



'Dead' man recovering after ATV accident

Doctors said he was dead, and a transplant team was ready to take his organs -- until a young man came back to life

TRANSCRIPT

By Natalie Morales

updated 6:22 p.m. ET, Mon., March. 24, 2008

This story originally aired on Dateline March 23, 2008.

OKLAHOMA CITY - A tiny news clip plainly spelled it out: a road fatality. It was another life cut heartbreakingly short. The news story made no mention of the giant affection young Zack Dunlap had earned from family and friends, who more than anything wished they could rewrite history.

They dared even to pray for the impossible, asking that this beloved local son be returned to them.

But even the most fervent believers could not have fathomed that such a prayer might really be answered.

In fact, Zack himself had been the answer to a prayer years earlier. He was adopted by Doug and Pam Dunlap when he was just 15 days old.

Doug Dunlap: I was thrilled to be a dad. And he was the best-looking boy I'd seen and ever would see. **Pam Dunlap:** He had the most gorgeous blue eyes that I'd ever seen -- just made your heart melt.

He was special to them in so many ways, they said. But what touched them most was how well he handled adversity. Growing up, Zack was severely dyslexic. Even writing his name could be a huge undertaking.

Pam Dunlap:

He fought through it, and he graduated from high school ... That was a huge accomplishment. We were so proud of him. It would have been easy for him to have given up.

After graduation, Zack continued to live with his family in Frederick, Ok. -- a small farming and ranching community. A warehouse worker, Zack played just as hard as he worked.

He drove souped-up all-terrain vehicles, more commonly called 4-wheelers. It was a passion for him and his friends -- and they all said Zack was fearless, even calling him "Outlaw."

Last November, a few days before Thanksgiving, Zack and some friends, including Colton Gaines, rode their 4-wheelers in the local parade, occasionally popping wheelies.

Colton Gaines: Just showing off and everybody was "Aaw, look at that."

At dusk, everyone was heading toward Colton's house when Zack fell behind.

He raced to catch up -- at the same time, popping a wheelie.

Colton Gaines:

When you're on a wheelie, all you're seeing is straight up in the air. I guess that he didn't see me in the road.

Bad move. When Zack's front wheels touched down on the pavement, he was a hair's breadth from Colton's 4-wheeler. Zack swerved, and then...

Colton Gaines: I just saw his 4-wheeler turning, flipping in the air. And then hitting the asphalt.

Colton was fine. His best friend, who had not been wearing a helmet, was not.

Colton Gaines:

He was laying there facing down on the road, not moving or nothing, not saying anything. Just laying there. And I yelled his name and he didn't respond. *(911 call)*911: Police department, dispatch. Caller: Somebody's had a 4-wheeler accident.911: Where at?Caller: Highway 70, turn west. Hang on, buddy! Emergency!

As an ambulance scrambled to reach Zack in the chilly darkness, his 80-year-old grandmother, Naomi Blackford, was at home listening in on a personal police scanner.

Naomi Blackford:

I knew he'd been down there riding. That's why I called Pam and asked her if she knew where Zack was at.

Pam soon did. Her son was at the local emergency room.

Natalie Morales: You were a mom in a panic.**Pam Dunlap:** Oh, in panic mode.**Natalie Morales:** What did the doctors tell you at that point?**Pam Dunlap:** She just said it wasn't good.**Doug Dunlap:** She said brain matter was coming from Zack's ear.**Pam Dunlap:**

All I can remember is just being down on my knees saying, you know, "No. No, God, no. This isn't going to happen."

Zack was Medivac'ed to a hospital 50 miles away, in Wichita Falls, Texas -- one equipped to deal with traumatic brain injury.

With Zack on a ventilator to support his breathing, it was relatively easy for doctors to address his broken collarbone and multiple skull fractures. Far more confounding was stabilizing the pressure building in Zack's bleeding brain.

Dr. Mercer: His brain injuries were absolutely catastrophic.

Dr. Leo Mercer, Director of Trauma Services at United Regional, said Zack's condition deteriorated as the hours wore on. With the young Oklahoman unresponsive to any sensory stimulation, the doctor wondered if they'd already lost him. He apprised Pam and Doug of his findings.

Dr. Mercer:

I told them that I was going to order a confirmatory test, a brain flow study.(At the scanner)We actually scan it twice...

A blood flow scan would determine if there was any blood still coursing through Zack's brain. The results couldn't have been worse.

Pam Dunlap:

The doctor took us in and showed us the image on the computer. And he told us the dark areas will be the areas where there's no blood flow to the brain.**Doug Dunlap:** And that was the whole brain. That was the whole thing. It was just black.**Natalie Morales:** Were the doctors giving you any sense of hope? **Doug Dunlap:** They were already saying he was brain-dead.(Looking at brain scan)**Natalie Morales:** So, when you see this, I mean, he was in a permanent vegetative state?**Dr. Mercer:** No, he was dead. He meets the legal, medical requirements for declaring a patient brain dead.

