

YOU WON'T BE MY NEIGHBOR  
By Wendy Levine

Mr. Rogers is dead, and we are all in trouble. He hadn't been around nearly long enough when he retired. Who else in your life told you that you were special just the way you are? Do you have enough self-esteem for the long haul?

Naïve and Barney-like as it sounds, someone liking me for who I am is a message I've never outgrown. And though **Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood** may have enough episodes on its spool to run forever, who *else* has appeared to counter the mostly negative messages relentlessly spewed from the rest of the world? In the forty years I shared with Mr. Rogers, very few others have gotten on board to back up his assessment that I AM special just because I'm me. And what of the next generation--so cynical and sophisticated that the concept of a neighborhood itself means next to nothing to them? **Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood** was the last of the safe places in a society that's become too smart for its own good. Where will the unpopular kids of today go to find reassurance and security?

Whole lives have been created and lived since I was Mr. Rogers' target audience. Fred's death comes at a time when a lot of my peers are facing 20-year high school reunions. Our age, and presumably our maturity level, has doubled since we saw these people last. And when we see them next our accomplishments, our progress, our grown-up lives will be completely overshadowed by the need to impress and be accepted. So much for evolution. We'll be quick to spout out an update of how well we're doing, but on the inside we're teenagers again, trying to look good and not get picked on or left behind. Reunions are proof that we never completely outgrow the need to be on the inside, or for Fred Rogers.

In junior high and high school we have these beautiful young growing bodies (we don't appreciate) but the insides are so fragile. As we get comfortable in our own skins and validated in our own lives, the body ages. And when the body goes, it shakes our emotional well being. And we are fragile all over again. Mr. Rogers seemed to know this and how to help us through it. But who will help us now?