



Exploding The Phone

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A Conversation with Joybubbles

May 9, 1998

With Joybubbles, John Fail, and Chris Strunk

I started working in the University of Pittsburgh Information Sciences Library this summer, and in the beginning of May I met the "Special Patron," Joybubbles. Joybubbles ♦ his legal name ♦ was a round bald man in his early fifties who was watching every single episode of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, which our library archived. Or rather he was listening to them all, for he was born blind.

Joybubbles had saved up money from "smelling hog doo-doo" in Minneapolis to come to our library and listen to the 870 or so episodes that he hadn't heard yet. He led his own organization supporting eternal children, and claimed to be five years old. It was almost unbelievable.

A quick search on the Internet for his name led to some information that he was previously known as "The Whistler," one of the most famous phone phreaks in the 1960♦s. The Whistler was famous for his ability to whistle a 2600Hz frequency into the telephone, thus enabling him to exploit the phone system.

Joybubbles was devoted to his project. The videotapes were an older format ♦ not Beta, even older, and much larger than VHS tapes. The only video player the library had began eating the tapes the first day he was there. He was distraught, but a staff member was able to find another video machine, so his project was saved.

My duties in the library involved changing videotapes for him, and I often would talk with him about a variety of things. He was extremely friendly and approachable, and I believe entirely guileless. He sang along with the theme song every single time, and would always identify the test pattern tones at the beginning by ear ♦ "That♦s 420 Hz!" My friend Chris and I went to his apartment one night and did this interview, which was an incredible experience ♦ he played with the phone and shared some toys with us, and merely asked that we read his mail for him.

As he got more into his project, he began to spend 11-hour days at the library, in order to be ahead of his schedule. He would go the entire time without eating, just sitting in front of the TV in the back corner of the library, playing with the various toys he had brought with him. After a few weeks, he began to drape a large blanket over himself and the TV, in order to make his time with Mr. Rogers more private.

On the day of his birthday, May 25, we baked him a cake, but when we called him, he said that he had been robbed the day before while taking out the trash. Someone had reached into his pockets and taken his money. Joybubbles was upset and wanted to spend the rest of the day alone.

He finished his project about a week ahead of schedule. He had listened to every single episode of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* except two, and had even gotten to preview some recently-made episodes that hadn't yet aired. On Friday, June 19, myself and several other staff members took Joybubbles to the Pittsburgh Children♦s Museum, which was showcasing an exhibit on Mr. Rogers. The visit was a wonderful experience ♦ Joybubbles, although he couldn't see the exhibit, still enjoyed it and shared all kinds of obscure Mr. Rogers trivia with us ♦ "That♦s from Episode #424!"

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette did a front page story on him in their Thursday, June 25 issue. Joybubbles left Pittsburgh on June 30, but I♦m certain that no one that met him will ever forget him. Without any further ado, I present the interview.

[dialing]

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Now you're doing this completely illegally, right?

Oh well, you know, we'll go to jail in a few minutes [laughs] No, actually, I was just dialing a disconnected number in Japan.

[dials]

Now I'll dial Saudi Arabia so we can hear how to say "thank you" in Arabic. The last word is "thank you". It's *shokrun* so listen for the *shokrun* at the end of the recording.

[voice in Arabic]

Shokrun that means "thank you". Well, maybe after dialing Saudi Arabia I'm a little more relaxed. It does seem a little weird but life is weird I guess. I'm starting to wake up, too. I was mostly asleep.

Shall we start the questions? It's not late for us we're students.

That's right I forget I'm a five year old, and they're so used to. Actually, I do wake up. See, I go to bed at like seven or eight o'clock and then wake up for the night calls Kevin's actually been in a coma for a few days.

This is a terminally ill child you talk to?

Yes, we usually talk at night and I'm working on a song for him that's sort of coming and sort of not

[picks up phone]

I've already found a bug in the system, actually.

In what, the Pittsburgh phone system?

A feature, yes, called Callgate you can block any seven or ten digit number from being able to be called from your phone

--

[dials]

This is one in Virginia here.

["Dial your personal identification number"]

See, you have to dial a secret code in order to get through --

[hangs up]

but all you have to do is call forward to it. It's going to be a busy number, but --

[dials]

see, if I call forward

[busy signal]

see, it didn't say "dial your four digits" -- it went right through. That's all you have to do -- call forward, and that defeats their Callgate system. That's the way it is, you know. All kinds of bugs.

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Where were you born? Where are you originally from?

Oh, I was born in Richmond, Virginia and I've lived all over the country. I'm not so concerned where I'm from, I'm concerned with where I am.

How old are you actually?

Five forever. Yep, that's how old I am "actually".

What kind of life did your parents have?

My father was a school picture photographer.

In Richmond?

No, this was all over the country. About 30 states, but in Richmond too.

How do you think your upbringing affected your decision to become an eternal child?

Maybe being sexually abused repeatedly in a blind school by a nun that may have had something to do with it. It's hard to tell, looking back.... how things would be different, but perhaps also, I was called "gifted" an IQ of 172 or something that kinds of makes you put too much emphasis on learning and not enough emphasis on just being yourself and playing.

Before I was four, I knew how to be read to with people spelling the words and stuff. So when I learned Braille I already knew how to read and learned in only a month or two. Sometimes that can keep you away from being a child.

Do you feel that the educational system had a definite impact on you?

Not so much that ... it was sort of my parents and everybody being driven to that and I was just as much of a culprit. I mean, I told the kindergarten teacher "play stinks!" and I wanted people to read to me by spelling the words.

