

*Dave, born with Cerebral Palsy, has had to battle through life from the start. His first fight was to get an education. That led to having to deal with battles with bullies and teachers who chose to look the other way. With the help of his friends and family, he is able to overcome them!*

## **My Life in a Short Bus World**

By D.A. Perry

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I have tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity in some instances I have changed the names of individuals and places, I may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

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# Chapter 4

When I started Fenton, it was like I had rolled into another world. One that mentally, I was unprepared to handle. I walked with crutches at the time, but I couldn't walk for long distances. They got me a three-wheeled electric cart to ride around between classes. When I was at DTM, all the kids were used to seeing kids in wheelchairs. At Fenton, I was the only one, and I stuck out like a sore thumb. I was never stared at before, but now everywhere I went, that's all everyone did. It is hard enough starting a new school, not knowing anyone, but starting a new school as the only disabled kid was unbelievable. Add to it the fact that I was never really bullied in school before. I just was nowhere near ready for what I was facing. I was struggling from the word go, and it wasn't just the kids but the teachers and the principal too. It became clear to me that I wasn't wanted there. I think they thought that if they made it hard enough on me, I would want to go back to Flint.

Thankfully for me, though, I wasn't the only one starting in the school that day. I remember going to lunch. I was the first one in the lunchroom. I sat down and started to eat just trying to ignore all the kids staring. That's when Daron sat down across from me. He asked me my name, and we started talking. Daron had just moved to the area from Grand Rapids, and he didn't know anyone either. He needed a friend just as much as I did. We hit it off rather quickly. Then during the same lunch, Greg came and sat with us as well. He had moved to Fenton before the start of summer and didn't know many people. We became very close friends from then on.

Not long after my first marking period at Fenton, they made me take a series of tests. I think to try and prove that I couldn't do the work that was required so they could ship me back to Flint. They were a lot like the tests I took when I was younger at DTM. The tests took three days, and after them,

we had a meeting with my mom. At the conference, they said I passed the tests with flying colors. The psychologist who gave them to me did say she was surprised by my intelligence.

The question became, why was I doing so poorly? I tried to explain to them all the bullying that had been going on. The superintendent and others did not want to believe anything that I had to say. The kids, especially the boys, were mean as they could get. They loved to kick my crutches out from under me as I was walking or grab my books and throw them. If I was in my three-wheeled cart, they tried to tip it over. They would stick their foot under the tire, and as I ran them over, they would complain to teachers.

I told them about what had been going on in my computer class. In that class, we all had assigned seats. My seat was in the first seat in the first row. I wasn't complaining about the desk I had. My issue was with who was around me. The boy behind me was one of my biggest bullies. The boy next to me was just as bad. Then there was the boy behind him who was as bad as the other two. They had me surrounded, and I did complain to the teacher who did nothing. He refused to even talk to the boys about what they were doing. They thought it was funny to spit on me all class long. You could see it on my desk and my books but still the teacher did nothing. Which, in turn, told the boys what they were doing was OK. Things just got worse from there.

I started getting what I now know is an anxiety attack going to that class every day. No one seemed to believe me in the meeting. They went and got the teacher. What the teacher had to say still has me dumbfounded to this day. He said that while some of the things may be going on in his class, it wasn't the fault of the boys. He said the mistake was mine. I was trying too hard to fit in. If I didn't work so hard to fit in, things would be easier on me.

I also learned early on that I couldn't go to the bathroom between classes. If I had to go, the safest time was during class when I would be the only one in there. The reason being is they loved to knock me down in the bathroom or accidentally pee on me. Or in some cases both. As I said, it just wasn't easy on me. The principal didn't like me, and he hated my three-wheeled cart. He told me not to drive it around because it wasn't safe for the other kids. When I complained to my mom, he said he would never tell me that. I knew I wouldn't be able to win with the principal and going to anyone

for help would be pointless. I may have always had good grades up to this point. My grades in Fenton were terrible.

Not everything was all wrong, though. I had some great friends in Greg and Daron. We were spending the night at each other's houses and hanging out just about every chance we got. Usually, our base of operations seemed to be Greg's house. His house also had a bunch of neighbor kids up and down the street. There was always something going on. Greg's parents made everyone feel more than welcomed.