Tough as it was, the Dunlaps decided against keeping Zack on long-term artificial life support.

Doug Dunlap: He lived life to the fullest. And laying in bed the rest of his life? That wasn't an option.

But Pam and Doug were prepared to keep him alive in another way. Zack himself gave them the answer.

Pam Dunlap: I had seen his driver's license. And I knew that he was an organ donor.**Natalie Morales:** Always wanting to help.**Pam Dunlap:** That's it. He had a huge heart.

That's why Zack's heart was the first organ the Dunlaps OK'd as they considered the hospital's donor checklist.

Pam Dunlap: We wanted to make sure that some lucky person got to live on through Zack's heart.**Doug Dunlap:** And then there were some things we wouldn't do.**Natalie Morales:** May I ask what were some of the things that you wanted him to have?**Pam Dunlap:**

His beautiful eyes. Because he had such pretty eyes. That was one thing I just could not do.

Pam and Doug were told they could expect the harvesting of Zack's organs to get underway within the next 12 to 24 hours. With the clock winding down, the hospital notified authorities that Zack had died at 11:10 that morning -- 36 hours after the accident.

As a helicopter sent by the organ donation team was scheduled to land, friends and relatives gathered to say their goodbyes.

They had no idea of the miracle they were about to witness.

Zack Dunlap was declared dead 36 hours after flipping over on his 4-wheeler. Official word of his death was reported to Oklahoma authorities. Zack's organs were expected to soon be harvested and his parents would start to consider funeral arrangements. Family and friends were told to gather at the hospital to say their goodbyes.

One of the first to arrive was Zack's best friend, Colton.

Colton Gaines: I couldn't even hold his hand; I was just shaking.

Zack's younger sister Kacy had a similar reaction.

Kacy Gaines: I just wanted to break down right there.

Someone who had an especially difficult time telling Zack goodbye was his adoring grandmother.

Naomi Blackford: I went in and I prayed right there.**Natalie Morales:** What were you asking for?**Naomi Blackford:** Just a miracle. That he was too young for God to take him. It wasn't time.

That's when everything changed. Divine intervention, said his family, that would be set in motion by Dan and Christy Coffin -- Zack's cousins who were also both nurses.

Christie Coffin: I sat there and I just said to him, "Zack, if you're in there, if you can hear me, ask God to help you." And I mean it probably wasn't 10 minutes later, I started getting this different feeling in my gut. And I thought, "he's not ready."

Dan wondered the same thing as he looked at the monitor to study Zack's vital signs.

Dan Coffin: Things were just looking better to me.**Natalie Morales:** What did you do?**Dan Coffin:** I grabbed his foot. I pulled my pocket knife out. And I just scraped from his heel up to his toes.

Dan and Christy said they got the shock of their lives.

Dan Coffin: He jerked his foot plumb out of my hand.

Was it possible? Was Zack still alive?

Brenda Ysasaga: My first emotion was disbelief, of course.

Brenda Ysasaga, one of the nurses in the room at the time, wasn't buying it, saying it was a reflex not uncommon even from those who are brain dead -- and certainly not indicative of life.

Natalie Morales:

There was no way for you to think that there was going to be a possibility that he could still be alive?**Brenda Ysasaga:** No.

Needing to challenge even his own skepticism, Dan said...

Dan Coffin:

"Let's try this." So I grabbed Zack's arm and I stuck my fingernail underneath his fingernail. You know that's a tender area. And Zack just threw his hand over here. And by now this kind of --**Natalie Morales:** So he physically moved his arm--**Dan Coffin:** He physically moved his hand away from me, across his body.**Christie Coffin:** And I kind of drew up inside myself, you know, and I'm like, "oh my God."**Brenda Ysasaga:** My first reaction was, "I need Dr. Mercer."**Dr. Mercer:** I, indeed, verified that these were purposeful movements.

Purposeful movement -- rather than a reflex twitch is a telltale sign of brain activity. Suddenly, four hours after Zack was declared brain dead, his room was bustling.

Pam and Doug were out in the hall, getting ready to head back in to spend their final hours with their son, when they were stopped.

Pam Dunlap:

And the lady that we'd been talking to from the organ liaison came in and sat down with us. And she said, "everything has stopped."**Natalie Morales:** "Everything has stopped," meaning...?**Doug Dunlap:** Towards the

organ donation.**Pam Dunlap:** Everything is on hold. And I'm just like, "What is going on?"

Meanwhile, Kacy, who had heard the commotion coming from her brother's room, peeked in.

Kacy Dunlap: I couldn't believe it. I was like, "Oh, my goodness." Because, I mean, he moved.

Kacy made a beeline for her grandmother.