Did you complete high school?

Yeah, but I went back I hated school so bad I went back and repudiated that. When I became a child I went and got a GED cause that wasn't compulsory. I hate compulsory education.

So you disavowed your high school diploma?

Yeah, and got a GED, which I like better. Then I wrote for one of these novelty degree places and they sent me a nice parchment Ph.D. in Eternal Childhood, which I value very highly.

So why not grow up?

Well, until 1988 I didn't know how to swing on swings. When a TV newsman came and interviewed me, and asked me my biggest wish in the world, I said it was to learn how to swing on swings. People tried to explain it to me, but it's kind of hard to explain in words so he took his cameras and took me out to a swing. I was so excited when he taught me that I was screaming, and he got it on TV and won an award. A guy named Steve Hartman.

That was when you decided to be an Eternal Child?

No, that was a few months after. It was sort of a spiritual initiation for it, though. It was ten years ago this month that I decided it that's one of the reasons I scheduled the Pittsburgh trip for this time. Ten years ... saved up for a couple years to get here. I had a job in Minneapolis a lady in Oklahoma told me about it where you get paid for smelling hog doo-doo.

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Yeah, Eternal Children are kind of fascinated with poop and stuff anyway. They have a mask down there with "Joybubbles" written on it, and I'd go there and smell. Best paying job I ever had I had one at the phone company paying \$400/week, but it was a yucky atmosphere so I quit and

You probably knew more than they did anyway.

Not necessarily --- well, I would lots of times say things that they would eventually believe but didn't at first. But mainly it was the teletypes going, and the noise and when I wanted to work from home they couldn't let me do that, and I had an unsatisfactory absence record cause I would go out and find some trouble that I was working on, and not be there, and All those little things that were important to them weren't to me, so I found the best thing to do was part ways and do it free again. They were kind of surprised when I quit [silly voice] *that good job* cause the vice-president, Lloyd Legier, the guy who hired me, helped me get hired personally and that was kind of a big deal there.

Because you were a famous phone phreaker?

No, he just knew that I had found troubles -- well, they found that out along the way. Basically I came up to him and said "I got 30 trunks going into New York City, into an exchange, and they're giving me free calls, and I kept trying to report it and they won't believe me. Who'd be the right man to report that to?" He goes "I'm the right man" and he got them fixed, so they started charging. New York wouldn't believe me. There was a bunch of stuff like that, where they kept fixing stuff and finding out that it was where I said it was.

Which city was this in?

Denver, with Mountain Bell telephone. I got hired there in September of '77, but by '80 yes, it was March of '80 that I quit. Well, actually I didn't quit I quit as far as their payroll was concerned, but I continued the next day doing the same things they were paying me \$400/week for. It made no difference to me. Especially now that I'm a child.

So this was all before you were a child?

Yeah.

Were you attempting adulthood?

Yeah, I was, but ... it wasn't as satisfying as being a child. When you can get on the phone with a little kid and sing the Barney song with him, or go to a play group and get all those nice hugs ... I lay on the floor and Jennifer, a little girl, will jump up and down on me for 15 minutes. Her little feet boy, she has wonderful feet two of them. Gosh, they had high arches. One day her and Zach were whispering, you know -- *psst psst psst sssh* -- I was wondering what they were doing. [kid voice] "Here's Jennifer's feet. Hi, these are my feet," Jennifer said. I said "You know what they feel like Zach's feet." [kid's voice] "How did you know?!" So yeah, there's things like that I haven't really learned to play yet. Ten years and I've started it's kind of a beginning.

The first time you were a child, would you say that you missed your childhood?

I think so. I didn't like playing and stuff. At four I was in first grade, reading and stuff, and living in the blind school.

You lived there?

Yeah, and the next one I lived at was the one where I was repeatedly sexually abused by a nun. When you live there and they tell you "If you parents know how bad you are, they may not want you and they'll give you away."

Horrible things to tell a child.

Yeah, and they tell you that only by grace you're held back from being flushed down the toilet, and if God gets tired of you

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Are you religious now?

Yes, I have Eternal Childhood Spirituality, and I'm an ordained minister. As a matter of fact, I've got to find out how to register my minister's credentials in Pittsburgh to have them on record. I've already registered in Minneapolis.

How long are you staying in Pittsburgh?

Two months.

When did you arrive?

May 1.

Are you going to return to Minneapolis?

Oh yeah ... I got my apartment there and all my phones are still hooked up. My play room is full of toys, crying for me.

You didn't bring anything with you?

Yeah, but nothing compared to what's there. I brought my globe that I hugged when I was listening to tapes and we some of the people on my network did a prayer service for Kevin at 1 pm Eastern. I hugged the globe and sang him a song and stopped the tapes at the library.

At what point did you have your name changed to Joybubbles?

I went to court in 1991 June of 1991 and had it changed on my birth certificate.

What was your old name?

Oh, I don't say that anymore, thank God. I made sure it was all in the police file and everything, so every legal requirement even if I decided to go bankrupt, because they're charging me too much at the library to listen to those tapes

You're paying to use the tapes?

[laughs]

No. But if they do decide, and I have to go bankrupt, I don't even have to use my old name cause it's only like six years you have to use any name you used in the last six years. Not that I particularly want to go bankrupt, but at least if I do, the only person that will go bankrupt is Joybubbles. No, I don't have any idea of going bankrupt in the next few days. I could always borrow ten thousand from you if I need it.

[laughs]

John: Yes, us library employees make so much money.

