

**1st Place
Middle School**

**Clark and Division
By Samantha Puckorius**

Dave Williams started his first day at the Clark and Division train station on Monday, February 27. He was an engineer. The cold February air cut straight through his neon green CTA windbreaker. He walked in the tunnel, buying his time looking at the rounded roof above him. The thump of his boots on the tracks was the only sound except for the whistle of the wind above the underground ceiling.

Dave sat down in the office by the window overlooking the train stop to eat his lunch. He noticed an older man sitting alone at the far end of the station. A large green overcoat covered the man's hunched shoulders. A red tattered knit cap covered the man's head, a few sprouts of hair visible under the cap. He had a small amount of stubble on his cheeks, surprisingly more well-shaven than any other homeless person. A black scarf was around his neck and brown fingerless gloves covered his hands. Worn black boots could be seen from under the bottom of the green coat. A rip in the seam of the boot gave way to a gray sock. He was shaking from the cold. Dave paid no further attention to the man and continued to eat his turkey on rye with mustard and lettuce.

A few weeks later in March, Dave noticed him again. The man sat there every day, from eight in the morning till five-thirty at night. Dave asked his coworkers about the man, but no one had noticed him sitting there.

Dave watched the man from the office window while he ate his lunch. Dave felt bad for him. Sure, it was March, but in Chicago it was still cold. The wind seemed to go straight through your clothing. Having no money made food even harder to come by. The man was probably hungry.

Dave walked out of the office with his lunch. The man paid no attention as Dave approached him from across the train stop. Dave stood next to the bench for a few minutes, unsure of what to say. Deciding that words were just a formality, he sat down next to the man. "Hello," said Dave.

The man continued to look across the tracks. It seemed as if he was waiting for a train to pass by. His eyes never wavered, though no train would be coming for quite some time. Clark and Division was under repairs, and no trains had been by in weeks. "My name is Dave Williams. I'm an engineer at this stop," Dave said.

The man continued looking across the tracks. "What's your name, sir?" asked Dave.

He did not reply. Dave started to open his lunch—a thermos of hot coffee, a sandwich, tuna on whole wheat with mayo and tomatoes, and a shamrock shaped cookie with green frosting wrapped in plastic. Dave poured some of the coffee into the thermos lid and offered it to the man. At first, the man simply ignored the cup. Dave extended his arm even farther towards him. The man looked down at the steaming coffee and then up at Dave. Dave was surprised. From a distance, and even as Dave sat next to him, the man appeared to be over fifty years old. Now as he looked into the man's cerulean eyes, Dave realized that the man was younger than he was, and Dave was only thirty-six.

The man took the cup of coffee from Dave's hand and started drinking. Dave raised his sandwich to his mouth to take a bite, but froze before he clamped his incisors

into his lunch. He tore his sandwich in half and asked the man, "Do you want some?"

The homeless man nodded his head and extended his knit-gloved hand. Dave watched him closely while they ate. While he held his half of the tuna on whole wheat, the man's hands appeared fine, but as he folded the napkin Dave had given him, his hands twitched and shook with every motion. Dave handed him a cookie wrapped in plastic. The homeless man started to unwrap it, but his fumbling hands could not seem to be able to grab hold of the wrapper. "Would you like some help?" Dave asked.

A simple nod was the only reply given. Dave took the cookie and unwrapped it, the green frosting sticking to his numb hands. He handed the shamrock cookie back to the man and resumed eating his half of his turkey on rye.

After a few more minutes, Dave checked his watch and realized that his lunch break was over. He got up from the bench, picked up his gloves and the remains of his lunch, and started to head back to the office. He paused for a moment in thought. Dave turned around and set his nearly full thermos of hot coffee back on the bench with the man. "Have a nice day," Dave said as he headed back to work.

The next morning, Dave entered the station around eight forty five. The man sitting on the bench in the large green overcoat was already there. As he approached the office door, Dave noticed that his thermos was placed in front of the door, empty. Dave picked it up and entered the office. He would have one the guys fill up later when they went on a coffee run.

For a whole year Dave and the homeless man sat together on the far bench at the Clark and Division station eating lunch. They never spoke. Every day Dave would help the man with his lunch, the small task of unwrapping plastic too difficult for the man's hands. When it became hot outside, Dave brought him water. When it became cold, Dave got the homeless man his own thermos and would fill it up with steaming hot coffee for him. On holidays, Dave would bring him a present or treat. The unspoken agreement to share lunch was a bond that the two shared. They felt a sort of dependency upon one another. Dave's coworkers always eyed him unusually now, wondering what he was doing talking to, let alone sharing his lunch with a homeless man.

Dave began to notice that the homeless man had other problems besides his hands. During lunch, the man would occasionally stop eating and stare back across the tracks. His body would become rigid. Sometimes he would even drop his food in his seemingly catatonic state. Dave learned of John's true problem one day in December.

