

A neighborhood is being constructed by Fred Rogers Co. for animated series

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By Rob Owen, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



"Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" (c) 2011 The Fred Rogers Co.

Daniel Tiger changes into sneakers, a nod to Fred Rogers on "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," in the new series "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood," set to debut on PBS stations nationwide in the fall of 2012.

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. -- A new era for a familiar neighborhood begins in fall 2012 when "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood," produced by the Oakland-based Fred Rogers Co., debuts on public television stations nationwide.

PBS was slated to announce this morning at the Television Critics Association summer press tour that production has begun on an initial 40 episodes of the animated series, which will air weekday mornings, including on Pittsburgh's WQED.

Set in the same Neighborhood of Make-Believe popularized by Mister Rogers during 33 seasons of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," the new series focuses on the children of that show's famous puppet characters.

Daniel Tiger is the son of Daniel Striped Tiger, who will also be seen alongside other parents. Additional new characters include Prince Wednesday, son of King Friday and Queen Sara; Miss Elaina, daughter of Lady Elaine Fairchild; Katerina Kittycat, daughter of Henrietta Pussycat; and O the Owl, nephew of X the Owl.

The series has been in development since 2006 when Family Communications, the previous name for the nonprofit media company Mr. Rogers founded in 1971, announced its intention to develop a new program and partner with another producer.

Fred Rogers Co. chief operating officer Kevin Morrison is executive producer of "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" alongside Angela Santomero, who is co-founder of New York-based Out of the Blue Enterprises, creator of PBS's "Super Why!" and co-creator of 1990s Nickelodeon hit "Blue's Clues."

"We wanted to weave the values and philosophy of Fred Rogers into whatever we did but make it relevant for the 21st century and a new audience," Mr. Morrison said, noting that several Fred Rogers Co. staff members who worked on the old "Neighborhood" offer notes on scripts for the new program.

Ms. Santomero grew up watching the original "Neighborhood" and credits Fred Rogers with her interest in a career in children's television and in her approach to creating programs for young viewers. At one point she was pen pals with Mr. Rogers before meeting him at a children's television symposium at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.

Early in the new program's development, Ms. Santomero said she and the Fred Rogers Co. creative team ruled out any attempts to create a next-generation version of Mr. Rogers, who died in 2003 of stomach cancer.

"But what it can be about is the Neighborhood of Make-Believe and putting that in animated form," she told the Post-Gazette in an interview earlier this month. "Daniel Tiger, for me, was the young Fred Rogers, what Fred would have been like as a

child: curious and empathetic."

The new program, aimed at children 2 to 5 with a focus on 3- and 4-year-olds, will offer nods to parents who grew up on the old show, including some of Mr. Rogers' songs and a scene of Daniel, in a cardigan sweater, changing into sneakers.

"There will be nostalgic moments for fans like me but it's important to know it's a show for everybody, whether they know the 'Neighborhood' or not," Ms. Santomero said.

"Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" will feature story lines that model skills needed for school readiness, including the social and emotional skills.

"These are our youngest, most impressionable viewers and for most of them this will be their first experience with media," said Lesli Rotenberg, senior vice president of children's media at PBS. "It has to be handled very carefully because media has the power to do good or evil, and with kids that young, who will imitate what they see, we take that to heart. ... There's nobody we trusted more than the Fred Rogers Co."

Each half-hour episode of "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" will contain two, 11-minute animated segments produced in Toronto by 9 Story Entertainment and a short live-action segment that will be produced in Pittsburgh.

The live-action segments are still in development but will likely include some "Picture Picture" elements from Mr. Rogers' program, including new factory visits. There also will be scenes of 4-year-olds talking about their experiences with whatever the episode's theme happens to be, such as "I like you because you're you" or "Let's think of something to do while we're waiting."

Using two animated and one live-action segment is a familiar PBS kids show formula, but for the first time the two animated segments will share a theme or topic.

"With the number of characters we have, we can have a couple of different approaches to the same topic and that will just reinforce the lesson doubly so," said Linda Simensky, vice president of PBS children's programming.

In addition to the TV show, Schell Games on the South Side will develop online content, including "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood"-themed games that will be available at no charge at PBSKids.org.

"We're taking a show for our youngest kids that's really focused on school readiness and finding a way to make games that underscore what we're teaching on air," Ms. Simensky explained.

Joanne Rogers, widow of Mr. Rogers and honorary chairwoman of the Fred Rogers Co. board of directors, said she is thrilled with the brief scenes she's seen from "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood."

"I just got goose bumps right away," she said. "I was so excited because the old feeling is there. I think [Ms. Santomero] really captured it and I almost cried because I felt such relief. I'd been anxious not knowing what to expect, but, oh, Daniel is just so cute. I can't imagine everybody won't love him, and I'm delighted in any case."

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