

For the Little Ones



Jeff Land

SUGAR LAND, Texas (BP and local reports) – “Wherever Mister Rogers is, so is sanctuary.”

That was TV Guide’s take on the iconic good neighbor who explained difficult situations to children for 35 years in the U.S. and Canada on the television show, Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.

Mister Rogers has been at Sugar Creek Church in the Houston suburb of Sugar Land for weeks now, teaching young children how important it is to wear masks during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

Well, at least that’s the character that the church children’s pastor Jeff Land, a native Mississippi Baptist, has been portraying on video messages he’s produced for Creek Kids during the pandemic.

“I’ve always loved Mister Rogers, and so I love the way he talks to kids, because he talks to kids about things that are harder for them to understand,” Jeff said. “I just love his personality.” Jeff is the second son of Art and Anne Land. Jeff’s father is pastor of Parkway Church, Kosciusko.

“I praise God that Jeff recognized His call from the Lord, and submitted immediately to the call,” his father said. “His job

gives him many opportunities to use the talents God has given him We are so proud of Jeff, Abbey, and their family. God has blessed us through the work they do." Jeff's mother said she was convicted that she had not surrendered fully to the Lord, and submitted to baptism again while pregnant with Jeff.

"I've always had this sense that God touched Jeff in special ways through my own submission to Him. Jeff grew up loving God from birth. He was always involved in activities at church with his brothers, Trae and Bobby," said Anne, who retired after 34 years as a public school teacher and is currently a kindergarten teacher in Kosciusko.

Jeff graduated from Mississippi College in Clinton where he met his future wife, Abbey Drake from Batesville. They have four sons adopted from Taiwan: Reed, Nash, Will, and Tuck.



Jeff Land (back row, middle) joins his family for an earlier-day photo that includes older brother Trae (back row, left), younger brother Bobby (back row, right) and parents Art and Anne Land. (Submitted photo)

After graduating from Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth and prior to answering the call to Sugar Creek Church in June

2018, Jeff served at First Church in Cedar Hill, Texas; First Church in Joelton, Tenn.; and LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville.

Sugar Creek Church initiated the video series in June as one of many online Creek Kids resources to help children continue to thrive during the pandemic.

"We decided to do one about masks because they are definitely becoming a part of who we are," Jeff said. "As Americans, we're not used to having to wear masks... and so we wanted to do something to help kids understand, 'You know, [masks are] not scary, and we really wear them to help people.'"

Jeff said when onsite worship resumes at Sugar Creek Church, children in kindergarten and beyond will be required to wear masks. Children in pre-school and below will be encouraged to wear masks.

According to Parents.com, the average five-year-old child has an attention span ranging from 10 to 25 minutes, and children may stay more focused on a project if it's fun and creative. How can anyone get children so young to wear masks for any extended period of time?

"It's OK if you don't like wearing a mask. It really is," Jeff tells children on a set resembling the Mister Rogers television show staging – complete with a jingle, cardigan, comfy shoes, and picture cards closely resembling signature items from the original Mister Rogers show, "but we have to wear masks when we're asked to.

"Can you do that for me? Can you help me? Can you wear your mask when you're asked to, and know that it's OK? ...We can be happy even when we're wearing masks. I'm going to wear my mask because I love you and God loves you, and I want you to know that you are special." Jeff's Mister Rogers series includes Scripture to let children know God has a plan for their lives.

Installments include talks on illness and hurricanes that can occur frequently in Texas.

Jeff releases a new video every couple of weeks and is preparing one on race relations. Initially, the Creek Kids ministry was going to forego masks but ministry leaders changed their minds after consulting parents and learning, according to Jeff, "A lot of our families really wanted us to require masks."

Given the rapid spread of the COVID-19 in the Houston area, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's mask mandate, and the local school system's intention to require masks when onsite school resumes, the church decided to make it a priority.

"It's biblical to support what your government says," Jeff pointed out. "We try to do that and show respect for the people who are making decisions in our government."

Sunday mornings before COVID-19, Creek Kids attendance averaged between 1,200 and 1,500 children from birth through age five at the church's two campuses combined. Four full-time staff, 12 part-time staff and a team of 300-400 weekly volunteers serve the children.

Creek Kids will keep children active, provide projects that children can do individually, change activities frequently, and frequently remind children to wear their masks.

The children's ministry has been solely online since the shutdown began, but the church saw children wearing masks during the brief period that onsite worship resumed before the current shutdown.

"No doubt, it's going to be hard to keep kids wearing a mask for a full hour," Jeff observed, "but we've seen it, and we've seen it in our services where kids have done it, and we believe it can happen."

Jeff encourages churches to do what feels right for each church's situation, and to also consider the "least of these" when deciding whether children will be required to wear masks at church. "That's a biblical thing, that whatever you do unto the least of these, you did unto Me," he said.