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## Columnists

**Gene Collier**



### There's Martin Luther King, and there's Gandhi ... and there's Fred Rogers

Sunday, March 09, 2003

The 53-year-old blind man known as Joybubbles was crying in a Minneapolis grocery store. A stranger consoled him. Bought him an orange. Oranges are his favorite.

He sure wasn't the only middle-aged American to go to pieces upon the death of Mister Rogers, and though no one should ever get the last word on Fred, a short personal epilogue from Joybubbles would not be the worst way to punctuate the first tremorous weeks of mourning.

"When I heard it, I just curled up on the floor and cried for a while. Then I went to the store and starting crying again," Joybubbles said on the phone from Minnesota the other day. "I was wearing the T-shirt I got in Pittsburgh, my 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood' T-shirt. I was just thinking, 'Mister Rogers, how much love and joy you've given me.' When I was in Pittsburgh, it was like he was visiting with me 10 hours a day. It never got boring. Children could feel him hug them right over the TV, and I could, too."

Joybubbles made it to Pittsburgh by himself on the train. It was the spring of 1998. It was an intensely personal mission to the Neighborhood. He survived the city's only tornado, a back-alley mugging and six weeks of frozen dinners and Mountain Dew in a stark Oakland apartment, all so he could listen to the University of Pittsburgh's entire archival library of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" on tape.

Eight hundred shows. Give or take.

All day, every day, for most of May and June, he'd sit in a remote corner of Pitt's School of Information Sciences library, his head covered with a blanket because he was too near the air conditioning, singing along with Fred and playing with some puppets.

"They told me I'm the only one in the world who has heard the whole



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series," he said then. "Whether that's true, I don't know. I only know that I wanted to hear it. I kind of missed childhood. I had sexual abuse and stuff. I need healing, so I'm having my childhood now. I'm 5 years old forever."

Joybubbles said he'd only recently remembered being sexually abused as a small child at a school for the blind in New Jersey. His mother, who lives in Florida, denies any knowledge of his sexual abuse, but in 1991, Joybubbles changed his name specifically for that reason.

"I went to court and rendered the name I was abused under null and void forever," he said. "I never have to say it again."

When I went to meet Joybubbles at his Oakland dungeon that day almost four years ago, I'd anticipated a relatively straightforward interview about the nature of hero worship, about how if you insist on looking for heroes in an era when 50 heroes disintegrate every week, Fred Rogers was as close as you can get to the real thing. In fact, he was the real thing.

But it wasn't that simple. Nothing about Joybubbles was simple. His was a story so singularly bizarre that when I first laid it out for PG editors, they rightly scoffed. "Scoff, scoff," they said, approximately. "No, no," I said. "It checks out."

The part about Joybubbles earning the train fare to Pittsburgh by working for the University of Minnesota as a dung sniffer (odor panelist, officially) was confirmed by the school's agriculture and engineering department. The part about his name change (Minneapolis civil court file 91-11464), the part about him setting up a phone network to talk with terminally ill children nationwide, the part about "phone-phreaking" -- his ability to emit a tone that somehow allowed him to place calls worldwide in the '70s (he was arrested for malicious mischief) -- all true.

And still the most powerful thing he managed to convey in a long life of powerfully turbulent changes was the simple genuineness of his love for Fred Rogers.

When I asked him this week how everything was, he mentioned his phone network getting set up in Australia and that "I haven't been smelling any pig poop lately," but said he couldn't stop thinking about Fred.

"In the 20th century, he ranks with Martin Luther King and Gandhi," Joybubbles said. "Nobody knows how much peace and love he sowed."

Joybubbles, it so happens, defies any ranking. There is no one like him.

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