

GUESTS: HEDDA SHARAPAN

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The teacher asked, Where does the Sun go at night? A little boy next to her says, My daddy said the Earth spins on its axis, and when it's day here, it's night somewhere else, the Sun's shining here. And the teacher's thinking, Oh, he's really got it. And next to him is a little girl who says, I think at night ... the Sun breaks up into stars, and it lights up the sky in stars. And then in the morning, they all come back together again and make the Sun. And the little boy says, Now, that makes more sense. [CHUCKLE]

Children know what they see, and no one understood this better than Fred Rogers. Hedda Sharapan started her career working as an assistant director for Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. At the time of our conversation in the summer of 2013, she was the director of Early Childhood Initiatives at the Fred Rogers Company, continuing to carry out his legacy. Hedda Sharapan, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. If you grew up during the 1960s, 70s, 80s, or 90s, chances are good that Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was part of your childhood.**

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor.
Would you be mine? Would you be mine?

Hedda Sharapan's childhood and upbringing set her on the path that led her to meet Mr. Rogers.

I grew up in, actually, a European family in a small town right outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And it was my grandparents from Europe, and my parents who were raised in Europe, and my sister and I, and we sort of felt like we were almost really in a European household ourselves.

Your grandfather was a Holocaust survivor?

My parents got married in 1936 and came to America, leaving behind my father's father. He was a widower at the time, and he said, You go set your new life there, I'm okay here. When the second world war broke out, my father enlisted in the Army and he was an officer. At the end of the war, he started looking for family, friends who had survived. And a reporter came to their base in France and said, There are survivors from Dachau, I think some of them are from your town. And when they went into Dachau, he found his own father. And the story was that my grandfather said, We knew that you would find us.

And what was his condition?

Well, he was down to about ninety pounds, but he had survived. He was a hard worker, and I understand the phrase was, *Arbeit mach frei*, work makes you free. And he was a hard worker. And he lived with us until he was about ninety.

Are you saying that he did hard work, and the Germans didn't ...

Yeah, they liked that. [CHUCKLE] They left him alone because he was a good worker.

What was he like to live with in his later life?

He was loving, but he was also stoic. There's a holiday of Yom Kippur, which is a very sacred day, and it's a long day in the synagogue. My grandfather used to stand the whole day. I mean, I know myself how relieving it was when you could sit. But I grew up in that kind of a household of honoring the elders, respecting.

How do you think that's affected you?

It made me feel that I had a heritage that I had to carry on of being someone who was a hard worker [CHUCKLE], and who honored the past and honored ... the elders, maybe more than anything. And also, I think it also said to me, You never know what can happen in life, so be an appreciator.

So, you're in this family with immigrants, and what did you decide you wanted to be in America?

I played a lot as a child. I made up stories and I loved reading. [CHUCKLE] I lied about my age when I was twelve, because I was so desperate to work in the library. I loved books. I still do. And I worked all the way through high school. I also took a lot of theater classes. I loved performing, but I sort of left that life behind when I went to college. I was gonna be a doctor, and I started in biology. And it didn't feel right. The labs were so tedious. I said, This is not for me. So, I switched to English. And that was too abstract. I was like Goldilocks and the Three Bears. This is too this, this is too that. And then, I found psychology, and that was just right.

After earning her degree in psychology in 1965, Hedda Sharapan decided to go to graduate school. In the meantime, she applied for jobs. That's when she met Fred Rogers.

Truly on a lark, I came to our public station, WQED, and I said, Maybe I could do something for children on television? The man who interviewed me there said, I'm sorry, there aren't any jobs here now. Now, this was before Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood; this was 1965.

Okay.

And he said, If you're really interested in children's television, why don't you see if you can get some advice from Fred Rogers. Now, I knew his name because I watched the program that he made from 1954 to '62. And he was behind the scenes; he was the co-producer, he was doing the music and the puppets. But people knew his name. So, I thought, Well, let's see what he has to say. And he was kind enough to meet with me, and here was his advice; that I should think about a master's degree.

In?

Child development. What he was saying to me is, the important thing is not so much what can we give children, what can we do for them. The question is, what are they bringing to us? Who are they? What's important to them? What are they thinking about? What are they afraid of? What makes them upset? What do they think is funny?

To go on the recommendation of one guy --

Yeah.

Was there something about him?

Well, I was leaning towards child development in graduate school, and it just kind of made sense. And I guess I figured from loving the program that he had made, something about living a meaningful life, finding good stuff in life, maybe that's why Public Television meant something to me.

