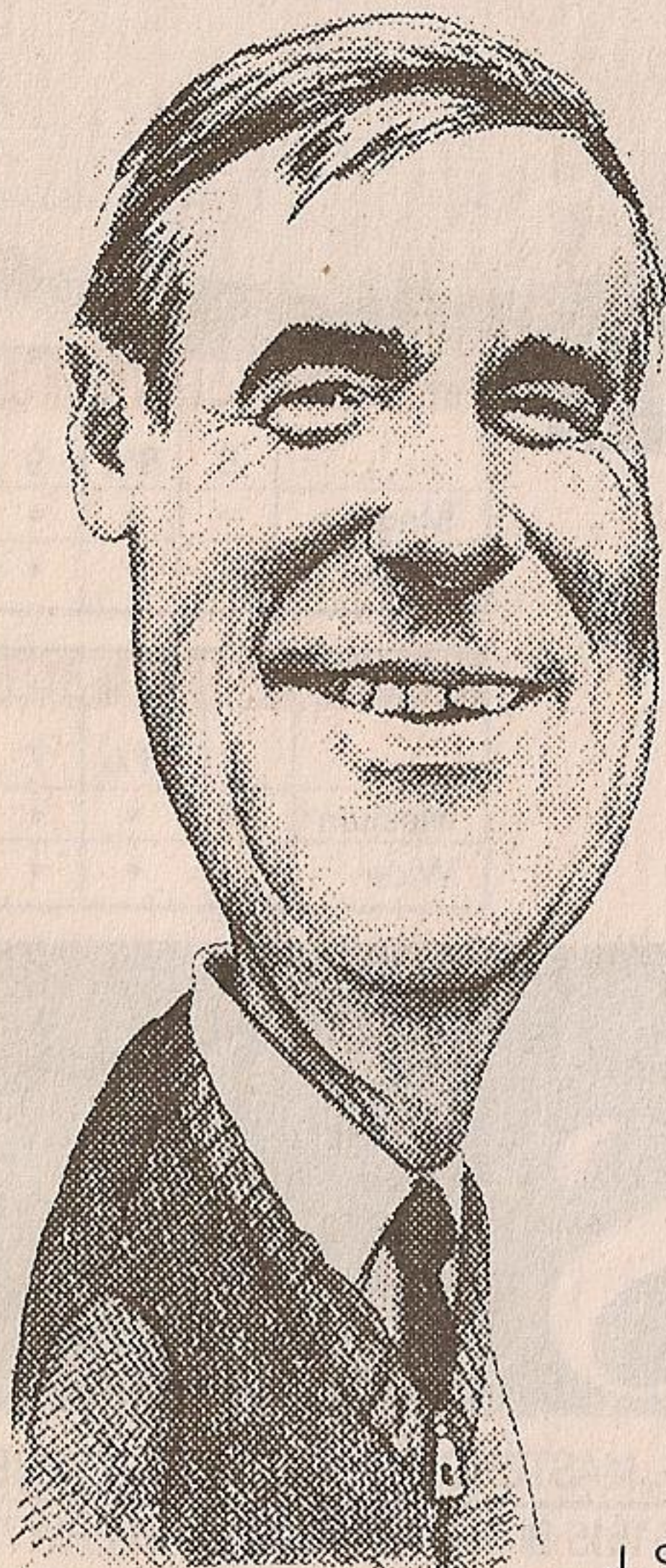


# There were no strangers in his neighborhood



J. SUIT

By PEGGY SHAW

I met Mister Rogers a few years ago when he was visiting Colonial Williamsburg, and as a local reporter I had a chance to interview him.

It's not often that we get to talk with our personal heroes, and I took full advantage of it. I told him how I became familiar with *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* while studying secondary school education at Vanderbilt University. We were assigned to watch shows such as *Sesame Street* because characters like Big Bird and Mister Rogers' Henrietta Pussycat were replacing my own childhood "television friends," like Captain Kangaroo.

Mister Rogers listened intently as I talked, just as he did on TV when Picture Picture magically transported us all to factories to see how wagons, crayons or fortune cookies were made. (Fac-

tory visits help children understand that most things happen through a process, with a beginning, a middle and an end, he believed.)

When I told Mister Rogers that adults were affected by the messages he offered to children, he did not reply, "That's nice." He cocked his head slightly and said, "How is that?"

And I told him.

Every day, Mister Rogers would assure the listeners who tuned in, "You are special." All of us can benefit from that message, as well as his other missives like: "It's OK to be afraid," and "There are many ways to say I love you."

After my story ran in the paper, I sent a copy to Mister Rogers, thanking him for his time and telling him again how much his expressions of love and kindness, as well as his childlike sense of wonder, had meant to me. I said I

had tried to pass those things on to my own children, and in reply, he sent me a gracious hand-written note and autographed pictures for both of them.

David Newell, who played the postman, Mr. McFeely, on the show — Mister Rogers' full name was Fred McFeely Rogers — said that Mister Rogers always replied personally to the thousands of children and adults who wrote him every year during the 35 years of the show.

I only had a few minutes of this special man's time in real life, but I've had many hours with him on TV. And, according to the show's producer, Family Communications Inc., the 900 hours of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* will continue to be available for broadcast.

FCI posted a message on its Web site last week that is good advice for remembering Fred

Rogers: "We hope that you'll join us in celebrating his life by reflecting on his messages and taking them into your everyday lives."

I also offer these suggestions taken from the many whimsical songs that Mister Rogers wrote: Take time off for make believe. (Adults could consider this day-dreaming or meditating.) Think about what a good feeling it is just to be alive. Recognize what's special about people, and tell them when you're proud of them.

We might also remember what Mister Rogers once said was his guiding philosophy in life, taken from Antoine de Saint-Exupery's classic children's book, *The Little Prince*:

"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." ■

Peggy Shaw of Franklin is a writer for *The Tennessean's* Williamson A.M. section.