Not that I didn't feel welcomed at Daron's house because I did. It's just his dad was a preacher, and you had to watch what you said and did at his house. They didn't believe in dancing or going to the movies and that kind of thing. I am not saying there is anything wrong with that; it's just not for me. I think that is the one thing Greg did for both Daron and me. He forced us to come out of our shells. We had both grown up very sheltered and in controlled environments. We hadn't experienced much. Some may say Greg was a bad influence, but I wouldn't put it that way. He just showed us there was a lot more to life than we had seen so far. I couldn't have picked two better friends, especially on my first day when I was worried I might never make friends.

We did get in our fair share of trouble. We probably should have gotten in more, but we were lucky we didn't always get caught. As I think back at some of the things we did, all I can do is shake my head and laugh. Greg lived a few miles away, and at first, he would meet me at my house. Eventually, I would meet him halfway, or I would wheel all the way. That is something I never thought I would ever do before meeting Greg. He had a way of making me believe in myself and that I could do things that my mind said I couldn't. The three of us were all over town from one side to the other.

Usually, if we were at Greg's, we were playing outside with all the kids in the area. Sometimes we would play baseball in the back yard. I was always the umpire. When I called Greg out, and he didn't like the call, he would flip my chair backward and just kind of leave me that way for a few minutes. He didn't do it to be mean, though. Sometimes we played volleyball. They changed the rules so I could play. They allowed me to catch the ball and just throw it over the net. They always tried to make everything so that I could

play as well. I don't remember a time where Greg and Daron didn't include me in whatever they wanted to do. We even went and played putt-putt golf together. It wasn't always easy getting my wheelchair in and out of places, but they were determined, and I always appreciated that.

I was also able to become close friends with a few girls as well. There were a few that would say mean things from time to time, but they were all friendly. For that reason, most of my friends were girls. In 7th grade, the two closest girls I made friends with were Theresa and Alexis. Alexis was in a few of my classes. She was a beautiful brunette with a peaceful, sweet demeanor about her. I have to admit I looked forward to classes we had together, and it had nothing to do with class. She was a real sweetheart. We never got as close as I would have liked. She at least brightened my day daily during a period I needed it.

Theresa, on the other hand. She was the kind of girl that will turn your world on its ear. She was a real wild child with a very free spirit. She was what some would say was a bad girl. Not that she did terrible things outside of maybe smoking. She just would say and do what she wanted. Theresa and I had the same group of friends, so it was natural that we would hang out. We talked on the phone almost every day for hours. It didn't take long for me to be head over heels for her. But I had another issue. Daron also liked her a lot and was talking to her. Not that I minded. Theresa had been clear with both of us. She wasn't interested in anything beyond friends with either of us. That, however, didn't stop us from trying.

When 8th grade started, I met Jeff. We had a lot in common we both loved video games and sports. Hanging out with Jeff was a little more complicated. He lived out in the country in the middle of nowhere. When we wanted to hang out, we had to rely on our parents. We were still a few years from driving. Hanging out with Jeff was different. He wasn't the outside type, so it seemed that everything we did was inside. It never really mattered to me.

I was doing OK at school, but I will admit I could always have done better than I did. I was way more focused on having fun than actually doing school work. I was still being bullied by the same kids all the time. My first hour was my most hated class. I didn't have any friends in the class. I was free game for

the bullies. The teacher never really paid much attention. I know he saw and heard things he just chose not to do a damn thing about it. We had an end of the year project that was to be a group project. Each group was to have 3-4 kids per group. When it came time to choose groups, no one wanted me in their group.

The teacher did try and talk people into it, but no one would do it. I ended up doing a solo project when everyone else was in a group. I would like to say it didn't matter to me, but it did. I would like to say it didn't break me, but it did. I remember going home and crying that night. I felt I was as isolated and lonely as ever. And the kids were so cruel during that project. They would joke and laugh about it. I tried to ignore it but I couldn't. The teacher finally went off on the entire class, but by then it was too late. I wanted to skip that class every day. I still had to go, and I still had to finish the project. No kid should ever feel that way!



# Chapter 5

At the start of high school, we had all gone to a football game and a dance after. I had danced with Theresa. I remember that she smelled of an intoxicating mixture of cigarette smoke and perfume. That combination now would make me want to throw up, but my hormones were all over the place. It had an odd effect on me. We all went outside and were hanging out with another one of my friends Darryl who was a junior. Theresa and Darryl were into each other, and I didn't take it well. I don't blame Theresa, though. She had been upfront and honest with me. It was my fault I didn't listen.

