



ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

Tom Neff gets a helping hand from patrolman Larry Adkinson as he begins his day as an engineer. Wayne Workman (left) made the necessary arrangements for the trip.



Engineer Robert Stigall checks the tracks ahead as Tom Neff blows the whistle.

Youth's dream of running train becomes reality

By Carol Carpenter
staff writer

The sleeping cat, symbol of the Chessie system, has uncurred for Tom Neff. Tom, 9, seriously ill with muscular dystrophy, long has dreamed of becoming a railroad engineer. On Monday, he finally got his chance.

It took road foreman Wayne Workman two weeks to make Tom's dream come true at the Middlebelt train yard in Livonia. Thanks to Workman, a 27,700-pound locomotive worth \$200,000 was put on the track and reserved for Tom.

Under the able guidance of Robert Stigall, an engineer since 1955, Tom took a 15-minute run from Middlebelt to the Plymouth yard. Blue eyes twinkling, Tom looked up

at the enormous locomotive. Placing his hands on the arms of his wheelchair, he stood.

TOM IS "in between walking and using a wheelchair," said Linda Neff, his mother. On Sunday, he fell and got a couple of big bumps on his forehead, she added, but he just "plunges into" everything he does.

Muscular dystrophy, an inherited disease, causes its victim's muscles to progressively deteriorate. Tom was diagnosed as having the disease when he was 6.

Workman and James Ward, assistant superintendent, carried Tom up the steep steps and placed him in the engineer's seat. His sister, Dawn, 7, sat in a seat next to the window.

Tom listened carefully as Stigall explained the complex instrument panel.

The bumpersticker on Tom's collapsible wheelchair flashed as Workman lifted him back into the chair and braced it.

Hunching forward to get a better look, Tom made it all worthwhile for Workman and the crew who, on duty since 4:30 a.m., were ready at 9:30 a.m. for Tom.

Tom hadn't shown up on time because Mrs. Neff had to take him to the clinic where he receives treatment. And when Tom saw one of his grandfather's friends in striped pants and an engineer's hat, he begged for a ride on the train.

So Rowe talked to his friend, James Matthews. Although Matthews is not with the railroad, he loves to dress in costumes, and Rowe asked him to "fix it up" so the kids could ride a train.

Matthews contacted Workman, and because of a lot of people who care, Tom was ready for his qualifying run.

"Trains are big and noisy and he loves them," Mrs. Neff said. "He's always wanted to be an engineer."

His grandfather, Don Rowe of Redford Township, knew this when he gave Tom an electric train for Christmas.

ON THE TRAIN, Tom's small hand

curled around the lever for the whistle. "Now," said Stigall.

Tom pulled down the lever — two long blasts, two short, and another long.

He watched out the back window and was ready for the next crossing. He reached for the whistle lever.

Sunlight bouncing off the sprinkling of freckles across his nose, Tom asked question after question.

And Steigle, immaculate in his blue velour shirt, spoke as if he were answering an adult.

"How fast are we going?" "About 31 miles per hour because of the speed limit here." "Boy, doesn't that bell make it noisy?" "Sure does." "What's the red light for and the yellow?" On and on, Tom fired the questions.

The ride went fast. Tom was getting the hang of it and enjoying it more each minute. The woosh of the air brakes filled the space.

He grinned as Workman carried him back down the steps and Ward unfolded his wheelchair.

HE WAS GRINNING even wider when Ward presented him with the wooden plaque with a carved symbol of the sleeping cat. A brass plate read: "Tom Neff — Honorary Engineer, Chessie System."

Holding the plaque against his chest, he said, "Did you hear the whistle, mom? Did you hear it?"

Tom read the plaque again. "Can I take it to school?" asked the spunky boy from Eagle Elementary School in West Bloomfield.

His classmates would be impressed.



The excitement ran high as Tom worked the controls of the 27,700-pound locomotive.



Robert Stigall takes the controls as Tom settles down to enjoy the ride.

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