



WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR? was recently screened by Kino Ken at the Diamond Theater in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Here's his review of that film.

14 of a possible 20 points

1/2 of a possible **

United States 2018 black-and-white and color 94 minutes live action feature documentary Focus Features Producers: Emma Balada, Caryn Capotosto, Samantha Casey, Nicholas Ma, Morgan Neville, Susan Ricketts

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile

Points:

- 1 Direction: Morgan Neville
- 1 Editing: Jeff Malmbergen, Aaron Wickenden
- 1 Cinematography: Graham Willoughby, Shana Hagan, Ben Kolak, Nicola Marsh, Joe Victorine
- 0 Lighting: Chris Tonkovich
- 2 Interviews (Cast): Joanne Rogers, Betty Aberlin (Lady Aberlin), David Bianculli, Michael Cephas, Jr., Francois Scarborough Clemmons, Johnny Costa, Kailyn Davis, Jeff Erlanger (j)*, Tom Junod, Brian Kilmeade, Max King, Junlei Li, Yo-Yo Ma*, Joe Negri, David Newell, John Pastore, Penny Patterson, Fred Rogers, Jim Rogers, John Rogers, Betty Seamans, Tom Snyder, Nick Tallo, Eleanor Way (j), Margaret Whitmer

- 2 Research
 - Music Supervision: Jody Friedman, Jennifer Lanchart
 - 2 Music: Jonathan Kirkscey, Mary Lattimore
 - Music Consultant: Jonathan Palmer
 - 1 Graphic Design: Scott Grossman
 - 2 Sound Design: Al Nelson*
 - Sound Editing Supervision: Pete Horner*
 - Sound Effects: Teresa Eckton
 - Sound Mixing: Arjun Banga, Steve Bores, Jade Howard, Dan Mazur, Richard Pooler, Anne Pope, Craig Rhee, Chris Rudyk, John Sessoms, Qiao Xin
 - Animation: Ariel Costa, Rodrigo Miguel Rangel
 - Casting: Lesley Wolff
 - 2 Insightfulness
- 14 total points

WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR? is an inspiring documentary about the life of Latrobe, Pennsylvania's Fred Rogers. A readily identified television personality who detested the bulk of what passed for children's televised entertainment, Rogers chose to establish a caring, humane relationship with viewers rather than a simply sensory one. He wasn't concerned about overpowering audiences and enjoyed listening as much, or perhaps even more, than talking. This quality of retreating into the background and letting a child, puppet, or guest bask in the limelight endeared him to both parents and preschoolers.

Morgan Neville's tribute reveals both the perfectionist drive motivating its subject and his willingness to accommodate ideas coming from others which might be enhancing or superior to personal originals. At a time in the 1960s when revolution and visual imagery dominated media productions, with emphasis on volume and passionate debate, Pennsylvania's maverick instead preferred quietly questioning and discussing ideas in simple form with unhurried rhythm. Despite a rigid shooting schedule, the genial host of what eventually became *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* succeeded in conveying a sense of timelessness most appealing to youngsters elsewhere harried by compulsory adaptation to adult agendas and timelines. Promoting tolerance in an era notable more for its rejection than advancement, he focused on what

was uniquely human and special about individual boys and girls, telling each he or she had merit, talents to share with others for the overall good of their family and community. Coming together for work or play should be an act of creative interchange. Not a vehicle for taking sides defensively and building entrenchments.

Whether it was divisive politics engendered by the Vietnam conflict, terrorist assault on individual freedom, or bureaucratic unwillingness to subsidize American art in any shape or form, one individual, however inclined to political conservatism from habit, was always willing to speak out on behalf of an otherwise disrespected and discounted collective unable to vote or finance itself. If that pre-reading set was truly America's future, it should behoove educators and parents to provide members with the highest quality of edifying entertainment available.

For the most part, this wasn't happening when Fred Rogers began his telegenic career. Nor has this changed since. National leaders still resist ongoing commitment to upgrade of what is publicly offered those too young to legislate or articulate for themselves. Perceived continuing anomie of American society frustrated the Neighborhood's leading resident throughout his public career. Children ought to be taken more seriously as a moral responsibility of the entire community, not just of its designated guardians or caretakers.