For days I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. I just never let my mind even think about what would happen when Theresa started dating someone. And now seeing it with my own two eyes, it was a rough time. Greg and Daron did everything they could to try and cheer me up. My relationship with Theresa would never be the same again. After this, I kind of put a wall up and stayed my distance. We were still friends but not nearly as close as we were.

Theresa was the least of my worries. I had been to the doctor and found out I had to have major hip surgery. I hadn't had an operation in years. I thought they were behind me, and now this. The surgery was in January. With the operation hanging over my head, it's all that I had on my mind. The months passed, and before I knew it, I was in the hospital for my surgery. The surgery was rough. I would be in a body cast again. I had to be in the cast for four months. I wouldn't be able to move at all. There is no way to prepare yourself mentally for that. I was depressed and lonely. My friends did try and stop by when they could. They never stayed long, and I don't blame them. I really couldn't do much but watch TV or play video games, and that got boring.

I was at a low point in my life. All I wanted to do was go and hang out and do the things I used to do. I think it was that dream and doing all of that, which pushed me to get better. After I was out of my cast, I knew I had to keep going so I could hang out with my friends. As soon as I was able to get around a little bit better, my friends were there. I still remember my first day out. It was a fantastic spring day, and the air was warm and perfect. School was just about to let out, and summer was just around the corner. I spent that whole summer hanging out with my friends and preparing for my sophomore year.

One great thing that happened in my sophomore year was I had choir class. That is when I met Audra. I just remember her smile and eyes caught my attention right away. We sat close to each other and had plenty of time to talk. It wasn't long till we were good friends. Audra kind of fit into the spot in my life that Theresa had. I was talking to Audra all the time. I was starting to develop feelings that went beyond friendship. I did try and explore those. Audra was clear that she just wanted to be friends. I wasn't happy about it. I can't fault her for being honest with me. I loved the fact that I could count on her when I needed to talk. That didn't mean I wasn't jealous sometimes.

I found myself fighting jealousy quite often. I hated feeling that way; it just happened. I tried not to let it show too often, but sometimes it did. There is a scene in the movie *The Fault in our Stars* that explains my feelings perfectly. It's a small scene with no words, but I know the feelings in the scene. The scene is of Hazel sitting in the food court at the mall reading a book. She is having a drink by herself. She looks over and sees a girl about her age kissing her boyfriend. Hazel stares for a minute, then sighs and goes back to her book. I know what Hazel is thinking at that moment. She sees everything she has ever wanted, and yet Hazel fears she will never have. That movie and especially the book is the most accurate portrayal of kids with disabilities I have ever read or seen in a film. They did a fantastic job!

My dating life may have been a disaster but school was going much better. I was excited for my junior year. Half my day would be at high school and the rest at the skill center, which was a career style school in Flint for all the local area schools. I looked forward to getting away and taking classes in what I wanted to learn. Plus, to get away from all the bullying sounded like a great idea. I had fun in my skill center class, and with everyone all from

different schools, it kind of took away all the usual clicks. The class was small, less than 20 kids in total. I knew one of the kids in the class and quickly made some other friends. The course was harder than I expected at first; it moved at a college pace.

While I was at the skill center, I met a girl in my class named Sara. Sara was timid at first. We started talking, and we became friends fairly quickly. With Sara, things went much slower for me than they had with Audra or Theresa. I think I was starting to grow up and mature. I had also put walls up to prevent myself from getting hurt. She knew she could count on me, and I would never hurt her. As Audra and I grew apart, I just really replaced her with Sara. We went out to dinner and a movie at least once a month. We even would go to family events together. If either of us needed a date for anything, we could always count on each other. I cared for her. I thought about being more than friends, but I never said anything to her about it. I believe in part because I was afraid I would ruin what we had.

Sara and I weren't in the same class in our senior year. We were at the skill center at the same time. We would see each other often, even if it was for a quick hi or a hug. I can honestly admit I did love Sara. I can't help, but wonder, would things be different had I spoken up and had I acknowledged it. I remember that toward the end of the school year, I wanted to go to prom. It was a dream of mine. It looked like fun to get all dressed up and go. But I knew I couldn't go stag. The kids already bullied me enough.

