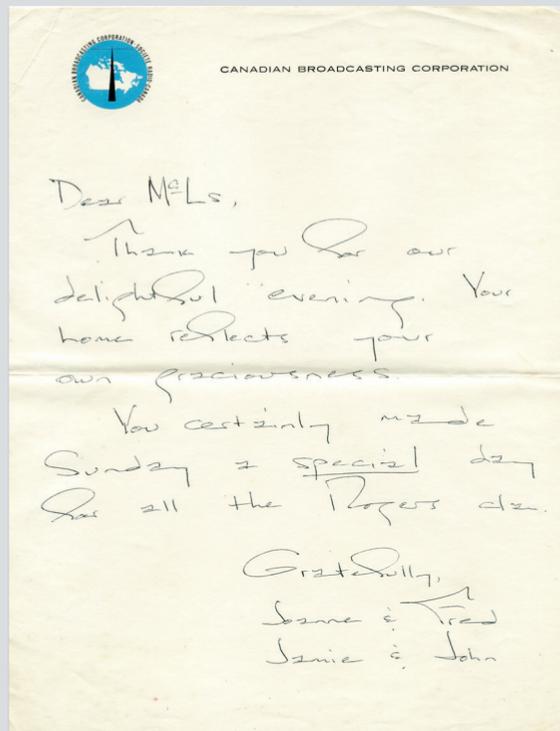


VISUAL ESSAY

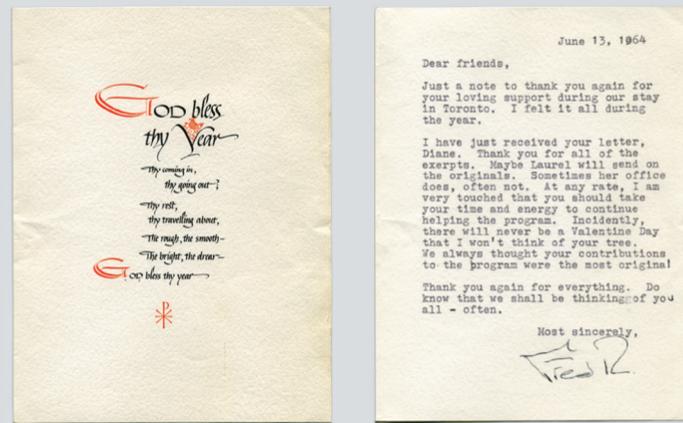
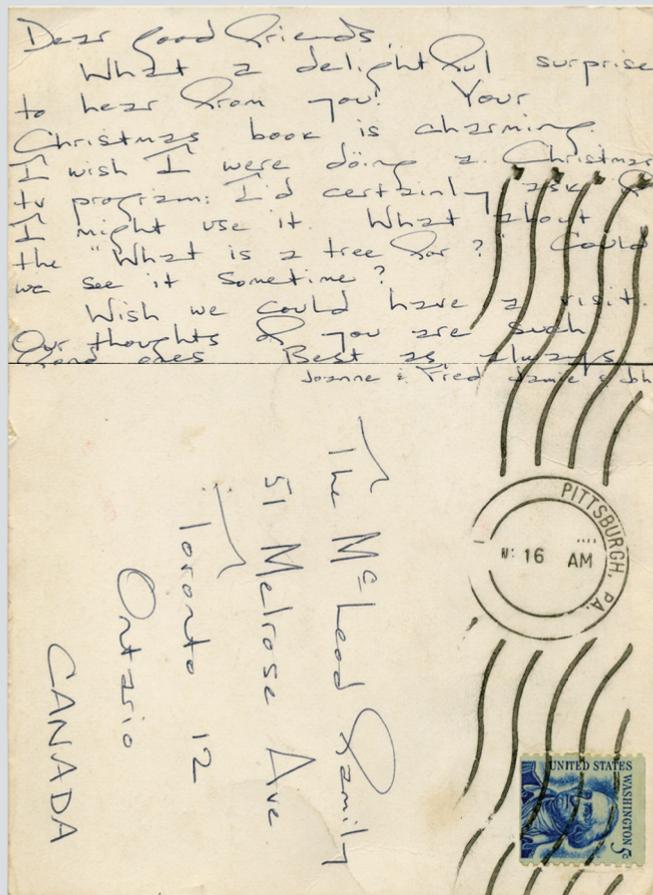
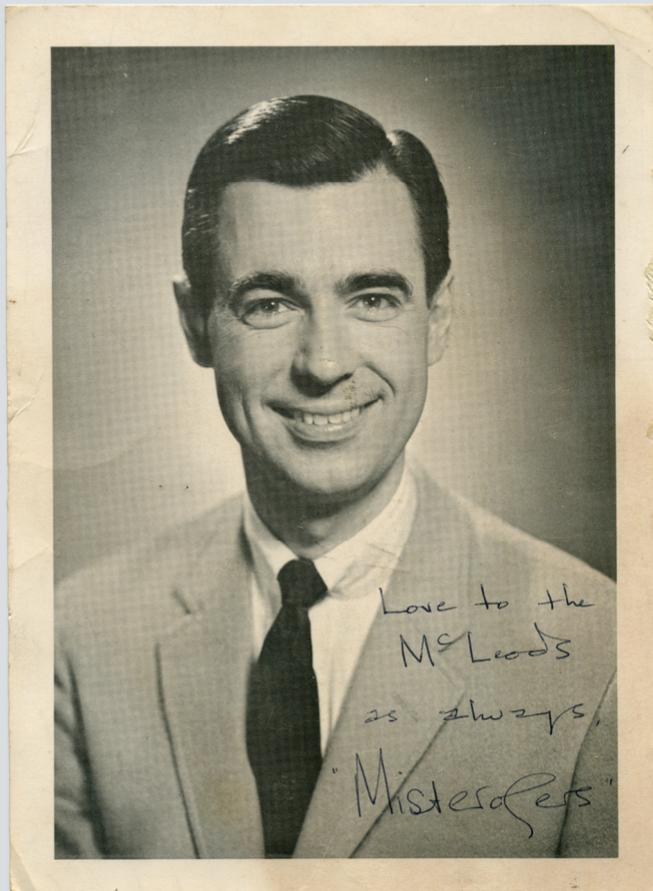
My Mum and Mister Rogers