Naomi Blackford:

I had heard of miracles all my life. But I had never seen a miracle. But I have seen a miracle. I've got proof of it.**Pam Dunlap:** We went from the lowest possible moment to "Oh, my gosh--"**Doug Dunlap:** "Our son's alive."**Pam Dunlap:** "Our son is alive." **Natalie Morales:** I imagine you're still though not getting your hopes up because you don't know.**Pam Dunlap:** We were very guarded. We had no idea what we were facing.

Zack's doctor was even more measured.

Dr. Mercer:

I still didn't think that Zack was going to have a good outcome. I thought, well, OK, well, he's not brain dead, but he's pretty close to it.

But the boy who had struggled valiantly to learn to read and write was now fighting hard to hang in. In fact, he did better than that. Five days after Zack "returned to life," he opened his eyes.

Pam Dunlap: It was tears of joy.

Two days later, Zack showed more progress when he was taken off a ventilator and began to breathe on his own. That's the same day, the Dunlaps said, he started to squeeze their hands.

Pam Dunlap: We don't know if he was doing that really on purpose yet. But we like to think he was.

But when could anyone be sure Zack could ever be more than a profoundly brain-damaged patient? That answer came the following week, when Zack's neurosurgeon asked him to hold up two fingers.

Dr. Langham Gleason:

And he did that. And that was the first time I realized that he was aware. He was awake. He was "in there," as they say.

On Dec. 2, 12 days after his startling reawakening, Zack spoke his first words to his parents.

Pam Dunlap: He looked around, and he said, "I love you."**Natalie Morales:** Did you know that from then on, everything is going to be OK?**Pam Dunlap:** You know, you did.**Doug Dunlap:** He had the spark in his eye.

That same day, Zack took his first steps. Pam was there to record them.

Pam Dunlap: I just wanted Zack to be able to look back and see what a miracle that he had been.**Doug Dunlap:** What he had been through.**Natalie Morales:** As a trauma surgeon and seeing this 21-year-old coming back to life, do you have any sort of medical explanation that you know of?**Dr. Mercer:** I don't.**Natalie Morales:**

Were any mistakes made, or was the process rushed along in any way to declare him brain dead because the family made you aware that he was an organ donor?**Dr. Mercer:** No. We didn't rush anything along. We certainly don't do that.**Pam Dunlap:**

We saw the test. We saw it. They followed every procedure. He was gone.**Natalie Morales:** So there is no blame?**Pam Dunlap:** There's no blame in a miracle. And there never will be for us.

While tests can be fallible, Zack's doctors insist the results of his were accurate, and that the hospital would have detected Zack's renewed vital signs before any organ harvesting. While doctors here haven't been able to explain Zack's return from a scientific standpoint, they said the 21-year-old's youth and good health prior to the accident worked in his favor.

And the miracle continued. Just five weeks after Zack's catastrophic accident, he graduated to the Jim Thorpe Rehabilitation Hospital in Oklahoma City for the second phase of his astounding recovery.

Medical Director Amal Moorad: Anytime you have severe brain injury, you'll never be the same again from a mental, emotional standpoint. Zack will be very close to normal, but not 100 percent, and only time will tell us.

(In hospital)**Zack:** I'm just ready to go home.**Natalie Morales:** How quickly do you think he will get his wish?**Therapist:** Probably this week.

But Zack was on his own timeline. That he was up to being interviewed was itself a huge accomplishment.

Natalie Morales: Do you remember hitting the asphalt?**Zack Dunlap:** I remember a little bit before it. But I don't remember the accident.**Natalie Morales:**

What do you remember of the moments leading up to it? What were you doing?**Zack Dunlap:** I was just hauling tail.**Natalie Morales:** Hauling tail?

Something Zack claimed to remember from his first days in the hospital was startling: that when people thought he was already gone, he overheard a doctor talking about him.

Natalie Morales: What do you remember the doctor saying?**Zack Dunlap:** That he was dead.**Natalie Morales:** You heard that?**Zack Dunlap:** I heard it and it just made me mad inside.**Natalie Morales:** How lucky do you consider yourself?**Zack Dunlap:** I think my luck's already happened. I'm just ready to get out and get to work. If I'm still here by Friday, I'll have to sneak out and walk home.

Zack left the rehabilitation hospital 48 days after he was declared dead and came home to a hero's welcome.

A down-home crowd was there to greet him.

Dan used the occasion to present Zack with his pocket knife -- the one that gave him a first clue that Zack might be alive.

(Video of the handoff)**Dan Coffin:** I wanted you to have that pocket knife..**Zack Dunlap:** Thank you.

Zack didn't fully grasp the significance of this keepsake -- yet. But give him time.

People here said Zack's return is a blessing, and they are humbled by it.

Pam Dunlap: We both feel that God has some big plan for Zack. We'll do everything in our power to help him pursue it -- whatever it is.

As for Zack himself, he said "no more 4-wheeling." He's going to pursue a gentler sport -- fishing.

Zack Dunlap: If they weren't biting, I might have to go chase them.

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