I knew had I even attempted to go stag; they would have made my life pure hell. I had asked Sara, but her prom was the same day, and she had already agreed to go with her boyfriend. I did ask Monica, who was in my skill center class. She said she would if it wasn't the same day as her, but it was. I just couldn't catch a break. I wish I could have thought of someone to ask at Fenton. I didn't think anyone would say yes. My mom tried to talk me into going anyway, but I just couldn't. I wish I would have been strong enough mentally just to say fuck it and go. I let too much of what the bullies said and did bother me. It honestly is my biggest regret in high school.

While in the Skill Center, I became friends with Clem. I had known Clem for years, but we never really hung out much. He also had a car which was huge. I no longer lived in town. I lived in Lake Fenton and really couldn't

wheel anywhere. I think I spent every weekend at his house. Thankfully his mom was awesome and never seemed to mind. I was lucky not just that I had great friends, but their parents were just awesome to me. They all treated me like a member of the family.

Even Daron's parents, who were stricter than the others, couldn't have been kinder. I always expected at some point for some parents to ask why their son would want to hang out with me, but they never did. They always welcomed me, usually with a hug, and offered to stay for dinner. Because Clem's stepdad had a stroke, they even had a ramp on the front of their house. I joked with them a few times that they added that on just for me. As senior year winded down I needed to decide what my next step would be.

I had decided that the best college choice for me would be Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan. They had a great business and computer department. It was also far enough away from home but not too far. My grandparents were only an hour away if I needed help. I started the application process and was accepted. Clem would also be going to Ferris. It made it helpful, knowing my best friend would be there with me. In May of 1990, I took my senior exams and had my last day in high school.

After all the bull shit and all the bullying, I was happy it was over. I think back at my time in high school whenever I see a kid who commits suicide after being bullied. People openly wonder how or why something like that can happen. I understand how desperate those kids were. You just get to a point where you need it to stop. You get to a point where you just want the pain to go away. I understand why they felt that was their only option. I wish they had stopped and reached out to someone. I know from personal experience that even if they had reached out, it doesn't mean anything would have changed.

On graduation night, the school had an all-night party for all the graduates called Project Graduation. I think it's a way for all the graduates to party and have a great time in a safe drug and alcohol-free environment. They had food, drinks, games, and dancing. Everyone was put on teams to play games. I was scared at first because of my experiences over the last six years.

I didn't think the kids would want me on their team or would even want me to play. They shocked me that night. All of the kids were encouraging me to play and also helping me at times. These weren't the same kids that I had known since my time at Fenton. They were the exact opposite. I even made out with a girl I had a crush on forever. Yes, it was a fantastic night. I couldn't help but wonder after the party why they couldn't have been that accepting in school. I do find it sad that my best day in high school just happened to be my last day.

# Chapter 6

Getting ready for college was unlike anything I can explain. I was nervous but anxious and excited. I thought I was ready for the next step. My mom and I took a tour of the campus over the summer. I really couldn't wait to start the next phase of my life. I remember packing up my room, unsure of what I was going to be doing. I thought I would be able to get around by using my wheelchair. Because my wheelchair took up so much space, I was going to have my own room. I would be sharing a bathroom with someone who was also in a wheelchair. The bathroom itself was bigger than most dorm rooms with a complete roll-in shower. It was set up perfectly for me. The campus was huge, and everywhere had ramps and everything that I would need.

It wasn't long until it was a move-in day, and that was organized chaos. People from all over the state moving into the dorms and saying goodbye to their parents. I can't explain the overwhelming feeling of freedom I had after my mom left. I could go anywhere I wanted. I had no curfew for the first time. Honestly, for someone who grew up sheltered and isolated, it was too much of a good thing. Clem didn't live in my dorm, but he wasn't far away. On our first night there, we did what every red-blooded college kid recently set free would do. We went to the bar. We may have both just been 18, but finding someone over 21 willing to buy for us wasn't that difficult.

Once I was all moved in and settled, it was time to prepare for my first day of classes. I was a little nervous about getting to and from classes. I had wheeled long distances before, but I knew this would be different. My first class was a major disaster. My class was in the building that was the furthest out. It would take me a long time to get there. I wheeled out there. My class was on the 2nd floor. The problem was when I got there that the building was old and didn't have an elevator. How does that even happen? You would think that at least there would be some kind of warning. I was pissed! I

couldn't believe I wheeled out there for nothing. I had to go to the councilor's office and fix my schedule.