Fred Rogers believed everybody was somebody. A box of lost letters tells the story of how he helped my mother believe in herself too

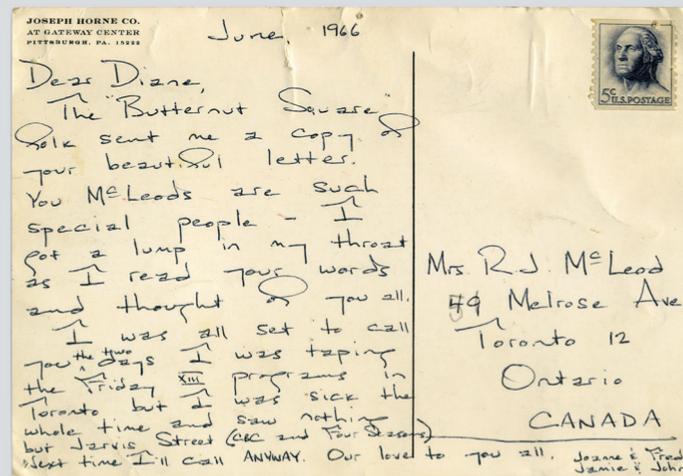
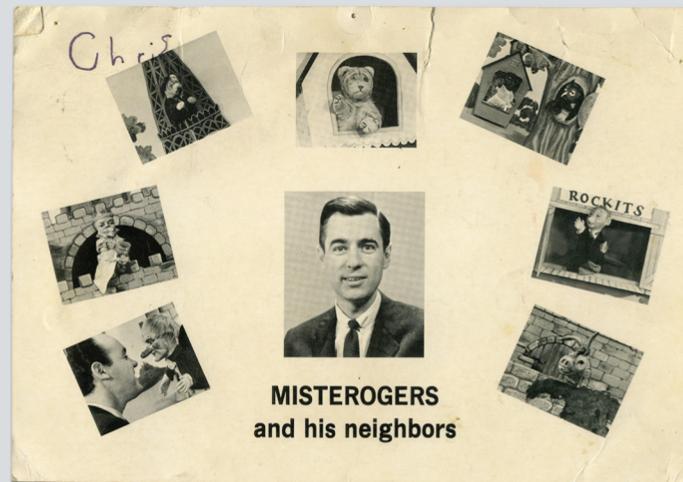
BY CINDERS MCLEOD



