NEVER GIVE UP 1

By Dianna Hutts Aston

Until he was 89 years old, Ed Bray had a secret.

A secret he kept hidden deep inside himself.

A secret that trapped him in a world inwhich he felt alone.

His children didn’t know his secret. His friends didn’t know. The soldiers with whom he served in World War II didn’t know. Only his wife, Margaret, knew.

Numbers made sense to Ed, but

words were a jumble of letters…

sentences , a code he could not understand…

paragraphs, a jigsaw puzzle…

all books, mysteries.

Ed Bray could not read.

*(The following would be illustrations--)*

[YEESRCS: tercesasgnihteepkotltilibayhet]

[Translates to:]

[SECRECY: The ability to keep things a secret.]

[EDOC:] Amestysfotretcesslobmyssrettelrosdrow tahtodtonekamesnesotsrehto.]

[Translates to:]

[CODE: A system of secret symbols, letters, or words that do not make sense to others.]

[YCARETILLI: etirwdnadaerotytilibanieht]

[Translates to:]

[ILLITERACY: the inability to read and write.]

Ed didn’t make good grades in school, but if secrecy was a subject, he would have earned the highest marks.

When his children asked him to read them a bedtime story, he said he was too tired.

When the doctor asked him to fill out forms, he said he’d forgotten his reading glasses.

When a waitress asked him what he would like, he ordered what he knew would be on the menu: a hamburger or eggs and toast.

When he received birthday cards, Margaret read them to him.

When he drove, he memorized exits and warning signs.

When he returned from WWII—a hero with a dozen gleaming medals for bravery and service —he took all kinds of jobs to support his wife and seven children, jobs that did not require reading. He worked as a janitor, a school bus driver, a house painter, a mechanic.

He volunteered as a firefighter, a little league coach, a Scout Master, and more.

Children in the neighborhood knew him as Mr. Bray, a fixer of flats and broken chains. He never said no to a child who brought a bicycle to his shop and asked if he would repair it. If hard work and a giving heart were subjects, he would have earned the highest marks.

Ed did have a skill that came naturally to him. He could repair vehicles of all kinds—cars, tankers, trucks, motorcycles, lawnmowers, bicycles. Engines made sense. He applied for a job at Tinker Air Force Base and had to admit he couldn’t read the application. The man who became his boss helped him fill it out. Ed kept engines running at Tinker for 30 years. He never needed a book of instruction about how to repair an engine. Had he known how to write, he could have been the author of one.

Despite his talent for fixing engines, his inability to decode words continued the silent war within himself.

[EDOCED: egaugnalyranidrootniedocmorfegassemtercesaegnahcot]

[Translates to:]

[DECODE: to change a secret message from code into ordinary language.]

A war of weakness versus strength.

A war of shame versus pride.

A war of despair versus hope.

[EMAHS]: hguonedoogtongnileefmorfsemoctahtnoitomelufniapa]

[Translates to:]

[SHAME: A painful emotion that comes from feeling not good enough]

[RIAPSED: llewtuonrutlliwgnihondnagnorwsignihtyretahtgneleefeht]

[Translates to:]

[DESPAIR: the feeling that everything is wrong and nothing will turn out well]

Private 1st Class Ed Bray had survived World War II, but his secret almost defeated him.

Year after year, he struggled to learn to read.

Year after year, words still made no sense.

Year after year, he felt frustrated and alone.

He dropped out of tutoring classes many times, just as he had dropped out of school as a boy.

As the decades passed, convinced he would never be able to read, Ed almost gave up. He felt like a nobody.

[YDOBON: noitaripsniroecneulfnoonfonosrepa]

[Translates to:]

[NOBODY: A person of no influence or inspiration]

In the eighth decade of his life, while visiting his grandson at Northeastern State University in Tahlequa, Oklahoma, he met Professor Fount London. After learning about Ed’s struggle, Fount urged him to wage one more effort. He introduced Ed to Tobi Thompson, a professor who teaches people to read.

In WWII, Ed had learned there are many battles to be won before there is victory.

He mustered his courage and became a student again, a student without much hope, a student among mostly elementary age children, a student willing to try once more.

More than almost anything, he wanted to unlock the mystery of books.

[RETSUM: gnihtemosodotegaruocehtdnifot]

Translates to:

[MUSTER: To find the courage to do something]

Tobi hoped that with practice and many tutoring sessions, he could learn to read. Her method was simple: flashcards.

Flashcard after flashcard….

“One word at a time,” she said. “One word at a time. Skip the big ones.”

Unlike previous tutors, she remained patient as he memorized word after word.