That particular December day was one of the coldest days that winter. The temperature was seven degrees with a wind chill of negative one. The crisp winter air seemed to fill the subway station. Dave's lungs were becoming frozen and sore, worn out from the difficulty to breathe. He walked in the tunnel, returning from an early morning check of the electrical wires to make sure they hadn't frozen over. Another train would soon be passing by, and Dave quickened his pace and jumped up onto the platform. The faint whirring of a train could be heard, not so far off in the distance. Huddled, asleep underneath his bench, was the homeless man. No blankets covered him, just his customary winter gear, not warm enough for this type of weather. Sleeping was dangerous. Many didn't wake up when it was this cold out. Dave walked over to him and began to gently shake him awake. The man barely stirred. He was mumbling incoherently. Dave shook a little more forcefully, and said, "Sir. Sir, wake up."

The man began to writhe in his sleep, becoming more agitated in his slumber.

Dave shook him even harder. The man bolted awake, eyes wide open and screamed. He looked at Dave with fury, not recognizing him. The homeless man jumped up and stood in an aggressive stance as if he was prepared to fight. Dave put his hands out as a sign of surrender. The homeless man ignored him and tackled Dave. He began to strangle Dave, his large hands enclosed around Dave's windpipe. The man seemed to be under a trance of unrecognizable fury. Dave fought him off, punching the homeless man's chest. The choking would not relent. Black spots started to appear in Dave's line of vision. He took his arm and rammed it into the homeless man's elbow. The homeless man lost his grip and fell backward onto the cold, hard gray cement. Dave got up and went over to the homeless man. Dave stood over him and was prepared to strike. Before he could lay a blow, Dave looked down at the homeless man. He was cowering in a fetal position with his hands covering his face. Dave froze in surprise. He nudged the homeless man with his foot. The man in the green overcoat looked up at Dave. The bright cerulean eyes of the homeless man were wide with tears. His shame and fear were evident. The man was trembling.

The homeless man began to crawl away from Dave. He got up and ran out of the station, turning to look back at Dave. Dave faintly called out after him, "Wait."

Dave's breathing was still constricted. He took calming breaths and rubbed his neck. He was going to have bruises. The grip had been so tight. He closed his eyes, still shaking from the lack of oxygen in his blood flow. "What just happened?" he asked himself, "Why did he attack me? What had I done wrong?"

Dave thought about what had happened in his head. He had walked over to the homeless man and shook him awake. The homeless man had been mumbling and writhing in his sleep. Maybe that was it. He seemed to be having a nightmare. Was he reliving the nightmare?

The next day the homeless man wasn't at the station. Dave spent his whole lunch break searching the station, checking all the nooks and crannies he could find or knew of. After a week of searching, Dave went out to the street above during his lunch break. He searched the local alleyways till he found them. In an alley behind the nearest coffee shop was a group of homeless people. He approached them cautiously, calling out, "Hello," in order to not surprise them. They all turned to look at him, but then ignored him as if he wasn't there. He tried to approach them. As soon as he got close, they scampered away like rats. "Please, I need your help," said Dave.

They continued to ignore him. "I'm looking for a man who used to sit down at the Clark and Division station. He wears a large green overcoat, black boots, a red knit cap, brown gloves, a black scarf. He hasn't shown up in a week. Please, I need to find him," pleaded Dave.

The homeless continued to ignore him. Dave began to walk away when he felt someone grab his arm. He turned around and an elderly Hispanic woman had her hand on him. Her dark brown eyes bore into Dave's green ones. She made him feel as if she could see right through him. Her tan skin was weathered and wrinkling, showing signs of her age. She wore a magenta cap over her frizzy black hair. A blue and red flowered scarf with tassels covered her hunched shoulders. Under that she wore a brown corduroy coat with a large green sweater that reached to her knees underneath. Black sweatpants covered her short legs. She wore white sneakers, or at least once they were white. "Are you the one who fed him?" she asked Dave in a strong Spanish accent.

“How did you know about that?” Dave asked.

“He stopped coming for lunch every day. He only sleeps here now. He used to be here all day but not anymore,” she replied.

“So where is he?” Dave demanded. “He hasn’t shown up for a week.”

“Calma, Señor. We haven’t seen him either. He was here a week ago. He was running and out of breath. We asked him what was wrong, but he never talks. He huddled in a corner and grabbed his knees. He rocked back and forth. His eyes were wide open in fear.” The old woman cocked her head to the side. “What happened in the subway, Señor?”

“I, I, I don’t really know. He was sleeping under his bench. It was too cold to sleep there, so I went to wake him up and check on him. He had been mumbling in his sleep and moving. I shook him awake, and he jumped up and attacked me. We fought, he started to choke me, and I threw him off of me. He cowered on the ground as if he was ashamed and got up and ran away. I haven’t seen him since.”

“He attacked you? He is usually very quiet and keeps to himself. Did you do anything wrong? Take something of his?”

“I don’t believe I did. I just woke him up.”

“We’ll watch out for him. I’ll send one of us down to tell you if we see him.”

“Thank you,” John said.

He walked back to the station, his head down, contemplating all that had happened.

Dave never saw the homeless man. He searched for him during his lunch break and on the weekends for two months. It was early March, and the train tracks were frozen. Dave was called in at midnight on Saturday night to defrost the tracks at the station. It was dangerous work. Trains still passed by.

