

THE MISTER ROGERS SWEATER COLLECTION

From Sun Valley Alpaca Co. Designed by Inca Fashions

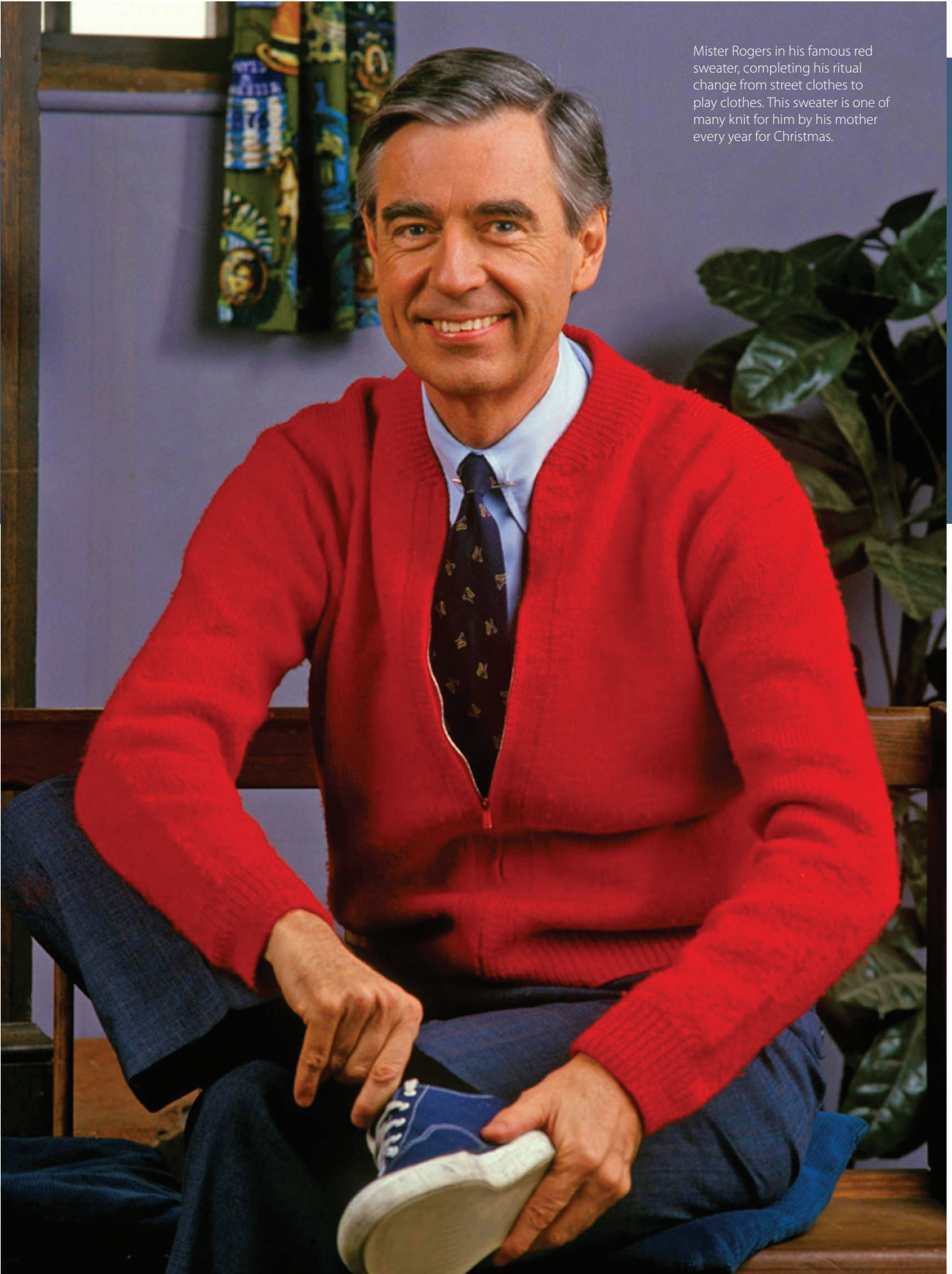
By Meyla Bianco Johnston

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To Generation Xers like me, the Mister Rogers' Neighborhood theme song instantly transports us back to a simpler time, sans cell phones and adult responsibilities. Where naptime and Etch-a-Sketches ruled, apple juice flowed freely and the highlight of each day was riding your Big Wheel or roller skating. On PBS right before *Sesame Street* in the afternoon, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was something you could count on, like the sunrise.