Ed gave himself homework. Practicing to recognize words, he sang karaoke and read the lyrics of songs on the screen. [Eddy Arnold’s *“Make the World Go Away”*] Microphone in hand, Ed sang and sang. He memorized the words.

Tobi was beside him when he deciphered his first word: WORLD.

[REHPICED: egaugnalyranidrootniedocegnahcot; ytluciffidhtiwdearot]

[Translates to:]

[DECIPHER: to read with difficulty; to change code into ordinary language]

[WORLD: The world in which we live]

She was beside him when he read his first book. It was not a mystery. It was a biography about the first president of the United States, George Washington, one of his heroes who had fought for freedom—just as he had.

Nearly two years after he had entered Tobi’s classroom, words finally made sense. He deciphered the code. He learned to read. No longer trapped by a secret, he was free.

For nearly 90 years, Private 1st Class Ed Bray had fought a war within himself.

He won.

[BRAVERY: being courageous even when you are afraid]

[VICTORY: the successful ending of a struggle.]

[PEACE: the absence of mental stress or anxiety; a feeling relief to the end of war.]

END

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Charles Edwin Bray, born March 17, 1923, has never been alone in his struggle to learn to read, to become literate. The United States Department of Education estimates that more than 30 million adults in the U.S. (14% of the population) cannot read. Of those, 63% have been in prison. Nineteen percent are high school graduates. Worldwide, about 774 million people are illiterate, more than half of them female.

Ed dropped out of school in the eighth grade, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when tens of thousands of Americans lost their jobs, their homes and their savings. For these people, survival was more important than education. Many young people, like Ed, had to work instead of go to school. He took most any kind of job he could to earn money for food, clothing and shelter. However, even if he had remained in school, he’s not certain whether he would have learned to read. Like so many people suffering from illiteracy—then and now—he says, “I just didn’t get it.”

After appearing on national television’s “CBS News” for his victory in learning to read, hundreds of letters, simply addressed to Mr. Ed Bray, flooded the post office in the small town where he lives—fan mail from viewers, schoolchildren, teachers, and even inmates in prison who were trying to learn to read or who found inspiration in his perseverance. Many of their words are still a jumble to him, but some are not. He keeps every letter. His daughter, Betsy, replies to as many senders as she can.

Requests to speak at schools and PTA conventions began the next chapter in his life: to conquer his fear of public speaking. He did.

In his military regalia, microphone in hand, he now tells large groups of children about his journey to literacy. Just as England’s Prime Minister, Winston Churchill had encouraged people fighting for peace in WWII to “Never give up! Never give up! Never give up!” so too does Private 1st Class Ed Bray, a decorated veteran of WWII, with Honorary Diplomas from Central High School and Tahlequah High School in Oklahoma.

[Medals: 2 Purple Hearts. 2 Bronze Stars. Victory in Europe. Combat Service. D-Day WWII. Army Occupation. American Campaign. Overseas Service. Army Good Conduct. Army Commendation.]

***Actual letters can be scanned:***

* “I think you are a great, brave and nice man for just coming out and saying your big secret on television. You are a true American hero.” – Zachary H.
* “You are an inspiration to all people who want to learn and that will make them try and succeed.”
* “Thank you, Mr. B, for not giving up on your dreams.”
* “You’re amazing!”
* “Mr. B, you are a cool dude.”
* “You are my hero.”
* “I like penguins/I like sequins/I like glitter/I like you/because you are not a quitter. Keep reading, Valentine!” Love, Ellyanna.
* “I love red/I love blue/I love new books/and so do you! Happy Valentine’s Day.”—Keith
* “I think the true lesson that you were trying to say was to never give up, even if you can’t get to do what you want. It takes a long time to learn something so even if it takes me 90 years, I will keep trying. Thanks for teaching me this lesson. Keep reading.” – Belle
* “I’m so delighted that you can read because you can’t do it when you are dead. I’m sorry that the teachers gave up on you, but we did not!” –Marissa
* “Hello. My name is Jack. You are very brave that you admitted you can’t read. I am so happy that you can read now.”
* I think you are very brave because you told lots of people that you could not read. But you have done so many achievements without reading.” Love, Jene

“BRAY’S POEM”

*(A thank you for people supporting his journey to literacy)*

*My WORLD is for you,*

*Let me make it up to you;*

*For my WORLD is for you.*

*Wanting the best for you.*

*You picked up my heart and helped me carry on.*

*For the WORLD I live in now, it’s so different from*

*The one back then;*

*So many people I have met have now become*

*My friends.*

*The kindness that’s been shown from people far*

*And near;*

*For the support that you have given,*

*I will always hold that dear.*

END