Dave was defrosting the control panel handle with a blowtorch when he spotted a large object down the tunnel in one of the holes in the wall. He walked over, stepping over the racks as he went. Dave realized what the mound was when he was a few feet away. It was the homeless man covered in a blanket and cardboard. Dave approached quietly, not wanting to wake him because of what happened the last time he did. One of the man’s blankets had fallen onto the tracks. Dave picked it up and placed it over the man. He walked to the control panel where he had left his thermos. He placed it next to the man in the cubby hole.

Dave returned on Monday to find his thermos in front of the office door. At lunchtime he went to the cubby hole where he had found the man. The homeless man was asleep again. Dave set the lunch in the cubby hole and went to eat his own lunch in the office. The next day the homeless man was sleeping on the bench. The subway station was filled with parents and excited children. The homeless man was hiding in a corner, away from all the families. Dave was in the office, watching the train monitors. A little girl with blond pigtails in a bright red pea coat was peering over the edge of the tracks, trying to see the train that would soon be arriving. She was teetering over the edge, one step from landing on the tracks.

The little girl leaned even farther. She lost her balance and fell onto the tracks with a little yelp. No one saw her. No one saw her fall except the homeless man. He threw off all of his blankets and got down onto the tracks.

Dave was watching the monitors when he saw something in the corner of his eye.

He looked at the monitor. The homeless man was on the tracks. Dave's eyes widened in shock. He peeled out of the office. A train was due any minute.

When the little girl fell, she hit her head and was knocked unconscious. The homeless man tried to lift her, but the edge of her coat was stuck in the tracks. He began to unbutton the coat. His shaking hands fumbled with each red button. He could hear the squeak of the train get louder. The train lights could be seen not so far off down the tunnel.

Dave stood on the platform above the homeless man and the little girl. "What can I do?" he asked.

The homeless man looked up at him with fear in his eyes. "Help," the homeless man replied quietly.

Dave jumped down onto the tracks and proceeded to get the girl out of her coat. A crowd was beginning to gather on the platform above. "My baby!" a woman yelled above.

Dave turned his head to speak with her while he undid the buttons. "Ma'm, I need you to stay up there. Everything will be alright."

The woman began to sob as she watched her child laying in peril. Dave pulled the girl out of her coat and lifted her up. The front of the train was quickly approaching. Dave put her onto the platform. He pulled himself up and turned to help the homeless man. The homeless man reached up to Dave, but his arm was too short and he was too weak. Dave leaned down even farther. He was going to save this man. He pulled with all his might, yet he felt nothing grab on. He felt himself get pulled back. All he saw was the blur of a train passing by.

The trains in Clark and Division were shut down for the rest of the day. The police came not quickly after the homeless man died. They had been called because of the little girl. Dave was the first to go onto the tracks to look at the body. He bent down, feeling as if he couldn't breathe because of his guilt. Tears started to appear in Dave's eyes. He looked down at the homeless man. The man's body was beaten and broken. His cerulean eyes were hazed over. A piece of shiny metal caught Dave's eye. It was connected to a chain. He put it in his hand and looked at it. It was a pair of dog tags. They read Capt. John Downings, U. S. Army, 506th Airborne, Company F, 6/23/52.

Dave sat next to the body in shock. He remained there until he felt a hand on his shoulder. A police officer was standing over him. "The EMTs already pronounced him dead, sir. There's nothing you can do. We need to take the body now," the officer said solemnly.

"He was a soldier," Dave whispered.

"Pardon me, sir?" asked the officer.

"He was a soldier, officer. He wasn't just some homeless man. He was a soldier," Dave said a little louder this time.

The police officer, seeing the dog tags that were still in Dave's hands, said, "We'll make sure he gets the proper burial."

Dave nodded, not wanting to say anymore. He put the dog tags down, stood up, and climbed back onto the platform. His shift was over. He gathered his things and left the station a changed man.

Dave was regarded as a hero that day, as was the homeless man. Dave was awarded a medal from the mayor. None of it mattered though; he wanted to know more

about Captain John Downings, Army veteran and homeless man of the Clark and Division station. A week after the accident, Dave went to the Army office downtown. He approached the desk and requested Captain John Downings' file.

Captain John Downings had been born in Joliet, Illinois, to Louis and Mary Downings. John and his four siblings had been born and raised on the Downings farm, six miles outside of downtown Joliet. He enlisted during his senior year of high school in 1970. Less than a year later John deployed out to Vietnam. He was in the 506th Airborne, Company F. He fought all over Vietnam. He received a silver star, a Purple Heart, and the Medal of Honor. He was wounded in a mine explosion not long after receiving the Medal of Honor. He was sent back to America in 1977. John was diagnosed by Army doctors with PTSD and schizophrenia not long after.

The file ended there. Dave read the file cover to cover. He handed the file back to the desk after an hour and a half.

Dave Williams worked for the CTA until he retired at the age of sixty-five. Even after he retired, he brought food to the homeless at the train stop. There was always at least one homeless person at the Clark and Division stop until the day Dave Williams died.

