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# Angel in Paradise

UP man collects 88,564 returnables to keep 55-student school's sports teams going

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*Reader comments: "Our little town hasn't been the same since you were here. Mr. Dreves - a.k.a. the Can Man - is still going strong. Through your article, he has been featured on ESPN, on a cancellation stamp for the U.S. Postal Service, has been written up in several magazines and papers throughout the world, and most recently was visited by a group of HOGs (Harley Owners Group.) ... The financial support for our program has been awesome but the greater idea out there is that one person can (and does) make a difference." Pat Rowley, Paradise school superintendent*

Can anyone make a difference at a school that's tiny and shrinking, in a sleepy town north of nowhere?

One man can, and can, and can, and can.

And does.

It's been three years now. After a close brush with death, John Dreves has daily and deliberately collected returnable cans and bottles in and around Paradise. He keeps track of his achievements the way a basketball coach keeps stats on his team.

Once, when he was healthier, Dreves taught kids how to get the ball through the hoop. Now, he does what he can.

On the day we meet, he pulls a bulky black bag of returnables from a designated bin at a convenience store. Then, in the parking lot, he draws from his wallet a folded strip of white paper. From it he begins to read to me:

"On July 6, I took back 92. On July 11, I took back 412. On July 12, I took back 473. On July 16, I took back 512."

I stop him. What counts is his running total of returnables: 87,740.

A week later, this past Tuesday, it's up to 88,564.

Laid end to end, that's more than 9 miles of discarded containers.

Each is worth a lousy dime. But together, wow.

Dreves handles all empties at least twice -- draining and sorting them, then popping them into machines at any of about 10 stores. Each dollar goes to the shoestring sports program at Whitefish Township School in Paradise.

Its enrollment, kindergarten through 12th grade, is a mere 55 boys and girls.

Its gym is so small spectators must try to keep their feet tucked out of bounds.

Its young athletes, in all their awkward promise, are beloved to him.

### **'This Suburban brakes for cans'**

Dreves (rhymes with sleeves) is known in town as the Can Man.

He's more than a scrounger. He manages several plastic trash cans hand-lettered with his mission, placed around Paradise, including its town hall and the popular Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum.

Dreves advertises himself on yellow flyers as a picker-upper of your party's empties. He lists his address as a place to drop off your cans and bottles. Women hug him because he relieves them of the nasty job of returning their own empties.

He promises everyone: "What you drink is between you, me and the machine."

He guesses 70% of his returnables held beer, much of it quaffed by snowmobilers, tossed in the snow then fetched off the trails each spring by do-gooders.

Dreves is ever alert. He scans the roadside along Lake Superior's Whitefish Bay and jokes he needs a bumper sticker: "This Suburban brakes for cans."

At first, his goal was to collect 75,000 cans and bottles by his 75th birthday in June. He beat that by several thousand.

His new goal: 100,000 by next June.

His chance of success is high and his motivation is simple: "I thank God," he says, "for my health and for even letting me be here to do this."

His point is to thank the kids, whose affection helped bring him back from the brink.

His wife, Zelna, remembers: "We just about lost him." In 2002, he languished for 58 days at Munson Medical Center in Traverse City after open-heart surgery for an aneurysm led to sepsis and 18 days in a coma.

Paradise kids sent him cards. Athletes signed a poster with a poem that included, "Your basketball knowledge we sure do miss, even though some fans do hiss."

When doctors let him go, he knelt on the sidewalk at the hospital door and kissed it.

After months of rehab, he and Zelna returned to their simple home on Whitefish Bay, where a painted Madonna stands watch in the yard and an American flag always flies from the end of the driveway.

To the right of the front door hangs a welcome sign. To the left hangs a broom.

And a dozen steps across the blacktop is their garage, a.k.a. Sorting Central.

Inside, with his back to the day, John drains bottles, re-plumps dented cans with a kitchen knife, tosses each into cardboard boxes bound for different stores, and marches ever forward on a humble mission with no end in sight.