In the early 1960s, Fred Rogers hosted a children's show on the CBC. Diane Hutchings wrote to the network after seeing it, and a few months later, she invited him and his family for a Sunday roast.



Rogers stayed in Canada for a few years with his wife and two young sons, then returned to Pittsburgh when his show moved to American television. He wrote to Hutchings, "We always thought your contributions to the program were the most original."



Rogers took the CBC concept to Pittsburgh's WQED-TV and later renamed it *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The program went national in February 1968.

OPPOSITE Hutchings remembers his letters: "I think he sensed in me that I needed reassurance. He was ultrasensitive to people's feelings and the things they could do."

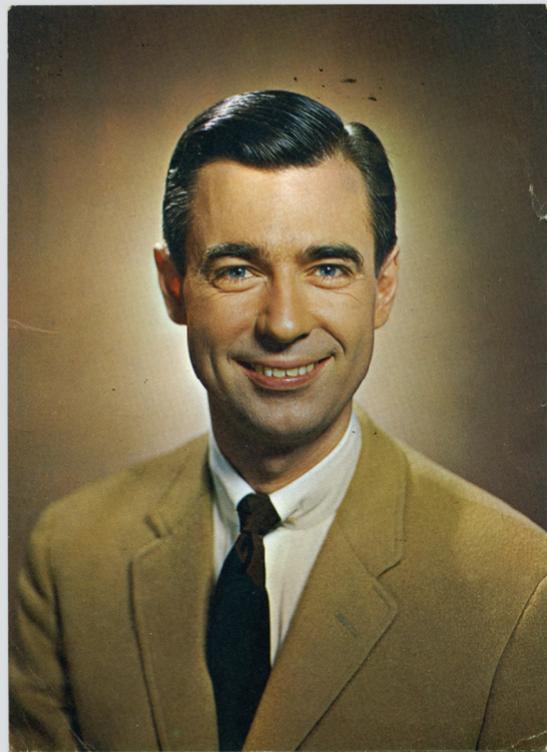


ABOVE Hutchings was named Mrs. Chatelaine in the magazine's May 1968 issue.

PICTURE HER LIFE, starting in the Depression. My mother is born in the 1930s to a working-class immigrant family living in Toronto. Her father is a foreman at Casselman's Wiping Cloths Company, and the couple has three children: two cherished boys and one perhaps not-as-cherished girl. Her name? Diane Hutchings. Not worth a middle name.

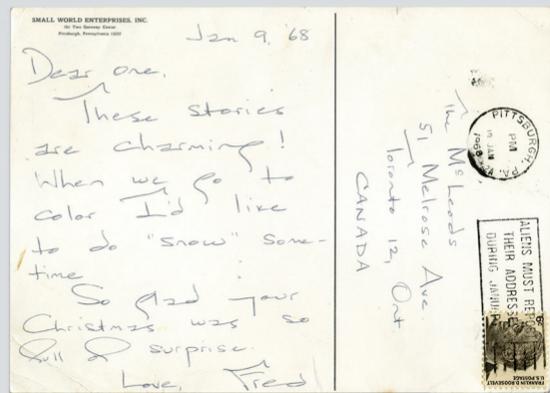
Diane gets her high school diploma, teacher's certificate, marriage certificate. But, in the early 1960s, marriage leaves her isolated in a Richmond Hill bungalow. She lacks confidence, but she's a natural creative. She paints, presses flowers, and pens poems—and she teaches her students to be creatives too. A few years later, in 1968, she would win the Mrs. Chatelaine title, an award bestowed by the women's magazine on the best Canadian homemakers. That would give her a dishwasher and a fleeting belief in herself.

