



CHANNELING MISTER ROGERS HELPS SHALER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT FIND KINDNESS AND COMMUNITY

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Fred Rogers — “Mister Rogers” to most of the world — left us with many things, from a legacy of kindness and openness to a rich imaginary world

of kings and tigers and owls and possibilities. He left behind, too, the notion of “143” — the number of letters in the words “I love you.” It’s a lightly coded call for us to be good to each other.

Which is exactly what Shaler Area School District does with those three numbers every year, turning the springtime marking of Mister Rogers’ “143 Day” — the 143rd day of the year, on May 23 — into a districtwide effort to build community around the principles that the western Pennsylvania native-turned-national-icon held so dear.

“We figured, what better way to show kindness than to evoke the messages and memories of Fred Rogers?” says Angela Evans, a music teacher at Marzolf Primary School in the district and one of the day’s main planners.

The ripples of the day at Shaler Area — and beyond, since other districts have started to follow the example — have impacted students, teachers, and administrators alike as the effort to spread kindness virally begins

to echo across the hills north of Pittsburgh.

And 143 Day has made the transition from the district’s small primary schools to the larger intermediate school more comfortable for scores of children.

The celebration traces its roots to 2022, during the jumbled days of reemerging after the COVID pandemic disruptions of 2020-21.

In an effort driven by history teacher Nick Haberman, founder of the LIGHT Education Initiative at the high school, school leaders started planning an event modeled on Mister Rogers’ principles that they first called “It’s a Beautiful Day in Titan Town,” a mashup of Fred Rogers’ neighborhood theme song and the name of the Shaler Area mascot.

Its guiding principle: bringing the community together — both the school community and the physical community around it.

AN INCREASED SENSE OF BELONGING

143 Day at Shaler Area becomes a more powerful experience each year. This spring will include a district-wide contest for students to design the T-shirt that everyone at the event will receive. Anyone can win — even one of the youngest kids in the district.

The district is also introducing “meetups” of matching grades from some of the different schools early in the event. That’s followed by a larger meetup of different grade levels that involves introducing yourself to your neighbor in a way that Mister Rogers would have loved: giving students half of something fun and having them find the other half by getting to know their peers. Peanut butter, for example, would have to find jelly.

And in a district where some schools, like Scott Primary, have a large population of English language learners, organizers have identified a priority: to infuse parts of those families’ cultures in the event, ensuring they’re part of a neighborhood that welcomes everyone.

As soon as 143 Day took root in 2022, Shaler Area’s educators noticed the growing cohesiveness that came with simply drawing together on a certain day at a certain time.

That inspired them to grow the event in 2023. WQED-TV, Mister Rogers’ television home, got involved and brought along some Daniel Tiger-related activities. A few special guests also made an appearance, including the anti-bullying musical duo of Josh and Gab. It all helped kids acclimate to

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