Today, the iconic show's message of kindness and acceptance has gained relevance for a wider swatch of generations through the film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, starring Tom Hanks. It served to remind us of the iconic show that ran from 1968-2000, beloved by multiple generations of Americans.

Mister Rogers in his famous red sweater, completing his ritual change from street clothes to play clothes. This sweater is one of many knit for him by his mother every year for Christmas.





A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood ... in Alpaca

A fan of Mister Rogers since she was a child, President, CEO and lead designer of Inca Fashions Kimberly DeVos-Brooks cites him as a “motivational factor” in her life.

In 1999, DeVos-Brooks first started her alpaca fashion enterprise and has been growing her brands ever since. As Alpaca Unlimited in 2004, DeVos-Brooks introduced a line of Alpaca Golf Sweaters, reimagining the vintage styles made popular by Arnold Palmer. These familiar staples



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Top: In the spirit of inclusiveness, no models were used for the Mister Rogers Cardigan Sweater Collection campaign. Everyone featured here is a friend and family member at Inca Fashions. Left to right: Jerry Ferdolage, Katherine Ferdolage, Jason Miller, Alana Best, Jack Brooks, Kim DeVos-Brooks, Heather Porter, Maya Benitez, Sam Saunders, Jerry Harris, Jr. Carol Maul, John Bishop, Lisa Amundsen, Beth Richardson and Dale Cahill.

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of the '50s and '60s were followed by the Warrior Alpaca Sock line. In 2009, DeVos-Brooks and her team added Sun Valley Alpaca Co. to complement their demographics and offerings. In 2015, Inca Brands incorporated and in 2019 released the Alpaca Home line, a line of alpaca throws, blankets and home interior items.

Then, during a shoot for the golf sweaters, a model was wearing lace-up Vans and did the Mister Rogers pose in one of the gold cardigans. DeVos-Brooks, a Pittsburgh native who had the chance to meet Rogers in the '90s, had been thinking about making Mister Rogers sweaters for years. Everyone loved the shot, so DeVos-Brooks' public relations agent, Cindy Berman Morrow, sent it to the Fred Rogers Company to see where it might lead.

The Rogers camp loved the image, and DeVos-Brooks says it evolved

into a natural collaboration that resulted in a licensing agreement in September 2019. Then, at around the same time the film was widely distributed, the Mister Rogers Sweater Collection, created from 100% superfine alpaca fiber, was debuted.

Sized for Everybody, Made with Kindness

Meant to pay faithful homage to the cardigan sweaters worn by Fred Rogers on the iconic show, the Mister Rogers Sweater Collection styles are unisex.

"We wanted to make these accessible for everyone, every size, age and gender — to be inclusive. Going with a numeric size and providing measurements was not only the easiest way to make this possible, it also honored inclusiveness," DeVos-Brooks says.

Of course, Mr. Rogers' sweaters

were actually handknit in wool for him by his mother, Nancy, one per year each Christmas. But DeVos-Brooks describes the sweaters Sun Valley Alpaca Co. created "as close to the real thing as you can get, complete with a ribbed collar, cuffs and hem and finished with a metal zipper."

As for why the Mister Rogers Collection of sweaters are even better in alpaca, DeVos-Brooks says, "Alpaca is a kind textile. I know it sounds trite, but it's unbelievably true."