Thankfully it didn't take long, and I was off again to my next class. I had a harder time wheeling around the campus than I expected. I was enjoying my new found freedom. It was also a lot to deal with at once. My procrastination issue was still going strong. I learned a valuable lesson. Once you get behind in college, it is almost impossible to catch back up. If you focus all your efforts on catching up in one class, then you're behind in two. Not to mention, I had a very active social life. For the first time, it seemed that just about everyone I met wanted to hang out and party. I am not going to lie. I lived it up. The problem is you can't have good grades in college and an overactive social life. I was burning the candle at both ends, and I paid the price.

With winter rapidly approaching, I knew getting around would be a big problem. I started asking the school what options I had. They said that if I had someone that could wheel me around, they would set it up so that we would be able to schedule our classes first. Usually, scheduling went by seniority so that first-year students would schedule last. Sometimes you had to fight to get a class you wanted. But this would make it much more manageable.

I talked to Clem, and he was OK with it, so we set that up. I also learned that because I was disabled, I could get clearance to have a car on campus. I didn't have a car at the time, but Clem did. Now we had a car on campus as well. Turns out, being in a wheelchair wasn't all bad. Even if I wasn't hanging out with Clem, I was hanging out with my other friends in my dorm. I didn't have a roommate, so if anyone was having issues with theirs, they came to my room. I don't remember sleeping much. I was instead more focused on having fun, and that's what I did.

College isn't just about having fun. I knew I needed to focus more on school. In my second term, I came to learn one valuable piece of information. I hated computer programming. I thought I would love it because I loved computers. I had never actually tried programming. When I started programming, I found it made me miserable. First of all, I type slowly, which for a computer programmer is a bad thing. Then a computer programmer has to love sitting in the lab for hours just programming. They don't talk or move;

they just program. I am a talker, and I love to talk to anyone. I will even talk to myself. I quickly found out that talking isn't allowed in the computer lab.

I started to get depressed because I didn't know what to do. The more depressed I got, the more I drank. Admittedly I was losing myself. I didn't want to admit I needed help. I was so stupid, and I just kept on the same path. I passed my classes but barely. I should have checked into changing my major, but I didn't do that. I stayed on the computer programming track even though I hated it. My next term was even worse.

The more advanced the classes got, the more miserable I was. My last straw for computer programming was when I was working on a project, and it wouldn't work. It took two computer lab assistants and me almost three hours to find a space that was in the wrong spot. I had something that had two spaces in between, and there was only supposed to be one. At that moment, I looked at myself in the mirror, and I knew this was not the life for me. I was going to have to make a change.

Clem and I realized it was expensive to have a social life in college. We decided to start our business selling sports memorabilia. It involved two of my favorite things. I loved talking to people, and I loved sports. It was an excellent combination for me. We started small and worked our way up. I learned people would buy and deal with people they trust. If you're friendly and trustworthy, people will come back. We had a business license and everything. We managed to do several shows in different states and even a couple in Canada.

The business was doing great, so we decided to go on a trip for spring break. We were on our way to lunch, and there was this travel company offering cheap cruises to the Bahamas. We put a deposit on the trip. We would get a one day cruise to the Bahamas. Then three days on the island and cruise back. There were a few bonuses to the trip to the Bahamas. First off, they don't have a drinking age. We would be able to drink legally. The Bahamas also had some excellent casinos so we would be able to gamble as well. Clem wanted to spend a few extra days in Florida. We added a day before and a day after the cruise.



I love to fly, but the hard part when you are disabled is getting on and off the plane. There is no easy way to do it. Planes just aren't designed for disabled people. Thankfully I had Clem with me. He had been used to helping me get around for years. He just grabbed me and pulled me onto the plane and threw me into a seat. They brought my chair up as far as they could, and he drug me off. We got our bags from the baggage claim, and the hotel had a van from the airport. The van wasn't wheelchair accessible. So getting in it was a struggle, but we managed to make it work.

We had a free day then we would be traveling to the Bahamas the following morning. There wasn't much to do around the hotel, and Clem wanted to go to the beach. The problem was the beach was 5 miles away. We tried only to spend money when we had to. Clem decided he was going to walk and push my wheelchair the entire way. We spent the day at the beach. That is real friendship right there, no doubt about it!

