35 Facts About Mr. Fred Rogers - mental_floss on YouTube (Ep.2)

List Show
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Hi, I'm John Green, welcome to my neighborhood. This is mental_floss, and today we're going to talk about Mr. Rogers, with whom I have a lot in common. By the way, thanks to copyright laws, that's the only picture of Mr. Rogers we can afford, so you'll be seeing a lot of it today. But yes, Fred Rogers and I have many similarities:

1. We both considered becoming ministers (he actually did).

2. Both happily married to women named Sara(h).

And we both make stuff for young people... although I don't think that his work has been banned from several dozen high schools in Tennessee.

[intro music]

3. Mr. Rogers was an Ivy League dropout. He completed his freshman year at Dartmouth, and then transferred to Rollins College so he could get a degree in music.

4. And he was an excellent piano player; not only did he graduate from Rollins "Magna cum laude," but he wrote all of the songs on the show, as well as more than 200 other songs, and several kids' operas including one called "All in the Laundry."

5. Mr. Rogers decided to get into television, because when he saw it for the first time he, "hated it so." When he turned on a set, all he saw was angry people throwing pies in each others' faces, and he vowed to use the medium to make the world a better place.

6. Over the years, he talked to kids about their feelings, covering topics as varied as why kids shouldn't be afraid of haircuts, or the bathroom drain (because you won't fit), to bigger issues like divorce and war.

7. In the opening sequence of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, the stoplight is always on yellow. That's a reminder to kids and parents to slow down a little.

8. Also, Mr. Rogers wasn't afraid of dead air time, unlike me: Once he invited a marine biologist and explorer onto his program to put a microphone into his fish tank, because he wanted to show the kids at home that fish make sounds when they eat. However, while taping the segment, the fish weren't hungry so the marine biologist started trying to egg the fish on, saying "C'mon," "It's Chowtime," "Dinnerbell." But Mr. Rogers just waited quietly. The crew thought he'd want to re-tape it, but Mr. Rogers just kept it... to show kids the importance of being patient.

9. Fred Rogers was a perfectionist, and so he disliked ad-libbing. He felt that he owed it to children to make sure that every word on his show was thought out. But here at mental_floss, we love ad libbing because it's much less work.

10. In a Yale psychology study, when Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood went "head to head," kids who watched Mr. Rogers not only remembered more of the story lines, but their, "Tolerance of delay," a fancy term for their ability to wait for promised treats or adult attention, was considerably higher.

11. Mr. Rogers was also beloved by Koko the Gorilla, you know Koko the Stanford educated Gorilla who can speak about 1000 words in American Sign Language; she watched The Neighborhood, and when Mr. Rogers made a trip to meet her, she not only embraced him but she did what she'd always see him do on screen: She proceeded to take his shoes off.

12. Those shoes were store bought, by the way, but every one of the cardigans Mr. Rogers wore on his show was knit by his mother.

13. Today one of them resides in the Smithsonian - a red one. Mr. Rogers chose to donate that sweater, because the cameras at his studio didn't pick up the color very well.

14. Mr. Rogers could start to feel anxious and overwhelmed, and when he did, he liked to play the chords to the show's theme song on the piano on set in order to calm himself.

15. The other way you could tell he was exasperated? If he said the word, "mercy." Mostly, he said it when he got to his desk in the morning, and the mountains of fan mail were a little bit too tall. But, "mercy" was about the strongest word in his vocabulary.

16. And yes, Mr. Rogers responded to every single piece of fan mail. He had the same routine every morning: wake up at 5:00AM. Pray for a few hours for all of his friends and family, study, write, make calls, reach out to every single fan who took the time to write him, go for a morning swim, get on a scale, then start the day. My morning routine is a bit less ambitious than that; Mr. Rogers, I thought you were supposed to make me feel good about myself! You just made me feel terrible!

17. But speaking of that daily weigh-in, Mr. Rogers watched his weight very closely. And he'd like to weigh exactly 143 lbs (65 kg). By the way, he didn't drink, smoke, or eat the flesh of any animal. NATCH.

18. Why did Mr. Rogers like the number 1-4-3 so much? Because it takes 1 letter to say "I", 4 letters to say "love," and 3 letters to say, "you" (Jean --Luc Picard).

