A sad day in the neighborhood

Mr. Rogers, gay men and me

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARC
by Marc Acito

So I'm talking with my friend Bobo about the recent death of Fred Rogers when he says to me, "When I was a kid, I wasn't allowed to watch Mr. Rogers."

Wasn't *allowed* to watch Mr. Rogers? What kind of flicking-cigarettes-at-your-head, child-services-arriving-in-the-dead-of-night parents don't allow their kid to watch Mr. Rogers? Did they keep him in a cardboard box in the basement, too?

"My dad thought he was gay," Bobo says.

Gay?! OK, purse-carrying Tinky Winky I can understand. The *creepy* purple dinosaur, sure. But Mr. Rogers?

The Far-Out Right would have us believe that there's a vast gay conspiracy determined to warp the young minds of America. But I've got news for them: Most gay men don't give a rip about the young minds of America. Forget Tinky Winky; most of us are just interested in Hanky Panky.

The latest target is SpongeBob SquarePants. OK, I admit, the little guy makes Christopher Lowell look positively butch by comparison, but he is most certainly not a homosexual. He's a *sponge*, for chrissake.

SpongeBob, Tinky Winky, Mr. Rogers: What is it about these characters that's so threatening to conservatives?

Is it their gentleness, which has always been considered subversive in our "my weapons of mass destruction are bigger than yours" culture? Maybe. Because no one was gentler or more subversive than Mr. Rogers.

Wait a sec. The guy in the faggy sneakers subversive? Perhaps I'd better explain.

I went to college in Pittsburgh, where Mr. *Rogers' Neighborhood* was filmed, and I once found myself seated near him on a People's Express flight home. (For those of you who don't remember People's Express, it was the first no-frills airline. It was a good deal until the rubber bands broke.)

We disembarked at the same time and, after making the insightful observation that he was indeed Mr. Rogers, I found I had absolutely nothing to say to the man.

He took one look at my off-the-shoulder sweatshirt and leg warmers (it was the 1980s, OK, give me a break) and politely inquired as to whether I'd seen *Torch Song Trilogy*. "I hear that Harvey Fierstein is awfully good," he said.

That's right, my one and only conversation with Mr. Rogers was about a drag queen.

A couple of years later my roommate, Lisa, got an internship on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, which began a lifelong friendship. Her most cherished memory is of a trip to Boston they made together for a concert. (No, not to see Metallica, he was *doing* a children's concert.) Upon arriving at the fancy home of a WGBH executive, the limo driver, Billy, turned to Fred and asked when he should return to pick them up.

"Why, where are you going?" Fred answered, and promptly invited Billy to join them for dinner, much to the bewilderment of the hostess.

On the way back to the hotel, Fred sat in front so he could find out more about Billy. When he discovered they'd be passing Billy's house, Fred suggested they stop in to meet Billy's parents.