The next morning we had to get up early to catch a bus to the ship. We got to the boat and went through customs. We would just be on the ship for a few hours. We decided to roam the ship and check it out. The casino and bar wouldn't be open until we were in international waters. I quickly realized was that cruise ships are not wheelchair accessible. We tried to take the elevator. It was so small. Clem had to lift the back of the chair, so I was almost standing straight up. Then turn it to get us both in.

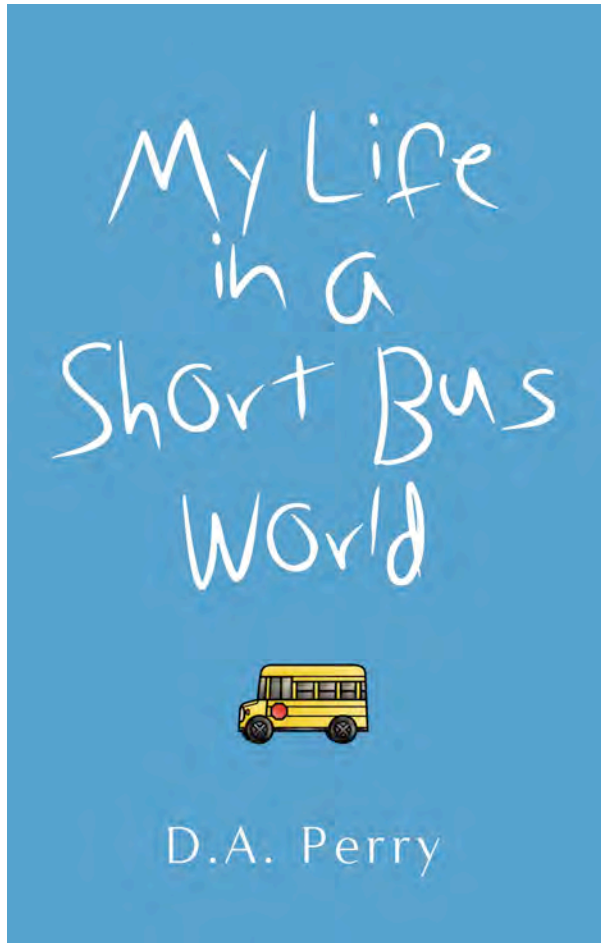
Soon we were in international waters, and we could drink and gamble. All I did was play the slots. We made it into port, and it was time to leave the ship. We ended up taking a ferry to the hotel, which took a few people helping to get the chair on. The next day we had booked a tour through the botanical gardens. We also had a tour of the town and shopping areas. I am glad we went; it was stunning. You got to see many styles of plants they didn't have in America.

We went to the shopping district and ended up picking up a bottle of Bacardi 151. Before we left the Bahamas, we acknowledged we had a problem. We still had half of the bottle of 151 left. We weren't going to let that go to waste. We went to the store and found a bottle of ginger ale that was close in color. Then we dumped it out and rinsed the bottle.

We poured the 151 into the ginger ale bottle. They took our luggage from us and had all the dogs sniff it. I am assuming looking for drugs. We were a bit worried because we saw them tell some people to open up their luggage. Had we done that, we would have in big trouble. The custom agents told us to grab our bags and go to an agent. As soon as we got to the agent, they looked at us asked us a couple of questions and waved us on. We walked calmly to the bus and went back to our hotel. Thankfully when we got back to the hotel, the bottle didn't break in transit.

When I went back to Ferris for my sophomore year, I was miserable. My mom had warned me if I didn't start doing better, she was going to make me move back home. I was already in that situation because I was under academic probation. The problem was I had dug myself into a hole already. I did work very hard in the term. I just couldn't figure out what I wanted to study. I was lost, but I was fighting.

I wasn't partying as much, but I couldn't stop drinking. I did try and cut back, but when the pressure got to me, I would drink. Then I would just get more depressed. It was a vicious cycle! I did a little better this term, but my grades weren't good enough. I had to move back home. I am still ashamed of how all this worked out. So many times, I think back to things I should have and could have done differently.



*Dave, born with Cerebral Palsy, has had to battle through life from the start. His first fight was to get an education. That led to having to deal with battles with bullies and teachers who chose to look the other way. With the help of his friends and family, he is able to overcome them!*

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