Hedda Sharapan started her graduate degree in child development, and the following year, Fred Rogers got funding for Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. He remembered Hedda Sharapan, and asked her to help with his new show.

Fred wrote all the scripts, all nine hundred. He wrote all the music, the melodies and the lyrics. He did almost all the puppets, the voices and the manipulation. He was the creator, he was the host. I was in grad school in the daytime, learning this complex child development theory. And then, I'd come sit in the control room at night. I was the assistant director. There was no pay, and there was no staff. This was just, you know, could we make this thing happen. It was black and white television. It was in October of '66. And I would sit there in the control room and watch Fred live out all this complex theory about ritual, transition.

Complex theory, but it was the simplest of shows.

Yes. [CHUCKLE] Well, but when you understand what ritual means, that you start with the same thing and you end with the same thing so that you have a way of children getting ready for your hello, and ready for your goodbye. When you understand what transitions mean, what it means. I help you know what's coming next. And as we do that, we blend where we've been and what's next. And when you know that children have trouble with reality versus fantasy, you have two different sections, and you say, Now we're going to pretend in the Neighborhood of Make Believe. And it sets it apart for children. And you come

back, and he says, What do you think might happen tomorrow? And what would you pretend about?

And you were doing it all for love.

Yeah; right. Well, after a couple of months, they found some pay. [CHUCKLE] And then, I was assistant director two years, and then assistant producer two years. And then, when my first child was born in 1970, I said to Fred, I know what I can do from home. How about if I help with the fan mail? Because Fred answered every letter in a really personal, meaningful kind of way. There was uh, a second grade boy who said, Dear Mr. Rogers, my best friend is having a 99.9 percent chance of moving, and I feel so broken and so upset, and I know you could help me. [CHUCKLE] And what Fred would say is, I know you only from what you wrote, and the most meaningful kind of help comes from someone who can get to know us in a real and ongoing kind of way. And there are people like that in every community, and I trust you can find somebody. This is not easy.

Oh, that's real.

I mean, that's who Fred was.

And he knew what the real world was all about. It wasn't all positive wonder. You know, he heard about, you know, difficult family situations.

Right; right.

How did he respond to those?

Well, I mean, I'm even thinking of September 11th, the anniversary, or Persian Gulf War. PBS asked Fred to do PSAs for the Persian Gulf War. And his most famous quote that people have actually been using, even with the Boston Marathon tragedy is, he said that when he would see difficult things in the news, tragic things, his mother would say to him, Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.

Which is another way of saying, think of the positive side of this.

Right. There are many more helpers in this world. Yeah. I mean, look what he created, something called a neighborhood, that sense of neighborhood, we need each other. And Fred used to say, It's not a sign of weakness to ask for help, there's real strength in that. We need to know that other people care, and just to listen, to listen to our story.

Fred Rogers' background and training were not in television or acting. Yet, his interest in wanting to help children led him to a career in television.

He studied music composition in college. And then, he was originally going into the ministry.

Right.

But instead, he went --

As a Presbyterian minister. I think he was ordained.

Yes; yes. But at that point, he was just thinking of going into the ministry. And he watched some children's television, commercial television in 1950, and he said, This stuff is pies in faces, it's nonsense, children deserve better. So, he went to NBC and he worked as the floor manager for the Kate Smith Hour, for the music

programs at NBC. And one of the people that he worked with as the floor manager was Gabby Hayes, who did a TV cowboy kind of thing, introducing cowboy films. And Fred loved to tell the story that one day, he said, Mr. Hayes, what do you think about when you look out there and you know there are millions of children who are watching? And Gabby Hayes said, Freddy, ya just think of one little buckaroo out there. [CHUCKLE] Fred always talked about, this is not mass medium. This is really personal communication.

I think not everyone can turn mass medium into a personal conversation. And somehow, he resonated, didn't he? What do think it was?

Well, I think it's a few things. First of all, he learned about television and he understood what it could do and what it couldn't do.

So, that's a craft.

That's part. Secondly, while he was working on this children's program, he went to the seminary and he got the master's in divinity, and then was ordained with the special ordination of serving through television. But one of his professors said, If it's children you want to devote your life work to, then instead of writing your paper on an adult for the case study, I would like you to write it on a child. But, in order to do that, you need to go to the University of Pittsburgh and their Child Development Graduate School and learn more about children. He didn't just read the material for classes. He sat down on the floor with the children. He knew what it was like to really talk with a child. And that's why his communication -- the word people often say is, it was so authentic, it was so honest. Because he learned about how you listen to children so that you understand who they are, so that you can communicate with them.