Chris: I don't make that much at the bagel shop.

A bagel shop, did you say?

Yes.

Do bagels have holes in them? I forgot.

Yes.

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Let's see well, smelling hog doo-doo I get insurance for the blind. Occasionally I get paid for storytelling, but most of the time I do all my stuff for free. But yeah, I get by. I have the national support line in Minneapolis called We Won't Grow Up: Supporting the Eternal Child. The phone company got me the number USA-PLAY. I happened to pick a lady who has toys on her desk and stuff, and she kinda got crusading and working on stuff for me. Even the I.R.S. call up "What is the name of your group or organization?" "We Won't Grow Up: Supporting the Eternal Child." "Oooh, neat, what does it do?" Her voice went about an octave higher, you know? "I'll give you your tax ID number over the phone, it's 41-1854483". Oh goody

You pay taxes?

No, but if I had enough income I would. Lately, they needed it for the phone book. This is kinda neat, when you're 5, to have We Won't Grow Up be your tax number with the I.R.S. records. And if I did get any money I could pay taxes if I needed to, and at least I'd have the number.

Phone phreaking I how did you first become interested with the phone system?

Well, in 1953 I learned how to dial by mother putting tape on the 7 and the 3, cause 737 ... I knew I loved phones and I kept learning about them and was reporting troubles at 4, and kept on learning and growing... it was just part of that I still am. It'll be 50 years in 2003, 50 years of being a telephone man. It's a great love, a wonderful way to play.

In the 1960s, I guess, you started to meet other phone phreakers?

Yeah, when I whistled in college, in 1968 and then I got in some of the papers and TV and stuff, and people were calling me from all over the country. One network of people once I met them and introduced them to a whole other network that was that much together ... that kind of stuff.

Did the different networks have different techniques of phone phreaking?

Not really I well, maybe they did It was basically the same stuff ... blue box for outgoing calls to make special tones, and an incoming device that you could trip the ring quickly a lot of them had different words for it, but it was basically all there.

Can you still whistle at 2600 Hz?

Yeah I

[whistles]

It's kind of dry, with half-waking up ... but for short tones, like 5 I as many tones as it is for dial-pulsing I

[whistles short pulses]

-you know, for dialing digits I it's all the same tone, just different repetitions, numbers and pulses of it.

Do you still keep a blue box, for nostalgia?

No, I kinda want one, though. I thought of getting one, so while I was listening to Mr. Rogers tapes I could push it.

It wouldn't actually work anywhere, would it?

No. You might on a limited basis get it to work, maybe in some places, but it would still charge I the bypassing methods wouldn't work.

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[dials a series of numbers quickly ♦ maybe a hundred numbers]

You really need to know a silent number. I haven't found one yet here.

Just a number that doesn't answer?

A number that answers and goes silent. It'll be in the 00-series, cause there's a lot of test numbers there. I'm real interested ♦ one of my big wishes is to go to Squirrel Hill in the 42 or 52 exchange and invade somebody's place and use their phone for like two hours straight.

We can arrange that.

You know somebody in the 42 or 52 exchange?

Yeah, we'll try and set that up.

Gee, that would really be fun. See, that exchange is made in Germany by the Seaman's company, and for me of course, every exchange is different.

Depending on what it starts with?

No, like who made it, and what generic programs run it ♦ they all make different sounds. There is a Seaman's in Crafton and Homewood ♦ is it Homewood? Homedale? Homewood?

Yeah, Homewood.

But the phone company told me the one nearest to here would be Squirrel Hill.

[dials a series of seemingly random numbers]

Are you dialing something that you know, or are you just trying to find something?

No, I'm just sitting up on an intercepted number and doing this for fun.

Is what you are doing ♦ can it be traced to this line?

I guess so ♦ if anybody wanted to.

Is what you're doing illegal?

No ♦ dialing a disconnected number and sitting on it and doing tones after the recording finishes is not exactly illegal. Or, I could dial the number in Denver that's going to be the test number for the new area code on July 12 and see if they put it in yet.

[dials]

I don't know if it's in or not ♦ it may not be hooked up yet. I'm anxiously awaiting for when it is, for the new 651 area code.

[ringing]

When I called the guy who handles numbering for US West telephone company and told him before it was announced what the area code was going to be, he gave the message to his boss and was a little surprised. But it's just a pattern from number assignments ♦ I figured out that one, and the second choice ♦ what it was going to be. He said "Yeah, you're

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Maybe when I couldn't afford long-distance calls in the 60s and very early 70s, when I lived with my parents, I had no other way to make them. I guess that would be stealing.

Do you morally justify that?

Uh, no ... I just wanted to learn I guess if I was going to justify it morally, it would be later, when I learned about phones and started reporting troubles. Those 30 circuits in New York that were giving free calls and I told them about it that's a pretty high volume thing, every day to an office in New York. It had been going on for awhile that was like thousands of dollars a day, probably. If you want to think about it morally, I guess I saved them a lot of money more money than I could have ever made in calls. But still the calls were illegal and I was doing an illegal act, so you could either way on that, I guess.

With your whistling, how did you find out how to do it, and how exactly did it work?

I was seven or eight years old, and I was sitting on a long-distance circuit, and I heard the background hum of the tone that controls it 2600. I started whistling along with it, and all of the sudden the circuit cut off, and I did it again and it cut off again. And gradually, through thinking about it and learning everything I figured out back in the mid-fifties just how to do it.

Did you continue to blue box until 1985, when they went with the electronic system?