### **Little things mean a lot**

Paradise is less perfect than its name implies, but its couple hundred residents can't imagine better bliss.

Founded in 1925 as a tourist destination, 70 miles north of the Mackinac Bridge on Whitefish Bay, some of its buildings are now in shambles. Its school is 55 years old, heated by wood chips, but voters rejected a \$5-million bond issue that would have built a new one.

"With declining enrollment, it's a tough sell," admits Pat Rowley, a Royal Oak kid who began his teaching career here 28 years ago when the school held twice as many students.

Now it survives on a special state stipend for so-called island schools, too far from other districts to bus kids. Four teachers share high school teaching duties. Younger kids share classrooms, three grades per teacher.

Rowley (pronounced RAW-lee) is the principal and superintendent and substitute bus driver and basketball coach and referee and EMS volunteer. Friends think he can blame his hip replacements on the hefty key ring he carries.

It was Rowley who urged me to visit Paradise this summer to meet John Dreves. He told me of his recovery: "Mr. Dreves had a new lease on life and wanted to do whatever he could to help our little sports program."

"Little" may overstate its size.

The school gym, also its cafeteria, is no bigger than a tennis court.

It has no pool, no track, no football team. Your options are soccer, volleyball and basketball. Each team is coed and includes scrawny seventh-graders through brawny seniors.

In winter, when teams compete against Mackinac or Beaver islands, the school flies as many kids as it can afford. Each plane costs \$500.

The money from Dreves' returnables campaign means more kids can go.

New is a proper platform for the volleyball referee, who before had to stand on an embarrassing folding chair.

Best, the money bought new uniforms for kids who once wore old, faded, mismatched duds.

"You talk about a pride thing, a self-esteem thing," said superintendent Rowley. "I remember the Engadine game when we got the new uniforms. The kids played up a whole level. It was big."

### **Systematic sorting**

John Dreves' T-shirt reads "Basketball is Life." He can't explain why, except to say, "It's always been my sport."

John lettered in basketball at Central High School in Traverse City, his hometown. He played in the Air Force while stationed in Korea.

Back home, he raised five children, clerked at the post office and coached basketball at St. Francis School near his house. He still roots for its teams, in the winter pulling on a snowmobile suit to sit in his Paradise driveway and try to catch games on his car radio.

He remains beloved at that school because, as president of its booster club, he helped buy a new bus and build a football field and track.

His new school loves him, too. For years, he helped Rowley coach and ref basketball. Now, he's at every home game, rooting from the sidelines.

"I gave up coaching and traveling with the team," he said, "because our kids gave us a dog four years ago who won't eat when I'm not home." His wife chimes in: "And she won't go to the bathroom, either!"

Once a month, they drive 170 miles to Traverse City to see John's doctors and dump a load of returnables at Meijer, whose brand shows up in Paradise but is rejected by UP stores.

Dreves started his mission in 2004 after a small local can drive turned up hundreds of oddball brands local stores rejected. He realized he could reap their value only by being willing to deliver them back to where they belonged.

That means 10 different stores in the UP, plus Glen's and Meijer downstate.

His system is impressive. Every few days he empties his bins, or lifts them full into the back of his Suburban.

Back home, he works fast, from a folding wooden chair, sorting with both hands. His biggest challenge is removing pull tabs from cans. Most are off in a second, but Faygo's distinctive square tabs may require 10 seconds of wiggling.

He gives tabs by the thousands to his daughter, who takes them to her American Legion post in Munising, which sells them to an aluminum scrap dealer for about a buck a pound. Proceeds buy medical equipment for hospitals.

He reloads his Suburban for weekly trips to Newberry or Sault Ste. Marie, an hour away. Strangers who exclaim over his chore, often, once they hear what he's up to, donate their own returnables or redemption slips to the cause.

Finally, he dutifully recycles every flattened cardboard holder and every no-deposit bottle at the Paradise town dump.

In the winter he moves the whole sorting operation inside, into Zelna's kitchen.

"I think it keeps me in shape," he says simply of his project.

I think it guarantees him a high place in heaven.