You have two daughters.

Uh-huh.

Did you use the Fred Rogers strength of character training on them?

Well, they essentially did grow up in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. You can't help it. I mean, I drank this, you know philosophy.

Kool-Aid.

I took it in, and it was part of my child development background too, of how you approach things with children and talk about them. Although, I do remember once, I was traveling at a conference and staying with a family, and around the dinner table they asked each one, What was the best thing that happened to you today? And then they'd go around again and say, What was the worst thing? And I remember bringing it home to my kids, and they said, Oh, god, Mom's been to a workshop. [CHUCKLE]

One comment I've heard people make is, You know, he seems too good to be true. Was he?

I'd say he was.

He really was?

I will tell you, that's who he was.

He was not one of those guys who's a great persona on camera, and then --

No. In fact, when you went into his office to have -- I mean, we were only twelve, fourteen at the most, just a small bunch of support people for him. When you went to talk to him about something, you could just feel yourself, your respiration and your blood pressure lowering and lowering, because he spoke like that.

Fred Rogers; he talked about ritual. His show also didn't change over the years in terms of its format and its message.

M-hm.

I mean, there was a wide-ranging message involving childhood development, but there were no new skills added on, or no references to technology, and yet he was on television for more than thirty years. What's that all about?

Well, Fred used to say that even though the outsides of children's lives have changed, their insides haven't changed. We all need to know people care about us because of who we are. And all these tools of learning -- there was a reporter who once said to him, Why don't you do more with ABCs and one-two-three? And I remember [CHUCKLE] Fred said ... I'd rather give children the tools for learning, because if you give them the tools, they will want to learn the facts, they'll be motivated to learn the facts. Tools like curiosity, persistence, sense of humor, industriousness, hard work, being able to get along with others; you know, you give them those tools, they'll want to learn the facts, and more importantly -- and this was really important to Fred -- more importantly, they will use the facts to build and not to destroy. We sometimes forget and get enamored and seduced by all these things around us, the fancy gadgets and whatever. And it's the real stuff that matters, it's the people-to-people. And that's part of what we're saying is, we have to keep this face-to-face this way, not just Facebook and not just FaceTime. We need the nuances.

We've changed our definition of friend over the years.

That's right.

Somebody can be a friend who's never met you. Do you think if Mr. Rogers were still here -- and he passed away, I believe, in 2003. Do you think he'd still be taking off his shoes and singing, and speaking slowly, and giving transitional lessons?

Well, there are two ways to think about that. One is that ... Fred said, If we were starting out today -- now, he said this even in the mid-90s. If we were starting out today, there probably would not be a place for us on television.

Because it wouldn't be fast-paced enough, with bells and whistles.

Right. This is not neW. [CHUCKLE] In fact, some people said that he even took television back fifty years. [CHUCKLE] So, that's one thought, is that he recognized that his pace was slower, and that what he was talking about was different than what was going on in the the genre.

Now, was that because he was kind of a folksy, slower speaking guy, or because he thought children needed a little slower pace, more calm?

He felt children needed that, and it fit him. So that's hard to split those two apart.

Gotcha.

But now, here's the other thing. After Fred died, we continued the legacy, PBS kept the program on the air, and we started to think as a company, where are we, where are we going. And the board of directors said, You know, you can either be an archive, a history place, or you could consider another program.

And everyone must have said, Replace Fred Rogers?

Right; right.

Yeah.

And we all realized you couldn't replace Fred. So, to create a new program, that wasn't who we were. So, fortunately, we hired an incredible COO whose name is Kevin Morrison to lead us through this. Kevin had had experience with animation, he had been in children's television in many different capacities.

Were you looking for somebody who knew animation?

I don't know. [CHUCKLE] I don't really know. It was just someone who could move us into the future. But obviously, animation was the way PBS even was going. So, Kevin said, Let's talk to some creative people, put out the word that we will go to PBS. We wanted to stay with PBS. That was always important to Fred; he felt PBS represented a gift to people. I'll sort of tell you; the reason he left in NBC in 1953, he told me once that he saw that commercial television was going towards greed and away from gift, and he wanted to be part of gift of television. And Public Television was so important to him. And we wanted to stay in this neighborhood [CHUCKLE], so to speak. So, we brought three ideas to PBS, and the one that resonated with them was the one that we developed in conjunction with Angela Santomero. Angela's company is called Out of the Blue, they're in New York. And together, the idea grew of, Why don't we take the Neighborhood of Make Believe part, animate that, but we don't have the voices that Fred gave these puppets ... why don't we do the next generation down. So, Daniel Tiger of Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood is Daniel's son. The old Daniel [CHUCKLE] is now grown up, and he's a father. So, you can have the pieces of the legacy and bits of it, and the songs, and changing the sweater, sneaker, and the characters, the King and the Queen, and Lady Elaine, and you can have the characters, but in a different scenario, a scenario that would work with today's children. And what I love hearing from adults saying they like the bits of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, that they're hearing in it and feeling in it.

