

# Unlikely Hero

Leah Early, October 1, 2018

In 1995 the principal of Incline High School hired me as a part-time drama/English teacher. This principal was committed to offering a variety of electives for this 500-student body tucked into the mountains above Lake Tahoe. So, as the new English and Drama teacher, I dreamed up a challenging two-week long Spring One-Act Play Festival, starring the 40 plus students in the drama classes. Every student would be an actor in a play featured during the festival.

On the last evening of the festival, headliners were two comedies: *Louder, I Can't Hear You*, a play about a family of talkers but no listeners, and *Present Tense*, the story of a nerd who fantasizes about his female relationships. The curtain closed on the first comedy with applause, whistles and cheers. Student faces beamed with excitement, while their parents proudly stood taller than usual. We swung into a lively intermission and time for resetting the stage by the *Present Tense* cast and production team. Strangely, the second group seemed unusually flighty and jittery.

As I headed for the second team's context to be held in my classroom across the hall, I was stopped. The president of the local Lions Club put his arm around my shoulders, as if to console me. He chuckled and then whispered, "There's a young man puking his guts out in the boys' restroom." I immediately registered doom and internal lights flashed and flickered on and off, as he continued, "If I'm not mistaken, he is drunker than a skunk." Patting my shoulder and chuckling again, he injected, "I'd really love to see how you handle this, but I have to run. Good luck!"

I heard a weak "Thank you" slip from my lips as horror began to spread throughout my

reptilian brain. Every cell in my body began shifting into battle station positions. Tumultuous things were going on throughout my body, as I stood frozen in the hallway. *I could be fired over this!* I heard doom, da doom, da doom as my feet carried me though the door of my classroom and then stalled. *That kid could die of alcoholic poisoning! Oh no, maybe there are two or three students dying by toilet bowls in the boy's restroom! . . . My principal is not going to like this!*

I acted calm, I think, as students gathered. It dawned on me as the group grew in size that we were all present but David. Yes, we waited for Dave, our male lead. He was a new student from Sacramento, living with his aunt and uncle this year. So far, he seemed to be a loner, who had found his place in drama. When it really came down to it, we didn't know much about Dave, save he loved being on stage. Finally, the puking-his-guts-out fellow walked in on weakened legs and reeking! He flopped down in a desk right in front of me.

"How are you feeling, Dave?"

"Not so good, Msssearwee." Dave appeared too far gone to revive during the twenty minutes we had left before curtain time.

"Is anyone home at your house tonight?"

He nodded affirmatively. Quickly, I dispatched two students from the first play's cast to drive Dave home, while the rest of us decided how to handle what remained of our evening.

"Come, let's gather around." As they drew closer, all eyes focused on me as I smiled and began. "This is not how we pictured our time unfolding, is it? The group responded with snickers, grins and a few sets of eyes filled

with unshed tears. “I have a few options to suggest and maybe you will think of others. We will decide our next steps together.

“Option number one: We can announce before the curtain opens that one of our cast members is unable to participate tonight and that, under the circumstances, we are canceling the last performance of *Present Tense*. It will be disappointing to our audience and us, but it will not be unforgiveable.”

Silence. No one moved.

“Option number two: We may announce before the curtain opens that our lead actor is sick. Standing in for him and reading the lines of Doug tonight will be so-in-so. Again, this is not how we envisioned things, but given our situation, it is an honorable response. I have seen it done; it’s considered acceptable in theater circles.”

Again . . . silence.

Then, there was some movement as Chris Dawson walked quickly around the groups’ left edge toward me and wonder bloomed. The school classified Chris as a high school junior. He was my height with a slim frame and permanent brown circles under his eyes. School staff lowered their eyes and voices when they shared that Chris had a dubious reputation, involving several robbery offenses and rumors of stays in drug rehabilitation centers. Chris made direct eye contact with his peers and me as he hurried to the front. He had our attention.

“I’ve been thinking about another option, Mrs. Early.”

“Good, Chris. Please, what have you got in mind?”

“Well, I am looking around this room. I guess I am probably our best improvisation actor at this point. I know the storyline of the play; but, of course I don’t know the exact words nor the exact moments when the lines should be delivered. But, the story can be told, if I cue off the other actors. What if, I ‘improved’ the role of Doug?”

Smiling I asked, “You haven’t been drinking, too, have you, Chris?”

“Nah, nah, I just had a cigarette outside; but I have not had a drop of liquor—honest!”

The students began trying on various ways this could happen among themselves and suddenly a girl declared, “It might work.” Next I heard, “Let’s don’t announce anything. Let’s just do it!”

Obviously, we had made our decision because we were all moving in the direction of the stage. I selected one of the more poised girls in the group, Reanna, to read the scene ahead of the one being acted on stage; to meet Chris in the wings after each of his scenes; and to remind him of what was next.

Frankly, I am not sure the author of *Present Tense* would have recognized his play that Friday evening. It certainly was not the same play we produced the two previous evenings that week; but who is to say which version was better? Members of our full house laughed long and hard, never suspecting the changes my tough, quick-thinking and acting students made. The cast and crew were extremely impressed with their abilities to pull this one off so seamlessly and with young Chris Dawson, playing with surprising ease the invisible role of hero.