19. Now it starts to get a little weird. So, journalists had a tough time covering Mr. Rogers because he'd often, like befriend them, ask them tons of questions, take pictures of them, compile an album for them at the end of their time together, and then call them afterwards to check in on them and hear about their families. He genuinely loved hearing the life stories of other people.

20. And it wasn't just reporters. Like once, on a fancy trip up to a PBS executive's house, he heard the limo driver was gonna have to wait outside for two hours, so Mr. Rogers insisted that the driver come in and join them. And then, on the way back, Rogers sat up front, and when he learned that they were passing the driver's house on the way, he asked if they could stop in to meet the family. And according to the driver, it was one of the best nights of his life. The house lit up when Rogers arrived, and he played jazz piano and bantered with them late into the night.

21. Okay, so thieves, Smithsonian curators, reporters, limo drivers, kids, all these people loved Mr. Rogers, but someone has to hate him, right? Well, LSU professor Don Chance certainly doesn't love his legacy: He believes that Mr. Rogers created a, "culture of excessive doting" which resulted in generations of lazy, entitled college students... and that makes sense, because generally the deterioration of culture can be traced back to a single public television program.

22. Other curious theories about Mr. Rogers that are all over the Internet: That he served in the army and was a sniper in Vietnam;

23. That he served in the army and was a sniper in Korea;

24. That he only wore sweaters to cover up the tattoos on his arms. These are all untrue. He was never in the army; he never shot anyone; he had no tattoos.

25. One other rumor we'd like to quash? That he used to chase kids

off his porch on Halloween. That's crazy! In fact, his house was known for being one of those generous homes that give out full-size candy bars... because of course it was!

26. In fact, for all the myths that people want to create about him, Mr. Rogers seems to have been almost exactly the same person "off screen," as he was, "onscreen." As an ordained Presbyterian minister and a man of tremendous faith, Mr. Rogers preached tolerance first. He never engaged in the culture wars; all he would ever say is, "God loves you just the way you are."

27. He was also kind of a superhero, like when the government wanted to cut public television funds in 1969, the then relatively unknown Mr. Rogers went to Washington and almost like straight out of a Capra film, his testimony on how TV had the potential to give kids hope and create more productive citizens was so passionate and convincing, that even the most gruff politicians were charmed... and instead of cutting the budget, funding for public TV jumped from $9M to $22M.

28. Years later, Mr. Rogers also swayed the Supreme Court to allow VCR's to record TV shows from home. It was a cantankerous debate at the time, but his argument was that recording a program like his allowed working parents to sit down with their children and watch shows as a family. Plus, it allowed him to watch Captain Stubing on The Love Boat anytime he wanted, without having to stay up till 8:30PM.

29. He was also heavily parodied, but most of the people who made fun of him, loved him. Like Johnny Carson hoped his send up of The Neighborhood would make Mr. Rogers more famous.

30. And the first time Eddie Murphy met Mr. Rogers, he couldn't stop himself from giving the guy a big hug.

All right, we're running out of time, so let's speed this up.

31. Mr. Rogers was color-blind. I mean that figuratively, like his parents took in African-American foster children, and he loved people of all backgrounds equally, but also literally.

32. Michael Keaton got his start on the show: He was a puppeteer and worked the trolley.

33. Mr. Rogers once made a guest appearance on Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman as a pastor's mentor.

34. And many of the characters on his show took their names from his family. Like, McFeely was his grandfather's name, Queen Sara is named for his wife.

35. And lastly, we return to the Salon so I can tell you probably my favorite story about Mr. Rogers: that he could make a whole New York City subway car full of strangers sing. He was rushing to a meeting and there were no cabs available so Mr. Rogers jumped on the subway. The car was full of people, Rogers assumed that he wouldn't be noticed, but he quickly was, of course, and then people burst into song, chanting, "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood."

Thanks for watching mental_floss, which is made with the help of all of these lovely people and remember that you make every day special just by being you.

If you have a fascinating question you've always wanted the answer to, submit in comments and we'll try to start answering them here at the end of the video April. In the meantime, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.