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor.
Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?

It's a very different program than Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was, but what we're hearing about how children are using it ... Fred used to say that television is the only appliance that's best used when it's off. [CHUCKLE] Meaning, when it's off and you use it, you take something from it and use it.

For example?

For example; I did a workshop here on Oahu and I showed a short clip of Daniel. He's making a card for his dad because he sees how happy his father is when he gets mail from his own father. So, he makes a card. And the song is, [SINGS] Making something is one way to say I love you. So, there are these jingles within the animated story. And one of the participants in the workshop said that her daughter, four years old, when the program was over, that episode was over, she said, I'm going to make a card for Daddy. I think that's beautiful.

And also an example in-house, and I wish I could remember the words. But there's one Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood episode about controlling your anger.

Yes. [CHUCKLE]

You know, frustration as a kid. And so, there's a song. Do you remember how the song --

[SINGS] When you feel so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count to four. Is that the one?

Yes. And that is what I heard two members of our advancement department saying one day.

Oh! [CHUCKLE]

And it worked.

That's beautiful. Yeah; that's beautiful.

You know, it is true that you remember things better when they're in song.

M-hm; m-hm.

And that obviously, that's accepted and known information. That's what he was doing from the very beginning.

Right.

He was getting kids to remember key messages.

Yeah; yeah. But Fred's music was different. It was harder to sing, it was much more sophisticated in a different way. These are jingles, and they are so sticky. [CHUCKLE] And that's what we hope, is that we're giving life lessons.

That's a big change between ...

Right. And we are script consultants, so that we try to help make sure that there's Fred thoughtfulness in the scripts.

So, you try for short in terms of jingles. He's singing songs, or doing jingles.

I guess. I mean, that was the plan, to give children life lessons that they would use.

The life lessons may have been for the children, but Mr. Rogers wanted the family involved as well. He originally named his company Family Communications, Incorporated because he wanted to foster healthy communication in families.

What was most important to him was that parents were watching Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood with their children. I hear that over, and over, that parents now are saying, I remember with my daughter, we would sit there, that was that

beautiful half-hour. And parents today, whether they're sitting there with their children or in the other room, they're aware of what's going on. Or they say, Where did you learn that? Oh, from Daniel. So, there's something really important about that communication. You assume that children know you're coming back at the end of the day, but to know that it's helpful to a child to hear you say that, to put it in words.

Because he knew what kids' fears are.

Yeah; yeah.

Fred Rogers brought his own finely tuned sensitivities and awareness to his shows.

Fred was an appreciator. We had Yo Yo Ma in a program, and after Fred had sat with him -- he was on a couple of times. This first time, his music was so magnificent. Fred came back from the music shop having heard him, and he said, Sometimes when you've heard something so wonderful, you just want to sit and think about it for a while. Let's just think about it. And he left silence.

That's unusual on television.

And we watched him think and remember.

Without effects; no visual effects, right?

Right.

He was the real deal.

Yeah; yeah. He was. What you saw was what you got. What has been a treasure for me and a real privilege is that working with him so closely not only helped me professionally, but it's helped me grow personally.

The gifts that Fred Rogers passed on to Hedda Sharapan probably influenced her two daughters, as well.

It's wonderful knowing that your children want to make this world a better place, and that's where they directed their lives. I am just so proud of my daughters, of who they are and how they are living their lives in ways that are really, a gift to others, helping others, doing better things for this world.

Like their mom.

[CHUCKLE] You hope so.

And so, Fred Rogers lives on through Daniel Tiger, Jr. and the wonderful staffers who've chosen to carry on his legacy. Mahalo to Hedda Sharapan for sharing her life's work and the story of this icon of children's television, the late Fred Rogers. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii, and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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When I was about eleven years old, I had my own television show.

You did?

It was called The Happy Hedda Show. [CHUCKLE] But it was only in the mirror. [CHUCKLE] I was fascinated by television. We didn't get television in our home 'til 1954, and I was ten years old. And I was enchanted by the people on television. And I guess I wanted to be the sidekick to these different characters.