Actually, I didn't really have a blue box after '71. It got confiscated ...

Describe your arrest.

Well, I went to Memphis and I was on welfare and trying to get jobs and stuff, and running out of money, and I didn't know what else to do, so I reported some troubles. While the test man was on the line I guess he didn't know that I knew he was on the line, but I heard a subtle impedance change I just said "Oh, I'm going to call Russia now." I whistled up the US Embassy in Moscow and talked for about two hours pretending I was a talk show host and he was a talk show. They heard that, and then I made a couple of other free calls and gave my phone number and then used the blue box after it.

Because you wanted to be arrested?

Yeah, and I didn't know any other way. I did get a job offer at a small phone company. It was just cleaning phones and it wasn't really that much, but it was a job and it kept me on my own in Memphis, when I first got away from the family I was living with. I needed to do that at whatever cost it incurred.

What are some of your most famous adventures in the phone system? Did you ever bounce calls off of like 50 different places across the world?

No, I would just call country codes and test each one, and see if they were in calling England and listening to rings, and measuring the frequency by ear so I could get the right number of Hertz.

What was the neatest thing you ever did?

Oh I don't know I just consider everything interesting I don't really categorize it like that. I'm sure somebody else, if they knew what all I'd done, would find something interesting that I hadn't even thought of maybe calling Russia was interesting, but for me, it was just a call.

I see you still mess around today do you ever worry about getting in trouble?

No ... I would tell them what I do if they ask. I'm always on the phone and they know it. Some lady in Minneapolis kept trying to get me paid and stuff but I said that would just be a bureaucratic hassle. I won't accept more than a nickel to keep

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Since it went electronic, has it been less fun?

No. The phone has always been fun. Had I been around in the 1890s, it would have been fun then too. But I only started in the early 50s, so it's always fun. Like this is a 5E and I found a little bug in three-way. One I found they fixed in a neat way. See, if you program a number on speed call

[dials]

So you can dial with one digit, and wait for the dial to return

[dial tone]

and then dial an 800 number, it would go to fast-busy. Well, now the way they fixed that bug is they made that dial tone not even respond to touch-tone.

[dials, but dial tone is still present]

Cause it won't process right. So to fix that bug they made the dial tone not be able to dial so you don't get those wrong indications. And I found that the recording for activating the feature code of Anonymous Call Reject to block blocked calls if you three-way that on, it drops the whole connection.

[dials]

Like, if I dial the time here and three-way that on

[rings]

it won't let me come back to the time. It not only drops that connection, it drops the time connection.

Do you have all of the services on your phone?

Oh yeah, tons of them.

[dials]

See, I dial that number it dropped both calls. A generic bug ...

[dials]

The phone is the world to me. Like, if I want to read the paper

[You have reached Minnesota Dial-In News. Press 1 for Minnesota Dial-In ..]

[presses 1]

[Please enter your four-digit ID number now.]

[dials ID code]

This is my newspaper.

[You are now in the St. Paul Pioneer Press.]

See, this is the St. Paul Pioneer Press, and category 30 is features

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Are you a fan?

Yes. Then we can skip articles here ♦

[dials]

[Saturday bulletin board --]

[dials]

[Joybubbles time!]

Yeah, they put me in here.

[Another Pittsburgh report from that Eternal 5-year old, the one and only legally sanctioned Joybubbles of Minneapolis:]

"Of Minneapolis" ♦ that sounds good.

[I ♦m in Pittsburgh! I ♦ve saved for a couple of years to come and hear all of the Mr. Rogers tapes that I haven ♦t heard yet ♦ about 300 tapes. Here at the University of Pittsburgh, they have an archive collection of all of his shows.]

No they don ♦t ♦ I ♦m just making that up. [laughs]

[.. listening to the these great big old video tapes that are a lot thicker and wider than the VHS tapes ...]

We can speed it up ♦

[dials]

[(faster) Erin, who is charge of the archives, came up and said "Say hello to Andy!" So I reached out, and there was this dog ♦ I mean, there was this dog ♦ and lots of dog! I reached out from where I was sitting, and I had to reach up over my head to feel the dog ♦s head. She said "He ♦s Andy ♦ he ♦s a Great Dane." I never saw a Great Dane before ♦ I thought about Andy and what a good dog he was, and I tried to reach back. He knew what to do ♦ he had to walk along slowly, so I could feel him. He had this nice wonderful coat ♦]

And slower ♦

[dials]

[(slower) That ♦s what I learned today about a Great Dane. I never thought that while being in a special collection of old video tapes ♦ some of them going back 30 years ♦ I would get to reach out and say some kind words to a Great Dane. And I ♦ve had a lot of other adventures. I heard Mr. Rogers speak in person when he got an award ♦ a wonderful little talk at an education of young children ♦s convention. But you know what the most important thing I found out from this trip is? It ♦s how much I miss the Twin Cities. There ♦s nothing like home, and when you have a home in the Twin Cities, you have something that ♦s very, very special. I really miss all of of there. Yeah, there ♦s some big adventures to come, and some people say they have a surprise planned for me. I don ♦t know what that could be ♦ I know that it ♦s going to be wonderful, but nothing could be quite as grand as coming home.]

So that ♦s how I read the paper.

[hangs up]

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Oh, all of them ... but that one was over WorldCom.

[...operation of the budget...]

This is USA Today and the Chicago Tribune, and the New York Times ... they don't have a talking newspaper here in Pittsburgh.

[Please enter your security code.]

Let's see if it still remembers me, even though I moved.

