes care of Henrietta. And I especially notice that during this pandemic, I am making sure all my neighbors are okay.

*Besides Mister Rogers, which puppet or person of MRN do your students talk about the most?*

I think Lady Elaine. She's kind of naughty. She's not a rule follower. The kids are like "Oooh, I can't believe Lady Elaine did that." Lady Elaine kind of blows their minds a little bit. Sometimes they'll kind of look at me like "What's Ms. Brown going to say?" And I might say, "Well, that's not very nice, but she's learning and sometimes people need us to help them learn to be nice."

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

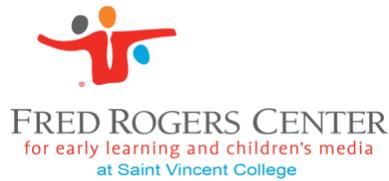
My questions are always about how to handle tough family situations and make sure I know how to say the right thing. I think I've learned just to listen. You don't need to always give advice. Mostly just listen. Try not to be judgmental. If you can find a way to help, that's great. Mostly listen and try your best to be a helper.

*What do you want to explore and study more next year in the archive?*

I want to look into how to overcome traumatic situations. This pandemic has turned many families' lives upside down. I become overwhelmed imagining what some of them are going through right now. They have lost jobs, pets, education, and maybe their homes. How am I going to help children feel safe in school?

*Why do you show MRN to your students?*

This is a time when we all can be together watching the same show. To get sixty kids together is a magical moment of bonding. We might read the same stories but we're usually in our separate



little groups. We come together for Mister Rogers. And we try with to have no interruptions. We don't want to be called on the intercom. The whole school knows... Kindergarten is watching Mister Rogers, don't interrupt. It's a special time. They don't get this compassion and kindness and love in any other part of their curriculum, so that's why I do it. I'm glad to do it.

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

I just read an awesome quote on a Fred Rogers page I follow on Facebook: "In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers." I think this is a beautiful quote to share because this pandemic is hard. Just the anxiety, waking up every day, and saying, "Oh my gosh, is this still going on?" People are unemployed for the first time in their life. It's a shock to be out of routines. And a shock to not be able to see your family and friends and teachers. I know my school families are having a hard time with that.

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