She cites the importance of the animals to Peruvians, alpacas' environmental benefits, how alpaca fiber does not require harsh scouring chemicals, the wide range of natural alpaca colors and the incredible natural properties of the fiber as proof of this kinder, gentler fiber.

"We often hear how people once they try alpaca are hooked — in a good way," DeVos-Brooks says.

When the show first aired in February 1968, Rogers donned a button-down sweater. The next season, he switched to zippers because he kept missing buttons on camera and the zipper made it easier to change from his work to casual attire, which needed to take less than one minute.

There are four signature Mister Rogers Sweater Collection styles. Each has the signature ribbed collar, zip closure, ribbed cuffs and waistband — their differences are in the details.



Raglan Rib

Features raglan style sleeves featuring a diagonal sleeve seam. The bodice is a jersey knit with a zip closure. The sleeves have wide ribs and again, an adjustable, ribbed cuff.

Classic Cable

Features cables on the front and back and a single cable running down each set-in sleeve. The balance of the sleeve is jersey knit and finished with a ribbed cuff.

Double Cable

Features cables on either side of the zipper, also in a jersey knit. The long, set-in sleeves have an adjustable ribbed cuff so that multiple arm lengths can be accommodated.

The Iconic

Features light ribbing extending roughly one inch on either side of the zipper with a jersey stitch knit. The long, set-in sleeves have a finished cuff.

Because DeVos-Brooks' companies use fair trade practices to make the sweaters, they weren't willing to press their makers "to rush or stress." So the styles were introduced in November as pre-orders to account for the 8-10 weeks needed to make them and to time the release with the film release and peak holiday shopping.

"My path hasn't always been free of roadblocks, and many of those arrived early in my life. Mister Rogers gave me some faith in myself when my insides felt incapable. Those early building blocks allowed for a foundation that was strong and aided me in building a life and a business even when times were challenging. I think my love of sweaters was formed by

this legacy," DeVos-Brooks says.

Back when Mister Rogers' Neighborhood first aired, we might not have seen how tremendously brave Rogers was, putting himself out there with vulnerability before that was in vogue. Why is it that some people are so far ahead of their time and the impact of their genius only comes

"Don't ever give up on yourself or your dreams. You're worthwhile and always will be, no matter what. Just remember to always be who you are because that person is very special. There is no person in the whole world like you. And I like you just the way you are." – Fred Rogers

I Like You Just the Way You Are

DeVos-Brooks believes the message of personal empowerment Rogers consistently delivered is still as relevant today as it was when Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was on the air.

"A curated lifestyle has become commonplace rather than living an authentic life.

"Mister Rogers stood for authenticity, in addition to love and kindness. I think that by living an authentic life, and I mean really believing in the depths of my being that I am enough, I am loved just the way I am, that I am capable of being loved and being loving to others, I can be kind. And when confronted with unkindness, I can find the confidence in myself to move through challenges with love and kindness. This is an inside job, but it needs fostering. Mister Rogers has always been there to foster this ideal. There is nothing more empowering than that to me."

Even further, she believes she would not have a business if it wasn't for Fred Rogers.

Fred Rogers — and I do love sweaters, you should see my closet — because they are indeed like hugs. Hugs release good feelings and give people nurturing and security."

In the spirit of inclusiveness, no models were used for the campaign. Those featured in the Mister Rogers Cardigan Sweater Collection are friends and family of Inca Fashions.

"We hope that this showcases love, acceptance and kindness to all our neighbors, near and far. We hope that it shows that ecommerce can be wholesome, and we hope that it can expand people's awareness of alpaca along the way.

"While Mister Rogers was an ordained [Presbyterian] minister, he quietly taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that's what we want to do, too," DeVos-Brooks says.

She emphasizes that the important concepts they want to emulate were not just created for the November release of the film. "We hope that these ideals and goals are embraced and we can bring more sweaters in more colors to the marketplace to continue

out after they're gone, after steeping in the culture for some time? Today, we don't have Rogers to ask about it anymore. But if we can pay homage to his memory with a well-made sweater like his, that's a start. ●

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