[dials]

[Good evening, Joybubbles.]

It's always refreshing to hear that somebody still remembers my name.

When you say you find troubles with the phone, what exactly do you mean?

Oh, like an area code not programmed in right, or a country code left out ... or that *77 if you're on three-way and you use *77 it'll drop both calls instead of the one, although that will be harder to fix. You know, area codes left out of like AT&T's system ... let's see if Minnesota's new one has been put in yet. It's not due until July 12.

[dials]

[Please enter your calling card number.]

[dials]

[rings]

Ah, it's put in for one system but not for the other. It's still way ahead of schedule if it's due July 12, so ...

[You call did not go through ...]

Now I can see it's an 845 exchange, so I got put into a local long-distance in Minneapolis to work out of ...

[dials]

No, there's no 845 yet ... I don't know of any working number on it yet, so it really doesn't matter, but when there's the first working number I'll call them up and say "Hey, I can't call the 845 exchange from the 871!" and they'll put it in.

Do they pay you at all for this?

No, I wouldn't let them.

So this is just a service you do?

Yeah, it's just a way to play when you're five years old. If I was a grown-up I would probably have to accept pay and have invoices if I don't even know what an invoice is, but it sounds good.

So your group is not the Eternal Child Society?

No, it's We Won't Grow Up sometimes we call it SPICE Supporting People In Child-like Enjoyment. Sometimes

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In 88, cause I was really looking around for some place for support for me, and sometimes instead of warming yourself by somebody's fire you have to light one. Since I couldn't find any place for support so I said I'd just start my own.

This is right after you decided to grow down?

Yeah, a few months after. I put some ads in the paper and finding out people were calling me who had been through the Holocaust, and one lady whose mother had killed her little invisible friends when she was little. She ran over them with the car in a garbage bag, saying she had them in there and she had killed them. Different things different types of abuse and stuff. Some people just wanted to stay a child and never did grow up in the first place. Like this Elizabeth she always wanted to be a child and finally when she got her divorce she didn't have to hide her toys anymore. She heard my an hour radio show and called me up just crying and just reading stuff out of her journal she thought she'd never hear anyone else in the world say stuff like that. You know, when you find out you're not alone, there's just power in that. You can laugh together and cry together and heal together, both still groping through life wounded, but at least you can find people who have been through the same stuff, and there's power in that.

How many people are involved in We Won't Grow Up?

Just two at a time. Me and whomever I'm talking to.

So you are actually registered as a non-profit organization?

I guess so at least I have a tax-exempt number, or a tax-ID number. We never had any income, but the phone company wanted to see something for the yellow pages and all that, so I registered with the Secretary of State in Minnesota and the I.R.S. Some of those grown-up things, for a child, when you really do all that, it's really neat to pretend like you're a grown-up, and go up with all those papers and get stuff with seals on it.

Do you do mailings or have a website?

No, we just talk on the phone. Now I got some ads coming out in the Sunday Post-Gazette. Maybe nobody will see it, and nobody will call you never know, just like a casino.

Do you run the phones 24-hours?

For that, yeah, I got a separate number. It will ring differently and I'll wake up. That's the same one Kevin calls, or Kevin's mother.

That's who you're mostly dealing with right now?

Yeah, a terminally ill kid. Usually I only talk to one of them at a time. Actually, he has a twin, but his twin is well Jared.

Where are they from?

Florida. They're both six years old.

What is he dying of?

I don't know exactly I tried to keep away from that. Some sort of blood/muscle disease or something. I don't think it's anything like cancer, but ... we just sort of talk.

Would you say that being blind has influenced your beliefs? Does it help you be a better child?

I don't know. I don't know it's hard to explain. It's hard to know, since I've never been anything else but totally blind. When I was little and died, I went to this beautiful place, and people there I met told me that I had decided before I

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Yeah, in 1962 ♦ 1961, I mean. When I was sick, I came back from summer camp and I was really sick and stuff for awhile. It was real special.

What are the benefits of being an eternal child? Do you urge everybody to become an eternal child, or is it only for certain people?

Only for the people that know for certain that they really want to be more than anybody else in the world. Like Elizabeth ♦ she, or anybody that ♦s really into it ♦ if you really want to be one. I mean, anybody can benefit from a little bit of it. They can play more, or maybe spend an hour a month in a sandbox. Or still remember that you ♦re never too big to go on swings, or play in go ♦ like Elizabeth ♦ I mean Elaine ♦ she ♦s in her 60 ♦s. She always wanted to dump out a whole can of baby powder, ever since she was little -- she got whipped when she was just kind of starting too. So she got three cans and took them home, and just wonderfully jumped up and down and dumped them all out, and turned a fan on, and man, did that stuff blow. Maybe you don ♦t want to come down and help her clean up ... but I think anybody can benefit at least from a little more play in their lives. Maybe some kind of fingerpaint, or play with Play-doh, or read some of the little picture books or stuff.... there ♦s a lot in there. Even Mr. Rogers, talking about the funny shape an orange peel is, how it can be flat, but when you fold it around it makes a ball, and that ♦s a really odd shape that you wouldn ♦t expect an orange peel to be. He was showing that, how a map of the world, when you flatten it out, what shape it really is. And how *pomme* in French means apple, and *pomme de terre* means earth apple, a round apple. It ♦s actually a potato. See, there ♦s a lot in childhood.

How do you view responsibility? Do you feel childhood is against responsibility, or do you try and take the two hand-in-hand?