His willingness to tackle rather than skirt serious, potentially depressing subjects such as divorce, war, terrorism, and prejudice made Mister Rogers numerous enemies. That openness also generated a legion of admirers. Few people remained neutral when discussing the modern Pied Piper of the airwaves.

Though ever protective of family cohesion, Fred Rogers was equally aware of tensions created by external clouts from alcohol, drugs, peer pressure, racism, boundless consumption, bullying, and endemic poverty. He believed the single most crucial molder of character to be a spirit of optimism, one rooted in religious faith. To separate Rogers the minister from Rogers the programmer couldn't be accomplished. His wecomesork and mission: to communicate self-respect and anticipation of a better future through cooperative effort.

Competition with others or even undue attention to rivals only could lead to neglect of personal improvement. But what significance could that have for someone feeling worthless and unloved? Understand the connection between

loveless isolation and ease of manipulation from outsiders was essential for social progress. Anyone maintaining a conviction of powerlessness becomes a prime candidate for recruitment in gangs or suicide, neither outcome of benefit to home or country.

Director Neville blends excerpts from broadcast episodes and one-on-one interviews with footage from turbulent, yet decisive, parallel social events to fit his star into a character-shaping context. Without dwelling at length on a conservative childhood under firm patriarchal management, he nonetheless suggests outlets for loneliness in puppetry and music, two imaginative retreats that years later would buttress productions bearing the Mr. Rogers name. Courtesy, self-control, respect for elders, and inquisitiveness were more than empty abstractions in Fred's home. They had to be practiced daily and not just within the walls of the Rogers house. Each child was expected to follow set schedules, stay busy and productive, and keep informed about what was happening in the greater world outside the Loyalhanna Creek watershed.

Years later, these same core virtues would be communicated to thousands of auditors listening to Fred's scripted skits in living rooms across the United States. The neighborhood became a genuinely courteous showcase for behaviors which, if exercised by imitators, would lead to marked improvements in interpersonal engagements of all types.

Neville doesn't whitewash criticisms leveled at Roger's universalist approach. Yes, egos stroked and stoked too frequently can become oversize and tyrannical, a problem addressed onscreen when King Friday's arrogant patronizing slips into dispiriting militant tyranny requiring check from a populist opposition of peaceniks. Respect, though, for Fred Rogers and mainstream Christians is something beginning from a Creator. It's therefore not subject to negotiated earning and subordinate to a command one must love one's neighbor *as oneself*. Rogers always pointed out the primacy of self-love. If you don't even like yourself as you are, how in the world will you be able to like someone else? Let alone establish loving relationships.

Highlights of the film are operatic Gospel singing, introspective remarks by cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and the appearance of wheelchair-bound Jeff Erlanger, who clearly demonstrates different doesn't equate to inferior. Fred Rogers' love of classical music and jazz, integration of cast and guests, and frequent injections of humor all receive appropriate recognition.

Technically, the film is limited by budgetary constraints imposed by public financing. These result in shoddy lighting setups, barebones sets, minimal props, and merely adequate costuming.

What could have been drawbacks instead turn out assets, compelling attention to words, sounds, and gestures. Emotional content deepens. Distracting sensations diminish or disappear entirely. In this special microtonal world where shadings and murmurs replace glares and screams feelings are just as paramount as ideas. There's a lot of safety and consideration exhibited, which is what a small child greatly desires in an environment.

Interviews enlighten from within and without. Besides anecdotes coming from an associate, relative, or friend, there are insights plumbed from within the main character's own ponderings. Combining the two approaches yields a more balanced viewpoint than exclusive employment of either would.

It's refreshing to encounter a modern film emphasizing so unapologetically the transformational capabilities of words and the silences between them. Here is a film to which one listens attentively, less concerned with sights than sounds.

Appropriate for audiences ages eighteen and up, **WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?** includes some tastelessly obscene material presumably demonstrating Mr. Rogers was not a Victorian prude. There are also discussions of homosexuality. Adults can dismiss the first of these as misguided and accept the second as relevant for frank evaluation of Rogers' own inclinations and principles.

One of the better documentaries to surface this year, **WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?** is an uplifting remembrance of an individual whose life choices and messages made a major impact on some of our own.