In 1963, Mum, my young siblings, and I sit at the table with paper and crayons, watching the CBC—and that's when we encounter Fred Rogers. The network invited the young American, who had worked on a local children's show in Pittsburgh, to create a new kids program in Canada. Mum describes the segment, featuring Mister Rogers and his land of make-believe, as different from anything she'd seen. "Fred was so quick to pick up on how bad things could become good things for children, no matter what challenges they faced. It was a message I needed to hear too." Then, one day, the show's not there. She writes to the CBC and gives the broadcaster hell.

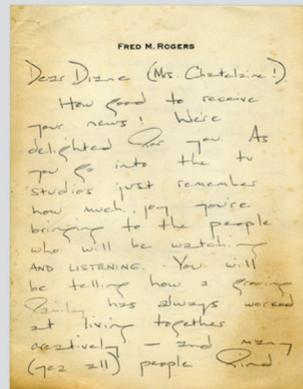


ABOVE Hutchings, her three children (Cinders, Chris, and Celeste), and their father, illustrating her books.

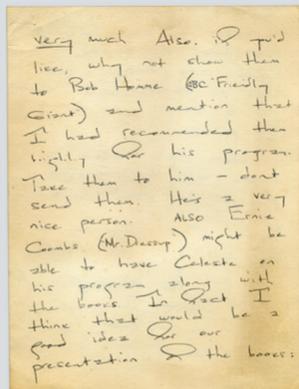
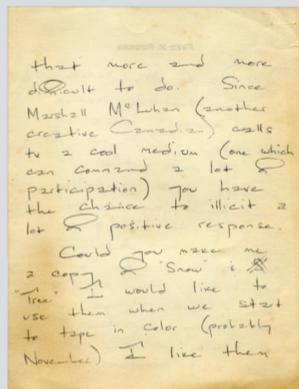
She recalls: "I admired Fred and liked him so terribly—as you love things as a child, like ice cream. . . My teaching that year was really good because he connected with the children so they had a reason to write him letters. They did that with a lot of people but none that they enjoyed as much as Mister Rogers."



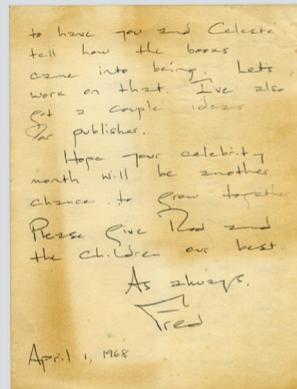
The first episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in colour aired February 10, 1969.



Hutchings won the Mrs. Chatelaine contest on the strength of her creative work. "[Rogers] was the first person I told," she recalls, and he later wrote to congratulate her.



OPPOSITE Rogers encouraged Hutchings to keep writing: "I do hope that you'll go on with it. We need more material in our world which reflects the kind of thinking that you do so well."



Mum remembers Rogers writing back: he'll return after Christmas. And so begins years of correspondence and collaboration. Soon, he invites us all to his CBC set. Mum also shows him her unpublished children's books: *What's a Tree For?*, *What's the Snow For?*, *What's a Friend For?*, etc. In one letter, he asks for copies: "I would like to use them when we start to tape in color (probably November). I liked them very much. . . I've also got a couple ideas for publishers."

I didn't know about the letters until I visited Mum in her retirement-home apartment this February and she mentioned she couldn't find them. I remembered the studio visits, but I didn't know that they'd continued to keep in touch.

I searched her closet and, in a box marked "keepers," found some survivors. A few weeks after that, the pandemic took hold and I could no longer visit. Most of our prepandemic phone calls had relied on me carrying the conversation with good news, but now there wasn't much to share. Instead, I crafted questions about her friendship with Mister Rogers before our calls, then methodically asked them until she tired. There were some lonely days for her in lockdown. But I'd hear a change in her voice whenever I mentioned Rogers. He was the man who had recognized her, and her daughter wanted to know that story.