I guess hand-in-hand because maybe saying "No" to some of the things that really don ♦t matter. Like, it matters more if I can be there for Jennifer to jump on than to let somebody give me some kind of humanitarian award to be on some high mucky-muck board thing

That ♦s happened?

Yeah. Well, I didn ♦t let it happen. I mean, it was a Challenge of Child award, and I got that, but they asked ... some place ... things like that ... that could happen if you let them. You find ... the ability to say "No" to things that maybe a grown-up wouldn ♦t say "No" to. That people would think "Oh, he ♦ll be a real success if ..." Like the lady that heard my songs ♦ I make up children ♦s songs like "Green slime, purple slime, ooey-goey-ishy slime" and this whole story about the day they did the Jello Pool in Florida. I made up this song, and the lady wanted me to publish it and come down with her to some production place and make it on tape ... which you get entangled in. So in a sense, you know what to say "No" to. Maybe it would be good in some respects, but you get into that, you don ♦t really have time to talk to Kevin for 6 hours anymore, if you do that stuff.

Have you ever recorded any of your songs?

No ... well, sometimes on my storyline or on kids tapes, when I ♦m there at the play group.

You play any instruments?

No, I do a lot of music theory and stuff but ... well, I play a keyboard like in the 5-tone scale, since I ♦m five, and put like chimes on it, and make this kind of random special music that ♦s healing to me.

But you ♦ve never wanted to record it?

No it ♦s in the pentatonic scale, in a certain key that I heard in my dream when I was little and stuff.

How did you learn music theory?

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Not too much ♦ children ♦s music, a lot of I started liking the Spice Girls, just cause I like the name of them.

Because your organization is SPICE?

Yeah, it ♦s sort of says something to me. A lot of little kids like them too, 10-12 years old.

So you pilgrimage here, to see the Mr. Roger ♦s ♦ has this been a dream of yours?

Yes, for a number of years. Jason ♦s mother ♦ one of the terminally ill kids was going to take me ♦ she was going to come in ♦95 ♦ this was in ♦93 we were talking about ♦ bring me, stay a week, get me settled, and I ♦d play with Jason every day, then I ♦d go back When Jason died in ♦93, I just said I was never going to Pittsburgh. I said "The heck with it" and got mad. Then it sort of came time to do it ♦ I worked through some of the memories of the abuse, that I hadn ♦t worked on and stuff ♦ and got ready, spiritually, to come.

Why is Mr. Rogers important to you?

It ♦s an investment in myself. There ♦s so much caring and kindness in there, and treasures of ideas that maybe you don ♦t even think of, about playing and words, and funny little things like the sound of a snap snapping, and that ♦s why they call it "snap" and ... I love snaps! And building an electric fan, and how it blows things around, or a big old umbrella Also, talking about some of the biggest and most important grown-up things in the world ♦ learning to love, and being loved, and how we ♦re all special just like we are, and we can be loved ♦ we don ♦t have to be anything else but who we all are. Like I like to say ♦ "Be somebody special ♦ be yourself." When you ♦re playing and you ♦re just you, powerful things happen. Just in Pittsburgh, it seems that everybody was helping me. A lady sewed a shamen book ♦ I think I still have it ♦ if I can show you the book she sent me here it is. This is the book for Pittsburgh ♦ it has a traffic light in it, and the symbol for Mr. Rogers, and ten pages for the ten programs I was going to listen to one day.

Who made this?

Some people ♦ an eternal child. There ♦s a 5 in there, and Mr. Rogers in Braille, and a bronze star for surviving sexual abuse

Have you met Fred Rogers?

No.

Would you like to?

I guess so ...

He lives here in North Oakland.

I don ♦t know what I ♦d say to him, exactly. Probably if he found out I saved up to take a train, and all this stuff, he ♦d probably think I was so crazy, he ♦d commit me to somewhere in the Poconos where I could be of no further harm. [laughs]

This book is amazing.

Yeah ... those kind of powerful things, like if you ♦re just yourself enough ... like when I went to the pool, just for play I saved up and went to a motel, just cause I love swimming pools ♦ and I was there, splashing myself, and "Ooh, I ♦m getting all wet". "Well, that ♦s cause you ♦re splashing yourself," one of the kids said. I said "Oh goody, I love to be splashed." "We can splash you!" And boy, they did. And afterwards they said "This place was kinda yucky until you came." And the last day I was there, a lady sat beside me, crying. She said she wanted to thank me ♦ she had come there with the intent of killing

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crying ... I thought if he can find happiness without his eyes ... actually, I do have eyes, but she said "without your eyes, then I guess I could too. So I called my best friend and threw the pills away and we went to Baptist Hospital and talked and ... I'm going to stay with that friend and get myself together." You know, those kind of things just start happening around you when you're truly who you are, and I promised never to grow up. You just don't know what kind of miracle or adventure there's going to be. Like the newspaper said it's sitting on the archive in there this lady named Erin comes in with a Great Dane. I didn't plan for that in my Pittsburgh trip, but it's a neat part of it.

Would you say you've succeeded in your quest to stay young?

Uh ... yeah. I consider myself a winner at the game of life. I was at the Casino one time. I was celebrating, getting filet mignon, and the big ice cream that they made me special, with no chocolate -- strawberry syrup on strawberry ice cream going way high. with a big cherry on top.

You don't like chocolate?

