

Speedy Deliveries

Mr. McFeely shares smiles, memories at nursing home

By Sandy Marwick
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SAXONBURG — At most television stations, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” has long retired from broadcast. Yet the courier named Mr. McFeely continues to make his Speedy Deliveries. Accompanied by a cast of puppets, McFeely traveled last week to the Saxony Health Center, delivering well wishes to the center’s 100-plus residents spread between the skilled care, personal care and memory impairment areas.

“He states that the younger ones don’t know him anymore,” said Saxony’s business specialist Kathy McKruit, who had the idea to invite actor David Newell to the center after seeing him at an amusement park.

“I thought, ‘What about the nursing home residents?’” she said.

McKruit’s idea was a hit, as residents like Coretta Coffman remember the show from their days of parenting.

“I have a boy and I have a grandson and I have a great-grandson,” said Coffman, 90.

“I watched him in the morning when I was ironing.”

Coffman was among a group of close to 50 who gathered in Saxony’s activity room, clapping their hands and shouting out lyrics to interactive songs.

“I’m going to touch Alma’s nose, and you say ‘Ugga mugga!’” Newell said to the group while using a Daniel Tiger puppet.

“Here, have a paw shake,” he added.

Afterward, Newell walked through the building, autographing photos and chatting with those unable to attend the program.

His character, Mr. McFeely, began appearing on the children’s television show in 1967 and continued through the show’s last taping in 1999.

Because not all Saxony residents would recognize the character, activities director Kathy Roudybush prefaced his visit by showing the 2008 documentary “Speedy Delivery,” which showcase’s Newell and his efforts to honor the show’s star and creator, Fred Rogers, who died in 2003.

“They watched the whole thing,” Roudybush said, noting many residents ordinarily don’t sit through an hour-long show.

As part of Newell’s visit, the center also hosted a sweater drive — something the actor advocates — inviting residents’ families and the community to donate.

“There are just boxes and boxes and boxes of sweaters,” McKruit said of the outcome, estimating she received several hundred sweaters.

“My goal was over 100,” she said.

McKruit will donate the women’s sweaters to Catholic Charities and the men’s sweaters to the Butler VA Homeless Distribution Centers.

Newell said the sweater drives began when the show was still airing as a way for public television stations to reach out to their own neighborhoods.

“Then it expanded to schools and day care centers,” he said.



David Newell, in character as Mr. McFeely from “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood,” gives autographs to residents at Saxony Health Center in Saxonburg.
JUSTIN GUIDO/BUTLER EAGLE

Newell said the sweater drives are but one way to perpetuate the memory of Rogers and his own trademark sweater. But the drives also rekindle Rogers' diplomacy and kindness.

"Fred would say when we were putting this together, 'It's tempting to say these sweaters are for the needy, but we're collecting sweaters for people who can use them,'" Newell recalled.

Although he appears multiple times each week at various events, Newell only accepted gas money as payment for visiting from Pittsburgh.

"It keeps me pretty busy, carrying on Mr. Rogers' legacy," he told the residents.

"That's why I'm here today: to thank you for the sweaters."

Now 72, Newell has been portraying Mr. McFeely since age 26. He has a degree in English literature and theater from the University of Pittsburgh. He is director of Family Communications, the nonprofit also known as The Fred Rogers Company.