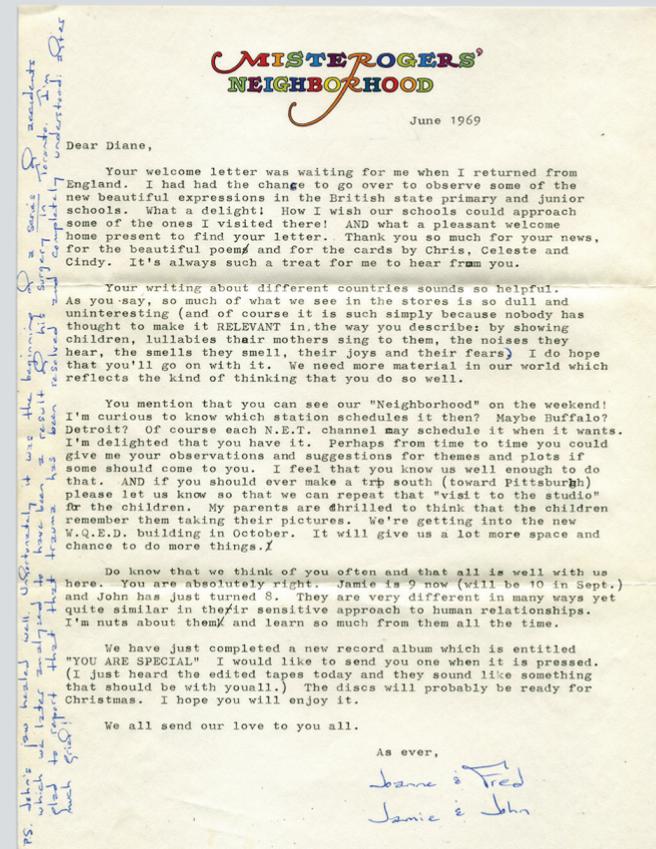
In one letter, he suggests she show her books to two CBC children's entertainers: Bob Homme, better known as the Friendly Giant, and Ernie Coombs, who had graduated from being Rogers's puppeteer to being on *Butternut Square*. Perhaps the performers might be interested in reading them on their shows, he writes. By then, he had moved to Pittsburgh, and I like to think he was looking out for her in his absence.

When I asked if she had taken the suggestion, I got a story for an answer. "Ernie was on a show called *Butternut Square*. And I asked my pupils to write him a letter about what they liked best, and they wrote they loved the part where he dressed up. So I sent Ernie all their letters telling him that. And then his own show airs and it's called *Mr. Dressup*." The program went on to become one of Canada's most beloved children's shows. Maybe Mum had something to do with that.

"How good to receive your news!" Rogers wrote when she won Mrs. Chatelaine. "We're delighted for you. As you go into the tv studios just remember how much joy you're bringing to the people who will be watching AND LISTENING. You will be telling how a growing family has always worked at living together creatively. . . Since Marshall McLuhan (another creative Canadian) calls tv a cool medium (one which can command a lot of participation) you have the chance to illicit [sic] a lot of positive response."

Mum eventually ended a difficult marriage, got a degree at night school, and continued sending her books to publishers. Rogers assumed that becoming Mrs. Chatelaine would catapult her into recognition. It didn't. But it reassures her, to this day, that it was something he thought she deserved. My educated guess is that we can get only so many rejection slips, bills, put-downs, and disappointments before we pack away our dreams in a box marked "keepers."

The day after we first read Rogers's letters, I took Mum to see *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, the 2019 film about Rogers. There's a moment when Tom Hanks asks us to think about the people who helped us become who we are. I looked at Mum. She was crying. She always gets teary when she tells a story about someone believing in someone else. The Group of Seven painter Lawren Harris's belief in Emily Carr, before she became a famous artist herself, is Mum's favourite in this genre. Later, I asked her if Rogers was the Harris to her Carr. "I never thought of it like that before, but yes, I believe he was." Mister Rogers's love and land of make-believe live on. ☑



CINDERS MCLEOD has had her writing and illustrations published in the *Guardian* and the *Globe and Mail* and featured on CBC TV.