No. Or peanut butter. [whispering] I guess I'm not a real child! [laughs] But I told a waitress "I am celebrating, and I got the biggest jackpot you can hit" and some guy came running over "What did you do?! What did you play?! Blackjack? Or slots, or what? Was it here?" I said "No, it wasn't here." "Oh, it must have been at Turtle Lake then, I hear they pay big." "No, it wasn't at any casino. What it was, I woke up early this morning and took a couple of deep breaths, and I realized that not only I was breathing, but I felt great, and I realized there's no casino that can offer a jackpot anywhere like that." I said "I'm a winner." He wanted to eat with me and pay for my lunch, and I said that I was eating a whole lot, and maybe he could just pay the tip, but he said "No" and paid for my lunch, and took notes on stuff I was saying. I used to think always that God was watching me and scaring me, and I added just one more word in it to make it true "God is watching OVER me." And that is true. Just that one word makes all the difference, from "God is watching you!" you know, scaring you, to "God is watching over you." Those kinds of things in life how I thought I couldn't count my blessings cause I had so few, and now I can't count them cause I've got so many. You know, the same stuff just a different way of seeing. I think that's the essence of what this childhood is about a different way of seeing. You sit down in front of a dandelion, and see it as a beautiful flower, and learn that you can talk and listen to stinky socks. When you find them in a closet, you say "Socks, do you want to stay this stinky?" and they say "No." You rinse them out, and realize they're your first two friends in Pittsburgh. When I came here and was kind of overwhelmed that first Friday they made real good stoppers in the bathtub.

Were you scared the first night you were in Pittsburgh?

Yeah, cause I couldn't get a cab and it was raining, and I didn't have any groceries in here, and I was going to buy sheets, and cords at Radio Shack I had a whole big day planned, and none of it happened. Then, about the time it was starting to get kind of better, on Monday the machine was eating tapes and ruining them. The first Mr. Rogers Neighborhood is one the episodes that got eaten. I said "Well, maybe I'll leave tonight" and I packed one suitcase to see how it felt, but Kevin, when he called up, and told me about this camp that he went to, for terminally ill kids, and he felt yucky when he got there, but it ended up he stayed and got to ride a horse for the first time in his life, and he felt better. He said "It's a quarter horse a really good horse." He kept saying "Make the sound of the thing eating tapes again" and I'd do [sound], kind of crunchy, right into the mouthpiece, with my hand cupped around it and he would laugh and everything, and I said "Well, things will straighten out." The next morning I went in, and it was eating tapes, but it turned out it's because they were already hurt tapes. When I saw it doing it again the next day, well, I was about ready to get up and walk, and say "Well, this project is hereby over."

Did you know anybody in Pittsburgh when you came here?

Nope. I knew the two stinky socks they're my two best friends, my only friends in Pittsburgh.

How did you find the library? How do you get there?

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just show up?

I talked to Elizabeth on July 7 of 97, a Monday, cause the spirits ♦ an inner voice came to me at 2:03 AM that day, Monday morning, July 7, and asked me if I was ready now to commit to Pittsburgh for my tenth anniversary of childhood. I said "Yes," and it said "Don♦t worry, you♦ll be taken care of." Then I called Hetta up at Family Communications that afternoon, who I had met once and talked to a number of times. She gave me Elizabeth♦s number, and Elizabeth said "Yes, we can." Those three words have disrupted my life quite a bit.

But you♦re happy, right? You♦re glad?

Yeah. Now that it♦s going better and I♦m hearing the tapes, I♦m almost catching up on the schedule. This has been more of an emotional thing than I thought. I used to ♦ when I was a grownup ♦ save up and go tour a telephone office or something, I♦d just spend 3 or 4 days and it was just completely unemotional, just getting knowledge, and I wouldn♦t miss home at all. Of course, back then I didn♦t really like where I was living, but I would save up and learn all this good knowledge about how telephone offices worked, actually going in and feeling parts inside. Back when there was mechanical stuff, you could actually feel the little ratchet, and paw all the little gears.

Tell us some more about the trip.

Well, it all happened when this lady in Oklahoma, one of the people who got that book ♦ oh, where is the book?

It♦s over here.

Oh, just want to make sure I know where it is. Well, she was wanting to just plain old send me the money for Pittsburgh ♦ however much it is, and then I could stay in one of these nice temporary housing motel executive kind of places and she wanted to *do it right*. She is an eternal child ♦ sometimes we both forget and talk grown-up every now and again ♦ me and her, we don♦t realize ♦ she wanted to send me money. I said "Well, you know, what did you say the other day about pilgrimage?" and she said "Oh, well, it is kind of arduous. I guess that would take some of the arduousness away, wouldn♦t it?" and I said "Yeah." But I didn♦t figure out where I could earn the money. She thought she would be the last to do it ♦ "Well, I do need my grass cut, but Oklahoma City is kind of far for you to come to do that." But her and her friend a few days later called me up at like 2 in the morning ♦ "Joybubbles! Joybubbles! Joybubbles!" ♦ you know, she♦s real excited ♦ "We found you a job!" This was in August, about a month after I had called Elizabeth. "You go to a laboratory at the University and they pay you, and I don♦t know, maybe it♦s just once, and that♦ll be some money for Pittsburgh!" I was so sleepy I just put it in my voice mail and said "They pay you ♦ well, what♦ll I do?" and she said "Smell hog doo-doo."

Is this ten years ago, or one year ago?

