TODAY

Pronounced dead, man takes ‘miraculous’ turn

Doctors can’t explain why 21-year-old Zack Dunlap recovered from accident

By Mike Ccelizic
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Zack Dunlap doesn’t remember much from the day he died, but he does remember hearing a doctor declare him brain-dead. And he remembers being incredibly ticked off.

“T’m glad I couldn’t get up and do what I wanted to do,” the strapping Oklahoman said in a soft drawl in an exclusive appearance on Monday on TODAY in New York.

And what would he have done, asked TODAY’s Natalie Morales, who has followed Dunlap’s miraculous recovery from an 117 ATV accident that left him with a catastrophic head injury.

“Probably would have been a broken window they went out,” the 21-year-old said with a hint of a smile.

He’s been through months of rehab, and he’s getting better, but he still has issues with memory and emotional issues.

“I feel pretty good, but this is hard,” he said of all the excitement of being in New York and on national television. He is getting better, he agreed, but said the process is frustrating.

“I just ain’t got the patience,” he said quietly.

He was accompanied by his parents, Pam and Doug Dunlap, and his younger sister, Kacy, who are more than happy to wait while he recovers.

“He’s been doing amazingly well,” Pam Dunlap said. “He does still have a lot of memory issues. It just takes a long time for the brain to heal after such a traumatic injury. It may take a year or more before he completely recovers. But that’s OK. It doesn’t matter how long it takes. We’re just thankful and blessed that we have him here.”

‘There was no activity’

Doctors have no explanation for why Dunlap is alive. He had been riding his souped-up ATV with some friends on that fateful Saturday, less than a week before Thanksgiving. They had participated in a parade that morning, popping wheelies and impressing the crowd, and then they had gone out riding on their machines. He did not wear a helmet.

Dunlap fell behind his friends on a highway just

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outside of Davidson, Okla., not far from his home in the ranching town of Frederick and near the Texas border. He gunned his machine to catch up, doing another wheelie on the back wheels. When he dropped the front wheels back to the pavement, he saw that he was going to crash into a friend’s machine that had stopped a short way up the road.

Dunlap tried to swerve, but flipped his machine and went flying, smashing headfirst and facedown on the asphalt. He remained there motionless, unresponsive to his friends, who quickly called 911.

Taken first to a local hospital, he was airlifted 50 miles away to United Regional Healthcare System in Wichita Falls, Texas, where there was a trauma unit that might be able to treat the severe damage he had done to his brain. But 36 hours after the accident, doctors performed a PET scan of his brain and informed his parents, along with other family members who had gathered to keep vigil at the hospital, that there was no blood flowing to Zack’s brain; he was brain-dead.

Doctors showed the scan to Zack’s parents, and, Doug Dunlap told Morales, “There was no activity at all. No blood flow at all.”

‘They said he was brain-dead’
The devastated parents were faced with the horrible decision of either keeping their son hooked up to life-support equipment or pulling the plug and letting his body follow his brain into death.

“We didn’t want him as a vegetable,” Doug Dunlap said. “We didn’t know what he was going to be like. They said he was brain-dead and there would be no life, so we were preparing ourselves.”

CONTINUED : ‘Our son is still alive!’
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Zack had declared on his driver’s license that he wanted to be an organ donor, so his parents gave permission for doctors to keep his body alive until the organs could be harvested.

“Zack has always been a giver. He always wanted to make sure everybody had things going their way,” Doug Dunlap continued. “He didn’t want to give up, and we didn’t want his organs to give up, either. And he didn’t, either.”

The decision made, there remained only a wait of several hours while an organ-harvesting team flew in by helicopter. The family spent the time saying goodbye.

During her time with him, Zack’s grandmother, Naomi, prayed. Her request was straightforward — “just a miracle,” she told Morales. “He was too young for God to take him.”

Some four hours after doctors declared Zack dead, a nurse began to remove tubes from Dunlap. His cousins, Dan and Christy Coffin, both of whom are nurses, were also in the room. Something about Zack’s appearance made them think that he wasn’t as dead as the doctors said. On a hunch, Dan pulled out his bone-handled pocket knife and ran the blade up the sole of one of Zack’s feet.

‘Our son is still alive!’
The foot yanked away, but the other nurse said it was a reflex action. So Dan Coffin then dug a fingernail under one of Zack’s nails. Zack yanked his arm away and across his body, and that, the other nurse agreed, wasn’t a reflex action. It was a sign of life.

“We went from the lowest possible moment to, ‘Oh, my gosh, our son is still alive!’” said his mother. “That was the most miraculous feeling. We had gone from the lowest possible emotion that a parent could feel to the top of the mountains again. We were still very guarded, because we weren’t sure what his prognosis would be, but just to hear the words that he was back with us is something we’ll remember forever’.

Doctors warned the family that Zack could have profound brain damage that would prevent his leading anything resembling an active life. But within five days he opened his eyes, and 48 days after the accident, he walked out of a rehab center and returned home, where the entire town gave him a hero’s welcome.

He’s working to regain his memories and to control his emotions, and he’d like to go back to

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his job as a warehouse worker. He also wants to get his driver’s license back.

"I've been wanting to drive [from] about the day I was back from rehab," he said.

At Morales' request, Zack reached in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the pocket knife his cousin had used to prove he was still alive. Dan Coffin had given it to him as a gift and a memento.

"It makes me thankful that they didn't give up," Zack said, turning the knife over in his hand. "Don't let the good die young."

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