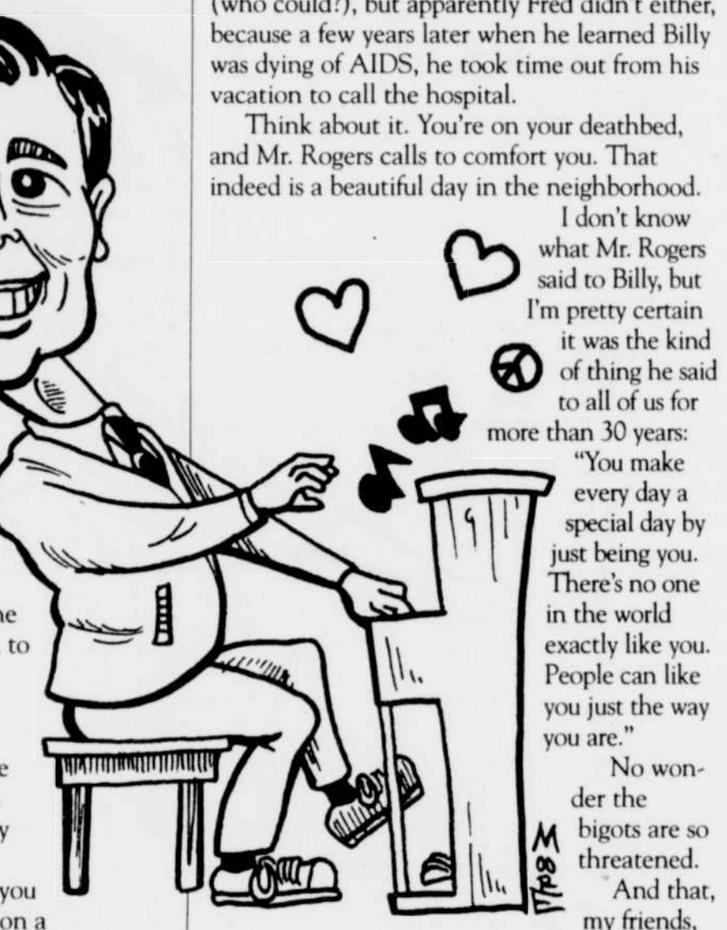
"So there we all are," Lisa says, "getting out of a limo in the middle of West Roxbury, Mass., to meet the driver's parents. We walk in the door and there's Billy's dad coming down the stairs in his bathrobe, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He takes one look at Fred and yells: 'Holy shit! You're Mr. Rogers!' "

Think about it. How would you react if you were sitting around on a Friday night and Mr. Rogers came wandering in your front door? Talk about visiting the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

"Then suddenly it was like the whole neighborhood showed up," Lisa says. "People brought cookies and Fred was playing the piano…it was just magical."

Billy and his family never forgot that night (who could?), but apparently Fred didn't either, because a few years later when he learned Billy was dying of AIDS, he took time out from his vacation to call the hospital.

Think about it. You're on your deathbed, and Mr. Rogers calls to comfort you. That indeed is a beautiful day in the neighborhood.



I don't know what Mr. Rogers said to Billy, but I'm pretty certain it was the kind of thing he said to all of us for more than 30 years: "You make every day a special day by just being you. There's no one in the world exactly like you. People can like you just the way you are."

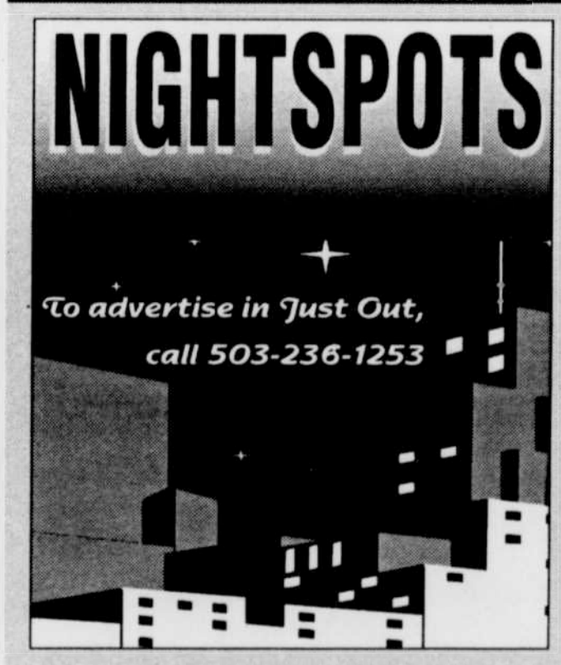
No wonder the bigots are so threatened.

And that, my friends, is The Gospel According to Marc.

MARC ACITO *still visits the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Write him at marcacito@attbi.com.*

NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS NIGHTSPOTS

NIGHTSPOTS



Wilfs

UPCOMING CABARET

MARCH

4th & 25th — Variety Show "Best of" Show

11th & 18th — Wendy Martel-Vilken

APRIL

1st & 8th — Jerry Stuart

15th, 22nd, 29th — Susan Overcast

All shows 7:30 pm
Call for reservations
503 223 0070
Union Station
NW 6th & Irving

Nightspot owners!
Advertise in Just Out!
(503) 236-1253