

September 5, 2012, 6:00 PM

There's A New Cat in 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood'

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By John Jurgensen



PBS

A scene from "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood"

Like payphones and aerial TV antennas, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" is one of those formerly vital pieces of civilization that now seem quaint. Fred Rogers died from stomach cancer in 2003, two years after retiring from the show he created in 1968. Old episodes are available online, and PBS says that about half of its stations still include the

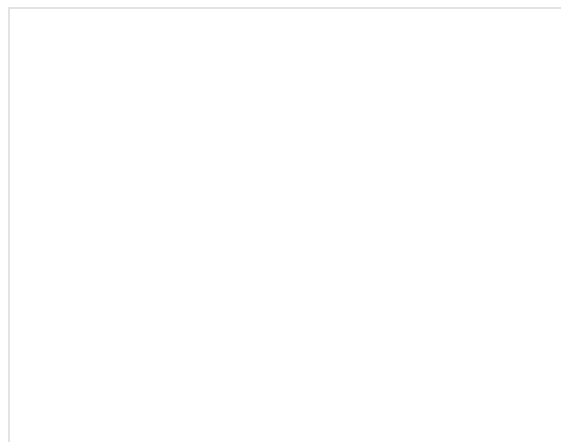
show in their schedule. But with children's programming moving at the speed of an iPad processor, the Mr. Rogers brand has been largely dormant.

Or so it seemed. This week, PBS launched a successor series for preschoolers, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood." It's an animated show that weaves in some references to the old live-action neighborhood, such as the lead character's familiar red sweater.

In 2010, the board of Mr. Rogers's non-profit production company, Family Communications Inc., rechristened the organization as The Fred Rogers Company so that any future programming would bear his name, at least in the credits. The company, based in his home town of Pittsburgh, Penn., with about a dozen employees, began soliciting ideas for a new show. "As a company that knew how to make 'Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood' but didn't know how to develop new programs, we needed to find partners," says chief operating officer Kevin Morrison.

One concept was immediately taken off the table: building a new show around a human host. "We all knew that was a once in a lifetime thing. We didn't want to recreate 'Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood,'" says company president Bill Isler.

Angela Santomero, co-creator of the kids' show "Blue's Clues," which Mr. Rogers had admired, got the job. After getting consensus to do the new series with animation, her company, Out of the Blue Enterprises, zeroed in on the central character of 4-year-old



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publication is produced by senior editor Christopher John Farley, Alexandra Cheney and Barbara Chai with contributions from the Wall Street Journal staff and others. Write to us at speakeasy@wsj.com or follow us on Twitter at @WSJSpeakeasy or individually at @cjfarley, @alexandracheny and @barbarachai.

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Daniel Tiger. He is the cartoon son of one of Mr. Rogers's original hand puppets (a head-scratching bit of make-believe reproduction). That puppet, Daniel Striped Tiger, "was my favorite character, and he was Fred's first puppet," says Santomero, the new show's co-executive producer. More importantly, the puppet's heir proved effective in research, including some 20 test screenings with viewers age 2 to 4. "He was the most recognizable for preschoolers...and they took away what we wanted them to," Santomero says.

PBS skipped the traditional step of asking the producers to create a pilot episode, and instead ordered the full series after seeing a roughly drawn "animatic"—a big vote of confidence.

Airing twice each weekday, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" builds on the lessons Mr. Rogers pioneered on television, such as encouraging compassion, curiosity and methods of coping with new emotions and experiences. But the show will also venture into territory that Mr. Rogers mostly ignored: licensed merchandise. In a deal announced in June, toymaker Jakks Pacific said it was creating a product line for "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" that would hit stores in 2014, and include "plush, figures, playsets, vehicles, dolls and doll accessories, ride-ons, play tents, ball pits, role play, dress up, novelty, bulk, seasonal toys, children's furniture and Halloween costumes."

Joanne Rogers, Fred's widow, says her husband wasn't against branded merchandise—he brought home the occasional toy and tote bag for her. However, "I just don't think he was interested in it," in part because he was wary of "the commercial aspects television."

The animated show is costly compared to the modestly budgeted "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," which for decades used the same set in the same studio. And with less money coming from PBS than in the past, Morrison says, "merchandising is an important component of how you fund a production in today's public TV environment."

Angela Santomero, Mr. Rogers, PBS

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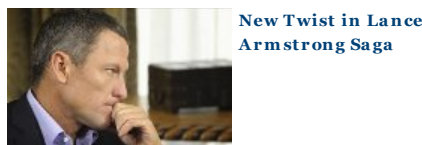
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Great work Angela. My daughter LOVES Daniel! everyday "I wanna watch Tiger"

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Thank you!
Mr. Rodgers will always hold a special place in my heart!

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