

Nonprofit group welcoming deaf children into 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood'

by Kristy Locklin
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Photo by Kristy Locklin

When it comes to preserving Fred McFeely Rogers' legacy, Kim Nussbaum is happy to lend a hand -- or two.

The Pine resident established ASL Readers Inc., a nonprofit group that is working to bring [American Sign Language](#)

to "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

Although the PBS series already offers closed captioning, its target demographic -- [preschool](#) children -- is too young to comprehend the text on the bottom of the screen.

The show is deliberately slow moving and conversational, helping tots develop simple, yet important, life skills. The lack of special effects,

however, causes [deaf children](#) to flip the channel in search of more visually stimulating shows.

Nussbaum, a teacher and interpreter of the deaf, doesn't want them to miss out on the educational benefits of "Mister Rogers'" any longer.

"The pacing of the program is so nice and the content --there's just such meaningful communication there," she says, a red trolley pin gleaming on her brown cardigan sweater. "That's the foundation you need for literacy. We want to put these language models in the homes of families with deaf children who have hearing parents."

Even the most dedicated moms and dads may never become fluent in [sign language](#), which could put their kids at an academic disadvantage. The average deaf student graduates from high school at a fourth-grade [reading](#) level.

Family Communications Inc., the production company Rogers' founded in 1971, gave ASL Readers permission to insert deaf signers into one, 30-minute episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

James DeBee, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and graduate of the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf in Swissvale, directed and produced the pilot, which was funded in part by a \$13,000 donation from the Scaife Family Foundation.

Interpreters, including Mary Lou Novitsky (another WPSD alumna), storyteller Roger Vass and Nussbaum, will pop up throughout the show, to translate spoken words and songs into a language deaf children can understand and appreciate.

ASL Readers is raising funds to film a week's worth of programming in which all characters will have their own designated signers. In the meantime, the pilot is being distributed to deaf schools around the U.S.

Nussbaum hopes the deaf and hard of hearing will embrace "Mister Rogers'" message.

Like most Pittsburghers, she grew up watching the show. When she moved out West to work at the [University of Arizona](#), she'd occasionally tune into PBS and revisit her favorite neighbor. Even with only a few sign language classes under her belt, she was able to interpret the basic lessons Rogers taught.

Upon her return to Pittsburgh, she approached Family Communications about incorporating ASL into the program. While officials were receptive to the idea, the timing wasn't right.

Over the next few years, Nussbaum had several serendipitous run-ins with the sweater-clad TV icon. The meetings inspired her to move her idea out of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe and into reality.

She assembled a board of directors composed of local mothers with a wealth of experience in deaf education, accounting, law and production: Shelley Schurer, vice president; Nancy Gleyze, treasurer; Kate Murray, secretary; and Sue Miller, Asst. secretary.

The group will hold an informational breakfast on Wednesday, Nov. 19 from 10 to 11 a.m. at the Treedale Cider House.

To RSVP for the breakfast or to view the pilot episode, contact ASL Readers Inc., at 724-713-1402 or aslreaders@zoominternet.net.

Donations can be sent to ASL Readers Inc., 30 Warrendale Bayne Road, Suite 101, Box 9, Warrendale, PA 15086.