One year ago, when I called Elizabeth, in ♦97. So I said "Hog doo-doo?" Well, I didn♦t believe her. Somebody calls you at two in the morning and tells you about a job smelling hog doo-doo, you don♦t always ♦ I mean, she♦s pretty reliable ♦ she♦s a child life specialist in a hospital ♦ but I still kind of ♦. Well, it♦s stretching it a little bit. Well I called the next day, and found out it♦s an odor panel, and they told me about the rules ♦ no deodorant that day, and no caffeine, and all these important things. As a matter of fact, I got a consent form and the rules ♦ if I do meet Mr. Rogers I♦m going to give it to him, cause his programs ♦ any one of them ♦ is good enough to smell hog doo-doo to come and hear. I know, cause I did. They have a mask with "Joybubbles" on it, and you stand up at this big machine called an Olfactometer, and they pump three air samples ♦ two of them are pure, and one has a wicked air to it, and you have to figure out the minimum intensity you can smell. They do different parameters like we wouldn♦t even need to know, like the feed and the humidity and stuff, and they can figure out how that affects the smell for like neighborhoods based on our intensity evaluations and stuff. The hog stuff didn♦t smell too good, but the checks did, cause they were for Pittsburgh. They gave me a little stuffed pig to bring to Pittsburgh ♦ Pigsburg ♦ in Pittsburgh ♦.

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me this for all of the smelling I did around Christmas.

So when you return you're going to continue doing it?

Yeah, to pay off the debts for Pittsburgh that I run up paying two rents, and two sets of phones a lot of long-distance. Some of these calls to Minneapolis are long-distance

What else has been influential to you, besides Mr. Rogers, in being an Eternal Child?

Doing the story I do a story for kids. I guess learning from terminally ill kids, that's been one of the things. Like the time I don't know, we have so many conversations but learning the value of magic and stuff in a kid's life, like Jason went out and planted a lollipop in the ground. He knew maybe it would grow into a lollipop tree. His mother thought "That might be magic out there you'll have to watch it every day and see if it grows." A few days later, after he was about to give up on it, she had been to the grocery store, and had something locked in the trunk. Early in the morning she woke Jason up and said "I think your lollipop has come up" and there were like 300 lollipops out on the tree out there. Those kind of things learning the value of not having to take things too literally. The time Jason wanted to give me his eyes he said "Do they put you to sleep when you take your eyes out and you give them to somebody?" His mother said that they do it after you're dead. He said "They wouldn't work dead. I could give him one eye, and he could see some and I could see some." He was almost five years old.

Do you want to see?

I don't think so not now. I think if I was starting over from the beginning, I would want to see. But I haven't found any reason to believe that it would make my life any more complete. Last Monday, the thing still would have eaten tapes, and last Friday, traveling somewhere I think that I would still be lonely, even if I could see. When you travel, I hear that people still get homesick, even when they can see. I haven't figured out yet that it would make me any happier. It's sort of like when people were telling me to sue the church and school about my sexual abuse. So they gave me a big package of thousand-dollar bills they don't really have my childhood. I don't know that that would make me any happier either. Because they may have helped take my childhood, but they don't have it to give me. It's in friends and swings and laughing and playing with clay, or going to a place maybe like Pittsburgh, unless I decided that I was too scared and never would go oh, that's right, I'm here but it's that kind of stuff that's where my childhood really lies. There's things you can't get from simple abundance. Like Mr. Rogers said "Wealth is not so much to the people that have it, but to the people that enjoy it." And I'm not so sure that sight would make me a more wealthy soul or not. And besides, my world is so structured and built the way I am, I don't think I could ever really go back successfully to something I haven't you know, my whole brain and everything is structured for it. I think I would like to start out seeing, if there is a next life, and I do come back to Earth, I definitely would want to see.

You said that you were an ordained priest have you ever conducted a church service?

No, I don't do it like that. Well, over the phone, you know, there's a prayer ritual for like Elaine, who had her invisible friends killed when she was little. We did prayers and songs and stuff to invite them back, cause they're people of spirit, really, in our belief. And, after awhile, after 40 or 50 years or so, they jumped back through her window, and suddenly remembered three verses of some song "Oh safe playmate, come out and play with me, and bring my dollies three" and she sung me three verses that she hadn't sung, I think she said, since 1936. She used to sing to them. And it was a glorious thing, and that's kind of the thing that my ministry would do not the usual [preacher voice] "Let us pray! And from the blood of Jesus, the power and the only way you can be cleansed! Do you realize you might be headed for hell this instant? If you walk out of here smiling, I haven't done my job." You know, I could do preaching like that if I wanted to, but I don't know if it would bring the world more joy.

Is that your ultimate goal to bring the world more joy?

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always watching you and you don't know anyway, and I have no idea. But if you just be yourself enough, and find the right pool I mean, I did try a health club one time [tough guy voice] "Hey, you're blocking our lap lane. If you're not going to use it, get out of it, man." So, I was in the wrong pool, but the right one was in the hotel where the kids were playing and stuff, and the lady threw the pills away, and she wished me happy birthday a few months later. And those kind of things I think if I was just bringing people joy without it bringing me joy, and being a martyr or something, it wouldn't really be truly it wouldn't really last indefinitely. But if I just settle back and be me, you know sometimes curmudgeonly and sometimes being kind of rude and sometimes feeling bad, and sometimes maybe even road rage except I don't drive, but you know. Being a wounded healer, and not being perfect, but there are times when both of us in the world are bringing each other joy, you know.

Do you have any concluding comments, remarks, or advice to anyone?

The more you're able to cry, the less you'll have to pee. [laughter] No, I guess a slogan "Out of the rat race, into the sandbox."

I heard that on your answering machine.

Yeah, that's one I did give. Yeah, but you can always remember about the peeing.

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